

# Vanity Fire

John M. Daniel

Poisoned Pen Press



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First Edition 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006900746

ISBN: 1-59058-322-1 (978-1-59058-322-7) Hardcover

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Poisoned Pen Press  
6962 E. First Ave., Ste. 103  
Scottsdale, AZ 85251  
[www.poisonedpenpress.com](http://www.poisonedpenpress.com)  
[info@poisonedpenpress.com](mailto:info@poisonedpenpress.com)

Printed in the United States of America

*For Susan, as always,  
and for my heroes,  
Morgan Daniel and Ben Daniel,  
and for their families*



# Acknowledgments

In the spirit of full disclosure, I must state that there is a city called Santa Barbara, California, and that I lived there for twenty years, during which time I was a small-press publisher. I also acknowledge that a few celebrities walk on and off these pages in cameo roles. But this is a work of fiction. All the other characters, including Guy Mallon and Carol Murphy, are entirely fictitious, and the events are entirely invented. Any similarity to real people or real events would be a big surprise to me.

Having said that, I'm safe in saying that without the partnership of Susan Daniel I would not have been a publisher, and without her companionship I would not have written this book. I thank Channing Bates for introducing me to Santa Barbara, Julie and Don Steele for introducing me to the Bay Islands of Honduras, and Meredith Phillips for introducing me to the pleasures of mystery fiction. I owe a great deal to the Great Intenders—Lance Hardie, Mary Wilbur, Dick Stull, Nancy Only, and Janine Volkmar—for their support, valuable constructive critique, and invaluable friendship while this novel was in progress. Thanks also to Robert Rosenwald and Barbara Peters and everyone else connected with Poisoned Pen Press.

—JMD



*Then I saw in my dream, that, when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair. It is kept all the year long....*

*Therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.*

*And, moreover, at this fair there are at all times to be seen juggling, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind.*

*Here are to be seen, too, and that for nothing, thefts, murders, adulteries, false swearers, and that of a blood-red color.*

—John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*



# Prologue

Saturday evening, no, actually it was Sunday morning, September 9-10, 1995. It was almost two in the morning when I got home. We lived on the East Side of Santa Barbara, a neighborhood of small houses and bungalows that was rapidly being munched by developers and turned into condos. Most of our neighbors spoke Spanish. The only Spanish the developers knew was the names of the streets in the neighborhoods they were destroying.

I parked on the street, even though I expected there was still room for my car in the garage. But the garage was Carol's space, and even though she'd been gone for a week, I still hoped she'd be back.

I got out of my car and stretched in the hot night. A Santa Ana wind had blown down from the mountains earlier that evening, raising the temperature twenty degrees and drying the air out. We get a lot of Santa Anas in the early fall, and that year they had been worse than ever. The town was a tinder box, too, whenever the Santa Anas blew through. People of Santa Barbara bragged about how long they'd lived there by remembering fires.

I locked my car and walked up the pathway to the front door. I let myself in as quietly as I could. I didn't want to wake Carol, on the off chance she had returned to our bed, to our house, to our business, to my life. And if she was home, I didn't want to wake her up and have to tell her where I'd been that night, and with whom, and what I'd been doing. I tiptoed back to our bedroom and peeked in. The bed was made and empty.

I walked out to the kitchen and switched on the light. Her note was still on the counter, where it had been for seven days.

*Guy,*

*I've had it. I'm going for a drive. I'm going north, as far as I can get from this stupid city, this stupid business, and you. I love you, you little shmuck, but this time you really fucked up big.*

C

She had me there. I had fucked up big.

◇◇◇

I lay on our bed for an hour without getting any sleepier. I was stripped down to my undershorts on top of the bedspread. I was still wide awake shortly after three in the morning when the phone rang on the table next to Carol's side. I rolled over and picked up the receiver. "Hello? Carol?"

"Is this Guy Mallon?"

I sighed. "Speaking," I answered. "Who is this? You know, it's three in the morning."

"I'm very sorry, Mister Mallon. This is Detective Rosa Macdonald, Santa Barbara Police Department. I—"

"Oh no!" I said. "What happened? Is she all right?"

"Mister Mallon, I'm afraid I have some very serious news for you."

"What?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but there's been a major fire at the old DiClemente Avocado warehouse. As I understand it, you've been using that warehouse space for your business. Is that right?"

I breathed. "Thank God. I mean, is that all?"

"I'm afraid the fire damage was...complete," the detective said. "And I need to talk to you. We have a witness here who reports that your car was parked in the DiClemente warehouse lot from about nine till sometime after ten this evening."

“Nope,” I said. “I’ve been with my car all evening, and I never was in the warehouse parking lot. Not tonight anyway.”

“You weren’t in the neighborhood at all?”

“Well, I was on that side of the freeway for a while, but not within half a mile of the warehouse. Who says I was there?”

“Just that your car was there,” Detective Macdonald corrected me. “Red seventy-six Volvo, license plate GFA 096.”

I gasped. “Where’s that car now?” I asked. “Where is it? Still there?”

“No, sir. The parking lot’s empty. But that is your station wagon?”

“No,” I said. “It’s my partner’s car.”

“I see,” she said. “Can you tell me how I can reach your partner, sir?”

“No. I wish to hell I could.” Then I asked, “Did you say police department? Is the fire department there?”

“Yes sir. They’ve done all they could. I’m afraid there wasn’t much left to save. We believe the fire began about ten-thirty. Old wooden building. Took about three hours to burn.”

“And you’re with the police?” I asked again.

“Yes sir. I’m an arson investigator.”

“Arson?”

“Mister Mallon, I’m stuck here for another couple of hours. Any chance you could come down here to the site and talk with me? I have a few questions—”

“That seventy-six Volvo,” I asked. “It never showed up again?”

“No sir, not yet anyway. Can you get down here? I have to hang up now. I’ve got people waiting to speak to me.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said. “Listen, if that red station wagon shows up again? Tell her to wait for me. I’ll be right there.”



# Part One



# Chapter One

I can tell you exactly when and where this mess began. Tuesday, June 28, 1994. Carol was out of the office on her morning rounds when the phone rang. I answered, “Guy Mallon Books.”

“Is this Guy Mallon?” The voice was gravelly but friendly. “*The Guy Mallon?*”

“Speaking.”

“Mister Mallon, my name is Fritz Marburger. I don’t expect you’ve heard of me, but if you have the time I’d like to take you and your wife to lunch today to discuss an idea I have.”

Oh right. Publisher beware. “Mister Marburger,” I said, “I’m not married. I do have a business partner, but she’s not my wife. I appreciate the offer, but we’re busy today, and—”

“We could make it tomorrow,” he said. “I’m free all week. One of the joys of being retired. Also one of the curses.”

“Look, maybe I should cut to the chase and save us both some time. If you’re looking to sell me stocks or real estate, I’m not interested. If you’re a poet and you have a manuscript to show me, you’re welcome to drop it off and I’ll look at it when I can find the time. But it won’t do you any good to take Carol and me to lunch, because—”

He cut me off with a jolly, gruff laugh. “Hey, Guy, I hear you, but let me cut to my own chase. Give me just a minute. I’m not selling a thing, and I’m not a poet. Jesus Christ, that’s for sure. I’m a retired businessman. I had a long and successful career in mergers and acquisitions. Now I’m out of work and I’m bored.

I'm bored stiff. So I thought it would be fun to invest a little money in a small local business and see what might happen. I've been asking around, and some of the people here at Casa Dorinda are saying nice things about Guy Mallon Books. So I'd like to get to know you. I'm thinking of rolling the dice with maybe fifty grand, if I feel it's a good fit. If not, I'll keep looking. That's all. It's worth a lunch, especially since I'm buying. So if you have the time tomorrow, what say we meet at the El Encanto, say twelve-thirty?"

Casa Dorinda was a retirement home in Montecito for the wealthy. Residents there bought a lot of our poetry books from Tecolote Books, a nearby independent bookstore. So far, so good. Besides, lunch at El Encanto? "Well, tomorrow's busy, actually, but today's free after all."

"Grand." Wealthy people say *grand* a lot, I've found. "Twelve-thirty?"

"Swell," I answered.

I was hanging up just as Carol walked through the front door, carrying the day's mail. She plopped the pile of mail on my desk. "Guess what," I said. "We're having lunch at El Encanto today."

"How sweet of you!"

"Not me," I said. "Fritz Marburger's the sweet one."

"Who's he?"

"I don't know, but he's interested in our company. He has some money to invest and for some reason he wants to scout us out. I figure it won't do us any harm to—"

"Oh, shoot!" Carol said. "I'm getting my hair cut at one o'clock. Remember?"

"Damn, I forgot. Well, maybe I can call him back and reschedule."

"That's okay," she said. "You go on without me. You can tell me about it this afternoon."

"But it's a business deal," I said. "You're the business manager. I'm just an editor. What do I know about business?"

Carol chuckled. "You don't know squat. But you're a dreamer, Guy. And you know how to listen. See what he has to offer and

we'll talk about it. But before you accept any money from this hotshot?"

"What?" I asked.

"I want to hear the string section."



"Look at that God damned view," Fritz Marburger remarked as we waited for our entrees to arrive. We sipped a local Chardonnay on the terrace of the El Encanto, a quiet and elegant restaurant high on the Santa Barbara Riviera, with the red-roofed city laid out below us like a bowl emptying into the harbor. Palm trees lined the beach and sailboats bobbed on the sapphire bay. Out on the horizon floated the Channel Islands; the air was so clear you could see, or at least imagine, the canyons on their hillsides.

Mr. Marburger was a tall, skinny man with a Walter Matthau grin, sparkling Sinatra eyes, and a forest of unruly gray hair, which he combed with his fingers throughout our conversation. He wore a tweed jacket and a plaid shirt. "I got to admit," he added, "Santa Barbara's easy on the eyes. I could get used to this town."

"How long have you been here, Mister Marburger?" I asked.

"Call me Fritz. Five years. The five slowest years of my life. Used to live in Chicago, but when I retired my wife insisted that we come out here and quote take it easy for a change unquote, move into that morgue in Montecito, play a little golf. Which was fine for her till she died two years ago, God damn her, and now here I am, twiddling my God damned thumbs, surrounded by beautiful scenery and beautiful rich widows."

"Too bad."

He laughed. "Just kidding. The widows leave me alone. I guess I'm too hot to handle. Actually, I've been seeing—I guess that's the way you say it—a younger lady lately, as you may know."

I shook my head. "Sorry, should I know?"

"You don't read the *Santa Barbara News-Press*?"

"Not the society page."

He chuckled. "Good man," he said. He reached into the breast pocket of his tweed jacket and handed me a small package

wrapped in gold paper and tied up with a silver ribbon. “My lady friend wanted me to give you this.” He handed the package to me.

“Feels like a CD,” I said, pulling on the ribbon.

“Don’t open it now,” Fritz said. “Wait till you get back to the office. Ah, here’s lunch.” I slid the package into the side pocket of my jacket.

A uniformed waiter opened up a folding stand next to our table, where he placed a large tray. He proceeded to put plates before us: I had pumpkin soup and the crab melt with shoestring fries and Fritz had a huge Cobb salad showered with roquefort dressing. The waiter refilled our wineglasses, asked if we wanted anything more, and bowed when he was excused.

“Not bad,” Fritz pronounced after a few bites. “I like this joint. I happen to know the *maître d’*, personal friend of mine. So when did you come to Santa Barbara, or have you always had it this good?”

“I came here in nineteen seventy-seven,” I answered. “I was just passing through. Bought a bookstore that was going out of business, then somehow got into the publishing business through the back door, almost by accident. Carol Murphy became my partner a few years later, and now we’re working our butts off, doing what we love.”

“Doing pretty well, from all I hear,” he said.

I shrugged. “For a rinkydink little West Coast poetry publisher, I guess you could say we’re doing all right. We pay the rent. We’ve had some good luck. One of our authors was Poet Laureate for a couple of years, and that helped. But it’s not an easy way to make a living. We pay the rent and that’s about it.”

“Seems to me you could do better. I mean, publishing *poetry*, for God’s sake? Does anybody *read* poetry anymore? I’ll bet the bookstore’s what’s paying the rent.”

“Nope. That was a total loss. We quit selling books years ago. It’s all publishing now, and yes, there are a few readers left. We can sell a thousand copies of anything we publish. We’re not getting rich, but we’re having fun.”

“You’re not interested in growing?”

“Growing?”

“Hey, I don’t mean anything personal. No offense, okay? How tall are you, anyway? Just curious.”

“Five feet. No offense taken.” I’m quite used to being the shortest man in any crowd. That doesn’t bother me, but rude people give me a pain in the ass.

“Well, I’m talking business, is all. That’s what I mean by growing. You may be stuck at five feet, but you could get a lot bigger in other ways.” Fritz pointed at me with a forkful of lettuce. “Thousand copies? That’s chickenshit, pardon my God damned French. You can actually live on that? What do you eat for dinner, pork and beans?” Then he glared and shook his head. “Sorry. It’s just that numbers like that tend to make me sleepy, know what I mean?”

“I think I do,” I said. “This crab melt is so good I’m going to finish it before I walk out. I hope you don’t mind.” I took a bite. Fuckin jerk.

But then he turned his glare into a grin and said, “Hey, Guy. Don’t get me wrong. I’m just needling your ass. Thing is, I know you can do better. I’ve made a career out of recognizing talent, and you’ve got it. But a thousand copies? Poetry? Give me a break. You can do better.” He poked his forkful of lettuce into his mouth and started chewing at me. “A lot better than a thousand copies. We’re going to get you and your partner into play, my friend. And it ain’t going to be with poetry. A thousand copies. Shit. Let’s forget tiddlywinks, shall we? How much would it cost to publish a real book? A big book, couple of hundred pages, hardback, first class all the way, ten-twelve thousand copies. Huh? How much.”

“Hell if I know,” I said. “I’ve never done anything like that.”

“But you’re a publisher, right?”

“Tiddlywinks.”

“You’re a businessman, for Christ’s sake. Come on. Let’s have some numbers.”

“Twenty thousand?” I guessed. “Twenty-five?”

Fritz Marburger grinned and nodded. He pulled a checkbook out of his jacket pocket.



“What the hell is this?” Carol asked, staring at the rectangle in her hand.

“A check for thirty thousand dollars. Your hair looks nice,” I told her. “I like it that length.” Actually I liked Carol’s strawberry blond hair any length, because I like hair and because it’s Carol’s.

“I can see it’s a check, Guy,” she said. “I can see it’s made out to Guy Mallon Books. What I don’t know is who the hell’s Fritz Marburger, and what the hell this is all about, and it’s not about my hair. What’s the deal?”

“Well, we don’t have to cash it if we don’t want to,” I said. “That’s the deal.”

“What’s this money for, Guy? Please don’t make me beg.”

I smiled. “It’s in case we want to publish a novel,” I said.

“We have to spend thirty thousand dollars publishing a novel? Is this man crazy? Are you crazy?”

“No. We publish the novel, and we get to do whatever we want with whatever money’s left over. Publish more God damned little poetry books, as Fritz puts it—”

“I see we’re already on a first-name basis,” Carol remarked.

“—or, if we decide we like real publishing for a change, we can publish a couple more commercial novels. Anything we want. Our choice.”

“Do we get to choose the first novel?” Carol asked.

“Well, that’s the string section you were worried about.”

“Let’s hear it.”

I pulled the small, square package out of my coat pocket and handed it to Carol. “Open it,” I said.

Carol pulled the ribbon and tore away the gift wrap. “*I’ll Be Seeing You*,” she read. “Sweet Lorraine Evans Celebrates the Standards.”

“Lorraine Evans?” I said. “She’s my favorite singer. I didn’t know she could write.”

“You still don’t,” Carol pointed out.

“Come on, Carol. It might be a good book. Could be. We might like it. If we don’t, we tear up the check.”

“I’m not sure I like this idea, Guy,” Carol said. “I love you to death, and whatever you say, we do. But damn it, we’re not vanity publishers.”

“Only if we like the book, Carol. Only if we love it.”

“But even if we do,” she reasoned, “even if it’s the best book we ever read—”

“Yes?”

“We’d have to print ten, fifteen thousand copies to break even.”

“Well? Now we can afford that.”

“Yeah, but—”

“What?”

“Where would we store all those books?”

“Think big,” I said.

“Of course,” she said, kissing my forehead. “That’s why I love you.”

## Chapter Two

We spent Fourth of July weekend out in the tiny backyard of our East Side bungalow. Carol did some gardening while I sat on the deck under a bougainvillea reading the Lorraine Evans manuscript. The first sentence caught my interest. The first paragraph had me hooked. The first page had me in love, and by the end of the first chapter I was out of my chair over and over, following Carol around the flower beds, reading aloud to her as she buried her hands in the soil.

Finally she put down her trowel and begged me, “Don’t read me any more. Let me garden. Then let me read for myself. You’re spoiling all the surprises, and besides, I’m getting a little bit jealous here.”

That was on Saturday. That evening, during cocktails, I had a hard time keeping my mouth shut and a harder time trying to talk about anything other than the novel I had just finished reading.

Carol gave me the smiling Irish eyes over her gin glass and said, “Okay, okay, tell me all about it.”

“Nope,” I said. “You’ll read it for yourself. Soon, I hope.”

“Tomorrow. Otherwise we’ll have nothing to talk about. And I don’t want you hovering over me while I turn the pages. Tomorrow you’re doing the laundry, the shopping, and the vacuuming, while I get to put my feet up and read.”

“I vacuumed last weekend,” I reminded her.

“I just want you to stay out of my hair while I read *Miss Glamorpuss*.”

“Why do you call her that?”

“Because she flounces,” Carol answered. “And because of the title of her so-called novel.”

I grinned at her. She was in for a surprise.

So maybe Lorraine Evans wore hoop earrings and too much makeup when she delivered the manuscript to our office, including pancake on her cleavage. So maybe the novel was titled *Naming Names*. Carol was in for a surprise, and our publishing company was in for a new set of wings.



“God damn it, this is a fine book!” Carol admitted the next evening at cocktails. “I was ready to give it the once-over and hand it back to you. But shit, I *like* this book. I figured it was going to be a tell-all thing, with thinly disguised celebrities misbehaving in each others’ beds. It’s not that at all.”

In fact, Lorraine’s novel was a sensitive story about a penniless, schizophrenic old woman living in a Santa Cruz charity hotel, who, when she went off her meds, would undress in public and rant about how she had been sexually molested by both Allen and John Foster Dulles when she was a child.

I grinned. “Too bad we publish only poetry.”

“Oh shut up, Guy. You know you want to publish this book, and I know we can afford to do it now. Call the lady and tell her to come in and sign a contract.”

“You’re not jealous anymore?” I asked. Just to make sure.

“Huh? You mean jealous of Miz Flounce? Don’t be silly. Oh, you mean what I said yesterday? I was just jealous because you got to read a book in the shade while I had to strain my back and break all my fingernails in the dirt.”

“I vacuumed today,” I reminded her. “And folded laundry.”

“Lorraine’s number’s on the manuscript. Call her up.”



Lorraine Evans came into the office Tuesday afternoon, and she didn’t come alone. She brought with her, or vice versa, her boyfriend, her

sugar-daddy. Wearing a big, proud grin she said, “Carol, Guy, I’d like you to meet my agent. This is Fritz Marburger.”

Fritz gave us his rubber-faced grin and extended his left hand; Lorraine was holding onto the right.

I said, “We’ve actually—,” but a slight shake of the head and a wink from Fritz told me to can it. “We’ve actually heard of Mister Marburger,” I said.

“Call me Fritz,” he said in his jovial bass rumble. He turned to Carol and said, “I understand you’re the brains of this organization. That’s what Lorrie tells me.”

“I control the purse strings,” Carol said. “Strings are my specialty.”

“Good girl.” Fritz extricated his right hand from Lorraine’s grasp and started moving around the office, looking at the bookshelves on the walls. “You published all these books?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Those are my collection. I collect postwar western American poets. First editions.”

He looked at all four walls of the office, as if mentally calculating how many books I owned. “Lot of poets,” he observed. “How much is this collection worth?”

“It’s priceless,” I said.

“Right, but if you were to sell it,” he persisted.

“Not for sale.”

“Okay, okay. Not like I want to buy it, you understand. I don’t read poetry. I read the *Wall Street Journal* and that’s about it. But this collection, how much is it insured for?”

Lorraine stepped in and said, “Don’t answer that. Don’t mind Fritz. He’s got a one-track mind. Let’s do business!”

So we sat at the round conference table and I passed around copies of a two-page contract I had drawn up that morning. Carol plopped down a yellow pad so she could take notes on the negotiations. Lorraine put on a pair of red-rimmed reading glasses and got to work. Fritz sprawled forward with his elbows on the table, humming and grunting as he went through the document. He nodded, he shook his head, he tapped the table, he ran fingers through his thicket of gray hair.

Lorraine looked up and smiled, then folded her hands on top of the contract.

Fritz looked up and said, "That's it? That's the contract?"

"That's it," I said. "That's the contract."

Fritz shook his head. "You can do better than this. This is fine as far as it goes, but I mean give me a break. Doesn't say anything about foreign rights, paperback rights, movie rights, greeting card rights, tee shirt rights, blah blah blah. Doesn't say how many copies of the book you're going to publish. Doesn't even name the God damned territory, for Christ's sake. And ten percent royalty? You gotta be kidding me. I think you could also throw in a few promotion guarantees, tour, advertising, we want a review in *Publishers Weekly*, yada yada. I want you to get Lorraine on 'Oprah.' And what's this horseshit about holding back royalties as a reserve against returns? There aren't going to be any returns. And another thing. Sales reports twice a year? Forget it. We get a sales report every month, and we get paid every month for that month's sales. The check's to be made out to Marburger Enterprises. I'll keep my agent's fee and pass the rest along to Lorraine. I want that written into the contract: an agency clause. Let me see what else—"

"Hold on," Carol said, her facial expression friendly. I know that expression. "It sounds as if you know quite a bit about the publishing business. Have you worked in publishing?"

Fritz raised his eyebrows. "I know a lot about business, and I know a lot about contracts. And as Lorrie's agent—"

Lorraine said, "Fritzy, be nice."

"You're the nice one. But somebody's got to play hardball. That's where business gets fun, right? Without back-and-forth, no give-and-take, there's no sex, pardon my French. Okay, let's roll up our sleeves." He moistened his thumb and forefinger, laid the pages of the contract side by side on the table before him, and said, "Paragraph one..."

It took us all afternoon, but the four of us hammered out a contract that suited us all. Fritz insisted that the territory be defined as the entire universe, which was fine with me and made

Lorraine squeal with pleasure. The contract named Marburger Enterprises as the agent, but Carol inserted a clause stating that Fritz Marburger have no decision-making power with respect to *Naming Names* or any other part of our publishing business.

That one was a little sticky. “Look, I don’t see why you wouldn’t want me to give you some advice from time to time, for Christ’s sake,” he said. “I mean I’m retired and I don’t have all that much to do these days, so—”

“So play golf,” Carol said.

Fritz brought a laugh out of his lungs that sounded like fifty years of unfiltered Chesterfields. “God,” he said. “Missus Mallon, I like your style!”

“My name’s Murphy. The clause stays.”

Fritz gave us all a splendid slow-motion shrug, a grin, a nod.

We shook hands all around, Carol promised to have the revised contract ready to sign the next day, Lorraine kissed Fritz, and I went to the storage closet and came out with a bottle of wine, a corkscrew, and four glasses.



The next day Fritz called me and said, “Listen, Guy, I know we have a contract and all that, but you and I have to have a separate agreement that I get something more out of this than my fifteen percent of Lorraine’s ten percent. I mean since I’m invested so heavily in this project, how about you put me on the payroll as an advisor or something?”

“Why didn’t you bring this up yesterday?” I asked.

“I didn’t want Lorrie to know I’d paid for this book to be published. I mean she’s pretty sensitive, and frankly I don’t want her to cut me off or kill me.”

“Well,” I answered, “I don’t want Carol to kill me either, and we don’t have a payroll.”

“Then how about you give me some stock in your company. Not a controlling amount, just some equity. After all—”

“We’re not a corporation,” I told him. “Look, Fritz, if you don’t like the agreement we agreed on, it’s not too late to back out. Nobody’s signed anything yet.”

His sigh was like a resigned growl. “Forget it, he said. “We’ll sign.”



Pre-press production took six months. In late January, we sent the book off to the printer in Michigan and called Lorraine and Fritz in for a conference on marketing.

“We’ve sent out the bound galleys,” Carol told them. “Guy’s writing the press release. Here’s a list of places we plan to send review copies, everything from *People* to the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. We’ve got a publication party scheduled at the Earthling Bookstore for Friday, April fifteenth. If you give us your mailing list—do you have a mailing list?”

Lorraine said, “Natch.”

“And I want this girl on ‘Oprah,’” Fritz interjected.

“Uh—we’ll try,” Carol said. “Remember, we don’t have a lot of clout.”

“I do,” Lorraine reminded us. “Don’t worry about ‘Oprah,’ my publicist will take care of her.”

“If you get on ‘Oprah,’ we’re going to have to be ready to reorder books. A lot more books,” Carol said.

“That reminds me,” I said. “We still don’t have a place to store the books we’re getting. I’ve got to look into warehouse space.”

“Where are you storing your books now?” Fritz asked.

“We have a couple of units at Budget U-Stor, other side of the freeway,” Carol told him.

“Shit. You guys really are amateurs, aren’t you. No offense.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, my voice getting high and loud. “You can’t get away with that, say ‘no offense’ after you do your best to offend us.”

Fritz grinned at Carol, then at me. “Look,” he said. “I’m here to help you grow. Work with me, okay? I’m going to put you on the map.”

“We’re already on the map,” Carol muttered.

“Map of Santa Barbara, maybe. That’s not enough for me, and it shouldn’t be enough for you.”

I thought about that. Yes, I had to admit having my name on a bigger map sounded good. “Go on,” I said.

Fritz said, “I’ve had my eye on a piece of commercial real estate. I’ll buy it as an investment and we’ll move the books in there. You can pay rent to me, which is the least you could do, come to think of it.”

“What do you mean by that?” Lorraine asked.

“Nothing, sweetheart.”

“You paid them to publish my book,” she said. I watched those big whole-note eyes of hers narrow to murderous slits.

“At least it’s getting published,” he fumbled. “Nobody else would touch it.”

“You’re really in trouble now, Fritz.”

“Baby, listen—”

“I’m not talking to you,” she told him. Then she turned to Carol and me. “It’s not true, you know. A lot of publishers would have been glad to have this book, I know that. But Fritz wanted to work with you, and I’m glad he did. I love you guys.” She turned back to her agent and repeated, “Love you to death.”



In mid-March, a week before ten thousand copies of *Naming Names* was scheduled for delivery, Fritz Marburger walked Carol and me through the DiClemente Avocado warehouse, which he had just purchased. It was run-down and dusty, a dimly lit cavern next to the railroad tracks on the ocean side of the freeway. And it was big. It was huge. It was made of wood that looked stained by the weather, but Fritz assured me that the cement floor was dry and the roof was new. It had a loud mechanized rolling door big enough to drive a truck into.

“You’ll be paying rent to Marburger Enterprises,” Fritz said. “Fifteen hundred a month.”

“That’s outrageous,” Carol said.

“What can I say?” Fritz countered. “Rents are outrageous in this town. Get over it. How much would it cost you to store ten thousand hardback books at Budget Fucking U-Stor?”

“Okay,” she said. “Since it’s too late for us to shop around.”

“Oh, and you’ll have a roommate,” Fritz added. “I’m renting the back third of this place to somebody else. Otherwise I’d have to charge you more.”

“You have anybody in mind?” I asked.

“Yeah, we signed a lease yesterday. He’ll be moving in next week. Another publisher, as a matter of fact. You guys should get along just fine. Name’s Herndon. Roger Herndon. Great guy. Knows a lot about publishing. He’s going to have his offices in the back, along with his printing equipment.”

“Roger Herndon,” I said. “Never heard of him.”

“He’s new in town. You’ll like him.”

“What does he publish?”

“Books.”

“What kind of books?”

“How do I know? Good books. Books that sell. No poetry. You’ll like him. You’ll get along just fine.”

“Is he paying fifteen hundred a month too?” Carol asked.

“That’s between him and me,” Fritz said. “But I’ll tell you this much. I’m going to get my thirty thousand dollars back one way or another. Now that Sweet Lorraine Evans has shown me the gate, I’m going to be a lot more businesslike.”

“You and Lorraine are—”

“Kaput. Finito. History City. But I’m still her God damned agent, and the royalty checks still come to Marburger Enterprises. I still own a piece of her ass, pardon my God damned French.”

For a moment I detected a sadness I had never seen before in Fritz Marburger’s eyes, but the expression quickly turned to steel.