

Book One

THE HIGH LIFE

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Chapter 1

Chinatown on the Rio Bravo

The big flatbed truck rolled up shortly before noon. Its driver tried to downshift and apply the brakes at the same time. The truck almost stopped, lurched forward, crawled the last few yards to where the two men stood waiting, and wheezed to a halt, the Rio Bravo River running blue green and silent just beyond.

The air was dry and still. Dust thrown up by the truck billowed and shimmered in the sun and began to settle. Under a blue California sky, the Sierra Nevada lay low on the eastern horizon, a pine-and-snow-topped backdrop for the foothills above the river, their high grass already brown and parched even though it was only April.

Jack Davis stood upstream about 20 yards. He had been looking at the river, running clear and high, trying to see the trout swimming in the shallows, but turned and watched as the truck pulled in.

Up closer, the two men walked toward the truck, eyeing its cargo. The near side door of the cab creaked opened slowly and a small, trim Asian man climbed down. "Excuse me, do you know where I can find Whitey Davis?" the man asked. He looked to be about 60 years old, was dressed in good casual clothes, and wore heavy black glasses.

“That’s me,” said one of the men, stepping forward and removing his sunglasses. “Professor Cheng?”

“Hello,” Professor Cheng said, extending his hand. “I’m glad we found you. The road’s a little confusing once you come off the highway down at Bakersfield.”

“Welcome to the Rio Bravo hydroelectric project,” said Whitey. He was Jack’s brother and the project manager for Catapult Energy, Jack’s power company and the owner of the project.

The second man with him walked slowly alongside the rig, looking up at the big pieces of hydroelectric equipment lashed to the flatbed. “This gear have a manual in English?” he said, standing in his Oakleys facing the rear of the truck, his back toward Professor Cheng.

“Professor Cheng, this is Pete Bright, Catapult Energy’s chief engineer,” said Whitey.

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Bright,” said the professor.

Pete Bright didn’t respond, but kept studying the flatbed’s cargo.

On the flatbed, a collection of raggedy men began to crawl out from the spaces between the equipment where they had been riding on makeshift mattresses and bedding. The men were small, brown, and wiry, their pants tied with rope or twine at the waist. Some of them wore flip flops, others what looked like the disposable slippers they hand out at the hospital.

Professor Cheng spoke to the workers. One of them answered, standing on the truck bed and speaking nonstop for about three minutes in Chinese. Soon all the men on the truck were talking among themselves in Chinese.

Jack Davis stood and watched, the sun moving up in the sky, burning down on his wavy brown hair and tanned, roughhewn face.

“He says they can install the turbines quickly,” said Professor Cheng.

“That’s not what I asked you,” said Pete Bright. “Where’s the manual?”

Professor Cheng spoke once more to the Chinese man on the truck who appeared to be the foreman. He replied in Chinese for several minutes, while the others kept speaking back and forth to one another.

“He says the men are very tired. They’ve been up since we unloaded the units from the ship in Long Beach yesterday,” said Professor Cheng.

“Jesus Christ! Can you just answer my question? Where’s the manual for this stuff?”

The Chinese men all stopped talking and turned and stared at Pete Bright.

The professor looked at Pete, then turned and asked the foreman a question. The foreman spoke more slowly but kept talking. The professor started to raise his voice, and the foreman raised his. “*Meiyou.*”

The professor spoke in what sounded like reproachful language to the foreman, who spit back, “*Meiyou!*”

“What does ‘mayo’ mean, Professor?”

The professor and the foreman stopped talking and together looked back at Pete Bright.

“Is anyone going to answer me?”

“There is no manual, Mr. Bright,” said Professor Cheng.

“No manual at all? Christ Almighty! How the hell are we going to install this iron? Jack, you’re out of your goddamned mind buying this junk,” Pete Bright yelled upriver toward where Jack Davis was standing.

“Pete, we all inspected this stuff in Wuhan,” Whitey said. “We know it works. Besides, they install it, not us. Quit being such a control freak. We don’t have to get involved. Let them sort it out.”

“Yeah, that’ll work out just fine,” said Pete. “Look at these guys. You expect me to believe they’re going to be able to assemble two turbine gensets and install them in our project without screwing everything up? It doesn’t even look like they brought winches and cranes.”

“Mr. Bright, I assure you these men know what they are doing.”

“Yeah, but when it comes to my machines, Professor, I want to know what they’re doing, too.”

“I’ll personally see to it we get a manual delivered to you from Wuhan immediately,” the professor said.

“Yeah, and it’ll probably come in Chinese, right?”

“Pete, lay off him, for God’s sake,” said Whitey. “He’s just Wuhan Turbine’s agent. What do you expect from the guy?”

The men stood in their respective groups, looking at each other.

“Professor Cheng, I’ve made some reservations at the local Holiday Inn for the crew,” said Whitey. “If you want, they can get their gear

and I'll drive them over there to get cleaned up. It sounds like they've had a long night."

"Holiday Inn? Oh no, that's very kind of you but I don't think they'll be interested in staying there," said Professor Cheng.

"Well, where are they going to bunk? That's the only hotel around here."

Professor Cheng turned and looked upstream at a flat stretch of grass running along the river where Jack Davis was standing, seeing him for the first time. "If it's all the same to you, they can pitch their tents right over there."

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