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JOHN
GRISHAM

A NOVEL

THE FIRM

The Firm

by John Grisham

Chapter 1

The senior partner studied the resume for the hundredth time and again found nothing he disliked about Mitchell Y. McDeere, at least not on paper. He had the brains, the ambition, the good looks. And he was hungry; with his background, he had to be. He was married, and that was mandatory. The Firm had never hired an unmarried lawyer, and it frowned heavily on divorce, as well as womanizing and drinking. Drug testing was in the contract. He had a degree in accounting, passed the CPA exam the first time he took it and wanted to be a tax lawyer, which of course was a requirement with a tax firm. He was white, and The Firm had never hired a black. They managed this by being secretive and clubbish and never soliciting job applications. Other firms solicited, and hired blacks. This firm recruited, and remained lily white. Plus, The Firm was in Memphis, of all places, and the top blacks wanted New York or Washington or Chicago. McDeere was a male, and there were no women in. That mistake had been made in the mid-seventies when they recruited the number one grad from Harvard, who happened to be a she and a wizard at taxation. She lasted four turbulent years and was killed in a car wreck.

He looked good, on paper. He was their top choice. In fact, for this year there were no other prospects. The list was very short. It was McDeere or no one.

The managing partner, Royce McKnight, studied a dossier labeled:

Mitchell Y. McDeere,

Harvard

An inch thick with small print and a few photographs, it had been prepared by some exCIA agents in a private intelligence outfit in Bethesda. They were clients of and each year did the investigating for no fee. It was easy work, they said, checking out unsuspecting law students. They learned, for

instance, that he preferred to leave the Northeast, that he was holding three job offers, two in New York and one in Chicago, and that the highest offer was \$76,000 and the lowest was \$68,000. He was in demand. He had been given the opportunity to cheat on a securities exam during his second year. He declined, and made the highest grade in the class. Two months ago he had been offered cocaine at a law school party. He said No and left when everyone began snorting. He drank an occasional beer, but drinking was expensive and he had no money. He owed close to \$23,000 in student loans. He was hungry.

Royce McKnight flipped through the dossier and smiled. McDeere was their man.

Lamar Quin was thirty-two and not yet a partner. He had been brought along to look young and act young and project a youthful image for Bendini, Lambert & Locke, which in fact was a young firm, since most of the partners retired in their late forties or early fifties with money to burn. He would make partner in this firm. With a six-figure income guaranteed for the rest of his life, Lamar could enjoy the twelve-hundred-dollar tailored suits that hung so comfortably from his tall, athletic frame. He strolled nonchalantly across the thousand-dollar-a-day suite and poured another cup of decaf. He checked his watch. He glanced at the two partners sitting at the small conference table near the windows.

Precisely at two-thirty someone knocked on the door. Lamar looked at the partners, who slid the resume and dossier into an open briefcase. All three reached for their jackets. Lamar buttoned his top button and opened the door.

“Mitchell McDeere?” he asked with a huge smile and a hand thrust forward.

“Yes.” They shook hands violently.

“Nice to meet you, Mitchell. I’m Lamar Quin.”

“My pleasure. Please call me Mitch.” He stepped inside and quickly surveyed the spacious room.

“Sure, Mitch.” Lamar grabbed his shoulder and led him across the suite, where the partners introduced themselves. They were exceedingly warm and cordial. They offered him coffee, then water. They sat around a shiny mahogany conference table and exchanged pleasantries. McDeere unbuttoned his coat and crossed his legs. He was now a seasoned veteran in the search of employment, and he knew they wanted him. He relaxed. With three job offers from three of the most prestigious firms in the country, he did not need this interview, this firm. He could afford to be a little overconfident now. He was there out of curiosity. And he longed for warmer weather.

Oliver Lambert, the senior partner, leaned forward on his elbows and took control of the preliminary chitchat. He was glib and engaging with a mellow, almost professional baritone. At sixty-one, he was the grandfather of the firm and spent most of his time administering and balancing the enormous egos of some of the richest lawyers in the country. He was the counselor, the one the younger associates went to with their troubles. Mr. Lambert also handled the recruiting, and it was his mission to sign Mitchell Y. McDeere.

“Are you tired of interviewing?” asked Oliver Lambert.

“Not really. It’s part of it.”

Yes, yes, they all agreed. Seemed like yesterday they were interviewing and submitting resumes and scared to death they wouldn’t find a job and three years of sweat and torture would be down the drain. They knew what he was going through, all right.

“May I ask a question?” Mitch asked.

“Certainly.”

“Sure.”

“Anything.”

“Why are we interviewing in this hotel room? The other firms interview on campus through the placement office.”

“Good question.” They all nodded and looked at each other and agreed it was a good question.

“Perhaps I can answer that, Mitch,” said Royce McKnight, the managing partner. “You must understand our firm. We are different, and we take pride in that. We have forty-one lawyers, so we are small compared with other firms. We don’t hire too many people; about one every other year. We offer the highest salary and fringes in the country, and I’m not exaggerating. So we are very selective. We selected you. The letter you received last month was sent after we screened over two thousand third-year law students at the best schools. Only one letter was sent. We don’t advertise openings and we don’t solicit applications. We keep a low profile, and we do things differently. That’s our explanation.”

“Fair enough. What kind of firm is it?”

“Tax. Some securities, real estate and banking, but eighty percent is tax work. That’s why we wanted to meet you, Mitch. You have an incredibly strong tax background.”

“Why’d you go to Western Kentucky?” asked Oliver Lambert.

“Simple. They offered me a full scholarship to play football. Had it not been for that, college would’ve been impossible.”

“Tell us about your family.”

“Why is that important?”

“It’s very important to us, Mitch,” Royce McKnight said warmly.

They all say that, thought McDeere. “Okay, my father was killed in the coal mines when I was seven years old. My mother remarried and lives in Florida. I had two brothers. Rusty was killed in Vietnam. I have a brother named Ray McDeere.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m afraid that’s none of your business.” He stared at Royce McKnight and exposed a mammoth chip on his shoulder. The dossier said little about Ray.

“I’m sorry,” the managing partner said softly.

“Mitch, our firm is in Memphis,” Lamar said. “Does that bother you?”

“Not at all. I’m not fond of cold weather.”

“Have you ever been to Memphis?”

“No.”

“We’ll have you down soon. You’ll love it.”

Mitch smiled and nodded and played along. Were these guys serious? How could he consider such a small firm in such a small town when Wall Street was waiting?

“How are you ranked in your class?” Mr. Lambert asked.

“Top five.” Not top five percent, but top five. That was enough of an answer for all of them. Top five out of three hundred. He could have said number three, a fraction away from number two, and within striking distance of number one. But he didn’t. They came from inferior schools—Chicago, Columbia and Vanderbilt, as he recalled from a cursory examination of Martindale-HubbelPs Legal Directory. He knew they would not dwell on academics.

“Why did you select Harvard?”

“Actually, Harvard selected me. I applied at several schools and was accepted everywhere. Harvard offered more financial assistance. I thought it was the best school. Still do.”

“You’ve done quite well here, Mitch,” Mr. Lambert said, admiring the resume. The dossier was in the briefcase, under the table.

“Thank you. I’ve worked hard.”

“You made extremely high grades in your tax and securities courses.”

“That’s where my interest lies.”

“We’ve reviewed your writing sample, and it’s quite impressive.”

“Thank you. I enjoy research.”

They nodded and acknowledged this obvious lie. It was part of the ritual. No law student or lawyer in his right mind enjoyed research, yet, without fail, every prospective associate professed a deep love for the library.

“Tell us about your wife,” Royce McKnight said, almost meekly. They braced for another reprimand. But it was a standard, nonsacred area explored by every firm.

“Her name is Abby. She has a degree in elementary education from Western Kentucky. We graduated one week and got married the next. For the past three years she’s taught at a private kindergarten near Boston College.”

“And is the marriage—”

“We’re very happy. We’ve known each other since high school.”

“What position did you play?” asked Lamar, in the direction of less sensitive matters.

“Quarterback. I was heavily recruited until I messed up a knee in my last high school game. Everyone disappeared except Western Kentucky. I played off and on for four years, even started some as a junior, but the knee would never hold up.”

“How’d you make straight A’s and play football?”

“I put the books first.”

“I don’t imagine Western Kentucky is much of an academic school,” Lamar blurted with a stupid grin, and immediately wished he could take it back. Lambert and McKnight frowned and acknowledged the mistake.

“Sort of like Kansas State,” Mitch replied. They froze, all of them froze, and for a few seconds stared incredulously at each other. This guy McDeere knew Lamar Quin went to Kansas State. He had never met Lamar Quin and had no idea who would appear on behalf of and conduct the interview. Yet, he knew. He had gone to Martindale-HubbellPs and checked them out. He had read the biographical sketches of all of the forty-one lawyers in, and in a split second he had recalled that Lamar Quin, just one of the fortyone, had gone to Kansas State. Damn, they were impressed.

“I guess that came out wrong,” Lamar apologized.

“No problem.” Mitch smiled warmly. It was forgotten.

Oliver Lambert cleared his throat and decided to get personal again. “Mitch, our firm frowns on drinking and chasing women. We’re not a bunch of Holy Rollers, but we put business ahead of everything. We keep low profiles and we work very hard. And we make plenty of money.”

“I can live with all that.”

“We reserve the right to test any member of The Firm for drug use.”

“I don’t use drugs.”

“Good. What’s your religious affiliation?”

“Methodist.”

“Good. You’ll find a wide variety in our firm. Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians. It’s really none of our business, but we like to know. We want stable families. Happy lawyers are productive lawyers. That’s why we ask these questions.”

Mitch smiled and nodded. He’d heard this before.

The three looked at each other, then at Mitch. This meant they had reached the point in the interview where the interviewee was supposed to ask one or two intelligent questions. Mitch recrossed his legs. Money, that was the big question, particularly how it compared to his other offers.

If it isn't enough, thought Mitch, then it was nice to meet you fellas. If the pay is attractive, then we can discuss families and marriages and football and churches.

But, he knew, like all the other firms they had to shadowbox around the issue until things got awkward and it was apparent they had discussed everything in the world but money. So, hit them with a soft question first.

“What type of work will I do initially?”

They nodded and approved of the question. Lambert and McKnight looked at Lamar. This answer was his.

“We have something similar to a two-year apprenticeship, although we don't call it that. We'll send you all over the country to tax seminars. Your education is far from over. You'll spend two weeks next winter in Washington at the American Tax Institute. We take great pride in our technical expertise, and the training is continual, for all of us. If you want to pursue a master's in taxation, we'll pay for it. As far as practicing law, it won't be very exciting for the first two years. You'll do a lot of research and generally boring stuff. But you'll be paid handsomely.”

“How much?”

Lamar looked at Royce McKnight, who eyed Mitch and said, “We'll discuss the compensation and other benefits when you come to Memphis.”

“I want a ballpark figure or I may not come to Memphis.” He smiled, arrogant but cordial. He spoke like a man with three job offers.

The partners smiled at each other, and Mr. Lambert spoke first. “Okay. A base salary of eighty thousand the first year, plus bonuses. Eighty-five the second year, plus bonuses. A low-interest mortgage so you can buy a home.

Two country club memberships. And a new BMW. You pick the color, of course.”

They focused on his lips, and waited for the wrinkles to form on his cheeks and the teeth to break through. He tried to conceal a smile, but it was impossible. He chuckled.

“That’s incredible,” he mumbled. Eighty thousand in Memphis equaled a hundred and twenty thousand in New York. Did the man say BMW?! His Mazda hatchback had a million miles on it and for the moment had to be jump-started while he saved for a rebuilt starter.

“Plus a few more fringes we’ll be glad to discuss in Memphis.”

Suddenly he had a strong desire to visit Memphis. Wasn’t it by the river?

The smile vanished and he regained his composure. He looked sternly, importantly at Oliver Lambert and said, as if he’d forgotten about the money and the home and the BMW, “Tell me about your firm.”

“Forty-one lawyers. Last year we earned more per lawyer than any firm our size or larger. That includes every big firm in the country. We take only rich clients—corporations, banks and wealthy people who pay our healthy fees and never complain. We’ve developed a specialty in international taxation, and it’s both exciting and very profitable. We deal only with people who can pay.”

“How long does it take to make partner?”

“On the average, ten years, and it’s a hard ten years. It’s not unusual for our partners to earn half a million a year, and most retire before they’re fifty. You’ve got to pay your dues, put in eighty-hour weeks, but it’s worth it when you make partner.”

Lamar leaned forward. “You don’t have to be a partner to earn six figures. I’ve been with seven years, and went over a hundred thousand four years ago.”