



# **COSY DELL**

The Land That Everyone Forgot

The native Indians didn't like the place. 'Cursed' was a term they bandied about. Pioneers ignored their warnings. Modern Californians snickered at the superstitious natives. What could be so wrong with a landscape this lush and beautiful?

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It was a nice summer day, although a little on the hot side. He stumbled into the bus station at Devore. He looked like hell. His skin was raw as if someone had run over his face with a belt sander. His jacket looked like he'd been through a bombing. Normally, I wouldn't even have noticed him. You know how you train yourself to ignore vagrants and peddlers at places like bus stops. Eye contact can be a dangerous thing. Never look at the crazy ones directly. As I said, I dutifully ignored him, but then he collapsed. There's a whole different rule set for aiding people in physical distress. You help them out because you hope they would do the same for you.

Getting him some water, I cradled his head in my lap. "I thought I'd made it," he mumbled. "I thought I'd gotten out."

He smelled of decaying dirt. The kind of mold and mildew which assails your nostrils when standing near a rotting compost pile.

Getting out my phone, I dialed 911. It took them forever to reply. It must have been a busy day. As I was talking to the operator, he got out his wallet and showed me his driver's license, so I could tell them his name. He was Jim Bennett. Opening the wallet a picture fell to the floor. It was a family portrait. On the back it read "Bennett family, Jim, Lisa, and Buddy." It was hard to recognize Jim in the photo. What lay on the floor was a far cry from the rather handsome man in the image. I let out a sigh. "Where is your family. How can I contact them? To tell them what happened to you."

"They are all dead," Jim gasped.

"What happened?"

"I killed them."

I raised one eyebrow. Now there was a revelation I had not expected. It changed the nature of my involvement, my willingness to assist. I started looking for escape routes. He saw my distress and he looked at me, but I couldn't find anything dangerous in his eyes. I think he could tell what I was thinking. "I used to drive through Cosy Dell all the time, there was never anything there... besides wood and streams," he offered.

"Not much more to it," I admitted.

He choked but continued. "This time there was a town. We stopped at a little dinner. The people there," he coughed, "They were so beautiful. It was like a photoshoot. As if everyone had walked out of Vogue."

"But there's nothing there," I argued, "just a few nature trails."

"I asked the same question. The buildings all appeared brand new. You could almost smell the sweat from the construction crews. There were still piles of sawdust in places. But they were cagey about answering any questions. Getting back into the car, we noticed a beautiful house for sale. Fancy, but not too extravagant." There was a slight gleam in his eyes as if he'd recalled a favored memory. "My wife loves to tour houses... even though we're not in the market. At least she used to enjoy it." There was a deep sadness in his tone. "She insisted we stop, so I pulled over. They had a very reasonable price they wanted for it. I should have expected something then."

I gave him another sip of water. "Like the old saying, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is..."

He grabbed me by the shoulders. I must admit it made me a little nervous, but then he fell back, too weak to maintain a grip. "She made me buy the house. I shouldn't have listened. I could have said no. We moved in a week later. The neighbors were all friendly and attractive... extraordinarily attractive. They could have all been advertisements for health clubs. We were met by the mayor, Altazar Meridian. Never seen a mayor who looked so young before. It was like he was just out of college. He was so nice, so pleasant."

"For the first few days everything was normal. We settled down, got into a routine. One by one they took us. First it was just our appearance. Everyone looked tired and haggard. It didn't matter how much sleep you got. Each day we each looked a little older. Patience, our Irish setter died the week after. She was eight months old. In the end she looked like a rabid dog who had been attacked by wolves."

"There are some wolves in the area," I replied.

"You don't understand," he rasped, "she was covered in gray hairs. An eight-month-old dog who looked about as geriatric as a toothless mule." All the color drained from his face. "Buddy went next. His skin looked like he had Progeria and he lost all his hair."

"Progeria, isn't it the disease you see in children with big heads and thin noses?" I asked.

"Yes, but my Buddy's head was normal. But his skin, his skin... he had liver spots you know. Toward the end. Do you know what killed him?"

"I thought you said you..." He waved his hand and cut me off before I could finish.

He started to cry. The tears were pouring down his cheeks. "He died of a heart attack. Organ failure."

Nothing in my experience had prepared me to comfort someone who had lost their child. I was at a loss for words. He took pity on me and continued his story. "My wife, my beautiful wife Lisa," he groaned. "She died of Alzheimer's disease. She old lasted for a week. She was 32. In the end, she looked like my grandmother. Gray hair, more wrinkles than a crumpled dress shirt. She could barely walk, she was 32."

I tried to cover my surprise and my disbelief, the man in my arms looked to be on the wrong side of 90. I glanced again at the photo. The woman in the photo couldn't have been older thirty, thirty-five tops. Still, she could have done covers for major fashion magazines. It wasn't a true photo. It was printed on regular paper as if it was a printout from an image taken by a smartphone. Based on the pristine quality of the paper, it couldn't have been printed more than a few months ago. I have a few photos like this myself, only the older ones are all ratty and some even have the corner's torn. "Then what happened," I enquired.

Jim had a terrible guilty look on his face. He wrinkled his forehead. "I shouldn't have taken them to live in Cosy Dell. They don't even know how to spell it." He exhaled. "I killed them. I killed them by taking them to live there. I should have said no. You know, I think the 'S' stands for sinister."

Jim shook violently. "Take it easy," I explained, "The paramedics will be here soon. Save your strength."

"It's my fault," he wheezed, "it's all my fault. We should have never moved there." Red and blue flashing lights filtered in through the front windows. His eyes glazed over. "They took everything." His voice got

softer. I had to lean down to hear his last words. “They took all the years of your lives. They sucked us dry. They are young and we became...”

He never finished his last sentence.