

THE FERIEEN -  
BROOMFIELD - FLUMEN  
INVESTIGATIONS

BY: BRIAN DURSKI

The Ferien - Broomfield - Flumen Investigations  
By Brian Durski

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Any similarities to those living or dead is purely coincidental

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*This one is for Shannon.*



THE  
FERIEN  
INVESTIGATION



# CHAPTER 1

Sandy closed her green eyes as Nicky gently stroked her luxurious brown hair. “You like that sweetheart?” he asked, hearing low and almost inaudible sounds of pleasure emanate from her.

The bedroom was slightly warm and she lay outside the sheet with her entire body completely exposed. He moved his hand to her back and smiled over at her. “Today I’m going to do something very special for you. Guess what? I bought you a present!”

He noticed that Sandy didn’t respond and simply stared at him. Nicky moved the bed’s covers aside and stood up. After lighting his first cigarette of the day, he walked directly to the window that faced the back yard and lifted a slat of the venetian blinds. “Snowing again, Sandy.”

Three bird feeders hung from the branches of a large, leafless maple tree. He knew they were empty. They’d been that way for almost two years and he wasn’t going to bother filling them. Nicky Andropolis sighed as he studied his snow covered yard and moved his gaze along the old wooden fence that completely enclosed the space in back. A few of the boards were obviously rotting and would need to be replaced someday. However, that was another task he could put off indefinitely.

Nicky walked to the bathroom, turned on the overhead light and stared at himself in the mirror. He’d have to shave today. Most of his face was covered in heavy stubble and he had to make a trip to the bank and liquor store. The nude figure that stared back at him in the mirror had coal black eyes, and dark hair was thick on his arms, chest and all over his body. The urge to urinate forced him to move to the toilet. He flicked his half smoked cigarette into the bowl and seconds later, pushed the handle down to flush it.

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The man didn't expend the effort to brush his teeth. Nicky rarely washed or showered, he simply didn't care. Besides, Sandy didn't seem to mind at all about his personal hygiene. He glanced at himself in the mirror once more and walked out toward the living room.

All the house's curtains and venetian blinds were always tightly closed and he didn't feel it necessary to dress. Besides, he preferred to keep the thermostat at a constant 80° to make sure Sandy was always comfortable. Nicky Andropolis rarely had visitors to his home at 14 Chestnut Street. If someone knocked on the door, he just didn't answer and ignored it, until whoever it was went away.

He entered the kitchen and prepared his usual breakfast. Two cans of chicken noodle soup with three slices of unbuttered bread. Nicky was quite pleased that he was a non-conformist and refused to eat a normal meal in the morning. He chuckled to himself and glanced over at Sandy who had followed him. She sat in her usual spot in the middle of the kitchen table. Usually, he'd save a small quantity of the broth for the cat to lap from the almost empty pan. "No breakfast for you today, sweetheart. You get to eat later!"

He tipped the pan up and drank most of the broth that remained. There were a few drops left in the bottom and when his cat purred loudly and put her paw on his arm he relented.

"Okay, I didn't finish it all. Here's a tiny taste for you, Sandy." The cat licked the pan thoroughly and Nicky stood to watch patiently, until she lifted her head and sat once again. He simply rinsed out the pan and his spoon under the cold water tap and set them in the sink. In his opinion, there was no requirement to actually wash the dishes. In fact, he'd use that same pan tomorrow morning. The spoon would be required again when he ate his customary two TV dinners later that day.

He glanced up at the kitchen's wall clock and noticed it was almost nine already. Nicky moved back to his bedroom and lit his second unfiltered Camel of the day. He studied a pile of clothes on the floor and selected a heavily stained pair of undershorts. The two white socks he picked up were a bit stiff and hadn't been laundered in quite some time. A wrinkled flannel shirt and a pair of gray jogging pants completed his wardrobe for the day.

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Shannon Grant sighed heavily and backed out of the barracks parking lot. It had been a long and troubling day as an investigator for the New York State Police. She'd responded to a devastating accident on The New York State Thruway. The snow covered asphalt had caused an eighteen wheeler to lose control while trying to avoid a slow moving van in the right lane. The large truck had jack-knifed and skidded sideways across the grassy median striking a passenger car. Four fatalities had resulted, and she knew she wouldn't sleep well tonight after viewing that accident scene.

Shannon shook off her thoughts of the tragedy on the thruway and turned them toward her twin girls as she drove home. Both were out of school for Christmas vacation and would be waiting for her at home. Snow was falling harder as she pulled into the outskirts of a small town in Northeastern, New York. There was at least six inches of powdery snow on the ground. She noticed the tire treads before her as she drove. Her trained eye spotted skid marks ahead of her where a car may have fish-tailed. She exhaled with relief when she pulled into the driveway. Finally, a full two weeks of vacation would start tomorrow. Christmas was a difficult period for her family and she needed to spend time with Joy and Hope. Initially, she and Rick had picked other names for their twin girls. However, when they were born two days before Christmas, he'd suggested they consider names that could be associated with the holidays. Shannon had acquiesced to her husband's request and felt melancholy at that very special memory from almost fifteen years ago.

This was the ninth Christmas without Rick. Shannon missed him terribly and the twins needed her close to help support and comfort them over the holidays. Their father's death from a massive heart attack had been sudden and completely unexpected.

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Nicky had completed his bank visit by using the drive-up window. Grocery shopping was next and it only took him a few minutes to fill his cart with the usual essentials. Bread, frozen dinners, soup, cat food and a few other items were all he required for a week. He checked out,

and as always, paid with cash.

The last stop was the most crucial to him — The Ferien Liquor Store. The establishment maintained a brisk and consistent business selling liquor, tobacco products and lottery tickets.

Zack Poselli glanced out the front window and saw Nicky's car pull up. He watched Andropolis exit the vehicle and slowly shook his head. "Here he comes." The proprietor studied his best, but least liked customer through the front window as he approached. Nicky wasn't what he would call fat, he just looked solid. Thick legs and a squat body reinforced his personal evaluation of the man. The owner grabbed three bottles of anisette from a shelf and stacked two cartons of Camels next to them on the counter. The man crept him out and any means to get him to leave the store quickly, he employed. When Nicky entered and approached the counter, Zack nodded toward the items. "Same as always?" Zack asked as he watched Nicky pull bills from a coat pocket and then added, "That'll be \$182.45."

Andropolis put two hundreds on the counter and waited while the owner bagged his items. Nicky never said a word and simply stared at Zack. He waited for his change, picked up the bag and again, nodded before he left.

The liquor store owner watched him leave and took a deep breath. "That bastard never blinks while he stares at me!" Poselli thought about Nicky and frowned. "Andropolis looks just like a big old toad." Zack had conflicting emotions about the man. Personally, he was completely disgusted by Nicky. However as a businessman, he'd made a significant amount of profit from Andropolis's weekly visits and wanted to keep the man coming back. Ferien Liquor only stocked anisette for him. Nobody else ever bought that type of alcohol, due to the taste. Out of curiosity, Zack had tried it once and had almost gagged at the overwhelming taste of black licorice. To him, it was horrible and he'd dumped the remainder of the bottle down the sink's drain.

Poselli consistently over-charged him by 25%. It was so easy, because Nicky never seemed to notice that he was being ripped-off.

He turned the TV's volume up and sat on his stool waiting for the next customer to open the front door. Abruptly, he stood up and glanced

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out the front window to make absolutely sure the man's vehicle had left. Poselli walked to the restroom in the rear. For some unknown reason, he felt an almost irresistible urge to wash his hands.

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Nicky sat at the kitchen table and studied the ATM withdrawal slip he'd gotten earlier that day. The remaining balance in his savings account totaled just over \$100,000. That was all he had left of his inheritance, and he figured it would sustain him financially for approximately three years. After that, he couldn't see any viable options to maintain his current life style. The man didn't want to think about the future and what would be his dire lack of money.

Sandy interrupted his thoughts when she rubbed her body against his leg. Nicky glanced down at his pet. "I know you're hungry, aren't you?" He reached down to stroke her sleek back. "You want your big surprise?"

Andropolis stood up and opened the pantry door to remove a blanket covered object. He walked to the door leading to the attached garage, opened it and called Sandy to follow him. The cat stood next to the table and simply watched. Nicky laughed at her. "Too cold out here for you?"

He moved inside the garage, pulled the blanket off the birdcage and set it on the trunk of his car. The bright yellow canary seemed lively. All he needed now was Sandy and returned to the kitchen to retrieve his pet.

Everything was ready. He stuck his hand in the birdcage and finally managed to get the canary to fly out. Nicky stood completely motionless as he watched the bird and Sandy. Only his eyes moved and his mouth hung partially open as the cat stalked her prey.

Nicky was fascinated at the bird's panicked flight around the garage and admired Sandy's slow deliberate movements. He was emotionally stimulated by his pet's hunting skills and his breath quickened. "You almost had it, Sandy!"

Suddenly in mid-flight, the canary simply fell to the concrete floor. Sandy pounced on it immediately and sank her small fangs into its

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neck. Nicky was disappointed; the exciting hunt had lasted only a couple minutes.

He stepped closer and watched his cat play with the bird's dead body. She'd slap it with a paw and grab it again. Nicky realized Sandy was simply savoring her kill. When she finally started eating the bird, he leaned closer to watch.

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Shannon and her daughters talked as they made Christmas Cookies. Hope and Joy were frosting them and she waited leaning against the stove for the next batch to finish baking. The twins were identical, but had personalities as different as night and day. Joy was outgoing and talked non-stop, while Hope was more reserved and thoughtful. Her girls loved each other, but like most siblings, had their frequent disagreements.

One used only red frosting and the other only green. Hope looked up from the cookie she was decorating. "Mom, are we going to The Merryville Christmas Festival tomorrow?"

Shannon grinned. "I don't know. The snow is piling up."

"Oh, Mom, you always say that!" Joy laughed. "It snows like this every year and we always go."

"Then why do you two ask me that every year?" She heard the buzzer go off on the stove. "When you're finished with those, another batch of snowmen are ready to be frosted."

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Nicky sat in the living room with Sandy's head in his lap. He was extremely proud of his cat's performance in the garage and tilted the freshly opened bottle of anisette back to take a swallow. Still, he worried about the future and his potential to be penniless in three years. Getting a job or deviating from his current occupational status of — unemployed — was never considered.

After much thought, he came to the realization that the only logical conclusion to his future plight was to kill himself. He looked down at his cat. "Sandy, you and me have three years. I won't go without

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you!” Nicky petted the animal’s sleek head and listened to her contented purring.

The man’s musings were interrupted by the sound of the mailman opening and closing the box mounted next to the front door. He was surprised as he rarely received mail and realized it was Friday. His subscription to *The Ferien Free Press* would be delivered today. Nicky relished the town’s weekly paper and would always turn first to the obituary notices to see who had died. He’d chuckle at a name he recognized and eagerly read the notice to see how the person had expired.

After retrieving his paper and an advertisement, he turned to the page where death notices were posted. “NOBODY!!! Not a single one this week!” Andropolis glanced away from the paper. “Sandy, I wonder if we’ll even make the newspaper when we die.”

Nicky scanned a couple pages of the small weekly publication and paused to read an article.

#### *FERIEN BICENTENNIAL*

*The town of Ferien, New York was founded in 1814 by Johann Ferien, a German immigrant. Mr. Ferien came to the United States in 1812 and settled here in the Catskill Mountains. During the early years, the small hamlet’s initial businesses were logging, the sawmill and a fur trapping enterprise. All were owned and operated by Johann Ferien.*

*The word -Ferien is of German origin and loosely translates into English as Festival. This coming July, our town will celebrate its two-hundred year anniversary and the planning committee is already asking for volunteers to.....*

Andropolis dropped the paper on the couch without finishing the article and closed his eyes to think. He worried about the impending financial disaster and now, he was concerned about not even having a future obituary in the town’s paper. After he and Sandy were dead, there would be no friends or family to write one.

The man opened his eyes and glanced into the kitchen. From that

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vantage point, the old refrigerator and gas stove were in his line of sight. A revelation struck him which solved his biggest concern. When the money ran out, Nicky now planned to open a gas line and blow his house sky high. That event would certainly make the *Ferien* paper and he was positive they'd mention his name. Even better, he and Sandy probably wouldn't feel a thing when it exploded.

He grabbed the liquor bottle, took a deep drink and set the anisette down to reach for his cigarettes. Slipping a Camel in his mouth, he flicked the lighter. The flame was fascinating, and he stared at it for a couple seconds, before lighting his cigarette and hitting the remote's button to turn on the TV.

All afternoon, Nicky drank heavily, smoked cigarettes and watched his favorite detective programs. By early evening, he was snoring loudly on the couch as the television droned on.

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The following morning, Shannon and her daughters ate breakfast together. "Girls, what's on today's agenda?" she asked.

Her twins looked at each other and said simultaneously, "Go shopping."

"Sure. The mall in Lewiston is only about twenty miles away. We can go there and easily be back in time for tonight's Christmas festival in the town square." Shannon stood and picked up their cereal bowls. "Let's get a move on. I'll do the dishes while you two prepare the platters of cookies for our neighbors."

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Nicky opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of his bedroom. He was a bit puzzled and didn't remember going to bed the previous night. He sat up and chuckled, because he was still fully dressed. Glancing at the nightstand next to the bed, he realized his cigarettes weren't in their customary place. Andropolis sighed and got out of bed. "I must have left them in the living room."

His TV was still on and an empty anisette bottle was on the end table. Nicky raised his eyebrows and commented aloud, "I drank the

entire quart!”

The pack of Camels was next to the liquor bottle and still had a single cigarette left in it. He lit it immediately and moved into the kitchen. Sandy followed him and Nicky reached down to tickle the cat’s chin. “Today, you get some of my breakfast soup!”

He drank some of the remaining broth and moved the pan into the middle of the kitchen table to share the meal with his pet. Andropolis held his chin in one hand and glanced at the kitchen clock. Today he had no specific tasks or goals and his fictional crime programs wouldn’t be on TV for another five hours. Nicky chuckled at the ones he remembered from the previous afternoon. Twice, he’d figured out who the killer was before the program was even half over. “I should have been a detective myself!” He contemplated his statement and sadly shook his head.

Andropolis had never finished high school. At seventeen, he’d abruptly quit to take care of his sick mother. In the entire world, she was the only person who ever cared about him and Nicky felt his eyes fill with tears.

He could never be a detective or even a police officer, due to his limited education. “Mom always told me I was special and would be something. Too bad for me. The last thing I am is special!” The man realized he’d never be famous or even recognized for any accomplishments — he had none. In fact, he had no goals, extremely limited ambition and simply lived from day to day.

Other than his sporadic shopping and caring for Sandy, he did nothing except watch crime and detective programs. Even that small measure of satisfaction was becoming more difficult to achieve. Nicky was starting to encounter re-runs and he couldn’t stand watching a plot unfold that he’d seen before. He found that his only pleasure was solving the crime before the fictional TV cops did. In fact, the man was quite proud of his ability to successfully evaluate every clue to reach his accurate conclusions.

Nicky watched Sandy lift her head from the soup pan. She was finished with her portion of their joint breakfast. He rinsed out the pan and turned off the tap. Glancing at the kitchen counter, he saw there

were still two full bottles of liquor. With last night's drinking bout, he was far ahead of his usual alcohol intake and sighed heavily. "What the hell!" He opened a fresh bottle.

He only took a small sip and swished the anisette around in his mouth. The strong taste of black licorice made him smile as he savored the liquid. Nicky swallowed and resisted the urge to tip the bottle up and ingest more. Instead, he opened a fresh pack of cigarettes and lit one.

The clothes he was wearing were the same ones as yesterday and Andropolis briefly considered changing. That requirement was dismissed immediately; there was no need and he wasn't going to bother. Nicky wandered into the living room and spotted The Ferien Free Press still sitting where he'd left it on the couch. "I forgot to read the police blotter!"

The ashtray on the end table was full to overflowing, but still he stubbed his Camel out in it and sat on the couch. He picked up the six page town paper and turned to the last page. After scanning the listing submitted by the cops he frowned. There were no serious crimes as usual, only a couple tickets issued for illegal parking, a single DUI and several home security systems going off. All were false alarms and Nicky was completely disgusted by the lack of exciting events.

In his delusional mind, Andropolis pictured himself as a crusading cop. In his own opinion, nobody could evaluate the crime scene and find clues like he could. No criminal would ever be safe from arrest by Detective Nicky Andropolis. His daydream was interrupted when Sandy jumped in his lap.

For once, he didn't pet her and simply moved the cat next to him on the couch. Depression had set in and, he stood up to go in the kitchen for a drink. This time he tilted the bottle up and took two deep swallows. Nicky glanced over at the stove and decided after he ran out of money; he'd follow his plan and disconnect the gas line in back. In his opinion, it would be a painless suicide and most importantly — spectacular. He nodded as he thought, *When the time comes, I'll hold Sandy and light my last cigarette!*

Again, he visualized the explosion being reported on the front page

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of *The Ferien Free Press*. He still held the bottle in his right hand and took another few sips. “What if they only print that a house blew up on Chestnut Street? Maybe, they won’t even mention my name!” Nicky screwed the cap back on the bottle of anisette and took a seat at the kitchen table.

The man put his hands over his eyes and swallowed hard. “I’ll never be famous and probably not even remembered by anyone!” He bit his lower lip as he obsessed about being relegated to obscurity. The fact that he intended to eventually kill himself and Sandy in the future didn’t concern him at all. Nicky stood up and unscrewed the cap on the liquor bottle.

## CHAPTER 2

It was bitterly cold on the outskirts of Riverton, New York. Bobby Silenski had made his fifth sale in the last hour. He carried the Christmas tree to the woman's van and lifted it into the vehicle through the rear overhead door. The lady handed him an extra five dollars and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Bobby."

"Same to you, Mrs. Henderson." He smiled back at his eleventh grade history teacher. "See you after vacation is over."

The lot was empty of customers at the moment and the young man opened a thermos of hot chocolate. He sipped from the container and closed the lid. Bobby glanced at his watch and saw he still had an hour before he'd turn off the outdoor Christmas lights, lock the gate and head on home.

The sales lot was open until 9:30 p.m. and the young man noticed a few snowflakes were fluttering gently down. He pulled his ski cap a bit lower on his head as he looked upward into the night sky. The teenager hoped somebody would come along soon for a tree. Without customers, standing around doing nothing bored him.

"Here comes somebody." Bobby stated as a car pulled up. A couple exited and he watched them extract two little children from car seats in the back. Both of the kids were wearing what looked like snow suits. The littlest one ran toward the tree-filled lot, tripped and flopped belly first into the snow. Bobby quickly walked over and helped the small boy to his feet. "You okay?"

The child simply grinned at him and pointed at the Christmas trees. After browsing through the lot for several minutes, they'd purchased a tree. Bobby assisted his customers to secure the small pine in their vehicle. He smiled at the man and said, "Sir, if you'll wait just a second,

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I have some baling twine. I'll tie your trunk down so it doesn't flop up and down."

"Thanks, I should have brought some rope myself."

Bobby had thought of this tie-down innovation himself and it usually got him a tip. In no time, he had the trunk secured and the man slipped him an extra three bucks. "Thank you, sir! Merry Christmas!"

Just prior to closing, Bobby pulled the plug on the first string of Christmas lights. He hadn't had another customer and noticed a car brake just outside the lot's gate. The teenager sighed and waited as a man exited the vehicle and hurried over. "I need a tree and was afraid you'd be closed!"

"A couple more minutes and I would have been. Go ahead, sir. We have a large selection left. Any specific idea of what you want?"

"Well, I need one about six feet tall. It'll have to go in my trunk and I'll tie it down." The man pulled a length of rope from his jacket pocket. "Can you help me pick one? Ah, my wife said it has to be perfectly straight."

"Sure thing." Bobby saw an opportunity for another tip, if he found a good one for this guy. "Let's check in back." He turned to move further into the lot and the man followed a couple steps behind. "Here's really fine tree, sir." The young man gripped it and moved it away from the others.

"Yeah, that one looks pretty good!" He stepped closer to the teenage salesman. "Can I see the bottom to make sure it's straight?"

"Of course." Bobby bent over to grip the bottom of the trunk. Suddenly, he felt himself being jerked backward by a rope around his neck. Desperately, he tried to grab the hemp strand that was biting into his throat and fell to his knees.

Almost five minutes later, the man pulled the plugs on all the decorative lights and the lot was in total darkness. To him, Bobby weighed little and he dumped the body in the trunk of his car. The vehicle's headlights were dark, until the car was a hundred feet from the Christmas tree lot.

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It was almost 7:50 p.m. and a crowd had already gathered in Mer-ryville's town square. Shannon and the girls hurried down the sidewalk toward the center of activity. Hope was in the lead and turned back to grin at her sister. "You think Jimmy is there waiting to see if his latest squeeze is gonna show up?"

"Be quiet, you jerk!" Joy snapped back.

Shannon had to hold back a chuckle as she listened to their playful bickering. The girls were several feet ahead and she increased her pace to catch up to them — but not too close. Both were a day away from being fifteen and she knew they'd want to see their friends at this annual celebration without Mom tagging along.

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Nicky woke the following morning on the living room floor. He felt dizzy and managed to finally sit up. Two empty bottles lay on the shabby rug nearby, which had a small burnt patch, he realized he must have passed out with a cigarette in his hand.

He attempted to gain his feet and had to crawl to the couch and used it to support his effort to stand. "I'm out of control. No more drinking for me!" Abruptly, he sat on the couch and glanced around the room. "Where's Sandy?" He was very concerned as the cat always slept next to his body to absorb the warmth. "Sandy! Here, Sandy!"

Nicky managed to gain his feet and moved slowly into the kitchen. Still, no sign of his pet and he staggered to the bedroom. She lay on the covers and simply regarded him with a cold stare that only a cat could convey. "Baby, you scared me!" When he reached to pet her, Sandy jumped down from the bed and ran out of the room. That surprised him. She'd never run from him before. But still, he was glad she was safe.

By early afternoon, he'd fully recovered and lit his sixth cigarette in four hours. Nicky put on his coat and grabbed the car keys. He needed a drink badly and to satisfy his intense craving, he'd have to make a quick visit to the liquor store.

Andropolis opened the door to the attached garage and stopped

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dead in his tracks. “Where the hell is my car?” He moved quickly to the living room and opened a venetian blind slat to look at the driveway. Nicky released the slat and sat abruptly on the couch. He put both hands on the sides of his head and tried to think. His Ford Focus was parked at an angle on the snow covered front lawn. “I don’t remember going anywhere!” In fact, he recalled very little of yesterday after he started drinking heavily.

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Merryville’s small highway department had been out all night plowing, sanding and salting the slick streets. Mack checked his watch. He had one more street to finish and then it was quitting time. Just as he was about to turn the corner, he spotted someone running toward him in the middle of the street waving his arms. He halted the plow. “What’s wrong with that guy?” He rolled the window down as the man approached

“There’s a body under the town’s Christmas tree on the bandstand,” said the man before Mack had a chance to ask. “He’s got a rope tied around his neck!

Mack was shocked. “You sure he’s dead?”

“Positive!” The man looked down and shook his head. “I don’t have my cell phone with me.”

The snow plow driver picked up his radio’s mike and pressed the button. “This is Mack in plow one. I need the cops over here at the town square. Ah, tell ‘em it’s an emergency!”

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Nicky had ventured out to inspect his car on the lawn. As far as he could tell, there were no dents, scratches or indications he’d hit anything. He swallowed hard and saw the right back wheel was several inches below the rest of the vehicle. Andropolis studied the driveway. There was a curved indentation in the otherwise pristine layer of snow. “It looks as if I backed out of the garage and onto the lawn.” He looked back at the right rear wheel. “Maybe, I got stuck and didn’t actually leave. Thank God for that!”

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Nicky headed back toward the garage for a shovel to dig out the car, but paused and glanced back. He rubbed a gloved hand over his chin. "If I went anywhere, I could have possibly got stuck when I came back."

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Merryville's town square was lit by the flashing lights of numerous law enforcement vehicles. The body still remained exactly where it had been found. Forensic techs were taking photos, scouring the ground around the bandstand and picking up any potential scrap of evidence. Two New York state police detectives stood several feet from the corpse. Both Lt. Pete Montgomery and Sgt. Doug Jamison had made detailed notes of their initial observations.

Montgomery shook his head and looked down at his small notebook. "He wasn't robbed and had a couple hundred bucks in the front pocket of his jeans. The kid still had a wallet in his back pocket and we went through it. His driver's license picture matches the face. Robert Silenski, residence 26 Skyline Drive, Riverton, New York." The cop closed his notebook. "Only seventeen years old!"

"Pete, Riverton is over fifteen miles north of Merryville," said Sgt. Jamison. "I wonder what he was doing here. Attending the festival you think?"

"I just spoke with the Riverton Police Department while you were with the medical examiner." Montgomery flipped to the page in his notebook. "According to them, the victim's father reported him missing last night about midnight. Apparently, when the boy didn't come home, his father went looking for him and found his stocking cap where he worked."

"Are we going to notify his family?"

"No, a local Riverton cop knows the family. He'll take care of that." Montgomery looked toward the bandstand. "Strange, this boy was working in his uncle's Christmas tree lot, Doug. Now, he's here on the bandstand under our Christmas tree."

"There's got to be some weird significance to the placement of the body." Jamison looked back at the local Merryville Chief of Police

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standing next to a cruiser in the street. “Let’s check with Chief Martino and see if he has anything of value.”

Both detectives walked toward the local officer and nodded their greeting when they got closer. Lt Montgomery glanced back at the murder scene. “Chief, we’re just getting started here. Anything at all you can give us?”

“We held the town’s Annual Christmas Festival last night from 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. I made my last routine patrol about eleven and the streets were deserted. I know for a fact that the plows were going to start about 1:00 a.m., if the snow kept falling heavily.” Martino looked down at his own notebook.

“You were the first official responder. Anything about the scene that struck you as odd?” Detective Jamison asked.

“Odd is an understatement! People aren’t usually murdered in this quiet town. As far as I can tell, only two people were in the vicinity of the bandstand this morning. The town resident who first found the murder victim and me. I tried to secure the area as soon as I saw the body. There were so many people here last night that...” He shook his head. “...all those foot prints partially filled with snow probably won’t be of any use.”

An officer was moving toward the three and called from several feet away, “Medical Examiner needs the two of you to come over to the body.”

Both detectives walked to the bandstand and went up the steps. “I have something for you,” said the coroner.

“What have you got?” Pete Montgomery looked at the body.

The doctor held up a plastic evidence bag. “Inside the victim’s mouth was this large strand of black material. I can’t guarantee my initial analysis, but I swear it looks and smells like licorice.”

Detective Jamison frowned. “You think the kid was eating it when he was strangled?”

“I can’t be absolutely sure, until it’s examined closer. Off the cuff, I think it was placed in his mouth post-mortem by the killer.” The coroner turned to one of his assistants. “You can transport the body.”

Lt. Montgomery stepped closer to the doctor. “We need your help

on this. You make darn sure nobody talks about that object in the boy's mouth!"

"I fully understand, Detective. Mum's the word."

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Nicky had dug and slowly shoveled snow away from his stuck car for almost an hour. The physical exertion left him panting next to his vehicle and he leaned on the trunk. His efforts were for a single reason; he needed a drink badly. The liquor store was over a mile away and the thought of walking that far wasn't even considered.

Andropolis was very concerned about being able to move his vehicle and opened the car door. His hand shook a little as he tried to insert the key into the ignition. Finally, he had it started and moved the shift lever to drive. The back tires spun and the car hadn't moved forward at all. Nicky slapped the steering wheel violently and floored the gas pedal to try again. In the rearview mirror, he could see dirt and grass flying backward. Seeing that his efforts weren't getting him anywhere, he took his foot off the gas pedal.

He opened the door to get out and evaluate this situation. Two teenagers stood in the street watching and Nicky yelled to them. "If you push me out, I got a twenty for ya'."

Thirty minutes later, he pulled into the liquor store parking lot. Zack Poselli saw the car. "He must have finished off three bottles in two days." The owner watched Andropolis walk toward the front door and noticed him stub out a cigarette in the container next to the front entrance.

Zack smiled at his best customer and motioned to the counter behind him. "How many today, Nicky?"

Andropolis simply held up three fingers and stared at Zack.

"Store's closing early on the 24th and not open at all on Christmas," Poselli volunteered.

"Five," Nicky answered and pulled bills from his pocket. He licked his thumb and peeled two hundreds from his wad of money.

The store owner put five bottles on the counter. "I've got a liquor box over here. It'll be better than a bag." He lifted it to the counter and

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pointed at the bottles. "If you don't mind, put 'em in the slots." Zack reached back and grabbed another bottle of anisette from the shelf by the lid. "I have a gift for you. It's a Ferien Liquor Christmas Gift for special customers. Take it, Nicky!"

Andropolis was so surprised that he blurted out, "Well, thank you!" Nicky was extremely pleased to get a present and picked the bottle up.

"Hold on," Poselli said. "The darn seal looks like it's not on tight. I can't give you a defective gift." He put a different quart bottle on the counter. "Take that one."

Zack handed him the correct amount of change. He watched Nicky walk out with the box. "That son-of-a-bitch will drink himself to death in months!" He reconsidered his statement and added, "Maybe weeks!"

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Shannon Grant was frosting the first of two birthday cakes for her daughters when the phone rang. She answered and heard, "Detective Grant, this is Pete Montgomery."

The woman frowned and worried that she was being recalled from her vacation. "Lt., good to hear from you, I think. Am I being recalled?"

"No! Absolutely not, Shannon. Look, this call is unofficial and I'm standing here with Doug. We have a murder victim that was found right here in your town and it's pretty gruesome. You can't repeat this, but the body is that of a seventeen year old boy and he's not from Mer-ryville. Doug and I both know you got kids and I just wanted to pass this on. Until we get a handle on what's happened and why, well, you might want to keep your girls close."

"I will and Pete, thanks." She gripped the phone a bit tighter.

"No problem, but as I mentioned, we haven't really gotten started. This call is only intended to be from one cop to another."

"I'll keep quiet and thank you again."

She glanced down at the kitchen floor while she thought. There was no way in the world she was going to let Joy and Hope go ice skating tonight, unless she went also. Shannon knew they wouldn't be happy about her tagging along, but with the phone call she'd gotten, they couldn't go alone.

*Brian Durski*

The stove's timer went off and she opened the oven door to remove the second cake. They always had two cakes, one for each of her twins. Most of the preparations were already complete. There was plenty of time before her girls' birthday party at two that afternoon.

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Zack Poselli picked up the defective bottle of anisette by the very top and set it under the counter. With the broken seal around the bottle's cap it couldn't be sold. He slipped on his coat and a pair of gloves. The store's front steps had iced over and would need an application of rock salt. The last thing he wanted to happen was some customer injuring themselves, which could result in a lawsuit. Also, he needed to empty the trash can and ashtray outside the front door.

The two hundreds left by Andropolis were still on the counter. He hadn't wanted to touch them after watching the customer lick his thumb. Poselli grimaced, picked them up with a gloved hand and dropped the bills in a cigar box under the counter.

In his opinion, not only was Nicky a drunk, he was a pig. The man actually stunk and Zack was amazed that a person could have that much dirt under his fingernails. He shook his head and said quietly, "I bet the bastard hasn't washed his hands in a month!"

The liquor store owner was totally disgusted by the customer and moved to the back room to find his pail of rock salt. A couple minutes later, Zack applied a liberal coating to the front steps and paused as he glanced at the single cigarette butt in the ashtray near the entrance to his store. He'd seen Nicky stub out a cigarette. If he wasn't wearing gloves, there was no way he'd pick it up.