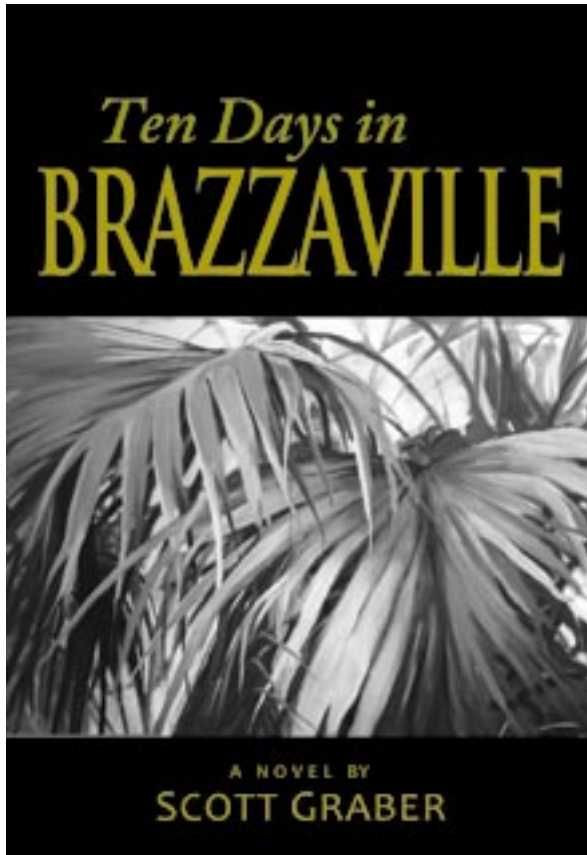




An excerpt from the new novel by Beaufort author Scott Graber

ONE

The envelope was there, in plain view, but he did not see it. Instead, his sleep-filled eyes went to a bookcase. His eyes always went to his bookcase.

His bookcase was eight feet tall and ran for twenty uninterrupted feet along his northern wall. This long run of American walnut was dark, almost purple in color and featured an ancient set of Blackstone's Commentaries. Blackstone's books were never opened—admittedly they were décor. They were secondary to a paper cup, a plastic valve, and ten other objects that were individually illuminated in a way that reminded Jake of Hittite burial objects at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

None of these artifacts were Hittite history. However, each of these objects was modern, machine-made and had failed to function as promised. When that explicit or implicit promise was broken there were consequences. In the case of the valve, it was Emily Grant's teenaged face. The young girl's still-forming face was burned; so badly burned that multiple skin grafts would always be a reminder of that broken promise.

Each broken promise consumed several years of his life.

Each demanded up front cash and was a gamble by Jake and his law partners. Each sucked marrow from his stiffening, middleaged bones and left him exhausted, wondering if there was another trial in his system.

After each trial there was the ceremony.

Surrounded by his partners, Jake would pour the first glass of Korbel and then tell a short, funny anecdote. Then he would turn away from his impatient partners and mount the toy truck, the failed object, above a black, hockey puck-sized disk.

Rigid, black-painted wires held the defective part above the disk and gave him a new war story—a story he was prepared to repeat when a client walked over to the bookcase and said, "What the hell is this supposed to be?"

This morning Jake's eyes went to the cup and he remembered the Cal Tech engineer who had testified the coffee cup was too tall, the cardboard too thin. But his expert's testimony had not been perfect: "When you say 'discomfort' aren't you really saying it hurts when you...."

“Objection. Counsel is leading his witness.”

“Aren’t you saying it hurts like hell?”

“For God’s sake Counsel,” said the red-faced judge. “How long have you been in this business, Jake? Surely you’ve been doing this long enough to know this man is your witness.”

“I’ll withdraw the question.”

He remembered his cross-examination of the selfrighteous, impeccably tailored CEO.

“It was a matter of per unit cost, wasn’t it?”

“Cost is always consideration but....”

“But in this case it was the primary consideration.”

“Jesus Judge,” shouted defense counsel, “now he’s answering his own questions.”

He remembered the call from the unlucky associate who had been told to settle the case.

“We have a good shot at a defense verdict, but one can never be sure about juries these days; not around here. Our people want to avoid another two or three days of trial if we can settle for an appropriate sum.”

“An appropriate sum?” Jake repeated. “And what do you consider an ‘appropriate sum’ in US Dollars?”

“I think our client will agree to \$850,000,” said the young man.

“You think your client will agree to \$850,000,” he repeated. “When do you think your client will actually decide that \$850,000 is appropriate?”

“I have authority to put \$850,000 on the table,” said the lawyer. “I’ve got that authority today. Now.”

“I’ll take \$850,000 to my client—as I’m bound to do— but she won’t agree to that number,” Jake said.

However, his client had liked the number. After two days of trial, most of his clients lost their anger and were ready to take the money. You could practically see the dollars flapping in the wind as they sprinted away from the courthouse.

“Yes. For God’s sake, yes,” she had said.

“We’ve got to wait,” he said taking her hands in his own.

“This is their first number. They know we won’t take \$850,000 and they’ve got a second number. Actually, they’ve got a third number, and what they think is their final number.”

“I’m not sure I can take another day of this torture,” she said. “Let’s just go to their ‘final number’.”

“It’s not good enough,” Jake said.

“This has got to stop,” she said. “I’m not tough. Not like you.”

“You are tough,” he said. “And this is meant to be hard. It’s meant to discourage people. That’s why it’s called a ‘trial’.”

He remembered the surge of electricity that galvanized his body when the foreman replied, “Yes, your Honor, we have reached a verdict,” and the agonizing 10 second delay when the foreman handed the small, folded paper to the judge. The 15 seconds it took for the judge to silently read the verdict, gaze at the ceiling, and then pass the verdict back to the Clerk who read it: “We find in favor of the Plaintiff in the amount of \$4.5 million dollars.”

As he sat in the darkness, he remembered some of the panicked words that came from the defense table: “ludicrous”... “outrageous”... “embarrassment”... “we’ve got to appeal”.

“You knew,” she said. “You knew how it would end.”

He remembered her words, “you knew”. He remembered the adoration in her eyes; her sense of wonder; his sense of control. Now he wanted to feel that way again. He wanted to feel that way soon. He didn’t see the envelope.

T W O

Slowly, his eyes moved away from the bookcase and made their way to the wide-matted, thin-framed photographs he had carefully arranged on the far wall. On that wall, a rough brick wall that he had refused to panel or sheetrock, he had mounted photographs that acknowledged his attractive family, and demonstrated he spent time with his wife, Emma, and their two

exceptional girls. His dedication to family was evinced by a dozen black and white photos: ten days on the Snake River; two weeks in Chaco Canyon; a hiking holiday in the Italian Alps. These images confirmed that he was an attentive, involved father who gave more, much more than what was normally expected from a busy, over-extended trial attorney. They attested to the fact that his girls still talked to him, trusted him with their secrets and, in fact, found him relevant. These images were secondary to another group of photographs.

On the third wall a photograph showed the trial lawyer with South Carolina's young, just-elected Governor. Governor Lewis had his arm around Jake's waist and was whispering into his ear. The image conveyed something more than the usual gratitude that comes after the discrete delivery of a campaign contribution. The image, in fact, suggested an intimacy reached over prolonged, bourbon-laced conversations that went well beyond baseball scores or the price of gasoline. There was the suggestion, in the photo, of a history between these men. An uneven history. If there was any lingering doubt about Jake's access to the Governor there is an inscription: You were with me in the beginning when my name was not known. Your early support will not be forgotten by me or those who work for me. You have my direct telephone number.

A second 8x10 featured Jake and South Carolina's junior senator, a man who had been his college classmate and another relationship that went beyond campaign checks. This relationship included a midnight telephone conversation with an upcountry sheriff who came upon a semiconscious, sobbing, apparently uninjured man who occupied an over-turned Buick; a man who happened to be a US Senator. In this long-ago conversation, Jake reminded the young sheriff of law enforcement legislation then working its way through the Senate. He carefully catalogued the slobbering man's legislative achievements and the jobs he had brought to upstate South Carolina. While making no promises, or proposing any deal, he suggested that restraint and, perhaps a little empathy, would be rewarded at some unspecified time in the not-so-distant future. It was a relationship not well-served or well-described by the Senator's hurriedly scrawled inscription: To my friend, Jake Timrod, who will always be my compass, ballast and counsel.

"Compass," he thought. "The man has no compass, moral or otherwise. And the only ballast this guy has is an everexpanding belly that hangs down between his huge thighs."

The well-framed photographs and the well-lit objects reminded Jake of what he had

