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# Camino Ghosts

John Grisham



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# CONTENTS

- [1 The Passage](#)
- [2 Panther Cay](#)
- [3 The Curse](#)
- [4 The Contract](#)
- [5 The Defenders](#)
- [6 The Intern](#)
- [7 Old Dunes](#)
- [8 Earwiggling](#)
- [9 The Dig](#)
- [10 The Trial](#)
- [11 A New Foundation](#)
- [12 With Nalla Close By](#)

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE PASSAGE

### 1.

None of the fifty or so guests wore shoes. The invitation specifically ruled them out. It was, after all, a beach wedding, and Mercer Mann, the bride, wanted sand between the toes. The suggested attire was *beach chic*, which may have had one meaning in Palm Beach and another in Malibu, and probably something else in the Hamptons. But on Camino Island it meant *anything goes*. But no shoes.

The bride herself wore a low-cut white linen gown with an entirely bare back, and since she had been on the island for the past two weeks she was superbly tanned and toned. Stunning. Thomas, her groom, was just as lean and bronzed. He wore a brand-new powder blue seersucker suit, a starched white dress shirt, no tie. And of course no shoes.

Thomas was just happy to be included. He and Mercer had been together for three years, sharing an apartment for the past two, and when Mercer finally got tired of waiting for a proposal she had asked him, three months earlier, “What are you doing on Saturday, June sixth, at seven p.m.?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’ll have to check.”

“Say nothing.”

“What?”

“Say you’re doing nothing.”

“Okay, I’m doing nothing. Why?”

“Because we’re getting married at the beach.”



Since he was not exactly a detail person, he had little input into the planning of the wedding. However, had he been detail-oriented it would not have mattered. Life with Mercer was wonderful in so many ways, not the least of which was the absence of responsibility for making decisions. The pressure was off.

A guitarist strummed love songs as the guests sipped champagne. She was a creative writing student of Mercer's at Ole Miss and had volunteered for the wedding. A server in a straw hat topped off their glasses. He, too, was studying under Mercer, though she had yet to break the news that his fiction was too weird. If she were a blunt person she would point out that he was likely to earn more money tending bar at small weddings than trying to write novels, but she had yet to gain tenure or the ability to discourage students with little promise.

Mercer taught because she needed a salary. She had published a collection of short stories and two novels. She was searching for a third. Her last one, *Tessa*, had been a bestseller, and its success had prompted Viking Press to give her a two-book contract. Her editor at Viking was still waiting for the next story idea. So was Mercer. She had some money in the bank but not enough to retire, not enough to buy the freedom to write full-time with no worries.

A few of her guests had that freedom. Myra and Leigh, the grandes dames of the island's literary mafia, had been together for decades and were living off royalties. Back in their glory days they had cranked out a hundred steamy romance novels under a dozen pseudonyms. Bob Cobb was an ex-felon who'd served time in a federal pen for bank fraud. He wrote hard-boiled crime stories, with a penchant for prison violence. When drinking, which was practically all the time, he claimed he had not pursued honest labor in twenty years. He was a writer! Perhaps the wealthiest of the group was Amy Slater, a young mother of three who'd hit pay dirt with a vampire series.

Amy and her husband, Dan, had taken a chunk of their money and built a splendid house on the beach, about half a mile from Mercer's cottage. When

they heard about the wedding, they insisted on hosting it along with the reception.

Like every bride, Mercer envisioned a lovely walk down the aisle with her father. He, though, got cut from the ceremony, as did the aisle. Mr. Mann was a complicated soul who had never spent time with his wife or daughters. When he complained that the wedding might conflict with his busy schedule, Mercer said never mind. They would have more fun without him.

Her sister, Connie, was there and could always be counted on for family drama. Her two rotten teenage girls were already sitting in the back row and staring at their phones. Her husband was gulping champagne. On the more pleasant side, her literary agent, Etta Shuttleworth, was there with her husband, as was her Viking editor, who no doubt wanted to grab a moment and inquire about the next novel, now a year overdue. Mercer was determined not to talk business. It was her wedding, and if the editor got the least bit pushy then Etta was expected to step in. Three sorority sisters from Sewanee were there, two with husbands. The third was fresh off an acrimonious divorce that Mercer had heard far too much about. All three had the hots for Thomas, and Mercer was keeping an eye on them. The fact that he was five years younger than his bride made him even sexier. Two colleagues from the Ole Miss faculty had survived the final cut of the invitation list and were spending a week on the island. Mercer got on with them well enough, but was cautious. She had invited them only to be polite. She was on her third campus in the past six years and had learned a lot about faculty politics. She was the only professor in the history of the Ole Miss English department to crack the bestseller lists with a novel, and at times she could feel the jealousy. An old pal from Chapel Hill had been invited but declined. Two friends from high school and one from kindergarten were there.

Thomas had a more stable family. His parents and siblings and their young children filled an entire row. Behind them was a rowdy bunch of college chums from his days at Grinnell.

The fake minister was Bruce Cable, owner of Bay Books and onetime lover of the bride, who began asking everyone to take a seat and squeeze closer to the front where a white wicker arch had been erected. It was laden with red and white roses and carnations and flanked by trellises on both sides. Beyond it was a hundred feet of white sand, then nothing but the Atlantic at high tide, a gorgeous view that stretched for miles until the planet curved. North Africa was four thousand miles away, a straight shot.

The guitarist kept strumming until Mercer and Thomas appeared on the boardwalk. They came down the steps, holding hands and smiling all the way to the arch where they were met by the fake minister.

It was not Bruce Cable's first wedding. For some vague reason, Florida allowed almost anyone to buy a cheap permit from a clerk's office, become an "officiant," and conduct a civil wedding ceremony. Bruce had not known this, and had no interest in it whatsoever, until an old girlfriend wanted to get married on Camino Island and insisted on Bruce doing the honors.

That was the first. Mercer's was the second. He wondered how many officiants had slept with all of their brides. Yes, on one occasion not too many years earlier he had slept with Mercer when she was spying on him, but that was ancient history. Noelle, his wife, knew about it. Thomas had been informed. Everyone was cool. It was all so civilized.

Well aware of Bruce's tendency to go off-script, Mercer had carefully written their vows. Thomas, surprisingly, had been consulted and even added some language of his own. A former student from UNC rose and read a poem, an impenetrable hodgepodge in free verse that was supposed to heighten the romantic mood but instead caused the crowd to gaze at the waves breaking gently along the shore. Bruce managed to re-focus things by giving brief bios of the bride and groom and got a few laughs. The guitar player could also sing and she delighted the crowd with an impressive version of "This Will Be (An Everlasting Love)." Connie read a scene from *Tessa* that was based loosely on their grandmother. In the story, Tessa walked the same stretch of beach every morning looking for turtle eggs laid the night before. She guarded the surf and dunes as if she owned them, and

several in the crowd remembered her well. It was a poignant piece about a person who had greatly influenced the bride.

Bruce then got them through the vows, which, in his learned opinion, were a bit on the wordy side, a recurring problem with Mercer's prose and one he was determined to correct. He loved his writers and nurtured them all, but he was also a tough critic. Oh well, it wasn't his wedding.

They swapped rings, had a kiss, and bowed to the crowd as husband and wife. The crowd stood and applauded.

The entire service lasted twenty-two minutes.

The photography took longer, then everyone climbed onto the boardwalk and followed Mercer and Thomas over the dunes to the pool where more champagne was waiting. They had their first dance to "My Girl." The DJ followed it with more Motown and the dancing caught on. Almost ten minutes passed before the first drunk, Connie's husband, fell in the pool.

The most popular caterer on the island was Chef Claude, a real Cajun from South Louisiana. He and his team were busy on the patio while Noelle supervised the table arrangements and flowers. She was mostly French, and in matters of fine dining with all the trimmings she had no peer. Amy asked her to take charge of flowers, china, place settings, crystal, and flatware, along with the wine, which Noelle and Bruce were happy to select and order from their broker. Two long tables were set on the terrace under a canopy.

As the sun was setting, Chef Claude whispered to Amy that dinner was ready, and the guests were directed to their assigned seats. It was a rowdy bunch, with lots of laughter and admiration for the newlyweds. When the first bottle of Chablis made the rounds, Bruce, as always, called for quiet so he could wax on about the wine. Then platters of raw oysters arrived and covered the table. During the second course, shrimp remoulade, the toasts began and things began to go off-track. Thomas's brother did a nice job but wasn't much of a speaker. One of Mercer's sorority sisters played the obligatory role of the crying bridesmaid and went on far too long. Bruce managed to cut her off with a splendid toast of his own. He then introduced the next wine, a fine Sancerre. Trouble started when Mercer's brother-in-

law, still wet from his splash in the pool and still drunk since midafternoon, stood and wobbled and tried to tell a funny story about one of Mercer's old boyfriends. His timing was bad. His remarks were mercifully cut off when Connie snapped loudly, "That's enough, Carl!"

Carl roared with laughter as he fell into his chair, and it took a few seconds before he realized no one else thought it funny. To break the tension, a frat brother from Grinnell jumped to his feet and read a raunchy poem about Thomas. As he read, the main course of grilled flounder was served. Verse after verse, the poem grew dirtier and funnier, and when it was over everyone was in stitches.

Amy had worried about the noise. The homes were built close together along the beach and noise carried. So, she had invited the neighbors on each side and introduced them to Mercer a week earlier. They were laughing and drinking harder than anyone.

Myra took the floor and told the story of the first time she and Leigh met Mercer, five years earlier when she returned to the island for the summer. "Her beauty was obvious, her charm was contagious, her manners were impeccable. But we wondered: Can she write? We secretly hoped that she couldn't. With her latest novel, a masterpiece in my opinion, she proved to the world that she can indeed tell a beautiful story. Why do some people have all the luck?"

"Now Myra," Leigh said softly.

Until then, most of the toasts and remarks seemed to have some measure of forethought. After that, though, everything was off the cuff and fueled by wine.

The dinner was long and delicious, and when it was over the older guests began leaving. The younger ones returned to the dance floor where the DJ took requests and turned the volume down.

Around midnight, Bruce found Mercer and Thomas at the edge of the pool with their feet in the water. He joined and told them again what a lovely wedding they had put together.

"When do you leave for Scotland?" he asked.

“Tomorrow at two,” Mercer replied. “We fly from Jacksonville to Washington, then nonstop to London.” The honeymoon was two weeks in the Highlands.

“Could you run by the store in the morning? I’ll have the coffee ready. We’ll need some.”

Thomas nodded and Mercer said, “Sure. What’s up?”

Bruce was suddenly serious. With a smug grin he looked at her and said, “I have the story, Mercer. Maybe the best I’ve ever heard.”

## 2.

Bay Books opened at 9:00 a.m. every Sunday morning when Bruce unlocked the front door, from the inside, and welcomed the usual crowd. Though the demographics were unclear, he had always surmised that about half the permanent residents of Camino Island were retirees from colder climates. The other half were locals from North Florida and southern Georgia. The tourists came from all over, but primarily the South and East.

At any rate, there were plenty of people from “up north” who missed their favorite newspapers. Years earlier he began handling the Sunday editions of the *Times*, *Post*, *Enquirer*, *Tribune*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and *Boston Globe*. Along with the newspapers, he sold legendary hot buttered biscuits from a restaurant around the corner, on Sundays only, and by 9:30 the café upstairs and the reading area downstairs were packed with Yankees reading news from home. It had become a ritual of sorts and many of the regulars never missed a Sunday morning at the bookstore. Though women were certainly welcome—Bruce had long since learned that most books were bought by women—the Sunday morning crowd was all male, and the politics and sports talk often became rowdy. Smoking was allowed on the outdoor terrace and a layer of rich cigar smoke usually hung over Main Street.



Mercer and Thomas arrived late in the morning, now legally married, remarkably clear-eyed and dressed for their trip. Bruce invited them into his downstairs office, his First Editions Room, where he displayed some of his finest rare books. He poured coffee and they chatted about the night before. The newlyweds were ready to go, though, with a long adventure ahead of them.

Mercer smiled and said, "You mentioned the greatest story of all time."

"Yes I did. I'll be brief. It's a true story but can also be fictionalized. You've heard of Dark Isle, just north of here."

"Maybe. I'm not sure."

"It's deserted, right?" Thomas asked.

"Probably, yes, but there is some doubt. It's one of two smaller barrier islands between Florida and Georgia and it has never been developed. It's about three miles long and a mile wide, with pristine beaches."

Mercer was nodding and said, "Oh yeah, now I remember. Tessa talked about it years ago. Isn't it supposed to be haunted or something?"

"Or something. Centuries ago, sometime around 1750, it became a haven for runaway slaves from Georgia, which, then ruled by the British, allowed slavery. Florida was under the Spanish flag and though slavery was not against the law, runaways were granted sanctuary. There was a long-running feud between the two countries about what to do with the slaves who escaped to Florida. Georgia wanted them back. The Spanish wanted to protect them just to irritate the British and their American colonies. Around 1760, a slave ship returning from West Africa was preparing to land in Savannah when a fierce storm from the north, what we call a nor'easter today, spun it around, shoved it south, and badly disabled it. It was a ship from Virginia called *Venus*, and it had around four hundred slaves on board, packed like sardines. Well, it left Africa with four hundred, but not all made it. Many died at sea. The conditions on board were unimaginable, to say the least. Anyway, the *Venus* finally went down about a mile out to sea near Cumberland Island. Since the slaves were chained and shackled, almost all of them drowned. A few clung to the wreckage and washed ashore in the storm

on Dark Island, as it became known. Or Dark Isle. It was unnamed in 1760. They were taken in by the runaways from Georgia, and together they built a little community. Two hundred years went by, everybody died or moved away, and now it's deserted."

Bruce took a sip of coffee and waited for a response.

Mercer said, "Nice, but I don't write history."

Thomas asked, "Where's the hook? Any sign of a plot?"

Bruce smiled and picked up a plain, thin book the size of a trade paperback. He showed them the title: *The Dark History of Dark Isle*. By Lovely Jackson.

Neither reached to take the book, which didn't bother Bruce. He said, "This is a self-published book that sold maybe thirty copies. It was written by the last living heir to Dark Isle, or that's her claim anyway. Lovely Jackson lives here on Camino, down near the old canneries in a neighborhood called The Docks."

"I know where it is," Mercer said.

"She claims she was born on Dark Isle in 1940 and left there with her mother when she was fifteen years old."

"How do you know her?" Mercer asked.

"She first came in a few years back with a bag full of these books and wanted to do a big signing. As you've heard me complain, the self-published crowd can drive a bookseller crazy. Very pushy, very demanding. I try to avoid them but I really liked Lovely and her story is fascinating. I was quite taken with her. We had a signing. I leaned on our friends, most of whom will do almost anything for a free glass of wine, and we had a nice party. Lovely was forever grateful."

"I'm still waiting for a plot," Thomas said, rather dryly.

"Here's the plot. Florida being Florida, the real estate swingers have scoured every square inch of the state looking for an undeveloped beach. They found Dark Isle years ago, but there was a big problem. The island is too small to justify the cost of a bridge. The developers could never configure enough condos, hotels, water parks and T-shirt shops, et cetera, to convince

the state to build a bridge. So Dark Isle was off-limits. But Hurricane Leo changed all that. Its eye went directly over the island, split off the north end, and shoved tons of sand into a massive reef that links the southern tip to a spot near Dick's Harbor on the mainland. The engineers now say that a bridge would be much cheaper to build. Like vultures, the developers are all over it and they're leaning on their pals in Tallahassee."

Thomas said, "So, Lovely Jackson is the plot."

"You got it. She claims to be the sole owner."

Mercer said, "If she doesn't live there, why not just sell to the developers?"

Bruce tossed the book into a pile and drank his coffee. He smiled and said, "Because it's hallowed ground. Her people are buried there. One of her great-grandmothers, a woman named Nalla, was on the *Venus*. Lovely is not selling. Period."

Thomas asked, "What's the position of the developers?"

"They have lawyers and they're a tough bunch. They say there's no record Lovely was even born on the island. Keep in mind, she's the only living witness. All other relatives have been dead for decades."

"And the bad guys have big plans?" Mercer asked.

"Are you kidding? Wall-to-wall condos, resorts, golf courses. There's even a rumor that they've cut a deal with the Seminoles for a casino. The nearest fancy one is two hours away. The entire island will be paved in three years' time."

"And Lovely can't afford lawyers?"

"Of course not. She's in her eighties and gets a small Social Security check each month."

"In her eighties?" Mercer repeated. "Do you know for sure?"

"No. There's no birth certificate, no record anywhere. If you read her book, and I suggest you do so immediately, you'll realize how isolated these people were for centuries."

Mercer said, "I've already packed books for the trip."

“Okay, your business, not mine. But allow me to offer a teaser. One reason they were so isolated was because Nalla was an African witch doctor, some sort of voodoo priestess. In a scene you’ll remember for a long time, she put a curse on the island to protect it from outsiders.”

Thomas shook his head and said, “*Now* I smell a plot.”

“You like it?”

“I do.”

Mercer said, “I’ll start reading on the plane.”

Bruce said, “Send me a note from Scotland when you finish.”

### 3.

As soon as the plane leveled off, somewhere over South Carolina, Mercer pulled the book from her tote bag and studied the cover. The artwork wasn’t bad and depicted a narrow dirt road lined with huge oaks and drifts of Spanish moss hanging almost to the ground. The trees grew darker and faded into the title: *The Dark History of Dark Isle*. Across the bottom was the author’s name: Lovely Jackson. Inside there was a half-title page, then the credits. The publisher was a small vanity house in Orlando. No dedication, no author photo, no blurbs splashed across the back cover. And no editing at all.

Mercer was expecting a simple writing style. Easy words of no more than three syllables. Short, direct sentences, only a few commas. Certainly no literary flourishes. However, the writing was easy to read, and the story so compelling that Mercer quickly set aside her rather snotty editorial and professorial thoughts and got lost in it. When she finished the first chapter without a break, she realized that the writing was far more effective and engrossing than most of the stuff she was forced to read from her students. Indeed, the writing and storytelling were more interesting than most of the hyped debut novels she’d read in the past year.

She realized Thomas was watching her. “Yes?”

“You’re really zipping right along,” he said. “How is it?”

“Quite good.”

“When can I read it?”

“How about when I get finished?”

“How about we tag-team and alternate chapters? Back and forth?”

“I’ve never read a book like that and I’m not inclined to start now.”

“It’ll be easy since I read twice as fast as you.”

“Are you trying to provoke me?” she asked.

“Always. We’ve been married for about twenty hours. It’s time for our first spat.”

“I’m not taking the bait, dear. Now stick your nose in your own book and leave me alone.”

“Okay, but hurry up.”

She looked at him, smiled, shook her head, and said, “We forgot to consummate our marriage last night.”

Thomas looked around to see if other passengers might hear them. “We’ve been consummating for three years.”

“No, Romeo, a marriage can’t be official, at least in the biblical sense, until the vows are said, we’re pronounced wife and husband, and we do the deed.”

“So you’re still a virgin, in the biblical sense?”

“I’m not going that far.”

“I was tired and a bit wasted. Sorry. We’ll catch up in Scotland.”

“If I can wait that long.”

“Hold that thought.”

## 4.

Nalla was nineteen when her short happy life changed forever. She and her husband, Mosi, had one child, a three-year-old boy. They were of the

Luba tribe and lived in a village in the southern part of the Kingdom of Kongo.

The village was asleep. The night was quiet when loud, panicked voices cut through the darkness. A hut was on fire and people were yelling. Nalla awoke first, then shook Mosi. Their son was asleep on a rug between them. Along with everyone else, they ran to the fire to help, but it was far worse than a fire. It was a raid. The fire was deliberately set by a murderous gang from another tribe that had previously tended to their own business. Now they were known as slave hunters. They attacked from the jungle with clubs and whips and began pummeling the villagers. As seasoned marauders, they knew their victims would be too stunned and disorganized to fight back. They beat them, subdued them, and chained them, but they were careful to kill as few as possible. They were too valuable to kill. The elderly were left behind to care for the children, who, in a matter of minutes, became orphans. The women screamed and wailed for their children, who were nowhere to be found. They had been led away to the jungle where they would be released the following day. Small children were worth little to the slave traders.

Nalla screamed for Mosi but he did not answer. In the darkness, the men were separated from the women. She screamed for her little boy and when she could not stop screaming, an attacker struck her with a club. She fell down and felt blood on her jaw. In the light of the fire she could see men armed with long machetes and knives shoving and herding the villagers, her friends and neighbors. They shouted harsh commands and threatened to kill anyone who disobeyed. The fire grew in size and got louder. Nalla was knocked to the ground again, then ordered to get up and walk toward the jungle. There were about a dozen women chained together, almost all of them young mothers who cried and yelled for their children. They were ordered to shut up, and when they kept crying a man with a whip lashed them.

When they were away from the village and deep in the jungle, they stopped in an opening where an oxcart was waiting. It was filled with chains,