

Jake Brigance stared at the bright red numbers of his digital alarm clock. At 5:29 he reached over, pushed a button, and gently swung his feet out of bed. Carla flipped from one side to the other and burrowed deeper under the covers. Jake patted her rear-end and said good morning. There was no response. It was Monday, a work day, and she would sleep for another hour before scurrying from bed and hustling off to school with Hanna. In the summer, Carla would sleep even later and her days were filled with girl stuff and whatever Hanna wanted to do. Jake, though, had a schedule that rarely varied. Up at 5:30; at the Coffee Shop by 6; at the office before 7. Few people attacked the morning like Jake Brigance, though as he approached the mature age of 35, he asked himself more often why, exactly, did he awaken so early? And why did he insist on arriving at his office before all other lawyers in Clanton? The answers, once so clear, were becoming more obscure. His dream since law school of being a great trial lawyer was not diminished at all; indeed, he was as ambitious as ever. Reality was bugging him. Ten years in the trenches and his office was still filled with wills and deeds and two-bit contract disputes, not one decent criminal case and no promising car wrecks.

His most glorious moment had come and gone. The acquittal of Carl Lee Hailey was three years ago, and Jake sometimes feared he was now beyond his pinnacle. As always, though, he brushed those doubts aside and reminded himself that he was only 35. He was a gladiator with many great courtroom victories before him.

There was no dog to turn out because they'd lost their dog. Max died in the fire that destroyed their beautiful and beloved and heavily mortgaged Victorian home on Adams Street, three years ago. The Klan had torched the house in the heat of the Hailey trial, July of 1985. First they burned a cross in the front yard, then they tried to blow up the house. Jake sent Carla and Hanna away and it was a wise thing to do. After the Klan tried to kill him for a month they finally burned down his house. He had given his closing argument in a borrowed suit.

The topic of a new dog was too uncomfortable to fully address. They had danced around it a few times then moved on. Hanna wanted one and probably needed one because she was an only child and often claimed to be bored playing alone. But Jake, and especially Carla, knew who would assume the responsibility of house-breaking and cleaning up after a puppy. Besides, they were living in a rental home with their lives far from settled. Perhaps a dog could bring about some normalcy; perhaps not. Jake often pondered this issue in the early minutes of the day. The truth was he really missed a dog.

After a quick shower, Jake dressed in a small, spare bedroom he and Carla used as a closet to store their clothes. All rooms were small in this flimsy house owned by someone else. Everything was temporary. The furniture was a sad ensemble of give-a-ways and flea market leftovers, all of which would be tossed one day if things went as planned, though, Jake hated to admit, almost nothing was going his way. Their lawsuit against the insurance company was bogged down in pre-trial maneuvering that seemed hopeless. He had filed it six months after the Hailey verdict, when he was on top of the world and bristling with confidence. How dare an insurance company try and screw him. Show him another jury in Ford County and he'd deliver another great verdict. But the swagger and bluster faded as Jake and Carla slowly realized they had been seriously under-insured. Four blocks away, their vacant and scarred lot was just sitting there, gathering leaves. From next door, Mrs. Pickle kept an eye on it, but there was little to watch. The neighbors were waiting for a fine new home to rise up and for the Brigances to return.

Jake tip-toed into Hanna's room, kissed her on the cheek and pulled the sheets up a bit higher. She was seven now, their only child, and there would be no others. She was in the second grade at Clanton Elementary, in a classroom around the corner from where her mother taught kindergartners.

In the narrow kitchen, Jake pushed a button on the coffee brewer and watched the machine until it began making noises. He opened his briefcase, touched the 9 millimeter semi-automatic

pistol holstered inside, and stuffed in some files. He had grown accustomed to carrying a gun and this saddened him. How could he live a normal life with a weapon nearby at all times? Normal or not, the gun was a necessity. They burn your house after they try to bomb it; they threaten your wife on the phone; they torch a cross in your front yard; they beat your secretary's husband senseless and he later dies; they use a sniper to take a shot, but he misses you and hits a guard; they wage terror during the trial and keep up their threats long after it's over.

Four of the terrorists were now serving prison sentences; three federal, one at Parchman. Only four, Jake reminded himself constantly. There should have been a dozen convictions by now, a feeling shared by Ozzie and other black leaders in the county. Out of habit and out of a sense of frustration, Jake called the FBI at least once a week for updates on their investigation. After three years, his calls were often not returned. He wrote letters. His file filled an entire cabinet in his office.

Only four. He knew the names of many others, all suspects still, in Jake's mind anyway. Some had moved and some had stayed, but they were out there, going about their lives as if nothing had happened. So he carried a gun, one with all the proper permits and such. There was one in his briefcase. One in his car. A couple around the office, and several others. His hunting rifles had gone up in the fire, but Jake was slowly rebuilding his collection.

He stepped outside, onto the small brick porch, and filled his lungs with the cool air. On the street, directly in front of the house, there was a Ford County Sheriff's patrol car, and behind the wheel sat one Louis Tuck, a full-time deputy who worked the graveyard shift and whose primary responsibility was to be seen in the neighborhood throughout the night and, specifically, to be parked near the mailbox at precisely 5:45 each morning, Monday through Saturday, when Mr. Brigance stepped onto the porch and waved hello. Tuck waved back. The Brigances had survived another night.