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DRAMA IN REAL LIFE

INTO THE MUD

The landslide had swallowed
his neighbourhood, and
Kris Langton's family was in there

BY ANITA BARTHOLOMEW

All through last March, the tiny hamlet of Oso in Washington State, soaked in twice the usual rainfall. Winter and spring were always soggy in the verdant Stillaguamish River valley at the western edge of the Cascade Mountain Range. But this time the clouds outdid themselves.

So, when the sun at last rose into a bright blue sky on Saturday, March 22, 2014 LoAnna and Kris Langton's three older kids happily ran outside to play with friends who'd been at their house on C-Post Road, near Highway 530, for a sleep-over. Inside, LoAnna, 30, nursed their youngest, Kristian, four months old, while her own mom and her great aunt sat together on the couch.

Then, above the laughter of the children, LoAnna heard a new sound—like the roar of a jumbo jet. The lights began to flicker. Leaving the baby with her mom, LoAnna rushed outside and searched the sky. Nothing. The rumble was coming from behind the house. She turned to see the earth rise up on the 600-foot high tree-covered hill in the distance. Then it fell again, as if a monstrous bulldozer were pushing from behind. As she watched, a half-mile wide tsunami of churning mud, sand and debris came thundering down the hill toward them, knocking over hundreds of towering conifers like so many toothpicks.

The children screamed in terror. LoAnna gathered everyone into the bedroom farthest from the falling

hillside. There, she huddled with her loved ones and waited to die.

TALL, RUGGED, red-bearded Kris Langton and his father-in-law had left earlier that morning to haul a load of trash to the Arlington dump to the west. They were waiting to unload the pickup when the 31-year old carpenter got a hysterical call from his wife, LoAnna. The mountain had fallen, she cried. Houses had been swept away. People were screaming for help. He got the gist: Landslide.

The men sped back toward Highway 530 and home.

QUINN NATIONS, 33, shook his head at the derelict farm truck his buddy, Isaac Hall, had just bought. But the burly logger obliged when Hall asked for his help getting it home to Darrington, east of Oso. As Hall towed it behind his other truck, Nations steered the heap along Highway 530. Pretty soon, Nations heard sirens behind them. A state patrol car whizzed by. More sirens sounded in the distance. Something big had to be happening.

TRAFFIC ON 530 had come to a dead halt. Langton left his father-in-law in the truck and began jogging along the road. When people asked what was going on, he shouted, "Mudslide," and kept going.

State patrol officers were cutting power. Up beyond the emergency vehicles, the highway and everything on both sides of it were covered with a thick, wet, gray stew of sand, clay, snapped trees and chunks of what used to be homes. A roof sat in the middle of where the road had been.

His family was on the other side. He waded in.

Officers who understood the risks of venturing beyond the perimeter they guarded shouted for him to stop. No one could yet say how deep the mud might be. More of the hill could fall at any moment. And with the slide debris blocking its natural flow, the river was rising.

"If you want to stop me, you'll have to Taze me," Langton hollered, and kept going. Almost immediately, the mud came up to his knees.

Shimmying across a fallen tree, he chose his next steps carefully, over logs, pieces of drywall and unrecognizable detritus. It was slow going. He heard a woman scream for help. As he followed the sound through mud now

waist high, air bubbles popped in the muck. Small water geysers danced six inches off the surface. The river was rising under the mud.

Soon he had to belly crawl over the shattered remnants of houses to reach the source of the cries, about 100 yards from the road. From the massive pile of debris, "it looked like the

house had just rolled," says Langton.

At first, all he could see was an arm, reaching up through the ruins. He pulled away some smaller branches and a sofa cushion and there she was, a young, dark-haired woman, buried under pieces of walls, furniture, and trees. Her head was

bloody and gashed. One eye socket was damaged. A huge laceration stretched across one arm.

And she was holding a whimpering baby.

QUINN NATIONS and Isaac Hall were waiting for the traffic to clear on Highway 530 when a fellow logger, Kody Wesson, ran up and told them about the landslide. "There are people out there screaming for help!"

Rushing to where officers had cordoned off the highway, the men were threatened with arrest if they tried to pass. Then Nations heard a baby's cry. "We're going in," he said. Several more

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people left their vehicles and followed them. The mud was now chest-high.

LANGTON YANKED AND CLAWED

at the debris that had the woman trapped. Her name was Amanda, she said, and the baby's name was Duke. He was five months old. And he wasn't looking good.

Amanda said she couldn't feel her legs—another bad sign. Langton kept her engaged in talk while pulling away the wood, metal and furniture springs trapping mother and child.

At last, he was able to pull out baby Duke. By this time, Kody Wesson had made it to the site. Pulling off his sweatshirt, Langton turned it inside out and wrapped the baby inside. He handed Duke to Wesson and went back to digging out Amanda.

Right behind Wesson, Nations and



Quinn Nations

The hillside appeared solid but it was mostly sand and gravel. When rains saturated the hill last March, the soft sediment could no longer hold the wall's face together. In less than two minutes, mud buried approximately one square mile around Oso to depths of up to 18 feet.

several others tossed down planks, logs, boards, parts of walls and roofs—anything they could find to help make a bridge to carry out the victims to waiting ambulances.

Wesson walked a few feet toward Nations and sank almost to his neck, holding Duke above his head. "I grabbed Duke from him," says Nations, "and gave him to the next guy behind me." The tiny child had gone limp. Seconds mattered now. Duke got passed along until a paramedic took him. The child had stopped breathing, but a few quick CPR compressions brought a hearty cry. A helicopter whisked the baby away.

About 75 yards away, Isaac Hall spied a small boy buried up to his waist and went to dig him out.

With baby Duke on his way to safety, "I went on in to help the momma," says Nations.

With the logger now taking the lead on freeing Amanda, and others helping, it was time for Langton to go. He was still a mile from C-Post Road. He had to find his own family.

ONE OF THE firefighters had carried



a chainsaw into the mud from his rig. Now Nations had something to work with. He spent his days, power saw in hand, climbing up trees, sawing off limbs so the guys below could pull the trunk down.

He told Amanda to be brave—he was going to be cutting very close to her body. The stoic young mother covered her face and said, "Go for it."

For the next fifteen minutes, Nations sawed away as much debris as possible. He could see that Amanda's legs were broken.

Nations laid aside the saw. Her feet were still stuck, but he couldn't risk sawing any further down. He and two other rescuers, a firefighter and a civilian, agreed they had to yank her out. "Ma'am, this is going to hurt," said the civilian and Amanda nodded her con-

sent. The two other men grabbed her under her shoulders while Nations reached down as far as he could into the debris and grabbed her legs close to her ankles. They all pulled at once. She cried out in agony—but she was free.

The three men carried Amanda out to where rescuers from the helicopter hovering above could bundle her into a basket. A member of the rescue team then descended in a sling, and Isaac Hall handed up little Jacob Spillers, four years old, then climbed aboard behind him.

WADING AGAIN THROUGH a landscape turned upside down and inside out, Langton saw that up ahead, two houses had collided. One was now just half a house, lying on its side. He

PHOTO BY GEO RITTENMEYER

PHOTO/ILLUSTRATION CREDIT

Chris Langton helped save four people before making it home to find that his family had found safety.



heard a moan coming from the ruins.

Right then, he felt it with a certainty: LoAnna was all right. She'd called him after the hillside fell, so she hadn't been trapped in the slide. Whoever was moaning needed him more. He went to help.

"I took two steps and jumped and just sank into clay, up to my shoulder blades," recalls Langton.

His arms and legs immobilized, he was sure this was the end. Then he realized that by wiggling his torso, he could get some forward momentum and slowly managed to shimmy his way out far enough out of the mud and continue toward the ruins.

Inside the rubble he found an older man buried in house debris and tree limbs. He was at least twice Langton's weight and he'd probably been in the

shower; he had not a stitch on him. Alert and precise, the man told him his name was Tim Ward.

Ward was solidly wedged. He'd have to wait for more help. Meanwhile, Langton asked if anyone else had been in the house. Yes, Ward told Langton—his wife. Langton went looking for her, calling her name. What he heard in reply was the moan, not of a woman, but of another man, coming from the remnants of the second house.

Following the sound to its source, he pulled away a microwave, shattered walls and spare tires, but the man was buried too deeply for Langton to see him.

Hearing helicopter rotors above, Langton climbed up on the roof, met a member of the search and rescue

team and led him to Ward. Then he headed back to work on freeing the second man. Soon Langton could see he was buried facedown inside a couch. He uncovered a thigh, a foot. He kept digging.

"I get the back of the head. I get an arm," recalls Langton. The man said his name was Larry.

Langton was finally able to turn Larry over to face him. "And at that second, I see him, his face is covered with dishrags soaked with blood. The backs of his hands are peeled back."

Once Tim Ward was in the helicopter, the crew came to free Larry. It was time for Langton to go find his family.

HOURS LATER, Langton finally reached home. The mud had stopped just shy of their house. His truck was gone and all his work tools had been pulled out—to make room for the nine people who had been at the house, Langton realized. LoAnna had gotten everyone out.

He changed his clothes, checked cars and houses nearby for survivors, then walked back toward Highway 530 through rising water, hitching a ride to search-and-rescue's ad hoc command center outside Darrington.

LoAnna had driven everyone to the home of one of the children who'd been with her kids. An officer called to tell her, we've found your husband. Meet him at the command center.

The big carpenter's heart swelled as he saw the car coming down the

road. LoAnna pulled over, leapt out, and ran to him. He folded her into his arms and hugged her close for what seemed a long, long time. Softly, he spoke. "Let's go home, LoAnna. I've seen too much. Take me home."

The Stillaguamish River flooded the Langtons' house with three to four feet of water. They now live in Arlington, 12 miles west of Oso.

Just nine survivors were pulled from the mud, all of them on that day. Langton, Nations, Wesson, Hall and the other civilians who disregarded orders from officials are probably the only reason that five of them are still alive.

Over the next several weeks, Nations took charge of the grim task of finding the bodies of the 43 people who lost their lives. The last victim, 44-year-old Kris Regelbrugge, was pulled from the debris on July 22.

PHOTO BY GEO RITTENMEYER