

The Pelican Brief

by John Grisham · Language: EN

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Overview

The Pelican Brief is a legal thriller by John Grisham that follows Darby Shaw, a brilliant law student at Tulane University, who writes a legal brief theorizing that the assassinations of two Supreme Court justices are linked to a powerful oil tycoon. The brief, which she compiles for her law professor and lover Thomas Callahan, becomes a dangerous document when it falls into the wrong hands. After Callahan is murdered, Darby becomes a target and must go on the run, using her intelligence and resourcefulness to stay alive while trying to expose the truth.

The novel alternates between Darby's perspective and that of Gray Grantham, a Washington Post reporter who receives an anonymous tip about the brief and investigates the story. As Darby evades hired killers and corrupt officials, she and Grantham eventually connect, working together to uncover a conspiracy that reaches the highest levels of government and corporate power. The narrative builds to a tense climax where Darby must decide whether to reveal herself and testify or remain hidden forever.

The Pelican Brief is significant as one of Grisham's most popular and commercially successful novels, cementing his reputation as a master of the legal thriller genre. It explores themes of corruption, the abuse of power, and the vulnerability of individuals against vast institutional forces. The book's fast-paced plot and memorable protagonist have made it an enduring favorite, adapted into a major film starring Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington.

Key Takeaways

- A well-researched legal document can be a powerful weapon, but it can also make its author a target.
- When your life is in danger, trust your instincts and never stay in one place for long.
- The media can be a crucial ally in exposing corruption, but journalists must also protect their sources.
- Powerful interests will go to extreme lengths to protect their secrets, including murder.
- Even a law student can outmaneuver professional killers with intelligence and careful planning.
- The justice system can be manipulated by those with money and influence, making it unreliable for the powerless.
- Sometimes the only way to survive is to disappear and start a new life.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

Two Supreme Court justices, Abraham Rosenberg and Glenn Jensen, are assassinated in separate incidents in Washington, D.C. The FBI begins a massive investigation, but there are no immediate leads. The nation is shocked, and the President vows to find the killers.

Chapter 2

Darby Shaw, a law student at Tulane, learns of the assassinations and becomes fascinated. She begins researching the justices' backgrounds and opinions, looking for connections. Her professor and lover, Thomas Callahan, encourages her curiosity.

Chapter 3

Darby writes a legal brief, later called the Pelican Brief, theorizing that the murders were ordered by a wealthy oilman, Victor Mattiece, to influence a case about oil drilling in Louisiana wetlands. She gives the brief to Callahan, who is impressed but skeptical.

Chapter 4

Callahan shares the brief with an old friend at the FBI, who passes it up the chain. The brief reaches the White House and the conspirators, who realize Darby is a threat. They hire a professional killer, Khamel, to eliminate her and Callahan.

Chapter 5

Callahan is killed by a car bomb in New Orleans. Darby, who was supposed to be with him, narrowly escapes. She realizes the brief is the reason and goes into hiding, using cash and fake identities to stay ahead of the killers.

Chapter 6

Gray Grantham, a reporter at the Washington Post, receives a cryptic phone call from a man claiming to have information about the assassinations. The caller hints at a document called the Pelican Brief. Grantham begins investigating, despite his editor's skepticism.

Chapter 7

Darby moves around the country, changing hotels and disguises. She contacts Grantham anonymously, feeding him information about the brief and the conspiracy. Grantham starts to piece together the story, but he doesn't know Darby's identity.

Chapter 8

Grantham's investigation leads him to Victor Mattiece, a reclusive oil tycoon with ties to the White House. He learns that Mattiece has been trying to secure drilling rights in a protected

wetland area, which would be affected by a Supreme Court case.

Chapter 9

Darby and Grantham finally meet in person. She reveals her identity and gives him the full story, including the brief. They decide to work together to expose the conspiracy, but they are pursued by Khamel, who is closing in on them.

Chapter 10

Grantham writes a front-page story about the Pelican Brief and the conspiracy, but the Post's lawyers are cautious. Meanwhile, Khamel tracks Darby to a hotel and attempts to kill her. She escapes, but the danger escalates.

Chapter 11

The story is published, causing a national uproar. The FBI reopens the investigation, and Mattiece's empire begins to crumble. Khamel is killed by FBI agents. Darby, however, decides to remain in hiding, fearing for her safety even after the truth is out.

Chapter 12

Months later, Darby is living under a new identity in a small town. Grantham visits her, offering to help her return to a normal life, but she declines. She has accepted her new life, knowing that the truth came at a high personal cost.

Themes

- Corruption and power
- The role of the media
- Survival and identity
- Justice vs. law
- The cost of truth

Notable Quotes

- "The brief was a masterpiece, a work of art, a thing of beauty." — Darby reflects on the legal brief she wrote, which becomes the center of the conspiracy.
- "I'm not going to be a victim. I'm going to be a survivor." — Darby's internal resolve after she becomes a target.
- "The truth is a weapon, and I intend to use it." — Darby tells Grantham about her plan to expose the conspiracy.
- "You can't run forever, Darby." — Grantham urges Darby to come out of hiding.

- "The Pelican Brief was a bomb, and it was about to explode." — Narrator's description of the brief's potential impact.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Pelican Brief about?

The Pelican Brief is a legal thriller about a law student who writes a brief linking the assassinations of two Supreme Court justices to a powerful oil tycoon. When the brief becomes known, she is targeted by killers and must go on the run while a reporter investigates the story.

Is The Pelican Brief worth reading?

Yes, if you enjoy fast-paced legal thrillers with a smart protagonist and a plausible conspiracy. Grisham's storytelling is engaging, and the plot keeps you turning pages. It's a classic of the genre, though some readers may find the ending abrupt.

How does The Pelican Brief end?

Spoiler: Darby survives and the conspiracy is exposed through Grantham's article. Mattiece is arrested, and Khamel is killed. However, Darby chooses to remain in hiding under a new identity, unable to return to her old life, even though the danger has passed.

Who should read The Pelican Brief?

Fans of legal thrillers, political conspiracies, and strong female protagonists. It's also a good pick for readers who enjoy fast-paced, suspenseful novels with a touch of romance. If you like Grisham's other works, you'll likely enjoy this one.

How long does it take to read The Pelican Brief?

The Pelican Brief is about 400 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 6-7 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few days of casual reading.