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Reading Group Guide

By John Grisham

About the Author

Excerpt from Camino Island

The satellite radio was playing soft jazz, a compromise. Lacy, the owner of the Prius and thus the radio, loathed rap almost as much as Hugo, her passenger, loathed contemporary country. They had failed to agree on sports talk, public radio, golden oldies, adult comedy, and the BBC, without getting near bluegrass, CNN, opera, or a hundred other stations. Out of frustration on her part and fatigue on his, they both threw in the towel early and settled on soft jazz. Soft, so Hugo's deep and lengthy nap would not be disturbed. Soft, because Lacy didn't care much for jazz either. It was another give-and-take of sorts, one of many that had sustained their teamwork over the years. He slept and she drove and both were content.

Before the Great Recession, the Board on Judicial Conduct had access to a small pool of state-owned Hondas, all with four doors and white paint and low mileage. With budget cuts, though, those disappeared. Lacy, Hugo, and countless other public employees in Florida were now expected to use their own vehicles for the state's work, reimbursed at fifty cents a mile. Hugo, with four kids and a hefty mortgage, drove an ancient Bronco that could barely make it to the office, let alone a road trip. And so he slept.

Lacy enjoyed the quiet. She handled most of her cases alone, as did her colleagues. Deeper cuts had decimated the office, and the BJC was down to its last six investigators. Seven, in a state of twenty million people, with a thousand judges sitting in six hundred courtrooms and processing a half a million cases a year. Lacy was forever grateful that almost all judges were honest, hardworking people committed to justice and equality. Otherwise, she would have left long ago. The small number of bad apples kept her busy fifty hours a week.

She gently touched the signal switch and slowed on the exit ramp. When the car rolled to a stop, Hugo lurched forward as if wide awake and

ready for the day. “Where are we?” he asked.

“Almost there. Twenty minutes. Time for you to roll to your right and snore at the window.”

“Sorry. Was I snoring?”

“You always snore, at least according to your wife.”

“Well, in my defense, I was walking the floor at three this morning with her latest child. I think it’s a girl. What’s her name?”

“Wife or daughter?”

“Ha-ha.”

The lovely and ever-pregnant Verna kept few secrets when it came to her husband. It was her calling to keep his ego in check and it was no small task. In another life, Hugo had been a football star in high school, then the top-rated signee in his class at Florida State, and the first freshman to crack the starting lineup. He’d been a tailback, both bruising and dazzling, for three and a half games anyway, until they carried him off on a stretcher with a jammed vertebra in his upper spine. He vowed to make a comeback. His mother said no. He graduated with honors and went to law school. His glory days were fading fast, but he would always carry some of the swagger possessed by all-Americans. He couldn’t help it.

“Twenty minutes, huh?” he grunted.

“Sure, or not. If you like, I’ll just leave you in the car with the motor running and you can sleep all day.”

He rolled to his right, closed his eyes, and said, “I want a new partner.”

“That’s an idea, but the problem is nobody else will have you.”

“And one with a bigger car.”

“It gets fifty miles a gallon.”

He grunted again, grew still, then twitched, jerked, mumbled, and sat straight up. He rubbed his eyes and said, “What are we listening to?”

“We had this conversation a long time ago, when we left Tallahassee, just as you were beginning to hibernate.”

“I offered to drive, as I recall.”

“Yes, with one eye open. It meant so much. How’s Pippin?”

“She cries a lot. Usually, and I say this from vast experience, when a newborn cries it’s for a reason. Food, water, diaper, momma—whatever. Not this one. She squawks for the hell of it. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“If you’ll recall, I’ve actually walked the floors with Pippin on two occasions.”

“Yes, and God bless you. Can you come over tonight?”

“Anytime. She’s number four. You guys thought about birth control?”

“We are beginning to have that conversation. And now that we’re on the subject, how’s *your* sex life?”

“Sorry. My mistake.” At thirty-six Lacy was single and attractive, and her sex life was a rich source of whispered curiosity around the office.

They were going east toward the Atlantic Ocean. St. Augustine was eight miles ahead. Lacy finally turned off the radio when Hugo asked, “And you’ve been here before?”

“Yes, a few years back. Then boyfriend and I spent a week on the beach in a friend’s condo.”

“A lot of sex?”

“Here we go again. Is your mind always in the gutter?”

“Well, come to think of it, the answer has to be yes. Plus, you need to understand that Pippin is now a month old, which means that Verna and I have not had normal relations in at least three months. I still maintain, at least to myself, that she cut me off three weeks too early, but it’s sort of a moot point. Can’t really go back and catch up, you know? So things are fairly ramped up in my corner; not sure she feels the same way. Three rug rats and a newborn do serious damage to that intimacy thing.”

“I’ll never know.”

He tried to focus on the highway for a mile or two, then his eyelids grew heavy and he began to nod. She glanced at him and smiled. In her nine years with the Board, she and Hugo had worked a dozen cases together. They made a nice team and trusted each other, and both knew that any bad behavior by him, and there had been none to date, would immediately be reported to Verna. Lacy worked with Hugo, but she gossiped and shopped with Verna.

St. Augustine was billed as the oldest city in America, the very spot where Ponce de León landed and began exploring. Long on history and heavy on tourism, it was a lovely town with historic buildings and thick Spanish moss dripping from ancient oaks. As they entered its outskirts, the traffic slowed and tour buses stopped. To the right and in the distance, an old cathedral towered above the town. Lacy remembered it all very well. The week with the old boyfriend had been a disaster, but she had fond memories of St. Augustine.

One of many disasters.

“And who is this mysterious deep throat we are supposed to meet?” Hugo asked, rubbing his eyes once again, now determined to stay awake.

“Don’t know yet, but his code name is Randy.”

“Okay, and please remind me why we are tag teaming a secret meeting with a man using an alias who has yet to file a formal complaint against one of our esteemed judges.”

“I can’t explain. But I’ve talked to him three times on the phone and he sounds, uh, rather earnest.”

“Great. When was the last time you talked to a complaining party who didn’t sound, uh, rather earnest?”

“Stick with me, okay? Michael said go, and we’re here.” Michael was the director, their boss.

“Of course. No clue as to the alleged unethical conduct?”

“Oh yes. Randy said it was big.”

“Gee, never heard that before.”

They turned onto King Street and poked along with the downtown traffic. It was mid-July, still the high season in north Florida, and tourists in shorts and sandals drifted along the sidewalks, apparently going nowhere. Lacy parked on a side street and they joined the tourists. They found a coffee shop and killed half an hour flipping through glossy real estate brochures. At noon, as instructed, they walked into Luca’s Grill and got a table for three. They ordered iced tea and waited. Thirty minutes passed with no sign of Randy, so they ordered sandwiches. Fries on the side for Hugo, fruit for Lacy. Eating as slowly as possible, they kept an eye on the door and waited.

As lawyers, they valued their time. As investigators, they had learned patience. The two roles were often in conflict.

At 2:00 p.m., they gave up and returned to the car, as smothering as a sauna. As Lacy turned the key, her cell phone rattled. Caller unknown. She grabbed it and said, “Yes.”

A male voice said, “I asked you to come alone.” It was Randy.

“I suppose you have the right to ask. We were supposed to meet at noon, for lunch.”

A pause, then, “I’m at the Municipal Marina, at the end of King Street, three blocks away. Tell your buddy to get lost and we’ll talk.”

“Look, Randy, I’m not a cop and I don’t do cloak-and-dagger very well. I’ll meet you, say hello and all that, but if I don’t have your real name within sixty seconds then I’m leaving.”

“Fair enough.”

She canceled the call and mumbled, “Fair enough.”

—

The marina was busy with pleasure craft and a few fishing boats coming and going. A long pontoon was unloading a gaggle of noisy tourists. A restaurant with a patio at the water’s edge was still doing a brisk business. Crews on charter boats were spraying decks and sprucing things up for tomorrow’s charters.

Lacy walked along the central pier, looking for the face of a man she’d never met. Ahead, standing next to a fuel pump, an aging beach bum gave a slight, awkward wave and nodded. She returned the nod and kept walking. He was about sixty, with too much gray hair flowing from under a Panama hat. Shorts, sandals, a gaudy floral-print shirt, the typical bronze, leathery skin of someone who spent far too much time in the sun. His eyes were covered by aviator shades. With a smile he stepped forward and said, “You must be Lacy Stoltz.”

She took his hand and said, “Yes, and you are?”

“Name’s Ramsey Mix. A pleasure to meet you.”

“A pleasure. We were supposed to meet at noon.”

“My apologies. Had a bit of boat trouble.” He nodded down the pier to a large powerboat moored at the end of the dock. It wasn’t the longest boat in the harbor at that moment, but it was close. “Can we talk there?” he asked.

“On the boat?”

“Sure. It’s much more private.”

Crawling onto a boat with a complete stranger struck her as a bad idea and she hesitated. Before she could answer, Mix asked, “Who’s the black guy?” He was looking in the direction of King Street. Lacy turned and saw Hugo casually following a pack of tourists nearing the marina.

“He’s my colleague,” she said.

“Sort of a bodyguard?”

“I don’t need a bodyguard, Mr. Mix. We’re not armed, but my friend there could pitch you into the water in about two seconds.”

“Let’s hope that won’t be necessary. I come in peace.”

“That’s good to hear. I’ll get on the boat only if it stays where it is. If the engines start, then our meeting is over.”

“Fair enough.”

She followed him along the pier, past a row of sailboats that looked as though they had not seen the open sea in months, and to his boat, cleverly named *Conspirator*. He stepped on board and offered a hand to help her. On the deck, under a canvas awning, there was a small wooden table with four folding chairs. He waved at it and said, “Welcome aboard. Have a seat.”

Lacy took quick stock of her surroundings. Without sitting, she said, “Are we alone?”

“Well, not entirely. I have a friend who enjoys boating with me. Name is Carlita. Would you like to meet her?”

“Only if she’s important to your story.”

“She is not.” Mix was looking at the marina, where Hugo was leaning on a rail. Hugo waved, as if to say, “I’m watching everything.” Mix waved back and said, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Lacy said.

“Is it safe to assume that whatever I’m about to tell you will be rehashed with Mr. Hatch in short order?”

“He’s my colleague. We work together on some cases, maybe this one. How do you know his name?”

“I happen to own a computer. Checked out the website. BJC really should update it.”

“I know. Budget cuts.”

“His name vaguely rings a bell.”

“He had a brief career as a football player at Florida State.”

“Maybe that’s it. I’m a Gator fan myself.”

Lacy refused to respond to this. It was so typical of the South, where folks attached themselves to college football teams with a fanaticism she’d always found irksome.

Mix said, “So he’ll know everything?”

“Yes.”

“Call him over. I’ll get us something to drink.”