BROKER

RISHAN

NOVEL

The Broker



Doubleday

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ISBN 0-385-51045-4

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The Broker

Also by John Grisham

A TIME TO KILL THE FIRM THE PELICAN BRIEF THE CLIENT THE CHAMBER THE RAINMAKER THE RUNAWAY JURY THE PARTNER THE STREET LAWYER THE TESTAMENT THE BRETHREN A PAINTED HOUSE SKIPPING CHRISTMAS THE SUMMONS THE KING OF TORTS BLEACHERS THE LAST JUROR

John GRISHAM

In the waning hours of a presidency that was destined to arouse less interest from historians than any since perhaps that of William Henry Harrison (thirty-one days from inauguration to death), Arthur Morgan huddled in the Oval Office with his last remaining friend and pondered his final decisions. At that moment he felt as though he'd botched every decision in the previous four years, and he was not overly confident that he could, somehow, so late in the game, get things right. His friend wasn't so sure either, though, as always, he said little and whatever he did say was what the President wanted to hear.

They were about pardons—desperate pleas from thieves and embezzlers and liars, some still in jail and some who'd never served time but who nonetheless wanted their good names cleared and their beloved rights restored. All claimed to be friends, or friends of friends, or die-hard supporters, though only a few had ever gotten the chance to proclaim their support before that eleventh hour. How sad that after four tumultuous years of leading the free world it would all fizzle into one miserable pile of requests from a bunch of crooks. Which thieves should be allowed to steal again? That was the momentous question facing the President as the hours crept by.

The last friend was Critz, an old fraternity pal from their days at Cornell when Morgan ran the student government while Critz stuffed the ballot boxes. In the past four years, Critz had served as press secretary, chief of staff, national security advisor, and even secretary of state, though that appointment lasted for only three months and was hastily rescinded when Critz's unique style of diplomacy nearly ignited World War III. Critz's last appointment had taken place the previous October, in the final frantic weeks of the reelection onslaught. With the polls showing President Morgan trailing badly in at least forty states, Critz seized control of the campaign and managed to alienate the rest of the country, except, arguably, Alaska.

It had been a historic election; never before had an incumbent president received so few electoral votes. Three to be exact, all from Alaska, the only state Morgan had not visited, at Critz's advice. Five hundred and thirty-five for the challenger, three for President Morgan. The word "landslide" did not even begin to capture the enormity of the shellacking.

Once the votes were counted, the challenger, following bad advice, decided to contest the results in Alaska. Why not go for all 538 electoral votes? he reasoned. Never again would a candidate for the presidency have the opportunity to completely whitewash his opponent, to throw the mother of all shutouts. For six weeks the President suffered even more while lawsuits raged in Alaska. When the supreme court there eventually awarded him the state's three electoral votes, he and Critz had a very quiet bottle of champagne.

President Morgan had become enamored of Alaska, even though the certified results gave him a scant seventeen-vote margin.

He should have avoided more states.

He even lost Delaware, his home, where the once-enlightened electorate had allowed him to serve eight wonderful years as governor. Just as he had never found the time to visit Alaska, his opponent had totally ignored Delaware—no organization to speak of, no television ads, not a single campaign stop. And his opponent still took 52 percent of the vote!

Critz sat in a thick leather chair and held a notepad with a list of a hundred things that needed to be done immediately. He watched his President move slowly from one window to the next, peering into the darkness, dreaming of what might have been. The man was depressed and humiliated. At fifty-eight his life was over, his career a wreck, his marriage crumbling. Mrs. Morgan had already moved back to Wilmington and was openly laughing at the idea of living in a cabin in Alaska. Critz had secret doubts about his friend's ability to hunt and fish for the rest of his life, but the prospect of living two thousand miles from Mrs. Morgan was very appealing. They might have carried Nebraska if the rather blue-blooded First Lady had not referred to the football team as the "Sooners."

The Nebraska Sooners!

Overnight, Morgan fell so far in the polls in both Nebraska and Oklahoma that he never recovered.

And in Texas she took a bite of prizewinning chili and began vomiting. As she was rushed to the hospital a microphone captured her still-famous words: "How can you backward people eat such a putrid mess?"

Nebraska has five electoral votes. Texas has thirty-four. Insulting the local football team was a mistake they could have survived. But no candidate could overcome such a belittling description of Texas chili.

What a campaign! Critz was tempted to write a book. Someone needed to record the disaster.

Their partnership of almost forty years was ending. Critz had lined up a job with a defense contractor for \$200,000 a year, and he would hit the lecture circuit at \$50,000 a speech if anybody was desperate enough to pay it. After dedicating his life to public service, he was broke and aging quickly and anxious to make a buck.

The President had sold his handsome home in Georgetown for a huge profit. He'd bought a small ranch in Alaska, where the people evidently admired him. He planned to spend the rest of his days there, hunting, fishing, perhaps writing his memoirs. Whatever he did in Alaska, it would have nothing to do with politics and Washington. He would not be the senior statesman, the grand old man of anybody's party, the sage voice of experience. No farewell tours, convention speeches, endowed chairs of political science. No presidential library. The people had spoken with a clear and thunderous voice. If they didn't want him, then he could certainly live without them.

"We need to make a decision about Cuccinello," Critz said. The President was still standing at a window, looking at nothing in the darkness, still pondering Delaware. "Who?"

"Figgy Cuccinello, that movie director who was indicted for having sex with a young starlet."

"How young?"

"Fifteen, I think."

"That's pretty young."

"Yes, it is. He fled to Argentina, where he's been for ten years. Now he's homesick, wants to come back and start making dreadful movies again. He says his art is calling him home."

"Perhaps the young girls are calling him home."

"That too."

"Seventeen wouldn't bother me. Fifteen's too young."

"His offer is up to five million."

The President turned and looked at Critz. "He's offering five million for a pardon?"

"Yes, and he needs to move quickly. The money has to be wired out of Switzerland. It's three in the morning over there."

"Where would it go?"

"We have accounts offshore. It's easy."

"What would the press do?"

"It would be ugly."

"It's always ugly."

"This would be especially ugly."

"I really don't care about the press," Morgan said.

Then why did you ask? Critz wanted to say.

"Can the money be traced?" the President asked and turned back to the window.

"No."

With his right hand, the President began scratching the back of his neck, something he always did when wrestling with a difficult decision. Ten minutes before he almost nuked North Korea, he'd scratched until the skin broke and blood oozed onto the collar of his white shirt. "The answer is no," he said. "Fifteen is too young."

Without a knock, the door opened and Artie Morgan, the President's son, barged in holding a Heineken in one hand and some papers in the other. "Just talked to the CIA," he said casually. He wore faded jeans and no socks. "Maynard's on the way over." He dumped the papers on the desk and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Artie would take the \$5 million without hesitation, Critz thought to himself, regardless of the girl's age. Fifteen was certainly not too young for Artie. They might have carried Kansas if Artie hadn't been caught in a Topeka motel room with three cheerleaders, the oldest of whom was seventeen. A grandstanding prosecutor had finally dropped the charges—two days after the election—when all three girls signed affidavits claiming they had not had sex with Artie. They were about to, in fact had been just seconds away from all manner of frolicking, when one of their mothers knocked on the motel room door and prevented an orgy.

The President sat in his leather rocker and pretended to flip through some useless papers. "What's the latest on Backman?" he asked.

In his eighteen years as director of the CIA, Teddy Maynard had been to the White House less than ten times. And never for dinner (he always declined for health reasons), and never to say howdy to a foreign hotshot (he couldn't have cared less). Back when he could walk, he had occasionally stopped by to confer with whoever happened to be president, and perhaps one or two of his policy makers. Now, since he was in a wheelchair, his conversations with the White House were by phone. Twice, a vice president had actually been driven out to Langley to meet with Mr. Maynard.

The only advantage of being in a wheelchair was that it provided a wonderful excuse to go or stay or do whatever he damn well pleased. No one wanted to push around an old crippled man.

A spy for almost fifty years, he now preferred the luxury of looking directly behind himself when he moved about. He traveled in an unmarked white van—bulletproof glass, lead walls, two heavily armed boys perched behind the heavily armed driver—with his wheelchair clamped to the floor in the rear and facing back, so that Teddy could see the traffic that could not see him. Two other vans followed at a distance, and any misguided attempt to get near the director would be instantly terminated. None was expected. Most of the world thought Teddy Maynard was either dead or idling away his final days in some secret nursing home where old spies were sent to die.

Teddy wanted it that way.

He was wrapped in a heavy gray quilt, and tended to by Hoby, his faithful aide. As the van moved along the Beltway at a constant sixty miles an hour, Teddy sipped green tea poured from a thermos by Hoby, and watched the cars behind them. Hoby sat next to the wheel-chair on a leather stool made especially for him.

A sip of tea and Teddy said, "Where's Backman right now?"

"In his cell," Hoby answered.

"And our people are with the warden?"

"They're sitting in his office, waiting."

Another sip from a paper cup, one carefully guarded with both hands. The hands were frail, veiny, the color of skim milk, as if they had already died and were patiently waiting for the rest of the body. "How long will it take to get him out of the country?"

"About four hours."

"And the plan is in place?"

"Everything is ready. We're waiting on the green light."

"I hope this moron can see it my way."

Critz and the moron were staring at the walls of the Oval Office, their heavy silence broken occasionally by a comment about Joel Backman. They had to talk about something, because neither would mention what was really on his mind.

Can this be happening?

Is this finally the end?

Forty years. From Cornell to the Oval Office. The end was so abrupt that they had not had enough time to properly prepare for it. They had been counting on four more years. Four years of glory as they carefully crafted a legacy, then rode gallantly into the sunset.

Though it was late, it seemed to grow even darker outside. The windows that overlooked the Rose Garden were black. A clock above the fireplace could almost be heard as it ticked nonstop in its final countdown.

"What will the press do if I pardon Backman?" the President asked, not for the first time.

"Go berserk."

"That might be fun."

"You won't be around."

"No, I won't." After the transfer of power at noon the next day, his escape from Washington would begin with a private jet (owned by an oil company) to an old friend's villa on the island of Barbados. At Morgan's instructions, the televisions had been removed from the villa, no newspapers or magazines would be delivered, and all phones had been unplugged. He would have no contact with anyone, not even Critz, and especially not Mrs. Morgan, for at least a month. He wouldn't care if Washington burned. In fact, he secretly hoped that it would.

After Barbados, he would sneak up to his cabin in Alaska, and there he would continue to ignore the world as the winter passed and he waited on spring.

"Should we pardon him?" the President asked.

"Probably," Critz said.

The President had shifted to the "we" mode now, something he invariably did when a potentially unpopular decision was at hand. For the easy ones, it was always "I." When he needed a crutch, and especially when he would need someone to blame, he opened up the decision-making process and included Critz.

Critz had been taking the blame for forty years, and though he was certainly used to it, he was nonetheless tired of it. He said, "There's a very good chance we wouldn't be here had it not been for Joel Backman."

"You may be right about that," the President said. He had always maintained that he had been elected because of his brilliant campaigning, charismatic personality, uncanny grasp of the issues, and clear vision for America. To finally admit that he owed anything to Joel Backman was almost shocking.

But Critz was too calloused, and too tired, to be shocked.

Six years ago, the Backman scandal had engulfed much of Washington and eventually tainted the White House. A cloud appeared over a popular president, paving the way for Arthur Morgan to stumble his way into the White House.

Now that he was stumbling out, he relished the idea of one last arbitrary slap in the face to the Washington establishment that had shunned him for four years. A reprieve for Joel Backman would rattle the walls of every office building in D.C. and shock the press into a blathering frenzy. Morgan liked the idea. While he sunned away on

Barbados, the city would gridlock once again as congressmen demanded hearings and prosecutors performed for the cameras and the insufferable talking heads prattled nonstop on cable news.

The President smiled into the darkness.

On the Arlington Memorial Bridge, over the Potomac River, Hoby refilled the director's paper cup with green tea. "Thank you," Teddy said softly. "What's our boy doing tomorrow when he leaves office?" he asked.

"Fleeing the country."

"He should've left sooner."

"He plans to spend a month in the Caribbean, licking his wounds, ignoring the world, pouting, waiting for someone to show some interest."

"And Mrs. Morgan?"

"She's already back in Delaware playing bridge."

"Are they splitting?"

"If he's smart. Who knows?"

Teddy took a careful sip of tea. "So what's our leverage if Morgan balks?"

"I don't think he'll balk. The preliminary talks have gone well. Critz seems to be on board. He has a much better feel of things now than Morgan. Critz knows that they would've never seen the Oval Office had it not been for the Backman scandal."

"As I said, what's our leverage if he balks?"

"None, really. He's an idiot, but he's a clean one."

They turned off Constitution Avenue onto 18th Street and were soon entering the east gate of the White House. Men with machine guns materialized from the darkness, then Secret Service agents in black trench coats stopped the van. Code words were used, radios squawked, and within minutes Teddy was being lowered from the van. Inside, a cursory search of his wheelchair revealed nothing but a crippled and bundled-up old man.

ARTIE, minus the Heineken, and again without knocking, poked his head through the door and announced: "Maynard's here."

"So he's alive," the President said.

"Barely."

"Then roll him in."

Hoby and a deputy named Priddy followed the wheelchair into the Oval Office. The President and Critz welcomed their guests and directed them to the sitting area in front of the fireplace. Though Maynard avoided the White House, Priddy practically lived there, briefing the President every morning on intelligence matters.

As they settled in, Teddy glanced around the room, as if looking for bugs and listening devices. He was almost certain there were none; that practice had ended with Watergate. Nixon laid enough wire in the White House to juice a small city, but, of course, he paid for it. Teddy, however, was wired. Carefully hidden above the axle of his wheelchair, just inches below his seat, was a powerful recorder that would capture every sound made during the next thirty minutes.

He tried to smile at President Morgan, but he wanted to say something like: You are without a doubt the most limited politician I have ever encountered. Only in America could a moron like you make it to the top.

President Morgan smiled at Teddy Maynard, but he wanted to say something like: I should have fired you four years ago. Your agency has been a constant embarrassment to this country.

Teddy: I was shocked when you carried a single state, albeit by seventeen votes.

Morgan: You couldn't find a terrorist if he advertised on a bill-board.

Teddy: Happy fishing. You'll get even fewer trout than votes.

Morgan: Why didn't you just die, like everyone promised me you would?

Teddy: Presidents come and go, but I never leave.

Morgan: It was Critz who wanted to keep you. Thank him for your job. I wanted to sack your ass two weeks after my inauguration.

Critz said loudly, "Coffee anyone?"

Teddy said, "No," and as soon as that was established, Hoby and Priddy likewise declined. And because the CIA wanted no coffee, President Morgan said, "Yes, black with two sugars." Critz nodded at a secretary who was waiting in a half-opened side door.

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He turned back to the gathering and said, "We don't have a lot of time."

Teddy said quickly, "I'm here to discuss Joel Backman."

"Yes, that's why you're here," the President said.

"As you know," Teddy continued, almost ignoring the President, "Mr. Backman went to prison without saying a word. He still carries some secrets that, frankly, could compromise national security."

"You can't kill him," Critz blurted.

"We cannot target American citizens, Mr. Critz. It's against the law. We prefer that someone else do it."

"I don't follow," the President said.

"Here's the plan. If you pardon Mr. Backman, and if he accepts the pardon, then we will have him out of the country in a matter of hours. He must agree to spend the rest of his life in hiding. This should not be a problem because there are several people who would like to see him dead, and he knows it. We'll relocate him to a foreign country, probably in Europe where he'll be easier to watch. He'll have a new identity. He'll be a free man, and with time people will forget about Joel Backman."

"That's not the end of the story," Critz said.

"No. We'll wait, perhaps a year or so, then we'll leak the word in the right places. They'll find Mr. Backman, and they'll kill him, and when they do so, many of our questions will be answered."

A long pause as Teddy looked at Critz, then the President. When he was convinced they were thoroughly confused, he continued. "It's a very simple plan, gentlemen. It's a question of who kills him."

"So you'll be watching?" Critz asked.

"Very closely."

"Who's after him?" the President asked.

Teddy refolded his veiny hands and recoiled a bit, then he looked down his long nose like a schoolteacher addressing his little third graders. "Perhaps the Russians, the Chinese, maybe the Israelis. There could be others."

Of course there were others, but no one expected Teddy to reveal everything he knew. He never had; never would, regardless of who was president and regardless of how much time he had left in the Oval Office. They came and went, some for four years, others for eight. Some loved the espionage, others were only concerned with the latest polls.

Morgan had been particularly inept at foreign policy, and with a few hours remaining in his administration, Teddy certainly was not going to divulge any more than was necessary to get the pardon.

"Why would Backman take such a deal?" Critz asked.

"He may not," Teddy answered. "But he's been in solitary confinement for six years. That's twenty-three hours a day in a tiny cell. One hour of sunshine. Three showers a week. Bad food—they say he's lost sixty pounds. I hear he's not doing too well."

Two months ago, after the landslide, when Teddy Maynard conceived this pardon scheme, he had pulled a few of his many strings and Backman's confinement had grown much worse. The temperature in his cell was lowered ten degrees, and for the past month he'd had a terrible cough. His food, bland at best, had been run through the processor again and was being served cold. His toilet flushed about half the time. The guards woke him up at all hours of the night. His phone privileges were curtailed. The law library that he used twice a week was suddenly off-limits. Backman, a lawyer, knew his rights, and he was threatening all manner of litigation against the prison and the government, though he had yet to file suit. The fight was taking its toll. He was demanding sleeping pills and Prozac.

"You want me to pardon Joel Backman so you can arrange for him to be murdered?" the President asked.

"Yes," Teddy said bluntly. "But we won't actually arrange it."

"But it'll happen."

"Yes."

"And his death will be in the best interests of our national security?"

"I firmly believe that."