

A brilliant and beautiful young woman is murdered, and everyone knows who did it. So, why is PI Lafayette "Lafe" Larson taking on a case that's already solved?

A Bountiful Harvest of Death: The Third Lafayette Larson Mystery

By S.D. Fisher

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S.D. FISHER

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HARVEST
OF DEATH**

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Foreword

By now, if you've read my books, you know the history. I lost my daughter, Mary, in a mass school shooting. Through chance, I happened to be on the scene and took the murderer out, but not before he killed several other students and teachers and managed to send rounds into me before he went down. As a result, I have a limp, and the right half of my face is paralyzed into a permanent rictus of ugliness that often sends people who don't know me hurrying out of the room.

Depending on whom you talk to, I'm brilliant or simply a pain in the ass know-it-all. My partner, Mike, favors the second definition. Not surprisingly, I prefer the first. As proof of my intelligence, I offer you the following evidence — this book. I'm a private investigator who solves and writes up our cases with a panache I owe to my mother and father. She supplied the artistry you see in these words. My polymath father supplied the intellect I apply to solving our cases.

Now, I know you didn't open this book to see me pay homage to my considerable ego, so let's

get to the story. What you'll find in the following pages is a murder mystery. Since I was involved, it's on a personal level. On a broader level, the continuing conundrum to me is how we humans can be so endlessly inventive in slaughtering each other. And, in truth, my resolution of cases sometimes seems less like seeking justice for the victims and, although I'm not a religious man, more like an atonement for those inherent violent sins of our species. However, no matter what, truth is always the goal, isn't it? It can be hard, oh so hard, to come by and sometimes I don't find it at all.

But when I don't find it, I turn to all the good things I have in my life for support and solace, things that allow me to continue staying committed to the pursuit of justice. The love of a good woman. The loyalty of my partner who forever has my back. And the protective devotion of a very large dog who inspires everyone he meets.

Chapter 1

Muzz's growl alerted me to the presence of an unexpected visitor before I heard the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway.

"Who is it, boy?" I asked as I rose from my chair. Joining the salt-and-pepper giant schnauzer at the living room window, I saw a top-of-the-line black Lincoln Navigator pull to a sudden stop. The hard braking sent a swirl of gray dust up into the fitful early October breeze. When the driver stepped out of the vehicle, I recognized a man I hadn't seen in over twenty-five years. As a teenager, I'd worked on George Mueller's farm for a month before he fired me.

Most farmers drive the standard-issue pickup and plead poverty no matter how good their finances are. Not George. Even back during the short time I knew him, he'd always been in-your-face about the wealth he'd accumulated, so it made sense that he'd arrive on my property in the luxury SUV. It was no secret that he saw display of his large fortune as a weapon to cudgel all business rivals into submission.

Muzz growled again, and I told the 100-pound dog, “You stay in here, boy. If anybody’s going to do any biting in this situation, it’ll be me.”

I stepped out onto my small deck as George strode toward the house, marching like a man on an eternal mission to increase his fortune. The wind drove the citrusy scent of his aftershave before him, the smell as astringent as the man himself.

As he came closer, I saw that my memory of him as being obsessively neat in his clothing for a practical farmer was still accurate. And that he now apparently had a passion worthy of a corporate CEO in using that clothing as a uniform for branding. He wore an unwrinkled grass-green shirt with “Mueller Ag Enterprises” stitched in corn yellow above a pocket, green jeans cinched by a green belt, and dark green work boots.

After all his years of success, I’d expected George to have gained weight to fill out a tall and spare body, but his frame was still all edges and angles. If the old farmer had been alive during the Cubist period, Picasso could have painted him as is, no deconstruction needed.

His eyes hadn’t changed either, still green as greed with a sharpness in the gaze matched by

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the knife-edged nose that slashed down his face as if wanting to cut anyone out of his life who dared thwart his wishes.

Although George was in his early seventies, his close-cut hair wasn't the expected silver, but an implausible red. I wasn't surprised at the dye job. Knowing him, it wasn't solely about vanity, although there was enough of that to stuff full several of his silos. It was also a business tactic, a physical signal to any enemy that, even at his age, anger could still erupt out of him at a moment convenient to his aims.

He stopped mid-stride when he caught sight of my injured face. Naked satisfaction slid into his eyes as he said, "You're not a pretty boy, anymore, Larson."

"George, what are you doing here ruining a fine, warm fall day with your presence? No, wait, I know why. Jimmy's put himself in the shit again, hasn't he? It must be serious this time if you need the services of Janus Investigations."

"I didn't say I needed your services."

"So, you just drove here to remind me that half my face is fucked up? I appreciate the thoughtfulness."

The old farmer nodded his head in confirmation of an unspoken assumption that didn't stay unspoken long. "You haven't changed since you were a teenager, have you? Still a sarcastic little asswipe."

George's tone remained the same after all these years. Every syllable seemed to convey either a demand of or contempt for, whoever was in front of him.

I responded in kind. "Not to point out the obvious, but I'm not that young, anymore. But I will cop to being an asswipe if it gets you back in your fancy Lincoln and out of here."

A tightening of the lips told me that George was doing his best to control a considerable temper. The fact that he achieved that control said he wanted something important from our meeting. After a moment, his mouth worked loose, and he said, "You going to invite me in to talk or are we just going to stand out here?"

"We're just going to stand out here. My dog's inside, and I don't want him to get rabies when he bites you."

"When' he bites me? You keep a vicious dog?"

"He's only vicious when I give him the proper command."

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“Now you’re just screwing with me.”

“Yup. Since that’s a Mueller specialty, I thought you’d appreciate the artistry.”

“What I’d appreciate, Larson, is putting a stop to all this dancing around.”

“Sure, tell me why you’re here.”

George took a deep breath and then reluctantly released it. “Okay. You were right. My oldest is in trouble.”

“What’s Jimmy done this time?”

“He’s been accused of the rape and murder of a high school girl, but he didn’t do it.”

“Then why’s he a suspect?”

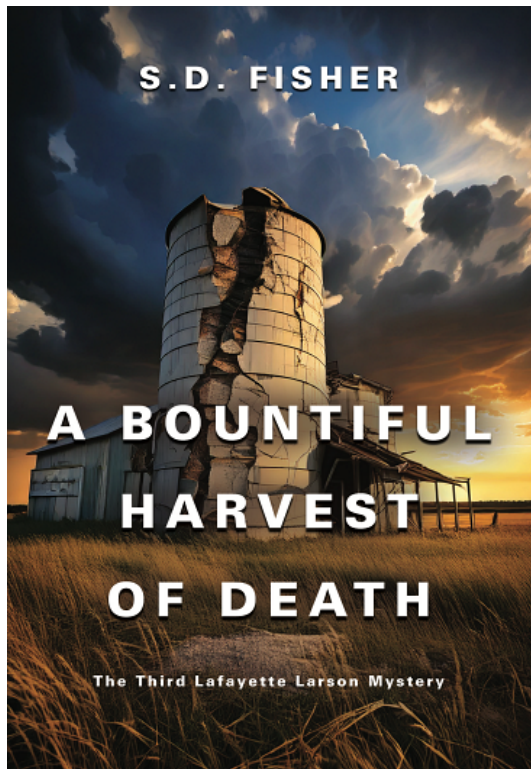
“Because they found a torn shirt with his fingerprints on it at the scene.” George tapped on his chest. “A shirt like this one.”

“Any DNA from the crime?”

“Yes. But there’s some sort of incompetence going on at the state lab. They have a backlog, and we don’t know the results of the analysis yet. But one thing’s for sure, though, when they do test for it, they won’t find a match.”

“So, what proof do you have that Jimmy didn’t commit the act?” I asked.

“Because he was with me and his brothers the night the crime was committed.”



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