

IT TAKES TWO TO STRANGLE

A Damon Lassard Dabbling Detective Mystery

by

Stephen Kaminski

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For information, email **Cozy Cat Press**,
cozycatpress@aol.com or visit our website at:
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Dedication: To Amy and Maya

Chapter 1

Damon Lassard bounced on the balls of his feet in time to the pulse of evening traffic. Standing at the crosswalk in front of his local grocer, he smiled to himself. He had convinced the manager to donate twelve dozen hamburgers for the upcoming Fourth of July picnic. The modest feat would free enough funds for the Hollydale Citizens Association to rent the county's clown-inspired moon bounce—something his predecessor as president had never managed. Not that Damon cared to impress anyone, other than his mother and Bethany Krims. Damon shook his head. The chance of Bethany coming to a local fireworks party was almost non-existent. Given her current love interest and his connections, she would doubtless attend a demonstrably more upscale gathering.

The light changed and gears audibly ground to a halt on the street in front of him. Damon crossed and turned down the block toward Rebecca Leeds' storefront cooking school. Hollydale's primary business route teemed with commuters, but the wide clean sidewalk was largely devoid of pedestrians at six o'clock on a Monday.

Damon poked his head in the door of "The Cookery."

"Anything good left Rebecca?" he shouted over the pounding of an industrial-sized dishwasher.

Rebecca cut the light streaming through the front windows with her hand and visibly brightened. "There

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are a few pieces of pie on the counter, but none of mine.” She swatted at dark brown bangs.

He stepped inside and eyed the student creations. The smell of fresh dough tickled his nostrils.

Rebecca flicked down a glowing green switch on the dishwasher and its angry hammering subsided to a low growl. “There’s some pecan and apple-rhubarb left,” she said. “But I wouldn’t touch the pecan. Mrs. Chenworth made that one and it’ll take you hours to scrape the goo off the roof of your mouth.”

Damon pictured Mrs. Chenworth’s large frame shaking with fervor as she poured puddles of caramel into her crust so no one could interrupt one of her diatribes. “Can I finish the apple-rhubarb?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” Rebecca slid her athletic legs over a tall stool in front of the narrow stainless steel countertop. “I’m exhausted. I’ve been on the phone for the past hour with my credit card company. Someone stole my card this afternoon.”

Damon raised his eyebrows.

“Whoever took it didn’t steal my handbag,” she continued. “I had no idea the card was even gone until I received a call asking if I charged four hundred dollars to a clothing store fifty miles from here.”

“Are you sure you didn’t leave it somewhere?”

Rebecca crinkled her nose. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Rebecca was still on the southern tip of thirty and many men found her tiny nose, pouty smile and tomboy figure attractive. But Damon never felt a physical connection in her presence. He speculated that was the reason they had become such fast friends. Whether Rebecca had any interest in Damon, she never let on as far as he could tell. Of course, he was much better at figuring out when a woman had no interest in him.

“Do you have any idea what happened?” he asked.

“I think so. I went downtown this morning to a cookware show at the convention center. Afterwards, I stopped for lunch at a deli counter.” She pushed palms against bare knees. “It was packed and I had to wait for a table. The first seat that freed up was wedged against the back of a chair at another table. I made the mistake of hanging my bag over my chair.”

“And someone reached in and took out your credit card.”

“I was sitting back to back with the woman behind me. My handbag was practically in her lap.” Damon smiled at her through a mouthful of rhubarb. “I think she took the whole wallet out, because less than two minutes after I sat down she pushed up against me and went off to the bathroom.”

“So she went to the bathroom, took out the credit card out and slipped your wallet back into your bag when she sat back down,” Damon said.

“Exactly. I had about thirty dollars in cash, but she didn’t touch it. My credit card was behind my driver’s license, so even if I had opened my wallet, I wouldn’t have noticed until the next time I needed to use the card.”

“That’s a pretty smart move on her part,” Damon said. “That way she could use it and toss it before you even knew it was gone.”

Damon leaned into the counter across from Rebecca, picked up the remaining pie crust with his fingers and held his head over the pan while he chewed the buttery shell.

Rebecca rose and unleashed a shower of spray from a bottled cleaner onto the other end of countertop. She stepped over to the misted surface and scrubbed vigorously with a folded paper towel.

Rebecca had been one of the first people Damon befriended after moving to Hollydale two years earlier.

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His mother insisted that he take cooking classes on the pretext that his intake of restaurant fare and her leftovers couldn't last. Their friendship blossomed immediately.

"It's a pain in the neck to shut down the card, but I haven't even told you the most frustrating part," Rebecca said. She stopped scrubbing. "Not only did the woman who took my card buy four hundred plus dollars of clothes, but she made a charitable donation."

"She did what?"

"There's a five hundred dollar charge to an organization that funds cancer treatments for children in Central America."

Damon smiled despite himself. "So the thief makes up for her transgressions by performing a selfless act?"

"It's pretty easy to be altruistic with someone else's money." Rebecca finished wiping the counter and sat back down.

"I'm sure the credit card company will remove the charge," Damon said.

"The woman on the phone said all I have to do is dispute the charges I didn't make with their claims department. But I don't know if I can bring myself to fight a donation to help needy kids with cancer."

"You looked at their website didn't you?"

Rebecca flushed. "Yes. A five hundred dollar donation provides six months of treatment for a toddler. How can I take that away now?"

Damon picked at his teeth. "You just have to rationalize it. I'm sure the charity hasn't sent the money along yet and it probably hasn't even been earmarked for a particular child."

"I know, but it's churning my insides. I can't exactly afford to make a five hundred dollar donation right now. But I wouldn't lose my home or business if I just left it alone. I'm stuck between my conscious and my

bank account.” She breathed loudly. “Sorry to vent, Damon. But I needed to tell someone.”

“I’m glad you did. Don’t do anything yet. How long do you have to dispute the charge?”

“Thirty days.”

“Let’s both think on it for a couple of days.” Damon stretched his back muscles. “I have some good news. I just convinced Doc Marley over at the Safeway to open up his coffers and supply burgers for the Fourth of July party.”

“That’s wonderful, Damon. I didn’t think you could top last year, but I have a feeling you’ll find a way.”

“I hope so. I saw someone from the county mowing the grass on the ridge yesterday, so it should be in good condition as long as we don’t get too much rain.”

As a small community in Arlington, Virginia—less than three miles west of Washington, D.C.—Hollydale had the luxury of sitting on a ridge that overlooked the city. While the view along the crest was breathtaking in the winter months, during the balance of the year, trees in full bloom crowded the vista from every vantage point other than the county picnic facility in Hollydale. Every July, crowds of neighbors funneled to the spot to watch the fireworks rise over the Potomac River.

“I’m just finishing up here,” Rebecca said. “Do you want to join me for dinner?”

“Sorry, I was just passing by and wanted to stop in for a treat. I’m heading off to meet with Liz de la Cruz and the carnival owners. They start set-up for the county fair first thing tomorrow morning. Between the fair starting on Wednesday and the Fourth of July party on Friday, this week is crazy for me.” Damon sighed. “And on top of everything else, after my meeting tonight, I promised my mother I’d finish re-grouting her shower.” He saw Rebecca stifle a snicker.

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“No problem,” Rebecca said and switched the dishwasher back to full hammering mode. She gave him a grin over her shoulder, ignoring the dirty pie tin Damon left on the counter as he exited.

Liz de la Cruz was Damon’s citizens association counterpart in neighboring Oakwood. Because the county fairgrounds spread over their two communities—the athletic fields at Wickland Elementary School in Hollydale and barren pasture in Oakwood—the Arlington County commissioner asked Damon and Liz to serve as point personnel for the upcoming fair. That included meeting with Big Surf Shows, the new carnival operator.

Damon pulled into the elementary school parking and saw Liz liberally applying cherry Carmex. The woman used more lip balm than anyone Damon had ever met.

They walked downhill to a metallic blue pick-up parked in the schoolyard between a baseball diamond and the edge of farmland. The grounds were ideal for a fair—fifteen acres of relatively flat and treeless land.

A man in his early fifties with sparse black hair clinging to its final days watched them approach. Broken capillaries around his eyes betrayed a drinking habit. He wore a faux Burberry-checked long sleeve shirt under a tan hunting vest and slightly worn jeans despite a temperature in the mid-eighties.

The man reached out a meaty hand starting to spot with age. “Lirim Jovanović. My partner Jim Riley and I own Big Surf.” He had a slight Slavic accent and directed his introduction to Damon, but eyed Liz with leering appreciation. Liz was oblivious.

“Damon Lassard from Hollydale and this is Liz de la Cruz from Oakwood,” Damon said. “What do you think of the grounds?”

“They look pretty good. There’s already a good-sized parking lot at the school so we don’t have to put one on the grass and there’s plenty of open space so the generator fumes shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Generator fumes?” interrupted Liz.

Lirim rolled his eyes toward Damon but responded patiently. “If we didn’t use generators, we’d have to run electrical lines across the fairgrounds and up to the school. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“I guess not,” Liz said quietly.

“Here’s a rough outline of the set-up,” Lirim said. He set a legal-sized notepad on the hood of his truck and showed them blocks marked for rides, games, concessions and motorized trailers that served as living quarters for the traveling workers. Damon caught a whiff of whiskey when he leaned in for a closer look and realized it was exuding from Lirim’s pores.

Lirim looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps and his complexion darkened. He introduced his partner Jim Riley to Damon and Liz through gritted teeth.

Jim was a small man with a clean-shaven goatee and a somewhat bulbous reddening on one of his earlobes. It looked more infected than sunburned. Liz eyed it curiously. Damon fancied that she wanted to soothe it with a heavy dollop of Carmex.

The muscles tensed in Jim’s neck when he spoke. He explained that he had been measuring land gradients to assess water flow which tended to cause large muddy areas when masses of people congregated on a low spot. They’d make sure to keep the most popular attractions away from the low lying land.

Liz asked a few more questions and Damon agreed to meet the carnival owners at the same spot the following morning when the entire carnival rolled into town.

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Damon parked at the curb next to his mother's modern townhouse in Hollydale. The community was an eclectic mix of old and new. Pre-fab homes from the early 1900s for the working-class were slowly giving way to large, vertical houses as the older ones fell into disrepair and were sold. The people living in Hollydale largely mirrored their houses. Those occupying older homes were typically long-time residents and the majority of the new houses were occupied by the endless supply of transplanted lobbyists and management consultants who lived in Hollydale, but tended to shop and eat in downtown D.C.

Damon considered his mother's brick townhouse. The prospect of living on four levels, so narrow that a third of the floor space was taken up by stairs, didn't appeal to him. But his mother never complained—Lynne Lassard-Brown had lived there for six years, including three since her second husband Jack passed away.

A rolling filing cabinet with colored paper bursting from the drawers greeted Damon as he pushed through the unlocked burgundy and brass front door.

"Mother, I'm here," he shouted, skirting the filing cabinet only to be met by a three-foot-wide gold frame leaning against the sitting room loveseat.

"I'm in the kitchen, Damon."

Damon deftly steered past dining room and kitchen clutter and kissed his mother on the cheek.

"That's awfully chipper for someone who's about to spend a couple of hours on his knees in my shower," said Lynne, posing cross-legged on a spindled kitchen chair. Her graying blond hair swirled into a nest piled atop her head, showing off a graceful neckline. Damon had to give his mother credit: she kept in better shape

than almost anyone he knew—it must be all of those stairs.

“I’m happy to see you looking so good mother,” Damon said.

She ignored the compliment. “I saw Bethany Krims today,” Lynne said and moved to pour Damon a cup of coffee.

“You know Bethany has never shown the slightest interest in me,” Damon replied and reached for the steaming mug his mother extended.

“I know. Which is why I don’t understand why you don’t start taking your relationship with Rebecca to the next level.”

Damon frowned and reversed course. “So where did you see Bethany?”

“Down at Cynthia’s.” Cynthia, who doubled as Damon’s citizens association vice president, owned a salon next door to Rebecca’s cooking school. The salon was doing its best to rival an old-fashioned barber shop as a place for exchanging information among Hollydale’s local women.

“Mrs. Chenworth asked her how serious she was with that attorney she’s been dating,” Lynne said. “Bethany told her they had parted company.”

Damon’s heart lurched, although he knew it was baseless. Bethany had been single on several occasions since Damon moved to Hollydale, but it hadn’t increased his chances with her. Not that he had ever summoned the courage to ask her out.

Two flights upstairs, Damon laid out the repair materials he had purchased earlier in the week and dug into the project for his widowed mother. Lynne met Jack while he was on a business trip to Michigan six and a half years earlier. Within months they were married and she moved from a quaint suburb of Detroit into Jack’s townhome in Hollydale. Damon was

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overseas at the time and only met Jack once before the wedding.

Damon spent seven years as a baseball player in Japan. After college, he knew he wouldn't cut it as a professional in the States, so he moved sight unseen across the globe. He caught on with a farm club in Kyoto because they had a knuckleball pitcher and few players could catch a knuckleballer like Damon. When the pitcher, Masaso Kimura, was called up to the major leagues, he insisted that Damon be given a contract.

Despite his limited batting skills, it was during Damon's tenure with the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters in Sapporo that he made enough money to be comfortably off. Damon had been in a one-for-fifteen slump, but on a windy Saturday afternoon, he connected with a fastball and drove it into the outfield corner. The ball took a strange ricochet off the back wall, allowing Damon to round the bases for his first ever inside-the-park home run. As he crossed home plate, Masaso ran out from the dugout and embraced Damon in an enormous bear hug.

The seemingly innocent gesture between the Japanese and American players caught the attention of a fan-favorite national sportscaster, and the next thing Damon and Masaso knew, they were cast as the poster boys of Kushiro Chewing Gum's latest ad campaign. He didn't consider himself exceptionally good looking, but his clear blue eyes occasionally drew him a second glance.

Once the Japanese public tired of seeing Damon and Masaso, and Damon was relegated to the minor leagues, he decided it was time to return to the States. Given the recent death of his mother's second husband, Damon knew that she would appreciate the presence of her only child. He moved into an updated duplex three streets over from Lynne Lassard-Brown's townhouse.

Damon knew he was in a unique situation. At thirty-one years of age, given his relatively frugal spending habits and chewing gum money, he didn't actually have to get a job. Instead, at Rebecca's suggestion, he volunteered at the Hollydale branch library. Damon wasn't an avid reader, but this suggestion had appealed to him on two fronts. He could volunteer on a part-time basis and Bethany Krims spent a significant amount of time there.

"Have you eaten dinner yet, Damon?" Lynne asked, resting a hip against the inside of the bathroom doorframe.

"Rebecca let me have some leftover pie at The Cookery, so I'm fine."

Lynne pushed aside a half dozen plastic razors and placed a bowl of Bing cherries on the bathroom vanity. "So how's Rebecca?"

Damon scoured grout-laden hands under cool sink water. "She's fine, except someone stole her credit card this afternoon." He filled his mother in.

"That's terrible," Lynne said, nibbling on the end of a cherry stem. "I remember when your father was still alive, Damon. After I first starting using a credit card, he would tease me incessantly. He'd say 'I wish someone would steal your purse, Lynne. I'm sure the thief would spend less than you do.'"

She laughed. Damon dried his hands and wrapped his arms around his mother's sinuous body. Her warmth passed through him and he tightened his squeeze. Losing two husbands hadn't been easy for her.

She broke away. A small tear trickled down her cheek and she hastily wiped it away.

Damon picked up her signal. "So mother, how did you manage to get nail polish in between the shower tiles?"

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Ignoring the playful jab, Lynne kissed him lightly on the forehead and started down the stairs. “You’re going to give Rebecca five hundred dollars to cover the thief’s gift,” she said. It was a statement rather than a question. It gave Damon great comfort that she knew him so well.