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# WINTERKILL

A Novel by  
**CRAIG LESLEY**



“UNFORGETTABLE....”—The Boston Globe

WINNER OF THE WESTERN WRITERS OF  
AMERICA GOLDEN SPUR AWARD  
AND THE MEDICINE PIPE BEARER'S AWARD

L A U R E L

# **WINTERKILL**

**Craig  
Lesley**



A LAUREL BOOK

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WFH

DANNY KACHIAH PULLED his hat tight, kicked his left foot free of the stirrup, and hunched forward in the saddle. "Now," he said, and the gateman swung open the doors to both chutes. The roan gelding shot out of its chute after the spurting steer. Shifting his weight so he leaned far to the right, Danny could have touched the bolting steer's black rump. "Faster," he urged the horse, the seconds ticking off in his mind.

The gelding overtook the steer, and for a moment Danny was alongside the dark, shaggy head. His eyes matched the wild, flatblack eyes of the steer. Then he concentrated on the horns, yellowed with brown tips, and lunged. As he dove free of the horse, his hands seemed to float toward the steer's horns, but the brown tips bobbed away from his fingers. For a giddy instant, Danny thought he had missed.

His chest slammed against the steer's front shoulder, jolting him with pain. His left hand grasped one horn and his right clung to the thick hair along the muscled neck. Danny dug his bootheels into the ground and tried to twist the matted head, but the steer's bulging neck refused to yield. Off-balance, Danny was carried along by the steer's momentum and driving legs.

He needed leverage on both horns to dog the steer. As he made a desperate move with his right hand to grab the other horn, the steer thrust its head forward and shrugged its big shoulders. Danny's left hand slipped off the horn and his hat



flew away. For a crazy instant, he was running with the steer, flailing its shoulders and back with his right hand. Then he tumbled forward onto the gouged dirt of the rodeo grounds.

Frothing from exertion, the steer shook his head and trotted to the far end of the arena, where a couple of pick-up riders shooed him through the exit gates.

NO TIME FOR DANNY KACHIAH, THE INDIAN RIDER FROM PENDLETON, OREGON, the announcer blared. Danny stood slowly and dusted off his pants. HOW ABOUT A HAND FOR HIM ANYWAY, FOLKS? As he bent to pick up his hat, Danny heard scattered applause. He waved toward the bright blobs of color in the grandstand. NEXT TIME USE BOTH HANDS, DANNY. One of the pick-up riders handed him the gelding's reins. NO MONEY FOR THAT COWBOY . . . DOGGONE.

As he led the horse through the working gates, a moon-faced cowboy sitting on the fence said, "Better go back to the reservation, Chief. You're getting too old to wrestle stock." He smiled but his blue eyes were hard. The cowboy wore a big tag with "12" on it in block print. Danny knew he was a hometown boy who had a good chance of winning the rodeo's All-Around Cowboy purse.

When he got to the area behind the chutes where the rodeo participants kept their pickups and trailers, Danny saw Henry Nine Pipes sitting on the tailgate of his pickup drinking a beer. Danny tied the gelding to the doorhandle of Henry's pickup on the passenger side. "Nice horse you got," Danny said. "He worked that steer just right."

Henry nodded. "I broke him in." He moved over on the tailgate so Danny could sit down.

"Guess my timing was off," Danny said. "Damn near missed the steer." He took a drink of Henry's beer and wiped his forehead. "He sure skittered, but maybe I'd have gotten him with Ring-Eye." Danny had left his horse on the reservation because his pickup had broken down and he had no way of getting him to The Dalles.

"Ring-Eye wouldn't have helped," Henry said. "The hazer didn't keep him close enough. Those hazers don't work as hard for us as for the white boys."

"Damn it, Henry. You could have hazed for me if I wasn't already using your horse." He didn't know if Henry was right or not. Maybe the steer could have been boxed tighter. "Anyway, I sure missed him." He took off his tag with the "42" on it and tossed it away. "So long, bad-luck number." A gust of wind carried it against a strand of barbed wire, where it caught and fluttered.

"Sure has been a long spell out of the money," Henry said.

"For me too," Danny said.

"Let's try a little wild-cow milking," Henry said. "You can mug and I'll rope."

Danny shook his head. "Hell, I can't even mug a steer much less a full-grown cow." He figured he had looked foolish enough for one day. "I'm beat."

Henry got off the tailgate. "I better go scout up someone else, then."

"Thanks for loaning me Cayenne."

"Sure," Henry said. "You thinking about riding in the Round-Up?"

"Not this year, I guess," Danny said. "Don't think I could make entry fees." He felt sorry about it because it had been three years since he'd ridden in a big rodeo. "I got to see about my pickup. And my uncle Billy Que sold some of our cows, so I better head back to get my share before he drinks all the money up."

Henry laughed. "You better run fast. Next year then, for the Round-Up?"

"You bet. Next year."

After Henry left, Danny took the Hamley's sack with his new boots, brown polish, and a change of clothes from behind the front seat of Henry's pickup. The driver's door was broken so it didn't close, and Henry had a piece of rope that he used to tie

it shut when he was driving. No one had bothered the stuff in the sack.

He thought about sticking around The Dalles, but he hadn't placed in saddle bronc either and he didn't feel like rubbing shoulders with the winners at the Pastime or Recreation bars. And there was his share of the cattle money. He had been selling frybread the night before to make pocket money when he had seen Pudge Whitecloud, who'd told him about the cows. The way she told it, Billy Que was already cutting a wide swath.

Danny was sorry Pudge had seen him working the frybread stands with the old men and big women. Pudge was his ex-wife Loxie's sister, and he didn't want to give Loxie the satisfaction of knowing he was down on his luck. He knew Loxie couldn't wait to tell his son Jack about it. He had hoped to win in The Dalles and go back to the reservation cashy with rodeo money.

Danny started walking east on I-84, holding the Hamley's sack under his right arm and sticking out his left thumb as the cars sped by. He wished he had his truck and wondered how much Milo would skin him to get it back. Because Danny didn't expect any of the tourists to give him a ride, he figured he might have to hoof it as far as Biggs Junction to get a lift from a trucker. On the outskirts of The Dalles, he stopped under the big billboard that read:

PENDLETON WOOLEN PRODUCTS AT  
HAMLEY'S  
ONLY 125 MILES  
WORLD FAMOUS WESTERN STORE

He put down the sack and waved at the passing cars, hoping someone might figure out where he was headed. When no one stopped, he sat down by the freeway's edge and studied The Dalles Dam.

The spillways were open and the waters from Celilo Lake rushed down the concrete channels into the old Columbia riverbed. Power lines carrying high voltage over the hills on both

sides of the river hummed and crackled in the dry afternoon heat. After an hour's wait, Danny felt thirsty. He picked up his sack and stood, then scuffed some loose gravel with the sides of his boots. He started walking again, muttering to himself, "Damn long time between rides."



It was almost dark by the time Danny reached Celilo Village. Both the sky above the gorge and the flat water of Celilo Lake had taken on a slate-gray color. The old village with its salmon-drying shacks and Wy-Am longhouse was gone now that the dam's backwaters had covered Celilo Falls and ended the fishing. Tommy Thompson's home was gone too. The old chief had painted his east door a bright salmon color to catch the sun's first rays each morning.

Yellow corrugated plastic sealed the east end of the new cedar-shake longhouse, and the same plastic covered the peak of its roof, although it had been nailed on earlier and had become faded with passing time. Danny didn't know why the one end had remained unfinished for so long, but he understood the Celilo factions had bickered over the completion of the longhouse. Beside the longhouse, a utility pole had a lead wire strung to a bright blue-and-white Pepsi machine.

Danny was thirsty from walking. As he crossed the railroad tracks that separated the village from I-84, he toyed with the change in his pocket, making certain he had enough for a cold drink. He passed several gutted houses with caved-in roofs. Two reservation dogs, lean as coyotes, sniffed at Danny. One growled, and when Danny lifted his hand as if to hit it, the dogs slunk away into the shadows of the gutted buildings.

Smoke rose from a cluster of small houses at the west end of the village. Danny figured the Celilos must be cooking, since it was too hot for heating. A couple of small boys shot baskets at a bent rim. A few trailers with blankets covering their windows were scattered behind the longhouse. Each trailer had a



fringe of junked cars. One wheelless brown Pontiac boasted a bright green car-lot sign on its windshield: TODAY'S SPECIAL.

Danny checked the selections in the machine. Some of the pop-tops had been pulled and the contents drunk with a straw, but he found an undamaged Pepsi and worked the machine. Carrying his soda, he walked over to the two yellow trailers used for tribal offices. A hanging wooden sign read:

## CELILO — WY-AM TRIBAL OFFICES

Administration

Planning

Education

Maintenance

Indian Health Services

Danny tried the trailer doors but they were locked. The veneer on all the doors was broken at the bottom where someone had tried to kick his way in.

Danny followed the secondary road under the freeway to the little park the Army Corps of Engineers had put in after they had built the dam and flooded Celilo Falls. Across the river, a long green train, almost black in the dusk, snaked its way up-river at the base of the dry, brown Klickitats. Wishram's lights twinkled in the gathering darkness, their reflections mirrored in the dark, flat lake. Danny closed his eyes and imagined he could still hear the roaring of the falls.

He shivered with the night wind that came off the lake. Across the water, the Wishram lights seemed cold and distant. He turned and began walking back to the nearly deserted village. He was sorry that his son Jack would never get to see the falls.

That night, Danny carried his sack into the longhouse and slept in a corner, out of the wind. He put on his denim jacket and used the new boots for a pillow.

Sitting beside an irrigation pump salesman in an air-conditioned Ford, Danny wondered if Billy Que would already be drinking at one of the Pendleton bars.

"The competition is maddening," the salesman was saying. "Everybody's in the water business now. My outfit Wade Rain was the pioneer, of course, but too many others have crowded into the field since they built the dams. The average Joe can't make a living selling pumps anymore."

"Is that right?"

"What business you say you're in?"

"Livestock, you might say."

The salesman nodded. "Good line. People got to eat. Nothing beats a good steak. I like those bumper stickers the cattlemen put out: 'Beef, Damnit, Beef! Buy it! Eat it!' Say, I could use a cup of coffee. You look a little ragged too." He took the Biggs exit and they passed the Nu-Vu Motel overlooking the green bridge that spanned the Columbia River. "How do you take yours?" the salesman asked, pulling into the parking lot.

"Lots of cream and sugar," Danny said, because he hadn't eaten for a while.

Dinty's Café was topped by a blue neon eagle with a pulsing red eye. A hanging wooden sign offered banquet facilities, although Danny couldn't imagine who would hold a banquet there, since they did mostly a trucker trade.

After a few minutes, the salesman returned with two large Styrofoam cups. He handed one to Danny. "You could plow this."

"Thanks," Danny said.

The salesman drove fast, using one hand for the wheel and the other to hold his coffee. "You gave me a bit of a surprise this morning. I didn't think any Celilos would be up this early."

"I'm not Celilo. Just slept in their longhouse after the rodeo. I sort of missed my ride out of The Dalles last night."

"How was the rodeo?"

Danny shook his head. "I made some others look pretty good."

"I thought you seemed a little tall for a Celilo. Going to Pendleton? You must be Umatilla then. Indians are sort of a hobby with me."

Danny nodded. "Nez Perce, mostly," he said.

"Say, that Chief Joseph was a crafty fellow. Ran the U.S. cavalry all over hell and gone before he surrendered, didn't he? You see that movie? My kids loved it."

Danny shook his head. He had seen it, but he didn't feel like talking about it. They had a Mexican playing Joseph. He put his head back and pretended to sleep.

"Which exit do you want?"

Danny opened his eyes and saw they had reached Pendleton. "This one's fine," he said. "I got to see about my pickup."

The salesman pulled over to let Danny out. Beside the exit sign was a large blue billboard that said:

**HOME OF TAYLOR WEBB — PRCA BULL RIDING CHAMPION**

Danny was a little surprised at Taylor's success, because when they had been in high school together everyone thought Danny was the better athlete. Now he saw Taylor on TV advertising beer and four-wheel drives. Danny had heard Taylor would be back for the Round-Up, and he was looking forward to seeing him.

"Don't forget your bag," the salesman said.

"You kidding? I got new boots in there." Danny took his sack. "Hey, thanks for the lift."

"Don't mention it. Glad I could help you out a little. Wish I could hang around Pendleton, but I've got to make eastern Idaho tonight. Mormon country." The salesman made a face. "Well, hang in there." He gave Danny a half-wave and pulled back onto the interstate.



Milo's Pioneer Auto was a two-story, pumice-block building painted green with orange trim. Danny's battered turquoise-blue

pickup sat in the vacant lot beside Milo's. Milo kept a couple of other pickups there to cannibalize for parts. Although Milo had made a number of improvements recently, including paving the old scraped-dirt parking area, he always complained about the lack of business since he was located on the old highway, some distance from the interstate exits.

No one was in the garage, and Danny figured Milo must be upstairs in the living quarters above the station. He stepped on the bellcord a couple of times so it sounded like a car was pulling up to the pumps. Then he strolled over to the Coke machine and waited.

Milo wasn't such a hot mechanic, but Danny was fascinated by his story. He had been just another drifter working the Pendleton Grain Growers wheat harvest when the dust exploded in a grain elevator. Milo survived and received a nice settlement, but according to him the blast had ruined his nerves, causing his health to decline rapidly. Lately, the trouble had settled in his teeth.

Milo hurried down the outside stairs, buttoning his pants. "I got a customer," he yelled to someone inside. When he saw no one was at the pumps except Danny, he said, "Son of a bitch."

"Guy was in a hurry to make Boise," Danny said. "Went right back out to the interstate."

Milo sat on a short stack of tires. "Interstate will be our ruin. Whole town's drying up. And those Jap cars can run from Portland to Boise without a fuel stop."

"You fix the pickup?"

"Sure. Between trips to the dentist. There it sits — all fixed. But if you want to know, I've been suffering —"

"I been off my feed lately, too," Danny said. "What's the damage?" He didn't want Milo to get started about his teeth.

"Let me take a squint at the bill. It needed a new timing chain, just like I told you. After that, I tuned it. Cleaned the carb, too. Figured you'd want it running sweet."

Milo might have been testing him, but Danny couldn't tell

because Milo had the strangest eyes. The eyeballs were pink and the irises light green, perhaps tinged by the green plastic visor he wore summer and winter. Milo said the explosion had weakened his eyes by bursting the tiny vessels. His thin hair was white, but he wasn't an albino. Milo swore he had thick, jet-black hair before the explosion.

"The bill's right here someplace." Milo dug around on the counter and found a slip of paper under an old copy of *Swank*. "Real Classy Chassis," he said, jerking his thumb at the girl on the cover. "Forty." He started to add. "Then there was the new tire — fifty-five — and the alignment. Front end was really bad. Would have ruined that new tire."

Danny stopped looking at the girl on the cover. "I bought those tires four months ago — right here."

"Good tires, too. Best I sell. But that one had a big gash. You know these reservation roads. Just eat up tires." He didn't offer to show Danny the tire with the gash. "Wouldn't want you to have blowout and wreck. I take responsibility for my customers."

Danny remembered that Milo's first wife had died when her car left the road and struck a telephone pole. The next issue of the local paper had featured a grainy, nighttime photo of the wreck. Milo made some improvements with the insurance.

"Comes to about four hundred and twenty-seven dollars, Danny."

"You'll need a gun to get that much money."

Milo flashed a smile, mostly gold fillings. "That's good. I like your sense of humor. You know, I never even charged you for the tow because you're a preferred customer."

"How's my credit — as a preferred customer?"

Milo shook his head. "Ordinarily, no problem. But right now, there's a cash-flow problem. Oral surgery is an expensive nightmare. They take the tops off my teeth and run needles into the root canals. It's agony. Be thankful you're blessed with sound teeth."

Danny took his checkbook out of his back pocket. "Let me see that pen." If he could find Billy Que right away and get his share of the cattle money, he might beat the check to the bank.

Milo quit smiling. He pointed to the sign above the tire rack. "The bank doesn't fix cars," he said.

"I wrote them here before."

"Took in a new partner. That's the station policy."

"Yeah," Danny said. "I heard you got married again." Milo's new wife had waitressed at the Husky truckstop just out of town. She had slept with so many truckers they called her Free-way, and some of the Indians claimed she had a white line down her back.

"It's tough breaking them in," Milo said, lowering his voice. "This one's crazy for me. I got a business to run, but I need to make her happy too. Teeth and women — can't live with them, can't live without them."

Danny picked up his sack. "I'll come back for the truck. Maybe tomorrow."

"Fine," Milo said. "Remember, cash makes no enemies." He started back up the steps to the living quarters. "Don't wait too long. This isn't a storage lot."

Danny took his new boots out of the Hamley's sack and tugged them on. He was sorry he hadn't won any money at the rodeo to buy a cowboy hat and fancy shirt to go with them. It was almost eleven, and hot. He was sweating freely by the time he had walked from Milo's to downtown Pendleton.

Wilson Windyboy stood outside Terry's Drugstore watching the young girls inside drinking Cokes at the fountain. He wasn't wearing a shirt and his brown belly hung over his belt. When Danny got closer, he could see Wilson didn't have any socks on either, but his ankles were so dirty they looked like socks. Wilson had been the janitor when Danny was in high school, and there had been lots of stories about Wilson taking girls to the janitor's closet.

Across the street from Terry's, on the sidewalk in front of



the Stockman's Bank, several Indian loafers were passing around a bottle of wine. Danny waved to Sam CutHorse. Later, he planned to talk with Sam about getting a job rounding up some cattle. But now he wanted to find Billy Que and get his money. After he got his pickup back, he would shop around for a hat and shirt to go with the boots. That way, if he ran into any women, he'd look as though he'd done okay at the rodeo.

Danny tried the Buckhorn first. G. D. Whitney, the half-breed with the walleye, clucked when he saw Danny come in with the Hamley's sack. "Nice suitcase."

Danny took a stool and put the sack on the bar. No one else was in the place. "Blitz," he said.

G.D. opened two bottles and pushed one across at Danny. He took a drink from the other one and winked with his good eye. "So how was The Dalles? You show those Columbia River cowboys how it's done?"

"I did all right," Danny said and took a drink so he wouldn't have to look at G.D.

"That's funny," G.D. scoffed. "Pudge was by and said you were selling frybread and curios with the old women. Figured you to be broke."

Damn that Pudge, Danny thought. She had a loose mouth. "Hell," he said, "I was just helping a guy out for one night. Henry's bringing my rodeo checks up later."

"Sure," G.D. said. "Around here, everyone's got money coming in. Rodeo money, lease money, wheat money . . . But nobody's got any to put on the counter. Say, you didn't pay for that beer yet."

Danny put some change on the counter. "I hear Billy Que sold some cows," he said, as if it didn't concern him. "You seen him?"

"Spending money like a whore with a credit card. He's busted now. Come by first of the week and tried to bum drinks off the people he bought for earlier. I tossed him out."

"How many cows did he sell?" Danny said. They had only seven.

"I heard two, maybe three. I guess that's all he could find."

Danny nodded. This time of the year, the unfenced stock might range as far as Wildhorse, kegging up in the cool of the high timber and sticking close to water. He finished his beer. "Well, I'm not in the cattle business today. You want to cash a check? Save me a trip to the bank."

"No credit, no checks. That's what the boss says. But if you're short, I'll buy that buckle off you for twenty dollars."

Danny pushed himself away from the bar and felt the silver buckle belt. Fourteen years ago, he had taken first in saddlebrone at the Klamath Falls All-Indian Stampede and Powwow. He could still remember the cheering crowd. Now he gave G.D. a hard look. "The bank's just across the street."

"Suit yourself," G.D. said. "You being a big winner and all, why not take a bottle to them boys in front of the bank? It's a hot day and they'd be obliged."

Danny knew G.D. was curious to see just how much money he had. But it might be a good idea to buy Sam a drink before he asked him about a job. He unsnapped the flap pocket on his cowboy shirt and took out seventeen dollars. He put six on the counter. "I'll take a bottle of Twister and one of rosé."

G.D. got the bottles from the cooler and wrapped them in paper sacks, twisting the ends. He scooped up the six dollars. "Just right, including tip." He seemed disappointed to see that Danny had some money.



The loafers in front of the bank stirred a little when Danny approached them carrying the bottles. "Who's that?" asked Perry Winishite, the old Cayuse.

"Man's best friend," Sam CutHorse told him.

Danny took the Twister out of the sack and handed it to Perry. "Try this, old-timer." Perry nodded his thanks.

"How'd the rodeo go?" Sam asked. "Say, I like them boots."

"Thanks." Danny handed him the rosé. "Not worth a damn. Sure is hot."

"So hot the sheep are lining up for crewcuts." Sam grinned and wiped the wine dribblets from his mouth. "I used to ride at The Dalles," he said. "But those damn promoters rig it."

"I don't know," Danny said. "First, I had a bad horse that wouldn't buck. On the reride, I got a good horse, but the judges said I fouled."

"Sounds like The Dalles," Sam said.

"Then I borrowed Henry's horse and tried bulldogging. Damned near missed the steer."

"What do you plan to do now?"

"Punch cows, I guess. You need any help for the fall roundup?"

"Always room for a good rider," Sam said. "In about three weeks. The cattle are spread all over the reservation. It'll take a month to find all of them and check the brands."

"Thanks, Sam. I can use the money." The Twister bottle came round to him and he took a long drink of the peppermint-flavored apple wine. "Beats brushing your teeth," he said. "Anybody seen Billy Que?"

Sam said, "I heard he's up in the county drunk tank. Should be about sobered up by now. He was on a three-day toot with his cattle money. He had a snootful here and caught a ride to Milton-Freewater. The Pea Festival was on and he kept going after the Princesses, so they juggled him."

Danny spit in the dirt. "Half of that money was mine."

Sam shook his head. "If Que didn't blow it all, the cops probably stole it. Well, maybe you can sell some more cows, but you got to find them first, and that won't be until after the roundup now."

"Good thing I got Ring-Eye," Danny said.

Sam laughed. "That's a funny thing. Billy Que tried to sell him too, but no one would buy him since they knew Ring-Eye was your horse. Made him hopping mad. Tried to shoot the horse. But he was too drunk to hit it."

Danny said, "That horse is worth more than Billy Que."

Both bottles were empty so someone suggested taking up a