



## **Chapter 1 Midnight Misadventure**

Thursday, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016

"Romeo...Romeo, where the hell are you?"

I stood by the side of my Honda, flashlight aimed toward the dark no-mans-land between the cemetery and the wastewater treatment plant. A strange pairing on adjacent parcels of land, but then Los Lobos is a strange town. "*Romeo?*" Where had the lovable goofball dog taken himself off to? Risking life and limb on high-speed Los Lobos Valley Road, I'd followed him with my window down for almost a mile. He'd let me get close, then run on ahead. His idea of a game, not mine. Now he'd been swallowed by the night. Didn't he know we were both too old for this?

I found the Great Dane mix a few days ago by the side of the road across town. His skinny body and dull coat indicated neglect and possible abuse. Probably a drop-off. Shameful. Still, I dutifully—and unsuccessfully—searched the newspaper and online for lost-dog notices.

Something moved in the distance, creating a shadow. I left the safety of my parked car and moved toward the shadow. Again it moved. Then it woofed, obviously enjoying the game. "Come back here, you idiot."

I tiptoed toward the sound, armed only with flashlight and leash, trying not to think about being out here alone, except for a nonsensical dog, on a moonless night. My flashlight illuminated only bare ground; Romeo had run off again. Hopefully, he wouldn't cut back to Los Lobos Valley Road. But no, I sensed him waiting for me out there in the darkness and headed toward the spot where I'd last seen him, about a hundred feet away. My senses became aware of an earthy smell—mounds of dirt piled near the fence surrounding the treatment plant. The loose soil would provide a natural attraction for a dog who liked to dig.

Feeling like an arthritic Nancy Drew, I bent over and directed my light into one of several hollows in the ground.

"Yeow!" Something nudged my butt, almost causing me to tumble into the hole. I regained my balance with difficulty and looked behind me. Romeo stood there unblinking with something in his mouth. He nudged me to take it, obviously proud of his offering. I accepted the brittle object and held it gingerly. What the...?

My flashlight beam revealed a large bone. It looked human, possibly an arm.