

The FAA Report

On Monday, November 29, Dr. Alma Cowdrey was back to present the results of the compensation study. Both Wes and Nathan were pleased with the results that allowed them to calculate standard cost for revenue departments such as nursing. Armed with this information, they convened a meeting for department supervisors to start developing flexible budgets based on these standards. Enthusiasm for the program increased when Wes announced that 50 percent of the anticipated saving from tighter standards would be shared with employees through an employee productivity bonus pool.

It was early afternoon when Wes returned from his meeting with his department heads. Two men were waiting outside his office. The larger one spoke first.

"I'm Officer Kuxhausen," he said, producing FBI identification. "Mr. Smith is with the Federal Aviation Administration. We'd like to visit with you privately."

Wes nodded, and they followed them into his office where he shut the door.

"You must be investigating Hap's accident," Wes said when all were seated. "Any clue about the cause?"

Kuxhausen nodded at Smith, who produced a large manila envelope.

"We have evidence that someone tampered with the plane," Smith replied. Opening the envelope, he laid on the desk two photographs taken by the FAA of the wreckage. Wes studied them, surprised that anyone had survived the accident. The impact had broken the back of the aircraft. A fire had followed, reducing the fuselage to a charred skeleton.

Smith removed a pointer from his shirt pocket. "This is a picture of the right engine, taken the morning after the accident," he said, leaning over the photograph. "The cowling surrounding the engine has been removed to expose the fuel pump. The nozzle connects to the fuel hose. Note the small hole—the probable cause of the fire.

"You'll notice a sticky residue here." Smith pointed to the fuel line. "Kuxhausen was the first to notice it—the lab tells us it's a petroleum-based electrical tape that originally covered the hole."

Wes looked up. "A fuel line repaired with electrical tape?" he asked skeptically.

"No—sabotaged. The boys at the FAA lab tell us the hole was carefully sanded with a three-sided file."

"Fuel pressure in a Cessna 340 comes through the line at about thirty-five pounds per square inch," Kuxhausen injected. "Whoever made the hole covered it, knowing that the aviation fuel would soften the petroleum based tape, breaking the seal and allowing the fuel to escape. From the burn marks, you can see that the fuel ran back along the hose until it made contact with the hot magneto." He outlined the path with a ballpoint pen.

A menacing smile cracked Kuxhausen's face. "Clever way to bring a plane down, don't you think?"

"Not with you guys around," said Wes. "Any idea who did it?"

"Nope. That's why we're here. Are you aware of anyone who had it in for Hap Castleton?"

Wes frowned. "Everyone in the public eye makes enemies sooner or later. It's no secret the hospital's got problems—big problems. Vendors haven't been paid, employees may lose their jobs, but no particular suspect comes to mind. You're welcome to interview the employees and staff."

"We will," Kuxhausen said. Removing a business card from his wallet, he slapped it on Wes's desk. "In the meantime, if you think of anything else, give us a call."

Outside the hospital, Smith and Kuxhausen visited briefly in the parking lot before going their separate ways. "Do you think he's a suspect?" Smith asked.

Kuxhausen picked at the remnants of a steak sandwich between his teeth with a plastic toothpick. "He seemed stressed," he said. "On the other hand, what would he have to gain? Anyone who'd aspire to that kind of job isn't smart enough to sabotage an airplane."



After Kuxhausen's visit, rumors about Hap's death swept through the hospital. Motives rumored behind the murder ranged from a crime syndicate interested in the hospital's undeveloped property to efforts of the hospital board to cover up illegal contracts they had taken to provide services at inflated prices to the hospital. One story even postulated an affair between Del Cluff and the wife of a jealous physician. Wes had trouble visualizing Del Cluff in the role of paramour, but as with all rumors, logic was irrelevant.

Wes had no idea why anyone would want to harm either Hap or Cluff. He was aware of a growing hostility within the community in general and the hospital in particular toward the financial problems plaguing the facility. The

hospital had \$90,000 in payables to local vendors who would not be paid in the event of a bankruptcy.

Loss of employment by several hundred employees was a similar concern. Tempers flared as employees, physicians, and board members deflected blame for what all feared was an impending financial disaster.

Though Wes didn't fear for his personal safety, he had come to the conclusion that a hospital failure would have a severe negative effect on his career. He wasn't responsible for the bad decisions that had brought the hospital to the brink of ruin, but in the community's eyes, he would share the blame—as the facility's last hospital administrator.

The advisability of closing his small downtown office—which he rarely visited now anyway—and circulating his resume with former associates from Portland had crossed his mind.

Later that afternoon, he drove to the Castleton residence to visit with Amy and Helen Castleton, where they discussed with Helen Castleton the possibility of Hap's murder. Helen had no idea of who would want to harm her husband but reinforced Amy's early observation that Hap had seemed different in the weeks before the accident.