



Whiskers of the Lion: An Amish-Country Mystery

By P. L. Gaus

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE FOR P.L. GAUS AND HIS AMISH-COUNTRY MYSTERIES

"Spellbinding." --Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

"This is definitely a series worth reading." --*Booklist*

"Gaus is a sensitive storyteller who matches his cadences to the measured pace of Amish life, catching the tensions among the village's religious factions." -- *The New York Times Book Review*

"Precise, detailed descriptions of Amish practices and full-bodied, unhurried, well-measured prose. A pleasure to read." --*Library Journal*

"Gaus captures the steady cadence of Amish life and offers a vivid depiction of both the world they live in and their particular vision of human experience." --Christian Science Monitor

"Gaus has done successfully what would seem nearly impossible: to meld a mystery novel with a description of Amish life in Holmes County without scanting either one." --*Ohioana Quarterly*

About the Author

Paul Louis Gaus lives with his wife, Madonna, in Wooster, Ohio, just a few miles north of Holmes County, home to the world's largest settlement of Amish and Mennonite people.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE THEME of this novel is taken from the Scriptures, but Sheriff Robertson's story arose from a modern song, "Pacing the Cage," written several years ago by the Canadian musician Bruce Cockburn. I particularly like the version sung by Jimmy Buffett on his 1999 CD, *Beach House on the Moon*. As I wrote the novel, and as the sheriff's story unfolded for me, I found myself listening to this song often. I greatly admire both the writer and the singer. Cockburn wrote (and Buffett sang) about the inside of the cage. I have written about the outside.

I am especially and continually grateful to my wife, Madonna, for reading my novels with a critical eye, and for her insights on this one in particular. I also thank my two older grandsons, Noah McKee and Grant McKee, for their enjoyable and enthusiastic discussions with me on the content and direction of the story's ending chapters. They are very insightful young men.

Next, I wish to thank the editors at Plume, and especially Denise Roy, senior editor, who has believed steadfastly in this series and whose support has been of great encouragement to me personally and of great

benefit to me as a writer. I am also most grateful for the fine work of Mary Pomponio, publicity manager at Plume. Many thanks are due also to my agent, Jenny Bent, for her critical and useful comments on the manuscript.

I finally thank Steve and Dawn Tilson and Kate Clements for an engaging evening of literary discussions, which helped me to discover the title for this novel.

1

Wednesday, August 17

4:50 A.M.

STAN ARMBRUSTER had been a Holmes County deputy sheriff long enough to know that even the best day could skip sideways on you like a ricochet. With the instincts of all patrol officers, he had ridden his entire career knowing that the positive could flip to the negative with the single bark of a gun. A bark as arresting and irreversible as the clang of a bell.

But Stan Armbruster wasn't going to ride in patrol cruisers any more. He was done with that. Done with the uniforms and done with the heavy-duty belts of gear. Now he'd wear a suit with a simple leather badge case hung from his suit pocket. He'd trade the big 9 mm pistol for the diminutive .38 revolver of a detective.

Armbruster stood in his new suit in front of the closet-door mirror in his trailer home and liked what he was seeing. He liked it so much that he found it easy to dismiss his patrol officer's instincts for the negative. Found it easy to dismiss thoughts of gunshots, ricochets, and clanging bells. Found it easy to be positive, because his first day as a probationary detective would surely prove to be the best day of his life.

Armbruster fished in the side pocket of his suit coat and took out his new flip case of business cards. He fanned the short stack of cards, then closed the case and dropped it confidently back into his pocket. Then he finished the knot in his tie, cinched it under his chin, and studied his new image in the mirror. Hair black, growing out long enough to sustain a part. Complexion fair, with a ready smile, offset by a dark blue suit with a sophisticated charcoal pinstripe. White dress shirt with a roomy collar and a red power tie. A new look for a newly minted detective. He was done with crew cuts, uniforms, patrol cruisers, and rental trailers. He smiled at himself and turned for the front door.

There he smiled, too, at the photo on the wall of his partner, Detective Pat Lance. Maybe, he dreamed, this would be the day he would tell her. Maybe this would be the day he'd ask her out. If not today, then soon. Because it just wouldn't do for her to learn, before he had a chance to explain himself, that he kept a picture of her at his door.

Outside, August's moist heat painted Armbruster's cool skin with cloying humidity. Runoff from the overnight rains dripped from wet branches hanging heavy and low. The last cloudburst had just finished with the racket of close thunder. Runoff clattered from the trailer's metal roof into the gutters and downspouts. As he locked up, a vaporous negativity again brushed the margins of his thoughts—Fannie Helmuth, missing since April, probably already dead.

But OK, Stan, *be positive*. They'd find Fannie Helmuth soon enough, safe after all, in some remote Amish colony a thousand miles away.

Then again, maybe not. Maybe she really was dead. Fannie Helmuth. The locus of Sheriff Robertson's

summer-long obsession.

Settling in behind the wheel of his red Corolla, Armbruster shook his head. Stop this, he thought. Just *stop* it. The sheriff will never change. Giant Bruce Robertson—impulsive, insistent, and impossible. As big as a Barcalounger, with the personality of a tank commander.

So do your job, Stan. Hit it early and have another report on Robertson's desk before the man makes it down to the jail. Go out to their farm and wake up the Dents if you have to. Ask them again. Not that they'll ever tell you anything. Not that they'll ever admit they know where their Howie has been hiding with Fannie Helmuth.

Armbruster started his car, turned on the air conditioner, and drove down the lane toward the blacktop of County Road 189. At Ohio 83 in Holmesville, he turned south toward Millersburg. At Courthouse Square in Millersburg, he joined truck traffic climbing eastward up US 62. Outside town and down in the next valley, he turned south on Ohio 557. After the long curve at the roadside tourist stands, he angled right to climb a wooded hill on an unmarked gravel lane. When he crested the hill, Armbruster parked on the hill in front of Miller's Bakery and set the brake because of the sloping grade. He got out in the dark and walked past a line of black buggies, the familiar country fragrances of fresh road apples and wet horsehair ushering him up to the door. Aromas like this outside a bakery? Armbruster thought. Only in Amish country.

Inside, Armbruster stopped to let his eyes adjust to the white-hot glow of the Amish gas mantles spaced at intervals across the low ceiling. Morning sales had long been under way, and a mother in a black bonnet and shawl was paying for pastries at the cash register. Her three young daughters, also in black shawls, pulled close to the hem of her long olive dress when they saw Armbruster enter through the screened door.

At the front of the salesroom, a white-bearded grandfather in Amish-blue work denims was stacking loaves of bread into his wicker basket. He gave Armbruster a reserved nod of his head. Two Amish lads in black denim suits stood beside a low table at the rear of the salesroom. They were pouring coffee for themselves from a steel thermos into Styrofoam cups. They ignored Armbruster with the practiced aloofness of religious separatists, mixed with the disdain of all teenagers, making private jokes at the expense of their elders.

From the back, one of the older Miller girls carried a wide aluminum tray of pies out of the kitchen and said to Armbruster, "Sticky bun, again?"

Armbruster smiled, "Maple cinnamon today, Edna."

The girl set her tray down, brushed flour from her hands, and turned back toward the pastry case. Over her shoulder, she asked, "You're not on patrol?"

"New job," Armbruster said and stepped up to the front of the case. "The biggest one, there at the corner," he pointed. "It's a celebration."

The girl teased the corner bun away from the rest, dropped the bun into a white pastry box, closed the lid, and handed the box across the top of the case to Armbruster. "I can take your money."

Armbruster handed her five dollars. "Keep the change."

Back in his Corolla, Armbruster put the pastry box on the passenger's seat and drove down off the hill to turn right again on Ohio 557. In the quiet little burg of Charm, he parked beside the Roadside Amish Restaurant and went inside as the first dim hint of sunrise was giving vague outline to the congestion of old rooftops in town. He took a seat in a booth by the front windows and ordered the farmer's special—eggs over easy,

bacon, sausage, hash browns, orange juice, toast with butter, and coffee. When he had finished his celebration breakfast, the sun was coming up stronger on a day that Stan Armbruster planned never to forget. Outside, the heat of an August morning was already starting to build.

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From Ohio 557, Armbruster made the sharp turn onto County Road 70, to climb the blacktopped lane up toward Troyer's Ridge. Overnight rains had left the pavement wet and puddled, and the Corolla's tires hissed and splashed as Armbruster leveled out to turn north through a stand of timber on narrow Township 369.

This would be Armbruster's second visit to the Dent farm this week. The sheriff had ordered the visits at least three times a week. Drive the narrow blacktop and gravel lanes north of Charm, out into the middle of pastureland nowhere, and ask the Dents again. Ask a thousand times if you have to, Robertson had insisted. Find Howie Dent. Whatever it takes. Because that's where we'll find Fannie Helmuth.

Armbruster crested the rise south of the one-room Troyer's Ridge schoolhouse, and he turned his Corolla right onto Township 371 toward the Dent farm, which would be at the second lane after the turn. But first, Armbruster came to the long drive leading back to the deserted Jonas Helmuth farm, and as he passed the drive, the corner of his eye caught a patch of yellow off to his left. He stopped twenty yards beyond the gravel, backed up, and looked toward the main house some seventy yards down the drive. There sat the yellow VW bug.

In that single glimpse of yellow, Stan Armbruster's celebration came to a halt. He flashed the thought of a bullet striking a bell—a ricochet. His grand breakfast was a distant memory. The maple cinnamon bun lay forgotten on the passenger's seat beside him.

This was going to be Howie Dent's yellow VW. Armbruster considered the radio, but as he pulled to a stop behind the VW, he saw that the doors were standing ajar. An odd assortment of items had been tossed out onto the gravel on either side of the car.

Armbruster shoved his gear shifter into park and shouted out the window, "Howie Dent?" He got nothing but lifeless silence in response. He shut his engine off, climbed out, walked a circuit around the VW, and made a mental catalog of the puzzling items scattered on the wet ground beside the car.

There was an old red backpack, soaked from the overnight rains, zippers pulled open, apparently empty. Armbruster picked it up and felt inside the pockets. Nothing there.

In addition to the red backpack, there was a small travel pack of tissues floating in a muddy puddle outside the passenger's door. There were also the contents of a typical glove compartment strewn across the gravel nearby—a tire gauge, a metal penlight, a bottle of aspirin, and napkins and straws from fast-food restaurants.

As he mounted the wooden steps leading up to the front porch, Armbruster again called, "Howie Dent?" He tried the door and found it unlocked. Heading inside, he called, "Howie?" and stepped farther into the front hallway. Deserted since April, the empty house sounded cavernous. "Where are you, Dent?"

In the parlor, the long Amish-purple drapes hung like sentinels, in straight pleats of plain cloth guarding either side of the glass. Morning light sparkled the dust that stirred into the stale air as he paced around the empty room. As he walked down the long hallway to the kitchen, Armbruster's footfalls on the hardwood floor punctuated his steps and gave him grade school memories of tapping a hollow wood block for music. It reminded him of the simple tunes of his childhood. The trouble was, it wasn't the pleasant tune of a grade school melody that was playing right then in his mind. It was something more frenetic. Something more akin

to distress. Maybe Led Zeppelin in manic high pitch, Armbruster thought, or a wrenching guitar solo by Carlos Santana.

Armbruster continued to search inside. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen hadn't been used in months. Drawers and cabinets stood open and vacant, just as the Helmuths had left them when they had packed up last April and cleared out abruptly for Kentucky.

At the back porch, Armbruster climbed down the short run of block steps to the outside and hurried across the muddy yard to the tall barn at the back of the property. With each step, he felt his polished shoes sinking into the ruination of the muddy drive, but he dismissed this in his urgency to find Dent. A lightning strike broke suddenly into a clap of thunder over the pastures to the east, and a hard wall of rain fell instantly down, soaking his hair and the shoulders of his blue suit coat just before he managed to duck into the cover of the barn.

Ten paces in, Armbruster could smell dried manure and pungent, moldering hay. The barn was obviously deserted, but he called out for Dent again. A flight of purple martins shot loose in the rafters.

Armbruster stood inside the wide doors of the barn and watched a gloomy wall of gray rain hammer the gravel of the drive as if it were an anvil, eradicating his footprints in the span of only minutes. Erasing tracks that might have been made there. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the rain stopped.

Distrusting the break in rain, Armbruster hurried out onto the drive again and turned right toward the little Daadihaus. There, too, he searched inside for Dent. But he found only the gloom of an abandoned home.

Outside, a light rain had started to fall again. Not bothering to run, Armbruster crossed the drive to go back inside the main house. There he searched briefly upstairs. Most of the bedroom furniture had been taken away when the Helmuths, the extended family of Fannie's brother Jonas, had caravanned to their new land in Kentucky. In the second-floor bathroom, he tried the faucet in the sink, but it was dry.

So the well water tanks in the attic were empty, Armbruster muttered. Of course. They would have disconnected the windmill when they left. Again he felt the abandonment. Even the water had deserted the pipes.

Down on the first floor, on the screened back porch, Armbruster took an old rag from a Shaker peg and sat on a wicker chair to wipe the mud from his new Florsheims. Standing again, he turned in place to remember his last time in the house. He and Ricky Niell had guarded the Jonas Helmuth family while Robertson hunted the county roads for Teresa Molina's gray Buick, which had been described by Fannie Helmuth and identified among others registered in northern Ohio by after-market tire prints that Armbruster had molded from the muddy edge of the Helmuths' driveway.

Armbruster remembered that day. He had guarded the rear of the house from this very porch. Down the interior stairs, the family had taken shelter in the basement.

Armbruster crossed back through the kitchen to the top of the basement steps. Using the handrail, he eased down the steps in the dark until his feet found the dirt floor of the basement. He could see only the dim shape of an eight-by-eight upright post, and he reached out for it, caught his suit on a protruding nail, pulled back, and heard the expensive fabric of his sleeve take a short rip. He groaned in self-reproach, fingered the tear, and climbed back up the steps, angry with himself for the vanity of his new attire. In better light, he inspected the tear in the sleeve, rolled his eyes, and muttered a scolding invective at himself. Then he pulled off his ruined suit coat and tossed it in a heap onto the kitchen counter.

A battered red kerosene lantern was hanging beside the back porch door. Armbruster found matches in a kitchen drawer, lifted the globe to light the wick of the lantern, set the globe back into place, and turned again for the basement steps. Lantern in one hand, railing in the other, he descended.

The lantern's flame threw a troubled glow of yellow light onto the basement's dirt floor and gave dim outline to the posts and walls. On the far wall ahead of him, there were wood shelves for canning jars. The shelves were empty. Against the wall to his left there was a stack of empty wooden crates and pallets, held in store perhaps for firewood. To his right, clotheslines hung lifelessly from hooks in the braces. His eyes adjusted more to the lantern's anemic glow, and Armbruster saw worn leather tack and harnesses, pegged to the wall beyond the weary clotheslines. And it was only then that he noticed the faint odor of urine, mixed strangely with something sweet. Maybe alcohol.

Armbruster took another anxious circuit around the front portion of the basement, then turned to the back part behind the step risers. A boarded partition nailed to the risers partly divided the front half of the basement from the back. He rounded the corner of the partition and saw a vague and disturbingly upright form strapped to the far side of another eight-by-eight post. He turned the wick of the lantern higher and advanced. The question, *Howie?* caught in his throat, and he asked aloud, "Who's there?"

No movement. No sound. He stepped forward and came around to the other side of the post. He took a nervous step in place, and something sounding like plastic cracked under the sole of his shoe. He lifted the lantern to eye level, advanced two steps, and was startled by the swollen, bloodied face of Howie Dent.

There in the basement, in the lantern's pale light, Probationary Detective Stan Armbruster stared with shock at the pale death mask of a man who had died badly after hideous torture. He stared slack-jawed at the evidence that Fannie Helmuth might now be dead as well. He stared with an addled mind at the proof that was written in Howie Dent's ashen face. The proof of both the beginning and the end of Armbruster's new career, over and done with in this morning's single clang of a metaphorical bell.

The big celebration breakfast rumbled in Armbruster's gut like corked fury. He set the lantern down on the dirt floor and circled back to the steps fighting a vomit reflex. With one hand clamped over his mouth and the other hand pulling himself along the railing, he labored up the steps. Running then, and losing control of his stomach as he crossed the kitchen linoleum, he spewed vomit onto his shirt and tie, and hurtled himself on unsteady legs down the back steps. Outside Armbruster doubled over onto his hands and knees and felt a wet chill soak into the expensive fabric of his new suit pants as he heaved the rest of his breakfast onto the grass of the back lawn.

Then, with his legs rubbery and his mind struggling to make sense of a useless tangle of grotesque images and fragmented thoughts, Armbruster got himself somehow back to his Corolla. He sat behind the wheel, pulled the microphone off the dash hook, and clamped the fingers of both trembling hands over the switch to radio in. "Armbruster! Over."

He eased back in the driver's seat, groaned from the gut, and drifted among ragged thoughts. He was alone. He wasn't sure how the new temp dispatcher would handle him. He was defeated. She had started just yesterday. He was finished. Adele "Just Call Me Del" Markely. Brought over from the Mansfield Highway Patrol to handle communications while Ellie Troyer-Niell was bedridden during a difficult third trimester with twins. Ricky Niell was home with Ellie, taking paternity leave. Mind wandering, Armbruster realized that he didn't know if Del Markely had responded to his radio call.

"Base, this is Armbruster. OK?"

"Go ahead," Markely responded evenly.

“Howie Dent is dead. Helmuth farm. Need the captain. Medical Examiner. Everybody. Over.”

“What’s that twenty, Armbruster?”

“Helmuth farm. North of Charm.”

“I’m gonna need more than that, Armbruster.”

“The sheriff knows where it is, Del! Just send everybody out here!”

Exhausted by shock and emotion, Armbruster switched off and pulled himself out of his car. Leaning against the front fender like a derelict hobo, he felt his stomach heave again, this time dry, and he bent over at the waist to wait it out. Then he sank to his knees, turned himself around, flopped down with his legs out straight, arms limp at his sides, back resting against the front wheel, with cold wet mud soaking into the seat of his new suit pants.

“A new suit, Stan?” he whispered to himself. “Really? Get a grip! What happened here? THINK.”

Fannie Helmuth had disappeared in Charlotte with Howie Dent in April. On a bus run from Sugarcreek to Sarasota.

Robertson had been manic since then to find them. Best hope, that Fannie Helmuth and Howie Dent were hiding in one of the remote Amish colonies that were scattered across America. Second-best hope, that knowing the danger to Fannie, they’d never try to come home. Not without the sheriff’s help.

But now they *had* come home. At least Howie Dent had.

It had all started with the murder of Ruth Zook, an Amish girl vacationing in Sarasota’s Pinecraft colony. Murdered by the Teresa Molina drug gang. For refusing to deliver a suitcase of drugs that she had been coerced into carrying on the bus ride home to Ohio.

Her friend Fannie Helmuth had then gone to the sheriff to say that she had earlier brought home a suitcase, too, one that she now suspected had also held drugs. She had carried the suitcase for a woman in an old gray Buick. Teresa Molina.

Then the sheriff’s sending Ricky Niell on the chase to Florida, hunting the Molinas. And a shootout in Sarasota/Bradenton’s eastern outskirts. Killing Dewey Molina, cousin to Teresa. And Teresa Molina and the rest of her crew? Vanished like smoke on the wind.

So Fannie Helmuth had fled the sheriff’s protection. With Howie Dent’s help. And Ricky Niell had tracked them as far as the bus depot in Memphis.

Thus you were assigned the Dent watch, Stan, Armbruster chastised himself grimly. Show up three times a week and ask Richard and Susan Dent if they’ve heard yet from their son. Two days ago, they had answered again in the negative. Now their son was dead.

So here you sit, Stan, Armbruster thought, laughing nervously. New suit ruined, and you *failed* Howie Dent. Celebration breakfast spewed across the lawn, and you *failed* Fannie Helmuth. Promotion to detective now a total loss, and you *failed* your first day on the job.

And the whole happy gang is headed right here to your position.

And what position is that, Stan?

The unwitting victim of a ricochet.

Fumbling uselessly with the quandary of unringing a bell.

Butt down in the mud.

On the worst day of your life.

2

Wednesday, August 17

7:50 A.M.

AFTER ARMBRUSTER'S call, Holmes County's captain of detectives, Bobby Newell, was first to arrive at the Helmuth farm. Newell had planned this as a personal day, and when the call had come in from dispatcher Del Markely, he had been standing on the second tee, dressed in blue-and-white-checkered Loudmouth golf pants, a matching knit golf shirt, and a white visor. He changed out of his golf shoes before leaving the parking lot at the country club, and he drove for Troyer's Ridge still dressed in the rest of his golf clothes.

A short fifteen yards into the Helmuth drive, Newell parked, switched on the flashers of his sedan, and climbed out. He saw Armbruster standing beside his Corolla in front of the yellow VW farther down the drive, and Newell raised his voice. "Tire tracks, Stan? Footprints? What?" He tossed his golf visor in through the open window and waited for an answer.

Armbruster shook his head, called back, "All washed out in the rains," and waved Captain Newell forward. Once Newell had reached his position, Stan added, "If anything was ever out here to see, I've already tracked over it. Then the rain washed it out."

"You've been inside?"

"Everywhere. He's in the basement."

"You sure it's Dent?"

Armbruster nodded. "I've been staring at his driver's license photo for the last four months. He's a mess, Captain, but it's Dent."

"Is Fannie here, too?"

"No."

"You sure, Armbruster? I mean dead certain?"

"Pretty sure, Captain. Before I found Dent, I had gone through the whole place."

Newell rubbed with frustration at the small black patches of hair over his ears, and then he ran a palm nervously over his bald pate. "We've got to be sure about her, Stan."

At the front end of the long drive, the medical examiner's van turned in and stopped. Melissa Taggart stepped out at the driver's door and called down the drive, "OK to move up?"

Newell waved her forward, and Taggart pulled the van around the captain's sedan. Behind her, a cruiser pulled in and stopped, and Pat Lance got out in her customary blue pantsuit. Newell waved her forward, too, and Pat came ahead on foot while Taggart parked her ME's van beside the back corner of the house. As Pat Lance was walking up to Armbruster's Corolla, Taggart called back, "Where is he, Stan?"

Grimly, Armbruster shook his head. "In the basement."

Joining the others beside the Corolla, Taggart next asked, "OK, who has been inside?"

Armbruster gave a chastened shrug of his shoulders. "Only me, but I tracked it up, Missy. Went up and down the basement steps at least twice with muddy shoes."

Missy Taggart turned back to her assistant, who was just opening the rear doors of the van. "Booties and gloves for now," she called out. "We'll dust and photograph everything going down the steps. But nobody goes down to the basement floor until I clear it."

The assistant pulled boxes and a camera bag out of the van and disappeared around the back corner, heading for the rear porch door.

Armbruster shook off dejection. "I wasn't careful, Missy. You'll find my prints on the railing and in the kitchen. Everywhere, really. And muddy footprints, too. I thought I'd find Dent in the house somewhere. Never thought he'd be dead."

Intending encouragement, Missy said, "Maybe we'll find what we need with the body."

Melissa Taggart, Missy to her friends, had first held the elected position of Holmes County Coroner. Then, because of her medical and forensics credentials from Ohio State University, among others, she had been appointed Holmes County Medical Examiner. On duty, she dressed perpetually in either green or blue scrubs, and she managed not only the county morgue in the basement of Millersburg's little Joel Pomerene Memorial Hospital, but also forensic investigations out of a lab she had built and equipped there with the aid of her husband, Sheriff Bruce Robertson. A little younger than her big husband, and considerably slimmer, she still had a fair and youthful complexion and moderately long brown hair that had been naturally curly since she was a child.

She studied the chagrin written into Stan Armbruster's expression and said, "You found him, Stan. That's a good thing. Otherwise, he might have rotted there for weeks."

Seeming too distracted to notice her attempt at kindness, Armbruster said only, "I need a change of clothes. Need to clean up."

"OK," Taggart said, "but what am I going to find in the basement? Tell me that much before you go."

"It's dark," Armbruster said. "I left a kerosene lantern down there, but you'll need flashlights to see anything clearly."

"Or lights on a stand," Taggart said to Newell. "With a generator."

The captain nodded a command to Pat Lance, and Lance said, "Right. Lights and a generator." She stepped off to the side to make a call.

Then Captain Newell pressed Armbruster. "Tell us what you saw, Stan. All of it."

"I got a good look at his face. He's bound to an upright post behind the steps. Strapped in place with rope or something. Maybe tape. And I held the lantern right up to his face. I lost it, Captain."

"Then how can you be sure Fannie Helmuth isn't down there, too?" Newell advanced. The muscles in his neck and jaw were bunching into knots. His arms were flexing and his fingers were clenching and opening as if he'd just finished a workout with his free weights and needed to dump tension from his muscles. Newell seemed to notice the tension he was broadcasting, so easing his tone, he said, "Relax, Stan. Just tell us what you know."

Armbruster hesitated. "I didn't see her, Captain. Fannie, I mean. Doesn't mean she isn't here."

Newell nervously adjusted his thick black glasses, pulled Pat Lance along the drive toward the back corner of the house, and called over his shoulder, "Where's the lantern, Stan?"

Armbruster shouted at their backs, "In the basement, right at his feet," and he leaned unsteadily against the front fender of his Corolla.

Taggart ran after Lance and the captain, caught up with them on the back steps, and said, "Wait. Booties and gloves."

At the back of the van, the three put gloves on their hands. Taggart pulled three flashlights out of a drawer, and once they were standing on the linoleum floor of the kitchen, they put booties over their shoes. Then Captain Newell led Lance and Taggart down the basement steps.

They first searched forward from the base of the steps to the far wall with its canning shelves. Then they worked down the left side of the basement, turning over pallets and crates to look under them for a second body. Once at the back corner, they could see the body of Howie Dent strapped to the post under the steps. He was illuminated by the erratic, yellow glow of the flame that Armbruster had left burning in the kerosene lantern at Dent's feet.

Newell held the lantern up to Dent's face as Taggart approached with her flashlight. She paused and then took a step forward for a better look, and she felt something crunch under her foot. She backed carefully away, pointing with her flashlight to debris on the basement's dirt floor. Back at the base of the steps, she directed Lance and the captain to search the other corners of the basement, and once they were certain that Fannie Helmuth wasn't there, she led them back up the steps, saying, "We won't go back to the body until we've rigged the lights." Then she went outside to her van.

In the kitchen, Captain Newell pulled Detective Lance aside. "How much of him did you see, Pat?"

"Enough," she said. "He was tortured. I've never seen anything like that. Looked to me like his whole body was one vast carpet of blisters."

"I saw punctures in the skin," Captain Newell said. "Like needle marks at the centers of swollen blisters."

Missy came back inside with her ME's bag. "That's an ugly way to die," she said. "I mean strapped in place like that. How long until I'll have those lights?"

"I called," Detective Lance said. "It won't be long."

Wednesday, August 17

11:15 A.M.

WELL BEYOND the bounds of propriety, and significantly past all pretense to the contrary, Sheriff Bruce Robertson was indignant. Also irate, and why try to hide it? He wanted them all to know—his wife, the medical examiner; his captain of detectives; and all the patrol captains. His three detectives, and all the deputies inside and outside the jail. Everyone for miles around for that matter, Amish and English alike. The whole state of Ohio, if need be. Because murder in Holmes County was one thing, but torture/murder was quite another.

The sheriff's deepest instincts told him to charge into the investigation of this murder, but his intellect told him to wait. It told him to let his new detective bureau take the lead, and with mounting difficulty, Robertson was struggling to obey his intellect. So outside on the Helmuths' driveway, as Bobby Newell's and Missy Taggart's investigations crept forward in the farmhouse, the heavy sheriff paced beside his blue Crown Victoria, relegated to the role of an observer.

Truly, it galled Robertson to have to watch from a distance. Scuffing at the gravel of the drive, the sheriff heard himself growl, and he recognized the agitation that this morning of disengagement was causing him. He marched back to his Crown Vic, bent over to the glove compartment, and pulled out his bottle of Ativan. This was his latest prescription. Something new to address his long summer's anxiety over the failed search for Fannie Helmuth. Years before, he had taken Ativan in combination with an antidepressant. That was before he had married Melissa Taggart.

But Missy had been a blessing to him, and he hadn't needed the Ativan so much. In the years since their marriage, he had tapered off the medicine. Now, with Fannie Helmuth missing, everything had changed, and Missy had insisted that he start taking the Ativan again. For his anxiety. And a regimen of aspirin for the chest pains.

Still, the last four months had been harder on Robertson than anything he could remember, and although he grumbled about having to take the Ativan, the truth was that it cooled him out when he most needed to remain calm. He crunched one small white tablet between his back teeth, took a long pull from a bottle of water, and slammed the door on his Crown Vic, all the while watching the back corner of the house for movement.

After long and anxious minutes, the sheriff finally saw Bobby Newell come around the corner of the house, walking slowly as he made notes in a spiral pad. The captain was still dressed in his checkered golf outfit. Robertson marched immediately up to him and spouted, "Bobby, I need to get down there."

Newell looked up from his notepad and shook his head. "No, Sheriff. We're still processing evidence."

"Does Missy know that I want to see the body?"

"You're not the only one, Sheriff. She's telling everyone 'no.' She's not ready."

"Then she can send somebody up here with a report!"

The sheriff got no reply from Captain Newell other than a slow shake of his head, so as Newell returned his attention to his notepad, Robertson struggled alone to frame the argument that would get him into the

basement. The argument that Missy could accept.

But Missy had said no, and Robertson knew his wife better than anyone did. There might as well be an iron gate bolted across the door to the basement steps. Nobody but Taggert and her people was going down to the body. Not until she was ready. Robertson clamped down on his ire and started again to pace on the drive. When it was apparent to Newell that Robertson would have nothing further to say, the captain returned to the kitchen at the back of the house, leaving Robertson alone again with his thoughts.

A short while later, tires crunched in the gravel behind the sheriff, and Robertson turned to see his chief deputy, Dan Wilsher, pull in behind the sheriff's Crown Vic. Wilsher climbed out into the August heat, pulled off his gray suit coat, and asked Robertson, "Why are you out here on the driveway?"

Exasperated, Robertson huffed, "Missy says I'll contaminate the scene."

A sympathetic smile drifted across Wilsher's face. He tossed his suit coat onto the driver's seat of his car and loosened his tie. With his belly straining against his belt more than last year, Wilsher smoothed his shirt in front and took his first look at the scene outside. There was the main house—two and a half stories of white-sided solidity. There was the tall barn—painted tobacco red and faded in weathered places to rust brown. There was the little Daadihaus to the rear—an Amish tradition for farmers who had raised their families and then retired. And there was the yellow VW with its doors standing open—parked like an abandoned wreck, near the front corner of the house.

Wilsher frowned and rubbed at a nervous tic on the back of his neck. "You sure that's Howie Dent's yellow bug, Bruce?"

"Yes," Robertson muttered. "The plates match."

"It looks like somebody pulled it apart," Wilsher said. "And tossed its contents out onto the driveway."

"They did. Stan Armbruster insisted that he needed something to do. He has just cataloged and photographed everything that was in it."

"Is Armbruster still here?"

"Went home to change. He's still *wobbly*, as Bobby puts it."

Wilsher ignored the indignant tone of the sheriff. "OK, Bruce, do we know for certain who is dead down in the basement? Who it is that Missy is looking at?"

"It's more like 'what it is' that Missy's looking at."

"But is it Howie Dent?"

"Missy won't say for sure."

"Do we have a wallet, fingerprints, anything like that?"

"Haven't found a wallet. And Missy told Bobby it'll take some time for the swelling to go down. Can't get prints just yet."

"Once she gets him to the morgue, she can use dental records," Wilsher said.

“Missy says that’s gonna take a while.”

Then, wondering why the Ativan wasn’t helping, Robertson held an uncomfortable silence beside Wilsher and rode the strong pulse in his temples. Gauging his level of anxiety to be increasing, Robertson stepped back to his sedan, crunched a second tablet of Ativan, and carried his water bottle back, to stand again beside his chief deputy. “That’s Howie Dent’s VW,” he complained to Wilsher. “And if it’s really Howie Dent in the basement, then Fannie Helmuth is already dead.”

“You didn’t find her here, did you?” Wilsher asked.

“Doesn’t mean she isn’t dead.”

“OK, Bruce. But if this really is Dent, his parents could identify the body. It’s the best ID we could get.”

Robertson shook his head. “He was tortured, so Missy has ruled them out for an ID. She wants Mike Branden to identify the body.”

“Why Mike Branden?”

“Howie Dent was Branden’s student a few years ago. She figures that if Mike can give us a more reliable identification, then that spares the Dents.”

“More reliable than what?” Wilsher asked.

“Armbruster. He’s the only one who’s sure that it’s Dent.”

“You’d think the Dents would be here, waiting or something,” Wilsher said. “Keeping vigil.”

“Here and gone already,” Robertson said. “I had a deputy take them back to their farm. It’s the next one over.”

“How bad is it in the basement, Bruce? Really.”

Robertson kicked hard at the gravel under his feet and stared angrily at the deserted farmhouse. “Missy says he was tortured with a syringe. Other than that, she really hasn’t told me much.”

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