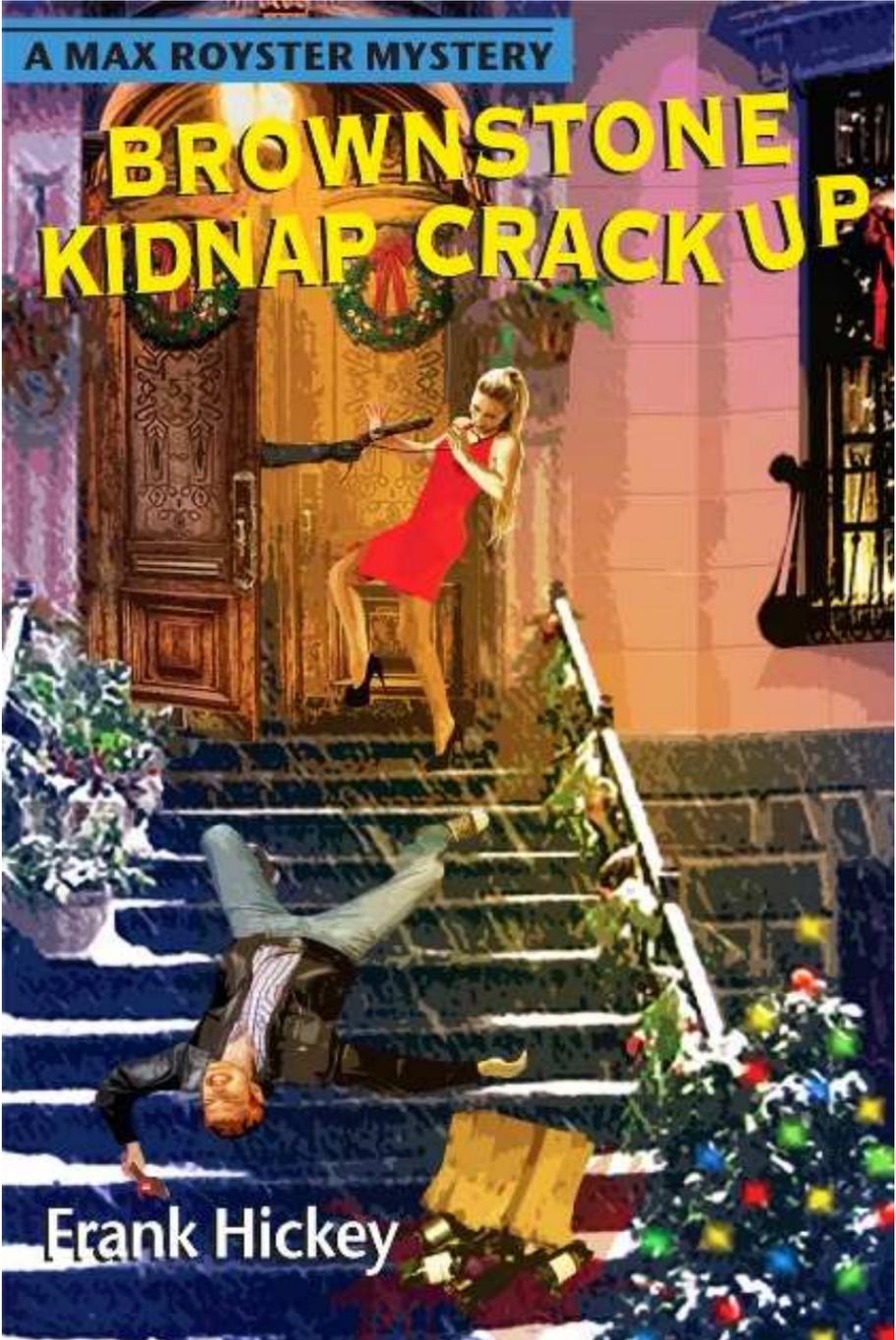


A MAX ROYSTER MYSTERY

BROWNSTONE KIDNAP CRACK UP



Frank Hickey

**BROWNSTONE
KIDNAP
CRACKUP**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR
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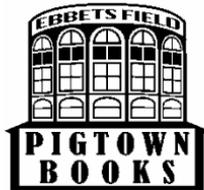
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Spy, The Movie
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BROWNSTONE KIDNAP CRACKUP

A Max Royster Mystery

by Frank Hickey



Brownstone Kidnap Crackup: A Max Royster Mystery
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First Edition / First Issue

To Miao,

To my family,

To members of Team Larry.

You know who you are.

PROLOGUE

WHUP!

Nancy's palm slugged me.

I staggered back.

By training, my left went out. But she danced away on her toes.

She weaved back. Short muscles bunched all over her body. Her honey-blonde hair waved over baby-blue eyes.

"Five one, one-hundred-and-three pounds," I panted. "And you could kill me with either bare hand."

"Well, Mister Royster," she purred in her Kansas drawl. "I sure wouldn't want to do that. I would miss these sessions."

I tried moving under her guard. She hit me with two strikes against my padded headguard.

"Sometime today," I panted, "the flu will hit me. I can tell. So I have to work out now, two days before Christmas. Or I'll be out of shape for a week."

Her foot tapped my shinguard.

It hurt.

"So you can coast through Christmas using your Department sick leave," she said.

"I'm off The Job, Nancy. They dropped me for what they call 'By Virtue of Mental Disease'."

We were sparring inside her fighting gym in Manhattan's Spanish Harlem. The radio played classic Christmas songs. Notes uncurled through the gym smell of old leather and sneakers.

"That hurts me to hear," she said. "I know how much you adored being a cop who helped losers like me and my man, Santiago. You're still getting checks, right?"

“Not a cent. They want me to fight them for everything, limp home and die of a stress heart attack while frying cheap falafel in my overpriced kitchenette.”

“New York’s Finest,” she said. “Ha!”

“The Irish choirboys running the Job say that they will lock me down in a mental hospital for life if I sue.”

“How are you surviving this Christmas season then?” she asked.

“Ducking relatives. In-laws and out-laws. Avoiding fruit-cake desserts.”

“Is that all?” she asked.

“Delivering liquor to the elite in the Upper East Side. Where I used to be the Man, patrolling in the blues and giving orders, now I’m hustling for tips from millionaires.”

“That is so wrong,” she purred. “Anyway, at your age, that’s enough workout for today. You know where the showers are.”



Stripping off my sweats in the shower room, I could feel the flu take hold in my body.

The hot shower water blessed me.

Then a small hard body gripped me around the hips. Fingernails scratched my flesh. Nancy was nude, showering with me.

“Mister Royster,” Nancy whispered. “The front door is locked.”

“But everything else is wide open,” I said.

“Let me scrub you like a big dog and then lie down with you. You need a private place to recover.”

“You have your honeybunch, Santiago, who makes your little heart go pit-a-pat.”

“Sure I do. He’ll never know.”

“But I will. And you remember that I’m in love with somebody else?”

“Who is making you suffer alone,” she said.

“Nevertheless,” I said.

She ground her body against mine.

Somehow my arm reached up and switched off the water. Still holding her, I stepped out of the shower and into the big room.

“You look so wretched that I want to cheer you up,” she whispered. “Give you something special.”

Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker” music played on the radio. I put us in waltz position.

“I don’t feel wretched,” I lied. “Watch.”

We waltzed naked to the “Nutcracker.”

“Tchaikovsky suffered a sad, toxic life,” I said. “But hear how happy his music sounds. He and I together can laugh through anything bad.”

Chapter 1

THE EVE OF CHRISTMAS EVE – 4:45 P.M.

Snow was starting to powder Manhattan's Upper East Side where the elite lived. Winter chill edged the air. Nearby, someone was burning Yuletide wood in a fireplace.

I double-parked the van on East 71st Street off Third Avenue. My window was open. The handle was broken. The cold air cut me. As usual, the key stuck in the ignition. I didn't have the three minutes of wrestling it would take to free it. Today was complex enough already.

My winter flu was growing, shaking and headaching me. It sapped whatever strength I had left. So the ignition key stayed. Nobody stole rickety vans like mine in this tony neighborhood, and now I would be just twelve feet away from it.

Last year, I had patrolled the neighborhood, wearing the NYPD uniform.

A case of Château Pontet Canet Pauillac sagged me down more. I hoisted it up to my hip and staggered over to Number 166, a brownstone with Christmas lights winking in the windows.

The door swung outwards.

The impact caught my left elbow. It spun me – six feet and two-twenty pounds – down onto the concrete. The case burst and the wine bottles exploded. My elbow screamed with pain.

“Oh, showers of bastards!” I roared. “There goes my tip!”

Bordeaux and glass splashed my leather bomber jacket, staining the cream sheepskin cuffs purple.

I smelled like a squashed grape.

A man came through the door. He saw me on the ground, kicked and caught my mouth with his heel.

BAM!

A stocking smeared his face, masking it. He gripped a sawed-off shotgun in a gloved hand.

He was robbing the rich, like Robin Hood.

“Get lost, Shotgun,” I grunted. “You made your score.”

But Shotgun came through the doorway gripping a girl in a red dress. The shotgun barrel had a wire noose taped to it. The noose fitted around her neck. If she moved, the shotgun could blow her head off.

Behind him, women screamed.

Plates smashed on the wall.

A man in a tuxedo tried grabbing Shotgun. But Shotgun elbowed him back onto the vestibule wall without releasing the girl.

The Grabber slid down the wall. Blood stained his gray hair where his head had hit the wall. His plastic eyeglasses slipped off his button nose.

I was suddenly aware of “Silent Night” playing on a stereo upstairs. Cigar smoke flowed out of the doorway and mingled with the swirling snow.

“Watch out for that gun!” another man shouted.

My mouth filled with blood. Shotgun kicked me and connected again. Bones crackled in my neck. I went backwards onto the pool of wine.

My hands gripped his leg. It felt strong and young. He moved like an athlete sideways, breaking my hold.

If he got away, he would rape the girl, then kill her to cover his tracks. Every cop knew that.

I punched at his kidney with all I had. The wallop hit. He gasped and swung the girl around to block me.

“Awww!” she keened, out of breath. Fear choked her like horrid hiccups. “Awww!”

“I’ll kill her, man!” Shotgun shouted.

I tried to kick him but missed. My forty-six careless years slowed me. The flu did not help.

My foot went out again. He dodged my foot, half-lifted her and made it to the curb.

He hauled her into the street.

“Open the door!” he shouted over his shoulder.

I pulled myself to my feet and ran after him.

Behind me, men in tuxedos came through the doorway.

“Stop that animal!” one of them shouted.

“Call 911!”

“My God Almighty!”

“I’ll get that gun off him!” yet another bellowed.
“Doesn’t frickin’ scare me.”

“You must be nuts,” I said. “Where they been hiding you?”

A blue Jeep Cherokee was double-parked on the street. That looked like the getaway car. Black tape masked the numbers.

“Open the door,” Shotgun shouted. “Do it! Shoot this fool loser!”

I was this fool loser.

The Jeep backed up, jolted towards me and hit my hip. It knocked me back onto the asphalt. My head went back and smacked the ground.

“Shoot! Shoot!” Shotgun cried out.

The Jeep Driver, wearing a cartoon-green clown mask, swiveled around. He pointed a black semi-auto gun at me.

I rolled backwards, away from that gun.

The Driver gunned the Jeep forward.

“No, goddamnit!” Shotgun shouted. “Wait up!”

The Jeep straightened out and flew down the street. The Driver caught the light on Lexington and was gone.

The girl in the red dress writhed. She tried to break free. A long thigh showed under the skirt. Her blonde hair threaded through wind-whipped snow. She was whimpering now, her eyes unable to get any wider.

I pushed myself up again and fell down on a knee. I remembered my cop days. On other nights, other victims got hurt because I was too slow.

“Not this one, Shotgun,” I said.

Shotgun dragged her to my van and slid the side door open. The girl screamed and grabbed the noose. He hit her a solid punch with his left hand. Her head went back. She sagged into the van. He yanked the noose, still attached to the shotgun, from her head and threw it into the van’s front seat.

I slopped back up to my feet.

He slid the van’s side door shut.

He got behind the wheel.

My leg muscles shaking, I sprang at my van.

He floored the engine.

I tried hooking my left arm around the driver’s side mirror.

My van sped up.

I threw a short right strike to his temple. He turned. It hit his ear and skittered off without stopping him.

The van jolted.

The side mirror bent.

I was hanging onto it.

My feet dragged on the roadway.

I lifted them, but they kept dragging. Fear choked me. Every cop’s nightmare was getting dragged to death by a speeding perp in a car, using all that metal and chrome to kill. Nothing could stop it. If you shot him dead, his foot would stick on the gas. The car would still drag you until your body broke apart.

He braked.

My legs flew up.

The mirror snapped.

I fell onto the street. My knees smacked the concrete. My nerves screamed. Pain shut my eyes.

The ground hit me again.

I rolled to one side, reaching to my hip for a gun that wasn’t there.

There was no van any more.

I opened my eyes.

My van was gone.

Shotgun had taken my van with the girl inside it.

My body lay on the street, aching everywhere

Snow kept falling.

“He kidnapped Huggy!” a man in a tuxedo shouted,
coming up to me in the street. “Why did you help him?”