

DEADLY LODGE

A Novel

Randall Reneau

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This book is for Lynne, Aimee, and Lacey.

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Prelude

Striking a match with the tip of his blackened thumbnail, the dynamiter knelt down and lit the fuse. He watched the acrid white smoke stream from the combustible cord. Satisfied the fuse was burning properly, he yelled, "Fire in the hole!" And hauled ass back down the drift. Thirty seconds later the blast shook the mine, sending dust roiling out the mine portal.

In the summer of 1891, near the small town of Winthrop, Washington, the Sullivan gold and copper mine operated around the clock. Mine manager Tom Delany worked long hours in the small log cabin that served as both his office and quarters. As he flipped-through the latest assays, a broad grin broke out on his face. The assays were good, damned good. The ore was averaging nearly three-quarters of an ounce gold per ton and 1.5 percent copper.

The only bad news in the assays continued to be the high levels of pitchblende, a uranium mineral discovered about a hundred years earlier. The heavy, dark mineral had no known economic value, and had to be separated from the gold and copper ore. A major pain in the butt, and an added expense. Shaking his head, Tom noted that every single assay contained uranium, often running as high as 10 percent.

"Jesus Maria," Tom said, to himself. "If they ever figure out a use for this damn stuff, somebody could make a fortune."

Uranium aside, he knew the Sullivan was a damned good gold and copper mine, and the assays on his desk proved it. He planned to bring his wife out from back east, buy a house in nearby Winthrop, and finish out his career working at the mine.

Glancing up from the assay reports and looking out his office window, Tom saw his day-shift foreman, Big Jim Maclean, striding toward the office. Big Jim was gesturing with his hands and looked to be talking to himself.

"Damn, this can't be good," Tom thought, as Big Jim burst through the door.

"Boss, two more men are down, and I mean down!" Big Jim boomed, while parking his huge frame into a not-quite-big-enough chair. "Puking their guts out, they are, down on level two."

"What in the hell is going on?" Tom asked, shaking his head in disbelief. "This is getting to be a full-time problem."

"By God, I have nary a clue, Tom. I've checked the mess hall provisions and chewed out the cook, but everything seems according to Hoyle. It cain't be the damn water, either. We all drink the same water out of Montana Creek. It's got to be something in the mine, cause the topside folks are fit as a fiddle."

"Any unusual odors in the mine?" Tom asked, thinking there could be some kind of mine gas present.

"You mean other than from miners that don't bathe real regular and fart more or less continually? Or them damn fumes from the dynamite?"

Tom laughed. "Yeah, other than those."

"I'll tell you what the miners think, Tom. They think the damned mine is cursed."

"Cursed, my ass. Look, Jim, I don't put any stock in such nonsense." Tom replied, then added under his breath. "Of course, neither did the fellow who stole the Hope Diamond."

"Hope, what?"

"Never mind, Jim. We've got to figure out what in the hell is going on here."

They needn't have worried. The mine would soon face a tougher problem than sick miners. It would come to be known as the Great Financial Panic of 1892. By 1893, the financial backers of the Sullivan Mine went bust, the mine closed, and talk of a curse was soon forgotten.

On the morning of June 23, 1946, everything at the abandoned Sullivan Mine appeared normal. Montana Creek gurgled along, the birds sang, and the insects buzzed. At a little past three in the afternoon, the birds quit singing, and the insects quit buzzing. The quake hit with megaton force. In seconds, the rocky slope above the mine avalanched down the hill-side, burying the mine portal under tons of rock and debris. Sealed and hidden, only the pitchblende remained at work, slowly decaying and emitting it's deadly radiation.

Significant events often begin modestly, and so it was with the great flood of 2003. The National Weather Service proclaimed the northern Cascade Range winter snowfall as an all-time record. Even grizzled high-country trappers said they could not recall, or even heard tell of, anything like the prodigious snow-pack now awaiting the spring thaw.

It began simply and gently. A warm zephyr followed by a drop in pressure caused the deer to snort and shake their heads. The rain began to fall, gently at first like a lover caressing a new partner; teasing, advancing, then climaxing in a torrent that consumed everything in its path.

The snow began to liquefy, first into rivulets like so many veins on the back of an old man's hand. Then coalescing into an arterial flow, swelling streams and drainages with a volume of water not seen since the retreat of the Quaternary ice. The deluge continued for days, funneling huge volumes of water, rock, and debris down canyons, reshaping the topography.

Montana Creek, now a raging torrent, began to eat away at the talus from the old landslide, rock and debris slipping inexorably into the muddy waters, no match for the abrasive mixture.

Great chunks of loose rock and soil broke away and disappeared into the morass. Little by little, a structure, not of nature but of man, began to emerge. Sections of square-cut timbers and pieces of worn steel rail were uncovered and pulled into the torrent.

As the flood waters exposed the Sullivan portal, dank, fetid air from the bowels of the mine rushed out. Hissing a warning to those who might seek her riches.

Chapter 1

Sitting with my feet propped up on my old cherry-wood desk, I was deep into re-reading a very hard-to-find copy of L. K. Hodges's *Mining in Eastern & Central Washington*. Written in 1897, it's arguably the best surviving record of mining in the late eighteen hundreds in this part of Washington State. And a book that never leaves my office.

I pulled out a pencil to make a few notes on old mines in the upper Methow River area. I'd just started to write when my desk phone rang. I jumped like a gut-shot bobcat. The pencil lead, leaving a check mark-looking thingamajig gashed across the paper in place of a word.

"Damnation." I muttered, picking up the phone. "Geology office, Trace Brandon speaking."

"Trace, Will Coffee here. Want to grab a beer at five?"

"You bet. Meet you at the First Inn?"

"See you there, amigo."

Will Coffee was a good friend and former classmate at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington. He'd been a star center for the CWU Wildcats football team while pursuing his business degree. After graduation, Will had gone on to get his law degree from Gonzaga, in Spokane. He was a stand-up guy and handy in an altercation.

While Will had been completing his undergrad and law degrees, I had knocked out my BS and MS degrees in economic geology at good old CWU. I had moved away from E-Burg, as the alumni referred to Ellensburg, after completing my masters.

Will had done likewise after passing the Washington State bar exam. Both of us had wanted to polish off any rough edges with a bit of Fortune 500 experience. Will had snagged work in the legal and land departments of Cal-Tex Oil Company in Los Angeles, while I had honed my mineral exploration skills with Continental Minerals Corporation in Denver, Colorado.

About eight years in the corporate meat grinder had done the trick. Now in our early thirties, well-honed, and still single, we'd migrated back to E-Burg and hung out our respective shingles. I had rented a second-floor office in the old Phoenix Building on West Sixth Street. Built just before the great Ellensburg fire of 1889, the building had been resurrected from the ashes and restored. Hence, the name.

At five sharp, I was standing in front of the First Inn, a long time E-Burg watering hole favored by the students at CWU. And by a few of the locals who could put up with them.

"Hey, Trace, how's it hanging?" Will said, ambling down the sidewalk from his nearby law and abstract office.

His office location just up the block from the First Inn, wasn't a coincidence.

"Twitching and slightly to the left, pard," I replied, with a smile.

Will laughed and shook my hand. "Boy howdy, can you believe this June weather?" he asked, glancing around. "Kind of makes you forget about last winter, don't it?"

"Yep, you can't beat E-Burg in the summer and fall," I said, opening the bar door.

The barmaid, Tina Hart, a tall, busty red-head with killer green eyes, spotted me and Will coming through the door and threw us a quick wave. Tina and I maintained an ongoing, semi-serious relationship. Meaning we slept together whenever possible. She often told me I reminded her more of a cowboy than a rock hound. She said it helped make up for me being just shy of good-looking.

I returned the wave and held up two fingers. Tina nodded and went to the bar to get two bottles of Tumbleweed Ale, known to the male student body as simply . . . T and A. Our usual libation.

In a couple of minutes, Tina made her way through the happy hour crowd to our table.

“Lordy, Lordy, if it isn’t Diamond Jim Brady and his trusted companion, Slick Willie,” Tina said, with a chuckle, handing us our Ales.

“I God, but you’re sassy, Tina,” Will replied, doing his best Gus McCrae imitation.

“Sassy, but damned good-looking,” I added, elbowing Will in the ribs.

“You know, Trace, for a guy with no money, you sure got a lot of style,” Tina said, with a laugh, before turning to the next table of thirsty customers.

“Yes, ma’am,” I called after her. “Thank you.”

“So, podjo, what’s shaking in the geology world?” Will asked.

I took a healthy pull of my ale and set the frosted mug on the table. “Well, since you brought it up, I have been doing some research on the old Winthrop mining district,” I replied. “I think I’ll head up that way in a couple of days and do a little prospecting.”

“Got wind of something?” Will asked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Nothing specific, but after a flood like this spring’s, a lot of fresh outcrop is exposed. You never know, a virgin vein might be sticking up shouting, ‘Come and get me, come and get me!’” I said, with a laugh, thinking about Curly in *City Slickers II*. “Anyway, it’s worth a look.”

“Well, keep me posted if you find anything worth staking. We, down at Dewy, Cheetum, and Howe, are always available to handle any legal or title work.”

“Roger that,” I replied, clinking my beer mug against Will’s.

A couple of days later, I packed up my 1976 Ford Bronco with maps, a GPS, a Brunton compass, clothes, boots, claim posts, the full-meal deal. My old Bronco looks a bit worn on the outside, but under the rough exterior she’s pure *Thunder Road*. Sporting a high-performance, 302-cubic-inch engine coupled

with a four-speed manual transmission and dual chrome exhaust pipes, she's my pride and joy, and a very fast mover.

From E-Burg, I headed up Highway 97 to Pateros, hung a left, and proceeded up Highway 153 along the Methow River. Just south of the town of Twisp, I picked up Highway 20 and rolled into Winthrop.

Too late to start any field-work, I checked into the Winthrop House, known locally simply as the W. The W would be my base camp for the next few days while I scouted out the area.

In my room, I spread topo and mineral management maps out on the bed and planned tomorrow's attack. The area I wanted to reconnoiter lay near the confluence of Montana and Goat Creeks. Historical mine production records from the area indicated good gold and copper values. One mine in particular caught my attention, the old Sullivan Mine.

Production from the Sullivan had ceased rather abruptly around 1893. This could simply be due to ore zones petering out. However, I had a hunch the culprit was the Panic of 1892.

Early the next morning, I gassed up, bought a pound of summer sausage, a six-pack of Tumbleweed, and a box of crackers, the basic field geologist's lunch; and headed out. Driving northwest along the Methow River on Highway 20, I turned off to the right on Goat Creek Road. I'd gone less than a quarter of a mile before the road got bad. I stopped, and locked the front hubs of the Bronco, and continued on in four-wheel drive. About two miles later, I hit the confluence of Montana Creek and Goat Creek. Pulling off the track, I parked and locked the Bronco, grabbed my backpack, and strapped on my Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum. I'd run into bears around here before. This time of year they could have cubs, and be damned dangerous. Backpack on, pistol loaded, I started up Montana Creek.

On the topo map, it looked to be about a mile to the old Sullivan Mine site. However, the spring mega-flood had pretty much destroyed the old mine road, slowing my progress to a snail's pace. After about two hours of working my way up the canyon, I looked up the steep slope to my left and could make out part of a mine entrance. I knew from Forest Service reports

that the quake of 1946 had triggered a landslide, sealing the portal. It appeared the talus had been washed away when Montana Creek flooded.

Adrenaline now in overdrive, I worked my way up the slope until I stood at the mouth of the old mine. I took my flashlight, pointed it down the dark adit and thumbed the on button. The adit looked open as far back as my light could penetrate. It's always a strange feeling to light up old mine workings, and the Sullivan was no exception. I could feel goose bumps on my arms.

Normally, I won't go into an abandoned mine when I am working alone. It's just too damn dangerous. I could see the obituary now: Dumb Shit Enters Mine Alone. As usual, curiosity overruled common sense. I needed to see the rocks and hopefully grab a few samples from the lode vein.

I took off my red CWU baseball cap, and dug my hard hat, light, and battery pack out of my backpack. My army-surplus webbed pistol belt carried my Brunton compass, rock hammer, and pistol. I also had a small Geiger counter in my shirt pocket.

Gearred up, I started into the mine adit. Most mines have a damp, earthy smell to them. Not this puppy. The Sullivan Mine flat-out stunk. A sickly-sweet smell of death and decay. As I moved cautiously deeper into the adit, I found skeletons of small dead animals I assumed had been trapped by the landslide.

All geologists and miners have a sixth sense about danger, and right now my sensor was in the red. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something wrong with this mine. At a bend in the adit, I saw a small alcove and what looked like a bunch of very old sample bags. Kneeling down, I looked at the tags on several of the bags. They appeared to be vein chip samples. The writing by now was too faded to make out the exact sample locations.

Opening one of the bags, I removed several of the larger rock chip samples. Even with my head lamp it was still too dark to identify all the ore minerals. However, I could make out copper oxides, pyrites, and a dark-gray mineral with a dull pitchy luster. The sample felt quite heavy for its size. On a hunch, I pulled out my pocket Geiger counter and held it to the

sample. The sample pegged the first couple of scales, each scale being ten times stronger. I went to higher and higher scales until I finally got a reading. Twenty-thousand counts per second. Very, very, hot rock. I re-bagged the rock chips and grabbed a couple of the old cloth sample bags and shoved them in my backpack.

The mine floor was covered with an inch or two of water from seepage. Moving down the adit, I kind of shuffled along. The roof of the working was clean, and I could pretty well make out the vein structure and geology. The pay zone appeared to be a big quartz vein sandwiched between a granodiorite, a type of granite, and schist.

I pulled out my Brunton compass and took a bearing down the strike of the vein. Two hundred eighty degrees to the northwest. I followed the overhead vein, taking Geiger readings and knocking off and bagging fresh samples. I was already spending the money when the floor disappeared from under my feet, and I was underwater.

I immediately knew two things. The first being, that I had stepped into a flooded vertical winze, a shaft connecting one or more mine levels. And secondly, I could be in serious trouble.

Bobbing back to the surface, I managing to hang onto my hard hat and compass. Drown if I must, but no way in hell was I losing my antique solid-brass Brunton. Treading water, I pocketed my compass and adjusted my hard hat and light and looked around. I'd stepped off into a winze all right. Walked right into it like a first-semester geology student. I'd made a classic amateur mistake of not cutting a walking stick to probe for holes as I be-bopped down the mine . . . un-damned believable.

There was only one choice. Pull myself out. I kicked my way to the edge of the winze but couldn't quite get a hold with my fingers. My main malfunction was all the weight I was carrying. The damned samples in my backpack were threatening to pull me under. One thing about uranium; it's a seriously heavy mineral.

I managed to shrug out of my backpack. Kicking as hard as I could to stay afloat, I shot-putted my pack to solid ground on the portal side of the adit. I could stay afloat now, but needed to

find a place to crawl out. The water smelled like dead rats and was cold as ice.

Now in full-blown survival mode with Mr. Hypothermia tapping me on the shoulder, I worked my way into a corner of the winze, where I could get some leverage with my steel-toed boots. Using my rock hammer like an ice pick and jamming my toes into any purchase, I managed to pull and crawl my way out.

My ascent from the abyss probably wouldn't have made the next issue of *Rock Climber*, but I made it out. Cold and smelling like week-old kitty litter, I grabbed my pack and headed, a bit more cautiously, back to the portal.

Clearing the portal, I went straight to Montana Creek and cleaned up as best I could. I draped my clothes over huckleberry bushes and laid out my gear and myself over several large, flat, sun-warmed boulders.

I'd nearly drowned in some damned stinking mine, and now, lying bare-assed in the sun, my mind started drifting back to my last date with Tina. Jesus, I thought, guys really are hopeless.

After a nap, I put my mostly dry clothes back on and rounded up my gear. I was anxious to see how the samples looked in sunlight. I opened a couple of sample bags and examined several of the larger rock chips with my ten-power hand lens. I confirmed the presence of chalcopyrite, a copper sulfide, secondary copper minerals, pyrite, and a ton of pitchblende.

Holy moly . . . this could be good, I thought as I bagged up the samples.