



## The Firm by John Grisham

### An excerpt

One secretary dug through a file cabinet in search of something Avery needed immediately. The other secretary stood in front of his desk with a steno pad, occasionally writing down the instructions he gave when he stopped yelling into the receiver of his phone and listened to whoever was on the other end. Three red lights were blinking on the phone. When he spoke into the receiver the secretaries spoke sharply to each other. Mitch walked slowly into the office and stood by the door.

'Quiet!' Avery yelled to the secretaries.

The one in the file cabinet slammed the drawer and went to the next file cabinet, where she bent over and pulled the bottom drawer. Avery snapped his fingers at the other one and pointed at his desk calendar. He hung up without saying good-bye.

'What's my schedule for today?' he asked while pulling a file from his credenza.

'Ten a.m. meeting with the IRS downtown. One p.m. meeting with Nathan Locke on the Spinosa file. Three-thirty, partners' meeting. Tomorrow you're in tax court all day, and you're supposed to prepare all day today.'

'Great. Cancel everything. Check the flights to Houston Saturday afternoon and the return flights Monday, early Monday.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Mitch! Where's the Capps file?'

'On my desk.'

'How much have you done?'

'I've read through most of it.'

'We need to get in high gear. That was Sonny Capps on the phone. He wants to meet Saturday morning in Houston, and he wants a rough draft of the limited partnership agreement.'

Mitch felt a nervous pain in his empty stomach. If he recalled correctly, the agreement was a hundred and forty some pages long.

'Just a rough draft,' Avery said as he pointed to a secretary.

'No problem,' Mitch said with as much confidence as he could muster. 'It may not be perfect, but I'll have a rough draft.'

'I need it by noon Saturday, as perfect as possible. I'll get one of my secretaries to show Nina where the form agreements are in the memory bank. That will save some dictation and typing. I know this is unfair, but there's nothing fair about Sonny Capps. He's very demanding. He told me the deal must close in twenty days or it's dead. Everything is waiting on us.'

'I'll get it done.'

'Good. Let's meet at eight in the morning to see where we are.'

Avery punched one of the blinking lights and began arguing into the receiver. Mitch walked to his office and looked for the Capps file under the fifteen notebooks. Nina stuck her head in the door.

'Oliver Lambert wants to see you.'

'When?' Mitch asked.

'As soon as you can get there.'

Mitch looked at his watch. Three hours at the office and he was ready to call it a day. 'Can it wait?'

'I don't think so. Mr. Lambert doesn't usually wait for anybody.'

'I see.'

'You'd better go.'

'What does he want?'

'His secretary didn't say.'

He put on his coat, straightened his tie and raced upstairs to the fourth floor, where Mr. Lambert's secretary was waiting. She introduced herself and informed him she had been with the firm for thirty-one years. In fact, she was the second secretary hired by Mr. Anthony Bendini after he moved to Memphis. Ida Renfroe was her name, but everyone called her Mrs. Ida. She showed him into the big office and closed the door.

Oliver Lambert stood behind his desk and removed his reading glasses. He smiled warmly and laid his pipe in the brass holder. 'Good morning, Mitch,' he said softly, as if time meant nothing. 'Let's sit over there.' He waved to the sofa.

'Would you like coffee?' Mr. Lambert asked.

'No, thanks.'

Mitch sank into the couch and the partner sat in a stiff wing chair, two feet away and three feet higher. Mitch unbuttoned his coat and tried to relax. He crossed his legs and glanced at his new pair of Cole-Haans. Two hundred bucks. That was an hour's work for an associate at this

money-printing factory. He tried to relax. But he could feel the panic in Avery's voice and see the desperation in his eyes when he held the phone and listened to this Capps fellow on the other end. This, his second full day on the job, and his head was pounding and his stomach hurting.

Mr. Lambert smiled downward with his best sincere grandfatherly smile. It was time for a lecture of some sort. He wore a brilliant white shirt, button-down, all-cotton, pinpoint, with a small, dark silk bow tie which bestowed upon him a look of extreme intelligence and wisdom. As always, he was tanned beyond the usual midsummer Memphis scorched bronzeness. His teeth sparkled like diamonds. A sixty-year-old model.

'Just a couple of things, Mitch,' he said. 'I understand you've become quite busy.'

'Yes, sir, quite.'

'Panic is a way of life in a major law firm, and clients like Sonny Capps can cause ulcers. Our clients are our only assets, so we kill ourselves for them.'

Mitch smiled and frowned at the same time.

'Two things, Mitch. First, my wife and I want you and Abby to have dinner with us Saturday. We dine out quite often, and we enjoy having our friends with us. I am somewhat of a chef myself, and I appreciate fine food and drink. We usually reserve a large table at one of our favorite restaurants in town, invite our friends and spend the evening with a nine-course meal and the rarest of wines. Will you and Abby be free on Saturday?'

'Of course.'

'Kendall Mahan, Wally Hudson, Lamar Quin and their wives will also be there.'

'We'd be delighted.'

'Good. My favorite place in Memphis is Justine's. It's an old French restaurant with exquisite cuisine and an impressive wine list. Say seven Saturday?'

'We'll be there.'

'Second, there's something we need to discuss. I'm sure you're aware of it, but it's worth mentioning. It's very important to us. I know they taught you at Harvard that there exists a confidential relationship between yourself, as a lawyer, and your client. It's a privileged relationship and you can never be forced to divulge anything a client tells you. It's strictly confidential. It's a violation of our ethics if we discuss our client's business. Now, this applies to every lawyer, but at this firm we take this professional relationship very seriously. We don't discuss a client's business with anyone. Not other lawyers. Not spouses. Sometimes, not even each other. As a rule, we don't talk at home, and our wives have learned not to ask. The less you say, the better off you are. Mr. Bendini was a great believer in secrecy, and he taught us well. You will never hear a member of this firm mention even so much as a client's name outside this building. That's how serious we are.'

Where's he going with this? Mitch asked himself. Any second year law student could give this speech. 'I understand that, Mr. Lambert, and you don't have to worry about me.'

"'Loose tongues lose lawsuits.'" That was Mr. Bendini's motto, and he applied it to everything. We simply do not discuss our clients' business with anyone, and that includes our wives. We're very quiet, very secretive, and we like it that way. You'll meet other lawyers around town and sooner or later they'll ask something about our firm, or about a client. We don't talk, understand?'

'Of course, Mr. Lambert.'

'Good. We're very proud of you, Mitch. You'll make a great lawyer. And a very rich lawyer. See you Saturday.'

Mrs. Ida had a message for Mitch. Mr. Tolleson needed him at once. He thanked her and raced down the stairs, down the hallway, past his office, to the big one in the corner. There were now three secretaries digging and whispering to each other while the boss yelled into the telephone. Mitch found a safe spot in a chair by the door and watched the circus. The women pulled files and notebooks and mumbled in strange tongues among themselves. Occasionally Avery would snap his fingers and point here and there and they would jump like scared rabbits.

After a few minutes he slammed the phone down, again without saying goodbye. He glared at Mitch.

'Sonny Capps again. The Chinese want seventy-five million and he's agreed to pay it. There will be forty-one limited partners instead of twenty-five. We have twenty days, or the deal is off.'

Two of the secretaries walked over to Mitch and handed him thick expandable files.

'Can you handle it?' Avery asked, almost with a sneer. The secretaries looked at him.

Mitch grabbed the files and headed for the door. 'Of course I can handle it. Is that all?'

'It's enough. I don't want you to work on anything but that file between now and Saturday, understand?'

'Yes, boss.'

In his office he removed the bar review materials, all fifteen notebooks, and piled them in a corner. The Capps file was arranged neatly across the desk. He breathed deeply and began reading. There was a knock at the door.

'Who is it?'

Nina stuck her head through. 'I hate to tell you this, but your new furniture is here.'

He rubbed his temples and mumbled incoherently.

'Perhaps you could work in the library for a couple of hours.'

'Perhaps.'

They repacked the Capps file and moved the fifteen notebooks into the hall, where two large black men waited with a row of bulky cardboard boxes and an oriental rug.

Nina followed him to the second floor library.

'I'm supposed to meet with Lamar Quin at two to study for the bar exam. Call him and cancel. Tell him I'll explain later.'

'You have a two o'clock meeting with Gill Vaughn,' she said.

'Cancel that one too.'

'He's a partner.'

'Cancel it. I'll make it up later.'

'It's not wise.'

'Just do as I say.'

'You're the boss.'

'Thank you.'

The paperhanger was a short muscle-bound woman advanced in years but conditioned to hard work and superbly trained. For almost forty years now, she explained to Abby, she had hung expensive paper in the finest homes in Memphis. She talked constantly, but wasted no motion. She cut precisely, like a surgeon, then applied glue like an artist. While it dried, she removed her tape measure from her leather work belt and analyzed the remaining corner of the dining room. She mumbled numbers which Abby could not decipher. She gauged the length and height in four different places, then committed it all to memory. She ascended the stepladder and instructed Abby to hand her a roll of paper. It fit perfectly. She pressed it firmly to the wall and commented for the hundredth time on how nice the paper was, how expensive, how long it would look good and last. She liked the color too. It blended wonderfully with the curtains and the rug. Abby had long since grown tired of saying thanks. She nodded and looked at her watch. It was time to start dinner.

When the wall was finished, Abby announced it was quitting time and asked her to return at nine the next morning. The lady said certainly, and began cleaning up her mess. She was being paid twelve dollars an hour, cash, and was agreeable to almost anything. Abby admired the room. They would finish it tomorrow, and the wallpapering would be complete except for two bathrooms and the den. The painting was scheduled to begin next week. The glue from the paper and the wet lacquer from the mantel and the newness of the furniture combined for a wonderful fresh aroma. Just like a new house.

Abby said goodbye to the paperhanger and went to the bedroom where she undressed and lay across her bed. She called her husband, spoke briefly to Nina and was told. he was in a meeting and would be a while. Nina said he would call. Abby stretched her long, sore legs and rubbed her shoulders. The ceiling fan spun slowly above her. Mitch would be home, eventually. He would work a hundred hours a week for a while, then cut back to eighty. She could wait.

She awoke an hour later and jumped from the bed. It was almost six. Veal piccata. Veal piccata. She stepped into a pair of khaki walking shorts and slipped on a white polo. She ran to the kitchen, which was finished except for some paint and a set of curtains due in next week. She found the recipe in a pasta cookbook and arranged the ingredients neatly on the counter-

top. There had been little red meat in law school, maybe an occasional hamburger steak. When she cooked, it had been chicken this or chicken that. There had been a lot of sandwiches and hot dogs.

But now, with all this sudden affluence, it was time to learn to cook. In the first week she prepared something new every night, and they ate whenever he got home. She planned the meals, studied the cookbooks, experimented with the sauces. For no apparent reason, Mitch liked Italian food, and with spaghetti and pork capellini tried and perfected, it was time for veal piccata. She pounded the veal scallops with a mallet until they were thin enough, then laid them in flour seasoned with salt and pepper. She put a pan of water on the burner for the linguine. She poured a glass of Chablis and turned on the radio. She had called the office twice since lunch, and he had not found time to return the calls. She thought of calling again, but said no. It was his turn. Dinner would be fixed, and they would eat whenever he got home.

The scallops were sautéed in hot oil for three minutes until the veal was tender; then removed. She poured the oil from the pan and added wine and lemon juice until it was boiling. She scraped and stirred the pan to thicken the sauce. She returned the veal to the pan, and added mushrooms and artichokes and butter. She covered the pan and let it simmer.

She fried bacon, sliced tomatoes, cooked linguine and poured another glass of wine. By seven, dinner was ready; bacon and tomato salad with tubettini, veal piccata, and garlic bread in the oven. He had not called. She took her wine to the patio and looked around the backyard. Hearsay ran from under the shrubs. Together they walked the length of the yard, surveying the Bermuda and stopping under the two large oaks. The remains of a long-abandoned tree house were scattered among the middle branches of the largest oak. Initials were carved on its trunk. A piece of rope hung from the other. She found a rubber ball, threw it and watched as the dog chased it. She listened for the phone through the kitchen window. It did not ring.

Hearsay froze, then growled at something next door. Mr. Rice emerged from a row of perfectly trimmed box hedges around his patio. Sweat dripped from his nose and his cotton undershirt was soaked. He removed his green gloves, and noticed Abby across the chain-link fence, under her tree. He smiled. He looked at her brown legs and smiled. He wiped his forehead with a sweaty forearm and headed for the fence.

'How are you?' he asked, breathing heavy. His thick gray hair dripped and clung to his scalp.

'Just fine, Mr. Rice. How are you?'

'Hot. Must be a hundred degrees.'

Abby slowly walked to the fence to chat. She had caught his stares for a week now, but did not mind. He was at least seventy and probably harmless. Let him look. Plus, he was a living, breathing, sweating human who could talk and maintain a conversation to some degree. The paperhanger had been her only source of dialogue since Mitch left before dawn.

'Your lawn looks great,' she said.

He wiped again and spat on the ground. 'Great? You call this great? This belongs in a magazine. I've never seen a puttin' green look this good. I deserve garden of the month, but they won't give it to me. Where's your husband?'

'At the office. He's working late.'

'It's almost eight. He must've left before sunup this morning. I take my walk at six-thirty, and he's already gone. What's with him?'

'He likes to work.'

'If I had a wife like you, I'd stay at home. Couldn't make me leave.'

Abby smiled at the compliment. 'How is Mrs. Rice?'

He frowned, then yanked a weed out of the fence. 'Not too good, I'm afraid. Not too good.' He looked away and bit his lip. Mrs. Rice was almost dead with cancer. There were no children. She had a year, the doctors said. A year at the most. They had removed most of her stomach, and the tumors were now in the lungs. She weighed ninety pounds and seldom left the bed. During their first visit across the fence his eyes watered when he talked of her and of how he would be alone after fifty-one years.

'Naw, they won't give me garden of the month. Wrong part of town. It always goes to those rich folks who hire yard boys to do all the work while they sit by the pool and sip daiquiris. It does look good, doesn't it?'

'It's incredible. How many times a week do you mow?'

'Three or four. Depends on the rain. You want me to mow yours?'

'No. I want Mitch to mow it.'

'He ain't got time, seems like. I'll watch it, and if it needs a little trim, I'll come over.'

Abby turned and looked at the kitchen window. 'Do you hear the phone?' she asked, walking away. Mr. Rice pointed to his hearing aid.