

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.

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.

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.