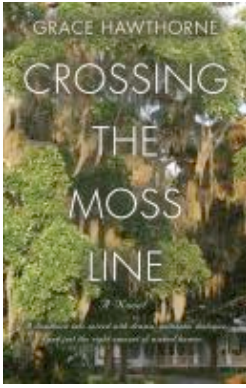


GRACE HAWTHORNE

CROSSING
THE
MOSS
LINE

A Novel

*A Southern tale spiced with drama, authentic dialogue,
and just the right amount of wicked humor.*



Set in the early 40s, Crossing the Moss Line is a tragicomedy about slippery choices and unintended consequences reaching from the Geechee community along the Georgia coast to New York City and back. When a practical joke goes wrong, it takes God, the conjure man, a Jewish mother, and an assortment of uniquely Southern characters to set things right again. The tale is told with drama, authentic dialogue, and a touch of slightly wicked humor.

Crossing the Moss Line

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Praise for *Crossing the Moss Line*

Grace Hawthorne's third novel, *Crossing the Moss Line*, is an entertaining read from beginning to end. Hawthorne invites her well-drawn characters to the table, and then serves up a uniquely Southern tale spiced with drama, authentic dialogue, and just the right amount of slightly wicked humor. I laughed out loud at the last line. Readers will not regret the time spent with *Crossing the Moss Line*.

Morgan James

Author of the Promise McNeal mystery series and

the Southern novel,

Sing Me An Old Song

"She's done it again. Starting with the award-winning *Shorter's Way*, then *Waterproof Justice* and now *Crossing the Moss Line*, Grace Hawthorne has proved she is truly a storyteller's storyteller. On top of that, I learned some Georgia history I wasn't aware of before. Great fun."

Janice Butt

Founder of Women's Imaginative Guild of Storytellers (WIGS)

"This is the third novel by Grace Hawthorne I've read and enjoyed. *Crossing the Moss Line* comes alive through a straightforward, evocative narrative style. The cultures and settings range from antebellum Ibo Island and coastal Georgia to World War II-era New York City, with a few stops in between. Bottom line, it's a truly delightful read."

Ron Loines

Digital Experience Project Manager

"I've come to expect wonderful storytelling from Grace Hawthorne and she doesn't disappoint in *Crossing the Moss Line*. Her characters pop off the page and make you love them—or not—from the start. Together they are a part of a complex and tender story of a special place and time in the South."

Lyn May

Editor, *Wise Women . . . Now*

"The story skillfully weaves together characters from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. I was particularly impressed with the authentic presentation of the Bronx Jewish character, Sadie Glanzrock."

Murray Friedman

Raconteur

"In *Crossing the Moss Line*, Grace Hawthorne's descriptions are so vivid you see, hear and even smell what's going on. Needless to say, her characters are equally on target. You recognize folks you know or have known. Grace's books will appeal to all readers, not just to those of us who were born and raised 'down here.'"

Ron Kemp

Owner of Anatron, Inc., Analytical Electronics

Crossing the Moss Line

Grace Hawthorne

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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First Edition

CHAPTER ONE

“We’ll take the whole lot, the whole shipload.”

The broker studied the two young men standing in front of him and shook his head. “Foolishness, total foolishness,” he thought to himself. “The whole boatload?” But then, who was he to turn down money...and a lot of it too. Cash on the barrelhead, up front. That’s the way he liked doing business.

The 300-ton Windward rode at anchor in the small harbor at Bunce Island. The trading site was in the Sierra Leone River about 20 miles upriver from Freetown. It was a small island in the country’s largest natural harbor, which made it an ideal base for the large ocean-going ships of European traders.

Due to the conditions aboard and the length of the voyage, he knew the buyers would lose at least ten percent of the cargo in the crossing and that was probably on the low side. However, once the papers were signed and he had his money, he’d be on his way. Not his responsibility any more.

Caleb Harding and Patrick Donegan exchanged worried glances and tried to maintain an air of confidence. They knew they were on shaky ground; they just hoped it wasn’t too obvious. Normally they would have dealt with a business agent

in Savannah, but to save some money, they decided to handle the transaction themselves.

They pooled every cent they had, negotiated what they thought was a good price at \$500 a head, and set very specific guidelines about exactly what they wanted. They also promised the captain a bonus if he delivered the cargo in good condition. If everything turned out as they hoped, they were on their way to owning the richest rice plantation in Georgia. If not... well, one way or the other, it was too late to turn back now. They followed the agent into his office to conclude their business.

The crew aboard the Windward paid no attention to them. They had enough to do with loading supplies and getting the ship ready for the long voyage ahead. In addition to spare sails, ropes, nails, pitch, tar, coal and oil, they loaded food supplies including ship's biscuits.

Jonesy, the new cabin boy, was as curious as he was green. "Here you go, try one of these," a craggy old sailor said and tossed him what looked like a cookie. Jonesy tried to take a bite and nearly broke all his teeth.

"Ahh come on, what's this?" he asked.

"Hardtack, me boy. Sealed up tight, it'll last for months at sea and there'll come a time you'll be glad to get it. Best soak it in your tea to soften it up a bit before you try to eat it, but don't forget to bang it on the table a couple of times first."

"Why would I do that?"

"To knock out the beetles and the weevils and any other nasty little beasties who've made a home for themselves in your biscuit." Jonesy looked a little sick and the crew laughed.

The seamen continued to load on the salt pork, dried fish and various grains. Finally Jonesy stopped and looked toward the hold. "How do you stand the noise?"

"Just ignore it. It'll quiet down. The first week or two's the worst. After that, things get quiet, sometimes too quiet."

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Jonesy tried, but he didn't think he would ever be able to ignore the cries and wails coming from the hold. They made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. No language that he could understand, just mournful, eerie sounds.

“That’s the way it started way back there in 1802,” Granny Johnson said. “They signed some papers, handed over some money and our people became the property of Caleb Harding and Patrick Donegan. *Buchra*, that’s what we Geechee people called the plantation owners. I get the misery in my head just thinking about it even today. Don’t you know that was a bad time. People from lots of tribes all crammed in together, strangers, starting a journey of thousands of miles, what we call The Middle Passage.

“Those slave traders didn’t just take anybody, you know. They wanted us because we know about growin’ rice and cultivatin’ long-fiber cotton. Mr. Harding and Mr. Donegan ordered us like you’d order a table or a jacket from Sears and Roebuck. And we didn’t come cheap, no siree. They paid a pretty penny for each and every one on that boat. That’s why they didn’t never sell a single one of us. We was too valuable.

“Strange they were willin’ to pay good money for us, even see to it that we was fed and watered on the way over, but they took our names away. Far as I know, not one single African name survived. You’d think they coulda left us that much of Africa, but they didn’t. Once we got settled here on Ibo Island, our family took the name Harding. That’s how it worked back then.

“That boat load of about a hundred souls was the start of the Geechee people. What those plantation owners didn’t count on was that we are a proud people and we know how to rise up over our circumstances.” Granny laid aside the sweetgrass coil basket she was weaving long enough to relight her pipe.

“You children heard that old sayin’, ‘Good comes from bad’ and that’s been true time and time again. Because they brought us directly here to Ibo, we didn’t never mix with nobody. Didn’t nobody interfere with us and we stayed true to ourselves. We didn’t never lose our African ways.

“Y’all better pay attention now to what I’m tellin’ you. Our language, our religion, our customs, our food, our stories, our whole way of lookin’ at life, all that’s rooted back in our homeland, back in Africa. Folks like me who’ve lived a long time, we know how important it is for you young folks to know your history. I’m gonna keep makin’ sure you know who you are and where you came from.”

Taking advantage of the summer weather, the voyage across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and up the east coast was relatively calm. The ship stopped at various ports to pick up fresh supplies and water. Periodically the captives were brought out of the dark, filthy hold up on deck for a little fresh air and exercise. The sailors searched the lower decks and anyone who had died was unceremoniously thrown overboard. Eventually the noise did quiet down.

“Yeah, it was just noise to them men on that *bateau*, gibberish. Like the Tower of Babel in the Bible. Lots of different tribes everybody speakin’ their own tongue. At first the people couldn’t understand one another. But what those sailors took as defeat and silence was really the beginnin’ of a new language. Gullah Geechee. Like a good gumbo, a little of this, a pinch of that. We took African, Indian, Spanish, English, Carib, mixed it up and made it our own.”

Finally the Windward reached Georgia, but the trials of the captives weren’t over. To prevent the spread of disease in Savannah, city officials built a nine-story quarantine facility, or “pest house,” on the west side of Tybee Island. Men and women like those aboard the Windward who had been brought directly

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from West Africa were quarantined while they waited for a physician to inspect them and determine if they had any infectious diseases. If they were sick, they were confined to the hospital until they were cured.

Only after they were pronounced clean were Harding and Donegan allowed to transport their possessions to their final destination, Ibo Island. History said the island had gotten its name from a tribe of captives from southeastern Nigeria who jumped overboard and drowned themselves rather than become slaves.

Almost all of the Windward's original cargo survived the Middle Passage. After the oppressive, dark of the ship's hold, just setting their feet on solid, dry land and lookin' into an endless blue sky was an improvement. In their first moments on Ibo Island, they were greeted with hot, humid, buggy air...just like West Africa. In their first weeks, they came to recognize tidal streams and marshes, the fish in the rivers and the sea. It wasn't home, but it was somehow familiar so they took what comfort they could from that.

The one thing they didn't recognize was a strange, gray hair-like plant hanging from the trees. It didn't have thorns. It didn't have fruit or flowers. It was just there, softly blowing in the breeze. Spanish moss takes nothing from its hosts: the live oaks, cypress, sweet gum and crepe myrtles. It lives on rain, fog, sun and dust. In many ways it defines the area in which it grows and to some extent, it defines the people as well.

As soon as the cargo was released from Tybee Island, Harding and Donegan wasted no time in putting the slaves to work. Covered with mosquitoes and sand flies, they stood knee-deep in water, to clear 500 acres of swamp. They cut the cypress trees, hacked out the thick undergrowth, leveled the ground, dug irrigation ditches, constructed dikes, planted and

tended the rice...all by hand. Simultaneously and undetected they also began to create the Geechee culture.

“Through the Middle Passage and all those slavery days, we survived. After the Civil War, we survived. When slavery was over, we survived. After the First World War, we survived. After the Great Depression, we survived. Now it’s the spring of 1942, there’s another war going on and we’re still survivin’. One hundred and forty years and we’re still here and holdin’ on to our African ways.”

Granny took a long pull on her pipe. “That’s not too bad, if you ask me. The Christians got the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Well, we Geechee got God, the rootman to conjure up spells, the numbers man to help us win a little money once in a while and the spirits of all our dead ancestors who don’t never go away. That’s what we got and that’s plenty good enough.”

Like every child on Ibo Island, Bird and his sister Robin Hamlin had heard these stories all their lives. It was their entertainment and their history. In the evenings, people came together, the children made themselves comfortable in the low hanging branches of the oak trees and listened to the “old folks” tell stories. Sometimes they were Middle Passage stories, sometimes creation stories or trickster stories about how the people tricked the master.

Robin put down the sweetgrass bottom she’d been weaving. Later on Granny would “feed the basket,” build it up and add a handle and a top. “Come on, Bird, we gotta get home.” Bird gathered up what he had been working on and followed his older sister down the sandy road. The trees reached out and touched branches high above the ground, making a cool green tunnel. Robin was never sure whether the wind made the moss sway or whether the moss made the breezes blow.

“Wait,” Bird said and turned back to Granny’s. Robin paid him little mind since he was always running off some place. She

walked on another couple of yards just to put some distance between her and the road that went back to the old Donegan place. No need to take chances. She didn't want to get caught by a boo hag or a haint that might be hanging around there.

It was common knowledge that anyone who wandered into a haint's territory—which could be anywhere—without some protection from the root doctor could find themselves in serious trouble. Of course, there are some warning signs to let you know when a haint was close. First, the air would get hotter than usual and very, very damp and it would smell like something rotten.

Haints were scary, but they also had some weaknesses. They didn't like indigo blue. In the old days, indigo was an important crop on Ibo, second only to rice. After the leaves fermented and the liquid was drawn off several times, the overseers gave the bottom of the pot to the slaves.

Granny told how they'd take that thick, dark residue and paint their doors and window frames. The smell alone was enough to keep haints away. Geechee people still painted their doors and windows blue.

Salt was a good repellent too, but you couldn't just run around pouring salt on anybody you thought was suspicious. Best just to avoid the haints all together. Still she didn't want to get too far ahead, because she knew Bird would show up sooner or later.

When Bird got to Granny's, he jerked open the screen door leading to the wide front porch. Granny looked up from her work. "You forget somethin', child?"

"Yes'em." Shyly he took a piece of paper out of his pocket, smoothed it out and handed it to her.

She studied the pencil drawing. "Well look at that. That's me, ain't it? Sho is, looks just like me, pipe and all. I can most

nearly smell the smoke. Bird, you got ‘the gift,’ no doubt about it.”

The boy smiled. It wasn’t the first time someone had told him that. He kissed Granny on the cheek and ran out, slamming the door behind him. From the yard, he waved goodbye and then ran to catch up with Robin, his bare feet making small dust devils along the road.

“What’chu give Granny?”

“Nothin’. Just a thing I drew.”

Robin believed somebody must have given her brother some powerful good root—what some of the old folks called *mojo*—because he could draw anything he saw. He’d been doing it since before he started school. Their mamma said he could draw before he could talk, which explained a lot. He still didn’t talk much. Instead he carried a beat-up old school notebook wherever he went. When something caught his attention, he’d sit down and draw.

Geechee people had gotten used to seeing him hanging around, and he sat so quiet and so still, they hardly noticed him anymore. Then when they least expected it, he’d hand them a drawing. Almost every house on Ibo Island had at least one of Bird’s sketches tacked up on a wall. His drawing *mojo* was enough to make him famous on their little island.

CHAPTER TWO

Bird did like to draw a lot more than he liked to talk. In fact, he didn't understand why everybody made such a fuss about something so easy. At first he thought everyone could draw just like everyone could see. It took him a while to figure out not everyone saw things the same way.

Robin saw everything all at once. The sky, the river, the boat, the people, the nets, the marsh grass, flowers, everything. Bird saw things one at a time. A cloud, the ripples on the water, the color of a boat, hands casting a net, marsh grass bending in the wind, the tracks raccoons made that looked like tiny hand prints, blue-purple beach morning glories and sea oats. Most people talked about what they saw. Bird drew it.

One of his favorite spots was on the edge of the marsh behind their house. And his favorite time of year was spring when the big, high tides came. Then the whole marsh turned white with water. It was like the marsh grass was growing out of a field of milky white glass.

At low tide, it all turned green. Bird liked to get up close enough to see the little clams that grew in the mud, or the outline of a creek running through the marsh. All that was

hidden at high tide. And the best part was it happened twice a day, every day.

Bird was patient. He knew if he sat still enough the birds would come. White egrets and ibis and blue herons and a million seagulls. And down in the grass were the funny little marsh hens that raised a ruckus loud enough to be heard all the way up to the house.

His other favorite place was the big, flat beach facing the open ocean, although looking out over all that water scared him. It had no stopping place, it was too big. The ocean only felt friendly at the edge where he could walk in the foam and get his feet wet.

Like most people on Ibo, Bird didn't know how to swim. The rivers and the ocean were for work, not for play. At least that was true for humans. It was the dolphins that seemed to have all the fun. Bird had his fun on land, after his chores were done, of course.

Geechee culture taught that each person was expected to contribute something to the community; to excel at something. Bird worried about that a good deal. Robin was the smartest girl in school. She could already weave sweetgrass baskets and she was learning to be a healer like their mother. His dad could fix anything that was broken and build beautiful things out of wood.

Granny was the best weaver on Ibo. People bought her baskets to store things around the house. She also made sweetgrass hats for the local girls to wear on Sunday. But her real talent was creating new designs and making fancy baskets to sell to tourists along Highway 17.

Because there was no doctor on Ibo, Bird's mother, Ammee, was the person local folks came to when they were sick. She didn't do root or cast spells. Her remedies came from the plants that grew wild on the island or things women usually

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had on hand. People counted on her, so Ammee had cures for almost everything. Honey with sea lavender oil for burns. Honey and lemon for sore throats. Chamomile tea and honey to calm colicky babies.

Spider webs were an ancient way to stop bleeding. Lard or butter smeared on a bruise kept it from turning blue. Green cockleburs made into a poultice cleared up skin ailments and warm Coca Cola settled an upset stomach.

Earaches were cured by heating a thick slice of onion in a little oil, wrapping it in a rag and laying it on the affected ear. For a cold or a cough, Ammee recommended a tent over a pot of hot water with sprigs of thyme.

Moonshine was also used for medicinal purposes. Even with the current wartime rationing of sugar, Ammee managed to make the best shine in the county. A potion of shine and hot peppers drunk as fast as possible cured a fever...as long as the patient didn't say "thank you."

Bird tried, but so far he hadn't found anything useful he was good at. One hot May afternoon near the end of the school year, he was trying hard to stay awake when Miss Lucy Chalmers, his teacher, started telling stories. She had lived in New York City for a while and she talked about Harlem a lot. It was a sure-fire way to get sleepy children to pay attention.

She told them what it was like to be at the Apollo Theatre on talent-show nights. The audience got to choose the winners and if they didn't like somebody, a man with a broom came and swept them off the stage. The whole class laughed at that.

Once she had their attention, she went on to talk about the Harlem Renaissance. She read them a poem by Langston Hughes and told them the story of *Porgy and Bess*, an opera about Gullah street venders in Charleston. Then she talked about painters and mentioned an artist named Palmer Hayden.

At the word “artist,” Bird raised his hand and started asking questions.

“What kind of pictures did he draw? Is he still alive? Where does he live? Did you ever meet him?”

It was so unusual for Bird to speak up, the whole class stopped to listen. Miss Chalmers had just planned to talk about the Harlem Renaissance, not specifically Palmer Hayden, but she didn’t want to discourage Bird’s curiosity. “Well, let’s see,” she said checking her notes. “Palmer Hayden grew up in the south, in Virginia.”

“Just like me,” Bird thought.

“He was born in 1890, so how old would that make him now?”

Robin’s hand shot up. “He’d be 52.”

“That’s right. To answer your question, Bird, I never met him, but as far as I know, he’s still living in Harlem. It says here he started drawing when he was a small child.”

“Just like me.”

“He studied in New York City and he drew pictures of people in the city, but he also drew pictures of people he knew who lived along the rivers and the coast.”

“Just like me.”

“He became very famous and lots of people bought his paintings.”

Bird rushed home from school to tell his mamma and dad the news. There was a man who made money selling his pictures. That planted an idea in Bird’s mind.

The next Saturday morning just about daybreak, “day clean” Granny called it, Bird asked her if he could go along to help set up her sweetgrass basket stand along Highway 17. He brought some of his drawings and Granny helped him display them. When a customer stopped to look at Granny’s baskets, she pointed out Bird’s sketches.

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“Those are pretty good, son. How much do you want for that one?” Bird kept his head down and didn’t answer.

“Does he talk?” the man asked.

“Yessir, he’s just shy.” No need to try to explain that Geechee children were taught it was rude and disrespectful to look a grownup in the eye without permission. Granny sold two baskets and negotiated the grand sum of 25 cents—two dimes and a nickel—for Bird’s drawing. Bird had finally found something he could do to be useful. He was anxious to get home and give the money to his mother.

Ammee congratulated him and took the two dimes which went into a coffee tin hidden in the bottom of the rice can under the sink. Slyly she added two pennies to the nickel and handed that back to Bird. “Your dad says a man should always have a little talkin’ money in his pocket. So you keep this.” Bird ran out the door jingling the coins.

When Ammee and Jacob were first married, she insisted that part of his salary and any money she made be put back for emergencies. Like most of the families on Ibo, they lived off the land and were self-sufficient. But in the world on the mainland, the only thing that counted was cash money. Ammee had heard stories of folks losing their land because they couldn’t repay loans or pay their taxes. She was determined that was never going to happen to her family.

After he sold his first sketch, whenever he wasn’t in school, Bird went to the mainland with Granny to sell his pictures. Granny still did all the talking, but he was proud to be able to add his money to the coins in the coffee tin. He might not be making a lot of money like Palmer Hayden, or helping the Geechee community exactly, but he *was* helping his family and he liked the sound of talkin’ money in his pocket. He started looking for new things to draw and that caused him to see Ibo Island a little differently.

Life on the island had a softness to it, like the moss. Time moved slow and easy. Bird spent hours drawing and listening to the sounds of the island. The pine trees were so tall you had to really listen to hear them whisper in the wind. The palmetto plants squatted on the ground and rattled in the slightest breeze. Bird liked the live oaks best. He always thought of them as ancient old men with long mossy arms, just sitting silently watching what went on in the world.

Water made sounds too. Along the rivers, the marsh grass hummed a low song and fish jumping added a high note from time to time. His dad's net made a swishing sound as he cast it over the water. The ocean had a big sound, steady and deep and strong.

Best of all, Bird loved the way the island could play tricks on him. When the fog rolled in, everything disappeared just like magic. The best time to go down to the dock was early in the morning when the ferry and the little fishing boats came in. The whole world was silent except for the noise the big fog-drops made hitting the dry palmetto plants. The island would cover itself in a blanket of gray mist and challenge Bird to find specific shapes. He would listen and strain his eyes to see through the heavy fog. And the island would always surprise him. A boat would appear, but never in the place he expected it to be.

Ibo was one of the smaller barrier islands off the coast of Georgia. It was about ten miles long and three miles across. Children were free to roam without fear of getting lost. They were taught to respect the waters. They provided food and income but they could swallow curious children who wandered too near. Life moved only as fast as a person could walk, or ride in Mr. Cathy's ox cart, or pole a boat on the rivers or inlets.

It was a tight community of about 70 people spread out among ten families. Everything they needed was within walking

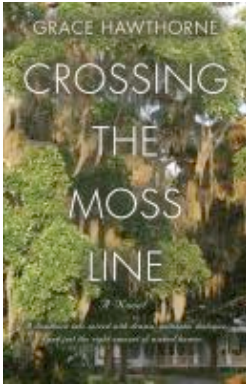
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distance, the church, the school and the little store Bird's dad built. Because there were so few kids on the island, the one-room school only covered grades one through six. After that, kids took the morning ferry to the mainland and then rode a bus the rest of the way to the big school.

Bird had just turned 12 and was about to finish the sixth grade. Summer vacation hadn't even started yet, and he was already worrying about next September. He was not looking forward to it, in fact, he was dreading the whole idea. With the exception of going with Granny to sell baskets, he'd never been off the island. The Geechee community was his whole life. What little he had seen of the mainland scared him. It was too fast and too noisy.

Of course, he would be catching the ferry with some other kids his age and Robin who was in the ninth grade. She loved going to Meridian because she loved anything new and different. Not like Bird.

It wasn't just the school that bothered him. Since classes were over at 3:00 and there was no regular afternoon ferry, students had to wait for a late ferry and sometimes it didn't run. The solution was for students to board with a friend or relative and only come home on the weekends. Bird didn't like the sound of that at all. He didn't want to be away from his family that long. He wasn't sure why, but he had a very bad feeling about the whole thing.



Set in the early 40s, Crossing the Moss Line is a tragicomedy about slippery choices and unintended consequences reaching from the Geechee community along the Georgia coast to New York City and back. When a practical joke goes wrong, it takes God, the conjure man, a Jewish mother, and an assortment of uniquely Southern characters to set things right again. The tale is told with drama, authentic dialogue, and a touch of slightly wicked humor.

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