

PART 1

..... The Crime

Chapter 1 Found Frozen

..... Monday, December 8, 1986, 4 PM

If there is a more inhospitable place to die than the back of a long-bed pickup on a winter night in northern Michigan, it doesn't come quickly to mind. With no coat, no hat, and no gloves, any sane man would have to be liquored up, high, passed out, or dead to spend it like this: flannel shirt hiked up, bare skin to metal, a body exposed to the mitten state's legendary deep freeze.

And that's exactly what Jerry Tobias was. Dead. Frozen stiff as winter laundry forgotten on a backyard clothesline. Townspeople would speculate for decades whether he'd been only half dead when he was tossed in, but he was definitely all the way dead by the time a State Police trooper peered over the truck's tailgate and took in the sight: a young guy wearing only jeans, a flannel shirt and cowboy boots, lying on his side.

The Michigan State Police trooper was Ken Burr, and he took off one of his gloves, reached out a finger, and touched the man's bare stomach. Cold and hard.

Burr patrolled the back streets of Gaylord, an Alpine-themed resort town in the northern part of Michigan's lower peninsula. It was a series of computer entries that led Burr to Jerry Tobias' blue Ford pickup. Late Monday afternoon, Jerry's wife, Jackie Tobias, hadn't seen her husband since Friday morning, and she was starting to worry. Jerry was an oilfield worker, and although he was frequently in the field for days at a time, she'd expected him home by Sunday. When Monday arrived and no Jerry, Jackie called his boss, his boss called the State Police, and a dispatcher entered the missing man's license plate number—"HD 2850"—into Michigan's Law Enforcement Information Network (LEIN). LEIN was a statewide database of missing persons, criminal activity, personal

protection orders, arrests, suspicious vehicles and the like; if the law knew where Jerry Tobias might be, chances were better than average that they'd find a clue to his whereabouts somewhere in the recesses of LEIN. It was often the first place police looked when someone went missing.

Finding a missing person wasn't always this easy, but when Burr checked the database he received an immediate hit. Not on Jerry Tobias himself, but on his truck. An officer on road patrol noticed it Sunday night, apparently abandoned, and ran "HD 2850" to see if the vehicle was stolen. The plate came back clean, and the officer, Karen McCann, went on about her rounds. Even though nothing came of that inquiry, LEIN still logged the activity into the system and dutifully fed it back to Trooper Burr on Monday afternoon, along with a location. The truck was last seen parked at the corner of South Illinois and Eighth Streets, on a quiet edge of downtown Gaylord, just behind the Fire Department.

And so at 4:25 PM on Monday, Dec. 8, 1986, Burr found the snow-covered vehicle exactly where LEIN said it would be. But the frozen body in the back came as a shock. Burr had to wonder if Jerry Tobias had been just lying there the night before, when Officer McCann shined her cruiser's brights directly at his tailgate.

The dead man's cowboy-booted foot stuck up out of the truck bed, clearly visible to Burr even from several yards away. It was hard to believe anyone could have missed that.

On the surface, Gaylord is one of a handful of small towns in northern Michigan that successfully transitioned from lumbering and trapping in the 1800s to golfing, snowmobiling, and skiing in the 1900s. In the glossy tourist brochures the town boasts it is "Northern Michigan's heart."

Tourists from Detroit and Chicago came north for the quaint downtown, sparkling ski hills, and pristine fairways. An easy

exit off I-75, the freeway that connects the southern suburbs to the northern resort areas, “Gaylord” means “meeting place” in Ojibwa. By the 1970s, it was already a well-known gathering spot for families on vacation, executives on corporate golf outings, and men at their annual fall deer camp. A decade later, Gaylord gained a reputation as the waypoint for another type of traveler, and one who certainly wasn’t going to be lauded in any of those tourist brochures.

In August of 1986, the *Detroit Free Press* uncovered a massive drug smuggling operation that began in Barranquilla, Colombia, and ended at the tiny Antrim County Airport, just thirty miles west of Gaylord. At the time, it was the largest drug smuggling operation ever uncovered in U.S. history, according to the report. In October of that same year, an area drug raid netted several pounds of pot and a grocery bag-sized stash of pills, the result of a yearlong undercover operation. Eight northern Michigan counties pooled their resources and instituted an undercover task force, the Straits Area Narcotics Enforcement (SANE), to address what they viewed as an out-of-control drug problem.

In November, Gaylord’s Police Department, the State Police post, and the Otsego County Sheriff’s Office formed yet another group, the Local Law Enforcement Partnership (LLEP), to fight the local spread of illegal drugs. All levels of the population were suspect, from teenagers to businesspeople. There were sweeps at Gaylord High School with drug-sniffing dogs, and the owner of the local Little Caesar’s Pizza franchise was suspected in a cocaine deal that led to a kidnapping. A grand jury indicted drug users and dealers and sent dozens of them to prison.

By the winter of 1986, it began to seem to police and townspeople alike that hard drugs were everywhere in Gaylord. As Trooper Burr stared down at Jerry’s body, it’s likely he would have had three parts of the same question on his mind: *Drug dealer, drug user, or both?*

Trooper Burr didn't know Jerry Tobias personally, but he did know of him. The dead man was no stranger to Gaylord's seedier side, and in some ways his life mirrored the dual nature of the town. Jerry was a fun-loving outdoorsman, a husband, a loving father, and a hardworking oilfield roughneck, but he was also a drinker and a flirt who ran around on his wife with women he met in bars—a trait caused, or at least enhanced by, his regular alcohol and drug use. Pot and cocaine were his first choices, but friends said he'd do pills when they were offered. And Tobias dealt a little to support his habit, too. Nothing big; he wasn't listed in any of the front-page drug busts, and he barely had a police record, just a decade-old delivery of marijuana charge. Still, Jerry was a partier, and Burr remembered hearing his name in conversations about the Gaylord drug scene at least once or twice.

But the lifeless man the trooper stared down at was hardly the grinning blond and blue-eyed charmer his friends and family adored. Tobias' body was pressed against the rear of the truck, his bare back against the tailgate, knees bent, one foot resting awkwardly on a gasoline can, the other stuck up over the edge of the truck bed.

His plaid shirt and white undershirt were yanked up to his armpits, exposing bare flesh. His face was bruised and there were scratches on the side of his forehead. Patches of scalp showed through his thinning hair. Tobias' left arm was flung over his head, a set of jumper cables was coiled near his wrist, and accumulated road clutter—hand tools, an empty jug of windshield wiper fluid, a spare tire, litter—were scattered around the truck bed. A crust of snow-cloaked random surfaces. Inside the truck, there was more detritus, and behind the driver's seat was something that looked a little out of place: frozen packages of meat wrapped in white butcher paper.

Snowflakes dusted Tobias' bare skin, and if this image caused Burr to shiver involuntarily, no one could fault him for it. He'd

been a trooper for 23 years, with all but a few of those years spent patrolling Gaylord and the surrounding area. Burr was used to writing traffic tickets, running down stolen snowmobiles, confiscating dime bags of pot, and busting drunks, not stumbling upon dead bodies.

The officer looked down at the snow drifting on the ground and back at his own footprints, visible in a direct line from the door of his cruiser to Jerry's truck. For the first time he noticed that someone else had already been to the truck. Older boot prints, blurred and half filled with snow, tracked from the ground in front of the passenger side door of Jerry's truck, around to the back of the bed, and then down the street.

Burr's eyes followed the mystery footprints north, away from the truck and up the snow-covered street, until they disappeared.

Chapter 2 Wild Game

..... Three Days Earlier, Friday,
December 5, 1986, 9 PM

Only the most experienced and wide-ranging carnivores recognized the smells wafting from the Northland Sportsman's Club the first Friday after gun season. Venison was on the menu, and so were partridge, duck, and rabbit. But there was also elk steak, buffalo, an antelope roast someone brought back from an excursion out west, greasy black bear stew from a beast shot in the Upper Peninsula, wild boar sausage, and a couple of wild turkeys, roasted like it was still Thanksgiving.

The social event of the season in Gaylord was not a charity ball, an art gallery opening, or a concert—it was the Northland Sports-