

THE STORM DRAIN MURDER

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CHAPTER ONE

The village of Sea Cliff slept beneath a thick blanket of fog.

On Bluffside Drive, just above the Pacific Ocean, the dense gray air clung to the houses and trees like a clammy shroud. The night was quiet as death, save for dripping drizzle and lapping wavelets.

The narrow pavement meandered along the bluff tops, thirty feet above the rocky beach. The windows of all the houses were black at two in the morning, except for the one next to Vista Point. Only the glow of a lamp behind curtains disturbed the gloom.

An idling engine and scraping wipers joined the sounds of nature. A silver minivan inched along Bluffside Drive. Its headlights were off, and the driver peered out the open side window, as if searching for a landmark in the fog. The passenger, who appeared to be drunk or unconscious, leaned forward against the seat belt.

The van drove a few feet, stopped, crept forward, and stopped again. A wraithlike man in ragged clothes slunk through the mist behind the van, hiding each time it stopped.

After many minutes, the van turned into the Vista Point parking lot and stopped. The ghostly man snuck behind a boulder near the edge of the lot, a few yards away.

The van's engine died. The lamp behind the curtains went dark. The sounds of murmuring waves and dripping dew reclaimed the night.

Vista Point jutted into the Pacific. A rickety wooden fence, entwined with yellow caution tape, traced the contours of the bluff tops and the Point. "DANGER – KEEP BACK" signs were posted every few feet along the fence. A metal sawhorse blocked the path from the parking lot to the point. A hand-lettered sign on the sawhorse said, "DANGER – STEEP DROP – UNSAFE FENCE." Next to the path, another metal sawhorse guarded a gaping hole in the ground, an open storm drain that emptied to the rocky shore below. A hand-lettered sign said, "DANGER – OPEN STORM DRAIN."

The driver climbed out of the minivan, closing the door with a muffled *thunk*. A second later, the curtains in the darkened window parted, and a face peeked out.

The driver wore all black—oversized sweatshirt and sweatpants, and a baseball cap pulled down low. The shapeless clothes concealed any hint of identity as male or female, stocky or slight. The driver moved through the mist like a billowy black shadow.

Circling the van, the driver pulled the passenger out of the seat. "You screwed too many people, and got shit-faced one time too many," the driver whispered, propping the limp form against the door. "So here you are, as dead as you can be."

With grunts of exertion, the driver lifted the body by the armpits and began dragging it backward across the parking lot to the path that led to the Point. The body's head bobbed back and forth, hitting the brim of the driver's baseball cap and knocking it askew.

The driver stopped at the sawhorse that blocked the path to the Point, gasping for breath. Struggling to hold the body upright, the driver reached down to shove the sawhorse aside. The body lost its balance. It swayed to the right, toward the open mouth of the storm drain.

The driver jerked the body to the left, but pulled too hard. "Come back here!" the driver yelled, yanking to the right, and left, and right again. With each sway, the arc grew greater and greater.

The driver tightened both arms around the body and gave it a mighty tug back, away from the storm drain. The body's boot caught on the leg of the sawhorse that guarded the mouth of the drain. The body and driver fell backward.

Now completely off balance, the driver shoved the body away, as chance would have it, in the direction of the drain. The body teetered precariously over the gaping opening.

A cry of "Nooo!" filled the air. Falling, the driver thrust arms out clumsily to grasp the body, but pushed it instead. It tumbled headfirst into the open storm drain, crashing into the grate thirty feet below.

"Shit!" the driver cried, hitting the ground on a hip, then a shoulder. "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Swearing and muttering, the driver crawled to the drain and stared into it before limping back to the minivan.

The ghostly man watched, peeking over the boulder where he hid. He held up his fingers in a sign that wards off evil. "You can ride that drainpipe straight down to hell," he spat.