

Colby In the Crosshairs

EXCERPT

John Hope

1

THE DAYS ARRIVE

The second my eyes locked on the treasures inside the Days' moving truck, I hated my life. I spotted a huge TV, a PlayStation 4, and a new couch—the ingredients every nine-year-old boy like me needs.

But I had nothing like that. I stood in my front yard naked except for my tighty-whiteys that Mom bought used at a garage sale. The sprinkler waved its thin wall of water back and forth as a breeze cut across my wet, bare chest. I sucked in with a slight shiver. Water dripped off the tip of my nose.

Huge men in blue jumpsuits walked from the Days' moving truck to the house, carrying in a nice-looking coffee table, the huge TV, a mattress, a hutch, and an endless number of cardboard boxes. A beautiful woman in a dress stood just outside the front door, pointing and giving commands to the men.

I trotted up to our front porch and hung onto a support, leaning my face against it. The cool, familiar scent of pine brought some comfort. But I still felt the unease of want. Our white trash house and clutter was garbage compared to these new neighbors.

I never knew why the McCoys moved out of the house across from ours. Nine going on nothing, I was often not told things I didn't need to know. But this new family, who I'd soon discover were the Days, was a definite upgrade. Not only to the McCoys, but to our entire street—weedy yards, rotted-wood porches, rusted wire fences, and dirty kids like me jumping through sprinklers in their underwear.

A wisp of cigarette smoke reached my nose. Mom leaned against the door frame behind me. A faded NASCAR T-shirt hung over her thin smoker's body, making her boobs look as small as mine. A smoky cigarette butt dangled between two fingers. "Beautiful family." Sarcasm was a second language to Mom and she used it all the time. But now, those simple two words and her gaze were nothing but true.

Once I had a dream about Dad. I woke, ran to the kitchen, and told Mom about it. I asked when he'd be coming home, a question that I'd occasionally nagged Mom with.

She twisted her mouth, mounted her hands on her hips, and said, "He's coming in the front door now."

I jumped from the kitchen counter. “Really?”

And before I could say “I don’t see him,” I’d gotten hit on the back of my head.

The porch swing squeaked. William, my sixteen-year-old brother, rocked in the swing. Buck-toothed smile, wild hair, shirtless, drool creeping down the sides of his mouth like an idiot hound dog, William had always been a strange fascination to me. Though almost twice my age, he had the mind of a two-year-old, if that. Mom called him autistic, which when I was younger I thought meant the same thing as artistic, and I was always waiting for him to paint something. Our neighbors always called him “a little slow,” but I figured that was sarcasm. He ran like a hyper rat when your back was turned. Plus, he was freakishly strong. With his shirt off, his six-pack and well-formed muscles were hard to miss.

I looked at the movers across the street and played with the bottom of my saggy, still-soaked underwear, my tongue twisting in my mouth.

“What’s the woman wearing, Colby?” Mom asked.

I squinted. “She gotta white dress with flowers down the sides and one of those bow things in the back.” After I spoke, a boy about my age stepped out the front door. He wore a collared shirt and pants with shiny shoes. Even his blond hair looked well-combed. “There’s a boy,” I added. “He got fancy clothes.”

She gave me a whack in the back of my wet

head. “Speak English. He *has* fancy clothes. What about the shoes? The woman’s shoes.”

I rubbed my head. “They’re white. The tall kind.”

“You mean high heels?”

“Yeah. High heels.”

Mom shook her head and took another drag. She crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. Mom was a small woman, but she had a coarse smoker’s voice and a roughness that’d make truckers shut up and listen. She was also blind as a bat. She saw fine up close, always reading books every evening. She told me anything beyond ten feet or so was a blurry blob. She often said, “If I weren’t so friggin’ near-sighted I wouldn’t have ever married your dad.”

Mom stepped forward and leaned against the porch support opposite of me. She puffed on her cigarette.

“Pretty girl. Pretty girl,” William spoke up.

I twisted behind me.

He jiggled on the porch swing, ripping out pages from Mom’s Redbook magazine. “Pretty girl. Pretty girl.” With every pretty girl, another ripped page flew out.

Mom didn’t look at him. Her eyes were planted on the new neighbors. “The wife is pretty, is she?”

I said, “Yeah. She’s a babe.”

Mom leaned from the support and I got another smack in the head.

I rubbed my head.

“How old’s the boy?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know. Ten. Eleven.”

Just as I said this, the boy turned and I noticed him gripping a stuffed doggie. He smiled and rubbed the side of his face with the doggie’s.

I snickered. No one in my neighborhood had the nerve to go walking around with stuffed animals, at least no boys. Sissy boys got the crap beat out of them.

Mom took another drag and turned to me. Smoke seeped out of her mouth and nose as she asked, “What’s so funny?” Her gaze led to William. “The hell?” She threw her cigarette butt to the grass and marched up to him. “I hadn’t read that, William!” She yanked the magazine from him, spun toward me, and smacked me with the magazine.

I curled my arms. “What’d I do?”

“You’re supposed to keep an eye on him. How’d he get my magazine?”

“How was I supposed to watch him? I was playing in the sprinklers.”

She ignored me and returned to William. She stopped and grimaced. “William. Did you shit your pants?”

“Uh-oh.” William’s circle eyes and mouth showed he seemed just as surprised as Mom. “Uh-oh. Shitty pants. Uh-oh.”

She tugged at his elbow. “C’mon, William. Up. Up.”

William's tall, firm body staggered. His smile and wide eyes gazing nowhere showed he hadn't a clue Mom was mad.

She steadied him and wrangled him into the house. Just inside, she called, "Colby. Clean up the mess."

I squatted and collected the torn magazine pages. I stopped and rubbed the back of my head, angered. Several times, I'd thought about swinging back at her, but I knew I'd be killed. Mom was like no other girl I knew. She was tough and hard as a man. I once saw her level a full-grown man with one punch to his eye. He sprang to his feet but his buddies held him back as Mom cursed and threatened to rip his balls off.

I sulked to the far end of the porch, crunched pages in one hand. Dipping my underwear down, I pissed off the side into flowery bushes next to the porch.

Still peeing, I looked across the street. Mrs. Day had taken her focus off the moving men and stared back at me, her hands on her hips and a slight smile on her face.

I shook off the last of the pee and pulled my underwear up.

Mrs. Day continued to stare.

I crossed my arms and wished I wasn't so naked.

2

APPLE PIE

The next day, Mom made an apple pie for the Days. I was mad. Mom never made us pies or sweets unless it was our birthday. But even then I had to share it with aunts, uncles, cousins, and snotty-nosed kids from the neighborhood who'd pick up a moldy doll from the gutter, wrap it in newspaper, and hand it to me just to get some free cake.

What's worse, she made me put on church clothes, which I had outgrown about two years ago. My nice pants squeezed my nuts with every step and didn't even reach my ankles, showing off my slippery, brown shoes that pinched my toes.

After getting my clothes on, I pouted in the kitchen, staring at the pie while Mom got ready.

I stuck my finger in one of the pie's steaming holes as it cooled on the cutting board. "Ouch!" I jerked my hand back and sucked on my burnt finger.

Mom appeared out of nowhere and smacked me in the back of my head. “Serves you right.” She picked up the pie with a dish towel. “C’mon. Get William.”

I walked into the living room and William was already in his wheelchair. He could walk fine, but he was so clumsy and erratic, it was always faster to push him if we were ever going anywhere. Grabbing the handles in the back, I gave him a shove and steered him to the front door.

We had laid a piece of plywood over the front steps of the porch as we usually did anytime we pushed William. I inched him forward to the lip of the plywood and hopped up in the small basket at the back end of the wheelchair. William and I zipped down the plywood like a roller coaster, yelling out, “Yee-ha!” like a pair of cowboys. When we hit the sidewalk, I jumped out and skidded across the pavement in my painful shoes. The wheelchair lurched to one side and William flopped out onto the sidewalk. I tripped and landed on top of the empty wheelchair.

William, though getting the brunt of the fall, muttered in his usual calm but confused voice, “Uh-oh. William fell down. William fell down.” Very little ever hurt him.

I stood and righted the chair, a bit dizzied and sore from the impact. Before I could help William, I felt a foot kick my sore rear. Mom yelled, “Just toss your crippled brother in the middle of Highway One, why don’t you?”

I inched away from Mom and rubbed my butt. “Our street ain’t no Highway One. And he ain’t no cripple.”

Mom gritted her teeth as she spoke. “Boy, I’ll ram this pie up where the sun don’t shine if you don’t git to it and knock off all this talk back.” Mom always reverted to slang when she got angry.

“I’m doing it.” I struggled to stand William’s oversized body.

With Mom glued at my side and William in the wheelchair, we crossed our potholed street to the Days’ new place.

I reached over William and knocked on the door.

Mrs. Day answered with a cell phone up to her ear. She was even prettier close up. Her face was covered in makeup and her hair looked like it was done up in a fancy salon. “Okay, fine. Talk to you later.” She lowered the phone. Her eyes brightened. “Yes?” She focused on William. I was used to new people staring at my brother; in a way I kinda liked it. He was like a toy that no one else had.

William’s head bobbed up and down like a buoy and his focus was on something inside their house. He said, “This side up. This side up.”

I spied into the house and noticed the marked cardboard boxes. He’d been working on his letters for years. Only in the past year had he started reading words. I doubted he knew what

the words meant.

Mom said, "Hello. We're the Reads and we live right across the street. I'm Sue, these are my two boys, William and Colby."

Mrs. Day smiled and extended a hand to Mom. "Hi. I'm Alice, Alice Day."

They shook.

Mrs. Day's face brightened, staring at me. "Colby, is it? What a cutie."

I blushed.

"Yeah," Mom said, as if confused by the comment.

Mrs. Day continued, still looking straight at me. "Are you about nine?"

I nodded.

"Perfect."

Her eyes were huge and I wondered what was so perfect about being nine.

I said, "How old's your boy?"

Her whole face sagged like I had let the air of it. "I don't have a son."

I frowned. "I saw a boy here just yesterday."

She smiled, though it looked forced. She reached a hand, patted my head like a dog, and then ran her hand down the side of my face to my chin. "You're cute."

I looked to Mom.

Her narrow eyes showed me she was at least a little suspicious of this Mrs. Day, as I was. Either that, or she was questioning if I was telling her the truth about seeing a boy.

But I did see a boy. I know I did. I looked to Mrs. Day, wondering why she'd lie about it.

She nodded toward the wall of boxes behind her. "I'd invite you in, but we're still unpacking. I'm afraid the place is a mess."

"Oh, don't I know," Mom said. "Moving is a lot of work."

I frowned at Mom. I wondered what experience she could have had. She was born and raised in the house at the end of the street. The only time she ever moved was when she married Dad, and it was to the house we were in now. I started to speak, "Mom—" but she knocked me with her bony hip.

Mom raised the pie to her chest. "Anyhow, welcome to the neighborhood."

"Oh, you didn't have to." Mrs. Day put her hand to the side of her face, as if she were embarrassed.

"No, please take it. You and your..." She paused, as if waiting for Mrs. Day to fill in the rest.

Mrs. Day took the cue. "Mr. Day is..." She made a strange, crooked move with her head.

Oddly, Mom seemed to understand. She sighed and nodded. "Yes. Same here." She held out the pie.

Mrs. Day smiled and took it, dish towel and all. "Yup. It's just me and Shelly."

"Shelly?"

"My... daughter." She said the word *daughter*

like it was a dirty word.

Mom nodded, then eyed me. “Yes. Your daughter.” She stressed daughter, as if correcting me.

I backed a half-step, expecting a whack to the head that never came. But, how was it my fault that Mrs. Day had a daughter who looked like a boy?

I looked at the pie and wanted to ask if she and her daughter were going to eat it now and if I could have a slice, but I didn’t.

Mrs. Day said, “We should have you over once we get settled in.”

“That’d be nice.”

There was an awkward pause. Both ladies stared at each other. I wasn’t sure if I should speak. Even William said nothing.

Mrs. Day at last nodded and said, “Well...we do have unpacking to do.”

“Absolutely.” Mom smiled. She grabbed the handles of William’s wheelchair from me. “Nice meeting you, Alice.”

“You too, Sue.”

We walked across the street to our house and I thought about Mom’s act. She wasn’t herself, all prim and proper. She reminded me of those ladies on Oprah who’d chat about their recipes and spoiled kids. Mom was nothing like them. She didn’t look like them. Didn’t think like them. And other than times like this, she didn’t talk like them.

Mrs. Day, on the other hand, would fit right in, with all the makeup and fancy hair and cell phone. As I thought about her, I wondered why she even moved into our neighborhood in the first place. Moms here usually wore ratty dresses and had frazzled hair. Mrs. Day was beautiful. She belonged in fancy neighborhoods with perfect lawns that they paid someone else to cut and spoiled kids and teenagers with expensive cars and dads with jobs that required ties.

Still, something pulled me toward their house. Staring at them from our porch and standing at their front door, I wanted inside, I wanted to check them out. I was curious the same way I was when I stared into department store windows and wished for the toys inside.

I wondered what Shelly had in her bedroom. I'd been in a couple girls' bedrooms before and they always had ratty dolls and doll houses and other crap like that. Nothing cool. I wondered if Shelly looked like a boy, maybe she had boy stuff, like rare Star Wars action figures and remote control anything and Playstation games and other things that often captured my attention in commercials during Saturday morning cartoons.

Maybe that was why Mom acted the way she did. She wanted in.

I looked at her as we worked together to shove William's wheelchair up the angled plywood to the porch. For once, I thought I understood.

3

DAD RETURNS

That evening, I sat at the table in the kitchen slurping up long strings of spaghetti. I was dressed for bed in my white tank top and pajama bottoms. The tail end of slurped noodles slapped against my cheeks, splattering red sauce over my face and shirt.

“Stop that,” Mom snapped, sitting opposite of me.

I swallowed. “How else am I s’posed to eat it?”

“Use a fork.” She stirred her plate of spaghetti. “I swear, sometimes.”

A wet plunk against the linoleum drew our attention to William. “Uh-oh. Meatball. Meatball.”

“I got it.” I dove underneath the table and retrieved William’s dropped meatball. Popping back up, I dropped it into William’s plate of

spaghetti.

Mom clinked her fork down. “Dang it, Colby.”

“What?”

“You gotta wash that thing off first. It’s been on the floor.”

I scratched the sauce drying on my cheek.

“But...William eats bugs from the ground.”

She glared at me.

“Well, he does.”

“No teenage boy should be eating bugs, and you know it.”

She said should and I knew that was code for it’s my fault he eats bugs. I laughed every time he did it, but it wasn’t like I made him do it. I dug my fork into my pile of pasta and grumbled.

In the middle of it, the front door slammed open.

“Honey, I’m home.” The voice was deep, pleasant, and familiar.

I gasped and sprang from my chair.

Mom slammed her fork. “Sit down, dammit.” She grabbed for a cigarette.

I sat, but just barely.

Dad strutted into the kitchen looking the same as when I last saw him over a year ago. “Hey, kids.” He was a giant and stronger than any man I ever knew. His faded white Steelers T-shirt appeared tight and so stretched around his huge biceps it was practically see-through. His face was dirty and had streaks of grease where sweat dripped down his face. He walked like he was

balancing weights on his shoulders.

I bounced in my seat.

William seemed not to notice him. He focused on his spaghetti, lining every single noodle in straight lines on his plate, as he often did before eating. He lowered his face to the side of his plate and started sucking in the noodles a few at a time.

Mom focused on Dad. She spoke with an exhausted strain to her voice. “Get the hell out of here.” She hugged herself as smoke trickled out both nostrils.

Dad swung a leg over one of the aluminum lawn chairs that made up our kitchen furniture and sat. The chair creaked like it was seconds from snapping. “Can’t a man come home to his family?”

“Yes, but he has to be a man first.” She breathed in her cigarette, pulled it out, and waved it toward the kitchen door. “Now, git the hell out of here. We’re eating.”

Dad smiled at my plate. “Ah, spaghetti.” He clapped once and rubbed his hands. “Colby, fetch me a plate.”

I shot up, hopped onto the counter, grabbed a plate from the cabinet, and fished out a fork from the drawer.

Mom didn’t say anything, but her heated eyes told me she wasn’t happy with me.

Still, I set the plate and fork in front of Dad.

Without getting up from his seat, he leaned, grabbed the colander from the counter, and

scooped out what was going to be our leftover spaghetti onto his plate. I held out the jar of sauce.

“Thanks, sport.” He took it and dumped out the rest of the jar over his mound of noodles.

Mom said, “That’s too much.”

“Ah,” he said as he mixed up the spaghetti and sauce. He looked to me. “Man, you’re getting big.”

I smiled.

“Lemme see them muscles.”

I flexed both arms.

He gave one of my biceps a squeeze and let out a whistle. “Tough as steel.”

I sat down and rubbed my arm. Dad’s squeeze hurt, but I liked the test.

Mom took a drag from the cigarette smoking between her fingers and let it out slowly.

“Whoo,” Dad let out, talking with his mouth full. “What a day. Hot as anything. You know we’re at an all-time low for rain? And there ain’t a drop comin’ for the next week.”

Mom stared at Dad, puffing her cigarette down to a nub. And when she finished it, she smacked out another one from the crinkled pack on the table and lit up.

Dad rattled on and on about the hot weather and working on the expansion project at the 33rd Street Jail and how thirsty he was. “Colby, fetch me a water.”

I pulled out a glass from the cupboard, filled it

with water from the tap, and set it down in front of Dad. He gulped it down in a single breath and then said, "Hit me again, Colby."

I refilled his glass.

Mom continued to stare at Dad. I wondered how he was able to take it. Anytime Mom stared like that, I was sniffing within ten seconds, mainly because I knew I was really going to get it. But Dad was fearless. He babbled on endlessly.

William finally noticed him. He screamed, "Daddy's home! Daddy's home!"

"How ya' doin', buddy?" Dad squeezed out a belch. "Man, you are something else. Look at you. You'll be bigger than your old man someday. Not like this runt." He thumbed toward me. "Got your mom's genes, Colby. It's Shortsville for you." He laughed.

My shoulders slumped. Why did William get to be the tall one? He could barely stand upright as it was. Without thinking, I gave Dad the same evil stare that Mom gave him. But he didn't care. He just sat there eating our spaghetti and talking about how hot it was.

"Daddy's eating spaghetti! Daddy's eating spaghetti!" William bounced up and down in his chair. William was so large that the chair squeaked and wobbled.

"Settle down, William," Mom said surprisingly calmly. Her eyes were still fixed on Dad.

Dad slurped up a mouthful of pasta. "C'mon. The boy's just excited to see his dad." He

swallowed and added, "At least somebody's happy. Even Colby here looks like he's about to—"

"What the hell do you know 'bout raising kids?" Mom yelled. The room suddenly got quiet.

Dad stopped eating.

Mom took another drag and grumbled, almost in a whisper, "Stupid... tryin' give me advice."

Dad stared at Mom for a moment. "Why're you so nasty?" He looked to me. "No wonder Colby's got that scowl." He turned to Mom. "You keep filling him with notions that I'm a no-good."

Mom smashed out her cigarette into her plate. "What've you done that makes you think you can stomp in here like you have the right to be heard? You want Colby to look up to you? Give him something to look up to." She slapped out another cigarette from her pack and stuck it in her lips. "Damn, you've got some nerve. Colby's going on ten in a few months and you ain't seen him more than five times total. That what you call a daddy? Hell..." She lit her cigarette.

"Eat, Daddy! Eat!" William said excitedly, pointing at Dad's plate.

Dad hesitated. He looked like he wanted to speak, but didn't. Slowly, he circled his spaghetti with his fork.

William hopped up and down in his chair. "Daddy's eating spaghetti! Daddy's eating spaghetti!"

“Settle down, William,” Mom said, still fixed on Dad.

William froze.

The abruptness was so sudden, everyone looked at William.

A second later, he vomited all over the table, splashing all over my plate and spilling onto my shirt.

I jumped up and cursed. “Shit!”

Mom jumped up and gave me a quick slap in the back of my head and said, “Watch your language.” She grimaced at the mess. “Get me some towels. Quick.”

I hobbled over to the sink where the dish towels hung, walking with my arms up and leaning forward as if it was toxic waste dripping from my shirt. I tossed Mom the towels.

She said, “No, not these, the big ones in the hallway. Hurry.” She cleared the food and dishes from the table.

William mumbled, “Uh-oh, messy. Uh-oh, messy. Uh-oh, messy.” And then he threw up a second time all over himself—red-orange everywhere.

Dad stood, holding his plate. He backed up to the corner of the kitchen and resumed eating.

Mom and I cleaned up the mess. I tossed the bile-soaked towels out the back door. Then I returned to guide William to the backyard. I peeled off my shirt that had gotten some of William’s barf, and stripped off all of William’s

clothes. I hosed everything off, the towels and William. The big naked kid was so excited, he took off running around the backyard screaming. I had to get one of the last towels from the house that we didn't use for the cleaning and drape it over his shoulders to calm him down enough to bring him back inside.

When I finally got him in, he peed all over the floor.

That night I lay in bed and listened to Mom and Dad arguing. I wondered when I was going to hear the slam of the front door and his trailing arguments failing away. As often as this happened, it hurt every time.

I heard the quiet calm of whispering from Mom's room. The mumbles that made it through the walls had tone and feeling, but I could only guess what they were talking about.

After I had brushed my teeth, I stepped into the living room just as Dad handed Mom an envelope. She opened it and fanned through some cash. She looked at him like he had just handed her a broken twig. "Now I can buy that palace I've had my eye on. Hope it's on sale at Penney's."

Dad's face reddened. "You know how long it took to save that?"

"Please..." She tossed the envelope to the

table and grabbed more smokes.

Dad roared about the hot days working and Mom's attitude. Mom muttered about child support and William's meds.

I watched TV with William for a few minutes until I got tired of the fight and went to bed.

Now, I lay in the darkness, still listening in. Much of the yelling had fizzled, but the talking continued. The fact he hadn't stormed out yet felt strangely hopeful, like maybe he would stay, at least longer than one night.

Dad was a stranger to me, a stranger that came around once in a while to tease me about being short and get Mom all up in a hissy for the next few days. I liked him as much as the weather guy on Channel Four. But unlike the weather guy, Dad knew how to hurt Mom. I mean really hurt her, not physically. He made her sad. I hated him for it. In fact, now, I don't know why I bothered sticking up for him. Who cared if he had gone to prison? He could go back, for all I cared.

The mumbles silenced and I found myself staring at the darkened stains and shadows on the popcorn ceiling. The moon shone through my bedroom window at a funny angle, making the room feel cold like a cemetery. I pulled the blanket around my waist up to my bare chest and turned on my side.

I heard the distinct sound of shuffling and the muted thumping of bare feet on a hardwood floor. The footsteps were erratic, only one or two

at a time. The footsteps stopped and then all I could hear was more shuffling, like blankets or sheets being moved around.

Again, I tried to imagine what was going on. But the unknown was killing me.

I slipped out of bed, the floor squeaking under my feet. The hallway felt chilly but my blanket draped around my shoulders helped. With the night's stillness, I felt like a criminal sneaking down the hallway.

I stopped at the end and gave Mom's door a small tap. It quietly swung open. The moonlight shone much brighter from my mom's bedroom window. I saw Dad's large body like a shadow on top of Mom's. He was doing pushups over her.

I thinned my eyes and leaned in, seeing more detail in the shadows.

Dad was naked and his wide hips pumped up and down into Mom like an oil rig. I could hear Mom panting quietly, but Dad was silent.

I stood there watching for a minute or so, until Dad finally collapsed on top of Mom.

I backed away, tiptoed back to bed. I closed my eyes and knew Dad wasn't leaving any time soon.