

CHAPTER 1

Light Speed Engineering

"Put that engineering department secretary down!" screamed the short, balding, heavy-set drafting supervisor at the top of his lungs.

Bill had no time to listen to the beet-red little man. He continued pushing Beth Pixey's ample buttocks up into the escape hatch of the prototype. An assortment of bells, whistles, sirens, and horns came on all over the Light Speed Engineering Research and Development hangar.

"All gauges have red-lined, Bill! We have to hurry!" Beth shouted down to Bill as he pushed even harder on her buttocks.

"Next time I'll remember to make the escape hatch bigger," Bill replied calmly. Bill never got emotional, even when he was faced with a possible meltdown. He was Bill LaMeer the engineer, and he didn't go in for anything like emotions and such. He could have remarked on Beth's considerable weight gain during the past year, but this was probably not the time, seeing there was a real possibility that Slapout and a substantial portion of the Oklahoma Panhandle could soon be vaporized. "Can you reach the emergency-coolant-release switch now?" he asked as politely as he could under the circumstances.

"What do you think I am, an orangutan?" Beth shouted, the frustration showing in her voice. Oddly enough, from where Bill was standing, Beth reminded

him of an orangutan with her Oklahoma State University orange Capri stretchy pants and all.

A small Asian man ran up to Bill and Beth under the massive gray prototype and shouted in Vietnamese, "We are all going to die!" It was Dr. Fuoi Fuoingh, the electrical engineer on the project. Fuoingh had no problem expressing his own emotions: "You people from Oklahoma are all crazy!"

Bill did not understand Vietnamese, but he got the gist of what Fuoingh was shouting. "I know," he said reassuringly. It was important for the project engineer to look like he knew what he was doing in front of the other engineers at all times.

Bill had not slept in almost sixty hours. He was beginning to fade. "Here's some money for the soda machine. Will you please get me a diet Jolt?" He took one hand off Beth's buttocks and reached into his pocket and put coins into Fuoingh's hand.

Beth suddenly popped out of the escape hatch like a plastic cork out of a cheap bottle of champagne knocking both men to the ground. "Wow! You sure know how to show a girl a good time!" she gasped.

A horrific sound, like thick steel plating being ripped apart, came from deep within the great gray machine. "That... can't be good," Bill whispered.

Beth, Fuoingh, and Bill looked fearfully up into the escape hatch and saw something deep inside glowing red, and then yellow, and then white. A sudden rush of scalding hot air blasted from the hatch singeing Bill's blond mustache, setting Fuoingh's hair on fire, and knocking Beth's big blond wig completely off her head.

"Dang' it!" Beth yelled and quickly scooted out from under the prototype. She caught the big furry ball of hair before it hit the floor and ran daintily to the woman's bathroom praying Bill hadn't noticed. Beth

would just die if Bill found out she wore fake hair. She worked very hard on her makeup and clothing and hair to appear much younger than she really was. Shortly after they started working together, Beth told Bill she was 27 years old and technically a virgin. That was three years ago. Beth, in fact, was 39 years old and had, since junior high school, slept with several men, most of who were now in prison, or dead, or just too tired to date anymore.

Bill came to Light Speed Engineering to replace the old project engineer who had been suddenly and tragically killed when the prototype fell on him. Oddly enough, when the machine was lifted off the "Old Kraut" as he was called, there was a peaceful smile on the crusty old German engineer's lifeless face. Bill was tall, blond, and built like an Adonis. He was soft-spoken and polite. He was the coolest thing ever to hit Slapout. Beth instantly fell for the big strong handsome man. She felt justified in modifying her past just a bit to improve her chances of capturing the new project engineer. There were other women in Slapout, both single and not, who had their eye on Bill, but it was Beth who spent her weekdays working next to Bill, and brushing up against him from time to time, and laughing at his jokes even when they were engineering jokes and not all that funny. One day, Bill would notice that she was much more than just an engineering secretary. One day, Bill would realize that Beth was his "special gal."

Beth, however, was unaware of the fact that when she said anything to Bill about romance, or feelings, or anything else not directly related to engineering, Bill didn't hear it. If someone were to ask Bill about Beth's age or the status of her virtue, Bill couldn't give any kind of an answer. Bill, like most engineers, believed

talking about anything outside of engineering was like farting in a tornado. The person doing the talking (or farting) was the only person in the room who thought it made a difference.

A loudspeaker blared over the din of sirens and bells in the Light Speed hangar and throughout the entire plant. "Do not panic," a pleasant, professional-sounding woman's voice echoed into every corner of the plant. "All personnel should leave the facility immediately by the nearest exit. Do not panic. Please exit to at least a six-mile radius of the facility and cover all exposed body parts. Should an unplanned nuclear event occur, please look away from the resulting burst of light and heat blast. Thank you." The message was then repeated.

Bill scrambled around under the tangle of hydraulic pipes, valves, switches, and gauges of the prototype trying to figure out how to shut everything down before the Light Speed facility and the town of Slapout were incinerated. It wasn't the resulting damage and loss of life he feared, but the personal embarrassment screwing up yet another big project. It is a well-known fact that men fear embarrassment more than death.

"I think I know where Beth put the fire extinguisher," Bill calmly assured Fuoingh as Fuoingh ran around and around in circles screaming at the top of his lungs in Vietnamese, "My hair is on fire! Do something, you big stupid redneck!" or words to that affect. Another hellish groan filled the hangar from deep within the prototype. The massive gray structure began to shake violently from side to side above the two men. Large steel jack stands holding the prototype off the ground began to fail and crumple like aluminum beer cans. A harsh yellow light poured from the escape hatch of the prototype and quickly filled the Light Speed hangar. The bright yellow beam seemed to suck all of

the surrounding light and color from everything including Bill and Fuoingh. The groaning from within the angry machine grew to a continuous and deafening roar.

Then, things got serious.

CHAPTER 2

Sally's of Slapout House of Beauty

The ground under Sally's shop moved slightly and the lights flickered.

"I'm going to buy one of them new computers through the mail," Officer Lonnie Dan told Sally as she shampooed his head. He pointed through the window of the shop toward the Slapout Post Office across the street, which was also the grocery store and the gas station. "One of them Dell computers. I hear they're pretty reliable."

Sally tried to imagine Lonnie operating a computer. All her mind could come up with was a chimpanzee at the controls of a space shuttle. "Come on over to the chair," she said to him. She knew Lonnie came in once a week to see her, and not for a cut and style like he said. Lonnie had no hair except for on the very back of his big bald head. But he had money and tipped well. He was recently retired from the Slapout Police Department with a nice pension. He was a big man and could have worked another few years, but he was starting to gain weight, and there had never been very much crime in Slapout anyway. He also took orders well. He was a little puppy dog around Sally.

"I intend to start an online business," Lonnie explained as he waddled over and plunked his huge ass into Sally's vintage 1940's barber chair of creme enamel and red leather. He carefully smoothed the big blue paper bib Sally had fastened around his thick neck. Tony Bennett sang "The Way You Look Tonight" softly from a radio nearby. Sally's AM radio still ran on vacuum tubes. Sally's shop and most of the equipment in it had been there since before World War Two.

"What're you going to sell?" Sally asked showing almost no interest. Sally and Lonnie had grown up together in Slapout. She knew Lonnie was all about big plans, big talk, and not much else.

"I'm not sure," Lonnie said slowly, savoring every small moment of Sally's attention. "Luxury items most likely. Knick-knacks. Or, maybe police gear: flack vests, assault rifles..."

Sally's phone rang. "Sally's of Slapout House of Beauty, Sally Husky speaking," she said into the receiver with her professional-business voice. She listened a moment, her face showing no change in expression. "Yes... unplanned nuclear event... got it... thanks Bobby." She put down the phone and returned to her work on Lonnie. "There's some trouble at Light Speed. Mayor Bobby says there might be an *unplanned nuclear event* or something and that we should get away from the town to at least a six-mile radius," Sally sighed. She finished trimming the stubble on the back of Lonnie's head with a number-two razor. She tossed the electric barber razor onto her salon tray next to her assortment of well-worn combs and scissors and picked up a large device that looked like a motor out of an old refrigerator attached to a small sheet of plywood. The plywood was padded in foam rubber and covered in the same red leather covering Sally's barber chair. Sally

pushed the padded board up against Lonnie's neck and flipped a switch. The 20-amp contraption began to hum ominously.

"Oh," said Lonnie. He really liked it when Sally massaged his neck and shoulders with the big vibromassage machine after his haircut. It was the closest he'd ever been to Heaven, although he never told her so. She might charge him more for the haircut, and he wasn't made of money like some folks thought. "Should we...?"

"No!" interrupted Sally. "Bill has things under control out there. He's an *engineer*."

Lonnie hated Bill LaMeer. Before Bill moved to Slapout, Lonnie did reasonably well with the ladies, including Sally, because he was the only eligible bachelor in town not on life-support. After Bill moved to town, Sally started comparing Lonnie to the big good-looking engineer. Bill was tall, slender, college-educated, courteous, hard working, soft-spoken, rich, and humble. Lonnie wasn't any of those things. All of the women in Slapout wanted Bill. Even crazy Mrs. Paul. Mrs. Paul once told Lonnie she would leave her husband *and* the Baptist church if Bill LaMeer asked her to run away with him. Mrs. Paul was a strong and serious Baptist, but she was ninety-seven years old and her husband had already passed away some twenty years before Bill came along.

Sally stopped dating Lonnie in the hopes Bill would someday ask her out, but in the ten years Bill lived and worked in Slapout, not once did he ask her or any other woman out on a date. Lonnie once made a crude comment about Bill's sexual orientation while Sally was cutting Lonnie's hair. She threw him out of her shop and told him he could just get his haircuts in Woodward from then on. Early the following morning, Lonnie came

to Sally's shop with two dozen long-stemmed roses and promised never to call Bill a "fairy" again.

The ground under Sally's beauty shop moved slightly again. "*Engineer, my ass*," Lonnie said under his breath.

"What did you say?" Sally asked as she shut the vibromassage machine off.

"Nothing," Lonnie replied meekly. He struggled forward to get out of Sally's barber chair. The faded black and white tile floor beneath his feet suddenly shifted north a full inch and knocked him back into the chair. "Jesus!" he said. A long low rumbling sound drifted over the shop from the direction of the Light Speed Engineering plant and Sally's radio popped and buzzed with static.

Sally turned just in time to see an old man in overalls running for his very life right by her big shop window. She seemed more startled by the old man than by all of the noise and shaking going on around them. "Was that T-Bone?" she asked still not believing it. T-Bone was Slapout's oldest, slowest, and laziest resident.

Lonnie finally made it to his feet and waddled to the front door of the shop. "I've never seen T-Bone move that fast before," he said with genuine concern. As he opened the door to leave, a dozen or so Bolivian women in powder-blue aprons came running by the shop full out. All the women were dark, short, heavy-set, and middle-aged. They all worked at the Light Speed manufacturing facility next door to Sally's shop. One of the women shouted to the others in Spanish, "How will we know when it is six miles?"

"I'm calling Bill," Sally said. "He might be in danger."

"Bill has things under control out there. He's an *engineer*," Lonnie mimicked.

Sally gave Lonnie a cold look.

"Sorry," Lonnie said meekly and escaped out the door.

CHAPTER 3

The Mayor

Bobby Brice was the mayor of Slapout. Bobby was like most mayors of small towns. Anything that went wrong in Slapout was his fault, and everyone except Bobby's wife was mad at him for one thing or another. But everyone liked Bobby anyway because he was easy-going and just plain likable. And nobody else wanted to be mayor. Bobby talked his best friend, Walt Doyce, into being mayor of Slapout for one year so that Bobby could have a break. Three weeks into his term, Walt died of a heart attack and Bobby got stuck being mayor again. "I've been calling folks to evacuate the town," he told his wife in the kitchen of their small wooden house. "Not one of 'em has budged. Nobody ever takes me seriously."

Jeannie Brice, Bobby's wife, listened to him as she read her *O for Oprah* magazine. "Did you tell them it was a nuclear thing?" she asked without looking up.

"Yes," Bobby said. He wanted to say more but thought better of it. He wanted to say he didn't care anymore about the town or all the complaining, ungrateful, and demanding people who lived there. He was sick of being mayor. He wanted to goof off and be lazy and spend what little time he had left over at the cafe in Laverne flirting with the waitress there who told him once that he was "cute." That was eleven years ago. He never told Jeannie. He was waiting for the right time.

"You worry too much. I don't think it's such a big deal," Jeannie sighed.

Bobby got mad. "There is no such thing as a *small* nuclear deal. When something nuclear happens, it's always a *big damn deal!*" he barked, irritated at her efforts to console him. Jeannie was always trying to console him. Bobby had trouble relaxing because when he was a kid he saw a movie where a young attractive Japanese couple was having a picnic on top of a hill. They were laughing and joking and enjoying themselves. Then suddenly, *Rodan* dived out of the sky and ate them. All that was left was one of the Japanese woman's shoes. The movie scared Bobby so bad he made a promise to himself he would never again let down his guard and enjoy himself. Folks at his Baptist church reinforced this fear. They were always careful not to enjoy themselves. They always acted as if *Rodan* might dive out of the sky at any moment and eat them.

"Sorry," Jeannie said.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry," Bobby said, now feeling embarrassed. He knew she was only trying to help.

The kitchen phone rang. "*Yellow*," Bobby said into the receiver. He slumped in his kitchen chair and listened as a look of concern crossed his brow. "I'm working on it, Bill. You know folks don't move very fast around here, even with an unplanned nuclear... occurrence." Bobby felt uncomfortable around men who had been to college. He would overcompensate and use bigger words than he normally used when he was around Bill and other college people. Bobby was sensitive about his own lack of formal education. In high school, Bobby studied biology and became fascinated with entomology, the study of insects. He marveled at how bug societies behaved and survived as a single

organism and how these societies like bees and ants, operated very much like human societies. Bobby's secret dream was to become a college professor of entomology and write books about how bug societies could teach humans how to live together peacefully and more efficiently and treat their planet a lot better. When Bobby told his dad about his plans to attend college, the old man laughed at Bobby. Bobby's dad told everyone in town that Bobby wanted to leave Slapout "to work at some big-deal university and show people how ants have sex." Bobby was so humiliated he gave up his dream of becoming a college professor of entomology and took a job at a feed store in Woodward instead. Later, Bobby opened his own feed store and met Jeannie. Bobby still loved to go out onto his back porch early in the morning when everyone else was still asleep. He'd solemnly watch the big brown meadow spiders spin their beautifully intricate webs in the gentle light of daybreak. Sometimes, he would watch heavily armored black beetles marching slowly across the porch. He'd find himself softly talking to the hard-working beetles. He would say things like "Slow and steady wins the race."

"Is that Bill LaMeer?" Jeannie squealed like a teenager. She grabbed the receiver from Bobby's hand and shouted into it, "Hi, Bill!"

Bobby pulled the phone away from her, "Do you mind? I'm doing mayor stuff here."

Jeannie gave Bobby a sour look and handed the phone back to him. She never got to see Bill except at Christmas parties and the like. When she read her romance novels, Jeannie would sometimes pretend that she was the beautiful young woman living in a dark gothic mansion in England near the stormy seashore and that Bill LaMeer was a handsome mysterious

stranger who visited her late at night. But they would not have sex or anything like that. They would just talk. She lit another cigarette and blew a thick cloud of smoke in Bobby's direction.

Bobby gave Jeannie an irritated look and put the receiver back up to his ear and coughed, "Bill?"

A horrendous sonic boom came thundering over the wheat fields from the direction of the Light Speed plant. The kitchen window rattled violently, and porcelain knick-knacks tumbled off the narrow shelf over Jeannie's gas stove and crashed to the white tile floor.

"What was that?" Jeannie yelled and jumped to her feet.

The phone went dead. Bobby's hands turned ice cold. "It sounded like... *Rodan*," he said softly.

CHAPTER 4

Bolivia Machine

Dr. Emeritus Cruz Fernando Cruz Cruz, or Dr. Cruz for short, was the general manager at Light Speed Engineering in Slapout, Oklahoma. Dr. Cruz did not have a college degree in anything, but he liked to be called "Doctor Emeritus" because it sounded distinguished. He got the job as manager at Light Speed because his uncle was a major shareholder of Bolivia Machine, Light Speed's parent company. The worst kept secret in Slapout was that Dr. Cruz didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground as far as being a general manager of a machine tool company was concerned.

Bolivia Machine was a machine tool manufacturer based in South America. Bolivia Machine was started by

a group of businessmen right after World War Two. These men, of German extraction, had a lot of money and a shady past, but they made the finest machine tools on the continent. Their company did so well in South American that they eventually expanded their operations into other countries. That's why they bought Light Speed Engineering in Slapout. They did not concern themselves with the fact Light Speed Engineering never made a profit, or that it was out in the middle of nowhere. Light Speed Engineering could operate at a loss indefinitely and Bolivia Machine would still make a ton of money from the generous tax breaks and trade agreements Light Speed allowed them. Ten years had passed since truckloads of equipment and busloads of Bolivians moved into Slapout and took control of the broken down Light Speed hangar, manufacturing plant, and administrative offices. Residents of Slapout welcomed the deferential Bolivians and the much-needed trade the newcomers brought to the town's Quick Stop station, trailer park, and beauty shop. Sally Husky learned to speak Spanish.

Dr. Cruz always wore a starched white shirt, a fine silk necktie, a tailored charcoal business suit, and a *'Go Sooners'* ball cap. He never attended the University of Oklahoma or even a football game in Norman, but he believed wearing the ball cap helped him to blend in better with the local people. Dr. Cruz also liked to repeat the parent company's slogan at monthly Slapout Rotary Club meetings: "When you have a BM, you have the very best."

"Dr. Cruz. The OFSEB is on the line. They would like to speak to you," a young woman's voice announced over the phone in Dr. Cruz's office.

"What's the OSBEF, Connie?" Dr. Cruz asked.

Consuela Cruz was Dr. Cruz's niece and Light Speed's receptionist. Most of Dr. Cruz's extended family worked at Light Speed. There were almost thirty of them, all women, all from Bolivia. To get them to leave their homes and loved ones, Dr. Cruz told the women that Slapout was crawling with handsome young Oklahoma men just looking for wives. All of the women knew this was a big lie, but the thought of dozens of handsome young Oklahoma men chasing after short, middle-aged, heavy-set Bolivian women just to marry them sounded so absurd and wonderful that the women came to Slapout anyway.

Connie was the only Bolivian woman working at Light Speed who spoke fluent English. "It's the federal government. The man sounded very upset. He said that their radar system just showed a large object being shot into outer space from Slapout. He asked if we have a permit to launch things into outer space."

"How does he know it was us?" Dr. Cruz asked weakly.

"There are only two listings for Slapout in the yellow pages," Connie explained patiently. "It was either us or the beauty parlor."

"I... well... yes, of course... I believe... refer him to Bill. Bill knows!" Dr. Cruz said nervously and slammed down the phone. He grabbed his *'Go Sooners'* crimson and cream ball cap, jammed it onto his sweating bald head, and immediately left his office and went to lunch even though it was only 8:40 in the morning.

"Dr. Cruz?" Connie said. She sighed and rang Bill LaMeer's office.

"Yep?" Bill answered.

"Will you please talk to this man from the OFSEB?" asked Connie. "He sounds really, really upset. It's the

federal government. You really have to talk to them. It's *really* important that you talk to them, Bill."

"Just one moment," Bill replied politely as he finished bandaging Fuoingh's head. Fuoingh's hair caught fire shortly before the massive prototype suddenly shot straight up and crashed through the roof of the Light Speed hangar and disappeared into the sky over Slapout. Fuoingh's hair was completely gone, but his scalp looked okay.

"I didn't know the prototype was designed to fly, Bill. I'm the damned electrical engineer on this project and you never told me the prototype was designed to *fly!*" Fuoingh said angrily as Bill secured the big white bandage around Fuoingh's head with several long strips of Scotch tape.

"I don't believe it is," Bill said.

"The man from the OFSEB wants to know if we have a permit to launch things into outer space," Connie said desperately over the phone. "Do we, Bill?"

"I don't believe we do," Bill said.

"So... What do I do?" Connie asked.

"Put him through," said Bill and handed the phone to Fuoingh. "It's for you," he told the agitated Vietnamese electrical engineer.

Fuoingh gave Bill a startled look and then carefully put the receiver to his singed ear.

"This is Sam Jiouccatiki of the Office of Federal Safety and Environmental Balance. To whom am I speaking?"

"Fuoingh!" Fuoingh answered.

"What?"

"Fuoingh!" Fuoingh repeated. "I think all my hair is gone! This is the thanks I get for coming to America. Land of opportunity, *my ass!*"

There was a long pause. Then the man asked, "Did you launch a missile into the upper atmosphere over North America a few moments ago?"

"If I had a nickel for every time somebody asked me that...", Fuoingh said.

"What?" the man interrupted.

"Did you drop bombs on my country for ten years and then suddenly leave and pretend nothing happened?" Fuoingh asked back indignantly.

There was another long pause. "Do you... speak English?" the man asked.

"In your dreams, G-man!"

CHAPTER 5

Channel Eight TV World News in Woodward

Thaddeus T. Bone, or T-Bone as folks called him, was Slapout's unofficial spokesperson and town drunk. He was ninety-four years old. He was the town drunk by choice, but he did not set out to be an unofficial spokesperson. Every time something newsworthy happened in or near Slapout, Mel Manlimon from Channel Eight TV World News in Woodward came out and put T-Bone in front of a video camera and asked his opinion. Mel was always in a hurry, so he grabbed anyone he could find. It always seemed to be T-Bone because T-Bone always sat in front of the Quick Stop Station and talked to anyone who happened by. Mayor Bobby and everyone else who lived in town were justifiably mortified by the fact that every time Slapout made the TV evening news, it looked like the only

people who lived there were stupid drunken toothless geezers.

When Sadie Beth Marsdue had quintuplets, T-Bone stated on TV, "Knowing Sadie Beth, I sure hope they all have the same father."

T-Bone saw himself as generally honest and fair in his treatment of others, but his perception of reality had been soaking in whiskey for close to eighty years. T-Bone was actually too young to fight in World War One and too old to fight in World War Two, but this didn't stop him from telling folks he had been awarded medals in both wars for his superhuman acts of courage and self-sacrifice on the field of battle in foreign lands. He told fantastic tales in excruciating detail of bloody hand-to-hand combat with German, Japanese, and French forces simultaneously. The fact that the French were America's allies during both wars didn't concern T-Bone. The older he got, the more fantastic his stories became. T-Bone reached a point in his life where he began to believe his own lies. Sally Husky once told Mayor Bobby, "T-Bone is an old man who has fallen in love with the smell of his own farts." This was shortly after T-Bone had made the announcement on TV that Bobby looked at bugs on his back porch early in the morning because he could communicate with them with using special mental powers or ESP, and that most insects were actually visitors from outer space; Mars or Jupiter most likely.

When T-Bone stood in front of a news camera, he found himself saying the most nonsensical things with an air of authority, conviction, and eloquence. Once, when he saw himself on TV, T-Bone asked his wife, "Who in holy hell is that?"

Today was no exception. Mel's newsmobile careened into Slapout very soon after a rocket or something had

been seen whooshing across the Oklahoma sky by dozens of people.

A real estate salesman in his late fifties sat in his small dark office and looked out his dusty window. He wore a bright orange blazer and polyester 'expando-band' pants. His agency had not seen any new business in months and a subtle look of failure and despair started to show in the wrinkles around his eyes. He was recently divorced. His grown kids lived in other parts of the country. They never called. He saw a bright object quickly cross the clear morning sky. The object glistened yellow and silver in the morning light, and then disappeared behind some trees. Was it a UFO? The sight startled him and he found himself calling a woman he'd met at a Rotary Club meeting the week before. "Did you see that thing in the sky just now?" he asked her. She said she did. His fear went away a little. Then he asked her, "Can we get together for coffee some time?" The woman said she'd like that very much.

Another woman was hanging laundry out to dry on a clothesline in the backyard of her dingy rental house. Her husband could not find work and the town had shut off their electricity. Her three young children wore clothing given them by a local church, and the clothing was shabby and filled with holes. She felt a deep throbbing ache of humiliation as she hung the hand-washed shabby clothing out in the yard for everyone to see. She paused a moment and saw something suddenly fly across the sky just a few hundred feet above her. It was a strange silver machine that looked much too big and clumsy to actually fly. But, there it was sailing majestically overhead as effortlessly as a hawk riding the thermals looking for field mice. She should have been startled, but in that moment, and for the first time in years, the young woman felt bright and pretty again.

She decided not to take the forty sleeping pills she'd stolen from her mother's medicine cabinet that morning.

These and hundreds of similar stories related to the rocket incident were never reported on *Channel Eight TV World News*. Mel Manlimon knew stories of hope didn't sell crap as well as stories of nonsense and disaster. "We are here with Mr. Thaddeus T. Bone of Slapout, Oklahoma!" Mel frantically barked into his microphone to create an atmosphere of tension, hurry, and upset so vital to reporting nonsense and disaster. "What do you make of the *unidentified flying obstacle* this morning, Mr. Bone?"

T-Bone hadn't witnessed a rocket or anything fly over that morning. When he saw all of the Bolivian women come running out of the Light Speed Engineering plant across the street from his bench in front of the Quick Stop station, T-Bone honestly thought they were coming after him because of something he said on TV or because he spent his waking life mostly drunk. Like nearly all men on the planet, T-Bone just naturally assumed he was the direct cause of everything that went on in the world around him.

"Mr. Bone?" Mel asked again not giving T-Bone time to think.

"This is obviously the work of corrupt government officials and waitresses who won't give you the time of day *even* when you leave them a big tip," T-Bone suddenly found himself saying.

"So, you believe the *mayor* of Slapout has something to do with this?" Mel goaded.

"I would not be surprised," T-Bone continued sanctimoniously. "He told me on more the one occasion that he often thinks of her in a *less* than Christian way."

"Thinks of who?"

"That waitress. The one in Laverne. I heard Mayor Bobby say he wanted to just run away with her to Mexico or somewhere and play on the beach all day and make love to her all night," T-Bone said. "Bobby's a married man, mind you, and a member of the Baptist church."

Mel needed to hurry back to Woodward to cover a pet funeral. "You heard it here first: Mayor Bobby Brice and a waitress in Laverne may be directly linked to the aerial incident that took place right here in Slapout no more than a few short hours ago. This is Mel Manlimon, *Channel Eight TV World News in Woodward!*"

CHAPTER 6

Hatchet Jack's Cafe and Tiki Room

Hatchet Jack's Cafe and Tiki Room were right next door to the Light Speed Engineering plant. Engineering meetings were held at the cafe every afternoon. Before the cafe started selling beer and wine, engineering meetings were held there once a month. The Tiki Room was opened later in the evening, but it was still the cafe, only darker inside.

Bill stood up to address the crew of the Light Speed R&D (short for Research and Development) department. They all sat around a large dark crusty wood table. There was Beth and Fuoingh, Ken Fritneck the drafting supervisor, Margo Eterna the teenager draftsman, and Imelda Cruz the engineering document control clerk. Light from the setting sun poured into the cafe through a dusty window and onto Bill's broad shoulders and neck.

Beth watched Bill's big muscular shoulders and neck glisten through his torn khaki shirt in the golden light. She ordered another large glass of Chablis.

"As most of you already know, we let the prototype get away from us this morning," Bill said.

"Nooooo, really?" Fuoingh squeaked sarcastically as he adjusted the large white bandage on his head.

Imelda Cruz was the oldest employee at Light Speed Engineering. She could not read or write English. She spoke fairly good English, but only when it was absolutely necessary. "How about another round of beers. We're dry at this end of the table, Billy."

Imelda was also Dr. Cruz's mother.

A black and white Dumont television on a high shelf at the far wall of the cafe flickered the bucolic image of Thaddeus Bone. "Oh, no. It's T-Bone again," moaned Hatchet Jack Amblin as he wiped down an empty table nearby. He turned up the sound on the Dumont. Everyone in the cafe stopped talking and looked over at the ancient TV set.

"... the one in Laverne. I heard Bobby say he wanted to just run away with her to Mexico or somewhere and play on the beach all day and make love to her all night." the TV said.

"The one what?" asked Margo looking bored. Everything either bored or annoyed Margo. In her head, Margo wrote poems and pretended to be a princess from another planet to keep from going completely crazy from the crushing boredom of living and working in a town no bigger than a postage stamp. She slouched in her seat and sullenly sipped her diet soda. She was as thin as a supermodel and the tallest woman at Light Speed. Her hair was a bright red stringy mop that surrounded her pretty face. She never smiled in the engineering office, except once. The very first and only time Bill showed

anything close to an emotion at Light Speed, it was because of Margo. Margo had been particularly offensive to everyone in the engineering department that day and wouldn't do any work. Bill was looking for his *Machinery's Handbook* and Margo found it first and wouldn't give it to him. He grabbed for it. Margo put it behind her back. Bill wrapped his big muscular arms around the slender teenager to retrieve his book and they were suddenly very close. In the scuffle, their lips touched briefly. Margo looked startled and let the handbook fall to the floor. Bill let go of her suddenly and backed away to a safe distance. "Damn it, Margo! You need to start doing some work around here or I'm really going to fire your skinny ass!" he said angrily. Beth, Ken, Imelda, and even Fuoingh gasped at Bill's uncharacteristic outburst. Margo burst into tears. Beth hugged the teenager away from Bill and tried to comfort her. Bill retreated to the R&D hangar and did not return to the office that afternoon. The following day, Bill quietly told Consuela to increase Margo's wages by fifty cents an hour. Nothing more was said about the incident, but Consuela promptly told all of her cousins and aunts at Light Speed. All sorts of rumors swirled around Light Speed for weeks after that, much to the delight of the Bolivian women in the manufacturing department. Luckily, all of the rumors were in Spanish. Upon hearing these rumors, Imelda said to Margo with a sly smile, "Red-haired women always make trouble for a good man." That was the only time Margo actually smiled in the engineering office.

"A waitress in Laverne," answered Beth sitting next to Margo. Beth sensed Margo's boredom and anger. She rubbed Margo's shoulders affectionately, much like an older sister would. Margo pulled away from Beth and

scowled, but she secretly liked Beth the most of anyone who worked at Light Speed.

T-Bone's interview was followed by breaking news: "The wreckage of what is believed to be a UFO has been found just east of Fort Supply. It appears to be a large, complicated device weighing several tons, possibly from another planet."

Shaky video of the Light Speed prototype appeared on the TV screen.

Bill jumped to his feet. "That's our baby," he said. "Ken, get the biggest flatbed trailer you can find. Fuoinh, you and me are going to Fort Supply."

Fuoinh choked on his beer. "Kiss my ass, cowboy! That thing already tried to kill me once today!" He crammed his ball cap over his bandaged head and ran out of the cafe.

Bill sighed and looked around the table.

Beth's heart skipped a beat. This is it, she thought. He's going to ask me to go with him to Fort Supply and realize along the way that I am his *special gal* and that he'd be crazy to let me get away and we'll get married and I can finally paint that hideous olive green kitchen of his and buy some new furniture and throw out all that crap he keeps in his garage and completely redo the front yard and...

Bill looked around the table. "Imelda?"

Beth gave Imelda a deadly look.

"Fort Supply is not on my list of places I want to see before I die, thanks," the tough old Bolivian crone snorted and promptly finished her beer. She gave Beth a wink.

Bill looked over at Margo. "Margo. You need to study for an algebra exam tomorrow, don't you?"

"Nope," Margo said, "my exam was yesterday."

Beth discretely punched Margo in her left butt cheek somewhat harder than was called for under the circumstances.

"Ouch!" Margo yelped and than added smoothly, "I can't go. I have a report to write for school tomorrow."

"I can go!" Beth said loudly, not hiding the desperation in her voice.

"We may not be back until real late," Bill said. "Maybe I'll just..."

"Sure!" Beth squeaked, jumped up, finished her Chablis in one gulp, ran to the bathroom, fixed her hair, and re-applied her makeup. She was sitting in Bill's little red car fourteen seconds later.

CHAPTER 7

On the road to Fort Supply

Bill and Beth sped east toward Fort Supply in Bill's fire engine red 1964 Chevrolet Corvette Coupe. He built the car from the ground up with parts he found in junkyards all over Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas. Cruising at seventy miles an hour, the Corvette made no sound except for the almost imperceptible hum of its massive turbo-charged engine. The interior of Bill's car had been lovingly restored to its original showroom condition. It was a cozy blend of rich creme leather padding, ebony and fluorescent green instruments framed in spotfaced aluminum, and lots and lots of chromed knobs and switches. After the sixties, thanks to Ralph Nader, the insides of cars looked all the same: safe, plastic, joyless containers for people in a hurry.

The "Mission Impossible" theme wafted up from Beth's large black canvas purse. She pulled out her cell phone. "Hello? What? Oh, my! I'll tell him!" She pushed the phone back into her purse and dug deeper into a tangled pile of woman stuff. She retrieved her makeup mirror, carefully inspected her left eye, and removed some thick black goo that used to be mascara from the lower lid.

Bill waited patiently for Beth to say something about the cell phone call.

Beth continued to dab carefully at the lower lid of her left eye and then inspected her lips. She grimaced several times into her mirror and turned her head from side to side. She pulled at the big blond curls across her forehead and frowned into the small mirror again. Finally, she said, "That was Sally. Mayor Bobby's been shot. He's in the hospital. They think Jeannie did it."

"Oh," Bill said.

They continued on in silence for another few miles. The soft gray landscape around them turned black as it drifted silently by the polished windows of the Corvette.

"Bill, I have to pee," Beth said.

"There are some trees up ahead."

"No! I can wait," Beth said. "Just don't squeeze me."

Bill looked over at Beth for a moment.

The green lights from his dashboard instruments illuminated Beth's round face and big hair. She smiled at him, and then looked away a little embarrassed. "We've worked together for almost three years, Bill, and I don't know anything about you," she said.

Bill sighed. He wasn't one to make conversation. He was an engineer. "Not much to know," he said and looked back to the dark flat road ahead of them.

"Come on, Bill."

Beth was a good engineering secretary. She always did a lot more than her fair share of the work at Light Speed. She always had a cheerful and positive attitude. She acted as a buffer between Bill and the other people who worked in his department. If Beth weren't there to smooth things over, Bill would have to deal directly with Ken's general incompetence, Imelda's loving disrespect, Fuoingh's foreign-language tirades, and Margo's gloominess.

And, it would be awhile until they reached Fort Supply. Bill felt obligated to tell Beth something about himself. "Okay," he said. "I was born and raised in Watonga by immigrant Croatians. I joined the Air Force and was sent to Puerto Rico to protect a golf course used only by Air Force generals and their friends. I was there to keep terrorists and enlisted men from playing golf. After the Air Force, I went to Oklahoma State University and studied aeronautical engineering. When the college registrar asked me what ethnic background I was, I said I was Croatian. She thought I said *Crow Nation* and listed me as a Native American. After college, I received a nice letter from the Crow Tribal Federation congratulating me on my achievement. Hearing that I was a Native American with a degree in aeronautical engineering, the DyneDorp Missiles and Space Corporation offered me a job designing weapons of mass destruction. I told them I was not a Native American, and that I would have nothing to do with designing weapons of mass destruction. They offered me ninety thousand dollars a year to start with comprehensive health and retirement benefits. I took the job. I was told to design a missile that could carry a one-thousand-megaton nuclear bomb to anywhere in the world within eighteen minutes of launch. I completed several prototypes costing DyneDorp almost a billion

dollars. Not one of them worked. In the interest of national security, DyneDorp and the government asked me to leave the aerospace industry. After that, the only place that would hire me was a Bolivian-owned machine tool manufacturer with a shabby little plant out in the middle of nowhere."

Bill waited for Beth to say something. It was quiet for a long time. Maybe he had said too much. Maybe Beth was put off by his involvement with the government and weapons of mass destruction. Maybe she wouldn't respect him anymore. *Familiarity breeds contempt*, he remembered from his brief and somewhat painful study of psychology at OSU. He loved the field of engineering. He loved designing and building machines. He loved redesigning and improving and making his machines run more efficiently. He loved the control he had over machines. Machines were so much more predictable than people were. He preferred the company of machines to the company of people, but Beth surely understood that he held human life in high regard and that he sincerely respected the earth and its ecosystem. Yes, he went for the money. He was much younger then. He never imagined earning so much money so soon in his career. He went for the money and pretended to be a Native American. Beth mentioned once that she was part Choctaw. Damn it! Why do women always have to know what he's thinking? Why can't they just leave him alone? Why does he have to deal with people at all? Machines are so much easier.

"Engineers really do a lot of good in the world and really improve people's lives," Bill found himself saying to Beth hoping to undo some of the damage he'd just inflicted on their working relationship. Bill finally ventured a look over at Beth hoping she wasn't too upset with him.

Beth was asleep.

CHAPTER 8

Roxanne

Years of bad choices made Roxanne Rutz hard and smart in her thirty-sixth year. She was not pretty. She had plain brown hair wrapped tightly into a bun on the back of her head. She wore no makeup. Her brow was often covered with sweat from the hot grill at Emmet's Cafe in Laverne where she worked fourteen hours a day, six days a week. She made no salary and had no health or retirement plan. Tips were her only income. But she knew how to talk to men. She remembered their names, the names of their kids, the trucks they drove, and what they did or used to do for a living. She asked them questions about themselves. She was interested. Every man who walked into the cafe was treated like he was her favorite and only customer. She knew what men most wanted from women: to be worshipped.

Roxanne was the most desirable woman in the county.

"Did you watch the television last night?" Wyleema Dootree gasped as she burst into the cafe. Wyleema was the senior waitress at Emmet's. She was eighty-three years old, weighed ninety pounds, and could still carry six full orders of chicken-fried steak and cheese fries on one tray. She was also the owner of Emmet's Cafe since Emmet died twenty-six years before. She was not Emmet's wife, but they had been intimate once back in the 1950's. She honestly could not recall ever sleeping with Emmet, but Emmet still felt guilty enough about it

to leave her the cafe when he passed. This very much upset Emmet's wife, Marbella, who was coincidentally Wyleema's twin sister. Wyleema and Marbella looked exactly the same. They dressed the same. They wore their hair and talked the same. They were tough, mean, and extremely bright women who possessed a razor sharp sense of humor. The fact that Emmet found Wyleema overpoweringly desirable and was bored silly by his own wife remained a mystery to both women.

Wyleema was also a pretty fair cook when Donnie Marx, who was the cook, was too drunk to cook, which was nearly all of the time. "They have got me mixed up in that mess down in Slapout with the UFO and the mayor and all," she said to Roxanne. "Can you believe it?"

"I've heard," said Roxanne as she busily pulled large white greasy slabs of bacon from a plastic freezer bag and tossed them onto the very hot shiny black grill behind the breakfast counter. "Your secret life has caught up with you, Wyleema!" she shouted over the sound of crackling bacon.

Roxanne, in fact, had not heard about T-Bone's interview. She didn't watch the TV evening news because it always so depressing. Most evenings, Roxanne watched movies on videotape. Nearly all of these movies were about a bright young waitress stuck in a small Midwestern town out in the middle of nowhere who gallantly struggles to make ends meet and quietly suffers from the crushing boredom and loneliness only a small Midwestern town out in the middle of nowhere can provide. Then, a big dumb good-looking man comes along and steals her heart. And then, of course, he breaks her heart because he turns out to be nothing more than just another big dumb good-looking man. There were a surprisingly large number of

movies with this exact same story line produced and on videotape at the Laverne Movie Stop store. She had seen them all a number of times.

Two large serious men in crew cuts and dark suits walked into the cafe. "Our first customers," Wyleema said. "Sit on down, boys."

"We're not here for breakfast, mam," one of the men said smoothly. The other man strolled into the kitchen and then out again into the dining area looking carefully into every little space and corner of the empty cafe. "We would like to talk to the waitress who works here," he said in the very same smooth tone of voice. "We're with the Office of Federal Safety and Environmental Balance."

Wyleema grabbed her sagging bosoms with all the drama of a seasoned Shakespearean actor and wailed, "It's me! Yes, it's me! I slept with the man. He was my sister's husband, for God sakes, but I didn't care. I was young. I was crazy. Yes... a single, attractive woman from a small town has physical needs. Where have all the good men gone? It was after the war. The war took away all the good men!" She dropped into a chair and sighed as if a thousand-pound weight had been lifted from her. "I never wanted his damned cafe," she sighed softly, but loud enough for the men to hear.

The two serious men were genuinely startled by the dramatic outburst. "You're Roxanne Rutz?" they both asked at the same time.

Roxanne had been driving without auto insurance for several months. She was sure this was the reason the two men were there. She turned her back to them as casually as she could, took a deep breath, and then bolted through the front door of the cafe before they could do anything.

The men turned around and looked at the front screen door of the cafe as it slammed shut. "Great! You wouldn't think Laverne could be this much trouble," one man sighed to the other. He no longer sounded like a smooth special investigator. He sounded more like an exhausted middle-aged man stuck in a highly paid and meaningless government job. "Should we go after her?"

The other man slumped into a cafe chair. He suddenly looked and sounded like a real person, too. "She won't get very far," he said resignedly. The man looked over at Wyleema and moved his lips up almost into a smile. "That bacon smells pretty good."

"Best in the Oklahoma Panhandle!" Wyleema chirped, completely recovered. She nimbly jumped to her feet and cheerfully trotted toward the kitchen. "And, we have a cheese and bell pepper scramble to die for!"

CHAPTER 9

Suicide watch

"I just don't feel like playing the game anymore," Mayor Bobby Brice sighed from his hospital bed in Woodward. The mayor of Slapout tried to shoot himself when he heard T-Bone, right on television, accuse him and Roxanne Rutz of being lovers involved in a UFO conspiracy. "My life is a big damn joke." He turned his face away and looked sadly out the hospital room window. The bandage on the side of Bobby's head covered a nasty gash where his left ear used to be. He had missed his brain, but managed to shoot his ear clean off.

Jeannie found Bobby on their kitchen floor in a pool of blood next to his target pistol and a brief note of apology. She went completely numb for almost five minutes as she took in the grizzly scene. There lay her husband, her closest friend and companion for almost thirty years. Bobby was the only man Jeannie had dated in high school and the only man who made love to her. Officially, Bobby took Jeannie's virginity on their wedding night, but actually they had made love a few clumsy guilt-ridden times before then. It was when Jeannie sensed Bobby was losing interest in her during their long Baptist courtship that she gave in to his half-hearted advances. She reasoned it wasn't technically a sin if both of them felt sufficiently guilty. She never looked at another man in those thirty years. Even when Bill LaMeer came to Slapout and all the other women were making such a fuss over the new man in town. Jeannie knew for a fact that if she ran off with the big good-looking engineer, Bill would make her stop smoking cigarettes and start cooking meals for him every night, and she wasn't ready to change her whole life around for some new man no matter how pretty he was.

Bobby lay sprawled grotesquely in a dark red puddle on her white tile kitchen floor. He definitely looked dead. And then, Bobby moved a little and groaned softly, and Jeannie realized he was still alive. Her numbness turned to anger and her first thought was "How am I going to get the blood out of this damned ceramic tile. I'll have to re-grout the whole thing!"

Hatchet Jack Amblin listened quietly as Bobby sighed from his hospital bed. He and Bobby had gone to high school together. Bobby told Hatchet things he never told Jeannie, even about his secret dream of becoming a professor of entomology and teaching at the

State University in Stillwater. Hatchet never tried to give Bobby advice when Bobby talked about his problems. Hatchet just listened. He was a good friend that way. When Hatchet heard Bobby was in the hospital, he jumped into his truck and headed for Woodward. Hatchet was doing almost ninety, but he had to back off some on his '65 Ford Falcon pickup when a horrendous vibration from his left front tire nearly shook all the refrigerator magnets off the truck's rusty dashboard. When Hatchet got to the hospital, he met Jeannie in the hallway. She walked right past Hatchet without a look or a word. When Hatchet walked into Bobby's room, Bobby's face was as white as the large fluffy pillow he rested on. The look on Bobby's face showed a sadness held onto for many years but not shown until now. Hatchet wanted to burst into tears right then, but held back because a nurse was in the room fussing with machines and clear plastic tubes going into Bobby's arm and nose.

"Is Jeannie okay?" Bobby asked distantly.

"She's been real quiet," Hatchet answered softly, respectfully.

Bobby said nothing for a time. Then he said, "That waitress in Laverne. There's really nothing going on between us."

"I know," Hatchet replied. "It isn't necessary..."

"I met her just the one time at the cafe in Laverne. Jesus, that was more than ten years ago. Then, I started pretending there was some big secret romance between us and how a scandal might breakout to all the newspapers and television at any moment. I started thinking of ways the two of us could escape together to Mexico and how the change of scenery would make me young again and how we would swim in the ocean,

and...." He carefully touched the bandage and grimaced, "I doubt if she even remembers me."

A small dark man in a starched white coat and carrying a metal clipboard hurried into Bobby's room. "I am Doctor Glicoeui, the county psychiatrist," he announced mechanically. He stepped up to Bobby's bed and shined a penlight into Bobby's eyes. Then, he turned and addressed Hatchet Jack as if Bobby wasn't even there: "Is he labile?"

"Is he *what*?" Hatchet asked.

The doctor, slightly annoyed, glanced at his platinum Rolex wristwatch. The wristwatch was a gift to him from an attractive young woman who represented a large pharmaceutical company that made the antidepressant medication the doctor prescribed to all of his patients. The Rolex cost more than Bobby's house. "Is he labile? Is he unstable? Do you think he'll try to kill himself again?" the doctor asked rapidly, loudly pronouncing his words carefully as if he were talking to a child.

Hatchet looked at Bobby. "Are you unstable?" Hatchet asked, feeling a little embarrassed in front of the doctor.

"I don't think so. I just have the one ear left. I suppose I'll keep it," Bobby replied as the doctor scribbled out a prescription and pushed the small square sheet of paper into Bobby's hand. The man was gone before Bobby could finish his sentence. The county psychiatrist had spent a total of eleven seconds with Bobby. He would charge Bobby three hundred and forty dollars for the visit. The doctor had forty-two patients to visit that morning.

"Bob, do you mind if I stay awhile?" asked Hatchet.

"That'd be fine," Bobby said. He looked over at Hatchet a moment. "What was that foreign doctor's name again?"

Hatchet thought a moment. "Doctor La'Bile," he answered finally.

"La'Bile," Bobby echoed.

The two men sat and looked out the hospital room window at the trees and the clouds for the rest of the morning and said nothing.

CHAPTER 10

The OFSEB

The Office of Federal Safety and Environmental Balance, or OFSEB, was created by a congressional committee to save money by combining several smaller ineffective federal agencies into one giant ineffective federal agency. It costs the government three times as much to run the OFSEB as it did to run all of the smaller agencies combined.

Sam Jiouccatiki, an aerospace engineer from Burma, ran the Midwest Division of the OFSEB based in Oklahoma City. Sam used to run the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, but NASA was absorbed by the OFSEB shortly after the new agency was formed. Sam loved NASA. He hated the OFSEB. Soon after that, the OFSEB absorbed the Environmental Protection Agency and several other agencies that did not directly serve the private interests of the current administration.

"So, what is it?" Sam asked.

"Well," a man said over the phone, "it's really big and heavy. It's mostly machined metal parts. All different kinds of parts. Lots of parts fitted together in no systematic way. I can't tell exactly what it's supposed to do. Judging from the corrosion on some of the component parts, they've been working on this thing for years. A very complicated piece of equipment. I think there was a nuclear power source on board, but there is no reactor core and our instruments don't show any radiation levels that would cause... "

"Could it possibly be a bomb or a missile?" Sam asked abruptly.

"I don't know, " the man said. " The thing is kind of pretty, like a big metal sculpture or something."

Sam was irritated. He was spending almost a thousand dollars a minute investigating a pile of space junk. The OFSEB had a very clear unwritten policy regarding matters that might upset people and cause them to suspect the agency was not in complete control of everything all of the time. It was very important for people to have confidence in the OFSEB. If people were to find out that the agency was, in fact, a massively ineffective bureaucracy that spent money like water and got nothing done, there would be chaos. That's why everyone who worked for the OFSEB was always overworked, underpaid, and in a desperate hurry to meet some arbitrary deadline. The agency didn't actually have to do anything because the tax structure paid the bills whether the agency accomplished anything or not. The agency only had to *look* like it was doing something. All of the people who ran the OFSEB were extremely bright and loyal professionals from other countries. These people plainly saw through the charade and were okay with it because conditions in their own countries were so horrendously bad that the

OFSEB seemed like a Utopia by comparison. They were paid handsomely for their management services. Everyone else who worked for the OFSEB hovered precariously near the edge of poverty, always in a hurry, always behind schedule, and always afraid of losing their rat-hole government job.

"Let's wrap this one up," Sam said finally. "I'll send a truck out to Fort Supply. We have a C5 at Tinker waiting to fly this thing to Nevada. We'll bury it with the other ones..."

"The truck's already been here," the man said.

"What?"

"A big guy and a woman in an old Corvette hauled it away on a flatbed trailer a couple of hours ago."

"What?" Sam asked, not believing what he'd just heard.

"It was the sweetest little 'Vette I've ever seen. Fire engine red," the man said. "We're talking showroom..."

"What did this big man say?"

"He said he was an engineer from Slapout. Didn't say much after that. He just sort of took charge and got our people to help him put the thing on the truck. I just assumed he was one of our guys."

"He's not one of our guys!" Sam shouted into the phone.

It was silent for a moment. Then, the man asked blankly, "Should we go after him?"

"Yes," Sam said with restraint, "that would be nice." He wanted to say, "You stupid idiot!" But, being from Burma, Sam had to be careful what he called Americans, even though he secretly thought all Americans were stupid idiots.

"Sorry, Mr. Jack-tickie," the man said.

"It's Dr. Jiouccatiki."

"Sorry."

Sam slammed down the phone. He turned to a small gray box bolted to his desk. He hesitated a moment and then carefully removed the clear plastic dust cover from the box. He took a breath and pressed the large red button on top. "This is M-W-One. We have a code red, code red for Slapout, Oklahoma."

CHAPTER 11

Cell Phones Can Kill You

Bill and Beth drove up ahead of the flatbed tractor-trailer now hauling the prototype. They were still several miles from Slapout when Beth's cell phone started playing the "Mission Impossible" theme in her large purse. She rummaged through to the bottom of the clutter and fished the chirping device out. "Yes? He's right here," Beth said and handed Bill the phone.

Bill didn't like cell phones. He didn't own one and avoided using them because he believed cell phones shot EMR, electro-magnetic radiation, through people's brains. EMR, Bill firmly believed, caused brain tumors and dementia and all manner of other horrific illnesses. He looked at the phone as if it were a rattlesnake and said, "Who is it?"

"It's Sally."

"Sally?" Bill asked weakly.

"You know, Sally from next door."

Bill remained fixed on Beth's small blue cell phone. "Sally's of Slap..."

"... out House of Beauty, yes. She wants to talk to you."

"What does she want?"

Beth jammed the small cell phone against Bill's ear and snarled, "You are not going to get a brain tumor! Take the damn phone you big baby!". Beth had not slept in more than twenty hours and she really had to pee, but she was definitely *not* going to go behind a tree like Bill suggested.

Bill gingerly grasped the small phone between his thumb and index finger and held it as far from his ear as he possibly could, "Yep?"

"Bill? This is Sally. Sally from Sally's of Slapout House of Beauty?"

This annoyed Bill to no end. The beauty shop was right next door to the Light Speed Engineering plant. Sally didn't need to advertise her stupid beauty shop while his brain was being sizzled by the EMR waves radiating from Beth's cell phone. "Yep?" Bill said.

"So, how are you?" Sally asked.

"Fine." The fewer words Bill spoke, he believed, the less EMR could fry his brain.

Sally was hoping for a bit more conversation than this, but she knew Bill was afraid of cell phones and women, and that engineers didn't like to talk much anyway. "I'm sorry to bother you, Bill, but I thought you would be the best person to call, seeing how you're pretty much in charge of the Light Speed facility and all."

"Yep?"

Sally paused. She could hear the impatience in Bill's voice. She regretted having called him. Maybe Bill knew Sally had a monster crush on him. "Bill, you're not mad that I called, are you?"

"Nope."

"Oh, good. You know the last thing on earth I would want is for you to be...."

Bill could almost see waves of EMR shooting from the stubby antenna on Beth's cell phone into one side of his head and traveling through his poor old brain and exiting gleefully out the other side of his head. "Could you just tell me what you're gonna tell me?" he pleaded.

"The army has taken over Slapout!"

"The... the U.S. Army?"

"*No, the Croatian Army!* Yes, of course, the U.S. Army! There are helicopters and tanks and soldiers all over the place! They're all carrying rifles, and they took Dr. Cruz and his mother into custody. They're looking for you and your proto' thing!"

"They took Imelda?"

"When she saw them take Dr. Cruz away, she started beating crap out of the soldiers who had hold of him. It took five more of them to subdue her."

Bill gave the cell phone back to Beth. "The U.S. Army's in Slapout. They want the prototype."

Beth started to panic, "*My god, Bill!* What should we do?"

"I'm not sure," Bill said.

"Should I call Bolivia?" Beth asked anxiously.

"No. We can handle this ourselves."

"I really think we should call corporate."

"No," Bill said, "*Do not* call Bolivia under any circumstances."

"Is the army going to take our baby away?"

Bill's large tanned hands tightened around the steering wheel in the first display of emotion Beth had ever seen during her tens years working with the big rugged engineer.

Up ahead of them appeared a small green sign with the word 'Laverne' in white letters and an arrow pointing to the right. Bill slowed the car down and

turned back to Beth, "Do you know anyone in Laverne that would help us?"

"I know someone there. But, she can't help us," Beth lied. She didn't want other women meeting Bill right now during these stressful times. After, when Bill had realized Beth was his special gal, would Beth feel comfortable letting other women into Bill's life.

"Not today," Bill said softly.

CHAPTER 12

Ken is killed.

Roxanne's car, a 1983 Yugo, had broken down again. She stood on the side of the road just south of Laverne for some time before a small red car sped past ignoring her wave for help. She was able to flip the driver and his big-haired passenger the finger just before they zoomed by. A moment later, a large flatbed truck carrying what looked like a huge mechanical penis came over the hill. Roxanne mussed her hair, leaned on the fender of the Yugo, and gave the trucker her best "maiden-in-distress" look.

Ken Fritneck, Light Speed's drafting supervisor turned truck driver, saw Roxanne leaning against her car. He did not make a conscious decision to stop. His foot, all by itself, just lifted off the gas and slammed on the brakes of the flatbed truck he was driving. Subject to the ever-present laws of physics, the Light Speed Engineering prototype continued on its trajectory over the cab of the truck and landed heavily onto the road ahead with a deafening crash. The complicated machine

took a shallow bounce and skidded off the road and into Roxanne's Yugo flattening the sorry little car.

Roxanne had been with enough abusive men to know when to duck. She jumped out of the way in the nick of time.

Ken was not so lucky. When he got out of the truck to check on the waitress and to survey the damage, Roxanne socked him squarely in the eye and sent him reeling to the ground. "Who's going to pay for my car, you son of a bitch!" she shouted.

Ken sat up slowly and put his hands over his injured eye. "Jeez! I'm sorry," he gasped. "I assure you, it was not my original intent this morning to drop that big-ass machine on your car."

Roxanne started kicking Ken as the red car she had just flipped off rolled up. A tall tan muscular man and a short chunky blonde got out. The blonde shouted, "Roxanne!"

Beth ran over and hugged Roxanne. "Honey, are you alright?" She kissed the waitress and turned to Bill and announced, "Roxanne and I dated the same boy in school!" She hugged the waitress again and asked, "Is Ed still in prison?"

"Ed's dead," Roxanne said somberly. "Gloria Wingstram shot him."

"I haven't seen Gloria in ages! How is she doing?"

"She's in prison. She's lost a lot of weight. She looks good."

"Maybe I should do time," Beth said mournfully. "Just look at my butt!"

"You look fine, sweetie," Roxanne said being more than kind.

Ken sat on the pavement and looked up at the two women with his good eye. No words can describe the expression on his face.

Bill stood off to one side at a safe distance and watched as the two women chattered on and on. He was always amazed at how women could talk endlessly about almost nothing. In college, Bill learned that men back in the Stone Age were mostly *hunters* and women were mostly *gatherers*. For millions of years, men had to be very quiet to sneak up on the animals they were hunting, but women spent most of their time in camp chattering with other women as they raised children and fixed the food the men brought back. To Bill, this seemed to explain neatly why women like to talk so much more than men do. But, when he ever shared this observation with a woman, she would usually get very angry with him and call Bill a "macho shithead" or some other unpleasant name. He turned to inspect the prototype. The massive gray machine was not damaged seriously, but it looked like it had grown a set of wheels. The wheels belonged to Roxanne's Yugo, now flat as a pancake underneath.

After Roxanne finished kicking Ken and kissing Beth, she started toward Bill. "Who's going to pay for my car?" she said in a loud and angry tone. As she approached the big engineer, however, her anger dissolved. She looked up at the big good-looking man and suddenly felt like a teenager on her first date. "I mean... are you going to buy me another one?" she asked with an unfamiliar shyness.

Bill looked down at the waitress from Laverne. "Of course," he said politely.

Roxanne looked over at the prototype and was about to say, "Not another Yugo," but her words drifted away. She stepped closer to the machine and, for a moment, seemed to be lost in its sheer size and complexity. "What *is* this thing?" she asked finally.

Bill smiled slightly at the small slender waitress, but said nothing.

Beth helped Ken up off the ground. "She's a sweet gal, really," Beth said, and then she saw Roxanne touch Bill's big muscular arm through his torn khaki shirt. It was a very subtle move, but Beth knew instantly that Roxanne would try and steal Bill away from her someday soon.

"A peach, I'm sure," Ken groaned and limped out into the middle of the road in considerable pain. "I believe I'll stand over here until she cools down." He was promptly struck by a very long black limousine. The limo screeched to a halt as the drafting manager landed on his head in a ditch on the opposite side of the highway.

Beth, Roxanne, and Bill looked on in awe as three large dark men wearing white business suits and sunglasses emerged from the back of the long car and surrounded them. One of the men nodded toward the limo and a dark slender woman in white emerged. She slowly approached the three and looked at the massive prototype on top of the mashed Yugo. Then, she looked at Bill and said politely, "Senior LaMeer? My name is Sangria Cruz. I believe you called for our... help."

CHAPTER 13

If I had my life to live over.

Ken awoke in the ditch where he had landed after being hit by the long black limousine. Amazingly, nothing was broken, but he was very bruised by the limo and very sore from the beating he'd just received from the angry waitress from Laverne. He picked

himself up and staggered back out to the middle of the highway.

Everyone was gone. The prototype was gone. Even the squashed Yugo was gone.

"Son of a bitch!" Ken gasped. They had left him behind. Drafting supervisors always seem to get the worst of it. He could have called for help, but Bill LaMeer had convinced Ken that cell phones caused impotence, so Ken stopped carrying one.

Ken started limping toward Laverne and had gotten about a mile down the road when a black Apache helicopter gunship swooped out of the clear blue Oklahoma sky and very nearly hit him as it roared past. "Jeez!" he screamed and dove to the ground. This was the third time today he found himself hugging the pavement and he was damned sick of it.

The nimble helicopter cut a tight three-sixty and headed back toward the prone drafting supervisor. Ken had nowhere to go. He suddenly realized this could be his last few moments on earth. He shut his eyes and thought about his wife and son. His wife had recently left him to pursue a lucrative career in pharmaceutical sales. She had taken their thirteen-year old son with her. Ken was secretly glad to see them leave. The boy was always in trouble at school with drugs, and his wife was always complaining about how Ken spent too much time on the computer and not enough time with his family. When they moved out, Ken had a lot more time to play video games. He also had a lot more time to spend looking at pictures on the Internet of people having sex. He couldn't understand what all the uproar was about Internet porn, however. All of the women in these pictures looked so bored and unhappy. He reasoned that most men looked at Internet porn just because it was forbidden to do so, not because it was all

that enjoyable. After the initial excitement of seeing something new and forbidden had worn off, Ken found Internet porn to be as dull and unsatisfying as his job at Light Speed Engineering.

A few months after his wife left him, Ken started to miss having real people around. He tried calling her to get her to come back home, but she had another man by then, a doctor who was rich and charming and who really appreciated her. Ken's son didn't want to come back home either. The boy told Ken that he hated him and never wanted to see him again. Ken brushed it off, but his son's words hurt Ken deeply.

In these precious few moments left, Ken realized that he had failed at life. He was about to be cut to pieces by his own government just because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It made no sense. It was all so stupid, so meaningless.

Ken opened his eyes. The helicopter dropped close to the ground as it screamed toward him. He could see the big green helmet of the pilot inside. Then Ken remembered a poem he had read in high school:

"If I had my life to live over again,
I wouldn't take things so seriously.
I would climb more mountains,
swim more rivers, watch more sunsets.
I would ride more merry-go-rounds.
I would pick more daisies...."

The helicopter was very close now. Ken wished he had spent more time with his son. Maybe the boy wouldn't have gotten into so much trouble at school. He gathered up all of his courage and lifted himself off the ground. He held his head high and faced the helicopter to make an easier target. Then, Ken solemnly raised his

middle finger in salute to the Apache pilot and shouted with abandon, "*Kiss my ass, cowboy!*"

CHAPTER 14

Just what does it do?

The corporate limousine rolled into Slapout. The streets were empty. "Where did the army go?" Beth asked.

Sangria Cruz sat facing Beth, Bill, and Roxanne. She took a deep drag on her unfiltered Lucky Strike cigarette and said, "I made a phone call." She tapped on the glass between her and the driver. "Stop here." The limo halted abruptly in front of the Light Speed Engineering plant.

"Get out," Sangria said.

Beth and Roxanne scooted out of the car.

"Not you," Sangria said to Bill. The limo door slammed shut and the long black car headed out of town.

It was quiet for a long time. The flat brown Oklahoma landscape streamed past them. Sangria finally said, "I think you are concerned about your friend the draftsman?"

"Ken looked pretty bad," Bill said.

"You will not worry. I have taken good care of him," Sangria said and smiled slightly. She pulled her sunglasses off for the first time since they met. Her straight red hair hung down over one of her luminescent green eyes.

Sangria Cruz was the most attractive young Bolivian woman Bill had ever seen, and the scariest. His palms began to sweat.

"Mr. LaMeer. I would like to talk about the prototype," Sangria said. "As you know, my company in Bolivia spends six million American dollars a year on your Light Speed operation here in Oklahoma. That is six million dollars a year, *every year*, since 1997." She took another deep drag on her cigarette and exhaled a thick cloud of blue smoke in Bill's direction. "Please explain to me, Mr. LaMeer, how a barn in Hooterville can cost six million dollars a year."

Bill's stomach tightened into a hard knot and he had to fart something fierce, but it was very close in the limo, and he wasn't doing that well with corporate right at the moment. "We've had a setback or two...."

"A setback?" Sangria interrupted her tone not as polite as before. "You and your people have been working on this device for almost ten years, and we have yet to see a return on our investment."

"We'll be finished up pretty quick."

"What exactly needs to be finished?"

"Well," Bill said, "the reactor housing needs to be... more robust...."

"This prototype has a *nuclear reactor*?" Sangria asked not hiding her astonishment.

"Well, it's a lot more involved than you would...."

"Just what does it do?" Sangria interrupted again.

"What does *what* do?"

Sangria was visibly angry now and leaned forward in her seat and spat at Bill, "Do not play this game with me, Mr. Engineer! One word to my driver and you and all of your friends in Hooterville will be working deep in a coal mine on Lake Titicaca!"

Bill suddenly shifted in his seat.

Sangria's expression changed from anger to disgust. "Madre d' Dio!" she moaned. She pinched her nose and immediately opened a window to let in fresh air.

"Sorry," Bill said.

CHAPTER 15

Bolivia is quite lovely this time of year.

Connie Cruz burst into the R&D office at Light Speed Engineering and cried, "Many men from our corporate headquarters have just come into the plant! They have brought a bus and they are putting everyone in it! What should we do?"

Beth, Margo, and Roxanne jumped to their feet. "Who's in charge when Dr. Cruz isn't here?" Beth asked Connie.

"Bill. Bill's in charge even when Uncle Fernando is here," Connie said.

"Bill's with the Spider Woman," Roxanne said. "Who's next on the totem pole?"

"I always go to Imelda. She's kind of like our mama at the company, but she's not here either," Connie said looking frightened. "I guess Dr. Fuoingh is in charge then."

Margo raised her hand. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. The army shot Dr. Fuoingh while he was trying to run away. He's dead. Sorry."

Connie looked at Beth and tears filled her big brown eyes. "Are they going to kill us, too?"

Beth picked up the phone. "Don't you worry, darling. I know someone who will help us."

Margo gasped, "I am not staying past five o'clock. I've got to study for an algebra exam!"

Beth dialed a number and switched on the speakerphone. The four women listened as the phone rang once and then someone answered, "Sally's of Slapout House of Beauty. Sally Husky speaking...."

The door to the R&D office flew open and the room filled with large dark men wearing white business suits and sunglasses. A moment later Sangria Cruz entered and looked coldly at the four women.

"Where is Bill?" Beth demanded.

"Mr. LaMeer insisted on joining your co-worker, Mr. Fritneck," Sangria said smoothly. She walked up to Roxanne and studied her a moment. She turned and looked at Margo, and then Connie. "So this is where our Mr. Bill spends his days... and my money."

"Why are you putting everyone on a bus?" Beth asked.

"Have you ever been to Bolivia?" Sangria said. "It is quite lovely this time of year."

"Not today!" Roxanne shouted and turned and socked the large dark man standing next to her square in the eye. He went down like a sack of potatoes. A second man hit the floor before Sangria's henchmen subdued Roxanne.

"Put them on the bus!" Sangria commanded.

It wasn't long before Sangria's chief bodyguard reported, "All of them are in the bus, Senora, but this bus is a pile of junk. It will not go faster than ten kilometers an hour."

"Take your men and the Light Speed device to the airfield in Woodward," Sangria said to the man. "I want this expensive pile of junk on a plane and on its way to Bolivia as quickly as possible. And, take the waitress

with you. The local television reported she knows something about this machine that the others do not."

"I will leave some men with you," the large man said.

"I can take care of this load of cattle," Sangria smiled and pulled a 9mm automatic pistol from the waistband of her white Capri stretchy pants.

CHAPTER 16

I honestly didn't think we'd live this long.

Not long after Sangria's henchmen and the prototype left Slapout, her limousine led the ancient school bus, carrying its unhappy cargo of Light Speed Engineering employees, slowly onto the highway for its trek to Woodward. They were on the road only a few minutes, however, before Sangria's limo driver slammed on his brakes causing Sangria to spill a large glass of vodka all over her white Capri stretchy pants.

Sangria angrily poked her head out of the limo's sunroof. In the middle of the road ahead stood three men next to a pristine 1968 Dodge Polara black and white police car. The big sedan was long enough to block the entire highway. The emblem on the door of the shiny old cruiser said, "SLAPOUT POLICE."

"What is this!" Sangria shouted from the top of the limo. She was plainly annoyed.

Mayor Bobby Brice, Hatchet Jack Amblin, and newly reinstated Chief-of-Police Lonnie Dan walked confidently up to the long black car. Lonnie's navy blue police uniform was a little tight in places, but it was starched, pressed, and imposing. "Please exit the

vehicle, Miss," Lonnie said with authority and tipped his tall "Smokey-the-Bear" hat.

Everyone on the bus opened windows and stuck their heads out to get a better look at what was going on.

Sangria ducked back into her limo and cursed at her driver, "We do not have time for this! Shoot those three stooges and clear the road!"

The large Bolivian man behind the wheel of the limo turned and smiled at Sangria apologetically. "Our company has given to me orders that there will be no shooting of the local people while we are in these United States. It is bad for business, Seniors."

"Bastardo!" Sangria hissed. She grabbed her 9mm pistol and poked her head back out of the sunroof.

Mayor Bobby, Hatchet Jack, and Officer Lonnie stood their ground. Bobby pointed to the bus behind Sangria's limo and said with all that he had in him, "Let them folks go!"

Years in law enforcement had given Officer Lonnie the skill to sense when a person was about to shoot at him. He turned his left shoulder very slightly toward Sangria, and in one smooth and subtle move, swung his right arm round back and drew the chromed Colt .44 service revolver from its black patent-leather holster on his hip.

Sangria gave Bobby a sour look and asked roughly, "And, just who in the hell are you?"

"I am the mayor of this town," Bobby said, "and the man wearing the boot that's kickin' your ass back to Bolivia."

Sangria drew her gun up over the roof of the car and pointed it at Bobby. There was a sharp "pop!" as she fired in the mayor's direction. People on the bus screamed.

"Drop the heat, honey!" Lonnie ordered.

Sangria could see Lonnie's big chromed revolver aimed squarely at her forehead. The large policeman clearly meant business. She let her gun slide off the roof of the limo and fall to the ground.

People started to cheer and shout and wave from the windows of the crowded bus.

"Bobby?" Hatchet Jack whispered.

"Yep?"

"What do we do now?"

"I'm not sure," Bobby whispered back. "I honestly didn't think we'd live this long."

Hatchet Jack felt his head. He looked behind him. On the ground some thirty feet away rested his new hat. Hatchet could see a neat 9mm hole between the words *John* and *Deer*. "Sweet Jesus," he said softly.

To be continued...

Slapout, Oklahoma
A true story.