

The Lightning Stones: A Novel

By Jack Du Brul

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What was Amelia Earhart carrying on her final flight? The adventure begins two thousand feet beneath the surface of the Earth.

Philip Mercer, a preeminent geologist with a taste for international intrigue and danger, rides an elevator two thousand feet into the earth at the Leister Deep Mine in Minnesota. Mercer is there to visit his old friend and mentor, Abraham Jacobs, who is leading a research team to the deepest section of the mine for a groundbreaking study on climate change. But as Mercer approaches, he is stunned to hear automatic gunfire in the massive underground chambers. By the time he finds his way to them, Abe Jacobs and the entire research team have been brutally attacked—and Mercer is left seeking not only answers but revenge.

Mercer immediately retraces Jacobs's tracks, searching for clues to the secret project on which the distinguished scientist was working. Staying one step ahead of a highly trained team of assassins, Mercer follows a trail that leads from a harrowing close call in the Midwest to a nail-biting showdown in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan to a remote island in the middle of the Pacific. At stake is an extraordinary scientific discovery that could irrevocably alter the planet, centered on a cache of rare crystals called lightning stones—rumored to have been aboard Amelia Earhart's plane when it vanished on July 2, 1937.

With his trademark combination of intellectual swagger, riveting action, and cutting-edge science, internationally bestselling author Jack Du Brul has crafted a superbly entertaining novel that will thrill his fans.

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Editorial Review

Review
THRILLER WRITERS ARE RAVING ABOUT *THE LIGHTNING STONES*

“Fresh, original, and incredibly ingenious, *The Lightning Stone* is one of the best thrillers I have read in years. This is wall-to-wall excitement! Nobody writes like Du Brul.”
– **BRAD THOR,** #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Code of Conduct*

“I don’t know how he does it, but Jack Du Brul just gets better with every book. In *The Lightning Stones*, his hero Philip Mercer—as good with a gun as he is with a geological survey map—really comes into his own. This is the most un-put-downable thriller I’ve read in ages.”
– **LINCOLN CHILD**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Forgotten Room*

"Wow! *The Lightning Stones* is a labyrinth of science, history, action, and adventure, featuring the wary geologist/spy Philip Mercer. A perfect blend of menace with normality. Without question, Jack Du Brul is one of the thriller genre’s acknowledged masters."
– **STEVE BERRY**, #1 internationally bestselling author of *The Patriot Threat*

"*The Lightning Stones* is a rip-roaring, globe-trotting, seat-of-your-pants adventure novel extraordinaire. Even better, it is whip smart and as topical as it is exciting. Jack Du Brul has outdone himself and given us an absolutely first rate novel and a gripping good read!"
– **CHRISTOPHER REICH**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Invasion of Privacy*

About the Author
Jack Du Brul became a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author with Clive Cussler, cowriting the Oregon series, which has become a fan favorite. Du Brul is also the author of earlier bestselling novels featuring Philip Mercer. He lives in Vermont with his wife.

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chapter 1

Leister Deep Mine, Minnesota

Today

For the trapped miner the blackness was an absolute. It was his entire world. It filled every nook and cranny in the collapsed tunnel. It was a clammy presence on his skin, like he was pressed up against a corpse. The black had weight, like it was squeezing him as though he wore a too-tight diving suit. And that weight intensified every time he breathed, for the black invaded his lungs, crushing them, making him feel like he was taking in a warm liquid that he had to cough out. It coated the back of his throat like a noxious oil, slick and cloying. It filled his ears, jamming them so even when he screamed as loudly as possible, it sounded like a distant echo of a child’s whimper.

The black. It was his entire world, and if rescue didn’t come soon he was certain that it would begin to invade his mind as it had already subsumed his body.

Fifty yards and a world away, Hans Gruber, a taciturn German who was sick of the jokes people made about his name, picked his way past a jumble of crushed rock—detritus from the cave-in that littered the floor of the shaft some one thousand feet below the midwestern prairie. He wore heavy work clothes that were streaked and caked with dirt. An oxygen tank was strapped to his back although he and his team hadn't detected any poisonous gases. The LED lamp on his helmet cast a bright blue cone in the otherwise stygian realm in which he worked.

Making the going even tougher were the four-foot-long steel bolts that had once held the collapsed ceiling together. There were hundreds of them sticking up in the rubble that blocked the tunnel, and each one seemed to snag at his clothes and tear at his skin like skeletal fingers. The dust was mostly settled since the cave-in, but motes still hung suspended. The air was perfectly still—a sure sign that the ventilation was not working in this section of the mine. Another in a long string of omens.

Behind him the rest of his crew was busy with the screw jacks. A steel forest had grown in their wake. His men had erected dozens of polelike jacks to help stabilize the hanging wall over their heads and hold back, at least until they could finish with the rescue, the millions of tons of rock above them.

Three hours earlier, on what was otherwise a normal Tuesday in the mines, a crew was shoring up the roof in this section of tunnel by drilling holes into the ceiling and then using a pneumatic tool to twist the screw bolt into the living rock, binding the otherwise unstable matrix until it was no longer a threat to those who had to work under it. This mine was known for poor rock conditions, but men had worked it successfully for years without a fatality from a cave-in. The techniques and safety protocols were perfected and the men followed them to the letter, and yet Mother Nature and gravity care not for proper preparations. Without so much as a groan, a fifty-foot-long section of ceiling at least six feet thick had crashed to the floor of the tunnel. Fortunately the men coming behind the "screw crew" to fill the holes with grout to prevent the metal from rusting in the hot humid air hadn't yet reached the site of the collapse, so none of them were struck by the fall. But there were miners on the far side, and it was up to Gruber and his rescue team to reach them.

As the point man, it was Gruber who wielded the fifteen-pound steel bar and jabbed at the ceiling, prying at loose stones still hanging dangerously above them. The roof over their heads was a fractured mass of stone that could collapse at any second. With each poke and thrust, head-size chunks of stone fell to the scree-littered ground. Many times they would bounce toward Gruber, and he would need to jump aside.

It was hot, filthy work, and sweat cut runnels through the dust, smearing his face. He paused to check on the man directly behind him.

The second rescue worker gave him a nod of encouragement and a thumbs-up. "Yippee-ki-yay, Hans."

For once Gruber didn't mind the Die Hard reference. He got back to work, probing and jabbing and inexorably moving deeper and deeper into the collapsed section of the mine. There were three men waiting for him someplace ahead. Odds were they had been horribly crushed, their bodies nothing more than tissue stains, but there was always the chance one or more had been beyond the avalanche and unharmed. It was Gruber's job today to defy the odds and pull them out alive. It was the hope of rescue that allowed men to overcome the twin primal fears of darkness and enclosed spaces, and venture into the hellish mazes of underground mines. Like soldiers behind enemy lines knowing their buddies were looking for them, miners too needed that promise of salvation in order to hold out until help arrived.

Gruber jabbed at yet another weak spot in the ceiling and caused a mini-avalanche of loose rock and at least one boulder to fall. Pebbles rained off his miner's helmet, and for a few seconds the air filled with thick

choking dust. He opened the tap on his air tank and took a few purifying breaths before stowing the mask. That air was for the men he was to rescue, he chided himself, not for his own comfort. He crawled on, climbing up and over a taller hillock of stones and debris, pressing himself nearly to the top of the tunnel, his heels scraping the hanging walls as he wriggled forward on his belly. The passage ahead appeared completely blocked.

So far they hadn't had to shift a lot of material, but it seemed now they would have to laboriously clear the tunnel one stone at a time.

Gruber reached and stretched and pressed hard against the wall of junk rock and felt the pile blocking the top couple of feet of the passageway shift. He dug his feet into the debris and pushed even harder, his gloved fists like the blade of a bulldozer as he used his tremendous strength to push the obstruction back and finally down the far side of the hillock.

Even as the rocks skittered and jumbled down deeper into the mine he heard a weak voice cry for help.

With a flash of excitement, Gruber realized he had reached the end of the cave-in.

"I think we have one!" the German shouted. He crawled faster, thrusting his head through the debris as though the earth itself was birthing him.

His light revealed that the tunnel beyond was all but unobstructed. Twenty feet farther in he saw the hulking pneumatic drill machine the miners had been using to bolt the ceiling. And between him and it lay one of the men. The miner's helmet was lying a few feet away, and it looked like one of his legs was pinned.

Gruber wiggled and fought until the rock finally released him, and he slid down the pile of shattered stone and crawled over to the trapped miner. Overhead, the ceiling appeared to be solid and undamaged.

"It's okay," he told the man.

The miner looked to be in shock. He'd been in darkness so long that Gruber's light seemed to blind him.

"Thank God," the man finally said. Gruber held a canteen to the miner's lips and let the man drink thirstily. So much so that he started to choke, and half the fluid he took down came back up again.

"Let's look at your leg. How does it feel?"

"It doesn't hurt," the miner replied with a cough. "It's just pinned."

"We'll have you out and in a bar before you know it."

"Can you find my helmet and turn on the light? It's been so dark .?.?." The miner's voice trailed off.

"Sure thing, my friend. What's your name?"

Gruber stretched out to grab the man's helmet.

"I'm Tom Rogers."

Hans flipped the switch to turn on the lamp.

“Boom!” The voice was so loud it echoed.

“Vas?” Gruber gasped, and looked about.

“I said boom,” the second rescuer repeated; it was the man who had given Gruber encouragement just moments before. “You just killed yourself, Tom there, and most importantly you killed me.”

“Nein,” Gruber protested. “Das ist bullshit.”

“Das ist neicht bullsheet,” the man replied, mimicking Gruber’s excited German accent. The second rescuer finished climbing through the tiny aperture and slid down to the tunnel floor on his butt, planting his feet firmly when he landed. When he spoke again any teasing in his voice had evaporated. “Check your gas detector.”

Sheepishly, Gruber peeled back the cloth cover of the device hanging in a bag over his shoulder. The detector wasn’t switched on for this training exercise, but pieces of paper like a tear-off pad had been affixed over the digital display. As they had progressed through the rescue, Gruber had checked the meter at various way points by tearing off the topmost sheet. The page below had always said “clear.” This time he tore off the penultimate piece of paper. Below it was written “Methane at explosive concentrations.”

“But I didn’t cause any sparks,” Gruber protested. “I left the pry bar up on top of the debris, and there is no metal on me that could cause a spark. The methane could not explode.”

By now the “trapped” miner, Tom Rogers, had regained his feet and was dusting off his coveralls. Like Hans Gruber, Rogers was another trainee, and he leaned in eagerly to see what had gone wrong. Other than Hans giving him water too fast, which he’d spit back out to indicate the gaffe to his classmate, he thought Gruber had performed a textbook rescue.

“Look at Tom’s headlamp,” the rescue instructor said.

“The electronics are vacuum sealed,” Gruber said. “The lamp cannot cause an explosion.”

Philip Mercer pulled off his goggles and headgear, and fixed his gray eyes on Gruber in a serious stare. “That’s why I said to look at it,” he said with just a trace of irritation.

This was the twentieth time Mercer had led the miners on this, their final test, with each person taking point to show off what they had learned after two weeks of classroom instruction and field training. Mercer was justifiably tired.

Gruber examined the lamp under the white aura of his own. “Scheisse,” he cursed when he saw his mistake.

“That’s right,” Mercer said, pointing to the lamp. “The lens is cracked. That allowed methane to seep into the light, and when you flipped the switch the initial arc of electricity ignited, turning us into so much roast schnitzel.” He patted Gruber on the back. “Let’s go back to the others.”

Mercer let the two students precede him out of the seemingly isolated chamber and then clambered out himself. He was grateful that Hans had been the last of the nineteen men and one woman he’d agreed to train

as he himself had once learned mine rescue techniques from South Africa's fabled Proto Teams.

Mercer had designed the curriculum himself, and with the help of the mine's owner had built several subterranean obstacle courses to challenge his students. He'd built this one by loading a particularly tall shaft with overburden brought down from the slag heaps on the surface. Another course he had rigged with smoke machines to simulate fire, while a third could be flooded using seep water pumped up from a lower level. In all, Mercer had shown them the basics of what they would find in a real-world mine rescue. He'd been in on enough actual rescues to know you can't plan for everything, and the ability to think on one's feet was as crucial as being well practiced.

Mercer still received cards from many of Los 33, the Chilean miners he'd help rescue back in 2010, and expected he would for many years to come. It had been his gut call, in coordination with a local engineer, as to where to drill the escape shaft 2,300 feet into the bedrock in order to save the thirty-three men who'd been trapped for a record-setting sixty-nine days. In a life and career filled with proud moments, Philip Mercer had to concede that that was one of the best.

The rest of his students were waiting in a panic shelter carved into the side of a main tunnel about a hundred yards from where he'd constructed the "cave-in." The shelter had once been provisioned to last forty men a week in case of an emergency, but this former copper mine had been abandoned in the late eighties when it became too expensive to work profitably. An adjacent rock quarry was still going strong, but the Leister Deep Mine was played out.

The room was just barren stone walls and a smoothed-out rock floor. Power was supplied by a jury-rigged system using wires Mercer had run off a generator that he'd jacked into an old ventilation conduit. He wasn't sure if the exhaust actually made it to the surface a thousand feet above them, but carbon monoxide levels hadn't risen, so he figured he'd done something right.

These people had come from all over the world to study rescue techniques from him, and for the most part he'd been pleased with their progress. All of them were type A's, especially Kara Hawkins, the sole woman. She was a shift foreperson at a newly reopened Nevada silver mine who had arrived here on a Harley Softail Heritage Classic wearing full black leathers over her six-foot frame and dispelled any question of her sexual preference by sharing a bed with José Cabrillo, a mine engineer from Bolivia who looked and sounded like a young Ricardo Montalban.

"Well?" Gerhard Werner asked when Hans appeared with Tom and then Mercer. The two Germans were longtime friends who worked at the same mine back home.

Hans slashed a finger across his throat. "Kaput."

"Gather round," Mercer called, wiping sweat from his face with a towel and then swigging from a water bottle someone had handed him. The water was cold thanks to the fridge they'd lugged down. And like a sports team they all took a knee to listen to their coach. "Half the class made the same mistake."

Gerhard interrupted, saying, "Hans turned on the lamp too."

"He did," Mercer said, "but that wasn't his main mistake. No, the mistake many of you made was listening to the victim. Think of this like saving someone who is drowning. Have any of you gotten lifeguard certification?"

He looked at the blank, sooty faces. Most of the miners were from rural coal country in whichever nation they called home. They were rednecks and hayseeds, and he didn’t think fishin’ holes and cricks had much in the way of swimmer safety. Still, he could tell they wanted to please him.

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