



## **Coast Range Chronicles 4: “Murder Capital”**

by

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The project site was located on the outskirts of a seedy little metropolis. I read somewhere that it once had the highest murder rate in the nation, claimed the dubious moniker “Murder Capital of the United States.” But, despite its tough reputation, the city had some exceptional wetlands, and I was there to delineate them.

I was using a high-end GPS unit. A fine piece of equipment, accurate to within a few centimeters. But the contraption was so massive it required a special backpack to tote the batteries and other hardware, complete with a giant antenna that smacked me in the head every time I bent over. It looked like something poached from a lunar expedition.

While mapping a wetland boundary, I stumbled upon a guy loitering in the vacant lot that constituted the project site. We got to talking. He seemed a little sketchy, had the fidgety mannerisms of a tweaker, but who am I to judge? He seemed friendly enough.

As we talked, he kept looking at my GPS unit.

"What's that?" he asked.

I explained it to him.

"Uh huh," he said, wiping his nose. "How much a thing like that cost?"

"Ten grand," I blurted without hesitation. I was sort of proud of it. The company had entrusted me with ten thousand dollars worth of equipment!

His bloodshot eyes lit up. "Ten grand?"

"Yeah. It's brand new. Best money can buy."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Brand new, huh?"

"Yep."

"Best money can buy." He spoke the words slowly, carefully, rolling each one around his tongue like hard candy.

"The best," I said, eager to share the details of the equipment with someone.

He seemed in a hurry all of a sudden. "Well, I'll see ya." He turned and hustled down an alley, glancing back as he turned the corner.

I watched him go. Nice enough guy, I thought.

The sun hovered low on the horizon. A stray mutt wandered into the lot and pawed a rotting carcass of uncertain origin and classification. Sirens wailed in the distance. Several lurkers peered at me from behind tattered curtains.

Creepy.

Absorbed with mucking through the vegetation and soil all day, I'd barely noticed the surroundings until that moment. My obtuseness hit me like a cord of wood. Ten grand? Best money can buy?

I abandoned the delineation and got the hell out of there.