

DEADLY ANGER

By Noel Markham

CHAPTER ONE – ESCAPE

Damon shoved his way through the door of the psychiatric hospital and momentarily froze in place. Cocking his head, he looked skyward as he released a lungful of air and made a cursory sign of the cross.

Just behind him, on the other side of the glass door, the armed guard seemed engrossed by the conversation between Tilly and the stony faced woman behind the gray metal desk. Damon resisted the urge to bolt. Instead, he swallowed hard and tried to look like a man who simply stepped outside for a cigarette or a breath of fresh air.

It had been a challenging time. At any moment he could have been recognized and slammed back into that awful locked room or worse. He took a moment to congratulate himself for marching boldly down those long, brightly lit corridors. There had been a bad moment when Tilly, exuding confidence, spoke briefly with Julio, a dark skinned man swabbing an already glistening floor. But the stupid janitor was so honored to be addressed by the nurse that he failed to recognize Damon who, thanks to Tilly, no longer appeared to be one of the inmates.

“Okay?” Tilly asked as she finally pushed through the exit. She hooked her arm in his and they walked in step towards the employee parking area.

Although her closeness revolted him, as it always did, every step that took him farther away from that dreadful place lightened his spirits. He gave himself credit. The reason he was out in the cool night air, not inside that stinking hospital, was because he had convinced this sex-starved woman that he wanted her. It always amazed him what women would believe.

“I had to chat with Janet,” she explained. “They would have thought it strange if I had just walked out as I’m leaving for vacation now.”

“Yeah,” he said trying not to show his impatience.

When they came to a red, Toyota Camry, Tilly turned, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with passion. Damon felt his skin crawl but he had to play the game. Checking his impulse to escape, he caressed her back tenderly and tried to match her desire. But he had no desire for this tall, unshapely woman and he knew she would soon realize that. He pushed her away.

With his voice hinting at more intimate times ahead, he said, “Let’s get out of here first.”

Tilly frowned and blinked her dull, brown eyes. Damon pasted a look on his face that showed both sympathy and frustration. He was skilled at showing emotions he did not feel. Soon she relaxed. She tilted her head to one side signaling that she had to agree with him. She unlocked the car.

As soon as he opened the door, the fresh smell told him he would not be smoking until they reached the winery. He fastened his seat belt and as Tilly waved at another uniformed man guarding the gate, he rubbed the back of his stiff neck.

He reminded her that they needed to go to Palm Desert. She nodded and took off down a dark and lonely San Bernardino road while he slumped in the passenger seat. If there was a moon out that night, he did not see it.



As soon as she rang the doorbell, it occurred to Lindy that she was being foolish. Glancing at her watch, she confirmed it was exactly eleven p.m. She straightened her shoulders and tried to brush away her momentary regret for scheduling such a late appointment for a real estate listing. She switched her briefcase to her other hand and noted that the door looked like it came from a monastery in the French countryside.

Waiting, Lindy glanced over her shoulder at the street that was empty of all activity at this late hour. Lights shone on a massive bougainvillea that covered one wall of the stucco garage and crickets chirped their evening song. She flinched at the sound of metal scraping metal and imagined the woman inside fiddling with a brass chain lock. *Why would someone feel so insecure in such a safe neighborhood?*

A small woman opened the door cautiously. She looked quite surprised to see Lindy who was dressed for success in her midnight blue designer pants suit.

This was not a good sign.

“Hello. I’m Lindy McAdams...Carter with Rivers’ Realty?” She kicked herself mentally for making a declarative sentence end with a question mark. She had planned to come across as ultra-confident—not tentative or weak.

The woman blinked, opened her dark eyes wide and seemed to study Lindy with great intensity.

It occurred to her that she had come to the wrong house. Lindy cleared her throat. “Are you Diane Tomich?” She had already started to back away.

“Yes, yes. I was expecting you.” Diane stood aside and, holding her right arm across her waist as if in pain, opened the door wide. She had olive skin and hair so black it had to be dyed. “You’re very punctual.”

“I try to be,” Lindy said, “but if I’m too early...?”

“No, no, I need to deal with this.” Diane led Lindy into a living room dominated by a statue of the Blessed Mother and enhanced by framed paintings of Jesus in profile and on the cross. The furniture was mainly overstuffed and in shades of brown to match the carpeting.

Diane perched on the edge of a huge medium brown recliner. She wore a simple print dress that barely covered her knees and left her arms bare. Gold sandals exposed her purple toenails that were just a shade darker than the large bougainvillea outside the front door.

“You’re interested in selling your house?” Lindy sat on the sofa and struggled not to become enveloped by it. She tugged on the front of her jacket that always seemed too tight when she sat down.

“Yes,” Diane nodded vigorously. “I bought it...actually my husband and I bought it seven years ago, but we’re...we’re separated now and...and...” She shrugged as a way of finishing her thought.

Lindy imagined there must be a compelling reason to put a house on the market at a time when prices were dropping faster than the popularity of land line telephones. But then there was also a compelling reason why Lindy decided to go back into selling real estate at such an inopportune time. She hoped to regain a small portion of the life she enjoyed in Santa Barbara—a life tainted by the night she found her parents’ mutilated bodies. Damon had shot them both.

Carter thought she was delusional. “You can’t go back,” he advised her. “We have to learn to live in the here and now.”

But the here and now was difficult. Real estate wasn’t selling and neither were her paintings. She had to do something! She pulled her mind away from Carter and herself and tried to focus on the needs of Diane Tomich—she really wanted this listing.



“What is this?” Tilly jerked away from his touch as she braked the Toyota in front of a huge stone structure surrounded by acres of rotting grape vines. “This isn’t a winery. It’s a...a...” Without giving any thought to slinky desert critters, she pushed herself out of the car and headed towards the huge, oak doors.

A heavy chain passed through each door handle and a thick padlock held the chain together. Damon’s nostrils flared and he felt his entire body stiffen. This was not what he expected to find.

“We’re not even going to get inside,” Tilly complained with her coarse, whiney voice.

“Shut up!” He wanted to backhand her but he restrained himself. “Open the trunk.”

“Don’t you talk to me that way!” Tilly tried to be forceful but Damon had no intention of letting that happen.

He reached over, grabbed the Toyota’s keys, got out and opened the trunk. He found a crowbar, a hammer and a sledgehammer—he started with that.

“Why don’t you just give me the keys to the car and I’ll leave you to your madness?” Tilly held out her hand as if she expected him to comply.

Ignoring Tilly, Damon pounded the chain and the padlock. He pounded with force and a fervor he didn’t know he still had. Soon the padlock fell to the ground. Damon removed the chain and pulled on the oak doors. He would take care of Tilly as soon as he made sure his black pickup was in place and ready to roll. But what he saw produced uncontrollable body tremors. He grabbed hold of the door for support.

It’s gone!

The room was empty. No, that was not true. There were piles of trash, broken wine bottles, chair parts and lots of shattered glass. To the right there was a broken down counter where wine lovers used to gather to taste the fruit of the vine. But there was no pickup—his black Ford pickup was gone. As he tried to fathom a world in which his pickup was missing, uncomfortable flashes of heat rolled over his entire body

“Lindy did this!” He spat the words into the filthy room as he moved behind the counter and tried to open another, smaller door. It was locked but Damon knew the key was kept in a secret box under the dusty counter littered with dead flies and rat poop. He thrust his hand under the counter, found the key and unlocked the door.

Beyond the door there was nothing but blackness, but he was prepared for that. He ran his hand along the inside wall until he felt the light switch. In an instant, a brilliantly lit room appeared at the bottom of a metal staircase. Damon took the stairs rapidly. Tilly followed cautiously.



Carter swallowed a lungful of air and blew it out slowly as he pulled off his apron and tossed it in the laundry bin. He looked forward to the cool, June night air after spending eight hours over a hot stove. But first, he would head to the bar for two fingers of his favorite single malt scotch.

Sitting alone at one of the small tables in a crowded and dimly lit room, Carter spotted Detective Bill Santangelo wearing an off-duty brown sweatshirt over a pair of brown denim trousers.

"Bill." Carter clapped his friend on his shoulder and pulled out the other chair at the table. "You expecting somebody or...?"

"Naw," Bill said, gesturing for Carter to take the chair. "I was waiting for you."

"Great!" Carter raised his arm and signaled for the cute little server, Kitty, to bring him a drink. She knew what he wanted. "How are the crooks treatin' you?"

Although Bill had become a friend during the time that Damon was stalking Lindy, trying to kill her, Carter couldn't help but feel edgy to find Bill, a homicide detective, waiting for him at the bar.

"Ah, you know. Crime never ends but the murder rate is down so here I am. Besides, I'm teaching at the Police Academy now."

Surprised, Carter raised his glass to toast his friend. "That's a switch. Want somethin'?"

Bill shook his head and lifted his glass a few inches off the table. "Lemonade's my speed. But I wanted to catch up and see how you and Lindy are doing since you got back. Hear you got married."

"Did the deed in Taos. Visiting my folks and...the moment was right."

"So why did you come back here?"

Carter took a sip of scotch, put down his glass and then put his hands on the table. "Not sure. After we got married she said she'd had enough of the damned motorhome and tourist towns." He shrugged. "So here we are. She's sellin' real estate in San Clemente and I'm here cookin' meals for the upper class." He paused, then added, "Besides, I think she wants to try to sell some of the property she inherited. Told her I think it's a lost cause."

Bill raised his empty glass in the air until Kitty signaled that she got his message. "I heard you were trying to get a hold of me so I thought I'd stop by."

Kitty brought Bill another lemonade and Carter another two fingers of scotch.

"That'll be it for me," Carter said. Not a good idea to drink too much while sittin' with a cop.

"Any news about Lindy's brother?" Bill asked.

"Damon?" Carter ran his hand through his hair. "You know he came out of the coma but..."

"That's what I heard but he's not well enough to go to trial?" Bill grabbed a handful of peanuts from a large bowl that Kitty set down for them.

Carter shrugged. He knew that Bill was anxious to see charges brought against Damon who murdered his own parents and tried to kill Lindy. "She doesn't really keep up with him, you know. Talks with the doctors when they call her but other than that..." He shrugged and tried to let his thoughts float away. Trouble was that Damon loomed over both of their lives but they tried to ignore him—at least Lindy did. Carter knew in his heart that one day they would have to deal with Damon. The two men sat in silence for the next few minutes.

"Anyway, my wife and I got back together," Bill said happily.

"Great!" Carter said. "Congratulations." He knew Bill had deeply regretted breaking up with his wife. "Is that why you're teaching now instead of hunting down killers?"

Bill laughed. "It's part of it—a big part of it."

"I imagine."

"Yeah, and I want the four of us to get together. Have dinner. So you can meet Jenn and she can get to know you and Lindy. She's seen some of Lindy's paintings."

"You ever get a Tuesday night off?" Carter asked.

"Is that your night off?"

"That's it. One damned night." Carter checked his bitter tone. He deeply regretted their decision to give up their easy life with her painting and him foraging for wild foods. He'd much rather be doing that than...

Bill interrupted Carter's thoughts. "Okay, I'll see what we can put together and get back with you." Bill downed the last of his lemonade and set the empty glass firmly on the table—a definite signal he was about to leave.

Carter felt his heart begin to race. There was something he wanted to bring up with Bill—something about a couple killings several years back but he wasn't sure exactly how to go about mentioning it.

Bill stood. He watched Carter for a moment then asked, "Is there something...?"

"Sit," Carter said. He wished he could order another glass of scotch but held himself in check. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, slipped out a photo and handed it to Bill.

"Lindy's brother?" Bill asked.

Carter nodded. "And my ex-wife."

Bill raised an eyebrow and stared at the photo for a few minutes before he looked up. "Your ex-wife who was killed by a hit and run driver?"

"Yeah."

"Hmmm, I didn't know your ex-wife and Damon were...uh, friends."

"Neither did I," Carter said. "Found that when Lindy and I were packing up to leave the gallery."

"What does Lindy say? Did she know your wife and Damon were acquainted?"

"Didn't mention it to Lindy. Least I haven't yet."

Bill continued to study the photo. It was a head shot of Damon and Natalie gazing at one another like they were madly in love. "I don't think the police ever questioned Damon about her death."

"You were too busy grillin' me about it," Carter shot back. For a long time he was the main suspect in Natalie's death. Lucky for him he had an iron-clad alibi.

Bill spread his hands and set the photo on the table. "Wasn't me. It happened in Dana Point right?"

Carter nodded.

"Well, Laguna Beach was my territory."

"Yeah," Carter agreed. Natalie had been at the gym that night. The parking lot was partially torn up as was the street and, apparently, as she walked to her car, she got hit.

"So what do you think?" Bill asked.

Reaching for his empty glass, again Carter fought the urge to order more scotch. "I don't know," he said, wondering why it was so hard to make his point. "I think about those other gallery owners—you know the ones I mean."

"I do," Bill said. "I'm thinking the same thing." He stood and pulled out his keys. "I'll tell you one thing. I'm going to look into this first thing in the morning."

Carter also stood, pulled some money from his wallet and left it on the table. He followed Bill outside where they continued their conversation.

"You remember Lindy was pretty sure Richman killed those gallery owners," Bill said.

Richman! Carter couldn't think of the rat-faced man without experiencing the bitter taste of bile. "I know." He also knew that she never would consider that it could have been her brother. "Denial is her middle name."

"But there was never anything to connect him...Richman, I mean."

"I know."

"But, you're implying that you think Damon might have killed them and your wife—three female gallery owners."

"My ex-wife," Carter corrected him. "Lindy's my wife and back then Natalie and I were going through a divorce."

"Right," Bill said stifling a laugh. "Natalie was your soon-to-be ex-wife."

"Begins to sound like a serial killer," Carter said. "And I don't know if Lindy..." He shrugged. "I mean, it's like telling her that her brother is a real monster. I don't think she's ready to hear it. It's bad enough that he murdered their parents."

"And tried to kill her twice." Bill still held the photo in his hand. "You know the investigations didn't show any evidence of murder and even after Lindy insisted that Richman might have killed them..." He tossed his hands wide apart. "Nothing!"

Carter looked at the photo of Natalie and Damon and shook his head. "I don't know. This is different from the hunch Lindy had."

"I think it'll take more than a photo of your wife with Damon to open those cases."

"Even though his MO is to take people out with his pickup?"

"Even so," Bill said. "Besides, only Natalie was a definite hit and run. The first gallery owner may or may not have been hit by a car and the second one was..."

"I know," Carter interrupted him. "She died in a boat accident." He studied Bill's steely face for a moment and then decided to look into these deaths himself. What could it hurt?



Lindy tossed her briefcase onto the sofa, walked out to the kitchen and reached for the bottle of Merlot. She had been crazy to even think she would get that listing and never should have gone out to call on the woman in the middle of the night. She poured herself a generous helping of wine and carried it into the living room.

She removed her jacket, kicked off her shoes and tried not to think about the weird meeting. First of all, the woman couldn't manage to speak a complete sentence. She would start in one direction, switch to something else entirely and never even finish her point. She had no idea what she wanted for her house and seemed to be clueless about the current downturn in home sales. Lindy took a drink of her wine and convinced herself that it was a good thing that she did not get the listing.

And then her cell phone rang.

It was Diane Tomich. "I just wanted to call and tell you to make sure to bring all the paperwork when you come," she said.

Lindy's mouth fell open. "When I come?" She had no recollection of setting a follow up meeting.

"Yes, didn't we...I mean, if it's not convenient then..." Diane rambled until Lindy cut her off.

"No problem," Lindy said as calmly as she could possibly speak. "Let's just confirm the time and I mean, I'll fill out the paperwork as much as I can but we still need to discuss the price and how long you want..."

"I know all that. But I really don't have time to waste. Chuck isn't paying anything and Arthur is insisting..."

"Of course," Lindy sounded way more certain of herself than she felt. "You can count on me. Did you want me to be there by...?" Lindy sighed as she realized that Diane had already disconnected.

"Yes!" Lindy gestured with a vigorous fist pump. Carrying her glass of wine, she walked to the French doors but at this time of night or early morning there was nothing to see but darkness. There were no lights on the ocean—no cruise ships sailing down to Ensenada.

She glanced at her watch. Carter would be home soon. She went back to the kitchen to prepare a snack tray of crackers and guacamole. Then she stuck a champagne bottle into the ice bucket and took it all back to the living room. She could hardly wait to tell him the good

news. Her door-to-door canvassing of the neighborhood had paid off. Her broker, Ed Rivers, would be ecstatic. She didn't worry much about what time she was supposed to be at Diane Tomich's place. She could figure that out in the morning.



Inside his underground cave-room built against the side of a rocky hill, Damon wanted to inspect his things but he knew he had to deal with Tilly first. She had followed him down the stairs with a look of disgust on her homely face.

"I don't believe there's three million dollars hidden in this...this smelly underground shit hole." She spoke with contempt. "Do you even have any money?"

Damon turned but looked right passed her. He no longer had any use for her. She had served her purpose. She got him out of the psychiatric hospital with the promise that they would collect \$3 million and run off to Idaho together. What a laugh!

"You can't just ignore me," Tilly shouted. "What are we doing here?"

Instead of responding to the nurse, he searched for his 3D printer. That was how he made the gun he used to kill his parents. It was gone too. Evidence! Evidence against him.

His mind flashed to the library of his parents' home in Laguna Beach. He saw himself holding the gun to his father's temple. The old man whined and whimpered but he wouldn't tell where he had hidden the money. Damon blew the old man's head right off his body. If only he had told him where to find the money. This wouldn't be happening right now.

Damon made a throaty sound as he recalled that he almost left his parents' house that day without producing a suicide note.

"We need to move on," she said. "We can't stay here. The place stinks!"

"Stinks?" Damon inhaled the familiar aroma of oil paint, turpentine and varnish that permeated the room. This was his special place. It was where he painted...where he lived.

"Why did we even come here?" Her whole being was confrontational. She looked directly at him, head tilted forward, fists clenched.

Damon knew it was time. He knew what she wanted. He walked over to a large art supply cabinet, opened the top drawer, and slipped a box knife into his hand. Then he looked at Tilly, tilted his head a little to the right and gave her his irresistible smile as he opened a lower, larger drawer and looked inside. She would melt. He knew she would. And she would trust him again.

Tilly moved closer. "Is that where it is?" She sounded more hopeful now and came close enough to look inside the drawer that contained nothing but sheets of watercolor paper—not the \$3 million in cash she expected to see.

From behind, Damon wrapped his left arm around her waist and pulled her close with such force that it took her breath away. With the box knife in his right hand, he slit her throat from left to right with one swipe.

Instinctively her hands clawed the air for support but to no avail. He heard her make a gurgling sound and then felt the weight of her body press on his arm as her life evaporated. He let out a huge breath as he rocked back and forth with closed eyes. He felt happiness—happiness and an intense sexual fulfillment that left him staggering.

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