

THE STORM DRAIN MURDER

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PART 1

The Body

Chapter 1

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

On Bluffside Drive, just above the Pacific Ocean, the windows of the houses were black at two in the morning. Dense gray air clung to the roofs and trees like a shroud. The night was quiet as death, save for dripping drizzle and lapping wavelets.

An idling engine and scraping wipers joined the sounds of nature. A silver minivan inched along the narrow road. The van's headlights were off, and the driver leaned out the open side window, as though searching for a landmark in the fog. The passenger slumped against the door and half-open window.

A wraithlike man in ragged clothes snuck through the mist behind the van, hiding behind each hedge or bush that offered cover.

The van drove a few feet, stopped, crawled forward, and stopped again. The man, crouching behind a garbage can, coughed in the damp air. He cringed. He raised his head just enough to peek over the lid.

The van's passenger window slid down. "Who's there?" the driver demanded in a gruff whisper. "Someone there?" The man dropped to his knees and froze, holding his breath. A minute later, the van inched forward again.

Bluffside Drive meandered along the bluff tops, thirty feet above the rocky shore. The van crept the length of the road and turned into the Vista Point parking lot. It stopped near a sawhorse

blocking a dirt path that led to the Point. A sign with hand-written, “STEEP DROP – KEEP OUT,” was taped to the sawhorse. Just beyond it, in the center of the path, a gaping storm drain was open to the beach below.

The van’s engine died. Murmuring waves and dripping dew filled the silence. A few yards away, the ghostly man crawled behind a large boulder.

The driver climbed out of the minivan, closing the door with a *thunk*. A light behind a curtain went dark in the house next to the parking lot. A second later, the curtains parted.

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 shadow.

Circling the van, the driver opened the door and hefted the passenger out of the seat. “You screwed too many people, and got wasted once too often,” the driver whispered hoarsely, propping the limp form face-first against the van’s door. “So here you are, as dead as you can be.”

“Amen to that, you son-of-a-bitch,” the ghostly man whispered behind his rock.

The driver lifted the body under the armpits and dragged it backward by its heels to the dirt path, stopping at the sawhorse. Gasping and struggling to hold the body upright, the driver reached down and shoved the sawhorse aside. The body lost its balance. It swayed to the left. The driver swore and yanked the body sharply to gain control.

Fighting for breath, the driver heaved the body backward up the path and around the storm drain before stopping. The drain’s rusted cover lay several feet behind them, invisible in the gloom. “OK,” the driver rasped, “to the Point and down you go.”

One step backward. Two steps. On the third step, the driver tripped over the grate. Falling while holding the body's dead weight, the driver shoved it away, as chance would have it, toward the storm drain. The body's boot toe caught on the lip of the drain. For five heartbeats, the body teetered over the gaping opening.

Arms flailing for balance, the driver thrust out clumsy hands to grab the body, but pushed it instead. It tumbled headfirst into the open storm drain, crashing into the bottom grate thirty feet below.

"Shit!" the driver cried, hitting the ground on a hip, then a shoulder. "Damn! Damn! Damn!" The driver crawled to the drain and stared into it before limping back to the minivan muttering and swearing.

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.