

CADE McCRANE



THE
HERRICK SOLUTION

A DETECTIVE LIGHTHOUSE MYSTERY

The Herrick Solution

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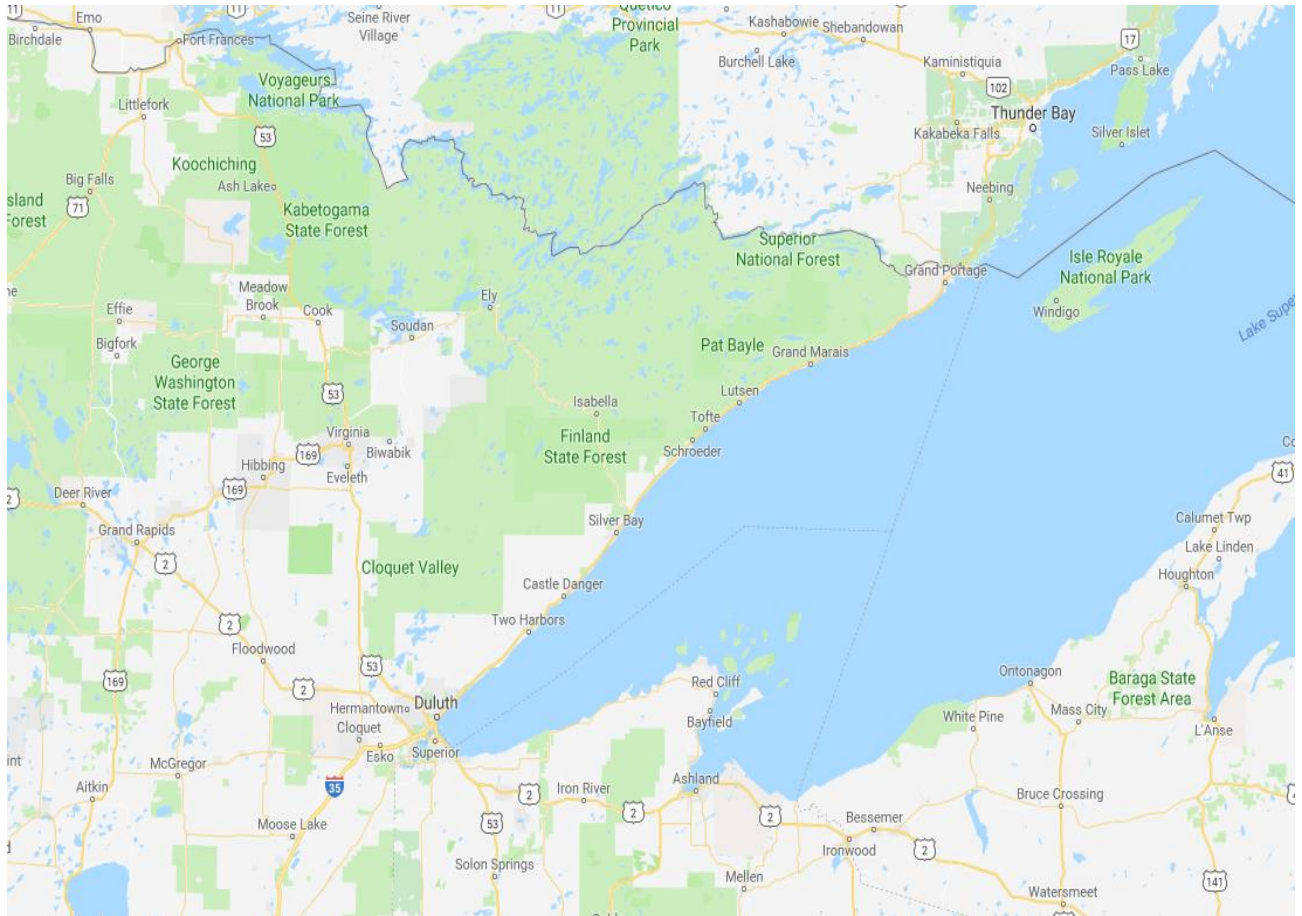
Detective Lighthouse Mysteries

The Herrick Solution

Tunnel Vision

The Lion Tamer

The Aymarán



Map of Northeastern Minnesota including Lake Superior

Chapter 1

Sunday, October 27, 2002—Day 1

National Transportation Safety Board Special Agent Ashley Lewis struggled through another hundred feet of slushy bog before coming to rest her thin frame against the seat of the Sheriff's half sunken Ski-Doo. The Northern Minnesota air was bone-chillingly cold. She panted heavily, thick clouds of vapor materializing in front of her face.

Ashley jogged her eyes upward into the sky. Her timing was impeccable, witnessing the last remnants of darkness in the western sky being replaced by the beauty of the breaking dawn.

She looked down at her new REI hiking boots and knocked them against the track of the snowmobile. A pre-Halloween winter storm had moved into the region, and her boots were no match for the eight-inches of icy, mucky snow. She clenched her teeth and shivered. The sensation of her toes rubbing together like prickly ice cubes was unbearable.

She took in a deep breath. The smell of fire was strong, and she flinched at the scent of roasting flesh. She peered across her immediate surroundings. A dozen yards away in the charred forest, four ruggedly dressed emergency responders sloshed around dragging corpses out from the smoldering wreckage. Off to the side in a small clearing was St. Louis County Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Earl Blatnik, who stood inspecting the contorted remains spread out in front of him. He was bundled up from head-to-toe with only his gaunt, pale face exposed to the elements. Behind him, toxic blue smoke billowed off a blackened wing of the plane.

The impact area had been a shocking inferno. She'd seen her share of grisly wrecks but this one was topping the charts. But she'd expected as much before coming out here: first at the scene had been the National Guard search helicopter whose pilot reported over the radio, "All that's left is a patchwork of burnt toast, over." The eight people onboard had been presumed dead from the beginning.

Ashley peered down at her watch. It was 8:13 a.m. With any luck she'd be back to the command center by noon.

She glanced over at FBI Special Agent William Buckley who was off taking a piss in the woods. She hated working with him and hoped his penis would freeze off.

The local sheriff and his deputy, both with goatees and clad in outdoor hunting apparel, were huddled on the sidelines casually watching two of the emergency workers pull the sixth charred victim from the wreckage and place it atop a body bag. As if performing a comedy skit, the worker slipped on the plastic and, in his attempt to recover his footing, grasped onto the corpse's uncovered shoulder and peeled off the crispy skin all the way down to the wrist.

Ashley could only shake her head and get back to her job at hand. She pulled her gloves off, grabbed a digital recorder from the front pocket of her backpack, and turned it on. She cleared her mind and took a proper site survey. She lifted the recorder to her lips and in her soft soprano voice stated flatly: "The fuselage is destroyed. The cockpit is gone. The plane door has been blown thirty feet off its hinges. The left wing is badly torched and mangled. The right wing is severely damaged, and the tail is only about one-third intact. The angle of the propeller damage to the tops of the trees indicates the engines had been operational at the time of the steep descent."

She reached back into the pack, pulled out her Garmin GPS and turned it on. She was facing west which meant the main section of the plane was facing due north, and pointing away from the airport at a 90-degree angle to the runway. Planes don't fly sideways and she filed the unusual trajectory away in her mind.

She replaced the recorder back to her mouth.

She dictated, "The accident occurred in dark lighting conditions under snow and sleet. The site is forty-seven degrees eighteen seconds north latitude, ninety-five degrees thirty seconds one hundred twenty-five west longitude at an elevation of about thirteen hundred feet sea level. The primary impact zone is free of snow as the fire and subsequent heat from the crash melted most of it away."

The Blackberry in her pant pocket vibrated three short bursts. She turned the GPS to tracking, snapped it to her pack and replaced the voice recorder to its case.

Next, she retrieved her phone. There were two texts from Bob Burns, her NTSB co-worker. The first text read: 'The plane was a twin-engine turboprop Beechcraft King Air A100 manufactured by Raytheon Aircraft.' She looked back to the twisted wreckage. In her experience, the Beech A100 was a strong and durable plane that had more than met its muster in flight-hour safety. From now on she'd keep the model of plane in the back of her mind when theorizing plausible scenarios for the cause of the disaster, knowing now that in percentage terms it was far more likely that the accident was pilot error rather than mechanical.

She scrolled to the second text where Burns had provided the METAR, the Aviation Routine Weather Report in which the form of weather is given. It read:

262314Z AUTO 00000KT 1SM -SN SCT004 OVC005 01/00 A3006

Ashley closed her eyes and envisioned last night's weather scene: 26 October 23:14 hours; wind calm; visibility 1 statute mile in snowy conditions; scattered clouds at 400 feet and overcast at 500 feet; temperature 1 degree Celsius and dew point 0 Celsius; barometer 30.06 inches of mercury.

She drew her eyes back to the message. The text ended with: 'the METARs throughout the entire day showed barometric pressure falling. Temp at ground level was 1 C!!!'

A scenario materialized in her mind. The altimeter reading would be inaccurate and the aircraft would appear higher to the pilots than it actually was. The air would've been well saturated and reduced the lapse rate to as little as one degree per 1000 feet. The aircraft would've been experiencing icing conditions borne out by the fact that it was snowing with freezing rain. To her it was the perfect set up for a classic tail stall. The stab on this model of plane was low and the King Airs performed well in moderate levels of ice but she also knew great care must be taken during liftoff or getting into the approach phase. Also in this weather model, the flap selections must be made with great care, the boots which break up any ice formation must be working well and there couldn't be any disruption of airflow over the tail. Once the stall occurred and the pilots needed to recover, the proper procedure was to check back and reduce power. But this recovery was what most pilots never learned.

A stiff wind blew across her face. Not inured to the smell of burnt human flesh mixed with jet fuel, Ashley reflexively lifted her Gore-Tex sleeve to her nose.

She pushed herself off the snowmobile and trudged over behind Dr. Blatnik who, smartly, stood upwind from the corpses. He was shaking his head in dismay as the last victim's lower torso was laid out in the row. The Sheriff and his Deputy ambled up next to him and drooped their heads. The grisly job of piecing body parts back together was now over.

Ashley peered down at the fleshy and fried sack of bones of a dead human being that had just come to rest. It was a ghastly sight. The body had been dismembered in half, with the upper torso mostly just muscle and skin fused to the bone; yet, one set of captain's bars clung perilously

on the shoulder, the rest of the shirt ashes. The right eye had melted. The left eye, somehow left unscathed, sat perched in its socket, its glassy stare gazing straight back at her.

She looked away and shivered again.

“So whattaya think, Dr. Blatnik?” the Deputy asked plaintively.

Dr. Blatnik twitched his nose. He pushed back the sleeve of his coat, glared at his watch and declared, “I hereby pronounce all eight individuals dead this twenty-seventh of October two-thousand two at eight nineteen a.m.”

Ashley took a last peek across the field of corpses, wondering which one was United States Senator Russ Sellwood.