

A CEDRIC O'TOOLE MYSTERY

Blood Ties

BARBARA
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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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One

I SAW THE GUY coming half a mile away, the dust from his pickup blowing across my cornfield. Not many vehicles use the gravel road past my farm, so Chevy and I both stopped to watch. By the time the truck was halfway up my lane, the dog was off the front stoop and running toward it. Tail wagging, tongue lolling. Chevy never has been much of a guard dog.

The truck had Alberta plates, so the dude was a long way from home. He took his time climbing down, like he was stiff from hours

of traveling. He limped toward me slowly.

“Cedric *Elvis* O’Toole?” he said.

I bristled. I’ve heard that little sneer often enough. My mother saddled me with that name, but she is long dead, and she couldn’t help her love for Elvis. With his wraparound sunglasses and his leather cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes, the guy didn’t give much away. But he wasn’t smiling. About three feet from me he stopped.

“I think you might be my brother.”

Now, I should say here that I have no brother. There’d only ever been my mother and me when I was growing up. We lived together out on this worthless scrub farm. She died when I was seventeen, and no one ever came to claim it from me. The only one of my mother’s relatives who actually spoke to us was her aunt Penny. Getting pregnant at sixteen was an unforgivable sin in the O’Toole clan, Aunt Penny said.

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So there could be a whole lot of cousins I know nothing about, but I'd have noticed if there was a brother underfoot.

I said that to the man standing in front of me. I couldn't see much of his face, but he was built like an oil drum. I'm a beanpole, even though I spend most of my days working on my farm and doing construction.

He grinned. "Half brother, I should have said. Steve Lilley's my name." He shoved out his hand. It was rough and callused, but his grip was friendly. He gestured to my front stoop.

"Can we sit down, Cedric?" He cocked his head at me. "Do people really call you that?"

"Only my great aunt when she's mad at me. Rick will do."

Steve limped over to my stoop and eased himself down. "You got something cold to drink inside?"

“Um...Coke?”

Steve made a face. “I guess that will do.”

I went inside to get two Cokes. I don't drink the stuff often. It's so sweet it makes my teeth ache. But there were a couple of cans in the back of the fridge. I'm guessing they didn't have an expiry date. While I was opening them, Steve came into the kitchen and stood looking around. His eyebrows shot up.

I know the farmhouse is nothing fancy. It's about a hundred years old, and my mother couldn't afford to fix it up. She put in electric appliances and painted the pine cupboards and the old farm table bright yellow with blue flowers. But we pretty much left the rest of the place alone. I live here by myself, and so far it's suited me fine. I've been thinking I should fix it up a bit now that Jessica is coming over, but that's a story for another time. Now I could see it was pretty shabby.

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I felt the tips of my ears grow red.

He peered over my shoulder into the fridge. I grow or raise most of what I eat myself. The fridge had a few vegetables, milk, eggs and goat cheese. “I don’t have much right now,” I mumbled.

“I passed a pub in town,” he said. “We could grab dinner and a couple of beers there instead.”

I thought of all the flapping ears that would be listening to our conversation. By morning the whole town would know about Cedric O’Toole’s long-lost brother coming to town. My poor mother had had enough gossip in her time.

“I’ll fix us something. And I’ve got beer in the cellar.”

He seemed happy with that news and settled in to watch. I cut up some goat cheese, homemade bread, peppers and carrots, and put them all on a tray.

Back outside on the stoop, he downed half his beer before he said a word. He seemed to be having trouble getting started. “Your mother dead?” he said finally.

I nodded. “Long time ago.”

“Mine died three months ago.” He drank more beer. “Cancer. That was a bitch.”

Words have never been my strong suit. But I know it must be hard to watch someone die bit by bit. “Sorry,” I muttered when he’d been quiet too long.

“There was just me and her at the end. My dad died ten years ago. At least, I thought he was my dad. He was the only one I knew, and I always thought he was my real dad. But when my mom was dying, she told me he wasn’t.”

I finally saw where this was going. My heart raced as I waited. He drained his beer can and crushed it in one fist. “This is hard,” he said. “I’ve been going over it in my mind

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this whole trip, how I was going to explain it to you.”

“You want another beer?” I needed one. I was about to get the answer to the biggest question of my life, and I wasn’t sure I was ready. Down in the cellar, I breathed in and out to settle my nerves.

“I brought us the case,” I said when I went back outside. The sun was setting, and long shadows were creeping across the yard. Steve was scratching Chevy’s ears. “We used to have a dog,” he said. “God, I loved that dog. When I went into the service, my mother had her put down. Said she was old and sick, but I’ve always wondered.” He paused and took a breath. “We grew up in Calgary. That’s the only home I know. My mother said my real father worked in Fort McMurray during the oil boom. He’d come to Calgary for his holidays. He met my mother there, one thing led to another.

But when I was a baby, he went east to visit a buddy. Never came back. She never heard from him again.“

He stopped again to scratch Chevy's ears and drink more beer. “Who's your father, Rick?”

I wasn't ready to tell him that story yet. I was already about to jump out of my skin. “Who's yours?” I shot back.

“They were never married. My mother called him Wild West, and she said there was a rumor he had an affair back here. Fathered a kid.”

Wild West? In all the years I'd been wondering about my dad, the idea he was from out west had never come up. But why did that name sound familiar?

“Me?” I croaked.

“She thought I should know.”

I was thinking, What kind of mother drops that sort of bombshell on her deathbed?

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I thought mine was bad enough, carrying the secret of my father to her grave. But since I'm not great with words, only one word came to mind. "Why?"

"I was home on compassionate leave. I'd just finished three tours in Afghanistan. With this busted-up knee, I was on my way out of the army. I guess Mom thought finding my dad would give me something to do when she was gone."

"So that's why you're here? To find him?"

"Not especially. He left my mother with a two-year-old boy and a pile of grief." He looked at me, his eyes glinting in the sunset. Silvery blue, just like mine. "But it would be nice to know if I had a brother."

BARBARA FRADKIN is a child psychologist with a fascination for how people turn bad. Her compelling short stories haunt numerous magazines and anthologies, but she is best known for her two series of gritty, psychological novels, one featuring Ottawa police inspector Michael Green and the more recent one with foreign-aid worker Amanda Doucette. Barbara won Arthur Ellis Best Novel Awards for both *Fifth Son* (2005) and *Honour Among Men* (2007). Her work as a school psychologist helping adolescents and younger children, many of whom struggle with reading, has also made her a strong advocate of programs that help develop reading as a lifelong passion. She lives in Ottawa.



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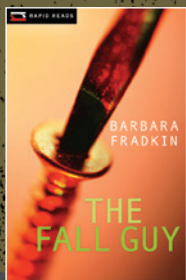
COUNTRY HANDYMAN CEDRIC O'TOOLE loves his quiet, laid-back life. When a stranger named Steve shows up claiming to be his brother, Cedric is forced to come face-to-face with a lifetime of family secrets. At every turn someone seems to be hiding something. Together Steve and Cedric work to find answers. But the question is, are they really ready to learn the truth?

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