



SOMETHING'S GOING ON HERE

Chapter One

Another grey misty Friday night in this small coastal town. The few street lights fuzz in the dark. Even fewer cars crawl through the clouds sitting on the deserted roads. A Friday night like every Friday night here in Los Osos. I walk alone past the closed diner, the closed used bookstore, and the closed barber shop/tackle and bait supply store. All 7,864 citizens are somewhere else. I don't know where; I moved here two months ago and I don't get this place.

I retired from the English department at Penn State after twenty-five years teaching nineteen-year-olds to observe the world around them and describe it precisely in terms of sight, smell, touch, and sound. I've always been a precise kind of guy—my closets were organized before there were companies telling me I needed it. I roll my socks and stack them seven deep in the second drawer on the left side of my chiffonier. The newspaper rests to the right of my spoon at the breakfast table until I read it when it then moves to the left and from there to the recycle bin. I have routines which work for me. Even now I rise at dawn though no classes await.

Rosemary, my wife, tried to fit into my structured days but in her heart she was an artist, more comfortable with chaos and spontaneity than predictability. I must admit that she tried to adapt to my lifestyle, no doubt harming herself in the process, but in the end she left me, a year before retirement, with her wish that I may be happy with the straight lines in my appointment book filled in neatly with black ink. Her departing words were, "Now you can do everything according to plan, not disrupted by life's inconsistencies." During my explanation that life wasn't the problem, she slammed the door and disappeared. I miss her.

In my eagerness to leave Pennsylvania winters and, secondarily, Pennsylvania summers, I allowed my cousin, Ellie, to talk me into moving to Los Osos on the central California coast. Who has ever heard of Los Osos? No one in College Station, Pennsylvania, but I wanted a change—a change of scenery, a change of lifestyle, and a change in me. Something is missing and I thought I might find it here in the mist and the clouds.

I drove my tan 1998 Honda Civic cross-country with my black lab, Hildy, snoring in the backseat. She's been with me for most of my Penn State tenure and isn't going much farther in this lifetime. I wanted her to see the Pacific Ocean before she leaps or stumbles to the other side but she's seldom awake long enough to notice the waves. She has acclimated to this sleepy town better than I have.

Tonight I am acutely aware of my otherness. I walk through the unpaved streets and realize that my life is similarly unpaved and going who-knows-where. The fog describes my thinking, my plans, and my awareness of my wants. I have had everything I asked for and hoped for in my early years. My carefully laid out life was pressed as finely as my button-down blue work shirts. Trouble is—that just doesn't suit me any longer and I have no idea what will. So, I walk slowly and wait.

I don't wait more than a minute before I hear a gunshot cleanly piercing the still night. At first I don't believe it could be a gun but I know that sound. The chills shake me the way they had the first time. You don't disregard a sound that signals death.