

SON OF A DITCH

By William Neale

This is copyrighted material and may not be reproduced in any form. It is intended for an adult audience because some language and situations may not be appropriate for persons under 18.

Excerpt

Colby Dawson stepped off the bus and waited for the driver to open the luggage storage compartment on the vehicle's road-gritted lower side. He looked around the nearly deserted municipal parking lot and thought the scene would make a pretty poor first impression on someone arriving in Moorestown for the first time. He, on the other hand, was home again.

Weeds and gone-to-seed grasses thrived through alligator cracks in the asphalt, evidence that few cars ventured here anymore. Parking meters from the nineteen-seventies still stood; or more accurately, leaned. When the big shopping mall opened out near the Interstate, the downtown merchants association removed half of them in a feeble and futile attempt to compete with the mall's free parking. Now most of the merchants had either moved to the mall or simply closed their doors.

These days, the lot was used mostly by the Greyhound bus terminal and the old Coachlight Inn hotel. Colby noticed that the bus station's sign still only said "hound." The "Grey" part had been ripped off during a supposed tornado many years earlier. The bus company and the building owner had argued over who was responsible for replacing it and apparently neither side was still willing to budge.

His large military-issue duffle now retrieved, he returned the driver's friendly wave as the bus departed. Colby didn't even mind the blast of diesel exhaust fumes that burned his nostrils. It was almost cleansing compared to the quality of air he'd breathed for the past fourteen hours—that of old sweat, discarded baby diapers, half-eaten salami sandwiches, and cheap perfume applied in excess to presumably mask other odors, either real or imagined.

Colby considered his options. Yes, he was home, so the logical thing to do would be to call his father or one of his brothers to come pick him up. Or, to call the town's only taxi service. But he wasn't looking forward to the drama that would surely be attached to his arriving without having warned anybody he was coming home.

It was an unusually warm early April day. More like mid-June, he thought. He decided to just walk the three miles home since he'd been sitting on his ass on the bus for so long. The sun felt great on his shoulders and sweat was already soaking the armpits of his Air Force t-shirt. He doffed it and threaded one end through a belt loop in the back of his jeans. Slipping his arm through the duffle's strap, he hefted the heavy canvas bag over his shoulder and across his broad back.

As he headed out of the parking lot, Colby took a deep breath of air he hadn't inhaled in over two years. Despite his conflicted emotions about returning, it still smelled like home. Tender new grass mown for the first time of the season. Sweet wafted scents drifting from a nearby lilac bush. The earthy, pungent rot of freshly distributed mulch—probably from the First Tennessee Bank branch next door. And, best of all, and especially tempting to his growling

stomach, the greasy hint of something Southern-fried and delicious cooking a block away at Ina and Aden's Downtown Diner. It was one of the few downtown businesses that still thrived. Or at least he hoped it still did.

The dogwood, redbud, and serviceberry trees were at peak color across the hills and ridges here at the base of the Great Smoky Mountains. It was a brilliantly splendid spring day in East Tennessee and, Colby decided, a good omen. When he'd left Washington D.C. the previous night, it had been cold and raining, an appropriate metaphor for what he hoped to forget, perhaps forgive, and at minimum, to at least put behind him.

Colby took a shortcut through a back alley that only a native son could know was a straight shot to the highway leading home. If only life worked as easily.

Detectives Clay Landon and Andrew "Tag" Taggart drove in their unmarked police car along Highway 25E on the way back to the department headquarters in downtown Moorestown. They passed a dark-haired and shirtless twenty-something man walking on the side of the road in the opposite direction. He carried a large khaki green duffle bag across his back as effortlessly as if it had instead been a lightweight jacket or sweater.

"Make a U, Tag," Clay said, "and make a show of it. Burn some rubber."

"What the hell? What for? He wasn't doing anything wrong."

Clay turned on the portable blue flashing light on the dash. "I know that guy. I went to high school with him. He used to be one of my best buddies before he went into the Air Force."

"So why are you after him now? He better not be some old boyfriend."

"Oh, come on, Taggy. Just play along. When we stop behind him, I'm gonna stay in the car and act like I'm radioing for backup. He doesn't know you, so get out and play hard ass. Treat him like he's wanted for a crime. Make him assume the position."

"All right, if you say so, partner."

Wearing the coat and tie uniform of a MPD detective, Tag got out of the car with his hand ready to withdraw the service revolver from the holster slung around his shoulder. "Drop the bag on the ground and put your hands in the air," he said forcefully.

"Hell no, until you tell me who you are," Colby responded.

Tag flashed his badge with his left hand. "Moorestown Police. I'm telling you one more time. Hands in the air and behind your head."

Colby dropped the bag and did as ordered. "What did I do? I wasn't hitchhiking. Is there a law against walking?"

"Shut up, put both hands on the car, and assume the position. You're in serious trouble, buddy."

"I don't understand. I just got into town and came straight from the bus station. You obviously have the wrong guy."

"Yeah, funny how they always say that."

"Yeah," said Clay, now out of the car, wearing dark and reflective Ray Ban sunglasses and moving behind Colby before the man could get a good look. "All the scum-bucket drug dealers tell us that. *I just got off the bus*," he said in mocking falsetto. "Detective Taggart, would you pat him down for weapons or contraband?"

"I don't have any weapons or contraband," Colby said, now a slight edge of panic in his voice as Tag began the routine. "Please let me open my bag and show you there's nothing illegal

in it. I'll also show you my bus ticket and the time of arrival. I've been in town less than an hour."

"Find anything, Detective?" Clay asked.

"No, not on his external person. Maybe we should do a strip search."

"What!" Colby yelled. "No way!"

"Drop those jeans, asshole," Clay barked, "and your underwear too. Once we get you naked, we'll have to do a cavity search."

"I don't believe this! I can't strip naked here on the side of the road."

"You should have thought about that before you hid that kilo of Tina up your ass."

"What?"

"Course if Colby Dawson had the slightest lick of sense in that good lookin' head of his, he would have let his old buddy know he was coming home."

Colby flipped around to see two broadly smiling faces.

"Gotcha, Cole." Clay said in teasing sing-song. He winked and held out his arms in invitation.

Colby shook his head in mock disgust. "Why you good for nothing prick. You nearly made me shit out that kilo of Tina!" He rushed to Clay for the awaiting buddy hug from his old friend.

Tag took a step back in silent observation of both the intensity and the length of the embrace between this sickeningly handsome shirtless stranger and the man with whom he shared a bed every night. *Who is this Colby person—apparently "Cole" to Clay—and why have I never heard his name mentioned?* Tag looked at the man's darkly stubbled square jaw now framed by a broad smile of perfect white teeth and noticed he'd closed his eyes during the hug. *What straight man closes his eyes when he hugs another guy?* And the way Clay's hands stroked across the man's rippled and shiny-with-sweat back muscles made Tag seethe with the desire to physically separate them and pull his man away in he-belongs-to-me possession.

"Damn, it's good to see you, Clay!" Colby finally said after releasing him.

"Yeah, *so* good to see you too, buddy. And I really am pissed you didn't let me know you were coming. And why are you walking on the side of the highway? Couldn't any of that big family of yours come get you?"

"My choice. It's a beautiful day and I needed the sun and the exercise. So who's your partner in bad practical jokes here?"

Yeah, partner, did you forget I'm standing right here?

"Oh—sorry—where's my manners? Colby Dawson meet Tag Taggart, and he *is* my partner. We're both detectives for MPD now."

Tag looked into piercing cobalt eyes now focused on him that, at any other time, he would have found stunning. But—he grudgingly admitted—the combination of Colby's stare along with that smile could snake-charm anyone—man or woman—anytime Colby chose to turn it on. Tag forced a smile and extended his hand.

"It's really nice to meet you, Tag," Colby said with what seemed to Tag—at least on the surface—genuine warmth. "Now tell me. Just how do you stand working with such a major asshole?"

"It's a hazard of the occupation and they pay me extra 'cause nobody else will work with him." Tag answered with forced affability. "But anyhow, it's good to meet an old friend of Clay's."

“Wow, and both of you are detectives. I remember when you were just a rookie cop, Clay-Doh. You’re big time now. Congratulations!”

Clay-Doh? Only I’m allowed to call him that. And they’ve apparently seen each other after Clay and I became a couple. Where was I at the time?

“So how long are you back for?” Clay asked. We have to get together for a beer and talk old times.”

“I’m here for good—or at least the foreseeable future. I discharged a couple of weeks ago.”

“That’s awesome. It’ll be so good to have you back home. We need to have him over for dinner asap, Tag.”

“You guys live together?”

“Yeah, it’s bad enough that I have to work with him,” Tag deadpanned, not altogether in jest at the moment.

“We take care of Rogan James’ house over on Booker’s Mountain since he moved up north to Cleveland a few years ago,” Clay said.

“He used to be the chief of police, didn’t he?”

“No, he was the deputy chief, but he pretty much ran the place. He and his partner Lucas are still two of our closest friends. Listen, Cole, I hate to break this up but Tag and I are due back for a department meeting in a few minutes. Can we drop you off at home and make a date to get together sometime soon?”

“No thanks to the first, and you bet to the second. I’d rather just finish my walk. Let me give you my cell number and you guys call me when you wanna set up something. And hey, Tag, especially good meeting you. I hope we’ll get to be good friends too.”