

HEIGHT OF DANGER

By Nancy and Nolan Radke

*Start reading*

MAIN MENU

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Owen Putman stood motionless in the heavy tropical heat, the sun searing the Central American countryside around him with brilliant light. The roar of many machines, grinding their way through the bright red soil, surrounded him with a loud and constant clamor that made it almost impossible to hear. A lot of earth had to be moved to support the dam they were building on the wide river.

Owen lifted his hardhat, and used the back of his other hand to swipe at the sweat-covered dirt on his brow, while he watched the caterpillar earthmover take gigantic bites out of the mountainside just fifty yards in front of him. Red dust swirled through the air, then settled around the earthmover, as if trying to muffle the raucous noise. When the driver's head turned his way, Owen waved the bright yellow hardhat in the air, trying to get him to acknowledge his presence. He wanted to make certain the driver, Kelly, saw him, before he moved in closer.

Part of Chris Galbec's construction team, Kelly was one of those magicians who could make a giant earthmoving machine turn on a dime, tiptoe over a trench, or scoop soil next to a parked car without ever touching the paint job. He was a happy-go-lucky man in everything but driving his machine. At that he was an artist, and deadly serious about safety on the job.

As Owen waited, Kelly stopped the earthmover and stared up at the slope. He had been cutting away at it with his bucket, moving tons of dirt from the side of the cliff, which he had piled up beside him to be loaded on the trucks as soon as they got back from the dumpsite.

Owen knew better than to march unannounced up to any worker on the site, so waited for Kelly to indicate that he had seen him. The man suddenly stiffened.

"Rock!" he screamed, pointing upward, at almost the same instant throwing the machine into gear and driving it at top speed straight toward the cliff—and away from Owen.

Owen glanced up to where Kelly had pointed, to see the "rock"—a huge boulder dislodged from the top of the cliff—thundering down upon them. It tumbled end over end, gathering speed as it descended, as if enraged by the men cutting away at its foundation. With each turn it bounced higher and higher in the air, an unstoppable, mindless entity, carrying a quantity of red dirt, small rocks, and pieces of foliage along with it.

The sound of devastation was now louder than the engines of the machine and the distance to safety looked impossibly too far. Unconsciously, Owen gauged the speed of the tumbling giant, of the swiftly receding earthmover, and his own speed. He wasn't going to make it.

It was headed straight for them. There was no room to run sideways, out of its way, so he raced for the earthmover, straining to run faster than his feet could move.

*That rock had better bounce high when it gets here and not come straight down, or I'm dead.* The thought had just flashed through his mind, when the boulder hit the slope fifty feet above him, shattering smaller rocks under the impact. The fragments shot out like shrapnel from a grenade, tearing his clothes and ripping into his flesh. Something hit him just above his left eye, causing him to involuntarily close it. The pain spurred him on, running faster than he'd ever run before.

The earthmover had stopped, nose-first into the bank, the treads still moving as if trying to push the mountain aside. Pelted by small rocks, Owen raced towards it, blood pounding in his head. A slip, a stumble, and he would be dead. With no time left, he dove frantically between the tracks. He reached them at the same time as the boulder, just in time to keep from being squashed.

The boulder grazed the back of the earthmover with a terrific clanging noise, the force of the blow bouncing the huge machine sideways as if it were a child's toy. The boulder continued on, while the earthmover slid to a stop on the loosened soil, making a small pile on the outside of the track. The machine rocked from the impact, and Owen did a quick scramble to stay underneath, while trying to keep from being crushed. It stopped with a loud clunk, the tracks squealing in protest.

He waited until the smaller rocks settled, then tried to pull his leg free of the pile of dirt dumped around him. It was trapped, the tread sitting on his pant leg, just enough that he couldn't move. The smaller rocks and dirt brought down buried his right foot. He yanked it free as his thoughts raced. Had someone found out who he was? Was this one meant for him?

The blood pounded so hard in his head that he almost blacked out. He gasped in air, still filled with swirling dust, and choked on it. Did Kelly know he was underneath?

Owen reached for his knife to cut himself free. He was laying on it, and had to work the leather strap off first. In his haste he fumbled with the strap.

He heard Kelly jump off the machine, then the scrunch of soil as he ran around to the back. "Opie! Opie! Are you under there? Did you make it?" Kelly shouted, his voice frantic with fear.

"I'm okay, Kelly," he yelled back. "I'm caught though. The track is holding down my pant leg." He got the strap off his knife, but he was caught between the pile of soil and the earthmover, so that he was unable to turn and cut away his jeans.

Kelly stuck his head underneath, so he could see where Owen was trapped. "Man, I thought we'd lost you," he gasped. "I was too busy trying to get close to the cliff to see what you were doing. Then after the boulder bounced over us, all I could see was your smashed hardhat." He looked closer at what Owen was trying to do.

"You look less than an inch from losing that leg. Throw me the knife and I'll cut you free."

Owen tossed it the short distance in a flat, sideways trajectory, and Kelly crawled underneath, picked up the knife, then worked his way around to where Owen's leg was trapped. He hacked at the jeans until Owen could move, then they both crawled out and stood up.

Owen brushed off some of the red dust and glanced about to see what damage had been done. His hardhat lay where it had landed when he started to run. It was cracked in two, completely flattened. It made his head hurt to look at it.

The boulder had continued to tumble further down the slope, coming to rest between two oversized dump trucks. It was about the same size as the trucks and smaller than the earthmover, but the earthmover was a huge machine, brought in to cut down the sides of the mountain, all the way to bedrock, necessary when building a dam.

Owen stretched, lifting his arms upward. The sun was still shining, the tropical birds were still singing, and the monkeys were chattering away. He stared up into the intense cobalt blue of the sky and smiled. He was alive. And relatively uninjured.

He started to walk, realized his legs weren't quite yet steady, so stood there, trying to look unaffected as he brushed the dirt off his T-shirt. He drew in some steadying breaths and passed his fingers through his hair, dislodging more dirt. And blood. That had been close. You couldn't do anything to protect yourself against something that big, except run. Not even time to pray.

*Had it come down on its own, or had it been helped?*

Kelly appeared shaken, but unharmed, his eyes the only clean things on his dirt-covered face. The earthmover's steel cage, built to withstand falling trees and chunks of stone, would not have saved him if the boulder had hit square on, but it and his hardhat had kept the cascade of smaller rocks from killing him. He looked at Owen and frowned.

"Your head is bleeding."

Owen ducked his head toward him. "How bad?"

Kelly brushed away some of the dirt and examined the cut. "It looks worse than it is. It's not deep."

"Head wounds always bleed a lot."

"I've a clean pad in the first aid kit. Do you want it?"

"Do I need it?"

"Not really. That cut over your eye is worse, and it's stopped bleeding. It's swollen, though, and you might get a shiner." He wiped his hands across his eyes. "I'm glad you heard me, Opie, and had time to dive underneath. I didn't have the room to try to get out of its path, so drove straight into the mountain."

"What made you think you'd be safe, driving further under it?"

"Experience. Rocks bounce as they come down. It would either bounce over us, or land smack dab on top of us. We didn't have time for anything else. We were just lucky."

"I just hoped you knew I was there, and didn't drive over me, trying to get out of the way."

"I knew. I saw your truck coming and figured you had a message from Chris."

"I do. Chris wants you to pull out of this area while they do some more blasting. He's got men out setting up the charges."

"Okay. I'll be glad when we get our radios working again."

Even the radio malfunction had been mysterious. Chris had his own shortwave equipment, so that he could keep in radio contact with his men. He could call everyone at the same time, when needed. The men were using walkie-talkies while the radio was being repaired, but often they couldn't be heard above the noise.

Owen gingerly rubbed the back of his shoulder, which he had hit fairly hard on the underside of the earthmover. It would hurt for a few days, that was all. He'd been lucky, he'd heard the warning shout, and had been close enough to the earthmover to get protection.

He took some more deep breaths as he stared up the side of the mountain to the spot where the boulder had been. Then he looked past the spot, on both sides. Some movement up there caught his attention, but he couldn't tell who or what it was. He thought he saw a person.

*Deliberate sabotage?* The question no longer looked to be if it was taking place, but who was doing it. So far no one had been killed. Murdered, if these were not accidents.

Why had the CIA decided they needed to send an agent to investigate? Owen still hadn't figured out why Walt had sent him in. There had to be a reason.

"Can you move your machine?" Owen asked.

"I don't know. That boulder smashed into my tracks. I probably have some damage."

Kelly walked alongside the earthmover's tracks, checking the treads. "These three are toast and this one may be ruined, too. When a boulder comes down, bouncing like that, it's sometimes safest to be close to the mountain and hope it bounces over you."

"Which it did."

"Lucky for me. It smashed several of these treads. Did you hear them screech when they tried to turn? I doubt I can move it. I'll have to put on a new track."

"Can't you just replace each individual tread?"

"I'll let the shop do that. For me it'll be quickest to put on a new track. All I have to do is lay it down, drive off this one—if it will drive at all—and move onto the new one."

He walked back toward the cab. "Don't leave until I try it out." He started the engine and put the machine slowly into motion, stopping when it immediately protested with a loud shriek. Shaking his head, he turned off the engine, climbed out, and rejoined Owen.

They walked back to the truck Owen had driven out, and climbed into the cab.

"Have you had any other calls that close?" Owen asked, as he slammed shut his door.

"Almost. A boulder the size of a small car rolled in front of me one time. That was in Italy." The driver held out his hand, which still showed a fine tremor. "It doesn't matter where you work, when it gets you, it gets you. It's no safer at home, driving in traffic around Houston. Still dangerous."

Owen started the truck, then turned it around to drive them back to the base camp. "You were looking up when it came down. Did you see anyone up there?"

Kelly gave him a measured look. "No. Are you thinking what the rest of us are thinking? That these happenings are deliberate? I've worked with Chris for years, building dams all over the world. He keeps pretty much the same team with him, hiring local men as needed. He's always had an excellent safety record. No one can avoid all accidents on a job this size, but these have all come once the dam was half built. I wonder if one of the our new men is causing the problems."

"Not me," Owen said, half-laughing as he lifted one hand in denial.

"No, not you. Or you wouldn't have been anywhere around there when that rock came down."

"I agree." Owen shifted up as he hit smoother ground. "Chris feels there are too many of these incidents to be classified as accidents. It's hard enough to build a dam and keep the men safe, without someone deliberately trying to sabotage the work. I'm going to ask Chris to let me go up there and look around while the blasting crew is placing their charges. If someone did push that boulder, there might be some marks left."

"Which will be erased when the slope is blown," Kelly said.

"Correct."

"Or, it could be that the soil underneath it was loosened enough to make it fall."

"That's the trouble with so called 'accidents.' You have to check out each one."

Some may truly be just an accident, but with the number of them happening, some have got to be caused.”

Kelly nodded and shifted in the seat to glance out at the construction site. The trucks and tractors were moving away from the cliff. Only his machine still sat there. “I was a squad leader in Iraq. I’d love to go after whoever is messing with us. I’d come with you, but I have to get my machine out of the way. I doubt Chris will want me to leave it. But they can’t set anything off while I’m moving my rig, so that should give you plenty of time. Good luck, Opie.”

“Thanks.” They bounced along the dirt road and across the river on the temporary bridge to the construction camp. Owen pulled the truck into the motor pool, a large fenced-in yard, and parked alongside several others.

“Are you in good health, Señor Owen?” Juan, the older man whom Chris had put in charge of the vehicles, stared at them. “You look like you crawled through a hole.”

“Almost, Juan,” Owen replied. “We had some dirt dumped on us, that’s all.” He still could hardly believe he was alive, or not seriously injured. He didn’t want any more close calls like that one.

Juan nodded, and they left him and walked over to the main office building, still trying to knock the clinging dirt off themselves. The building was portable, one that could be taken down at the end of a job and re-assembled in a new location. It consisted of an outer office where Chris’ secretary worked, then three others behind it in a cluster with a small hallway connecting them. Chris Galbec occupied the main inner office, while the other engineers had the adjoining rooms.

He looked up from his papers as they came in, saw the red dirt covering both of them, and instantly became alert. “What happened?”

Kelly answered. “A boulder happened. It bounced off the cliff, smashed one of my treads, and may have put two dump trucks out of commission.” He motioned towards Owen. “Opie stayed alive by diving under my machine. We don’t know if it fell because the cliff was unstable, or if someone started it rolling, but it just about squashed us. I’d been cutting away at the face of that mountain, but I’m always careful not to undercut something that will fall on me. You need to investigate this, Chris. Someone’s going to get killed.”

Chris nodded, the worry evident on the engineer’s face. He pushed his hands through his short, greying hair. “I asked the staff back in Houston to find someone and send him out. I haven’t heard if they’ve got anyone yet. Private detectives usually don’t investigate this type of thing. I was thinking of an ex-engineer, or maybe a safety inspector.”

Owen stepped closer to the metal desk, dented and scraped from being moved from one location to another. Like the rest of the furniture in Chris’ office, it was Army surplus, functional and served its purpose well, which did not include being decorative. Or impressive.

“I’m not a safety inspector,” Owen said, “but I’d like to climb up to where that rock came from, and see if there are any indications that someone pushed it. It just about turned me into a grease spot. I could probably get done before you’re ready to blast. You still have to get Kelly’s earthmover out of there.”

Chris nodded. “Good idea. But you’ve injured your head. Do you want Doc Mardon to look at you first?”

“No. Kelly said it wasn’t deep. I want to get up there before the tracks are gone. If there are any.”

“Then take a jeep and drive as close as you can. And take a walkie-talkie. Let me know when you’re clear.”

“Will do.” Owen turned to go.

“Wait.” Chris unlocked a drawer and reached inside. “Take this.” He handed Owen a holster along with a .45 caliber Kimber. It was a small pistol, only twenty-five ounces and a three-inch barrel, but the rounds could pack a wallop. “A holdover from Iraq,” Chris added. “If someone is up there, you might run into him.”

Owen nodded, took the gun, checked the clip, then the safety, and strapped it on. He pulled his shirt over it, grabbed a walkie-talkie from a box by the door, clipped it on his belt, and left. He had his own weapons in the country with him, in his suitcase, but he didn’t carry them around while working. None of the other men went armed, although they all had weapons. One of the chief forms of entertainment in camp at the end of the day was target practice and shooting competitions. He joined in, but made sure he didn’t win.

He didn’t pick up a new hardhat. Not yet. He wouldn’t need it as he walked through the rainforest, and if there were people up where he was going, he didn’t want the bright yellow hat advertising his presence.

Owen stopped at the motor pool shed and got a pair of jeep keys from Juan, then drove back across the river. He turned up the narrow dirt road that snaked through the mountains and went past the location of the smaller flood control dam—the one Kelly had been working on.

It was a new road, constructed to allow the workers access to this side of the dam. All the trees and brush had to be taken off where the new lake would be, all the way down to bare ground. This part of dam construction was like a logging operation. The lakebed had to be cleared before the water covered it, so the clearing crew had to work fast, as the lake area was so enormous.

When he figured he was as close to the boulder’s original site as he could get, Owen drove off the road into the brush. The jeep plowed through the branches, bouncing over roots and stones. He drove as far as he dared, which was but a short distance. The cliff was close, and he didn’t intend to drive the jeep off it. His watch had a built-in GPS unit, and he checked his coordinates, then half walked, half ran along the top of the mountainside, avoiding as well as he could the heavy foliage next to the cut.

The rainforest vegetation ended abruptly in the unstable cliff above the construction site, the vines from the trees hanging over it like eerie fingers reaching for the soil that wasn’t there. Looking at the soft ground underfoot, he wondered if he should have bothered. It seemed highly likely that the boulder had fallen because of the construction work. The dirt had dropped away, leaving the trees and other plants barely clinging onto the soil. He climbed past them carefully, working his way the last few feet over to where the boulder had been.

He revised his opinion when he reached the spot. The dirt was trampled down. Many footprints marked the area, and he took a while figuring them out. Squatting down, he studied the tracks.

Three, no four men, maybe six, they had used pry bars to loosen the boulder and start it on its way. Owen could see the marks left by the iron bars. He circled the area,



looking carefully for anything extra, but found nothing.

It had taken the men quite a lot of effort and probably some amount of time to get that rock to roll. They couldn't have controlled it enough to target him. He must have just driven up at the wrong moment.

Looking down at the site, he could see that Chris' men had moved the earthmover and the trucks. He'd been up here for well over an hour. It was time to leave. He took the walkie-talkie off his belt and turned it on.

A loud explosion, fairly close, made him jump backward. The nearby mountainside erupted. Startled, he watched it hump upward, then fall into the valley below.

*What the...?*

Chris' charges. They had been set in a line, starting at one side. Fortunately, the crew had started them on the side away from him, but they were coming his way, fast. It gave him a few precious seconds only. Not enough time to reach safe ground.