

# MILES OF FILES

*MICHAEL J. SAHNO*

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## WELCOME

I'm truly grateful to you for taking the time to read this novel. It is among the great accomplishments of my life.

If you'd like to check out my other novels, please visit my website at [www.msahno.com](http://www.msahno.com). If you join my free email newsletter, you'll get news on upcoming events, along with my free e-book, *Marketing for Authors*.

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Thank you all.

- Mike

## CHAPTER 1

AT 5:38 ON the morning of his forty-first birthday, Graham Woodcock awakened to the sound of a cat retching. He heard three distinct thumps as the cat's larynx contracted, then a sound with a different quality, liquid, gurgling: no doubt the discharge of some vomitous hairball. Or, worse, an entire meal. He saw it in his mind's eye as he glared through the dark at the red numbers of the alarm clock.

When he finally decided to rise — after another hour's sleep — he was roused not by the urgency of cat puke, but by the urgency of the breakfast hour. Not his — the cats'. One of them leapt on the bed and nuzzled his outstretched hand with phony affection, a clear message: get up, get up. Giddyup.

Graham crept into the kitchen, trailing the cats in darkness. He scanned the floor to avoid any cat vomit that might be there, but there was none. He flipped on lights and fed the cats, then wandered from room to room in search of vomit. Nothing.

He sat down to eat his breakfast, and everything was fine until one of the cats began to move its bowels while Graham was finishing his cereal. It was Truman, no doubt, whose bathroom routine was maddeningly predictable.

He decided to ignore it and finish the cereal in spite of the odor. Then Truman strutted into the kitchen, waving his tail like a dog. Somehow he'd managed to snake his tail across the gloppy pile of excrement in the litter pan, and a streak of it glistened in his fur like a grotesque flag.

"Bloody hell."

The cat approached the breakfast nook, still switching his tail back and forth, and each motion left a faint brown brushstroke against the cream-colored paint. He created his own masterpiece right beneath the kitchen counter.

"NO, no, no. Shit," Graham said, then realized the irony. He picked the cat up by the scruff of the neck — the only way he could hold him without getting himself painted — and carried him into the bathroom. "You little bastard." He swallowed the urge to slam the cat against the wall.

"I hope this isn't an indication of the kind of day it's going to be."

But it was. On the side of the bathtub stood a cockroach the size of Graham's thumb. He froze, dropping the cat as the roach scampered down into the clean white tub. "Christ!"

He cranked the hot water all the way on to drown the brown beast, which swam around with frantic leg movements. At last it succumbed to the boiling hot water and floated toward the drain, which was too small for it.

"Why the hell did I ever come to this godforsaken swamp?" he muttered. "All I ever wanted was a nice house in the hills and a bit of crumpet on the side. Now I'm stuck in Florida with the cast of *Deliverance*, killing roaches that look like Harley fucking Davidson motorcycles. If it weren't for the 401(k) program, I'd bloody well sod off."

The Harley Davidson was dead now, and Graham grabbed it with a wad of toilet paper before flushing it. Unfortunately, he'd scalded himself in the process, and small pink welts like fever blisters rose on his arms.

He remembered the cat, and knew it was too late. Sure enough, as he walked from the bathroom he saw light brown feather-strokes at odd points on the burgundy carpet. Some were barely visible, like the first one he stepped on — with his bare foot, of course.

“Happy fucking birthday,” he said between his teeth.

## CHAPTER 2

PAUL PANEPINTO SAT at his desk, the phone pressed to his ear. On hold as usual.

Dave Johnson from Underwriting walked up to Paul's desk, paused, and cocked his head. In a phony British accent, he said, "Sir Graham not in today, old boy?"

Paul shook his head. "No."

"Wot a pity." He laughed and walked away.

Paul's mouth twitched. Well, he thought. Happy Friday.

Although no one in the office was close enough to Graham to know it, Friday, May eighteenth, was his birthday, and in the twenty-one years he'd been working, he'd never once worked on his birthday. Paul found out only that morning that Graham Woodcock would be out that day, not that it was his birthday, though the information wouldn't have mattered. Like any other day, Paul would still have to pick his way through a minefield of lapsed policies and customer service inquiries so banal and idiotic as to be almost incredible. And since Maggie Brown, the claims supervisor, would also be aware of Graham's absence, she would take the opportunity to harass Paul with requests for favors, always via e-mail.

He slumped back in his chair. The hot chocolate in the Federal Funding mug was now cold chocolate, and his hands were brittle from the overzealous air conditioning system. He listened to the muzak while on hold with Mortgage Depot and drummed his fingers on the desk's surface. Without consciously looking at his monitor, he glimpsed the small envelope in the bottom right hand corner indicating a new email message. He blinked and glanced over at it.

Ay, caramba. Now what?

Just a short time ago, he'd had a position of some responsibility, an actual management job. Now, stuck here at Flambet Insurance, he had moments of irritation and boredom so profound and impenetrable that they were almost mythic. The whole weary world receded, and what was left remained meaningless as falling stars. He watched the ripples on the pond outside the window, small undulations and an occasional spray of mist from the fountain, and the trees would nod and bow their mute adoration of nothing while the sun went slowly down....

He had good moments, too — uproarious laughter at a dirty joke from a fellow employee, slow periods when the whole room felt the release of tension like air from a tire and people took time to straighten up desks, wash coffee mugs, water plants. And, more noticeable than the rest, days when the big bosses were gone and people stood outside during breaks and traded war stories, basked in the literal warm sun of the present and allowed themselves to forget the jammed fax machines and computer crashes and all the other ulcer-inducers of a typical day.

Sometimes in the slow season, when claims only trickled in, he sat at his desk without a word for hours at a time. He played CDs on the computer: Howling Wolf and Prefab Sprout, Miles Davis, the Velvet Underground. If things got especially slow, he opened up a psychedelic screensaver and stared into swirling paisley patterns, listening to horns and electric guitars. Several others did the same thing, and they'd nicknamed the practice "Desktop Spacing."

Paul glared again at the envelope in the corner of the screen. Had it really been a year and a half in this menial position? He marveled at it, the astonishing truth of it, and at his

own intestinal fortitude. How had he done it? But he knew how. Had it not been for his painting, the time he'd devoted to it evenings and weekends, he would surely have put a noose around his neck.

No, he thought dryly, a gun would be more reliable.

But he also knew he wouldn't have been able to sustain this torturous period if not for Inocente Madrigal Fuentes. Inocente, with her bright eyes and studied touch, her brave attempts at *inglés*, her crazy jokes and imperturbable smiles. Sure, she was nuts, but she'd made the past year and a half bearable... and just because she was presently *incomunicado* didn't mean she wasn't a factor.

He remembered the assault well: "Hablas inglés, puta," the man hissed, his teeth clenched. "You're in the United States of Fuckin' America now."

Before Paul had even been able to react, Inocente, eyes big with disbelief, reared back like a puff adder while the man smiled his strange sneering smile, not understanding. And when her fist came up into his mouth, he looked so surprised — like someone about to die an undignified death — that she could barely refrain from laughter even as she pulled back her teeth-slashed knuckles. The blood from his mouth came up so fast she saw it still purplish, turning red as it hit the air. Though some of it covered her aching hand, the majority trickled down his chin, dotting the front of his shirt as he doubled over, tears in his eyes and both hands over his mouth.

"You spic bitch," he muttered. "I'll get you for that. You dirty bitch."

"Bite me. Asshole." She stooped down herself, clutching her hand, so that they glared at each other like gladiators. "You're nothing but a bigoted asshole. Ow, my fucking hand."

Well, okay. Sure she was in the past, a past that receded faster by the minute. She was an *ex-girlfriend*. But the past brought him to the present. To *here*.

And here in the present, he sat in this office, this windowless bin, still somewhat bleak, though the floor-to-ceiling windows helped immeasurably... what he could see of them, anyway. He'd never seen such a huge, open office space fill up so quickly, and he'd liked the view better when the room was still empty. Now, all he could see were the tops of trees and a high arc of spray from the fountain in the middle of the pond.

Another e-mail from Maggie Brown, he said to himself. Let's check this out.

PAUL, it said, all capital letters, like some moronic banner of boredom, CAN YOU CALL RELIABLE MORTGAGE AT 201-555-1797 AND ASK THEM TO FAX THE DEC PAGE FOR ACCT. #601-HO-79? THANKS. M. B.

You lazy wench, he thought. Why don't you ask one of your own peons to do your little chores? He clicked delete with a sense of futile glee, and Maggie Brown's message disappeared into the cyberspace void.

He began to daydream, and only the thought of Suzanne Beidertyme kept him from dropping from the precipice of consciousness. Five seven to his five ten — the perfect height — she worked down the hall in Claims, something to do with worker's comp. Her hair was dark and long, and her eyes were dark and sexy, and he would have overcome his nervousness and asked her out if she hadn't been a fellow employee. The "office romance" situation held no appeal.

But sexual fantasy wasn't out of the question, and he decided to indulge himself while the air conditioning froze his fingers and the muzak segued into yet another song. Good God, a muzak version of *Reelin' In The Years*... there's got to be some kind of law

against this. Pulling the phone away from his ear slightly and closing his eyes, he imagined office sex with Suzanne. Of course, such a thing could only happen in a world where he could snap his fingers and everyone on the planet froze in place except him and the object of his desire. And when he commanded it — later, much later — they'd all continue on as if time hadn't stood still, unaware that anything had happened.

In that world, he and Suzanne made love now, right there on the carpet in front of the copier. He created a surprisingly tame fantasy, really, with a lot of kissing, and nothing aberrant at all about the foreplay or even the consummation. Just uninterrupted sex, glorious and free and —

“Thank-you-for-holding-how-may-I-direct-your-call?”

Paul's head snapped forward, and a little of the cold chocolate in the Federal Funding mug sloshed out onto the papers beside his keyboard. Jane Garrett, one desk over, looked at him strangely.

“Yes, this is Paul Panepinto from Flambet Insurance. I'm trying to locate someone regarding some lapsed policies — ”

“One moment.”

Back the muzak came, a version of *Sweet Jane*, and Paul slumped forward onto the desk as if someone had just gently and quietly knifed him.

## CHAPTER 3

DOWN THE HALL, Suzanne Beidertyme nibbled a bagel while Cora Gable talked about men.

“You know,” Cora said in a low voice, as people wandered in and out of the break room, “I don’t think a lot of people would admit it, but *I* think some of the hottest guys around are the Flambet brothers.”

Suzanne choked on her tea, felt her face redden. “Jesus,” she said, “are you kidding? The Flambets? Which one, James the Dork or Mac the Slime?”

“He’s not slimy, come on. Admit it, there’s something about him that spells danger. And he likes you, you know.”

“I think there’s something about him that spells venereal disease. He gives me the creeps. You realize this guy is thirty-six and he’s been married *four times*? Those beady little eyes....”

Cora leaned back in her chair, her perfume like a wall of verbena, and when she spoke again, her voice went up an octave. “Mac doesn’t have beady little eyes.”

“He does too. He scares me. I mean, seriously.”

“Oh, stop. He’s just real intense. And besides, those guys like Mac and James... they’re seriously alpha males, you know? They’ve got money *and* power. They’re not like these mama’s boys who act like they’re eighteen when they’re twenty-five....”

“What do *you* know about them, other than what you see here? Is Lakeisha giving you dirt on them?”

She leaned forward, conspiratorial. “Lakeisha’s been cleaning for that family for almost two years. She knows all the dirt... she sees it, literally!”

Suzanne laughed. “*All* the dirt.”

Cora reached up and patted the stiff helmet of blonde hair that moved slightly against the pressure. “And you know,” she said, “even without getting serious with any of them, some of these guys can really show you a good time, if you know what I mean.”

Suzanne laughed again, pretending not to be disgusted, and swatted her on the arm. “Cora! I didn’t know you were such an animal.”

“Well, I’m not necessarily.” She leaned back in the chair again. “I mean, I was just talking about some fine dining and dancing, or a Broadway show — ”

“Yeah, right.”

Cora laughed shrilly. “I don’t think you’re taking this conversation seriously.”

“How could I?” Suzanne thought for a moment about how untrustworthy Cora was.

“Trust me,” Cora said. “Mac Flambet is the man. *And he likes you.*” A singsong, the schoolyard *I-know-something-you-don’t-know*.

Suzanne glanced down, as if to appraise her slight chest with disdain. “Oh, please.” This actually meant, “Oh, please spare me Mac Flambet,” but Cora wouldn’t have guessed it. Was Cora actually trying to set her up with Mac?

“No, no,” continued Cora. “He does like you. I’m sure of it. You didn’t really mean that about him being a slimeball, did you?”

“Well — ” She glanced away. “I just don’t think he’s my type.”

“Think it over, girl.” Cora got up, suddenly and decisively. “It could be the time of your life. Have you seen that Jaguar?”

Their eyes met. “Yeah, actually,” Suzanne smiled.

“There ya go.” And she flounced out of the room.

Alone in the room, Suzanne took a deep breath and shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said.

## CHAPTER 4

FLAMBET INSURANCE CORPORATION, owned and operated by James Irving Flambet (Chief Executive Officer and “chief cook and bottle washer,” in his own words), grew out of the need for the family law firm to diversify its holdings and provide more stability for its wildly fluctuating portfolios. The family law firm started out as Flambet, Cohn, Weisenstein and Montrachet — frogs and hebes, old man Flambet always said, frogs and hebes — and it grew through a series of outlandish permutations until at last it reached its present incarnation of Flambet, Flambet and Weisenstein. Jean Bertram Flambet was the old man, known to all as “J.B.,” like an old-time Hollywood director. He got a lot of mileage out of Weisenstein’s name, pretending he’d picked the name out of the phonebook. He had an elaborate pantomime routine: “Let’s see, Weisenborn... Weisenheimer... Weisenhoofer... *Weisenstein!*” He’d formed the first version of Flambet Insurance Corporation in his thirties, and when he decided to spin off a group of limited partnerships in addition to it, it only made sense that his elder son James should take the helm at the insurance firm. By that time, his younger son Mac had already established a prominent place for himself in the family law firm. James, something of a black sheep since he’d never achieved the MBA, was two years older than Mac and in need of a job better than the one he had at Tampa’s Westchase Country Club, so it wasn’t reasonable, really, to make Mac try to run an insurance company. Besides, Mac was a good attorney with a sharp eye and an instinct for the kill, and no one doubted he’d become a senior partner within a year or two at most. In fact, he did just that.

On the Friday that Graham Woodcock took off, James Flambet stayed home also, though not for the same reason. He’d planned to work, but his daughter Eugenie announced she had a fever that morning, and with James’ wife Celia out of town on business, he had to stay home. Eugenie, a striking seven-year-old, would normally have been comforted and nursed all day by her nanny, a Northampton girl named Pamela Mae Swenson, but Pamela was sick, too. So James Irving Flambet, Chief Executive Officer of Flambet Insurance Corporation, a man of some sophistication and an agreeable degree of material comfort, spent the morning eating buttered scones and oranges and watching *SpongeBob SquarePants* videos with his daughter.

Of course, he broke out the paperwork at length, and gave a perfunctory moment or two to the numbers at hand, especially the figures regarding a morass of legal problems he’d nicknamed The McDillon Nightmare. But the numbers didn’t add up, he found weird, inexplicable omissions in the spreadsheets, and it all fatigued him. So many problems in the firm these days, it felt like he was bailing water out of a leaky sailboat. Every time he discovered a new scheme to raise capital, down came another disaster, and the juggling act of creditors and debtors became more and more convoluted and futile. Where would it all end?

He put aside The McDillon Nightmare and went idly through printouts of payroll records. He didn’t have a compelling reason to look at them, but it diverted him from anything else. Since the company had grown so large and impersonal, three hundred employees in the home office alone, he felt somehow comforted flipping through these records of past and present employees. Part nostalgia trip and part “new hire” update, mostly it was just a diversion.

Lucy Hedges, he thought, thumbing through the pages. There's a name I haven't heard in a while. John Alsup. Hmm, thirty-five thousand a year. Must be a new processor. Philip Banks. Don't remember him. Must have retired. Says here he was born in... that would make him about sixty-seven now. Can't place the name or the face. He was here a while, too, look at this — stock options, the 401(k)... I've got to keep up more with this stuff, he thought. Shake a few hands.

Philip Banks, he mused. Nope, don't remember him at all.

## CHAPTER 5

ACROSS TOWN, PAUL stood on the threshold of discovering Philip Banks for himself. He'd swallowed his pride and done a few things for the ubiquitous Maggie Brown, and then it turned out he had to do a few things for Graham in the big boss' absence. Maggie, acting on orders phoned in from James Flambet, gave Paul one of Graham's sign-ins, a password into areas of limited access in one of the company databases. Paul opened the Teleclaim program and, while searching for a file called *claimtemp3*, he must have accidentally hit the wrong key. Blood throbbed in his temples as he realized he didn't know how to undo what he'd done. Hitting *Escape* didn't work. He hit *Enter*. Nothing. He clicked on *Help*. Nothing. Just the slow inexorable blinking of the cursor.

He was afraid to try a function key, since that was probably what he'd inadvertently pushed in the first place. For all he knew, it might damage the whole database. So he sat and tried to figure a safe way to escape, his left forefinger idly tapping the surface of the *Tab* key.

Suddenly, he realized he must have actually pressed the *Tab* key. The screen changed dramatically, fading to a duller shade of blue and prompting him to enter a password. Another password. Shit. He punched *Escape* again, hoping for luck. Nothing but a beep. Reluctantly, he reentered Graham's sign-in. And voila, he was in. He didn't know where he was, but he was in.

He was looking at an employee profile of a kind he'd never seen. It had a résumé, a screen that showed a whole history of company-related transactions enacted by the employee, and a financial statement of some sort related to the company's 401(k) retirement plan. Apparently the guy made pretty good money before retiring from Flambet Insurance.

His name was Philip Banks.

Later he would be hard pressed to say why he'd suspected something was wrong. He'd just say it was luck, a hunch. Maybe the name did it: a pun, Philip Banks, like Fill Up Banks. Somehow it just didn't sound real. Possibly it was just the oddity of Graham having this strange-looking file, isolated from the rest of the company's records.

He found another, of course. An employee named Dolores Buenas. Maybe because of his Latino background, or maybe just the prompting of Fill Up Banks, he transliterated Dolores Buenas into Dólares Buenas, "Good Dollars," so quickly and intuitively, it felt like an epiphany.

He scrawled the social security numbers and phone numbers of both Philip and Dolores on a piece of paper. He knew he was onto something. He knew that these two names, names he'd never heard — and there was nothing in the whole file besides their records — would lead to something secret and unsavory and probably illegal.

In fact, he decided to do more than write down numbers. He went through every page of the file, hitting the *Print Screen* button on the keyboard at each page, terrified lest he should be too late getting down the hall to the printer before someone else saw part of it. He slipped the piece of paper with the phone numbers and social security numbers into his pocket in case something went wrong, just so he'd have something. When he went down the hall, he was relieved to find no one near the printer, a lucky break. He pulled the last few sheets from the printer and put them face down on the rest of the stack, his forehead and back damp with perspiration.

He had it all, whatever it was. And he walked back to the computer, knowing he didn't know how to back out of the limited access file, knowing the computer guys would bitch at him for turning off the hard drive manually while he was in the middle of a file, knowing he would lie and say the thing had just crashed and not caring that he'd have to lie. He had it all. Whatever it was, it was his now, too.

## CHAPTER 6

THE NEXT DAY, in the public library, Paul found nothing to allay his suspicions, just as he'd expected. More impressive still, when he logged onto the Internet, he quickly found that the social security numbers were bogus, since it was easy enough to get modest-sized information files on virtually anyone in the country just by jumping through a few hoops. But no one had those socials, and none of the people he found named Philip Banks or Dolores Buenas matched the profiles.

He tried the phone numbers. One out of service, and the other a Chinese restaurant named Hao Wah.

Once again, Paul scanned the materials. All very thorough and apparently legit. Except for one thing: they didn't exist.

Without even using any imagination, he'd deciphered the mystery. Philip Banks and Dolores Buenas were fictitious characters — Graham Woodcock's brainchildren and heirs to a small fortune that he would undoubtedly amass within a few years, assuming their portfolios did well. Simple enough.

The only real mystery was how Graham had been so careless as to let the phony records be accessible. But then Paul thought back to how he'd gotten them: sheer accident. He'd hit the *Tab* key, of all things, which was never used as a command to open an application. It wasn't even really a function key. Somehow, Graham made it one and, naturally, figured that was safeguard enough.

And why not? The personnel files and résumés he'd taken great pains to create would have been sufficient "proof" for any snooper. Who would go further? Nobody ever checked up on these things, least of all an easygoing CEO like James Flambet.

Just for fun, Paul contacted the universities Philip Banks and Dolores Buenas had supposedly attended. No such students on file.

So in theory, he had Graham Woodcock by the short hairs, and no one would deny it. But did he? He had no legitimate way to retrieve the files for anyone else. He'd found the files through a series of keystrokes too bizarre and mysterious to reproduce; not just the *Tab* key, but the one prior to that, the accidental keystroke. Paul was pretty sure it must have been a function key, but the keyboard had twelve of those, and anyway, he'd need one of Graham's sign-ins to get back in... probably the exact same one.

Of course, he had hard copies, but what were they worth? Graham would obviously deny it all and destroy the records, and besides, who would believe it? The risk was too great. Graham was completely responsible for the 401(k), and with his other responsibilities, he was like an executive vice-president. Who else was higher up? Only James Flambet himself.

Paul picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Suzanne, it's me, Paul."

"Hi, what's up? I was just —"

"Listen, I have to talk to you."

"What's wrong?"

He cleared his throat. "Can we get together later? I don't think I should talk about this on the phone."

“Uh-oh. You haven’t been reading one of those conspiracy-theory books again, have you?”

He laughed. “No. But if I do have a conspiracy here, it’s a conspiracy of one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Meet me at the Café Con Leche at eight o’clock?”

“All right. Do I have to wear black, like a spy?”

“No, smartass, you don’t have to wear black. Although I like black...”

“Well, I told you I was the artistic type. Didn’t I ever tell you my greatest goal in life was to work as a dance instructor?”

He pictured her in a dance studio, an enticing visual. “You still taking night classes to get your dance degree?”

“Oh yeah. Wednesdays and Thursdays.”

“All right, well, I’ll see you at eight o’clock, then, right?”

“Okay. See ya then.”

He hung up the phone, sat back, and started to count the hours until eight.

## CHAPTER 7

MAC FLAMBET, thirty-six years old, tall and lank and hungry-looking, rose at five each morning and looked in the mirror before doing anything else. It was a mark of character for him that he stood before the great Victorian nightstand with its burnished chest of drawers and, as religiously as if he were performing some mysterious sacrament, always looked searchingly at his face and smoothed down his hair, paused to glance out the window at the Jaguar — this as much a ritual as the mirror — then back at the mirror for a last complacent look before retreating to the vanity in the bathroom or to the kitchen for breakfast.

Of course, the hair he smoothed down was not too thick, receding back farther and farther from the high colubrine forehead and the small cold eyes like the eyes a taxidermist would use, slick and dead-looking. But the smile was complacent nonetheless, and behind the expressionless eyes and the sharp incisors lay a mind sharper still that knew what it wanted and how to get it, and knew that he was not entirely wrong to fancy himself something of a lady-killer.

Someone had recently asked how old his kids were and, without thinking, he'd replied, "About three and a half marriages." And that was true, though since he hadn't found number five yet, he still hadn't gotten completely over ex-wife number four. He'd told the psychiatrist as much the previous Friday.

"I still think about fucking her sometimes," he'd said thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on some distant unseeable point beyond the St. Petersburg skyline. "Anybody would think about fucking her."

But in getting over his last wife, he'd had to have numerous affairs. There'd been a hooker somewhere in there — the thought of HIV never frightened him — and a young college student or two. *No need to worry about them*, he'd told himself, *their immune systems are strong*. The most exciting and, to his mind, fulfilling candidate was Andrea Heatherstone, a married woman of twenty-seven with the body of a swimsuit model and a face like a young Audrey Hepburn. She was absolutely magnificent, and in his frenzy for her, he'd done something he'd never done with a woman: gotten down on his knees, kissing her hand. He'd kissed her fingers, his heart pounding with lust and mad joy, kissed her wedding ring itself, knowing it was taboo — one of the most excessive taboos he could imagine — and yet it was dreadfully exciting, a shiver of excitement and revulsion passed through him and he breathed a little harder as she began to moan. He'd made violent love to her then, and he remembered the climactic moment when the orgasm hit him in the knees, a savage blow, and his legs twitched like the legs of a dreaming dog.

He stood before the mirror and smoothed his hair, and he chuckled. What a trip. Well, that was in April, and it was almost June now. She was something, though. Maybe it was worth pursuing yet, trying to pick up the loose thread.

He went into the kitchen and poked through the cabinet, looking for oatmeal. Damned if that cleaning woman hadn't rearranged everything again. He'd have to have a talk with her.

To add gasoline to the fire, he stood and ran a bony finger across the top of the refrigerator. Sure enough. The lazy negroid whore. He rinsed the finger carefully, then

thought better of it and went ahead with the anti-bacterial soap, washing both hands completely.

When he left for the law offices of Flambet, Flambet and Weisenstein that morning, his watch already read six, later than he liked to be leaving. When he wasn't in court, he usually worked from 6:30 to noon, ate lunch, then dove back in from lunch until about nine or ten, always working, stopping only for a brief dinner at the country club on nights when the firm's caseload was light.

More often than not, though, he waited until he got home at eleven or twelve and had some fruit or cheese and crackers in lieu of dinner before bed. Mostly, he just liked to make sure he was in his office before seven, since that gave him one more thing to lord over the slackers who didn't have the kind of vested interest in the firm he did. And since he had nearly an hour-long commute, he liked to leave between five-thirty and quarter to six.

But the building was still dark when he eased the Jaguar into parking space number one at 6:55. He got out and pressed the car alarm button, and as the alarm chirped in response he stepped toward the door lightly and with good cheer in his step. He was first again.

Stacks of documents awaited his signature. The ones in his in-basket typically held little importance, and could have been signed off by any of the partners. Others, mostly those set with care in the big leather chair behind his desk, required his signature alone: documents from his father, documents relevant to the office lease, documents from one of his ex-wives. He sighed and scrawled signatures across the bottoms of the pages, not even troubling to read them.

Ida Stephan, one of the firm's oldest legal secretaries, did most of the work around the office, and Mac had known her since he was a boy. She'd come down to Florida from Canada in the fifties and gotten a job with the firm not long after it opened. She was like family, and of the few people Mac trusted, he trusted her most. For that reason, he forbade anyone in the office other than Ida to leave signature-required documents on his chair. If Ida put it there, he didn't have to read it; he could just sign it.