

Death Leaves a Bookmark

Bibliomysteries

by William Link, 1933-2020

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TROY PELLINGHAM hadn't read a book since college. He had better things to do with his life, but so far none of these had turned out to be profitable. The irony was that his uncle, Rodney Haverford, was an antiquarian who dealt in rare books, having an exclusive shop on Melrose Avenue. Uncle Rodney was so snooty,

so nose-in-the-air, that Troy jokingly wondered how he blew it. The old man was healthy as an ox, was in his eighties, and never had suffered a head cold. This presented Troy with a problem.

His uncle always dressed in Saville Row bespoke clothing, imported from London: heavy tweeds with vests and watch fob pockets, even on sizzling summer days. And he never seemed to sweat. Perspiration would be unseemly to the old snob, something only blue collar laborers were forced to endure. Or other members of the lower class who worked with their hands.

Of course Uncle Rodney had a trust fund, set up by his father, whom Troy's late mother had once told him was another snob.

Genetically, Rodney was cut from the same bolt of disdain. Like father, like son, both elitist snots who might wipe their fingers with a scented hankie after shaking hands with someone below their status.

Troy had degradingly flattered his uncle, licked his posterior daily and twice on Sunday. He always metaphorically got on his knees to the wealthy, especially if he knew he could inherit some of their vast riches when they croaked in a comfortable bed.

The only family Uncle Rodney had left were a niece by marriage and his nephew Troy. The niece, Marcella, was attractive and spent money as if she could always print more because she knew the printing press was her uncle. Uncle Rodney and Marcella had formed a close relationship during the summers she and her mother had stayed with him when she was a child. Later she came to live with Rodney in his Beverly Hills home while studying at UCLA. Their bond remained so strong that she stayed on after college.

Once the old man had learned that Troy was no book worm, and was a failure in his business endeavors, he wrote the lad off as if he were a bad investment. He had even threatened to cut him out of his will, but Troy knew for a fact that he hadn't gotten around to it yet and probably wouldn't. After all, to Uncle Rodney, family ties were sacrosanct.

Troy also knew he wasn't going to allow the old snob to die peacefully in his comfortable bed, surrounded by sycophantic doctors and nurses, all with greedy, outstretched hands. That would take too long. Now, how was he going to work it? That was the question. Since all his business plans had gone awry, he knew that this undertaking couldn't. It had to be the most carefully well-thought-out scheme of his life. He had heard that some mystery books had beautifully worked-out murder plots, but he was no reader. He had once thought that he could pretend to read a book but he knew his uncle would ask him some well-chosen questions and prove him to be a liar.

Rodney seemed to dote on Marcella. She was a little flighty and self-centered, but Troy didn't mind splitting Uncle Rodney's fortune with her. Perhaps they would wind up married and he would then have it all. Stop dreaming, he cautioned himself. You're still a long way from driving a Rolls and flinging money around like confetti. First he needed a fool-proof plan.

His uncle had him working in his bookstore, wrapping books to send out to book lovers here and in Europe, going to the post office to mail them, keeping things tidy, and overseeing new purchases. Uncle Rodney had reduced him to a gofer, a member of the same working class that he despised. Lately, as Troy

worked in the store, he found himself trying to come up with a murder plan. One that would require an air-tight alibi, something that couldn't be picked apart. He thought, jokingly, that maybe the old man was the perfect person to work the plan out for him.

As it turned out, serendipitously, he didn't need a plan at all.

It was a slow afternoon, Uncle Rodney reading at his desk in the back of the store. Troy didn't know what the hell to do with himself. He could only stare out at the few passers-by on the street, most looking as bored as himself.

Scanning the store while his uncle was engrossed, he noticed that there was a small space behind the large bookcase on the west wall. The bookcase held a random collection of large art books, crime novels, and some law books. God, what a mess. He would have to reorganize all of those next. If he slipped behind the bookcase and his uncle came looking for him, he might...

But that meant he had to have a lot of strength in his arms and shoulders, and he had stopped going to the gym because of his money problems. Suppose someone came in at the wrong moment? It just might be worth it, though.

On an impulse, he closed the blinds on the street door and moved into the space behind the tall bookcase. God, am I really going to do this?

He gathered his inner strength and then called out: "Uncle Rodney!"

Querulous: "What do you want?"

"Could you please come here a moment?"

He could hear the old man's footsteps moving toward the front of the store. Annoyed: "Where the devil are you?"

Troy stood behind the bookcase placing both arms and his strongest leg behind it. It was the most difficult thing he had ever attempted in his soft life. He got the bookcase to move—and then with a push, it toppled over on the old man. The clatter could probably be heard in the adjoining stores and on the street.

He moved out immediately. He looked down through the empty shelves and saw the old man still twitching, just barely alive. He'd better finish the job and be damn quick about it!

He anxiously looked around. Several large art books were laying splayed open on the floor. He reached down to grab the heaviest one and almost dropped it. Fumbling again, he picked it up and closed the covers. This would do nicely. Death of a bookseller, ironically by one of his own books, he thought. Then he battered the old man's head through the space between two of the shelves. Satisfied now that he was dead, he wiped off the blood and his prints on the front and back covers of the volume with his handkerchief. And also the spine, just in case. He threw the book down on the floor, right next to his victim's head. He would have to remember to get rid of the handkerchief later.

He stood still, out of breath, listening for a moment, hoping against hope that the clatter went unnoticed and that nobody was too near-by. Then he took a deep breath. Held it for a bit. Waited. Frozen. Thank God there was still no response from anyone outside.

Knowing he hadn't left any prints on the back of the bookcase, he grabbed two parcels that had to be mailed, and ran to the back door of the store.

Outside now in the small parking lot, he moved past Rodney's Rolls and jumped into his own car, an eleven-year-old Dodge. Only one car had come down the alley,

but he had turned away just in the nick of time. He was flying on the wings of luck and there was no better carrier, not even FedEx!

As he sailed down Melrose on the way to the post office, he saw in his mind's eye his future. It was lit up like neon. Uncle Rodney's money, all millions of it, and half of it would be his. And who knew what his future would be with Cousin Marcella? It was about time he got married, anyway.

At a Dumpster far away from the bookstore he threw away the bloody handkerchief, covering it with the accumulated trash.

There was nothing that night on the tube about his uncle's "strange accident." Marcella called around eleven, worried to death that Uncle Rodney had not returned yet to the house. She had called the store but all she got was his answering machine. "Should I call the police?" she asked him.

"Definitely. Why didn't you call me earlier?"

"I thought... I thought that maybe he had dinner and gone off with a friend to have a drink. Oh, God, Troy, something like this has never happened before!"

"Call the police. You want me to come over?"

She hesitated. "Well... yes. Why don't you?"

"Be right there."

He hung up, combed his hair, and put on his best sport jacket. With Marcella in a very vulnerable mood, maybe this was just the time to be sympathetic and slowly start a relationship. A romantic one.

My, what a greedy pig you are, he thought with an inner smile. Half a fortune isn't good enough for you? You want the whole damn pie with a good-looking young woman serving it? Yes. I do.

The Rodney mansion was a Georgian Colonial, conforming to Rodney's expensive and elegant tastes. Another asset that would be his and his cousin's. It was all dark except for a light leaking through the blinds in the living room.

Marcella had been crying, her eyes red, but that didn't obscure her beauty. She had almost snow-white blonde hair left long, the way Troy preferred. Blue eyes and a pale provocative mouth that started rumblings in his lower region. A very nice piece, indeed.

He gave her a hug, his hands just lingering a beat around her slim body. Smallish breasts, but that was fine. He was not a big breast man.

"Did you talk to the police?" he said, still holding her.

"Yes. They've sent somebody over to the store in case he's still there, working late."

"But you said you called him there."

She broke slowly away from him, trying to regain her composure. "I know. But Uncle Rodney sometimes doesn't answer if he's in the middle of something. You know that from working there."

"Yes, you're right."

She sat down on a plush, comfortable davenport. He joined her, keeping a safe, chaste distance. He had been wrong: this was not the proper time to approach her. But somehow, as never before, she had whet his appetite. She was wearing jeans and a simple gray pullover. In Troy's mind, she could have been in a bareshouldered evening gown and he probably wouldn't have been turned-on more.

He had begun to tell her to stop worrying when the doorbell rang. She jumped up to get it.

The guy who walked in was nothing special, to say the least. He introduced himself with a badge as Lieutenant Columbo. He was wearing a raincoat that seemed to have endured a million rainstorms, and he seemed to be a bit bowlegged as he walked further into the room.

“Have you found our uncle?” Troy asked. Marcella was still standing.

Columbo hesitated, his expression darkening over. “I don’t have good news,” he said finally, looking at Marcella. She was stunned into silence.

“What is it?” Troy asked, his voice intentionally muted.

“We found Mr. Haverford in his bookstore. A big bookcase had fallen on him...”

“Good God!” Troy cried out. He was on his feet now, an arm around Marcella, who was staring in shock at the cop.

“I hate to say this,” Columbo said, “but there was something additional.”

Troy felt Marcella’s body tighten with tension.

“Someone had bashed his head in with one of the books,” Columbo added. “I’m really sorry to have to tell you this.” He looked sorry, as if it had happened to his own uncle.

Marcella shuddered and collapsed into Troy’s arms. God, he thought, what a lovely bundle. Her Chanel perfume floated up his nostrils like the fragrance of a garden of summer roses. He had to physically restrain himself from cupping her rear.

“Lieutenant... I don’t know what to say...” He tried to exhibit a deep grief, but he knew not to lay it on with a cement-worker’s trowel.

Columbo said, “We can’t do much at this time of night. All the other stores are long closed. What’s your name, sir?”

“Troy Pellingham.” He nodded at Marcella: “Marcella and I are distant cousins.” He didn’t mention he had been working in the bookstore. This guy would find that out in the morning.

Columbo took some time trying to locate his notebook, finally coming up with it in his back trouser pocket. He started jotting something down. Probably our names, Troy thought. He could feel Marcella beginning to tremble. “Marcella dear,” he said softly. “I think you better sit down.”

He guided her back to the davenport, helped her sit down, her head lowered as if she didn’t want to hear any more horrible news.

Columbo had closed his notebook, having trouble finding an empty pocket to put it back in. “I think that’s all,” he said, the dark look on his face again. “I know how you both must feel, and I have to tell you again I hated coming here to tell you this.”

Troy nodded. “That’s very good of you, lieutenant... Costello, was it?”

“Columbo,” Columbo said. He shuffled a little toward the door, stumbling a little, glancing back at Marcella. He wasn’t bowlegged, but his legs seemed tired as if he had been on his feet all day. “You better be sure the young lady gets to bed as soon as I leave.”

“Yes, lieutenant, I will.”

“Do you know if there are any sleeping pills in the house? She might need one tonight.”

“No, I don’t, but I’ll certainly check.”

Columbo was at the door. “Then I’ll say goodnight to both of you.”

“Goodnight, lieutenant,” Troy said. Marcella murmured something that was impossible to hear.

Columbo went out, and Troy sat down on the davenport, keeping his distance again from his cousin.

That guy seems a pushover, he thought. But you never know with these cops. He had never dealt with one before, but maybe, just maybe, he had lucked out with this forgetful guy. He had a premonition it was going to be a very interesting experience.

He finally led Marcella to the stairs. “Do you want me to help you go up?” he said.

A weak smile. “No, I can manage it. When will I see you?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll call and make sure you’re up and okay.”

He chanced a light kiss on her cheek. She didn’t mind, giving him another weak smile. Then she slowly mounted the stairs.

The next morning Troy called his cousin and found out she was feeling “okay.” He said he would be over, take her out for lunch if she was up to it.

He hung up the phone and it rang immediately. It was the cop, Columbo.

“Could you meet me down at your uncle’s store?” he asked.

“When?”

“As soon as possible.”

Troy hesitated. “I promised my cousin I would take her out to lunch. It’s important that I do that.”

Columbo said, “I understand, sir. But I’m afraid this has to come first. Can you tell her you’ll pick her up a little later?”

Irritation curled his words. “I guess. I certainly hope I can help you.”

“You never know, sir. I’ll be waiting for you at the store; I’m there now.”

“Okay.” Best to play along with this bird. He called Marcella and told her he’d be delayed, helping the cop with his investigation. She understood. What a doll, he thought.

A half hour later he joined Columbo at the bookstore. There were other plainclothes people poking around, probably a forensic team. The bookcase was still on the floor, the book he had used on Rodney was now on the old man’s desk.

“Any clues?” he asked Columbo.

He had half a dead cigar in one hand. “The book on the desk was used by the killer to bash your uncle’s head in after the bookcase fell on him.”

Troy made himself wince. “How awful!”

“Yeah, not pretty. The killer pushed it over on him. That’s the only explanation.”

“Any prints on its back?” A very safe question.

“Nah. Nothing so far. The murderer no doubt wiped them off.”

Troy took time to supposedly mull this over. “You already dusted the book?”

“Yeah. We’re waiting for that new electronic gadget for finding prints that hasn’t come into our jurisdiction yet.”

“No kidding. Gee, the whole world’s going electronic these days.”

Columbo nodded, vaguely.

“What kind of a book was it?”

“A big, fat, art book. But I think he just picked a book at random, didn’t notice what it was.”

Troy knew that was true—it just had to be big and heavy. He took a look back at the art book lying on the desk, placed there by the forensics guy. It was Rene Magritte’s *Catalogue Raisonne*, Volume I. “Well, you know about these things, lieutenant. You’ve probably investigated a lot of murders like this.”

Columbo frowned. “A book case falling on a victim? Nah, never. This is a new one on me... Oh, by the way, Mr. Pellingham...”

“What’s that?” He braced himself.

“You didn’t tell me you were working here.” It was a neutral statement, seemingly nothing behind it.

“I’m sorry. After you announced last night what had happened, we were both in shock. I don’t think Marcella or I had a clear thought in our heads.”

“How long had you been working here?”

“About a year. My uncle was getting old and needed some help mailing packages, keeping the place clean, organizing things, dealing with clients, various stuff like that.”

Columbo was scratching the back of his neck. “That reminds me. Where were you when this thing happened? I know you couldn’t have been here, but just where were you?”

He knew he was well prepared for the question. “I guess at the post office, mailing some books out to some of the collectors. Dayton, Ohio. Bangor, Maine. Places like that.”

Scratch. Scratch. “And what time do you think you left for the post office?”

“I probably left here around three or so. You can always check at the post office.”

“If you’re wondering, I’m trying to figure out a time when the murderer came in here. He sure didn’t want you around.”

Troy nodded, his expression dead sober. “Hell, no, I’m sure he didn’t. Anything else I can tell you?”

“The blinds on the door to the street,” Columbo said, not looking back at them.

“What about the blinds?” Now there was a question that came from the bleachers. What was it with him?

“I’m not here to annoy you, sir, but the blinds were closed when we got here.”

Hell. He had forgotten to open the damn blinds before he high-tailed it out. “The murderer undoubtedly closed them before he did his dirty work. He certainly didn’t want anyone on the street looking in.”

“That’s what I thought too, Mr. Pellingham. Just wanted to check with you.” He hesitated, thinking. “But you know...”

This guy was starting to drive him crazy. But at least he wasn’t scratching his damn neck any more. “What?”

“If he was smart he probably went out that back door. If he went out the front somebody might’ve remembered him leaving.”

“Makes sense. Now anything else before I pick up my cousin?”

Columbo pursed his lips, reflecting again. “No, can’t think of anything else I wanted to ask you.”

Troy quickly turned away and was about to head for the rear door when Columbo said, "Oh, just more thing, sir."

"What's that?"

"We gotta get your prints before you leave."

"They're all over the store; after all, I worked here."

"I know that, sir, but we have to separate yours from others, just in case the killer was a little careless and left us one." Columbo was staring guilelessly at him.

"Okay, but please make it fast. My cousin's in a shaky condition and I want to get her out in the world, get some fresh air, before she breaks down again."

"Excellent idea, getting her out. I promise it won't take a minute."

One of the plainclothesmen took his prints and Troy was out of there.

He picked Marcella up at the mansion and took her to Spago in Beverly Hills. She seemed a lot better than before, with her careful makeup and stylish getup. He had requested a table near the back wall so they could have a private conversation.

"What do you suggest I have?" she asked, looking candidly at him over her menu. He was taken again by her beauty.

"Everything on the menu's great, the salads, the fish, chops, whatever you're in the mood for."

She told him she would have the North American plaice, a fish Troy had never heard of.

The prescient waiter was there at almost that instant. "What can I get you two?" he asked.

Troy ordered for both of them, deciding on a steak for himself.

"Very good," the waiter said. "How would you like that steak done, sir?"

"Ah, medium rare."

"May I get you some starters?"

Troy looked at Marcella, who shook her head no.

"Not today," Troy told him.

"Very good." The waiter melted away in the crowded restaurant.

"You seem much better," Troy said to her.

"I guess I am. A good night's sleep cures a lot. But I'll never get over Uncle Rodney's death. Murder, I *should* say."

"Neither will I," he lied. "What do you think about this Lieutenant Columbo? Is he up to the job?"

"I only spent a few minutes with him. How did you size him up?"

Troy shrugged. "Hard to tell, never having had any dealings with cops before. I guess he's par for the course. Sort of disorganized, though, forgetful. Did you see how he couldn't find a pocket to put his notebook in? And the way he shuffled around like he didn't know what to do. If he's in charge of finding Uncle Rodney's murderer, God forbid, I wouldn't want to take any bets."

She smiled. "That's not very encouraging."

"Well, we'll find out, won't we?" He wanted to reach across and take her hands, but he resisted the impulse. "Let's just have a nice meal and try to forget what happened for a little while."

She nodded in confirmation.

When their food arrived, they were silent as hen they ate.

The waiter suddenly appeared as they finished. "May I tempt you with some desserts?"

Again Marcella shook her head.

"Some other time," Troy said.

"Very good, sir. I hope you enjoyed your meal."

Troy nodded. "We did. We'll be back soon."

Pleased, the waiter drifted away.

"How about a drive?" Troy asked her. "It'll keep you away from the house for a few hours, take your mind off things."

She mulled this over. Then: "Yes, let's do it. Change of scenery."

He drove them out to the ocean, turning north up the Pacific Coast Highway. "You want to go as far as Santa Barbara?" he asked her.

"No. Maybe half-way and then turn back."

"You're the boss, Boss."

At approximately the half-way point, he turned around and headed back.

"Who would kill Uncle Rodney?" she mused.

"Good question. I don't think he had any enemies."

Her hand rested near her side and he noticed she hadn't applied any polish on her nails. "People, his customers, really liked him. He was always fair in his business dealings, as far as I know."

"We don't know everything," he said. "Some people you treat fair and they still have problems with you."

"How would you know, Troy? You never ran a successful business, did you?" She smiled to take some of the sting out of it.

What was she getting at? "No, but I goddamn tried. And I did deal with some people you could never please."

"But now you're going to come into a lot of money when the estate is cleared."

What the hell was she getting at? Did she think he had murdered Rodney? "So are you. But it's a hell of a way to inherit, wouldn't you say?"

"If I remember, Uncle Rodney never thought you tried hard enough."

"Well, he never said anything to me." But he had. Many times. Luckily, Marcella hadn't been present at any of those. But why was she bringing this stuff up?

He decided to take the deer by the antlers or whatever the hell the saying was. "Why are you bringing this up now?"

"No reason. Just seems you got lucky when Uncle Rodney died. The inheritance, I mean."

"I'm not even sure I'm in his will. He certainly never mentioned anything about it."

She lowered the window slightly and the wind was not kind to her hair. "I think he had millions. How does it feel to maybe becoming a multi-millionaire?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. But if he left some money to me, I do know I would get rid of the payments on this old rattle-trap. First things first, though."

She smiled to herself. She removed a scarf from her handbag and tied it around her blowing hair. Making her look even more adorable, he noted.

He decided to show her some balls: "What about you, Marcella? Did you ever have a paying job in your life?"

The question didn't seem to disturb her in the least. "No, I haven't. I was a pampered brat ever since Uncle Rodney took care of me. And that, of course, was Uncle Rodney's choice. We loved each other."

"Pretty soft life," he said, looking over at her. Better not over-do this, he thought. How the hell am I going to make her fall in love with me? Seems all she wanted to do was pick on him.

"Yes. Pretty soft. I've had a life wrapped in cotton-wool. But that's the way he wanted it. I majored in political science in college and that prepares you for nothing."

He met her eyes. "Did Rodney think you'd meet some rich young man who would sweep you off your feet? You are quite beautiful, you know."

Her smile brightened. "Why thank you, Troy. I never thought you noticed."

"I've got two eyes, don't I?"

"Do you think you could fall in love with me?"

Jesus, she was really putting him on the spot. "What makes you think I'm not already in love with you? That I was in love with you ever since you were no taller than a toadstool."

"I never knew that," she said. It was hard to tell if she was sincere or not.

"Well, now you know."

"How come you never told me this before?"

"Because I'm good at hiding things." Like committing murder, he thought.

"I'm really surprised."

He was having trouble keeping his eyes on the road and also glancing at her. She looked like she had more color in her face. God, was he turning her on?

"Well, now you know," he said, dangerously taking his eyes off the road again for a quick moment to look at her. "So what are we going to do about it? Do you feel anything for me?"

"You know you're quite handsome," she said. Her slight teasing tone had vanished. "Want to call each other's bluff?"

"What do you mean?" He could feel his heart jumping.

"We could stop and take a motel room. Just for the afternoon."

My God, was she kidding? Was this really happening to him? Much earlier, he had thought his lucky star had disappeared somewhere in the firmament.

There was a row of motels on the side facing the ocean. "Take your pick," he said.

"Any one's as good as another. Let's try this one right here."

He waited until a few speeding cars had passed before he swung into the motel's driveway.

"I'll see if they have a room," she said, getting out of the car.

He waited, his pulse racing. Was this his day or not? Sometimes Lady Luck smiled when you weren't even looking.

She came out of the manager's office and gave him a thumbs-up. He drove into one of the empty stalls and parked.

He practically floated out of the car like he was on a magic carpet.

She had a key with a tag and she opened door number four. He followed her in, breathing deeply. If she couldn't read his surging desire she was both blind and deaf.

The room was typical with moldy green drapes open to the highway and a double bed with a bleached-out russet bedspread. But who gave a damn?

She closed the drapes and pulled the bedspread and blanket to the foot of the bed. The sheets looked fresh and clean.

Before he knew it, she was pulling off her sweater and shucking off her skirt. Off came her bra and panties and he was so impressed with her gleaming nudity that he wondered if he could perform. He found out almost immediately.

It was a half hour of fabulous sex. She even had a condom in her handbag! He totally forgot where he was as he enjoyed her opulent body.

When it was over, he lay back on the bed exhausted. What he really wanted now was a cigarette, even though he had given them up years ago. He was happily astonished when she removed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from that horn of plenty, her handbag. She shook out a cigarette and handed it to him.

He stuck the cigarette in his mouth. "My God," he said, "did you plan all this? Knowing men always want a cigarette after sex?"

She only smiled, lighting his cigarette. Then she was lying next to him on the sheet, staring at him with those depthless blue eyes.

"I think you did," he said, giving her a large smile in return.

"Do you know what *I* think?" she said.

"No. What?"

"I think you put Uncle Rodney out of his pain." The smile hadn't lost its strength.

"What? Jesus, that's a terrible thing to say. I liked the old man. I could never do something like that."

"No? Not even to split all his millions?"

He sat up on one arm, staring back at her. "No! Absolutely not! I wouldn't have the guts to pull something off like that." I wouldn't have the guts? What a stupid thing to say.

"Sure you would. We just made love, Troy. You're a very strong guy, even down there. "She poked a playful finger at him.

"Well, I didn't. That cop will find the real killer and it certainly won't be me."

"You're a little flushed, baby. What brought that on?"

He poked her gently in both breasts. "You did, baby. You could arouse a dead man, and you know it."

"Maybe I could. Never tried it."

"Well you sure got me aroused again."

Now she raised herself on her arm. "When we're having a serious conversation?"

"It's not serious. It's stupid. Get that crazy idea out of your pretty head that I did it. Columbo will undoubtedly nab the murderer."

"I thought you said the jury was out on him."

"Maybe he's a little shrewder than we think. As I said, I have no experience with cops. How do we know he won't come up with the killer?"

She was grinning. "The killer just gave me one of the best lays I've ever had."

"I'm not the goddamn killer! Got that?"

She was putting her bra back on, and he was unfortunately losing sight of those lovely breasts. Maybe they would do this again even if she thought he was the murderer. And it seemed she really did, damn it.

She was slipping into her panties, one gorgeous leg at a time, which was driving him insane again. They *had* to have another session; that was imperative. Should he admit he did it? He had the strong impression that she didn't care one way or another. God, how he had misjudged her! Little Miss Innocent with a condom in her handbag.

It was like she was reading his mind: "I don't care if you killed the old bastard. He kept me penned up in that house for years when I could've been out doing what we just did. Now I've got my freedom and I love it."

"I know what you mean."

She was silent, staring at him again. Suddenly, she began firing a bunch of questions. "Is there anything Columbo could find? And what about that book you used? Are you sure you wiped all your prints off? Answer me. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course I did."

She looked at him and smiled with satisfaction.

Christ, now he had admitted it. Wait a minute, could he back-track? How could he have done that? She could get the truth out of a politician. "Now wait a minute, just, uh, wait a minute here."

It was truly established now that he had done it, Troy thought. Had the cop gotten her to wring out a confession from him? No way. He was positive about that, although he knew now she was as tricky as he was and maybe even more cunning.

Silence.

"Do you know when we're going to find out about the will?" she asked.

"No."

She was into herself now, thinking. "You know, you could strangle me now and get all the money. Have you thought of that?"

"Are you serious? Of course not."

"When I checked in I put the wrong license number and phony names when I filled out the form. They only saw *me* in the office. And I noticed no one passed by the window to check out your car and license plate."

He was astonished again. "You mean while we were making love?"

"When else? That didn't mean I wasn't having the time of my life. I'm a multi-tasker, Troy-boy."

He shook his head. "You're really something. My hat's off to you."

Sexy smile: "You had more off than your hat a short while ago."

"You got me there. Should we drive back?"

"No. Let's drive over to a seafood restaurant on the ocean and have another good meal. Great sex gets my taste buds flowing."

He swung off the bed and began to get dressed. "Wonderful idea. Maybe by the time we get back we'll be revved up for another gitgo."

"Hmmm. Sounds yummy."

The following morning, Columbo received a message from Marcella that she wanted to see him at her uncle's house.

He drove over from the station not sure what to expect. Had she come up with an enemy or enemies of the deceased? His own investigation hadn't come up with anything so far, but they had just started.

She answered his ring herself. She looked much more composed than before, wearing a jaunty blouse and full skirt. Quite a goodlooking young lady.

She took him into the living room and pointed him to a chair. "Beautiful day," she said.

"Beautiful. Just why did you want to see me?"

"My cousin just confessed to me."

His bland expression stayed in place. "To the murder of your uncle?"

"What else?"

"He confessed"—snapping his fingers—"just like that? Or did you have to pry it out of him?"

"We made love, lieutenant. So afterwards he was in a vulnerable condition. Besides, the fool trusted me."

Columbo thought this over. "You made love. Were you in the habit of doing that with him?"

"No. First time. He was adequate but I let him think he was the king of seducers. You men are so easy to manipulate. He was so turned on he wanted to do it again. Right away."

Columbo kept his eyes on her—not very hard to do. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I loved my uncle and I want his murderer brought to justice. Even if it's my own cousin. That's not too hard to understand, is it?"

Columbo's scrutiny grew deeper. "No, not at all, particularly with all that money at stake. I can see why you might want your cousin out of the way."

"You mean the inheritance? You mean I want it all instead of just half?"

"Yeah. That's exactly what I was implying."

"Did anyone ever tell you have very penetrating eyes, lieutenant?"

"I think my wife did, once. But why don't you answer my question."

"What was the question again?"

"Are you turning him in for the money? So you can get it all instead of just half?"

"To be honest, that could be part of it. In fact, it could be a large part of it. And I don't want him to get away with killing my uncle. That is a definite no-no in my book."

"Book," he mused. "And your uncle was murdered with a book."

"Why are you complicating things?" she asked. "I'm handing him to you on a silver platter and you're bringing up a book. I guess Troy was right about you."

"About what?"

"That you're no great shakes at what you do. You think that's true?"

Columbo shrugged. "Different people have different opinions about me. All in the game."

"And you really don't care what people say about you?"

"I guess not. I just do my job as I see it."

She wasn't satisfied, obviously getting annoyed with his lackadaisical manner. "You don't believe he actually confessed to me?"

Columbo began opening the buttons on his raincoat. "Oh, I believe that's a strong possibility. Although I think you're a pretty devious person. I mean, you told me yourself how you manipulated him into confessing."

“So why aren’t you out of here questioning the hell out of him?”

Columbo clasped the fingers of both hands around his raised knee. “Because it’s not that easy. He might have confessed to you, and he might not have, but why would he confess to me? This is what we call a *he said, she said* situation. I guess you don’t have anything on tape, do you? Or anyone to corroborate it?”

“You think I carry a mini-recorder around in my handbag just in case somebody might confess to me?”

Columbo smiled. “Silly question. I’m sorry. Although you did engineer the tryst, you might also have thought to have a recorder with you.”

Her laugh was this side of sarcastic. “And another thing, lieutenant. Do you make love to your wife with other people standing around to corroborate it?”

Got him. She saw a faint flush rising from his neck to the roots of his hair. She knew instantly that she had caught him off balance and she delighted in the moment.

“Oh, no, no, no way! Sorry again. But I had to check because you never know in certain situations.”

Now she laughed just a laugh. “So you’re not going to question him? Is that it?”

“Oh, I’ll question him all right. But he might say you were in it with him.” Short beat. “And maybe you were.”

Unfazed by his supposition, she said, “Don’t worry, I can handle him. How long are you going to be clasping that knee?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right,” he said, lowering his leg to the ground. “I get so tied up with stuff I sometimes forget what I’m doing.”

She couldn’t help looking amused. “Okay. You know he’ll deny ever having that postcoital conversation with me. So what are you going to do when he does?”

“Keep plugging.”

“And what exactly does that mean?”

Columbo got to his feet. “It means I’ve gotta come up with something that’ll stick. And I’ve got to do it before either one of you gets half of your uncle’s money.”

She was interested. “And why is that?”

“Because then either one or both of you can buy the best defense counsel in the country. The D.A. doesn’t like going up against people like that. Do you blame him?”

“Yes, I do. He wants everything nice and easy so he won’t be late for dinner? That’s not my idea of a perfect, hard-working civil servant.”

Columbo shrugged again. “Well, that’s what we’ve got. I thank you for telling me all this. I really do.”

She got up too. “My pleasure. If I need any help fending Troy off, I’ll let you know.”

Columbo wasn’t finished. “I guess if you’re the guilty party you would’ve had somebody else do it for you. A hitman, a friend, maybe even a cousin.”

“What, and leave myself open to blackmail? Do you really think I’m that stupid?”

“Oh, no, no, miss, believe me, I don’t.” He edged toward the door. “Have a nice day.”

And he was off, unbuttoned, flapping raincoat and all.

Around three that afternoon, Troy was in Columbo's office. He had received a message after lunch that the cop wanted to see him again.

"What is it this time, lieutenant?" he asked.

"I was talking to your cousin."

Troy tightened up. "Oh?"

"She told me something very interesting about you. That you had confessed to the murder after you two had sex."

Troy covered up his anger at the betrayal with a big smile. "That's right, I did."

Columbo looked surprised. "You did?! You admit you were the perp?"

Troy appeared perfectly relaxed in his chair. "That's what she wanted to hear more than anything else after our love making. So I took the hint and indulged her. I suddenly understood that it was to be a sex game with her. That's what she wanted, a sex game, and that's what she would get. It was a great ploy to make sure she would keep coming back for more. Apparently, the thought that I had killed my uncle seemed to intrigue and titillate her. A little sick, perhaps, but not criminal."

Columbo looked surprised. "Boy, oh boy, oh boy, that is really something. That is a good one. And I gotta say that's a new one on me. I never heard that used for slipping out of a bear-trap before. You two are really two pieces of work."

Columbo secured both his hands on the desk and leveraged himself to a standing position. "Guess what? I don't think it was a lie at all, Mr. Pellingham. She suspected you were the killer and you admitted it. Either that or she convinced you to kill your uncle."

Troy stamped an angry foot on the floor. "Screw you. It was a lie to get her on her back some more, maybe plenty more. Now let's see the color of your evidence if you've got any—which I know you don't."

"That kind of arrogance can get you in a lot of trouble, sir."

He was not to be deterred: "I'm still waiting to see your evidence. So quit stalling."

Columbo picked up a sheet of paper from his blotter. "You think I'd accuse you of murder just as a lark?"

Troy leaned back in the chair as if someone had pushed him. "I'm still waiting." His voice had lost some of its conviction.

"You pushed that bookcase over on your uncle and when that didn't do the job, you bludgeoned him to death with that book."

"Can the suppositions. They'd get you laughed out of court."

Columbo looked down at the sheet of paper. "This lab report isn't a supposition."

"So what's in the goddamn report? This better be good."

Columbo tossed the report back on his desk. "It was the murder book that gave you away."

Angry disbelief: "What?"

"You see, you wiped your prints off the cover. But you still left a print on the book."

"Where?"

Columbo picked a book up from his desk. "You see on the side where all the edges of all the pages are lined up perfectly in a block?"

He saw—and he could feel the sweat crawling in his palms.

“That’s why I had your prints taken. There was a fair to middling partial print on those lined up edges. When the pages are flipped through, the print vanishes.” He riffled through the pages. “When the book is closed, when you used it as a weapon, you inadvertently left your print on the tight block of pages.” He picked up a volume from his desk. “Here, try it with this one.”

Troy hesitantly reached out for the book and Columbo handed it to him. He looked at the block of page edges, but said nothing.

“Take a look at the title,” Columbo said, punching in an extension on his phone.

Troy did. *The California Penal Code*. He looked up at Columbo, his face a grim mask now.

“You’ll have plenty of time to read it after you’re sent up for twenty years for Murder One.” He said to the receiver when someone picked up: “Come on in, Pagano. I want you to make the arrest.”

Troy flung the heavy book back on the desk.

“Now your sexy, ruthless cousin will get all of your uncle’s fortune,” Columbo added.

“The little bitch,” he mumbled.

“She knew you did it, Mr. Pellingham, but she didn’t have our expert lab.”

“Or you,” he said bitterly.

Columbo shrugged with his usual modesty. “Or me.”

