

A sheet of rain moved across Placid Cove Trailer Park.

Lightning made a complicated pattern in the night sky. Nudger held his umbrella against the wind as he walked, and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket to check the address of the trailer he was trying to find. Finally, he found Number 307 and knocked on its metal door.

'I'm Nudger,' he said, when the door opened.

The woman in the doorway stared at him. Rain blew in, making wet marks on her pale blue dress and ruffling her blond hair. She was tall but very thin. She looked at first to be about twelve years old, but a second glance showed her to be in her middle twenties. She had blue eyes, a large mouth, and top teeth that rested on her bottom lip when she wasn't talking.

'This rain's terrible,' she said at last, as if seeing beyond Nudger for the first time.

'It is,' Nudger agreed. 'And it's raining on me.'

Her whole body gave a quick, nervous movement as she smiled to apologize. 'I'm Holly Ann Adams, Mr Nudger. And yes, you are getting wet. Come in.'

The trailer was small, and crowded with cheap furniture. Shouts and laughter came from a program on a small black- and-white TV, which was on a tiny table near a worn-out sofa. The air smelled of food which had been fried too long.

Holly Ann moved a pile of magazines from a chair. Nudger folded his umbrella and sat down. She started to

Speak, then there was that same nervous movement again, as if she'd remembered something, and she walked over and switched off the TV.

'Are you a real private detective?' she said.

'I am,' Nudger said. 'Did someone recommend me to you, Miss Adams?'

'I got your name out of the phone book. And if you're going to work for me, it can be Holly Ann without the Adams.'

'Except on the check,' Nudger said.

She smiled a wicked twelve-year-old's smile. 'Oh, sure, don't worry about that. I already wrote you a check, I just have to fill in the amount. That's if you agree to take the job. You might not.'

'Why not?'

'It's to do with my fiance, Curtis Colt.'

For a few seconds Nudger listened to the rain crashing on the roof, then he said, 'The Curtis Colt who's going to be executed next week?'

'That's the one. But he didn't kill that liquor store woman, and that's a fact. It's not right that he should have to ride the lightning.'

'Ride the lightning?'

'That's what prisoners call dying in the electric chair. Curtis doesn't belong in it, and I can prove it.'

'It's a little late for that kind of talk,' Nudger said. 'Or

did you give evidence for Curtis in court?'

'No, I couldn't. All those lawyers and the judge and jury don't even know about me. Curtis didn't want them to know, so he never told them.'

'Tell me about Curtis Colt,' Nudger said. 'Give me the details.'

'Well, they say Curtis was inside the liquor store, robbing it. He and his partner had robbed three other places that night, but they were gas stations. The old man who owned the store came out of the back room and saw his wife with her hands up, and Curtis pointing a gun at her. He went crazy and ran at Curtis, and Curtis had to shoot him. Then the woman went mad and ran at Curtis, and Curtis shot her. She died. The old man will live, but he can't talk or even feed himself.'

Nudger remembered now. Curtis Colt had been found guilty of murder. And because the law had now decided to stop using poison gas to execute people, he would be the first killer to die in the electric chair for more than twenty-five years.

'They're going to shoot Curtis full of electricity next Saturday, Mr Nudger,' Holly Ann said. Her wide blue eyes stared at Nudger. 'I have bad dreams about it. Then I lie awake, thinking. I've just got to do whatever's left to try and help Curtis.'

'They never caught Curtis's partner, the driver who drove away and left him in that gas station, did they?' Nudger asked.

'No. And Curtis would never say who the driver was.'

'But you know who was driving the car.'

'Yes. And he told me that he and Curtis were miles away from that liquor store when it was robbed. When he saw the police come into that gas station where Curtis was buying cigarettes, he got out of there fast. The cops didn't even get the car's license number.'

Nudger rubbed a hand across his chin and watched Holly Ann. 'The jury thought Curtis shot the old man and the woman deliberately, in cold blood.'

'That's not true! Not according to-' She stopped herself before saying the man's name.

'Curtis's friend,' Nudger finished.

'That's right. And he ought to know,' she said.

'None of this means anything unless the driver comes forward and says he was somewhere else with Curtis when the liquor store was robbed,' Nudger said.

Holly Ann nodded. 'I know. But he won't. He can't. That's why I need you. The witnesses who say they saw Curtis at the liquor store are wrong. I want you to find a way to convince them of that.'

'Four people, two of them customers in the store, picked Curtis out of a police line-up,' Nudger reminded her.

'So what? Eye witnesses often make mistakes.'

Nudger had to admit that they did.

'Talk to them,' she said. 'Find out why they think Curtis

was the killer. Show them how they might be wrong, and get them to change their stories.'

'Even if all the witnesses change their stories, Curtis might not get a new trial,' Nudger said.

'Perhaps not, but the law wouldn't kill him if enough witnesses said they were wrong. Then, maybe, eventually, he'd get another trial and get out of prison.'

He had to admire her. She was prepared to believe the impossible.

'So will you help me, Mr Nudger?'

'Sure. It sounds easy.'

'Why should I worry about it any more?' Randy Gantner asked Nudger. He didn't mind talking, because he could have a rest from his construction job on the new road. 'Colt's been found guilty and he's going to the electric chair, isn't he?'

Holly Ann had given Nudger a photograph of Curtis Colt. Now Nudger held it for Gantner to see. 'This is a picture you never saw in court. Just look at it closely and tell me again if you're sure the man you saw in the liquor store was Colt.'

'I'd be a fool to change my story now,' Gantner said.

'You'd be a murderer if you really weren't sure.'

Gantner sighed and looked at the photograph. 'It's Colt. He shot the man and woman while I was standing at the back of the store. If he'd known me and Sanders were there, he'd have probably shot us, too.'

'You're positive it's the same man?'

Gantner began to look annoyed. 'I said it to the police and jury, Nudger. Colt killed the old lady.'

'Did you actually see the shots fired?'

'No. We were at the back of the store looking for some cheap whisky when we heard the shots. We saw Colt run out to the car - a black or dark green Ford. Colt fired another shot as it drove away.'

'Did you see the driver?'

'I saw a thin man with curly black hair and a mustache. And that's what I told the cops.'

The other witnesses also identified Curtis Colt from the photograph. The last witness was an elderly woman named Iris Langerneckert who had seen Colt run out of the store and into the car. Like Gantner, she said the driver was a thin man with curly black hair and a mustache, but then she added, 'Like Curtis Colt's hair and mustache.'

Nudger looked again at the photograph. Curtis Colt was thin, with a thick mustache and curly black hair. Was it possible that the car driver had been Curtis Colt himself, and that it was his partner who had shot the shopkeeper? Nudger found that hard to believe.

He decided he needed more information about the

robbery and about Curtis Colt, so he drove east towards the Third District police station.

Ten years ago, Police Lieutenant Jack Hammersmith had been Nudger's partner in a two-man police car, but now he looked much older and heavier than the handsome cop Nudger had once worked with.

'Sit down, Nudge,' Hammersmith invited.

'I need some help,' Nudger said.

'Sure,' Hammersmith said.

'I need to know more about Curtis Colt.'

Hammersmith lit a cigar. 'Colt? The man who's going to ride the lightning?'

'That's the second time in the past few days I've heard that expression. The first time was from Colt's fiancée. She thinks he's innocent.'

'Fiancées think like that. Are you working for her?'

Nudger nodded.

'I was in charge of that murder investigation,' said Hammersmith. 'Colt's guilty, Nudge.'

'The description of the car driver is a lot like Colt's. Maybe he did the shooting and Colt was the driver.'

'Colt's lawyer suggested that. The jury didn't believe it. Neither do I. The man's guilty, Nudge.'

'Can I see the papers for the Colt case?'

Hammersmith finished his cigar. 'Why didn't this fiancée come to the trial and speak for Colt? She could have

lied and said he was with her that night.'

'Colt didn't want her to have to give evidence.'

'So what makes her think Colt is innocent?'

'She knows he was somewhere else that night.'

'But not with her,' Hammersmith said.

'No,' Nudger said.

Hammersmith picked up the phone and asked for the Colt papers to be brought to him. Nudger looked at them, but didn't find out much that he didn't already know. Fifteen minutes after the robbery, officers from a two-man police car, acting on a radio description of the gunman, approached Curtis Colt inside a gas station where he was buying cigarettes. A car had been parked nearby and it drove away fast when the police car arrived. The officers got only a quick look at it - a dark green Ford with a license plate that might start with the letter 'L'.

Colt went with the policemen to the Third District police station, and later that night the four eyewitnesses had picked him out of a line-up. Their description of the car matched the one driving away from the gas station. The money from the robbery, and several gas station robberies, wasn't on Colt, but was probably in the car.

'What about the gun?' Nudger asked.

'Colt wasn't carrying a gun when we arrested him.'

'Seems odd,' Nudger said.

'Not really. He was buying cigarettes. He left the gun in the car.'

Nudger put the papers back on Hammersmith's desk. 'I'll let you know if I learn anything interesting.'

'It's over, Nudge,' Hammersmith said. 'I don't see how even the fiancée can doubt Colt's guilt.'

'She has bad dreams about Colt dying in the electric chair,' Nudger said.

'Colt probably has bad dreams, too,' Hammersmith said. 'But he deserves his.'

'None of the witnesses are in any doubt about identifying Curtis Colt as the killer,' Nudger said to Holly Ann in her trailer the next day.

'They know what's going to happen to Curtis,' she said. 'They don't want to live knowing they might have made a mistake and killed an innocent man, so they've convinced themselves it was Curtis they saw.' She looked at him for a moment or two, then went on, 'I see you need to be convinced of Curtis's innocence. Come here tonight at eight, Mr Nudger, and I'll convince you.'

'How?'

'I can't tell you. You'll understand why tonight.'

'Why do we have to wait until tonight?'

'Oh, you'll see.'

Nudger felt as if they were playing a children's guessing game while Curtis Colt waited to go to the electric chair. He had never seen an execution. He'd heard it took longer than most people thought for the prisoner to die.

At eight o'clock that evening, Nudger was sitting at the

tiny table in Holly Ann's kitchen. Opposite him was a thin, nervous man in his late twenties, dressed in a shirt with long sleeves despite the heat, and wearing sunglasses. Holly Ann introduced him as 'Len, but that's not his real name,' and said he was Colt's partner and the driver of the car on the night of the murder.

'But me and Curtis weren't anywhere near the liquor store when those people got shot,' he said.

Nudger assumed the sunglasses were so that he couldn't identify Len if they ever went to court. Len had dark brown hair that fell to his shoulders, and when he moved his arm Nudger saw something blue and red on his wrist. A tattoo. Which explained the long-sleeved shirt.

'Your hair didn't grow that long in the three months since the liquor store killing,' Nudger said, 'so that helps you. The witnesses say the driver had short curly hair, like Colt's, and a mustache.'

'I'll be honest with you,' Len said. 'Me and Curtis looked alike. So, to confuse any witnesses if we got caught, I used to put my hair up and wear a wig that looks like Curtis's hair. And I shaved off my mustache a month ago.'

'Can you prove you were the other side of the town at the time of the murder?' Nudger asked.

'No, but I'm telling the truth. I just want you to believe Curtis is innocent,' said Len, desperately. 'Because he is! And so am I!'

Nudger understood why Len was taking a risk coming here. If Colt was guilty of murder, Len was guilty of being at

the liquor store with him. Once Colt was dead, there was always a chance that Len would be caught and sent to prison for life, or even be executed. It wasn't necessary to actually fire the gun to be found guilty of murder.

'Are you giving Holly Ann the money to pay me?' Nudger asked.

'Some of it, yes,' Len said. 'I gave her some of the money Curtis and I stole.'

Dirty money, Nudger thought. Dirty job. But if Curtis Colt was innocent. . .

'OK, I'll keep working on this.'

'Thanks,' Len said. 'Stay here with Holly Ann for ten minutes after I leave. I want to know I'm not being followed. It's not that I don't trust you, but I've got to be sure, you understand?'

'I understand. Go.'

Len went out and Nudger heard him running away.

'You know I have to tell the police about this conversation, don't you?' Nudger said to Holly Ann.

She nodded. 'That's why we arranged it this way.'

'They might want to talk to you.'

'It doesn't matter,' Holly Ann said. 'I don't know where Len is, or even his real name. He'll find out all he needs to know about Curtis from the newspapers.'

'I don't believe it,' Hammersmith said angrily, chewing on his cigar. Angrily because he did believe it a little bit, and didn't like to think it was possible he was sending an innocent man to his death. 'This Len character is just trying to keep himself away from a murder trial.'

'It could be like that,' Nudger admitted.

'It would help if you gave us a better description of Len,' Hammersmith said, still angry.

'I gave you what I could,' Nudger said. 'Are you going to question Holly Ann?'

'Sure, but it won't do any good. She's probably telling the truth and doesn't know how to find Len.'

'You could have her trailer watched.'

'Do you think Holly Ann and Len might be lovers?'

'No,' Nudger said.

'Then they'll probably never see each other again. Watching her trailer would be a waste of time.'

Nudger knew Hammersmith was right. He stood up.

'What are you going to do now?' Hammersmith asked.

'I'll talk to the witnesses again, and read the trial papers again. And I'd like to talk with Curtis Colt.'

'They don't allow visitors on Death Row, Nudge.'

'Will you try to arrange it?'

Hammersmith chewed thoughtfully on his cigar. 'I'll

phone you and let you know,' he said eventually.

That day Nudger managed to talk again to all four witnesses. None of them changed their stories. Nudger reported this to Holly Ann at the restaurant where she worked as a waitress. Several customers that afternoon got tears with their baked potatoes.

Hammersmith phoned Nudger that evening.

'Colt won't talk to you,' he said. 'He won't talk to anyone.'

'Does he know I'm working for Holly Ann?'

'Yes. He wasn't pleased.'

Nudger swore.

'This isn't your fault, Nudge,' Hammersmith said.

'We've got one more day before he's executed,' Nudger said. 'I'm going to talk to those witnesses again.'

'You're wasting your time, Nudge.'

Hammersmith was right. Nothing Nudger did helped Curtis Colt at all.

At eight o'clock Saturday morning, while Nudger was preparing breakfast in his apartment, Colt died in the electric chair without saying any last words.

Nudger heard the news on his kitchen radio. That

afternoon, he apologized to Holly Ann for not being able to stop her lover's execution. She was polite, and tried to be brave. The restaurant owner gave her the day off, and Nudger drove her home.

Nudger slept a total of four hours during the next two nights. On Monday he went to Curtis Colt's funeral. There were twelve people around the grave. Holly Ann looked like a child playing dress-up in black. They didn't exchange words, only glances.

Afterwards, Nudger watched her walk to a taxi. She never looked back.

That night Nudger realized what was bothering him, and for the first time since Colt's death, he slept well.

In the morning he began watching Holly Ann's trailer. At seven-thirty she came out dressed in her yellow waitress uniform and got into a taxi. Nudger followed in his Volkswagen as the taxi drove her the four miles to her job at the restaurant. At six that evening another taxi drove her home, making a short stop at a food store.

The same thing happened every day that week. Holly Ann had no visitors. The weather got warmer, and Nudger sat in the hot Volkswagen and wondered if it was worth doing what he was doing.

The next Monday, after Holly Ann had left for work, Nudger got into the trailer. It took him more than an hour to find what he was searching for. It was a box hidden behind the bath. Inside were seven hundred dollars, and another object which Nudger wasn't surprised to see.

He closed the box and put it back.

He continued to watch Holly Ann, more confident now.

Two weeks after the funeral, when she left work one evening, she didn't go home. Instead her taxi drove east. Nudger followed through several narrow streets to a garage. The sign said: 'Cliff's Car Repairs'.

Nudger parked and waited until the taxi went by without a passenger. Ten minutes later, Holly drove by in a shiny red Ford. Its license plate began with an 'L'.

When Nudger reached Placid Cove Trailer Park, he saw the Ford next to Holly's trailer. He scratched the Ford's door with a key. Beneath the new red paint the car's color was dark green.

Holly Ann answered the door immediately when he knocked. She tried to smile when she saw it was him, but couldn't quite manage it. She looked ten years older, and was holding a glass with whisky in it.

'I know what happened,' Nudger told her.

Now she did smile, but only for a second. 'You don't know when to stop, Mr Nudger.'

He followed her into the trailer. It was hot inside. She offered him a drink, but he shook his head. She finished hers and poured herself another.

'Now what is it you know, Mr Nudger?' She didn't really want to know, but she had to hear it. Had to share it.

'The taxi fare to and from work must make a big hole

in your wages. And you seem to go everywhere by taxi.'

'My car's been in the garage for repair,' she said.

'I guessed that, after I found the money and the wig.'

She drank some of her whisky. 'Wig?'

'In the box behind the bath,' Nudger said. 'You're thin, and with a dark curly wig and a false mustache, sitting in your car, you'd look enough like Curtis Colt to confuse any witnesses. It was a clever trick.'

Holly Ann looked amazed. 'Are you saying I was driving the car at the liquor store robbery?'

'Maybe. Then maybe you paid someone to be Len and convince me he was Colt's partner, and that they were far away from the liquor store when the old woman was murdered. After I found the wig, I talked to some of your neighbors. They told me that until recently you'd driven a green Ford.'

Holly Ann moved her tongue along her top teeth.

'So Curtis and Len used my car,' she said.

'I doubt if Len ever met Curtis. He's somebody you paid to sit there and lie to me,' Nudger said.

'If I was driving the car, Mr Nudger, and knew Curtis was guilty, why would I hire a private detective to try and find something wrong with the witnesses' stories?'

'That's what puzzled me at first,' Nudger said, 'until I realized you weren't interested in proving Curtis was innocent. What you were really worried about was Curtis talking in prison. You wanted to be sure those witnesses

wouldn't change their stories. And you wanted the police to learn about not-his-right-name Len.'

'Why would I want that?' Holly Ann asked simply.

'Because you were Curtis Colt's partner in all his robberies. When you robbed the liquor store, he stayed in the car to drive. You fired the shot that killed the old woman. He fired the wild shot from the moving car. Colt kept quiet about it because he loved you. Now he's dead you can trust him forever, but I think you could have anyway. He loved you more than you loved him, and you'll have to live knowing that he didn't deserve to die.'

She looked into her glass, and didn't say anything for a long time. Then she said, 'I didn't want to shoot that old man, but he didn't leave me any choice. Then the old woman came up to me.' She looked up at Nudger and smiled. It was a smile he didn't like. 'God help me, Mr Nudger, I can't stop thinking about shooting that old woman.'

'You murdered her,' Nudger said, 'and you murdered Curtis Colt by letting him die for you.'

'You can't prove anything,' she said, still with the same frightening smile.

'You're right,' Nudger said, 'I can't. But Curtis Colt rode the lightning, and his bad dreams died with him. Yours will stay with you for years. I think you'll come to agree his way was easier.'

She sat very still. She didn't answer.

Nudger stood up and wiped his damp forehead with the back of his hand. He felt hot and dirty in the tiny trailer, and

he wanted to get out.

He didn't say goodbye to Holly Ann when he walked out. She didn't say goodbye to him. The last thing Nudger heard as he left the trailer was the sound of the bottle clinking on the glass.