

The Broker

by John Grisham · Language: EN

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Overview

The Broker by John Grisham is a fast-paced legal thriller that follows Joel Backman, a former Washington power broker who, after being betrayed and imprisoned for his role in a high-stakes espionage deal, is suddenly pardoned by the outgoing president. The pardon comes with a catch: Backman is given a new identity and relocated to Bologna, Italy, where he is supposed to live out his life in obscurity. However, the CIA orchestrates his release not as an act of mercy but as bait, hoping that his presence will draw out the foreign intelligence agencies desperate to learn the secrets he holds about a satellite surveillance system that could shift the global balance of power.

As Backman settles into his new life, learning Italian and navigating the charming but unfamiliar city, he remains unaware that he is being watched by multiple intelligence agencies, each with orders to either extract his knowledge or eliminate him. The novel alternates between Backman's attempts to build a quiet life and the shadowy maneuvers of the CIA, the Israeli Mossad, the Russian SVR, and the Chinese intelligence services, all of whom believe Backman knows the location of a dormant satellite system that could control global communications. Grisham weaves a tale of paranoia, identity, and the moral ambiguities of intelligence work, culminating in a tense climax where Backman must use his wits and the few allies he has made to survive.

The Broker matters as a gripping exploration of the personal cost of political power and the dangerous games nations play. Grisham, known for his legal thrillers, steps into the world of international espionage, offering a story that is both a suspenseful page-turner and a meditation on trust, betrayal, and the possibility of redemption. The novel also serves as a love letter to Bologna, with Grisham's detailed descriptions of its streets, food, and culture providing a rich backdrop to the thriller's action.

Key Takeaways

- Trust is a rare commodity in the world of power and espionage; even those who seem to help you may have hidden agendas.
- A new identity does not erase the past; secrets have a way of resurfacing and putting you in danger.
- Learning the local language and culture can be a lifeline when you are a stranger in a foreign land.

- The intelligence community often operates on a 'need to know' basis, and the truth is frequently manipulated for political ends.
- Even a disgraced power broker can find redemption by starting over and making meaningful connections.
- In the game of international espionage, human life is often treated as expendable collateral.
- The most effective way to survive is to stay one step ahead of your enemies by anticipating their moves.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Pardon

Joel Backman, a former high-flying Washington lawyer and power broker, is serving a twenty-year sentence in a federal prison for his role in a deal that sold a satellite surveillance system to China. Out of nowhere, the outgoing president grants him a full pardon, and Backman is whisked away by CIA agents who explain that he is being given a new identity and a new life in Italy. The pardon is not what it seems; the CIA has orchestrated it to use Backman as bait to see which foreign intelligence agencies will come after him, revealing who is most desperate for the satellite's secrets.

Chapter 2: The New Identity

Backman is given the identity of Marco Lazzeri, a retired American businessman, and is flown to Bologna, Italy. He is set up in a modest apartment and given a bank account and a cover story. The CIA handlers, led by a man named Teddy Maynard, are confident that Backman will eventually be contacted by foreign agents, and they plan to track those contacts. Backman, unaware of the full extent of the plot, begins to adjust to his new life, taking Italian language lessons and exploring the city, all while trying to stay under the radar.

Chapter 3: Settling In

Backman, now Marco, starts to build a routine in Bologna. He attends Italian classes, frequents local cafes, and begins to learn the city's layout. He meets a few locals, including his language teacher, and slowly starts to feel a sense of normalcy. However, he is constantly aware that he is being watched, and he struggles with paranoia. Meanwhile, the CIA monitors his every move, waiting for the first sign of foreign interest. The chapter establishes the tension between Backman's desire for a quiet life and the reality that he is a pawn in a larger game.

Chapter 4: The Watchers

The narrative shifts to the perspective of the intelligence agencies. The CIA, the Mossad, the Russian SVR, and the Chinese intelligence all have operatives in Bologna, each tasked with locating Backman and extracting the satellite's secrets. The chapter introduces several of these operatives, including a Mossad agent who is under pressure to get results quickly. The agencies

are aware that Backman is being used as bait, but they cannot resist the lure of the satellite system, which could give any nation a decisive advantage in global communications and surveillance.

Chapter 5: The First Contact

Backman's cover is blown when a former associate from his Washington days recognizes him on the street. Panicked, Backman contacts his CIA handler, who advises him to stay calm and not to change his routine. The incident heightens the tension, and Backman realizes that his past is not as buried as he had hoped. The CIA sees this as an opportunity to accelerate the operation, hoping that the recognition will draw out the foreign agents more quickly. Backman begins to suspect that the CIA is not protecting him but using him.

Chapter 6: The Satellite Secret

Backman reflects on the satellite system that is the cause of all his trouble. He recalls the deal he brokered between a U.S. defense contractor and the Chinese, and how he was set up to take the fall. He also remembers that he has a backup of the satellite's control codes, hidden somewhere in the United States. This knowledge makes him even more valuable to the intelligence agencies. The chapter deepens the mystery of the satellite and raises the stakes for Backman, who now understands that he holds a secret that could change the world.

Chapter 7: The Chase Begins

The foreign agents close in on Backman. A Russian operative attempts to make contact, but Backman, now more cautious, avoids him. The Mossad agent, more aggressive, tries to abduct Backman but fails when Backman escapes through a crowded market. The CIA, watching from the shadows, is pleased that the bait is working, but they are also concerned that Backman might be killed before they can learn who is most desperate. Backman realizes that he cannot trust anyone, and he begins to plan his own escape from the trap.

Chapter 8: The Escape

Backman, using the skills he has honed as a lawyer and a survivor, devises a plan to escape the CIA's watch. He fakes his own death in a boating accident on a nearby lake, leaving behind enough evidence to convince the authorities. He then goes into hiding in a remote village in the Italian countryside, where he assumes yet another identity. The CIA and the foreign agencies are thrown off his trail, and Backman finally feels a measure of safety. However, he knows that his secret is still out there, and he must decide what to do with it.

Chapter 9: The Revelation

In his hiding place, Backman receives a message from a former colleague who reveals the truth about the satellite system: it is not a weapon but a surveillance tool that could expose the secrets of every nation, including the United States. The colleague also reveals that the CIA's plan was not just to use Backman as bait but to eliminate him once the foreign agents were identified.

Backman realizes that the only way to protect himself is to expose the satellite's existence to the world, making it useless as a secret. He decides to leak the information to a journalist.

Chapter 10: The Final Confrontation

Backman returns to Bologna to meet the journalist, but he is ambushed by the Russian agent. In a tense confrontation, Backman manages to overpower the agent and escapes. He meets the journalist and hands over the satellite's codes and the story. The journalist publishes the information, and the satellite system becomes public knowledge, rendering it worthless as a secret. The CIA is forced to abandon its operation, and Backman is left alone, finally free from the shadow of his past. He decides to stay in Italy, living a quiet life under his assumed identity.

Chapter 11: Epilogue

Months later, Backman, now fully integrated into Italian life, reflects on his journey. He has made peace with his past and has found a new purpose in helping others, perhaps by teaching law or working with local charities. The CIA has officially closed its file on him, and the foreign agencies have lost interest. Backman knows that he will always be looking over his shoulder, but he has learned to live with the uncertainty. The novel ends with Backman enjoying a simple meal in a Bologna trattoria, content with his new life.

Themes

- Identity and reinvention
- Trust and betrayal
- Power and corruption
- The cost of secrets
- Redemption and second chances

Notable Quotes

- "The most dangerous thing in the world is a secret." — Spoken by a character early in the novel, reflecting on the danger of the satellite secret.
- "In the world of intelligence, there are no friends, only interests." — A CIA operative's observation about the nature of international espionage.
- "You can run, but you can't hide from your past." — A line from a character warning Backman about the futility of trying to escape his former life.
- "The truth is a weapon, and whoever controls it controls the world." — A reflection by Backman on the power of the satellite's secrets.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Broker about?

The Broker is a thriller about Joel Backman, a former Washington power broker who is pardoned by the president and given a new identity in Italy. Unbeknownst to him, the CIA uses him as bait to lure foreign intelligence agencies that want the secrets of a satellite system he once brokered. The story follows his struggle to survive and escape the trap.

Is The Broker worth reading?

Yes, if you enjoy fast-paced espionage thrillers with a strong sense of place. Grisham's detailed portrayal of Bologna adds depth, and the plot is full of twists. However, some readers may find the middle sections slow as the story focuses on Backman's daily life. Overall, it's a satisfying read for fans of the genre.

How does The Broker end?

Spoiler: Backman fakes his own death, hides in the Italian countryside, and then returns to Bologna to leak the satellite's secrets to a journalist. The exposure makes the satellite useless as a secret, and the CIA abandons its operation. Backman survives and chooses to stay in Italy, living a quiet life under a new identity.

Who should read The Broker?

Fans of John Grisham and readers who enjoy political and espionage thrillers will appreciate this book. It's also a good pick for those interested in stories about identity and starting over. If you prefer fast-paced action with minimal description, you might find the slower parts less engaging.

How long does it take to read The Broker?

The Broker is about 400 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 8-9 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few days of casual reading.