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JOHN
GRISHAM

THE
CLIENT

"THE CLIENT IS JOHN GRISHAM AT HIS BEST."
— *The Atlanta Journal*

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JOHN GRISHAM

A DELL BOOK

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A Dell Book

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**"ABSORBING . . . WILDLY ORIGINAL . . .
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John Grisham's phenomenal #1 best seller**

THE CLIENT

"COMPELLING . . . MAGICAL . . . JOHN GRISHAM CONTINUES TO DAZZLE with each new legal thriller. His latest, *The Client*, is richly textured, cunningly crafted, and poignant, and boasts a refreshingly different hero: an 11-year-old boy. Mark Sway is unforgettable. . . . Everything rings true, from the authentic milieu and vividly portrayed supporting cast to the behind-the-scenes view of the criminal justice system."

—*The Milwaukee Journal*

"This newest legal thriller . . . is as solidly plotted and masterfully suspenseful as Grisham's earlier *The Firm* and *The Pelican Brief*. Grisham uses his knowledge of the law to advantage, making his stories a notch more complex than most crime adventures. . . . *The Client* should please both loyal fans and those new to the author's work."

—*The Sacramento Bee*

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"The evidence is mounting. Lawyer-turned-writer John Grisham certainly knows how to please a crowd. . . . Grisham smoothly mixes the ingredients that have made his previous novels successful—insider legal knowledge and heart-pounding cat-and-mouse chases. . . . The kind of fast-paced yet largely credible entertainment readers have come to expect from Grisham." —*The Orlando Sentinel*

"Grisham's latest opens with a neat hook into the reader's jaw—and the tension never wavers—as the author strives for a knockout suspenser with echoes of Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson—or at least the reader can't help weighing what he's reading against the darker plots that enmesh Huck Finn and Jim Hawkins." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"There may be a few folks out there who haven't read *The Firm* yet. But it's unlikely that anyone will escape *The Client*. [Grisham] puts a new spin onto the standard legal thriller, tapping into primal fantasies and primal fears. . . . It will scare you enough to keep you up past midnight, when it gets even scarier." —*The Boston Globe*

"Grisham's latest novel is not only worthy of comparison with his first mega-seller, *The Firm*, it is in many ways better. Best of all, *The Client*, like *The Firm*, is not in the least bit formulaic. This is not just another three-act legal thriller. . . . Actually closer to *True Grit* in tone . . . A satisfying, fun read that should be Grisham's biggest seller yet." —*The Flint Journal*

"TOP-OF-THE-LINE . . . It's risky using an 11-year-old hero to hold such a story together, but Grisham makes it work." —*The Detroit News*

"FLAWLESS . . . Grisham has made a major leap forward as a writer. . . . His many clients, those of you who regularly place his books on the best-seller lists, will no doubt be well pleased." —*The Times Picayune* (New Orleans)

"THIS IS A GRAB-YOU-QUICK AND HOLD-YOU-FAST STORY. . . . In *The Client*, Grisham has combined his awareness of timely issues with his ability to weave a tale of intrigue and suspense while making you laugh out loud. . . . Grisham can look into the soul of his people and make you love to love or hate them. He knows them inside and out, knows the law, knows his territory and his craft. At the end of this one, he even made me cry. You're going to love this book."

—*The Florida Times-Union* (Jacksonville)

Books 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

1

MARK WAS ELEVEN AND HAD BEEN SMOKING OFF AND ON for two years, never trying to quit but being careful not to get hooked. He preferred Kools, his ex-father's brand, but his mother smoked Virginia Slims at the rate of two packs a day, and he could in an average week pilfer ten or twelve from her. She was a busy woman with many problems, perhaps a little naive when it came to her boys, and she never dreamed her eldest would be smoking at the age of eleven.

Occasionally Kevin, the delinquent two streets over, would sell Mark a pack of stolen Marlboros for a dollar. But for the most part he had to rely on his mother's skinny cigarettes.

He had four of them in his pocket that afternoon as he led his brother, Ricky, age eight, down the path into the woods behind their trailer park. Ricky was nervous about this, his first smoke. He had caught Mark hiding the cigarettes in a shoebox under his bed day before, and threatened to tell all if his big brother didn't show him how to do it. They sneaked along the wooded trail, headed for one of Mark's secret spots

where he'd spent many solitary hours trying to inhale and blow smoke rings.

Most of the other kids in the neighborhood were into beer and pot, two vices Mark was determined to avoid. Their ex-father was an alcoholic who'd beaten both boys and their mother, and the beatings always followed his nasty bouts with beer. Mark had seen and felt the effects of alcohol. He was also afraid of drugs.

"Are you lost?" Ricky asked just like a little brother as they left the trail and waded through chest-high weeds.

"Just shut up," Mark said without slowing. The only time their father had spent at home was to drink and sleep and abuse them. He was gone now, thank heavens. For five years Mark had been in charge of Ricky. He felt like an eleven-year-old father. He'd taught him how to throw a football and ride a bike. He'd explained what he knew about sex. He'd warned him about drugs, and protected him from bullies. And he felt terrible about this introduction to vice. But it was just a cigarette. It could be much worse.

The weeds stopped and they were under a large tree with a rope hanging from a thick branch. A row of bushes yielded to a small clearing, and beyond it an overgrown dirt road disappeared over a hill. A highway could be heard in the distance.

Mark stopped and pointed to a log near the rope. "Sit there," he instructed, and Ricky obediently backed onto the log and glanced around anxiously as if the police might be watching. Mark eyed him like a drill sergeant while picking a cigarette from his shirt pocket. He held it with his right thumb and index finger, and tried to be casual about it.

"You know the rules," he said, looking down at

Ricky. There were only two rules, and they had discussed them a dozen times during the day, and Ricky was frustrated at being treated like a child. He rolled his eyes away and said, "Yeah, if I tell anyone, you'll beat me up."

"That's right."

Ricky folded his arms. "And I can smoke only one a day."

"That's right. If I catch you smoking more than that, then you're in trouble. And if I find out you're drinking beer or messing with drugs, then—"

"I know, I know. You'll beat me up again."

"Right."

"How many do you smoke a day?"

"Only one," Mark lied. Some days, only one. Some days, three or four, depending on supply. He stuck the filter between his lips like a gangster.

"Will one a day kill me?" Ricky asked.

Mark removed the cigarette from his lips. "Not anytime soon. One a day is pretty safe. More than that, and you could be in trouble."

"How many does Mom smoke a day?"

"Two packs."

"How many is that?"

"Forty."

"Wow. Then she's in big trouble."

"Mom's got all kinds of troubles. I don't think she's worried about cigarettes."

"How many does Dad smoke a day?"

"Four or five packs. A hundred a day."

Ricky grinned slightly. "Then he's gonna die soon, right?"

"I hope so. Between staying drunk and chain-smoking, he'll be dead in a few years."

"What's chain-smoking?"
"It's when you light the new one with the old one. I wish he'd smoke ten packs a day."

"Me too." Ricky glanced toward the small clearing and the dirt road. It was shady and cool under the tree, but beyond the limbs the sun was bright. Mark pinched the filter with his thumb and index finger and sort of waved it before his mouth. "Are you scared?" he sneered as only big brothers can.

"No."

"I think you are. Look, hold it like this, okay?" He waved it closer, then with great drama withdrew it and stuck it between his lips. Ricky watched intently.

Mark lit the cigarette, puffed a tiny cloud of smoke, then held it and admired it. "Don't try to swallow the smoke. You're not ready for that yet. Just suck a little then blow the smoke out. Are you ready?"

"Will it make me sick?"

"It will if you swallow the smoke." He took two quick drags and puffed for effect. "See. It's really easy. I'll teach you how to inhale later."

"Okay." Ricky nervously reached out with his thumb and index finger, and Mark placed the cigarette carefully between them. "Go ahead."

Ricky eased the wet filter to his lips. His hand shook and he took a short drag and blew smoke. Another short drag. The smoke never got past his front teeth. Another drag. Mark watched carefully, hoping he would choke and cough and turn blue, then get sick and never smoke again.

"It's easy," Ricky said proudly as he held the cigarette and admired it. His hand was shaking.

"It's no big deal."

"Tastes kind of funny."

"Yeah, yeah." Mark sat next to him on the log and picked another one from his pocket. Ricky puffed rapidly. Mark lit his, and they sat in silence under the tree enjoying a quiet smoke.

"This is fun," Ricky said, nibbling at the filter.

"Great. Then why are your hands shaking?"

"They're not."

"Sure."

Ricky ignored this. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, took a longer drag, then spat in the dirt like he'd seen Kevin and the big boys do behind the trailer park. This was easy.

Mark opened his mouth into a perfect circle and attempted a smoke ring. He thought this would really impress his little brother, but the ring failed to form and the gray smoke dissipated.

"I think you're too young to smoke," he said.

Ricky was busy puffing and spitting, and thoroughly enjoying this giant step toward manhood. "How old were you when you started?" he asked.

"Nine. But I was more mature than you."

"You always say that."

"That's because it's always true."

They sat next to each other on the log under the tree, smoking quietly and staring at the grassy clearing beyond the shade. Mark *was* in fact more mature than Ricky at the age of eight. He was more mature than any kid his age. He'd always been mature. He had hit his father with a baseball bat when he was seven. The aftermath had not been pretty, but the drunken idiot had stopped beating their mother. There had been many fights and many beatings, and Dianne Sway had sought refuge and advice from her eldest son. They had consoled each other and conspired to survive. They

had cried together after the beatings. They had plotted ways to protect Ricky. When he was nine, Mark convinced her to file for divorce. He had called the cops when his father showed up drunk after being served with divorce papers. He had testified in court about the abuse and neglect and beatings. He was very mature.

Ricky heard the car first. There was a low, rushing sound coming from the dirt road. Then Mark heard it, and they stopped smoking. "Just sit still," Mark said softly. They did not move.

A long black, shiny Lincoln appeared over the slight hill and eased toward them. The weeds in the road were as high as the front bumper. Mark dropped his cigarette to the ground and covered it with his shoe. Ricky did the same.

The car slowed almost to a stop as it neared the clearing, then circled around, touching the tree limbs as it moved slowly. It stopped and faced the road. The boys were directly behind it and hidden from view. Mark slid off the log and crawled through the weeds to a row of brush at the edge of the clearing. Ricky followed. The rear of the Lincoln was thirty feet away. They watched it carefully. It had Louisiana license plates.

"What's he doing?" Ricky whispered.

Mark peeked through the weeds. "Shhhhhh!" He had heard stories around the trailer park of teenagers using these woods to meet girls and smoke pot, but this car did not belong to a teenager. The engine quit, and the car just sat there in the weeds for a minute. Then the door opened, and the driver stepped into the weeds and looked around. He was a chubby man in a black suit. His head was fat and round and without hair except for neat rows above the ears and a black-and-gray

beard. He stumbled to the rear of the car, fumbled with the keys, and finally opened the trunk. He removed a water hose, stuck one end into the exhaust pipe, and ran the other end through a crack in the left rear window. He closed the trunk, looked around again as if he were expecting to be watched, then disappeared into the car.

The engine started.

"Wow," Mark said softly, staring blankly at the car.

"What's he doing?" Ricky asked.

"He's trying to kill himself."

Ricky raised his head a few inches for a better view. "I don't understand, Mark."

"Keep down. You see the hose, right? The fumes from the tail pipe go into the car, and it kills him."

"You mean suicide?"

"Right. I saw a guy do it like this in a movie once."

They leaned closer to the weeds and stared at the hose running from the pipe to the window. The engine idled smoothly.

"Why does he want to kill himself?" Ricky asked.

"How am I supposed to know? But we gotta do something."

"Yeah, let's get the hell outta here."

"No. Just be still a minute."

"I'm leaving, Mark. You can watch him die if you want to, but I'm gone."

Mark grabbed his brother's shoulder and forced him lower. Ricky's breathing was heavy and they were both sweating. The sun hid behind a cloud.

"How long does it take?" Ricky asked, his voice quivering.

"Not very long." Mark released his brother and eased onto all fours. "You stay here, okay. If you move, I'll kick your tail."

"What're you doing, Mark?"

"Just stay here. I mean it." Mark lowered his thin body almost to the ground and crawled on elbows and knees through the weeds toward the car. The grass was dry and at least two feet tall. He knew the man couldn't hear him, but he worried about the movement of the weeds. He stayed directly behind the car and slid snake-like on his belly until he was in the shadow of the trunk. He reached and carefully eased the hose from the tail pipe, and dropped it to the ground. He retraced his trail with a bit more speed, and seconds later was crouched next to Ricky, watching and waiting in the heavier grass and brush under the outermost limbs of the tree. He knew that if they were spotted, they could dart past the tree and down their trail and be gone before the chubby man could catch them.

They waited. Five minutes passed, though it seemed like an hour.

"You think he's dead?" Ricky whispered, his voice dry and weak.

"I don't know."

Suddenly, the door opened, and the man stepped out. He was crying and mumbling, and he staggered to the rear of the car, where he saw the hose in the grass, and cursed it as he shoved it back into the tail pipe. He held a bottle of whiskey and looked around wildly at the trees, then stumbled back into the car. He mumbled to himself as he slammed the door.

The boys watched in horror.

"He's crazy as hell," Mark said faintly.

"Let's get out of here," Ricky said.

"We can't! If he kills himself, and we saw it or knew about it, then we could get in all kinds of trouble."

Ricky raised his head as if to retreat. "Then we won't tell anybody. Come on, Mark!"

Mark grabbed his shoulder again and forced him to the ground. "Just stay down! We're not leaving until I say we're leaving!"

Ricky closed his eyes tightly and started crying. Mark shook his head in disgust but didn't take his eyes off the car. Little brothers were more trouble than they were worth. "Stop it," he growled through clenched teeth.

"I'm scared."

"Fine. Just don't move, okay. Do you hear me? Don't move. And stop the crying." Mark was back on his elbows, deep in the weeds and preparing to ease through the tall grass once more.

"Just let him die, Mark," Ricky whispered between sobs.

Mark glared at him over his shoulder and eased toward the car, which was still running. He crawled along his same trail of lightly trampled grass so slowly and carefully that even Ricky, with dry eyes now, could barely see him. Ricky watched the driver's door, waiting for it to fly open and the crazy man to lunge out and kill Mark. He perched on his toes in a sprinter's stance for a quick getaway through the woods. He saw Mark emerge under the rear bumper, place a hand for balance on the taillight, and slowly ease the hose from the tail pipe. The grass crackled softly and the weeds shook a little and Mark was next to him again, panting and sweating and, oddly, smiling to himself.

They sat on their legs like two insects under the brush, and watched the car.

"What if he comes out again?" Ricky asked. "What if he sees us?"

"He can't see us. But if he starts this way, just follow me. We'll be gone before he can take a step."

"Why don't we go now?"

Mark stared at him fiercely. "I'm trying to save his life, okay? Maybe, just maybe, he'll see that this is not working, and maybe he'll decide he should wait or something. Why is that so hard to understand?"

"Because he's crazy. If he'll kill himself, then he'll kill us. Why is that so hard to understand?"

Mark shook his head in frustration, and suddenly the door opened again. The man rolled out of the car growling and talking to himself, and stomped through the grass to the rear. He grabbed the end of the hose, stared at it as if it just wouldn't behave, and looked slowly around the small clearing. He was breathing heavily and perspiring. He looked at the trees, and the boys eased to the ground. He looked down, and froze as if he suddenly understood. The grass was slightly trampled around the rear of the car and he knelt as if to inspect it, but then crammed the hose back into the tail pipe instead and hurried back to his door. If someone was watching from the trees, he seemed not to care. He just wanted to hurry up and die.

The two heads rose together above the brush, but just a few inches. They peeked through the weeds for a minute. Ricky was ready to run, but Mark was thinking.

"Mark, please, let's go," Ricky pleaded. "He almost saw us. What if he's got a gun or something?"

"If he had a gun, he'd use it on himself."