

FATAL BREAK

A super-fit 45, RED DIGBY, applies a metal peg to a whirling grindstone in his designer Workshop. Mountain-climbing gear hangs all around. On the walls, framed posters tell of the range of MTS outdoor products. They also speak of the company's rapid genesis from psychedelic Start-Up to corporate-colored Enterprise. It's a stretch from sponsoring a 10K road race to producing award-winning Documentaries.

Red's wife, lovely HELEN DIGBY, 42, jogs up the winding drive of their Chalet home, an ultra-modern rendering of traditional Alpine design. She passes two parked cars: an ice-blue and white Ferrari, and a convertible '67 Peugeot 404. Reaching the Climbing Wall, an integral part of the house that curves to meet the second-floor deck, Helen stretches for the first handhold. A Close-Up on her left hand reveals both her wedding-ring and the handhold. Moving with ease and agility, she reaches the deck, surprising the Maid, BETTINA, 55, who almost drops a tray of breakfast things.

"Signora! You get down from there. And please go call Mr Red for break... Ah!"

Helen leaps off the wall onto a springy, grass bank.

As Helen is opening the Workshop door, that sharpened metal peg twangs into the dartboard fixed there.

"Darn! Missed you!" quips Red.

"And I darn well missed you too, darling!" Helen retorts, after a fraction's indecision. She pulls out the peg, noticing the other equipment Red has prepped for their Climb.

They laugh. They embrace. She suggests breakfast. He's got that rehearsal for the Awards Ceremony to be held that evening. Todd Cooper might be an old friend but Red shouldn't be late too often. She hands him the peg, saying "I hear some of the Old Timers still use these!"

"Old Timer, am I?" growls Red, chasing after his giggling wife.

On a gentle mountain trail, Lt.COLUMBO, whistling "This Old Man" as he walks, catches his breath, and takes in the stunning scenery that includes a pretty village in the distance. He eyes the heavy hiking-boots borrowed from his nephew, LUIGI. He looks up the trail, where Luigi, 35, the picture of handsome health, is striding along despite carrying a heavy Backpack. A stencil on the Backpack reads: 4th Alpine Div., Mountain Rescue.

Strung across the Main Square of BUZZA, that pretty village, a banner announces the "Alpine Image Festival".

On screen in the Festival Hall, we see a black and white clip of classic Red DIGBY. Twenty-years younger, he is securing the final peg of a daring ascent. He reaches the peak, and turns to assist his exhausted partner. It's Helen. The fear, the relief, the elation are apparent as the couple gaze down from the mountain top.

"Cut Film. Hall Lights, go!" commands TODD COOPER, 42, from his position in the TV control room. "M.C. spot, go!"

The MASTER of CEREMONIES, in his gaudy leisure-wear, grins out at the empty hall and runs through an introduction.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, to bring this wonderful evening, sponsored by the International Association of Alpine Clubs, to

a close, a warm round of applause, if you please, for a man who's been as successful in managing "mountains," as he was in climbing them: Mr Reginald Evan Digby. I give you Red Digby!"

Red winces at the "Intro" as he's crossing the stage to shake hands with the M.C.. Todd announces over the P.A. that he's satisfied with the set-up.

Elsewhere in Buzza, a Rolls Royce Silver Ghost blocks traffic outside a BEAUTY PARLOR while its CHAUFFEUR retrieves a gift-wrapped box from the trunk and hands it to his imperious employer.

KURT SCHNAPZEN, 50, a dapper Swiss-German, invades the Beauty Parlor, carrying the gift. Unflappable, Kurt surveys the scene. He spots Helen in a corner having her nails done. Her Manicurist, HEIDI, 33, dressed in dazzling neon, is the first to react, scooting back her chair as Kurt makes a ceremonial presentation of the bottle of vintage wine.

"Carsini's Opus #5. Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon, 1976."

"My Wedding Year, this time?" remarks Helen, trying to keep a straight face.

"And it so happens," Kurt reports, "that the Adrian Carsini Winery is available at an incredible bargain price. Available, that is, to you only, on my receipt of MTS. I presume you retain sole ownership?"

Kurt's latest inducement of Helen to sell MTS is as swiftly unsuccessful as the three before. She sends him on his way assured of the happy state of her marriage, and her determination not to sell. Winemaking is in her blood. She loves it. But she loves her husband and what they "grown" together even more.

Kurt accepts defeat graciously, but informs her as he goes that there's a Sales Contract in the box. Just in case Helen changes her mind. He'll be at the Festival all week. Staying in his usual suite at the Imperator.

Heidi the Manicurist's expression of incredulity only fuels Helen's throaty laughter.

Back in the TV Control Room, Red is airing his own thoughts on the set-up. "What's all this bull about 'as successful as he was'? And whose idea was the Reginald Evan".

Red's cellphone rescues the embattled Todd. Todd calls Lunch over the P.A., as Red finds some privacy for his call. Phone cupped, we see MARISA, 22, lithe and lovely, draped on a hotel chaise-longue. She's reading Tennessee Williams.

Honey-voiced, Red assures her that he's on his way, which, after bailing on lunch with Todd, he is.

The Ferrari in MTS corporate colors threads its way through the busy village. It reaches the Hotel Imperator. Red takes the stairs, two at a time, his pace slowing by the Third Floor. As he nears Suite 315, breathing hard, the elevator doors open behind him. Kurt is there. Just in time to witness Red welcomed into Marisa's long, loving arms. Kurt gleefully prods the Foyer button.

At the Beauty Parlor, Helen, lulled by her Manicurist's rapt care, wakes when a faux-antique dial-phone is trolleyed over to her. She is caught by what is said to her. Her unease is registered by Heidi, anxious to complete her artwork. "But Signora! Signora!" she cries, as Helen exits at a brisk pace.

Minutes later, Helen is in her convertible Peugeot 404, top down, outside the Hotel Imperator. Taking some binoculars from the glovebox, she locates the 3rd Floor. Marisa's waving figure fills her view. The binoculars flick to the marquee where Red is exiting. Before taking the keys from the PARKING VALET, she glances upward from his waiting Ferrari. The minimally-clad Marisa blows him a lavish kiss good-bye. Red jumps behind the wheel. The Valet goes untipped. Marisa unacknowledged.

When Red arrives home later that afternoon, Helen is waiting for him with the Cabernet Sauvignon '76, uncorked, and two glasses. They're celebrating Kurt's annual buy-out bid. Red plays along with the joke and pours the first glass. Helen's hand covers the second. There's a clink as she drops something into it. She raises the first glass. Red lifts the second glass. On closer inspection, he realizes it contains Helen's wedding ring. He's slow to gather that it means a definite end to his infidelity, marriage, and business partnership.

"You can have that back," Helen snarls. "And," she adds softly, expertly sniffing her wine, "I can have this back. I'm selling MTS, and buying Carsini." Quaffing her wine, she flings the Sales Contract at her speechless husband, snapping "Believe your eyes, honey!" With an elaborate blown kiss, pointedly done Marisa-style, she leaves the house.

Around dusk, Luigi is sipping water from a canteen as he waits for Uncle Columbo to reach a charming Alpine Hut cradled among the Dolomite peaks. It's a breathtaking scene of which the weary detective is hardly aware as he staggers to a bench.

"How are the boots, Uncle?" Luigi inquires. "The boots are fine!" gasps Columbo, no longer whistling.

In the sold-out Festival Hall, the tuxedoed M.C. fluffs the change of text about Red. Elegantly attired, Red expresses the necessary sentiments, then creates a little suspense over the recipient of this year's "Pinnacle" for Most Significant Contribution to the Alpine Industry. The Audience gives the winner, SALLY PETTIWELL, a young woman who scaled the South Face of Annapurna, a standing ovation. Red greets her with a kiss. Sally is attractive. Red jokingly makes as if to kiss her again, properly.

Sally steps forward to the podium, "Pinnacle" in hand, to begin her hymn of thanks. Red retreats to the shadows. Over Red's earpiece, Todd cracks, "How's it feel to be giving the gongs not getting them, old buddy?" Red lasers a look through the dazzle.

2 AM: The luminous MTS logo on her knapsack and jacket are aglow as Helen heads through the inky-dark Forest.

Red calls out to Helen as he enters the Chalet. No answer. The wine glasses are unmoved. The Sales Contract has gone. He checks the answering machine. One message: Kurt Schnapzen's thrilled that Helen finally agreed to sell MTS, and available for the afternoon meeting she suggested. Punching the erase button, Red ponders the fix he's in.

Confirming a hunch, Red finds some equipment missing from the Workshop. He returns to the house and checks around for a note his wife might have left. Passing the computer, an idea occurs to him. He boots up the Computer and consults the Net Server for the most recent access. The map of the *Comici*

Americana on Black Tower - Red made first ascent aforetime - reveals Helen's whereabouts. Tossing down a paperweight he's been fingering, a lump of limestone, he acts on the information.

Still in his Tux, Red heads towards the door. He backtracks to pick the wedding-band out of the wineglass. Another piece of his plan falls into place.

Minutes later, Red joins the party at the Piste Bar, a hangout on the main square with a funky decor of Climbing photos and paraphernalia. He mingles like he's been mingling all night long. He parties, but is watchful of his beer intake. And, though it's tough for him, he even sidesteps a challenge to "Sound the Horn!". He nominates Todd to take on the local beer-drinking champion, a hulking VILLAGER.

5.25AM: At Buzzo Airfield, TITO, the gatekeeper, asleep in the cot in the Back Room, is woken by the honk of the Peugeot. Sitting up in his well-positioned cot, he pulls on a string that, running across the ceiling, raises the windowblind. The familiar car, scarf, and wave receive no more than a cursory glance. Stirred from his slumbers, TOMBA, Tito's Basset Hound, trudges to the button that activates the barrier. While Tomba's applying a paw, Tito squints at his watch in the spill of the headlights and logs Helen's entry. TOMBA is rewarded with a tidbit of some kind.

The Peugeot pulls up at the MTS Helipad behind the Main Hangar. Red loads his climbing gear onto the ice-blue and white Helicopter, which he quickly readies for flight.

Well advanced on her trail, Helen glances up as a helicopter thumps overhead. A Climber's first thought: It

could be a rescue helicopter. Other than that, there's nothing remarkable about it in this Chopper-busy region. She returns to her troubled musings.

Landing the MTS Chopper on the far base-slope of Black Tower Rock, Red carefully adjusts the seat (to Helen's leg-length). Soon he is climbing up the *Comici Americana* route. He ascends with impressive efficiency, till he reaches a small lip of rock known as the Tea Cup. A "tea-cup" of sympathy in an otherwise unforgiving rockface, it's a vital handhold at a crucial moment in the climb. With the aid of it, Red has little trouble in proceeding some thirty-feet to the next peg, through which he threads a rope. Rappelling down to the Tea Cup, he takes his hammer, and that sharpened peg, and deftly chisels a line of fracture. Struck with the hammer, the lip breaks cleanly into Red's hand. Once replaced, it looks no different. Red rapidly rappels from the scene, and jogs (6.30 AM) beyond some sizable boulders to the concealed helicopter.

7.05 AM: Helen preps for her ascent, putting her Climbing Watch in her Backpack. She climbs with precision and grace up the 1200' rockface. Only from some distance is it apparent that Red is tailing her.

8 AM: Helen nears the Tea Cup. She reaches for it. She shifts her weight to grasp it. Relying on its fixity, she shifts her weight further. The Tea Cup breaks in her hand.

A lesser climber would fall immediately. Helen somehow scratches her way into the rockface, desperately clinging on as she looks around for a way out. There is none, but down. There's nothing to be done, except pray for a miracle, and hold on as long as she can hold out.

A seeming answer to her Prayers. Red approaches from below. Perched on a lower ledge, off to one side some 30' below, he tells her that Andreas, that Guide, just mentioned that the Tea Cup didn't feel right...

Helen doesn't judge it opportune to quibble about who's offering the helping hand. She's more terrified than she's ever been. When he tells her to lighten her load by tossing down the Backpack, she does. An instant later, it occurs to her to ask why she shouldn't just drop it.

The answer is soon evident. Catching the Backpack, Red makes a Magician's Show of removing the Sales Contract and pocketing it. In the same macabre manner, he then smashes Helen's climbing-watch, thereby fixing the time, and drops the helicopter keys into one of the Backpack's sidepockets. All this Red could well have done down the mountain. But as he tells his wife, just before rappelling away, he wanted her "to see an Old Timer at work. One last time."

8.15 AM: Helen is alone on the rockface with a few seconds to live. It is not apparent why, but she devotes her remaining strength to edging her bleeding right-hand towards her left. Brief contact is made, as she falls, which she does, down, clean and hard.

Helen's Backpack smacks against a rock as Red scuffs it up. Nearby is her motionless, stricken body. He returns the pack to her back and the watch to her wrist. He does not succeed, however, in putting the wedding ring on her mangled, swollen finger, slipping it in the Backpack instead. Red hustles away, down the Forest Trail.

9.30 AM: The sun glinting off the Backpack's luminous logo leads Luigi to Helen's body. Stammering a little, he is ordering in a Rescue Chopper, talking by radio to one of his men. Lieutenant at the Fourth Division of Carabinieri, Luigi leads the Mountain Rescue unit based in Buzza. Identifying the victim as Helen Digby, he invites Columbo to examine the body, which he does with his usual scrutiny. Her clenched right-hand attracts his attention. Finding a blood-stained rock there, he then inspects the other hand.

No rope, no helmet, could it be a suicide? Luigi doesn't disagree. He doesn't agree, either. Helen was an expert climber. Even the most macho of the Polizia Alpina respected her. Since her husband, a very renowned alpinist too, and she bought that chalet, everybody in Buzza loved them. They were so happy to come here each summer. Luigi feels sincerely sorry.

The note in magnetic letters on the refrigerator door says "Bettina: Wake me at 10, please". Bettina, right on time, carries a glass of "power juice" and a cup of coffee from the Kitchen to the Master Bedroom. From under the covers, Red grunts for her to enter and put the tray on the table by the door. She does so, and exits. Red, still in climbing clothes, throws back the covers.

At the crime scene, TWO POLIZIA ALPINA stretcher away Helen's body. Luigi removes the Helicopter Keys from the Backpack. SERGEANT OGGIO reports that they landed the Rescue Chopper next to the MTS Chopper, just beyond the boulders.

Columbo pulls SERGEANT ZAPPELLA aside. He quizzes the eldest and portliest of this Polizia Alpina unit about

Helen's Climbing Watch. Above the time read-out, there are some little numbers: 6570?

"Like this?" asks Zapella, showing off his own combo watch/altimeter. It shows the time and the altitude: 6,000 feet. Then shouldn't it read the same as Helen's, Columbo queries. Got smashed in the fall, Zapella speculates. Luigi proposes they continue their chat on their way over to the MTS Chopper.

In the Chalet Office, Red flicks through the Sales Contract, pausing over Helen's signature on the final page. He twists the paper into a spill, lighting it and holding it aloft like an Olympic torch. Tossing it into the fireplace, he ensures that it is entirely burned.

Lt. Columbo's eyebrows shoot up almost as quickly as the MTS helicopter, skimming a rockface in its whirling ascent. Zapella enjoys the rare chance to fly such a sporty Chopper, not imagining that his enthusiasm isn't shared by his passenger.

In a hallway of the Hospital Mortuary, Columbo peeks through a door-window at Red and Luigi standing over Helen's slabbed body. (Just her feet are visible.) Electing not to disturb them, he carries Helen's Backpack towards a goofy-looking Refreshment Machine. He is pressing buttons at random, when Red and Luigi swing through the doors. "I'd need to climb it to be sure," says Red. "But my bet is she 'checkmated' herself." "Can happen to the best," Luigi hedges. "Sure can," Red admits, "it's how I took my tumble."

A NURSE calls Luigi to the phone. Red is left to his thoughts, and a clear view of a strange character wrestling a

refreshment machine. Then he recognizes the scuffed-up MTS Backpack. 'Hey you! That's not your bag. That's my wife's bag!" Red bulls up to the startled Detective. Luckily, in the same moment, the Refreshment Machine belches out a beverage. The distraction allows time for Luigi to return and make a timely introduction, "Red! This is my Uncle, Lt. Detective Columbo of the L.A.P.D. Uncle, this is Red Digby. Helen Digby's husband. Red Digby, the Climber."

Red smilingly accepts his celebrity and Columbo's condolences, then asks him if he's done with Helen's personal things. Luigi politely intervenes. They'll be needed for the for the Insurance Inquiry. If not a Police one.

Todd arrives. Red accepts his friend's silent, consolatory hug. It's a Climber Moment, one of those rare times when they acknowledge the risk of their sport. Milking the "moment", Red's voice cracks as he explains that Helen wasn't actually sick last night. Only sick and tired of all the glitz, all that stuff they climb to escape. She needed to "Get High. Get Mountain High" says Red, ironically quoting the MTS slogan. "And she just couldn't wait"...

"Like Yosemite, man." Todd recalls. "Remember how she'd cut out of there. Go solo it some place."

"Well, she soloed it one time too many," Red croaks, the tears rolling. "Oh Todd! If only I'd been there..."

Breaking a second hug, Todd offers to stand in for Red at the Festival Gala Dinner that night. Showing a little "grit", Red declines. He'll be there tonight. See it through.

A fellow Climber, Luigi is very taken by the scene. He makes his sympathy plain. He'll try and keep the "procedures"

from adding to Red's distress. About that Insurance business, perhaps Red would like his Uncle to help out. He's confident his Uncle won't mind not going hiking.

Columbo comments on the likely difficulties. Helen's not using a rope or helmet, and going off like that. Was it a large policy?

"Not so large, half a million or so," Red responds, unthinkingly. Perceiving Columbo's surprise, he qualifies, "If you're accustomed to handling such amounts."

"It's not the issue," Todd puts in. It's a question of honor among Climbers. Helen was respected in the community. Going down climbing is one thing..."

"Suicide is another," says Red, nabbing the punchline. "Any help you could offer to clarify the nature of my wife's accident would be very appreciated, Detective."

Back at the Chalet, Red is soon appreciating the quality of that help. Columbo is his fastidious self over Helen's agenda. In the Office, he enlists Red to decipher the handwriting. That would be why they got magnetic letters for the refrigerator messages, Columbo assumes.

"Yeah, hard to read. Just like Helen." Red quips, turning to the Datebook: 1 PM Beauty Parlor; 3 PM Tailor; 8 PM Festival. What did she do between 3 and 8? A little shopping, Red offers. Then they met at 6 PM. And that's when she changed her plans? Columbo chimes in. And declared, Red adds, that she wasn't going to the Festival. She was going climbing, with or without him. Which, in fact, she did. When Red got home from the Party around Sunrise, she'd already

left. Her car was gone. She'd driven to the Airfield, then flown the MTS Chopper to Black Tower.

And "2 PM Zurich (Z1305)," the following day? What might that be? What do those numbers mean?

Her Lawyers possibly, Red conjectures. Helen told him she'd planned to see them. The number could be the train reservation code. Columbo gratefully notes the idea on some scrap paper. But what about that 4 PM appointment for today? Red cannot even hazard a guess. Perhaps Bettina the Maid could help. The Detective is free to question her, even scout round for any messages Helen might have left. If there's nothing else...

Halfway up the spiral staircase, one last thing comes to mind. It was Red mentioning "messages" that brought it to mind. That piece of rock he found clenched in Helen's right hand. Could it mean something? Columbo unfolds his grubby hand-kerchief to reveal the lump of limestone. You know how people make those little towers of stones in rocky places. We call them cairns Red said. Cairns of course. Luigi taught me about them... messages can come in strange forms.

Red can't comment on that but recalls that Helen had a little "pet rock" around the house. She'd often carry it with her as a good luck charm. It was a souvenir from their first major climb in the Dolomites. Well, more of how they celebrated it. On the peak. It could well be that rock.

It could be, then, Columbo elaborates, that Helen reached out for the only friendly rock around. Unzipped her pocket, and clutched the precious keepsake as she fell.

Catching sight of the actual keepsake next to the computer, Red tries to casually accept the scenario and excuse himself. Palming the rock as he goes, he tells Columbo to just shout if he needs anything.

Red has barely pocketed the rock and reached the Atrium before that "shout" comes. There's the question of the Wedding Ring. Did Helen usually take it off before climbing? Red contends so. That would be why, the Detective concludes, the ring was in the Backpack sidepocket. Funny thing then, that Helen had such a marked tan line on her ring finger.

Red wriggles on the hook, before remarking that it is early in the season. They've only been in Buzza for three weeks or so. Neither of them had done much climbing yet. That's another reason Helen couldn't wait. Red wriggles free. He plays the grief-card. He "needs space to mourn". Columbo is content to fish about alone.

At the Climbing Wall, Columbo squints off into the distance, then turning back, runs an admiring hand over its beautiful curve. While puzzling over the hand and foot holds, he falls into what looks like a quirky dance-step. It clearly puzzles Red, on the phone, in the office window that overlooks the wall. All Columbo is doing in fact is mentally rehearsing certain climbing positions. Mental or no, his progress up the wall is checked by an attack of vertigo!

Red's interest is caught by his caller. Consenting to a meeting within the hour, he irritably tosses the phone aside.

Kurt Schnapzen, already en route in the Rolls, closes his cellphone with a smug smile.

Columbo rummages in Red's Workshop, taking particular note of the machinery, and the missing gear. The posters and the peg in the dartboard also merit attention.

We see Columbo consoling and assisting a saddened Bettina, as she goes about her domestic duties. The Chalet interior is revealed to be a blending of traditional Alpine style and California chic.

In the Kitchen, probing for the premeditation that might indicate a suicide plan, Columbo asks if Helen arranged for a Bag Lunch. No. The Signora kept to her usual eating habits when going on a Climb. If departing around daybreak, she would have both a large dinner and breakfast. If departing any earlier, she'd skip breakfast. In either case, she'd carry some dried fruit in her Backpack.

Bettina washes, Columbo dries. He relieves her of the tray she carries from the open-plan Living Room. She's sorry she doesn't know anything about that 4 PM appointment. Somehow the sight of the single, unused glass on the tray triggers her tears. The kindly Detective offers her a paper towel. Thinking to distract her with conversation, he casts about for a subject, the wine's from the Carsini Winery! Adrian Carsini. Now there's a coincidence. He was a very nice man. A murderer, as it unfortunately turned out, but a very nice man...

"Talking about me, I hope!" Red asks from the doorway, offering Columbo a glass of wine, taking two clean glasses from the shelf. But Columbo has already picked the one on the tray which is clean. Red just nods while replacing the useless glass on the shelf. Then he pours them both some

wine. He sips. He swills. He swallows. He says, "So what do you think, Detective?" Columbo hurries to taste the wine. "Not the wine, Detective. I'm certain it's good."

Columbo outlines his current thinking. If Helen had committed suicide, there'd probably be a note. She doesn't seem to have been "the kind to go gentle". An Autopsy would rule out that she took some sort of slow-acting poison. And rule out she was murdered, Red adds. Could the detective in you refrain from thinking homicide? Columbo just nods.

Anyway Red agrees to the Autopsy. He then declares that he's going to take on Black Tower himself. It's time to find out what happened. And, diligent as the Detective is, Red knows he'll want to come up there with him. He'll have to come anyway, just to witness things. Columbo has little time to either accept or refuse as Red is shuffling him out the door. An unexpected but important business meeting. Such concerns didn't stop with Helen's demise.

One last thing, about Helen, Columbo puts in. Bettina mentioned her jogging some mornings, working out on the Climbing Walls, other mornings. The Wall faces East, catching the morning sun, odd then that if she climbed without her ring, she didn't lose that tan line...

Columbo finds his own way out, dodging a Rolls finding its way in. He exchanges polite nods with Kurt.

Kurt is less reserved with Red, defying him to deny his late-wife's intention to sell MTS. Red simply counters by denying any obligation to pursue her intention. Kurt can give up. Helen's dead. There won't even be the annual opportunity to flirt with her.

Kurt listens intently, nods, and politely takes his leave. As a seeming afterthought, he remarks, "I *will* acquire MTS. As you Americans say 'You can take that to the Bank'. Any Caribbean Bank of your choice." Red stays cool under Kurt's departing gaze. Only a close-up of his steely grip on the little rock betrays his anxiety. His hand shakes as he tries to crush the keepsake to powder. A fragment drops to the floor, followed by several drops of blood...

As he follows Todd into the Festival Hall's roof-space ("The Void"), Columbo is able to talk of the Director's work. Mrs. Columbo and he just loved that weekly Adventure Show. What was it called? "The Great Outdoors". Todd admits himself flattered, as he eases through the roof to move over the Lighting Equipment with the ease of an experienced Climber. Columbo prefers to listen rather than watch.

Todd talks freely and fondly of Red and Helen. How the three of them met in Yosemite. Their Bohemian lifestyle. How, despite Helen's moneyed background, and Red's "army brat" upbringing, they were a tight couple. And remained so, whatever the rumors about Red's womanizing. They went through so much together. Like Red's "big time" accident, and "his deep deep funk" when recovering from it. Then there was the struggle to make a success of MTS. It wasn't an issue that it was Helen's money that made it possible. That she had to sell some property she inherited. Red and she were different folks with different strokes rowing the same boat.

Relieved to retreat from the Void, Columbo begs and receives a last favor of Todd: a videotape of last night's Awards, to be delivered that night at the Gala Dinner.

Passing the Fountain in the pretty Main Square, Columbo makes for the Beauty Parlor on his still-sore feet. Heidi, in another luminous outfit, makes a deal with him. She'll answer the Detective's question, if he'll allow her to give him a manicure. There's something about the minimalism of male nails that appeals to her. Columbo shakes on it. She could give him some of the attention Helen ran out on. Impressed, Heidi demands to know how he heard about it. How Signora D. got a phone call and left in hurry. He didn't hear. He saw. A glimpse at the Mortuary of Signora D's partly painted toenails.

Heidi counters with a dramatic account of the scene with Kurt. Columbo manages edit it down to something about buying a Winery and selling MTS. Heidi also delivers of a delicious detail. There was a document of some kind, a Contract. It was in the "box of wine! The box the bottle of wine came in". The Detective trumps her by being able to describe Kurt.

A Festival Poster in the window takes us into Buzzo's Dress Designer/Maker, somebody Helen patronized. The DESIGNER, in a self-designed folkloric number, is making a fuss over Columbo's raincoat. The Detective is bemused to find himself the subject of a positive fashion analysis: his "retro-grunge look" is pronounced "tres courant". But then, what would one expect of a friend of Mrs. Digby? Columbo clarifies that he's an investigator not a client. In a swift about-face, the Designer complains about Helen missing her appointment the previous day. And then to make matters worse, she very nearly knocked him over. As he was walking back from a late-lunch, she pulled out of the Gas Station, barely

missing his toes. Lucky he saw her. Not that she didn't look wonderful as ever. Just like Grace Kelly, head scarf, sunglasses, top down, racing away in her Peugeot.

It's been a long, hot day. Not exactly a vacation. The Detective heads for the Piste Bar. Taking a table that looks onto the Square and its pretty fountain, he is paying for a tall, local beer when he hears a familiar voice. "It's my Uncle. He's buying an Italian Beer. And he has a photograph of Aunty in his wallet!" Columbo closes his wallet, smiling into the miniature camera somewhere among the Climbing Gear stacked nearby. Taking his beer around the corner of the trellised Terrace, he discovers Luigi and the Four Polizia Alpina at their regular table.

"It arrived?" says Columbo, looking at the Wrist-Monitor on Luigi's arm. "Courtesy of the L.A.P.D."

"It's wonderful, Uncle! We tested it on a mock rescue this afternoon. Oggio had the idea of using it in training and safety films." And Zapella," Oggio cracks, "had the idea to put it on his bed. When he's on duty!"

Over Zapella's defence of his wife's fidelity, Luigi shouts a warning to PEPE, the BAR OWNER. to fill those beer glasses to the very top. He's being watched.

Columbo's asks if they're celebrating something. Luigi tells him that Zapella won big on the Carnera/Johnson Fight in Vegas last night. He's sharing his good fortune. Paying back a fraction of his debts, Oggio suggests.

Pepe the Bar Owner, bringing over the drinks, laments that he only saw the final round over a late late dinner. Every-body's working such long hours with all the Festival

Goers in town. Columbo wonders if Red was among those keeping him busy. Not as busy as he usually would. In fact, the Owner remarks, Red even dodged "Sounding the Horn". The local drinking challenge, Zapella clarifies. And that would also be unusual for Red, Columbo infers.

A little later, in the quaint wood-built Alpina Polizia Station just up the road, Zapella delights over the interest Columbo takes in his display of local rock samples. Luigi rescues his Uncle from Zapella's enthusiasm by inviting him to look over one of the more hi-tech services they offer mountaineers. In a Rear-Room, surrounded by climbing and rescue equipment, young CORPORAL TORNADO jockeys an impressive array of Computer Equipment. At Luigi's prompting, he explains to Columbo that he's updating the Mountain Rescue's Home Page. Climbers can resort to the Web for the latest news about routes and conditions. Fascinated, Columbo quizzes Tornado about Helen's route. Zapella is quicker to respond. He climbed it himself recently. There was nothing to report. When exactly was that, Columbo asks. March 8th, Tornado responds, patting his computer while Zapella splutters. Luigi breaks up the fun. He and his Uncle have to hurry home to get ready for the Gala Dinner. He hopes he can still get into his dress uniform.

In the antique grace of the Festival Hall Dining Room, Luigi, squeezed into his dress uniform, his buoyantly pregnant wife SOPHIA, in her best gown, and tuxedoed Uncle Columbo sip aperitifs. A vacant chair at the table is troubling Luigi. He vents about his sister "Zaza's" behavior since she went

away to college in Milan. Always late, and all this talk of Holly-wood...

Columbo watches Red arrive, gracious and stoic in accepting a succession of condolences. The Detective's eye is caught by Kurt's steering Todd out to the Verandah.

He excuses himself from the table, noticing as he crosses the room, that Red has also reacted to the encounter.

Todd disclaims any intimate knowledge of the workings of MTS, and has no idea why Helen might have wanted to sell up. He and she were more close friends than business partners. Kurt admits the convenience of such a naive distinction. It must make it easier to accept how Red is financing their "very ambitious film project". Of course he's naive, Todd quips, he's a Director not a Producer. Another distinction Kurt can ponder if he likes. Todd blusters about his cocktail getting warm.

Exiting the balcony, Todd hands off both the Broadcast Tape he'd promised, and Kurt, to the approaching Detective. Columbo, cigar to hand, makes like just another not-so-innocent smoker. Introducing himself, Columbo allows Kurt to recognize that they've already crossed paths. He then shifts from his reasons for being at Red's chalet to Kurt's. The Swiss-German is unevasive about himself and his motives. A Banker with a variety of business interests, among which are Outdoor apparel and the film industry, MTS was of obvious interest to him. "It's profitable, and better yet, it's growable."

"Growable? As are Napa Valley Wineries, I would imagine," says Columbo, dryly implying that Kurt is the

Invader of the Beauty Salon. Indeed, Kurt allows. But he'd still happily trade Carsini Estates for MTS. To think that at long last Helen was willing to entertain the idea. Why else would she have left a message making that 4 PM appointment for today? "And Mrs. Digby would have left this message?"...

Some time around 6 PM the day before, Kurt volunteers. It was evidently a very eventful afternoon for Helen. She opted not to go to the Gala. To going climbing, instead. Not to keep MTS. To buy Carsini, instead.

Entrees almost finished, dinner is well underway. We are fixed by Marisa's stare. Across the room Red has Sally Pettiwell, the Pinnacle Winner, seductively wrapped in his undivided attention. His gaze strays a moment. Just far enough for Marisa's to register. He fakes a genial smile. His gaze shifts to Luigi. We understand that Marisa (Mah-ri-za) is "Zaza", Luigi's sister. Detective Columbo's niece.

Kurt's movement to the podium microphone comes as a welcome diversion. As Chairperson of the *Steering Committee of the Alpine Industry Association*, Kurt declines to offer the usual State of the Business address. As good as the news is, it would be inappropriate, even inexcusable, not to take this occasion to reflect on the loss of a very valued member. Helen Digby was the living symbol of all that is best about their business. She excelled at every aspect. Her death is a poignant reminder of the reality of the passion they all share. Therefore, as Chairperson of the I.A.I., he is very proud to announce the creation, in Helen Digby's name, of a Memorial Fund dedicated to the care of disabled Climbers. An "anonymous" contribution of \$100.000 has already been

received. Perhaps Red Digby would be so kind as to come up and accept it on his late-wife's behalf?

Now himself wrapped in attention, Red finds it no less seductive. Limping slightly, mostly for effect, he makes his way to the podium. Accepting the envelope, Red stakes his claim to the microphone, to the spotlight. There's some meaningful eye contact, but basically, Red's got the billing. Kurt has to counter upstage. Red makes the moment mostly about him. It may be a night late, but now he's getting *his* gong. The Memorial Fund makes him feel good about "gutting it out" and attending the Gala. Sure he could claim Helen would want him to be there. She would. "But that's easy for her say!" Riding the relief his joke affords, Red sketches Helen's role, her fundamental and *supporting* role in everything he's achieved. By way of a cheap but potent climax, he tearfully addresses the spirit of his late-wife, assuring her that they're still on the same rope, together till the very top. A loud sniffing silence follows. Luigi breaks it, beginning a round of "He's a Jolly Good Fellow" that's rapidly taken up by everyone present. Overcome, Red gestures his thanks and hurries away to gather himself.

It doesn't go unnoticed by Columbo that Marisa ducks out a sidedoor before the singing is over. Savoring the occasion in the hallway, Red is caught unawares by an indignant Marisa. He directs her to the limited privacy of a window-bay. Todd, exiting the Dining Room, doesn't spot them. Red uses what time he has to reassure his Lover that Helen's death had nothing at all to do with their affair. He then exploits Todd's calling his name to get rid of her. If she still wants

that role. Marisa walks away, taking much of her confidence in Red with her.

Todd glimpses Marisa but far away enough from Red so as to excite only minor suspicion. Besides, as he explains while dragging Red into the Men's Bathroom, he's more anxious to discuss Kurt's blatant innuendoes about "Operation Blockbuster". Could Kurt have told Helen about Red's siphoning off MTS profits? He really wants that chance to direct his first Feature. But if getting that chance somehow led to Helen's suicide... Red, availing himself of the facilities, dismisses the notion. Helen didn't find out. Helen didn't commit suicide. Todd should come along to Black Tower and put his mind at ease. Red and Columbo are flying up there tomorrow. It's time to settle that, sad as it is, Helen checkmated.

First light the next day, at the Airfield, Columbo cycles a bright-red Mountain Bike in circles, pursued by a lumbering, barking Tomba. From the Guardhouse comes a shout for calm. Through the window comes a bribing tidbit. An instant later, adding an official cap to his pajamas, Tito appears at the door. Isn't that one of the new Alpina Polizia bikes? Columbo explains that he borrowed it from his nephew Luigi. He'd have walked to the airfield if his feet didn't hurt so much. But more interestingly, was that a dried fish Tito gave his Basset Hound? As a proud owner himself, Columbo's intrigued by such a dietary innovation. Would Tito care to see a photograph of "Dog"? Rampant "Basset Bonding" ensues.

While Columbo is sipping coffee in the Back Room of the Guardhouse, Todd's Jeep style Toyota Landcruiser pulls up.

Tomba handles the barrier, allowing Tito to express his regret that he didn't chat with Helen. She was always so kind... and what an elegant woman, like this American actress who became a princess... Grace Kelly? Exactly Lieutenant. But she arrived so early. 5.30 AM, he specifies, consulting his Log. All he could think of was going back to sleep. Though it did occur to him that it'd been years since she'd solo flown.

As Tomba escorts them to the MTS helipad, Todd tells Columbo the story of Gregory. He died in a Chopper Accident. Trying to rescue a white-water rafter they'd been filming. Helen hadn't flown since then. Gregory was her brother. For Todd, this only strengthens the urgency with which Helen must have needed to climb. Or, he admits grudgingly, the urgency with which she needed to do herself in.

As Todd is strapping the Detective into a rear seat, Red arrives, inquiring of Columbo's progress. The Detective informs him that his intuition about those numbers in his wife's Date-book was correct. It was a train reservation code. Beat. Red smiles and quickly stops as Columbo asks: But why Helen would ride the wheezing, old train when she could've taken the Chopper? At least as far as Milan? Beat. "Guess getting up there mattered more than getting to Milan," Red shrugs, firing up the MTS Chopper.

Nearing Black Tower, Red gestures for Columbo to don his Intercom Headset. The Detective refrains from querying why they waited till now. Red points out Helen's probable route, the *Comici Americana*: a Climb of 1,250 feet, with 12 Pitches, most of extreme difficulty. Columbo details the kind of basic Stats and Figures he needs to hear. Red responds that he and

Columbo are about to get up close and personal with those details. As Todd is piloting the approach to the Summit, he confirms an 11 AM rendez-vous at the Base. He'll pick up some Brunch for them when he's back in Buzza. The hovering MTS Chopper deposits Red and Columbo at the Summit.

On the Summit, Red is warmly greeted by ANDREAS, a Mountain Guide who, though beanpole thin, is toting a substantial amount of gear. First expressing his sorrow about Helen, he then accounts for his long absence. He went on a Climbing trip in South America. Red modestly dismisses his own achievements in that region. Andreas almost forgets to report that the Tea Cup's broken, Fifth Pitch of the *Comici Americana*. It was a devil of a job backtracking from it. Red nods, knowingly. There's the problem, most likely. Andreas departs. He'll phone in the news to the Polizia Alpina.

His eyes fixed on the rockface in front of him, Lt. Columbo is lowered by Red to that ledge below the Tea Cup. Red casually rappels down to join him. Then, just as casually, he unhooks and free-climbs to inspect the suspect handhold. The Detective is wide-eyed and barely able to glance up as Red requests. The Tea Cup's definitely broken. Columbo's prepared to take his word on it. Red returns to his hook-up.

At the foot of Black tower, Columbo draws long and hard on a Canteen that Todd's brought. He also offers around some smoked fish. "It's all Tito had," Todd explains, apologizing for forgetting Brunch. The Detective declines. He won't be ready to eat for a while. The reality of Climbing contrasts

with the televisual version. He'll probably need a seatbelt on his armchair now. Red compliments the Detective on his thoroughness. And it looks like they located the cause of Helen's fall...

The Detective is already puzzling over the two Climbing Watches he's taken from his pocket. Zapella's reads 6000'. Helen's broken reads 6570'. Yet it could only have broken at the bottom of the sheer cliff. "such a discrepancy is odd," Todd agrees. Red dismisses the irregularity. It might have got damaged when the Tea Cup cracked. Besides, those things don't register a change of altitude when it happens as rapidly as Helen's did. Todd, satisfied with the explanation, goes to prep the MTS Chopper.

Casual as Red on the cliff, Columbo supposes that the MTS/Carsini deal won't be happening. It was never going to happen, Red bluntly responds. No? Then what about the Cabernet Sauvignon? That was just Helen's way of joking around with him. So that was why Red didn't drink any of it with her? A Detective's reflex: he couldn't help notice one glass was clean. Red collects up the Gear. That's right. And Red knew he'd be drinking all night. The same beer? It's just that Pepe, the Pub Owner, mentioned Red's unlikely self-restraint. His mood may be, Red suggests. As Todd says, it's not easy giving out those gongs.

Yet Red's still making the Papers. Columbo pulls out a crumpled newspaper photograph of Red and Todd leaving the Gala Dinner. Red takes offence. He'd swap all the publicity going to have Helen back. In a heartbeat. The Detective apologizes for his insensitivity. Guess he was just excited to have such

a souvenir. There. That shadowy figure in the background of the photo. That's him. Red softens. The ink's so smudged you can hardly tell. Cold sweat, Columbo quips. We'll get a better copy and I'll autograph it, Red offers to the Detective's apparent delight.

On their return to the Airfield, while Columbo saunters over to Helen's 404, Todd clarifies why Brunch escaped his mind. Kurt Schnapzen cornered him this morning. He wants Todd to talk some sense into Red. He wants Red to honor the agreement Helen made, saying that it was in everyone's best interest.

Tito calls for Tomba. Columbo, in the driver's seat of the 404, gestures to the rear seat where Tomba's fast asleep. "He's got excellent taste in cars," the Detective observes, running his hand along the stylish dash. 43 kilometers on the counter. Helen reset it at the Gas Station maybe. Then where? What Tito only knows is that her Chalet is in a mile from here.

Bike in the back, Columbo is riding back to Buzza in Todd's Toyota when he notices the "Cortina 20KM" sign. What would be in Cortina for Helen? Main Branch of the Bank? offers Todd.

The Cortina Bus pulls away from the Buzza Stop heedless of Columbo's hobbling, shouting pursuit. As he's about to sit and wait for the next one, Marisa pulls up in her white Cinquecento (an old 500cc Fiat). "Uncle! Get in. I have some errands in Cortina."

Uncle studies the Odometer as they shudder away. "Not too fast?" Marisa wonders. Not at all. He's simply trying to

accurately retrace Helen's final day. Some time between 3 and 6PM, some time between the Beauty Parlor and meeting Red, something sent her off-schedule. The answer may well lie in Cortina, or on the road to Cortina. Marisa is obviously uneasy going down this avenue of inquiry. She turns conversation towards her English and acting studies.

Stop! Columbo yells, as the Odometer reads 20KM more since Buzza. He looks around. Some Stores. The Hotel Emperor. He'd expected it to be the Bank. Is there a Bank inside the hotel? Not as far as Marisa knows. Which isn't that far, she hastens to add. There's definitely a Bank 3KM further on. Perhaps the Odometer's as slow as the car!

The BANK DIRECTOR is able to precisely recall when he was "last of service to Signora Digby". An account of that type (large, that is) merits his personal oversight. Thus, he is also able to recall that she didn't come and withdraw the Jewels she planned to wear to the Gala Evening. There's no record of her safe Deposit being opened, either.

Columbo thoroughly combs the Stores between the Bank and the Hotel Emperor. In and out he goes, puzzling over what Helen could possibly have been shopping for in the neighborhood. A Baker's. A Butcher's. A Florist's. A Pet Store, with a splendid dog collar in the window. But there's nothing more promising than that until a squeal of tires. Ambling over to the Emperor's parking lot, he discovers the Parking Valet having a little fun with Red's distinctive Ferrari.

In Suite 317, Marisa is in tears. Red tells her that with her talent, she can turn them on and off at will. How's

he to believe her? He's really sorry that the "shooting" has been delayed. She'll have to be patient. They just need to cool it for a while. "Cool it," Marisa echoes him. Can he truly think she's crying about his stupid "Blockbuster"?

For her that was a Bed of Love, not a casting couch! With dignity, and without protest from Red, Marisa gathers her things and exits the Suite.

In a nearby side-street, Columbo is waiting for Marisa at her car. She is taken aback but looks ready to brave it out. Her acting talent fails her. She falls to sobbing on her kindly Uncle's shoulder.

Columbo drives. Marisa cries, here and there punctuating it with a confession. To begin with she was probably tempted by what Red could do for her. A part in his Action-Adventure film with Tom Pitt and Brad Cruise, how could she resist? But then she thought there was more. No. He was just using her. And now it's caused Helen's suicide. No suicide, Columbo assures her. And no, he won't tell Luigi. As for the Blockbuster, he probably gets news soon. Could she drop him in the Main Square and make her own way from there?

The Festival Banners are coming down in the Main Square of Buzza. Marisa drives herself home. Columbo spots Todd chatting to someone near the fountain and is about to join them when he sees the Tape Recorder. It's an interview, which the JOURNALIST wraps up by asking for comment on a hot trade rumor going round. Is there any truth to the talk of Todd directing "Cruise and Pitt" in a "thrills flick"? Can this be true? Todd can't bring himself to scoff too hard: "It can be, if you want it to be." The Journalist takes that as a

definite maybe. It's a defensive Uncle Columbo who follows up. The hot rumors he'd just been hearing included Red Digby in on the deal. Can that be true, too? Todd scrambles. Right now the only business with Red that matters is taking down the MTS exhibition stand. Todd heads for the Festival Hall. The Journalist for one of the Phone Kiosks near the Piste Bar. Columbo for the other.

In the Phone Kiosk, Columbo apologizes as if he woke SERGEANT WILSON. He needs confirmation of a "hot trade rumor going round". You need what, Lieutenant? says Wilson, waking.

Across the Square in the grand foyer of the Festival Hall, Columbo is immediately underfoot. Red and Todd are supervising the "strike" of the MTS stand. THEATER TECHNICIANS are shifting large bits of it out the door and into a truck. The MTS DRIVER is helping. Columbo is not. Just a few routine questions. A nagging little detail. Could Red be precise about the time he left the Piste Bar that morning? As it happens, Red can be precise. When they closed. Must have been 5.30AM. Plus the ten minutes, he spent chatting with Todd in the Square. Ah yes, a warm night, Columbo reflects, taking note of Red's answer. Red shouts at the Technicians to care with the loading. If there's nothing else, he's obviously needed at the Truck. Just one last thing. The Detective understands that, what with the good weather, Helen always drove with the top down on her Peugeot. Red compliments him on his understanding. The Detective thanks him. Now what he doesn't understand is why, cussed as those old Peugeot tops are, she bothered to put it up to drive the 1 KM to the Airfield, no rainy night nore cold..

Idling near the Piste's Terrace, Columbo overhears Pepe the Bar Owner instructing an AMERICAN TOURIST on Italian Boxing. Though he only saw a single round of Carnera's fight the other night, Pepe can tell him how Carnera fought the whole fight. He first worked to the body. Wait, the Tourist interrupts. One round, and you're going to tell me 'bout the whole fight? Detective, tell him, Pepe implores, tell him how people like you and me... A phone rings in one of the nearby kiosks. "That's for me," says the Detective, excusing himself.

Asking Wilson to hold, Columbo calls to Pepe, still debating the Tourist, and confirms that the Carnera fight was broadcast live in Buzza. Thanking Wilson for his efficiency, Columbo rings off, studies the notes he's taken, and weighs what he's just learned. An indignant honking alerts him to the proximity of Kurt's Rolls. While it waits for the MTS Truck to maneuver, Columbo taps on the window and invite Kurt for a drink.

Preferring the comforts of his car, Kurt hosts the Detective and readies himself for the inevitable questions. After some laudatory words about the Carsini Sauvignon they have in hands, he admits to still wanting to buy MTS. And yes, it will be sweeter in the chase than the capture. He was very fond of Helen. And not very fond of Red, whose "shady Caribbean finances", he did, he confesses, know a little something about. Buddy Todd has a Production Company that's a front for Red's company that's financed by embezzled moneys, from MTS, through a Caribbean Bank. This much he knew.

But not to his advantage, and certainly not through his brokerage. Anyone can pretty much finance anything from anywhere these days. Another reason he was looking to get out of the business.

Columbo gets dropped off at Police Station.

Tornado updates the Web Site: "Damage Warning: The Tea Cup, 5th Pitch, the *Comici Americana* Route, Black Tower. Reported by Andreas, the Mountain Guide. Confirmed by Lt. Columbo"! Luigi leads the applause for his Uncle. Columbo declares himself unable to confirm anything except that he's grateful to be walking again. And after hiking with Luigi, he never thought to say as much! On a more serious note, Luigi recognizes that the damaged handhold weakens the suicide theory. But of course they'll have to wait on the Autopsy before they discount it altogether.

Interrupting Zapella's dusting of his Rock Samples, Columbo asks to see some Black Tower type limestone. As if it were made of glass, the portly Polizia hands him a piece. Carrying it into the rear Equipment Room, Columbo requests a climbing peg from handsome CORPORAL HEISNER. Then he requests another, a sharper one, and a hammer. Zapella gets anxious. His fears are justified. Laying the rock on a Workbench, the Detective applies the peg, chisel fashion, then the hammer, sharply, and cracks the rock neatly in two. The assembled Polizia don't get what he's accomplished, other than upsetting Zapella. Blowing the dust from the line of fracture, Columbo fits the rock together again. Looks good as new! Good enough for Zapella's collection. "Like a beautiful woman," says

Heisner, grasping the concept, "Can be good to look at. Can be very dangerous to hold!"

"Sabotage?" asks Luigi. But who? A Climber, of course. Somebody who knew the importance of the handhold. Somebody who could get up there to break it. That's several hundred suspects in Buzza alone. "Divide that number by the number of those who had opportunity and motive," Columbo advises his nephew.

Reasoning aloud, Columbo says, "Let's consider the husband." Motive is easy. Red was a known womanizer. Heisner grins. His wife found him out. Heisner loses his grin. Enough's enough, she's going to sell MTS, dissolve the partnership, personal and professional. That would account for her visit to Cortina. And her sudden change of mind about Kurt's offer. A definite No in the Beauty Salon around 2PM. Almost a Yes around 6PM. She makes a meeting for the next day. Red's going to be out of a job, out in the cold. It was Helen's inheritance that financed MTS. Any money Red makes, he spends. It's Ferrari's for him. Peugeot's for Helen...

"It's wonderful speculation of Motive, Uncle, but not Proof," Luigi inserts.

"And the 'opportunity' is even more speculative," the Detective perseveres. Helen had the Chopper. Even the fastest of men would need 3 hours to reach the base of the *Comici Americana* Route on foot. Then he'd need, Columbo consults his notes, say, a good hour to reach then sabotage the Tea Cup, descend, and hide from Helen at the base. Four hours total. If Red left the Chalet at 6AM, that would put

him at Black Tower at 10AM. Not in bed, getting woken by Bettina.

The Detective admits himself stumped. Could Red be so much faster than the average Climber? "No, he's old now!" Heisner responds to immediate protest about his definition of old. The oldest person present, Columbo smiles sagely. "How long would it take you, Corporal Heisner, to rappel from the Tea Cup to the base of Black Tower, and then run to Digbys' Chalet" Heisner affects a little modesty. No more than an hour and half. "I could do it in that," Zapella butts in, and at Heisner's age, I've have done it in 1 hour 15 minutes. No more!"

Zapella's boasting is cut short by an Alarm. Tornado shouts the location. Luigi, Zapella, Heisner, and Oggio grab up their equipment and make for the Rescue Chopper. It's a rapid, well-rehearsed Rescue Procedure. Columbo shakes his head, a little in awe. A shrug doesn't mask Tornado's pride. "A question, Corporal Tornado, about the Altimeter on a Climbing Watch..."

After Dinner at Luigi and Sophia's, Columbo is playing with the KIDS (4 and 6 years old) when their Mother announces Bedtime. Great-Uncle Columbo wishes them good night and sweet dreams. Aunty Marisa does the same. Sophia shoos them upstairs to bed. She's going to get an early night herself. If she can't sleep, she'll only worry when her husband's on one of these long Rescues. When Sophia's gone, Marisa admits herself envious of what Sophia and her brother have together. Perhaps she should give up on her ambition... What's the videotape? "Gone With The Wind"? "From Here To Eternity"?

Or Marisa's current favorite, "Rear Window" with Grace Kelly and... None of the above, Columbo regrets, loading the VCR. Marisa gasps as the clip of vintage Red Digby plays. Helen attains the Summit. "Grace Kelly!" Columbo exclaims, slapping his forehead. "Uncle?"

"But Lieutenant, why do you need to see the Signora's car at this time of night?" Tito complains, guiding the Detective by flashlight across the shadowy Airfield. Rounding a hangar, they come to the parked Peugeot. "Maa--donna!" cries Tito, glimpsing the figure at the wheel, and crossing himself frantically. Tomba howls. Marisa quickly removes her head scarf and exits the car, gracefully. Columbo calms dog and owner, apologizing to both for the shock. It was necessary to establish that Tito could have been mistaken about seeing Helen. There's no disrespect to the Dead intended, quite the contrary.

The next morning, in Luigi's office the CORONER matter of factly reports his findings to the Sergeant, Columbo, and Red. No poison, no drugs. Stomach contents reveal benign traces of a meal and some dried fruit, mostly apricots. Numerous broken bones, including severe spinal fractures.. No external lacerations of note except for one on the left hand. Nothing on the right hand, Columbo interjects. No, nothing on the right hand, the Coroner confirms. Could Columbo then examine her clothes? The Coroner doesn't see why not, but nor does he see why. As Red hastens to point out, there's no evidence of suicide. The Detective's job is done, and well done at that. Red's confident he can now handle the Insurance company. After the Official Inquiry that afternoon, he will claim

Helen's body, see to a mountain top burial back home, and then somehow endeavor to get on with his life.

When the Coroner and Red have left, Luigi looks ready to scold his Uncle. "Apricots, Apricots, Apricots" the Detective repeats to nobody in particular. If Helen had actually left around 5.30AM, she'd have eaten Breakfast. That was her habit. "Yes yes yes", Luigi agrees, becoming agitated, "We have your ideas about the means and the mo... motive. But we don't even have that much on the op... opportunity. We don't have any... any.. any proof!" Intending no offence, Columbo wanders away, echoing his Nephew's exasperated stammering, "Any... any... anyone, anywhere!"

Corporal Tornado is immediately put to work browsing the Internet for Banking Information. While waiting on Tornado's Printer, Columbo receives a manila envelope containing some grainy photographs. They mystify Oggio. They evidently please the Detective. A few moments later, he's equally pleased when Zapella lends him this week's TV Guide. The Polizia are beginning to doubt L.A.P.D. methods...

Red is packing a suitcase in the Chalet's Master Bedroom when Bettina calls out that he has visitors, Columbo and Luigi. He is less than civil in his greeting, making it easier for Luigi to deliver an Order of Restraint. Red is not to leave Buzza without Polizia permission. He is, at the very least, a material witness. To what? "To murder," Columbo chips in. "I strongly suspect that you murdered your wife, Mr. Digby. Premeditated murder, an assassination, Sir.

"I strongly suspect," laughs Red, "assassination", "that you're out of your mind, Lieutenant! How could I possibly have killed her?"

"By flying the MTS Chopper to the Tea Cup ahead of her," the Detective clarifies. "You then skilfully sabotaged the handhold, hid out at the base till she'd started climbing, supervised her inevitable fall, and ran back to the Chalet for the 10 o'clock wake-up you'd arranged by way of an alibi."

"I'm impressed," remarks Red, "with me! I couldn't take the Chopper, Helen had it. That Airfield guy'll testify to that."

Not any longer, he won't. And, even the fact that Tito recorded the Peugeot's arrival at 5.30AM, while Red was chatting with Todd in the Square, is no longer an effective alibi. Producing Zapella's TV Guide, the Detective does the math. If the Carnera Fight started at 4.25, went the scheduled first 9 rounds of 3 minutes, allowing for 60 second breaks between the rounds, that puts the final round at nearer 5AM. Pepe the Bar Owner caught the final round. After he and his Staff closed. Ten minutes for that chat with Todd. That puts us at 5.10, 5.15 tops, which still allows time for Red to return to the Chalet, grab a head scarf, and drive to the Airfield by 5.30AM.

Then, before Red can, Columbo addresses his motive for murdering his wife. That most likely originated in Helen's being informed of something shortly before she left the Beauty Parlor in such a hurry. Blowing off her appointments at the Designer's and the Bank. That "something" was probably what was happening that, and several other afternoons, in Suite 317

of the Hotel Emperor. Red can dispute it but Columbo has a witness who's prepared to testify. Red's latest and last affair. Helen made an appointment with her lawyers in Zurich. Then made a reservation for the train there. Then made it home in time to toast her divorce with Red, with Kurt's present, Carsini's wine served in a single glass...

"Leaving me without financial means to support my lavish lifestyle, I suppose?" Red speculates. "Even though there's no evidence to show that she intended to sell MTS. Absolutely none!" Not quite, Columbo begs to differ. It's true that they don't have the signed Sales Contract. For Helen surely did sign it, otherwise why would she have taken it up Black Tower with her. Of which, there is actually some evidence. For which the Detective must thank Red. It was Red's remarking on what "cold sweat" had done to the news-ink that gave him the idea. Columbo produces the manila envelope. Admittedly, the blow-ups of the Backpack lining are grainy, and the writing is mirror-image, but they do clearly show the imprint of a contract on Kurt's letterheaded stationery.

"Your snapshots might do that, Detective," agrees Red, unflustered. "But they fail to reveal the actual contents of the document or my wife's signature. She frequently took papers with her. To read in the tranquillity. Now if you don't mind, I have a successful business to run."

No option. Uncle and Nephew leave. But, by way of a parting shot, Columbo corrects Red's Altimeter Theory. It might interest him to know that Helen's altimeter registers a change of 30 feet every second. Helen's fall lasted approximately 6 seconds. Therefore, it couldn't have read

6000', the base altitude. Six seconds times thirty feet equal a difference in altitude of one hundred and eighty feet.

The altimeter should have read 6420', Sir. The Tea Cup's at 6600'. At 6570', what reads the altimeter, it's the ledge 30' below that's. 30'? Not a lot of rope. But enough to...

In the Polizia Range Rover, Luigi expresses admiration for his Uncle's deductive powers. But he wonders why Columbo didn't raise the issue of the embezzlement. Helen's Lawyers are adamant she wouldn't have financed Red's film project. And Red couldn't afford it. Columbo smiles, and uses a Climbing analogy. Red is too certain of his foothold. If he can be made to shift his weight...

The doors of the Emperor's Third Floor elevator open and close several time. Finally, Columbo exits. Luigi apologizes to the American Tourist in the elevator, and follows his Uncle toward Suite 310. Kurt answers the knock.

Columbo dispenses with formalities. Is Kurt still prepared to admit that he knew Red was siphoning off 10% of MTS profits into a holding company and from there, through that Caribbean Bank, into Todd's production company? In other words, despite his upright reputation as Banker, Kurt admits that he was a party to wholesale embezzlement? Hard to prove any complicity, Kurt remarks. Not so hard, Columbo replies, looking over the materials Tornado printed out for him. Not so hard when you realize that the Caribbean Bank in question is the Aruban Credit Bank which was recently acquired by another "fiscal paradise outfit". "Outfit?" says Kurt. "Offended, Mr Schnapzen," the Detective inquires, "offended that I should speak that way of a company in which you are the

principal shareholder?" Kurt's cooperation suddenly knows no bounds.

"You know damn well I have no choice!" In the Chalet Office, Red, grimfaced, hangs up the phone.

Kurt's Rolls takes on the unlikely terrain of a mountain lane. We see the CHAUFFEUR wrestling somewhat inexpertly with the steering wheel. Arriving at a forest clearing, the limo parks. Kurt regains his composure in time to spot Red's Ferrari arrive. The Chauffeur admits Red to the rear of the Rolls and heads for a tree with obvious intention. Anyhow, his left wrist is in front of his body.

Red refuses any civility. He skims the Sales Contract as far as the last page. Taking out a Ladies Mont Blanc Fountain Pen, Red flexes his wrist, preparing to sign after he has written down the date of the genuine contract. Kurt observes that Red must be quite the expert at faking his wife's signature by now. He commiserates with him. Red loses MTS, yes. But as Sole Heir he gets the money. A reduced amount but still generous. In addition, how could the Police now accuse him of murdering his wife to prevent the sale? As for "Operation Blockbuster"... Yes, Todd told him. And the financial shenanigans involving the Aruban Bank, well, it was as much in Kurt's best interest as Red's to be discrete.

Red doesn't sign... Either Red signs or Kurt reveals the embezzlement. He's big enough to take the hit. Is Red? Red's not. He signs: Helen Digby. He tops the pen, pockets it, and reaches for the door. It's locked. Red looks around for the Chauffeur. Luigi's men are coming out of the trees.

The Chauffeur unlocks the car. Without his cap and sunglasses we see that it's Sergeant Oggio. Red still tries to maintain his innocence. Luigi, in charge of the arrest, gestures toward Oggio who lifts his left cuff to reveal the video monitor. The Red and Kurt show is playing in Fast Rewind! Red glances at Zapella detaching the Miniature Camera from above the Rear View Mirror. Red glares at Kurt who lights a Havana. "For Helen. Oh and for myself. My holding in that Aruban Bank has become quite an embarrassment." Red reacts. Kurt goes on, "Oh, of course, you didn't know that. But, unfortunately, Lieutenant Columbo did. He beat you at the top. And he got to the bottom of things!"

Columbo approaches. Red is cuffed and led towards the Polizia Range Rover.

"How long have you suspected me, Detective?" Columbo walks with Red. "Well, Sir, I was right away troubled by that rock in your wife's right hand. A keepsake? A lucky charm grabbed at the last moment to ward off the inevitable? I could almost believe it. She reaches down. She eases open the zip on her pocket. She grabs the rock. She zips the pocket again? That I cannot believe. I examined your wife's coat, Sir, the pockets were zipped. I conclude that she removed nothing from her pocket. It was genuine *Comici Americana* route limestone."

"But there was another thing about that rock that troubled me. It's stained, bloodstained. Yet the only significant laceration Helen suffered was to her other hand, the left hand. Before she fell, she joined them. She

struggled tremendously. To close her hands. In a kind of prayer, perhaps.

That Justice be done. But also in a gesture, a communication, a fingering. Columbo demonstrates with the Bloody Stone: "Blood. Red. Rock. Red. Sir, messages can come in strange forms."

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