

CADE McCRANE



THE  
LION TAMER

A DETECTIVE LIGHTHOUSE MYSTERY

The Lion Tamer

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Story and Text: Cade McCrane

CadeMcCrane.com

Library of Congress Control Number:

02 03 04 05 06 5 4 3 2 1

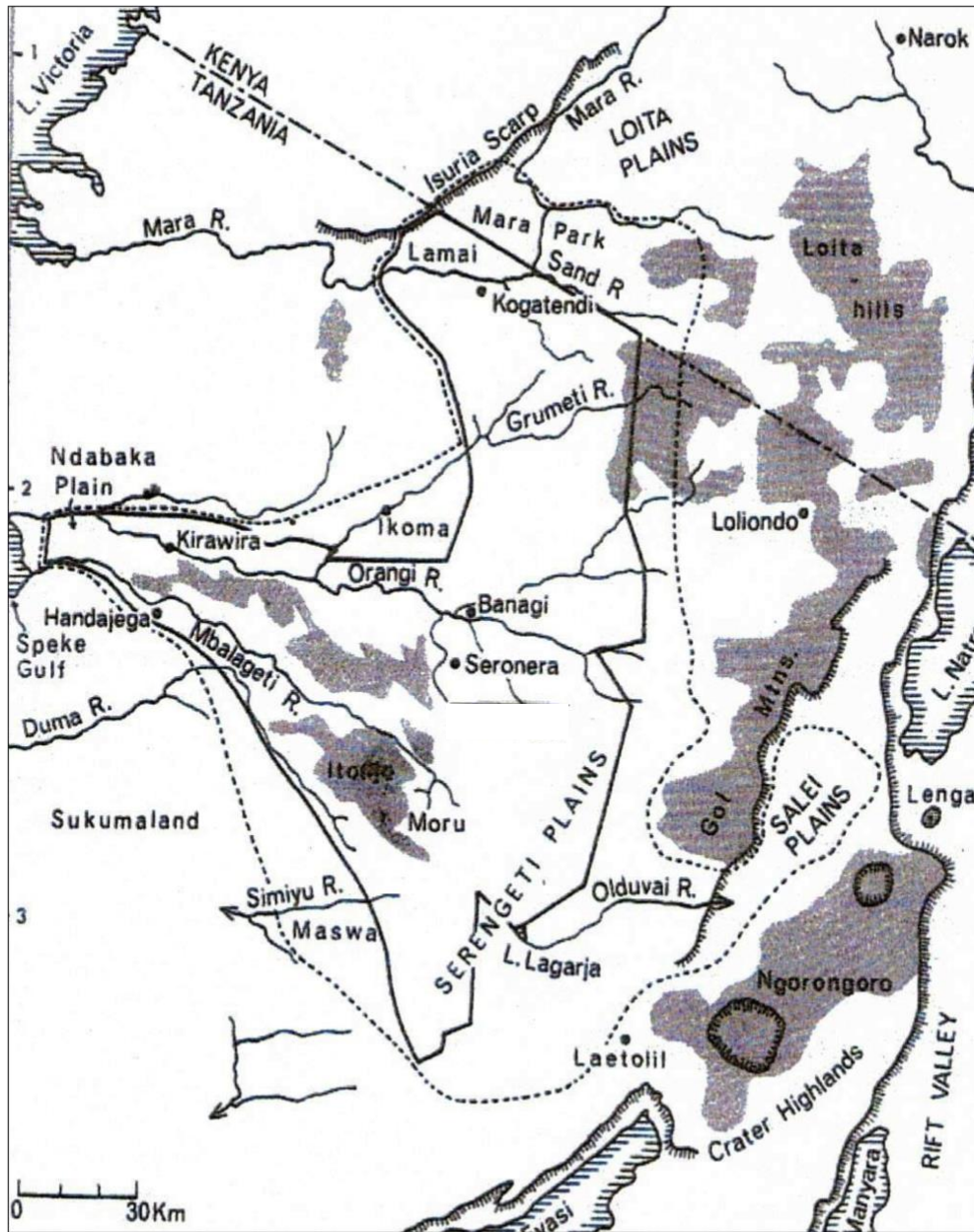
## **Novels by Cade McCrane**

### **Detective Lighthouse Mysteries**

The Herrick Solution

Tunnel Vision

The Aymarán



Serengeti National Park, Tanzania

## Chapter 1

His eyes were crusted with sticky blood and he struggled to focus out the window of his crashed-up Toyota Land Cruiser. He and his safari-modified 4-wheel-drive had been no match for the block-long granite boulder, the massive outcropping presiding uninterrupted for 900 million years inside Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

A sharp pain radiated from his torso and he screamed out. His outburst was immediately answered by the blood-thirsty growls of the lioness outside his door, her paws repeatedly swiping against the metal door, her roars spitting thick snot and drool against the spider-webbed window.

The situation was becoming desperate. He feverishly tried pressing his twitching fingers against his mangled neck, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't get the blood to stop seeping out. His thirty-one-year-old mind comprehended it all very clearly: the end was near.

His right eye blinked. He spotted the bottle of Tusker beer riding shotgun in the passenger seat. It had never looked better. At least he wouldn't be heading into darkness parched to the bone.

His hearing was still very acute, and the lioness' deep panting filled his ears, her primal sounds echoing nature's anticipation of the next bloodletting.

He convulsed and his spittle splattered across the steering wheel. He had to act quickly if he was going to make it out of this alive. When he first became an archaeologist, he never considered his life might end on the great plains of Africa.

He moved his left hand back up to the ignition key and tried turning it over. For the third time in two minutes, the engine failed to ignite.

His hand unconsciously dropped onto his supposedly stain-proof REI hiking pants. His fingers immediately became saturated in his own blood and urine as well as the lioness's excessive saliva she'd left as a souvenir of her first attack.

With difficulty, he rolled his head and took in a staggered breath. He hunched his shoulders backwards. It was becoming evident that his life was about to end here, his last glances upon ancient weathered granite, and subsequently the den where many millennia of lion prides stood perched as kings and queens of Africa's vast grasses.

He whimpered and gurgled, setting the lioness ablaze in grunts and growls. Her waves of pulsating purrs were spurred on by her first tantalizing tastes of human flesh, his blood now staining her fur.

He clenched his teeth and tried to hold himself still. His body was safe, for now. The approaching dusk was his most immediate concern. He was deep into the bush at least a dozen kilometers away from any tented camp, and there was less than ten minutes before the fickle blackness of night would descend. Worse, he'd lost his SAT phone during her initial attack, so there was no chance for a quick rescue call.

In hindsight, he shouldn't have exited the vehicle immediately after the accident while he was still dazed and confused. His only saving grace had been his ability to get back up on his feet and fight his way back inside the truck, narrowly escaping a complete mauling by the masterful animal's sweeping grasps. That, and a liter of beer had survived the crash intact.

The pain subsided enough for his mind to brighten toward a peaceful resolve. If this was the place for him to die then he, Blake Banfield, was exactly where and who he wanted to be: a noble archaeological adventurer in the wilds of Africa.

Blake exhaled slowly. He was the only son of United States Senator Marshall Banfield, who'd been a tyrant of a father. Notwithstanding coming from a family of rank and privilege, Blake was proud of his scientific accomplishments in his short life. The world would someday adopt his main theories of chemical evolution. He felt certain of it.

Blake let his mind fixate on his mentor, Dr. Arthur Freeman. The man was like a second father to him, but better. For nearly a decade the professor had taught him the rigors of East African excavation, disseminating every ounce of scientific information about hunting the origins of modern day anatomically correct humans.

Blake cracked a pained smile. His collaboration with Dr. Freeman had been extraordinary. Together they were underwriting and excavating an entire expanse of the multi-million-year hominin lifespan. In the Loiyangalani River Basin alone they'd revealed hundreds of Middle-Stone-Age artifacts dating back up to 100,000 years Before Present Era (BPE). A treasure trove of quartzite bifacial stone tools, ochre pencils, ostrich eggshell beads, and calcified ungulate and fish bone were scattered throughout the artifact rich valley. Once you dug a meter down into the ground, prehistoric material was aplenty. The Loiyangalani River Basin provides extraordinary evidence explaining the all-important inflection point in the dawning of human culture some

150,000-250,000 years Before Present Era (BPE). And at their Lake Natron excavation north of Oldupai Gorge, he and Dr. Freeman had successfully excavated the tibia of a bipedal hominid aged 3.45 million years BPE.

Blake squinted upon the immovable granite. He sighed. There was nothing he found more exciting in life than studying evolution and the human career, but that was apparently now over.

He broke another meager smile. In Africa, he'd found success like he'd never experienced before. In the previous six years, he'd underwritten more East African archaeology than most western governments combined, while also donating hundreds of thousands of dollars in anonymous grants to U.S. and African universities and National Parks.

Blake twitched his nose and relaxed his left eyelid enough to let it close. His thoughts turned to his African business network and its complexity. He'd never trusted anyone enough to teach them the entire ropes so, momentarily, he wondered what would become of the scientific teams and their expeditions once he was gone. He feared that his businesses and money would scatter into the breeze, as was the case with most things in Africa.

He became relaxed. His body was about to succumb. If a lioness ate him in the process, so be it. He knew his soul to be free.

The spasms in his body were steadily decreasing. His thoughts became crystal clear and focused on the concept of karma, more specifically, his own bad karma. He was sure this crash was no accident. It was of intentional design. *What were the chances a group of stray goats would jump onto the road in that very time and space?* he pondered.

Blake bite his lip. His mind flashed to the subject of the Kenyan gangs and their thieving mentality. He now regretted expanding across the border into their turf. He should've kept his operations entirely Tanzanian. He should've kept a low profile far away from short-sighted gangsters. But he'd slipped, and let ego get the better of him. Why he thought no one would fuck with him in Kenya was far beyond his imagination now. He should have been prepared. His verdict became clear: he'd built up too much bad karma for this crash to be a true accident.

His head sunk lightly, and Blake gurgled in a faint breath. He knew it was too late for regrets. He didn't have any anyway. Regrets were for the Mchaga tribe around Mount Kilimanjaro who during their own moment of death would surely be pleading their remote ancestors for forgiveness.

His mind played tricks on him, making him believe that he would survive if his next move should be to tourniquet his neck with his shirt. But it was in vain as his physical body was too weak to attempt the action. He hadn't expected his head to hit the windshield so hard upon impact. Then for his stunned and bleeding body to be rushed upon by a carnivorous opportunist.

Blake sucked in a last deep breath and his mind began free-flowing streams of lucid-like conscious thoughts. In the clarity of his last thoughts, he was confident his evolutionary theories would someday be recognized: specifically, it would be proven that the previous five million years of hominin evolution was due to geographically distinct water alkalinity and microbial diversity more than any other factors in the nature-nurture evolutionary equation. He was sure that someday his peers and future colleagues would weave some of his evolutionary insights into the more established theories to which they all currently subscribed.

The big cat jumped onto the door. She was here to stay, only a few inches of steel in the way of her expectant meal.

Blake released his right hand from his neck and let his arm flop down to the bottom of his shirt. Blood filled his throat. His last breath was a mere gulp which only served to settle out the air in his esophagus.

His eyes darkened away, but his mind still had sensory function. He tried to concentrate on something important. One, he'd backed up all his work on the university's searchable digital servers, so all his written theories were still living in digital form. He'd made sure of that before heading off to Africa again. He took some relief knowing eventually someone was bound to find his life's work, rather than it disappearing in some dusty old notebooks in his mother's attic.

His right eye suddenly popped open, groveling for a last view of light. Clouding the window was the lioness on her hind legs licking and scratching at the door.

Blake quickly reasoned that if he died here and now his soul would vanish deep into the bowels of the biological heartbeat of Mother Earth's evolutionary Holy Grail: the endless Serengeti Plains. So without further ado Blake made the last decision of his life and used every bit of effort left in his soul to open the door to the Land Cruiser and let his body slowly peel out of the widening gap. He'd decided to give himself over to the lioness, theorizing that it was better to go out nourishing the queen than be buried by way of a Christian ceremony, a religion he never understood much less entertained.



His last fleeting thought focused entirely on the one short phrase his favorite high school history teacher engrained in him from the first day of class fifteen years ago: either publish or perish. You become history or you do not.

Then the crack of his neck silenced all thoughts.