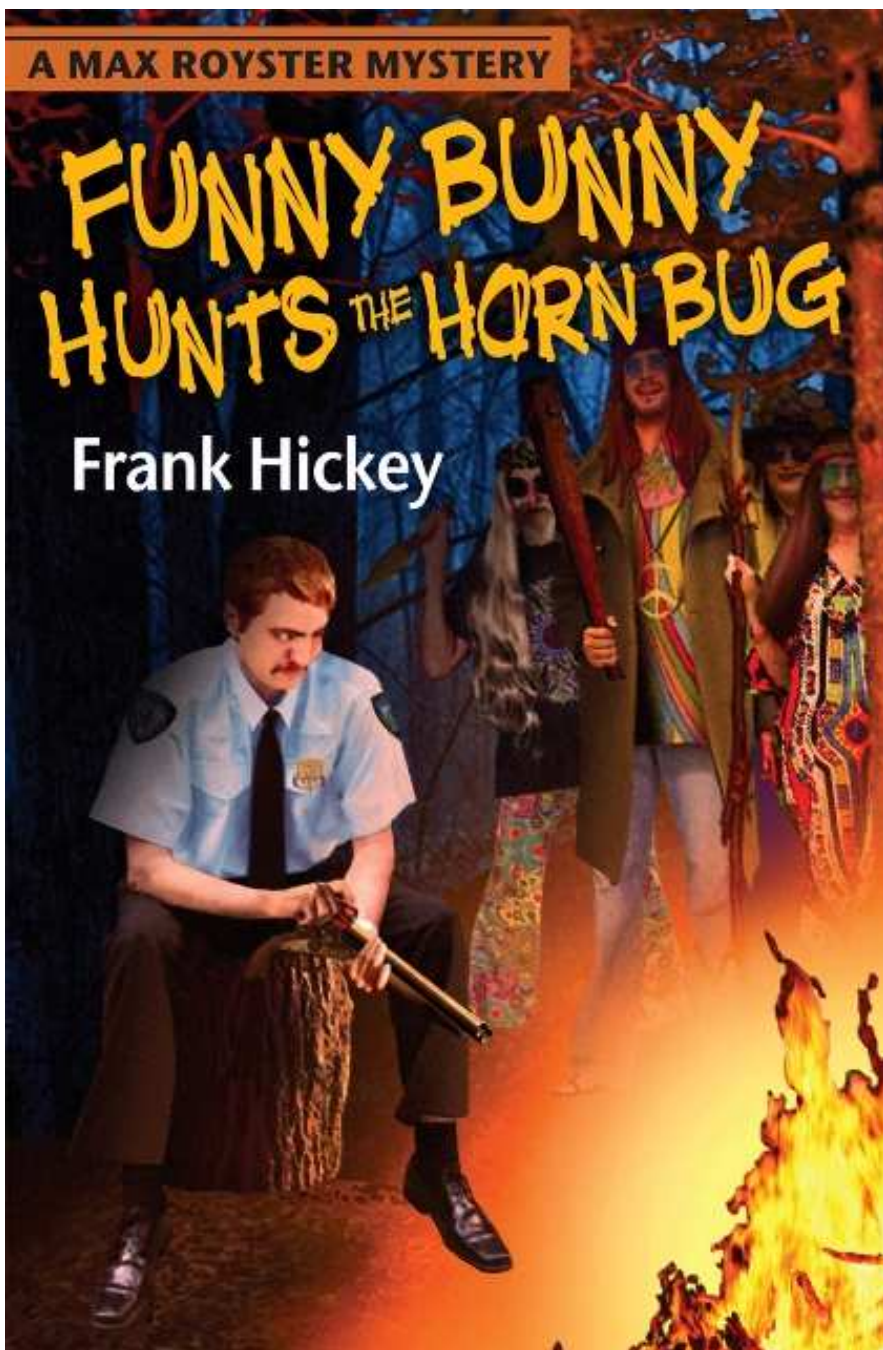


A MAX ROYSTER MYSTERY

FUNNY BUNNY HUNTS THE HORN BUG

Frank Hickey



**FUNNY BUNNY
HUNTS THE HORN BUG**

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(co-written with Charles Messina
& Lynwood Shiva Sawyer)

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Funny Bunny Hunts the Horn Bug: A Max Royster Mystery
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To Jean Hogan Hickey

1923-2007

Johnny Weissmuller Water Show Dancer,
Copacabana Dancer, Broadway Actress,
Member: Pax Christi and The Catholic Worker

PROLOGUE

Greenwich Village was a carnival of springtime magic whirling and laughing around the dance floor and my partner.

“Dancing is magic,” I reminded her.

“Max, you say that every time.”

“Because it becomes more true,” I said.

Aline showed a classic face with delicate dark brows and eyes. A lime-green summer dress moved with our rumba. She smelled of cinnamon from the cappuccino she was drinking.

Other couples danced past me. Their flanks said that I was slow.

The mirror behind us reflected me as a thick redhead, crowding fifty and weighing too much. For dancing, I always wore black. Alongside Aline’s freshness, my cowboy moustache made me look sinister.

On stage, the Cuban singer crooned “Sabor A Mi.”

Through an open window, I heard a man’s voice from the street outside.

My green eyes asked, “What the hell?”

“Ow, goddamnit!” the man said, near panic. “Are you crazy?”

His tone raised my hackles.

“You cut me!” he said.

“Give that wallet!” a woman spat. “Or I cut you more.”

I broke away from the startled Aline.

“Family emergency,” I said. “Just remembered. I’ll be back later.”

“Why don’t you grow up and get organized like other men?” she asked.

Aline did not know my job.

She spun and snagged another partner.

I went bounding through the fire doors then down a flight to the street. The stairs hurt my feet. The staircase smelled of cigar smoke.

I burst through the steel door onto the street.

Twenty feet away, a stagey blonde woman stood over a moaning black man on the sidewalk. Wet blood dappled the sidewalk and her right hand. Her shoes scraped the sidewalk.

“Police Officer!” I bellowed. “Don’t move!”

I never carried at a dance. My Glock and my nicked police shield lay back in my apartment.

“Officer!” the man said. “She cut me!”

“He tried raping me!” she said. “You know how they are.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “Always chasing you blondes. That’s why I heard you ask for cash. You’re under arrest.”

She lunged at me.

Something metal in her hand slashed at me.

I leaned back, kicked high and felt my foot kick her arm near the elbow. She cursed. Her hand opened. The wet razor blade pinwheeled from her fingers, catching streetlight.

The blade dropped somewhere dark.

But she rushed me.

She was a strong built woman about 30. As a street hustler, she knew everything about men’s bodies. She knew how to fight and take them apart.

Nerves shook my hands.

She threw strikes. I smelled a sweet perfume and felt knuckles BOOM! my face. Then garbage smell choked me.

I was on the ground. Her shoes clattered away.

She loped across Second Avenue. Traffic screamed and lurched to stops.

Then she ran west on Seventh Street.

Somehow, I carried my beef behind her, panting like a hippo getting into hot water.

“What’s up, dude?” a skateboarder asked, slouching at my elbow, cap on sideways.

“You are, Skates,” I said. “Police. Can you skate to that corner on Seventh and Ale Place in thirty seconds?”

“Twenty.”

“A blonde woman, 30, big-boned, black dress. Don’t let her leave.”

“I’m deputized?”

“With all my authority,” I said.

Skates whooped. He bang-slam-crashed his skateboard along Seventh.

I cellphoned 911.

My voice shook as I gave the operator all the up-to-the-minute news.

Skates reached the corner near Ale Place. Accordion music mixed with guffaws from inside McSorley’s. He stood about 90 feet from me. Nobody could get past him.

“The perp is locked down on East Seventh between Ale Place and Two Avenue,” I sputtered into my phone. “There are about five stores open on the block now. And about nine apartment buildings opening onto this block.”

“We got units en route,” the 911 operator said. “You say that you’re off-duty. Just remember that, officer.”

“You’re talking to the right man,” I said “And here comes your victim. Roll me an ambulance here.”

The man who had been flat on the sidewalk tottered across Second Avenue. Blood streamed down his face. It dripped off his jawbone onto his jolly polo shirt.

“She gave me a scar,” he blubbered. “I’m going to have a scar!”

“What’s the deal here?”

“Man, I don’t want to talk to you. You let her slide!”

Looking at him now, I could see that he was younger than he had looked before. He might be 22, with a fullback’s build and smooth looks, unmarked before tonight.

“Talk, anyway,” I said. “I’m all that you got.”

“What do you care? Huh? We started rapping on the subway. Just friendly, you know. She’s older than me but seemed interested. Said I had a great body.”

“God bless her.”

“I mean, oldsters need sex, too,” he said.

“So I hear.”

“Then we leave the subway together. Somehow she started kissing and feeling me up. I went with it. Then she asked for money. I started pulling away and she cut me with something. Now I’m scarred!”

“I’ll help you. And I’ll let you in on a secret. Women love scars.”

No blonde woman showed on the street.

An NYPD blue-and-white car bulled down the avenue. The roof light bled cherry Christmas colors. The Driver Officer bumped the curb. His partner, the Recorder Officer, cursed.

“Hey, pal,” the Recorder Officer said. “Whaddya got?”

“Max Royster, off-duty, Seven-One Precinct. I got Rob One, lady blonde perp up this block somewheres. Either in a store or some apartment vestibule. Put your next car up there on Ale Place to relieve that skateboarder kid.”

The Recorder Officer made a face. He stood about three bulky inches over my six feet, pale-faced against limp brown hair and bent tin eyeglasses.

Tobacco smell blended with sweat as he leaned closer to me. Smile lines grooved his mouth but he was not smiling now.

“We can’t do that,” he said. “Where’s your shield?”

“Back in my crib. Here’s my ID.”

The crumpled paper unfolded from my wallet. It showed the NYPD seal and my name and shield and command. It also said that I had lost three vacation days for working overtime without notifying the desk.

“That’s no ID. It’s just an official NYPD reprimand on PO Max Royster.”

“Can you think of a better ID?”

“Royster, we had to Taser some PCP fool on this street. Then we did three Community Policing projects, to calm the silly whiners down. Anarchists. Career complainers. Letter-writers. So we can’t search for this perp here. Everyone will get their nuts twisted if we search like you want.”

I stepped back

“You’re jerkin’ my Gherkin,” I said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Nope. Captain told us, leave this block alone.”

“Community Policing, known to us cops as ‘ComPol,’ means getting closer to your beat by walking and talking,” I said. “Helping with non-cop trouble. Developing relations with them. But it does NOT mean that we stop policing.”

“Cap don’t want to know,” the Recorder said. “He pretty dumb.”

“A real sharp cookie,” the Driver said. She was a muscled type, the kind who does pull-ups without straining. A tattoo of a surfboard decorated her left wrist. Her left canine tooth winked gold.

“He’ll punish us for shaking up this block,” the Driver said. “Days off and craparoo assignments.”

“But she cut this guy,” I said. “And we can jail her where she belongs.”

“Just a boy-girl cat fight,” the Driver said. “He said-she said.”

“So you can take off, pal,” the Recorder said. “We got this covered.”

My breath blew out.

I stepped towards the Recorder.

“You mean that you got this covered up,” I said. “What about me? She hit a cop. Or doesn’t ComPol care about that?”

“You shouldn’t get involved off duty.”

“Well, I am. Let’s please call your sergeant.”

“No,” the Recorder said.

There it hung.

I cellphoned 911 line again to put it on tape. Emotions warbled my voice worse.

The street corner smelled of dead beer and garbage.

The Sergeant who showed up was a round saggy joker who would have looked comfortable behind a butcher's counter.

His mud-colored hair was breaking white over the temples and needed cutting. He seemed a defeated bureaucrat.

You could see it in the wary gray eyes, avoiding contact and saying that he wanted to retire early tomorrow morning.

"No deal, Sport," he said. "We spent weeks stroking this block with ComPol bull sessions. I'm not throwing that away for one whore swinging some steel."

"What matters to you?" I asked.

"You don't. Keeping that moron captain off me does. And look at your vic here. Do you see him going to court on this?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't. He wants to tonight. But tomorrow, less and less. You know them. If we bother this block tonight, those same jerks that we stroked will write new complaint letters on me. It's not worth it."

"I want her arrested!" the cut victim said in his clear college voice. "And I'll go to court."

"You're drinking tonight and she's your girlfriend," the Sergeant croaked. "We had other cops check the block, sir. She's gone."

"You're lying," the cut victim said. "Anyone can see that."

The Sergeant closed his eyes.

"She's gone, sir," the Sergeant repeated.

"ComPol says so," the Recorder said.

"ComPol is great for lazy cops," I said. "A new excuse for doing nothing."

"You want a complaint?" the Sergeant asked. "Little written reprimand?"

"Sir, do you need an ambulance?" I asked the victim.

"What do you care?"

"Ambulance?" I asked.

“Not from you.”

“Then I’ll see you home in a cab,” I said. “Maybe we’ll take an adult beverage on the way.”

Thirty feet away, the woman burst out of a doorway, blonde hair flying. Her face twisted and turned ugly.

“Don’t move, officer,” the Sergeant said to me. “That’s an order! I’ll have you fired for Insubordination.”

I ducked my head and tensed my dancing leg muscles. They hurt. Everything hurt.

She saw us standing on the corner, grimaced and then laughed as she ran. It sounded like a bad smoker’s cough, hacking and spitting. She dodged The Skateboard Kid on the corner and kept running. You could hear the laugh all up and down the street.

“She’s laughing at us, Sarge,” I said. “And at your Community Policing.”

CHAPTER 1.

Heat had crinkled the dark blue shirt that NYPD cops call “the bag” until it glued to my flanks and rode piggyback on me. I was sponging my wet way past Manhattan brownstones where the city’s elite lived.

“You knock over my papers, I kill you!” the Korean merchant flailed his wiry arms. Everything in him sharpened as he stepped onto my sidewalk.

“We didn’t do nothing!” the pale whitefish grandmother wailed. Her blue eyes blazed under dyed gold hair. She marshaled someone who looked like her daughter and a pudgy granddaughter under her arm.

“Kill all you!”

Her offspring circled to the grocer’s left like a street boxer, moving to his weaker side. The Korean noticed. A tear-gas sprayer showed in his fist.

My heart hammered like a runaway horse inside the bag.

A stylish woman in soft leather boots and tailored jeans stepped in front of me, shifting her handbag to a shoulder.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Let me pass.”

She looked through me with light-colored eyes.

“I need to get past you,” I said.

“There’s no hurry,” she said, her accent refined at some tony private school.

She slung her handbag, blocked me again and then walked away.

“Think that one over,” I said.

The grocer shouted some more.

“Shill-yeh hamnida!” I shouted back in Korean. “Kyung-chahl!” or “Police! Stop right there! Both of you!”

The grandmother whipped around. Her daughter kept circling.

“I said STOP!” I bellowed, putting all of my 210 pounds behind it.

Somehow it worked. That was one more time.

“Listen up,” I said, winging it. “If I want someone to ignore me, I’ll get married.”

The instantly forming Manhattan crowd eddied on the sidewalk near us. You could smell a clove cigarette, rich perfume and somebody’s fresh running shoes.

“My friends, could we clear the sidewalk here?” I asked.

“You clear it,” someone said. “You’re the cop.”

“Upper-class revolt,” I said. “The attack of the lacrosse players.”

The grocer swung the tear gas sprayer at me. Another grocer bobbed up behind him, hands held to hit someone. They both looked wired enough to slug me. Their eyes said that they did not care anymore.

A teenage Latino messenger leaned his bike against a parking meter and watched. For him, this was better than free TV.

My feet twitched as I stepped back.

A dog walker, a regal-looking man in a Madras suit and bowtie, walked by with a borzoi, a Russian wolfhound. The dog stretched out the leash, striking my thigh and stopping me from moving.

“Excuse me,” I asked the dog walker. “Could you let me pass?”

He sniffed and ignored me.

The borzoi paid me more respect. He skittered out of the way.

My hand stopped the grocer with the tear gas.

“Put that tear gas in your pocket,” I said. “Or I’ll arrest you and end this little comedy right now.”

He obeyed, cussing in Korean with what sounded like terrible words.

“Don’t listen to him!” the dog walker said. “Call for his sergeant to come here. These police are getting out of hand.”

I gave the dog walker my best subway glare.

“You, sir,” I said to the grocer, “Do you pay taxes?”

“Too much taxes!”

“Well, I’m what you get for them. So let me earn them. Go back inside your store, handle your customers, and you and I will talk.”

“They attack my store, my property!”

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. My hands shook, so I folded them across my Sam Browne gunbelt. “Both sides get to explain to me what happened. Then I punish, okay?”

“That’s not fair!” the grandmother said. Her pink cheeks shook as she wagged her head.

“You’ll be happy with what happens, I promise you,” I said. “But I can’t do anything until you talk to me. You, nobody else. Nobody is leaving, okay? How does that sound to you?”

“Like a grand mess!”

“Are you angry at me?” I asked.

“He has no right. Does he –”

“Are you low rent people?” I asked. “How old is that child? Do you want her to see all this? Would you rather speak to me privately?”

“Why you asking these questions?”

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Why?”

“My name’s Max,” I said. “What may I call you?”

My questions slowed her. They sometimes worked that way.

“Why do you want to know my name?”

“Well,” I made her slow down even more. “Why not? Have you done anything wrong?”

“No!”

“Then, please, tell me.”

Now I pitched my voice so low against the traffic noise that she had to strain to hear me. Some of the sidewalkers pooled away from us. That brought my breath back to me.

“My name is Mrs. Rhonda Klepfer,” she said.

“That’s fine, Mrs. Klepfer,” I was almost whispering now and drawing out the words. “I want to thank you for helping me here today.”

“This ain’t a luncheon, Mama!” the daughter shouted. “He trying to flimflam you!”

I breathed out and shook my head slowly.

The daughter was thicker than I was, about five-feet-nine, and looked like one of life’s losers, running in place to nowhere fast. They both appeared to be neighborhood loudmouths from Long Island, the kind that hate and avoid the city.

“He’s just getting you off the track!” the daughter shouted.

I turned to the daughter, blading my body so that the gun stayed far from her.

“And what might be your name, young lady?” I asked.

My voice cracked. This was tearing me down and taking me apart.

“I don’t have to tell you my name unless you get me a lawyer!”

“You’re pretty sharp,” I said. “Too much for me, anyway.”

“By accident, right?” the daughter said. “Just an accident, you know, we knocked over this Chinese fool’s newspapers. But I’m gonna come back and sue his ass.”

“Let me handle this for you. Do you have a cellphone?”

“Why?”

This might work out for me, I thought.

“Now I know that nobody hit anyone,” I said. “I will contact you later and tell you how I cited this man inside for Disorderly Conduct. But I can’t do that without your phone number.”

The daughter reluctantly gave me her digits.

“He has no right to cause this kind of scene,” I continued. “How does that sound to you?”

The grandmother glared at the store. “He scared my little girl!”

“You are right,” I lied, giving her the magic phrase. “That’s where the Disorderly Conduct comes in. I’ll be in touch, Mrs. Klepfer.”

“You better not be lying to me! I got your name off your plate there. Royster, right?”

“Max Royster, yes, Mrs. Klepfer. Patrol Borough Manhattan North.”

“You lie to me and I call Internal Affairs. Nobody trusts you cops now. That’s why they pay you just 25K. Only slobs need apply.”

“Thank you again, Mrs. Klepfer.”

She shrugged and tugged the latest two generations with her back onto Madison Avenue.

“They’re gone,” I told the grocer. “If they come back, call 911. And don’t wave that tear gas around again.”

“This is my store!”

“This is my rule,” I said. “As of today. If I see you threaten a child with gas, I’ll cuff you and put you in jail.”

I spun the handcuffs out of the case and thumped them on the counter.

“Clear enough?” I asked.

Outside, I tried taking a deep breath and hoping that my pulse would slow down.

“Man, that was sweet,” the Latino messenger said. Gold inlays dotted his teeth under a scraggly moustache. “You gave that lady some verbal judo, right?”

“Gave her something.”

“Man, you like to walk, don’t you? I seen you up on 86th Street two hours ago.”

“New world,” I said. “Today’s my first day working this kind of rich upper-class precinct. I call it ‘The Playpen’ where the rich never grow up.”

“Yeah, you right about that.”

“Back in Brooklyn, I’m used to my slum precinct where everyone needs cops. I live near this Playpen. But patrolling in the blue is different.”

“They don’t think they need you here, bro. Crime is down way low. And nobody respects New York cops anymore. Scandals, shootings and that 25,000 chump change they pay you.”

“That’s just twisted thinking,” I said. “Every place needs cops protecting it.”

“Sure as spit, bro. Give you an example. While you were talking that stank ho down, this dude was checking all the doors on the block. When he saw you, he took off. But he was trying to get inside some house there,”

I swiveled on my heels and looked back at the block of brownstones going up to Fifth Avenue.

“Do you see him now?” I asked.

“Naw. You scared him off.”

“Which house?”

“Man, don’t you listen? All of them. He went down the steps and tried the cellar doors, too.”

“I appreciate the heads-up,” I said. “My name’s Max. What’s yours?”

“Raymundo.”

“Raymundo, what did this fool look like?”

“Tall. Skinny. Works out a lot. Short hair, like a GI cut.”

“Color of the hair?”

“Dirty blond.”

“How old would you figure?”

“Thirty-something.”

“Here’s my card, Raymundo. If you get any trouble, tickets or anything, please call me. Do you have a cellphone number?”

“Oh, no. That won’t play, bro. No courtroom for me, no way. I give you something and that’s it. Just wait and he’ll come back.”

“Who do you work for, Raymundo?”

“Man, I’m like you. The last of the independents. No paper on me. I see you around.”

He took his bike and gracefully kick-glided it into traffic. I wished that I could do that.

The brownstones lined 65th Street down to the store at Madison Avenue. Their elegance and location made them cost upwards of five million. The millionaire owners had left for the beaches during this August heat wave. The precinct had a standing order for us cops to check for any burglary signs.

I tried doorknobs and checked the window glass.

One window had a sticker on it from the Goff Security Company. I phoned the number and asked them to call me at the Precinct if anyone had tried this doorknob and set off an alarm.

My feet felt gummy and dead in this heat.



A dark suit topped by a shaved head bobbed up out of the crowd. His squinty blue eyes hopscotched over me. He palmed a Deputy Inspector's gold shield. Sunlight lit the shield's blue enamel.

"Deputy Inspector Trask, Inspectional Services," the dark suit said.

I froze. Inspectional Services hunted us cops for any infraction.

"Yup," I said.

"By your name-tag, you're Royster. Are you supposed to be on Madison Avenue here, Officer? And what are your current Community Policing projects?"

Buses wheezed past us. Horns blew.

"I'm assigned to Third Avenue and 57th Street," I said. "And I've got no Community Policing projects because Community Policing does not work."

Trask stepped closer. He smelled of some manly-type after-shave.

"I'd like to hear your thinking on that," he said.

"Nossir."

"Speak, Officer. Or else we'll have trouble here."

"You won't listen."

"PO Royster, I'm giving you a reprimand for insubordination, being off-post and failing to meet standards."

"I meet my own standards," I said.

“And you will complete three ComPol projects, in writing, by this time next week.”

My chin tucked down. It was a boxing habit.

“Sir, I’m new here,” I said. “But in Brooklyn, us cops did real work. I’m not risking people’s lives for some social experiment idea.”

“I can have you fired for refusing this order,” he said. “Loss of pension, medical, family dependents, *et cetera*, amounts to a one million dollar fine, over your lifetime. Be smart. Obey the order.”

He scribbled in my memo book and left to fight crime somewhere.

Beat up, I leaned against a taxpayer’s car.



“Officer, can I ask you a question?” a short squatty woman with silver-gray hair drawled.

She sounded like a complication.

“Of course,” I said by rote.

“Do you see that young man down the block looking into the cars?”

I had no idea who she was talking about.

“Where?” I asked.

She blew out a breath.

“Right there,” she said. “In that red T-shirt.”

Looking up, I glimpsed him. Deep in my thoughts, I had not noticed him before. But I did now. He was checking out each car that he passed, a good sixty feet from me. In his twenties, slight and agile, he looked like someone who would run.

I crossed the street to get closer.

He looked up, saw me and took off. His sneakers bobbed up and down. He hit the corner and vanished.

“Now he got away!” the citizen fumed.

To calm her, I put out his description over the radio. We could not arrest him for anything. The other cops would think that I had snapped my cap.

“Do I have to do your job for you?” she asked. “I park my car here every night.”

“Thank you very much for your help,” I said.

“Officer Royster,” she said, reading my name-plate. “I may report you for incompetence.”

Then I walked two rich blocks back to the 19th Precinct desk. The alarm company had called with an alarm just twenty minutes ago. I scribbled everything down in my memo book. A squinty-eyed Sergeant with a pug nose was busy spitting into a wastebasket.

“Sarge,” I said. “I got a possible burglar scouting out spots today. He’ll probably make his move tonight. Can you please get a car to cover this block tonight?”

He made me wait. You could hear him thinking.

I mentioned the alarm.

“You’re the new boy?” he asked.

“Yup. Just in from a crummy dangerous precinct.”

“How do you like the upper-class hoity-toity citizens here?” he asked.

“They don’t think they need us.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m retiring next year. All they do is bitch about us cops. And ask about ComPol. ComPol, what a joke.”

“Now the burglar,” I said.

“Everyone’s off tonight,” he said. “Summer time. And the boss isn’t giving you humps any more chances to pad your overtime. He’s hacked off at them for parking in his spot again.”

“But it may go down tonight.”

“It’s not your townhouse, is it, Royster? You notified me. That’s enough. Let them get burglarized. Remind them how things used to be.”

“This is not sharp policing,” I said.

I spun on my heel and tapped the planks out of the office.



Down the hall, a sign on the wall read “19th Precinct Anti-Crime. Sgt. Dunmoreland.”

I knuckled the door and walked in.

A softening football player-type, with a gold sergeant's shield around his neck, looked me over.

"Sarge, I'm Royster. Can your anti-crime team help a cop out?" I asked.

His pouchy black face tightened under the dapper moustache. I told him what I had.

"Probably not tonight," he said. "We got a letter-writer on Park Avenue, screaming to the press how muggers are scaring him whenever he jogs. Calling us lazy. But we'll take a look sometime."