

Friday, September 3

Janet felt drained. She always felt that way after talking with her brother. They'd spent, what was it? An hour and a half on the phone. Poor Jeremy. Too scared to sleep. Afraid he wouldn't wake up. The gentlest, kindest, sweetest, most caring boy she'd ever known, and now he was alone back in Boston, his HIV turned to full-blown AIDS. "I'm all in blotches," he'd said. And he'd always been so handsome.

She snatched a tissue out of the box, wiped her eyes and blew her nose, balled it up and stuffed it into the pocket of her robe with the rest.

His lover had passed away a year ago, and now he had nobody. He'd lost a dozen friends to the disease. His straight friends were sympathetic but increasingly distant. And their parents: divorced years ago, they really didn't give a damn about anyone. Just one more reason she'd left Massachusetts and moved a continent away. That was ten years ago. A lifetime.

She'd been married and divorced. But at least there were no children. She had mixed emotions about that. She very much wanted kids, and Blake would have made a terrific father, she was convinced. It was just as a husband that he was so lousy. Amazing how she could have been so blind to his flaws: his laziness, his selfishness, his inability to settle down into one damn career. He was so much fun sometimes, too. Loved games. Sports. Getting out and doing things. Hell, she still liked him in spite of his flaws.

But that didn't matter anymore. Janet was in a quandary. She loved her job at the university, she lived in a house that Blake was paying for, she loved living in Northern California, loved the weather, the variety of activities available, her many friends. And she hated Boston and everything about it. Especially all its memories and associations.

But she knew she was going back.

She had to take care of him. It was the only way she could look at herself in the mirror.

And what about Dan? It didn't matter. That relationship was going nowhere anyway. He'd sulk for a day or two, then he'd forget all about her. More than two years of her life wasted. She snorted a bitter laugh. Ah, shit. The hell with it.

Well, maybe she'd go out with him one more time, have one last night of vigorous fucking, then break the news. The sex part hadn't been a waste of time, anyway. She wrapped her robe around herself and padded down the hall to the kitchen. Opened the refrigerator and checked around. Nothing appealed to her. Then she remembered she had a leftover sticky bun on the counter. She got a fork out of the drawer.

Time for the late news. She took her snack and a napkin and went down to the family room. She did like this house. It had plenty of space. She hated to give it up. She knew once she moved back to Boston, good old Blake would kiss her off. He'd have the place on the

market before her moving truck was out of the driveway and she'd never see another dime out of him.

Would she be able to get a job in Boston? Probably. Not anything great, but something, anyway. She lifted a forkful of cake to her mouth. Caramel-covered pecans. *Yess!* Maybe she could get Blake to give her enough money to take care of a few months' rent if she released him from further obligation. That might work. She wouldn't really be giving up anything, and he might go for it just to relieve his minuscule feelings of guilt. She found the remote stuck between couch cushions and clicked the TV on. She reached into the crack again and pulled out a gritty quarter. My lucky day, she thought, tossing it onto the coffee table.

That woman with the perfect hair and the motor mouth came on and rattled off the top stories.

A drive by shooting in Oakland.

An earthquake near Fresno, a 4.8 chimney cracker.

A fire in Shasta, under control.

Miss Motormouth returned and talked about a meeting in Sacramento.

They went to commercials: a Chevy truck sale, a laxative, a Toyotathon, a dental adhesive, a Dodge Caravan Sale, an adult diaper, a promo for a reality show, a Ford blowout sale.

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Across the sloping street, a car sat parked in the darkness under a broken street lamp. The black-clad driver sat low behind the wheel, watching, waiting. Blue flickerings of a TV lit the windows of the house opposite the car. There was no street traffic. Inside the car, the man sat quite still, except for an occasional involuntary spasm. His breath whispered through the tracheostomy tube embedded in his throat; a faint hiss, mechanical and inhuman.

The minutes passed slowly.

A roiling of intestines, followed by the release of a particularly pungent bubble of gas. The man grimaced, shifted his weight. He reached into a pocket, produced a tablet, chewed and swallowed it. A low rumbling once again, this time ending with an acrid squirt of fecal mucus and blood. The man squirmed in his seat, but uttered no sound.

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Janet took another bite of her sticky bun.

Motormouth continued with the news. School opening may be delayed by teachers' strikes across the state. Cut to a meeting with people yelling at each other. Cut to the state school superintendent saying there's no money to meet demands. Miss Motormouth returned. No new leads on the Bay Butcher. Will this be like the Zodiac Killer of decades past? Will the killings just stop and the story fade to the back pages? Only time will tell. Sports and weather after this.

Janet finished her snack and put the plate and fork next to her feet on the coffee table.

She got up and headed for the bathroom, lowered herself and peed, took a few sheets of toilet paper, dabbed and dropped them in. She remembered the mass of tissue in her robe and dumped that in too as she flushed.

She returned in time to catch the highlights of the Giants beating the crap out of Pittsburgh. Five wins in a row. Arrright! She turned off the TV and headed for the bedroom.

At the mirror, she paused. She'd noticed hair sprouting under her jaw recently. Christ, Janet the Bearded Lady! It was getting worse. She decided to make an appointment with her gynecologist, see what was happening with her hormones. See her before she moved back to Boston. Damn, she liked this doctor, too. Something else she'd have to give up.

Would she still follow the Giants? She never could stand the Red Sox. Or their fans.

In bed, she thought briefly about the Bay Butcher. At least she wouldn't have to worry about that back in Boston.

Just the usual muggings.

She turned out the lamp.

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The watcher waited a few more minutes. His intestines writhed once again. He straightened up and opened his car door. The interior light did not illuminate. He pulled a large gym bag from the passenger seat, eased the door closed and, checking around once more, shambled across the street, scarcely visible in the darkness. He stopped on the driveway and pulled out a small electronic device, pointed it at the garage door and squeezed the button. The door slid quietly up.

It was time to go to work.

The door from the garage to her kitchen was unlocked, as he knew it would be. He moved silently through the darkened house and paused outside her open bedroom door. He glanced inside. A mound under the covers. Flicking on the light, he strode to the bed before the mound could move. His gloved hand reached out and ended the brief scream.

And now all motion slowed as though the very air had turned to heavy liquid, and everything--furniture, draperies, clothing, flesh--appeared to him drained of color, a grainy black and white. When the heavy flopping and flailing ceased, he dragged the unconscious lump out of the bed, opened his bag and found his tools. Forcing her jaw open, he reached inside with clamp and curved scalpel. Working down and in, he was able to extract the offending organ in its entirety. He placed it in a bag. He watched as the bright silver blood welled up in her throat and spilled into the trachea, where it bubbled for a time. There was a brief series of involuntary gag reactions, and then the bubbling ceased. Using the scalpel now, he opened the large soft cavity below and exposed the nest of snakes. A flow of quicksilver drops beaded up and ran together into rivulets. He stared in

fascination as the bright silver liquid pooled in depressions on the white marble flesh.

And then a sudden flash of color revealed scarlet blood, purple gore, gaping blue arteries and green ropes of bile and he tried to scream out in horror at what he had done but he no longer had the apparatus for screaming.

A mechanical hiss of sharply indrawn breath was the only sound he made.