

*Jealousy, drugs, family dysfunction, murder - the "two ugly detectives" face it all as they search for a missing woman.*

**The Two Ugly Detectives Agency:  
A Lafayette Larson Mystery**

By S.D. Fisher

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S. D. FISHER

THE TWO  
UGLY  
DETECTIVES  
AGENCY

*The Second Lafayette Larson Mystery*

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# Chapter 1

It began when Mike called me from Madison on an early October morning. He and I came to an agreement soon after we formed our partnership. He would staff the office in our capitol city by himself for two reasons. First, it keeps us apart. We don't do well when we have to be around each other all day long. Old issues and all that. The second reason was that this arrangement allows him to warn clients about my appearance before they meet with us at my office in the Wisconsin countryside home willed to me by my late mentally ill cousin.

Mike's voice sounded the same as it always did over the phone – like he'd swallowed one of the rasps he uses to shape his woodworking creations. Shrapnel from the neo-Nazi bomb had done a number on his vocal cords. He told me, "Lafe, we've got our first interesting client."

"Already? That's great."

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Why maybe?"

"It's a young woman with Down Syndrome. Her name is Skylic Cobb."

"Skylic? That's an unusual name for Wisconsin's neck of the woods."

"They're Mormon, she says."

"Equally unusual. Not that many Mormons in our state, as far as I know. Why does she want our services?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "She showed up this morning very anxious, and she's hard to understand at times. My gut feeling is that she's bursting at the seams to tell us something but keeps failing at putting it into words. Stutters a bit. She wants our help, but at the same time, she's obviously scared to death of me and maybe men in general."

"Abuse in her life?"

"That's my take. Anyway, we have to hear what Skylic has to say, but if I bring her to your place, I'm afraid she'll freak out even more facing the two of us by herself. We need a woman she can look to for safety and support. Is Maddie available?"

"Let me see if I can get hold of her," I said. "I'll call you back."

Maddie is a yoga teacher in Madison and the love of my life. She pulled me out of the darkest part of my existence through her boundless, yet common-sense compassion, and I've wanted to marry her ever since. But she hates the fact that I'm a PI and doesn't want to deal with that as part of marriage. I remind her that detective work is all I'm good at, and I wouldn't know how to do anything else. It's a difficult dance for both of us.

I phoned her and said, "Namaste, Maddie! How's my favorite yoga teacher?"

"Namaste. I'm doing fine. How's my favorite detective in bed or out of it doing?"

"Same as you. Doing fine. Hey, I have a favor to ask of you if you're not teaching a class for a few hours."

"Don't have one until this evening. So, what do you need?"

I explained the situation, and she said, "Tell Mike I'll be right over, and he and I can drive the girl down to your place."

## Chapter 2

From my late cousin Lyle, I'd inherited a Sixties split-level (light grey vinyl siding and white trim), a collapsed stable, twenty acres of land in central southern Wisconsin, and a pepper-and-salt Giant Schnauzer named Muzz.

A victim of early-onset Alzheimers, Lyle left the house in bad shape and packed with the junk he'd hoarded for years. I've emptied the main level and am still working on hauling out junk from the bath and three bedrooms upstairs in between making improvements to the property. Despite all my cleaning efforts, there's still a faint shifting smell that creeps down the stairs. Most times, it's the expected odor of mildew and mold; other times, when I'm tired and down from the pain of my wounds, it seems to carry the eerie reek of my cousin's unfortunate lunacy.

Once Mike and I decided to open Janus, I hired a contractor to convert the sunroom into an office space for meeting clients. Lyle had added it on to the side of the house, and it was obvious he'd done the work himself while the dementia was eating away at his mind. Insulated walls and windows had escaped his notice as well as trueing up the entire structure. As a result, the room had looked like a drunk leaning up against the house. It leaked heat like a sieve and needed a space heater in the winter to keep the chill to a bearable level.

Now it was a warm office filled with a Hermann Miller chair and desk for me (I inherited my mother's love of great design), an oversized black leather chair to accommodate Mike's long frame, and a matching couch for clients. At my request, the contractor had added an exterior door, so clients didn't have to tromp through the house. He'd also walled off the room from the house and put in an interior door. That way, I could gain access from the inside while maintaining my much needed privacy. Since being shot, I've required light more than ever to keep my mood up during the long dark days of winter. For that reason, the office now had eight insulated windows showing

me an expansive view of the rolling hills of my property and, unfortunately, of the fallen-down stable I haven't cleared away yet.

Prior to adding the office, I'd built a low redwood deck on the front of the house and put an inexpensive black mesh-metal table and chairs on it. Since I don't get a lot of visitors, I didn't see the point of buying fancy outdoor furniture, preferring to put the money into the interior.

Muzz and I were on the deck when Mike's vehicle came up into the driveway close to one p.m. The weather was unusually warm for October – in the 70s – but I'd seen the forecast and knew that, at any moment, a cold front was due to chase away the heat and replace it with the sting of early winter. Already, a fitful breeze batted at the dry leaves on the maples, making them sing their rattling portent of freezing weather.

I led Muzz off the deck and onto the grass, so we'd be readily visible to our nervous first client. It's easier for new people to get used to my face when they're not confined in a room with it right off the bat, and a big, furry dog is an effective way of distracting attention from my disfigurement.

During the recovery from my wounds, I'd passed the time training the 100-pound Schnauzer in the basic commands. He'd picked them up so quickly that I'd then taken him to advanced agility, trick, and tracking classes. I thought those skills might come in useful at some point in our PI work. Muzz was still agile despite the limp due to the bullet put into him by Cam Oliveri's fellow neo-Nazi, Sam Teilhardt, in a failed attempt to lure me out of my house and into the open for the kill.

Mike came out first. He walked around the front to join Maddie and our client as they stepped out of the car. He towered over the two women. I said earlier that a criminal had called Mike a "jug-eared giraffe." Well, he *is* tall, but that's where the similarity ends. I also said earlier that my partner is beak-nosed and that's what makes him look more like an entirely different species – a vulture, one that somehow manages to dress itself in a gray sport coat, red tie, dark

blue shirt and slacks and wrinkle everything in the process – including his shoes. He blames the rumpled appearance on his seven kids being hard on clothing. Sandy laughs at this claim. In the exasperated yet loving manner of a wife who knows she'll never change him, she jokes, "He doesn't need the kids to do that. If he so much as touches suits, shirts and ties, they wrinkle themselves before he even puts them on."

Let me be clear - the comparison of Mike to a vulture is a definite compliment in my book, not an insult. Vultures clean up carrion and help keep the ecosystem healthy. My partner does the same with the carrion in the criminal world.

I used Muzz's training now to ease Skylic Cobb's fears as she stood timidly close to Maddie, barely coming up to her waist. Her right hand squeezed the grip of a battered old blue Samsonite suitcase that looked like it had come straight out of the Fifties. She giggled as the Schnauzer completed a series of roll-overs, played dead, spun around and did a high-five with me.

Maddie smiled at me as the dog ran through his tricks, and I did my usual silent appreciation of the woman in my life. Tall. Strawberry-blonde hair. Full cheekbones. Straight nose listing a bit to one side. Clear blue eyes full of compassion from a long devotion to her yoga practice. A highly toned body wearing a light gray long-sleeved top over black stretch-fit pants and natural hemp shoes.

I tore my attention away from her to study our client more closely.

Skylic was a young woman with the obvious characteristics of her Down Syndrome condition - a flat face with a small nose atop a short neck, an upward slant to the brown eyes behind slightly crooked wire-rim glasses, and small skin folds on the inner corners of those eyes. A fabric-covered black elastic tie held her blonde hair back in a ponytail. Its color matched a worn long-sleeved ankle-length dress brightened only by a thin yellow belt secured around a chunky body. A scuffed faux leather everyday bag, the same color as the belt, hung over her left shoulder.



When Muzz had finished his tricks, Mike pointed at me and said, "Skylie, this is Lafayette Larson, my partner. We call him 'Lafe.' And the better-looking and smarter one is Muzz. He's as friendly and gentle a dog as they come."

"Hi, Skyliie," I said. "Muzz will shake hands with you if you want him to."

She hesitated for a moment, then put down the suitcase and shyly came forward to shake the dog's paw and pet his head.

"I...I...I have a dog too," she said. "His name is P-P-PugPug, but he's not big like your dog. I saw Muzz limping. How was he hurt?"

Her speech was slow, but her brain obviously wasn't. And compassion lay behind her words

"He was shot protecting me."

"That's sad. Like you. You were shot too."

"Yes."

"Mr. Mike told me about that. He warned me about your face, but it still scares me." She glanced shyly up at me. "I am sorry if that is wrong to say."

"Not at all," I said and joked, "it scares me too when I look in the mirror. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with it."

A wry, lopsided smile appeared on her face. "I know about that. Putting up with things, I mean. You know I am Down's."

"Yes."

"People think I'm stupid because of the way I look and talk."

"You're obviously not."

"I understand lots of things." A tone of pride and defiance entered her breathy, low-pitched voice. "Lots."

"Again, obvious," I said. "Say, why don't we all go up on the deck to talk? It's still warm so we might as well enjoy what may be the last heat of the year."

She hesitated and looked back at Maddie for reassurance. Maddie said, "I'll come with you, Skyliie. And I'm sure Lafe's got something to drink for all of us. What do you like?"

"I like lemonade. Mama makes it."

"I don't have homemade lemonade, but I've got a bottle from the store in the fridge," I said. "Take a seat while I go and bring it out."

"I will get my suitcase before I sit," she said. "I don't want to forget it."

We waited while she fetched the piece of luggage from the side of Mike's vehicle. When we got up onto the deck, Maddie patted one of the lawn chairs and said, "Skylie, you take the seat next to me."

Before I went in the house, I commanded Muzz to sit by the girl. This made it easy for her to reach over and pet the big dog which she did with enthusiasm. With each pat, a medicinal odor rose strongly in the air.

"I smell liniment," I said. "Did you hurt your arm, Skylie?"

Her gaze jerked away from me and then back again. "I fell. It's not a I-I-liniment; it's Mama's special salve – comfrey and honeycomb."

"I'm sorry. Is it getting better?"

"Yes," she said and put her focus back on stroking Muzz's head.

I glanced at Mike and Maddie. They nodded back their agreement that the long sleeves of Skylie's dress were hiding more than Mormon modesty, and whatever was under the fabric had nothing to do with falling.

When I came back out with a tray of drinks, Maddie was continuing to put the girl at ease. "I like your hair tie, Skylie."

The girl's eyes lit up with enthusiasm. "It's a scrunchie. I have many different ones because I love them so much."

I handed out glasses of apple cider for Mike, Maddie and me, then opened a bottle of lemonade for Skylie and handed it to her. She sipped tentatively before a smile lit up her face.

"Tastes good," she said, then added, "Maddie said you dress nice. I think she is right."

"Thank you, Skylie."

"He dresses better than I do," Maddie teased.

Mike gave his usual reaction to the subject – he rolled his eyes. The way I dressed had always been a bone of contention between us. In his mind, real cops didn't dress like "they were on the cover of GQ."

The truth was that it had been an issue between my parents long before I met Mike. As an artist, my mother had taste in all things, especially fashion. My father simply didn't see the point of spending money on clothing that wasn't basic and functional. I'd gone with my mother's preferences.

To be upfront about it, I enjoyed it for reasons beyond the fashion itself. In my high school hockey days, players didn't do "the faggot thing" so I was a target for haters and that led to more than a few fights – which I enjoyed because I won them all. And, to carry the honesty a step further, I didn't brawl solely to support my gay friends. I loved fighting; it was as simple as that. That love carried me into the Army and then into police work where I could put any brawling to better ends.

These days my love of fashion extends beyond all the reasons I just listed. With my face half-ruined, I look like Freddy Krueger at first glance to many people. Being well-dressed tends to mitigate that initial reaction of horror. Apparently, supernatural serial killers don't dress well.

I wore Tom Ford suits for years, but now all my outfits are custom-made. As with many detectives' suits, they're side-vented for freedom of movement and tailored with extra material around the waist to disguise a pistol, handcuffs or whatever other items are needed on an investigation. The difference between my suits and other cops is the material and the level of tailoring. I take it up a notch in both. It's not ideal to wrestle a suspect on the ground in a higher-than-Armani-level suit, but I live with the damage done. Needless to say, my tailor loves my frequent visits.

Today, I was as casual as I ever get these days – a blue quarter-zip cashmere sweater, tailored white sweats, and Mephisto deer skin sneakers.

"I'm glad you like the lemonade, Skylic," I said. "So, tell me, how old are you and where do you live?"

"I am 17. I live in northern Wisconsin."

"Whereabouts?"

"Our home is in the country north of Bellfield and south of Lydeville. Do you know Bellfield?"

"Yes, I've been there several times," I said. "A small tourist town, great for fishing and hunting. It's a long way from here – more than five hours driving time. Did a family member or friend bring you down to Madison so you could visit our office?"

"No, I got a ride from Bellfield."

"You said you live north of that town?"

"Yes. Mama says it's 20 miles north."

"Then how did you get from your home down to Bellfield?"

"I walked to the highway and then got a ride."

I was about to ask why her mother would let her hitchhike and not come with her, but Maddie beat me to the punch. "That's dangerous, Skyliel! You shouldn't ride with strangers."

"I know, but it wasn't strangers."

"Who was it?"

"Dr. Redlin and Jake coming by from a visit to the Senek dairy farm. They take care of sick cows there like they take care of my PugPug."

I said, "So, they took you to Bellfield. How did you get to Madison from there?"

"Mama said I should take the bus, but they said it was a very long ride and had a faster way."

"What was that faster way?"

"A friend of Dr. Redlin. He had to go to Madison anyway to make deliveries. I rode with him. Mr. Tom. He was nice too."

"Didn't Dr. Redlin and Jake want to know why you were making this trip?"

"Yes. I told them what Mama said to say to everyone – I was visiting Aunt Cambria. She lives in Madison. It was a lie, but Mama said this one time was okay."

"So, your mother didn't want anyone to know you were coming to a detective agency. Why?"

She ignored my question by saying, “Dr. Redlin is our veterinarian.” She giggled. “All the girls like him. They call him very good-looking.”

I decided not to press too hard for an answer as to why she’d come to us by asking, “Who’s Jake, another veterinarian?”

“No, Jake is one of Dr. Redlin’s assis-sistants.”

Maddie gently joked, “Is he handsome too? Do you like him like the girls like Dr. Redlin?”

Skylie processed the remark for a second, then blushed and shook her head vigorously accompanied by another giggle. “No! But PugPug loves Jake, and I do too because he doesn’t make fun of my dog and call him fat like some people do. That’s why I like him a lot – a whole lot - but not like girls like Dr. Redlin.”

The blush turned into a sudden frown as she asked Maddy, “Are you making fun of me?”

“No, no, I was just teasing.”

Skylie’s expression changed yet again, this time into a fierce, stubborn pursing of the lips. “I am Downs, but I can have a boyfriend if I want!”

“Of course, you can. I didn’t mean to - “

I interrupted to keep Maddie out of further trouble. “Skylie, how did you know about our detective agency?”

“I didn’t. Mama did.”

“Okay, then how did she find out about us?”

“At the dentist. From a magazine. I don’t know the name.”

“I did an interview for the *Madison Now!* magazine. She must have seen that story.”

“Yes. She said it was about your new agency...”

Skylie looked down into her lap and then back up with wet eyes. “And your little girl.”

At the mention of Mary, my heart ripped itself apart as it had done so many times before. And anger surged because I’d asked the writer to focus solely on our agency and not include anything about

the Lakeside School massacre. I should have known better. No journalist can resist the obscene drama of the story.

The girl drew back. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, no, Skylie, not at all. I'm mad at the writer of that article for including information I asked them not to print."

"Okay," she said. "Mama says I should give you this."

Digging into her bag, she pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to me.

I opened it and read the handwritten message out loud. "Mr. Larson. I sent Skylie to you because her sister, Kyzlin, has gone missing, and I would like your agency to investigate. Please help me find Kizzie! I'm so worried. I am sorry for the murder of your daughter and all those children and teachers at Lakeside Elementary. I'm writing this because I thought you would understand the loss of a child better than anyone."

Above an address was the signature, "Emmalyn Cobb."

I looked up from the note and asked the question I'd wanted to ask earlier, "Why didn't your mother come with you?"

"Hovan would not like it. He says the women should stay at home. But he doesn't care where I go, so Mama sent me without telling him."

"Who's Hovan, Skylie?" Maddie asked.

"My dad."

"Have you called your mother to let her know that you're safe?"

"She said not to call. She would call me. But I can text her."

"Why doesn't she want you to call?" I asked.

"Mama has a secret phone."

"Why does she have a secret one?"

"Hovan doesn't want anyone to have a phone but him and Deron and Cardell. They are my brothers."

"Why not?"

"He says the same thing all the time, 'I don't want the government listening in. I don't trust them.' But Mama is worried about Kyzlin. Kizzie's so beautiful and smart. Mama bought our phones at Walmart

with her pin money. She says if I text, Hovan will not know. It's not noisy."

"Why don't you text her now?" Maddie said. "She must be worried."

"Okay," Skylic said. She pulled a phone from her bag, typed in a message and hit Send.

"What message did you give to your mother?" I asked.

"What Mama told me to."

She showed the screen to me. The text read, *Am safe with Aunt Cambria.*

Because she was so guileless, it was obvious we'd be getting more information about the family during the course of the conversation, so I focused on the question at hand. "When did your sister go missing?"

"Mama says September 23. Her and Oaklyn and Chandley w-went to the Bellfield Fall Festival. They sell honey and jam that everybody likes. But this time Kyzlin didn't come back."

"Oaklyn and Chandley are your sisters too?"

Skylic nodded. "They're married. Oaklyn and Chandley come from their homes to pick her up and then they drive to the festival together. I like it when they come, Mr. Larson."

"Call me Lafe."

"I can't," she said. "I must be polite, Mama says, so I have to say Mister. I'll call you Mr. Lafe. Is that okay?"

"That's fine. I attended that festival years ago. Great fun and food."

"Every year, my sisters go there and come back right away with the money they make. Hovan insists."

Her face fell for a moment. "I want to go with them, but Hovan says I can't. He says I'd scare customers off."

"I'm curious," Maddie said. "Why do you call him 'Hovan' and not 'Dad?'"

Her cheeks reddened. "I have to call him that. He's a-a-ashamed of me because I am Down's."

"He told you this?"

"Yes."

I didn't even have to look at Maddie and Mike to know the same thought was in all our heads. *This guy's a real piece of work.*

"Have your parents gone to the police or sheriff and reported your sister missing?" I asked.

"No."

"Frankly, I'm surprised," I said. "That should be their first choice in this matter. Why haven't they reported Kyzlin's disappearance?"

"Hovan does not like the sheriff," she said and launched into a growling mimic of her father's voice. "All the time, he says, 'He's a s-s-stooge for an illegitimate government.'"

"So, that means he's trying to find Kyzlin himself?"

"Yes."

"How does your mother feel about this?"

"Not good, but -"

She shifted uncomfortably. I let my silence pry the information from her.

" - Mr. Lafe, Mama won't go against Hovan."

"Because?" I prompted.

Skylie lowered her eyes while her hands twisted the strap of her bag. There was a long pause before she said in a low voice, "I don't want to say."

"He hits your mother," I said. "And you."

My statement got a reflexive "No," but then Skylie burst out as if she'd been holding her true feelings in for a long time. "I mean, yes! My brothers hit too and like to fight. They're big like Hovan."

"And yet here you are, Skylie. You're a very brave young woman."

"Not brave. Hovan is gone, so he can't hit me or Mama. And she sent me here without telling Deron or Cardell."

"When you say your father is gone, you mean he's been out searching for Kyzlin since the festival?"

"Yes. He's like Mama, scared for Kizzie. But twice scared."

"What do you mean 'twice scared?'" Mike asked.



“Many bad things happened before Kizzie was gone.”

“What bad things?”

She scrunched up her face in concentration as if trying to make sure she got the events in the right order.

“First, Nauvoo was killed.”

“Who’s Nauvoo?” I asked.

“Hovan’s cat. Mama says nobody liked that mean old Maine Coon cat except Hovan but said he didn’t deserve to die that way.”

“How did he die?”

“Somebody cut off his head and stuck it on the hood of the Peterbilt.”

“Your dad’s truck?”

“Yes. Hovan was very mad because it was his special rig he kept in the garage up on the hill.

She screwed her face up in disgust. “And they smeared all the cat guts on the inside. He made me clean it out. I didn’t like that.”

“I’m sure you didn’t, Skylie. No one would. But, tell me, do you know why that truck was special to Hovan?”

“It was the only one he kept in our garage. That’s why I thought it was special.”

“Was it different somehow?”

“The truck looked the same as all the other company trucks, but the trailer was different, Mr. Lafe.”

“How so?”

She frowned at what was apparently a bad memory. “One time, I walked PugPug up near the garage. I forgot what my brothers told me.”

“What did you forget?”

“I should not be near the truck except when they wanted me to clean it and the trailer. And I didn’t mean to go in the trailer, but PugPug got away and ran up the ramp. I didn’t know why he did that, but then I chased him inside and saw why.”

She paused to collect her thoughts. “PugPug was eating beef jerky out of a torn bag on the floor. The bag was near an open door. I-I-

looked in and saw some beds with dresses on them and tables and chairs and a tv. It was a nice room inside the trailer. I never saw that before. So, I guess that made it special.”

“Did you see anything more?” I asked.

“No. I picked up PugPug and ran out fast, but Deron saw and hit me and PugPug. We ran into the woods.”

Mike and I traded glances. There were only two likely reasons for a hidden room inside a trailer – transport of prostitutes or illegals. We’d seen it before.

“But more things happened after the cat was killed?” Mike asked.

“Yes. One night, the garage blew up bad. The boom woke us all up.”

“The truck was destroyed?”

“Yes, Mr. Mike.”

“You must have been very scared,” Maddie said.

Skylie nodded. “Mama too. She asked Hovan, ‘What is going on?’”

“What did he say?”

“What he says a lot. ‘None of your business.’ Then he and my brothers got their guns and started patrolling our property. They were mad and wanted to hurt whoever blew up everything.”

“Did Hovan say who he thought was doing all the damage you described?” I asked.

“Yes. Mr. Eel.”

“Is that what he called him – ‘Mr. Eel?’”

She blushed. “Yes, but I’m not supposed to say one of the words Hovan said with that name.”

“It’s okay,” Maddie said. “You can say it for us, and you won’t get in any trouble.”

Skylie hesitated, then blurted out, “That ‘fucking Eel’ – that’s what I heard Hovan yell.”

She blushed again. “He calls him ‘That fucking Mexican’ too.

“Do you know why this Mr. Eel would want to hurt your father?” I asked.

“No.”

Mike and I traded glances. Mexicans in lily-white northern Wisconsin were as rare as a 90-degree day in December. It screamed drugs and cartel involvement.

I asked, "When Hovan and your brothers patrolled, did they find anyone?"

"No, but someone shot at Hovan twice."

"What did he do after that?"

"He went to a secret place. He told Mama he would hide until he could find out who was shooting at him. I was happy when he left. No more scared."

She frowned. "But then Kizzie didn't come back from the Fall Festival."

"And Hovan thinks it was Mr. Eel who took your sister?"

"No."

Her answer startled me. "But your father blames Mr. Eel for killing the cat, blowing up the garage and shooting at him. Why doesn't Hovan think he's the one who kidnapped Kyzlin?"

"I am not sure. He said if it was Mr. Eel, he'd know by now. I don't know what that means."

Mike and I traded another glance because we knew exactly what it meant. Cartel killers liked to ratchet up the pressure on their targets in brutal ways. The killing of the cat could be followed by body parts delivered by mail. The fact that a finger or hand from Kyzlin Cobb hadn't been delivered indicated either that Mr. Eel hadn't kidnapped the girl, or he was simply holding off for some unknown reason.

"So," I said, "who does Hovan think took your sister?"

"Dr. Redlin."

Her answer startled me again.

"The veterinarian who gave you a ride to Bellfield. Why does Hovan think that?"

"Because she disappeared at the festival after visiting Dr. Redlin's booth."

"What kind of booth does he have?"

“For the Humane Society. You can adopt puppies and kitties there.”

She became wistful for a moment. “I would like to see the puppies and kitties.”

“Is there a reason why Hovan thinks Dr. Redlin might have taken Kyzlin?” I asked.

“Yes. One time we came home after a visit to the vet clinic. Kizzie told me, ‘I like going there because Dr. Redlin is so handsome. We didn’t know Hovan was listening.’”

“What did he do when he heard that?”

“He got mad and knocked her to the ground. Kizzie ran into the woods like I do. I ran after to give her a hug. There she told me something and said to keep it a secret.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She was crying bad, said she wanted to run away. She said she was s-s-sufo –”

“Suffocating?” Maddie suggested.

“Yes, that’s the word.”

“So, Skyliie” I said, “do you think Kyzlin ran away with Dr. Redlin at the Fall Festival?”

“I don’t know. But Mama said no.”

“Why did she say that?”

“She said, ‘It’s ridiculous that a respected veterinarian would do such a thing – especially when all the girls chase after him’. Besides, she said, she knew who’d really done it.”

“Who?”

“Blue Jay Johnson.”

“Blue Jay’? That’s an odd name,” Maddie said.

“They call him that because he looks like that bird and is noisy like them. ‘Mr. Squawk, Squawk, Squawk,’ Mama says.”

“Who is he?”

Her face twisted in disgust. “He worked with Hovan.”

“You don’t like him?”

"I hate him." She hastened to add. "But I'm not the only one. Maddie."

"Why do you hate him?"

"He hit me when he was drunk with my brothers and made fun of me like them. Always repeating what my brothers say, 'You and PugPug are two of a kind – stupid, fat and useless.'"

Maddie cried, "You're not any of those things!"

"I told Mama Blue Jay said those words, and she said he's one to talk. He doesn't wash and is smelly like bad fish. Nobody likes him, especially Kizzie."

"Why her, especially?" I asked.

"Because he asked her to marry but she said no and told Mama and Hovan."

"What happened after she told them sick?"

"Hovan shouted and said lots of bad words. Then he chased Jay off the property."

She smiled. "I'm happy he's not around."

"Skylie," I asked, "do you know if Hovan threw Johnson off your property before shots were fired at your father or after?"

"Yes. Before."

"Hovan doesn't think Jay could have gotten mad and started shooting at him because he wouldn't let Kyzlin marry him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because when Mama asked the same question, Hovan said Jay's too much of a - "she blushed again - "chickenshit' to come after him."

"What did your mother say to that?"

"She said that might be true, but Blue Jay could have hired someone to shoot for him. Hovan was quiet after she said that."

Mike said, "Since Hovan's been gone has your mother said if he'd found out anything more about Kyzlin's disappearance?"

"No, but -"

She dropped her eyes again.

“But what, Skylie?” I asked.

“I miss Kizzie...but I like it when Hovan is gone.”

“He’s not at home at other times as well?”

“Yes. Sometimes he’s gone longer when he makes his deliveries.”

Her story intrigued me, and I wanted to hear more, but for once the weather forecast was accurate – a wind rose out of the north, and leaves scuttled across the deck as if bent on the singular pursuit of chasing the heat off the spot where we sat.

“Skylie,” I said as I stood. “I’d like Maddie to take you and Muzz to my office where you can stay warm. Mike and I will join you there in a couple of minutes.”

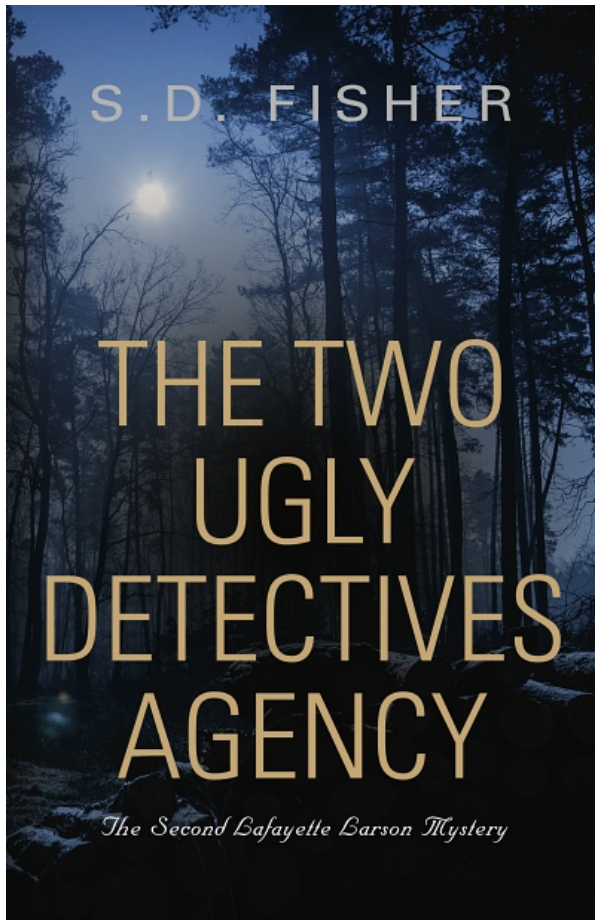
She picked up the suitcase, and Maddie ushered her and the dog off the deck and around the side of the house. When they were out of earshot, I asked Mike, “What’s your take on Skylie as a reliable reporter of what’s going on in the Cobb household?”

“I didn’t know much about her condition before so I googled Mayo Clinic before we came down here. The site said every Down Syndrome is an individual, and impairment can range from mild to severe. Skylie seems very high functioning to me, so I think what she says is accurate.”

“I agree,” I said. “So, we have one missing girl and three suspects according to what Skylie says – a possible Mexican cartel hitman, this Blue Jay Johnson character, and a Romeo of a veterinarian. This one is complicated right out of the gate.”

Mike nodded. “Definitely an interesting case. The question is, does Skylie understand how much it costs to do an investigation?”

“Let’s find out,” I said.



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