

Prologue

Michele is Missing

The school year had just started and for Cal and Michele Harris and their four small children and like most week days, the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, was rather routine. Married for ten years, Cal was now 40, and Michele would be turning 36 in a few days. Cal normally divided his work time between his Royal Ford car dealership in Owego, NY and his Royal Chevrolet dealership in Cortland, NY. The day-to-day operations at the Cortland dealership were run by Cal's GM, Joe Reagan. Routinely, Cal would work at the Cortland dealership on Tuesday's. Before driving to Cortland, Cal checked in at his Royal Ford dealership in Owego. While there, a 'Special Report' came on the news reporting the first plane hitting the World Trade Center in NYC. Like the rest of the world, Cal watched the events unfold on television as a second plane hit the towers, followed shortly thereafter by the towers crumbling to the ground. Cal left Royal Ford, still listening to the news on the radio while he drove his green Ford F-150 pick-up truck to the Cortland dealership where he worked the rest of the day with Reagan. Meanwhile, Michele was home taking care of their four children and getting the three oldest ready for school. Michele then drove the children to St. Joseph's school in Owego. Taylor was in 1st grade, Cayla in kindergarten and Jenna in pre-K. Michele would then return home with their youngest, Tanner. In the early afternoon, adult babysitter, Barb Thayer came over to babysit Tanner and Michele left for work. Thayer would later pick up the children after school and take them home and stay with them until Cal came home from work.

Trouble had been brewing in their marriage for quite some time and Michele had filed for divorce a few months earlier. For the benefit of the children, they continued to live together in the marital home, albeit, sleeping in separate rooms, until the divorce was settled. Michele, claiming that Cal had cut her off financially, had taken a waitressing job in Waverly, NY at a low-class bar/restaurant called Lefty's.

Like clock-work, between 5:15 and 5:30PM Thayer received a call from Cal in Cortland telling her he was just finishing up at work and will be home in about an hour. While waiting for Cal, Thayer fed the children their dinner. Cal then arrived home right on schedule at 6:30PM. He began playing with the children and Thayer headed for home, just a few minutes away.

In the evening, while Michele was working at Lefty's, Cal was home taking care of the children. Being a school night, Cal got the kids ready and tucked them into their upstairs bedrooms at/about 8PM and turned on their "white noise" machines, which was their routine. Cal then worked in his home office, preparing for the next day's work and headed to bed around 10:30PM.

Meanwhile, Michele finished working at Lefty's around 9:00PM as scheduled. Michele had accepted an invitation from one of cooks at Lefty's, to share a drink with him at the bar right after work. Reportedly, Michele had one drink and then left the bar between 9:10 and 9:15PM. After leaving the bar, Michele again reportedly walked out to her tan, Ford Windstar van and drove to her boyfriend Brian's apartment in Smithboro, NY, arriving about 9:30PM or a little after. Before arriving at Brian's apartment, Michele received a call on her cell phone from her friend, Nikki Burdick at 9:23PM who left a message. At 9:27PM, Michele checked her voicemail, but did not return Nikki's call. According to Brian, Michele remained at his apartment until approximately 11:15PM when he walked her to her van, kissed her goodbye and she drove away. Brian assumed she was going home, which was another twenty-minute drive away. Would she go straight home, or did she have other plans?

September 12, 2001, Cal woke up around 6:30AM, showered, dressed for work and walked downstairs, and quickly realized that Michele was not there getting the kids up for breakfast and ready for school. Cal knew that Michele had a boyfriend, and assumed she was still with him. But, needing help with the kids so he can go to work, he calls Barb Thayer around 7:00AM and tells her that Michele did not come home and asked if she could come and help

with the kids. Thayer agrees, and says she will be over shortly. At 7:14AM, while waiting for Thayer to arrive, Cal tries calling Michele's cell phone which goes directly to voicemail – he hangs up, leaving no message.

In the meantime, Thayer leaves her house and drives the short four to five-minute distance to the Harris driveway where she sees Michele's van parked at the end of the driveway. She parked her own car and got out to check to see if Michele was in her van. She found the van door unlocked and opened it to look inside but does not see Michele. She also went around and opened the rear hatch to see if she might be sleeping in the back. Still no Michele. Thayer then returned to her car and drove the quarter-mile long driveway into the Harris residence. As she entered the house, she saw Cal was dressed and ready for work and informed him of finding Michele's van at the end of the driveway. They briefly speculated as to where Michele might be or could have gone. Cal then drove Thayer out to the van and together they look through the van and discover that the keys are still in the ignition. Thayer then drove Michele's van back down the driveway and parked it in the garage. Cal and Barb continued speculating as to where Michele might be.

After Thayer got the children fed, dressed and ready for school, Cal took the three oldest children to school as usual and Thayer stayed with Tanner. After Cal left with the kids, Thayer received a call from Michele's friend Nikki Burdick, looking for Michele. Thayer explained all that had happened, and Nikki told Thayer that Michele was supposed to be having a meeting later today with her divorce attorney Robert Miller and that she had better call him.

Before calling attorney Miller, Burdick calls Michele's cell phone which went right to voicemail. Burdick left this message: "Where the hell are you. You need to call me as soon as freaking possible. I am worried to death about you. You need to call me on my cell phone – goodbye."

Then, at/about 8:45AM, Burdick called attorney Miller and explained the situation. Miller in turn, called the NYSP . Miller spoke with Sr. Inv. Susan Mulvey and advised her that he represents Michele in her divorce action. While speaking with Mulvey, Miller initiated a conference call with Nikki Burdick, who explained the details and concerns to Mulvey. Miller then requested the State Police conduct a missing persons investigation.

The State Police adopted a missing persons case and less than an hour later, two NYSP, BCI investigators were at Royal Ford, interviewing Cal. Cal was cooperative and answered all their questions. Then, after a lengthy interview, Cal accompanied the two investigators out to his residence and gives them written consent to search his house, surrounding property, Michele's van and his truck as needed. Cal then returned to work, leaving investigators to do their job at the house. Cal later called the house at 4:15 to learn that the police were still there, so he arranged to take the kids to dinner, giving the police more time to finish. Cal then returned with the kids around 7:15PM. The police were gone. Then, around 7:20PM, Cal's best friend, Todd Mansfield, arrived at his house along with Cal's brother Kevin. They had come to offer their support and to help with the children. Both Todd and Kevin observed Cal breaking down and crying, as he expressed his concerns about what to tell the children. Mansfield helped put the kids to bed upstairs. When returning down stairs, he saw Cal break down crying again and saying, "It's not good, I know it's not good." Then, around 7:57PM Cal received a call from the state police who had some more follow-up questions. Again, Cal cooperated fully and provided answers to all their questions.

As the state police continued and expanded their investigation, arrangements were made for various search methods to be implemented. NY State Forest Rangers were brought in to assist in the ground search using an organized grid-search system. Civilian volunteers, including friends of the Harris's, familiar with the property, were teamed up with state police investigators and Forest Rangers using ATV's to search the area. NYSP divers with SONAR equipment is brought in to search area ponds and Empire Lake. K-9 teams, including cadaver dogs were used. Fly-overs and aerial searches were conducted by helicopter using naked eye searches as well as FLIR and 3D scanning technology known as LiDAR . Nothing was found.

The state police issued a missing person press release regarding Michele Harris, including her physical description, as well as her clothing, jewelry, and where she was last seen.

On 9/14/01, the NYSP applied for, obtained and executed a search warrant for the Harris residence and surrounding property. Accordingly, several members of the NYSP, Troop 'C' FIU were brought in for a closer look. The FIU supervisor, Investigator Steve Andersen, discovered some scant specks of blood and blood residue on the painted, concrete garage floor and on the wooden floor and door moldings just inside the entrance to the residence from the garage. Random samples are taken, and presumptive field tests are positive for the presence of blood.

While field investigators interview family, friends and co-workers of Cal and Michele. Other investigators re-interview Cal and confront him about the blood they found. Cal was unable to offer any explanation. With Cal, clearly in their cross-hairs, as the number one suspect, police step-up their investigation in search of the proof they need to make an arrest.

At the NYSP Owego barracks, a command-post and lead desk are quickly organized, and the lead desk goes into full swing. With two Lieutenants, three Senior Investigators, and no less than fifteen BCI field investigators, along with a full contingent of uniformed Troopers, a major investigation is launched and underway. Leads were handed out in all directions. In addition to personal interviews, investigators were assigned to pursue telephone, financial, real property, and medical records. Some were assigned to check for criminal, civil, divorce and motor vehicle records. Still others, would conduct searches and execute search warrants, and the list goes on.

As Michele's husband, Cal knew he was an automatic suspect, compounded by the fact that Michele's family did not like him. He also knew that his character, financial status, and the pending divorce would all be used to point at him. While knowing this, he does all he can to cooperate with the authorities, answer all their questions and grant written consent to search his house and property. Although he is cooperating as best he can, he still has legitimate concerns. Not knowing what course, the investigation will take, his thoughts turn not only to himself, but to his children and his business. A million thoughts race through his mind as he wonders what might happen and then asks himself, "am I going to be charged, are they going to arrest me for something"? The uncertainty of what might happen was mentally stressful. With all these thoughts and concerns, Cal decided it was important to keep his business attorney, Stan Drazen, briefed regularly with periodic updates of any/all information as it developed and became available to him.