

# CLOUDS WITHOUT RAIN

AN AMISH-COUNTRY MYSTERY

P. L. GAUS



A PLUME BOOK



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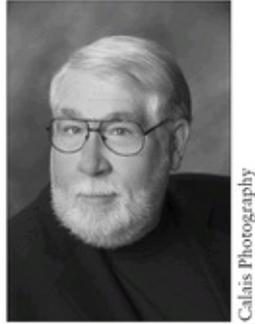
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*Teaser chapter*

## A PLUME BOOK

### CLOUDS WITHOUT RAIN



PAUL LOUIS GAUS lives with his wife, Madonna, in Wooster, Ohio, just a few miles north of Holmes County, where the world's largest and most varied settlement of Amish and Mennonite people is found. His knowledge of the culture of the "Plain People" stems from more than thirty years of extensive exploration of the narrow blacktop roads and lesser gravel lanes of this pastoral community, which includes several dozen sects of Anabaptists living closely among the so-called English or Yankee non-Amish people of the county. Paul lectures widely about the Amish people he has met and about the lifestyles, culture, and religion of this remarkable community of Christian pacifists. He can be found online at: [www.plgaus.com](http://www.plgaus.com). He also maintains a Web presence with Mystery Writers of America: [www.mysterywriters.org](http://www.mysterywriters.org).

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PLUME

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Because of my wife, Madonna, and dedicated to our daughters, Laura and Amy

*Jude 12*

These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead.

*Thursday, July 6, 2000*  
*Associated Press*

For the first time in at least 20 years, the average price of farmland in Ohio exceeds that of all the other Corn Belt states. The steady development of houses and shopping centers in rural Ohio eventually pushed the state into the top spot, an agricultural expert said yesterday. “In the past, farmland was owned by farmers for agricultural purposes,” said Allan Lines, an agricultural economist at Ohio State University. “What we’re seeing now is we have all these other interests there in owning a piece of the real estate.”

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Not all of the places in this story are real, but all are as authentic to Holmes County, Ohio, as I know how to make them. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental, and any reference to legal and trust practices is my own fabrication, as are the events in this story. I have moved and altered the description of the psychiatric ward at Aultman Hospital. The ritual barn was located in Panther Hollow, not Walnut Creek Township. It has been destroyed.

Thanks go to the excellent staff at the burn unit in the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Akron, Ohio, especially Julianne Klein, RN, BSN, and Mary Mondozi, RN, MSN, as well as to Mark A. Harper of the Akron Fire Department, Ed Gasbarre of R. W. Gasbarre and Associates, Inc., surveyors, and Dr. Wayne M. Weaver of the Joel Pomerene Memorial Hospital in Millersburg.

Many thanks to Amish and former-Amish friends who do not wish to be named, and also to Chief Steve Thornton, Tom Kimmins, Esq., Ray and Kaye Fonte, Pastor Dean Troyer, and Eli Troyer—good friends, able advisors.

Monday, August 7  
4:15 P.M.

PROFESSOR Michael Branden, driving a black Amish buggy, worked his horse at a walk along Walnut Creek Township Lane T-414, just north of Indian Trail Creek in Holmes County, Ohio, on a sweltering Monday afternoon early in August. Coming up to one of the short stretches of blacktop laid in front of a house to cut the dust, he slowed the horse and rolled gently onto the pavement. The buggy rocked and swayed from side to side on its light oval springs, and the iron wheels cut sharp lines through the tar blisters in the blacktop. The horse's hooves gave hollow plopping sounds that switched back to a lighter clicking in the dust and gravel after the blacktop played out beyond the house. The sky was cloudless, the sun hot, and beyond the thin line of trees that bordered the lane, the fields seemed withered and spent, the crops stricken with thirst.

Branden was dressed to outward appearance as an Amish-man. The Amish clothes and broad-brimmed straw hat with a flat crown were his own, bought two summers before, when he had worked on a kidnapping case involving an Amish child. He was wearing shiny blue denim trousers over leather work boots, a dark blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and a black cloth vest, unfastened in front.

Under his vest, he had hooked a deputy sheriff's wallet badge over the belt he wore instead of the traditional suspenders, a concession to English style so that the heavy badge and three pairs of handcuffs would ride securely at his waist. The belt also held a beeper, though locating a phone in those parts of the county would be a task.

The professor brought the rig to a stop, took off his straw hat, poured a little water from a plastic bottle over his wavy brown hair, and rubbed at it vigorously. Then he laid his hat on the seat, and while he dried his tanned face and neck with a red bandanna, he straightened the rest of the gear riding beside him.

There was a black radio handset from the sheriff's department, turned off for the task at hand. A Holmes County map from the county engineer's office, folded to the square of Walnut Creek Township. An elaborate Contax RTS III SLR camera with a long Zeiss lens, tucked securely into the corner of the buggy seat. On the floorboards under the seat, a Smith and Wesson Model 60 .357 Magnum revolver in a black leather holster.

With a light slap of the reins, Branden started the horse again. About a hundred yards further up the lane, he pulled into the drive of a new two-story Amish house and stepped the horse to a stone watering trough. A door on the upper floor opened as he stopped. Lydia Shetler, dressed in a plain, dark-blue dress and black bonnet, came out onto the top porch of the house and asked, "Any luck, already?" with the classic Dutch accent of the region.

The professor shook his head and said, "Mind if I water the horse?"

Lydia intoned, "If it suits you," and leaned over with her elbows on the porch rail to watch.

The porch, braced with tall posts, was level with the second floor of the house. The area under this high porch was latticed in front with a rose arbor, which made a shady breezeway at ground level. The family's laundry was hung out for the day, drying on clotheslines in the breezeway.

Branden climbed out, and as the horse snorted and drank water, Lydia asked, "How much longer do you figure to make these rides, yet, Herr Professor?"

"Till we get them," Branden said and laughed. He slapped his hat at the dust on his ankles and added, "Or until the sheriff gets bored with the idea."

Lydia nodded as if to say that she understood the sheriff's impulsiveness well enough, and asked, "Are you sure only our two families know about your business?"

"Why? Have you heard anything on the gossip mill?"

"Not a word."

"Then I suppose I'll still keep riding. As long as nobody at either end lets it slip."

"I haven't heard any mention," Lydia repeated, and went back inside. Branden mounted into the buggy, swung around on the wide gravel lane, and walked his horse out to T-414 again, continuing east toward the little burg of Trail.

This was his fifth afternoon drive in two weeks, traveling the northern edges of Walnut Creek Township on the center-east edge of Holmes County. His assignment was to be the decoy in Sheriff Bruce Robertson's strategy to catch the two Amish-clad teenagers who were making a reputation for themselves that summer by robbing the Peaceful Ones. Disguised in rubber goat's-head masks, they rode up to the slow-moving buggies on their mountain bikes and demanded money. Surprisingly large sums had been involved, and Sheriff Robertson now had his decoy in place. Professor Michael Branden, Civil War History, Millersburg College, a duly sworn reserve deputy, with a buggy, a costume of Amish clothes, a radio, an ample supply of handcuffs, and a very expensive camera. Also a revolver, just in case.

As the professor rattled along slowly in his buggy, a pickup shot by in the opposing lane. In the cloud of dust left in its wake, two Amish teenagers passed from behind on mountain bikes. Branden took up his camera and fired off several frames on motor drive.

Branden tensed a bit, wondering what he would actually do if the young bandits ever did approach him demanding money. He wasn't at all certain that the sheriff was right about this one. Amish or English, they wouldn't be that easy to apprehend. "They're Amish, Mike," Robertson had said. "They'll just stand there when you show them your badge." And if he took their picture or stepped down from the buggy to confront them? What then? They'd take off on their bikes.

That'd be it, Branden thought dourly. They'd scatter, and he wouldn't have a chance of chasing them down in the heat. The professor shook his head, laughed halfheartedly, and wondered about the ribbing he'd take from the regular deputies if the sheriff's little game should play out as he suspected it might, with him giving chase through fields or over hills, losing them both.

Chagrined, Branden rode the rest of his shift haphazardly back and forth along narrow T-414, radio off so as not to give him away. As the supper hour approached, he headed south on T-412 to return the buggy to its owner. As he brought the buggy into

the Hershbergers' drive, one of the middle sons, Ben, stepped out of a woodshop at the side of the property, slapping sawdust off his long denim apron. He waved to Branden and came down the steps to a hitching rail beside the gravel drive. The drive curved gently around a well-tended volleyball court and dropped with the slope of the land into a wide valley, passing the north side of a weathered white house. Three stories and gabled, the historic building had a round sitting room and cone-shaped roof set at the corner, where a large covered porch began at the front and wrapped around the side. Grandmother Hershberger sat peacefully in an oak rocker on the elevated porch, a small mound of potatoes on the floor at her side, peeling long, curling skins into her lap. Branden tipped his hat, and she glanced briefly at him with reserved acknowledgment. As Ben came forward and took the horse by the bridle, Branden turned on his handset radio and heard Sheriff Bruce Robertson shouting, "Two ambulances. Maybe three! Ellie, send five!"

"Fire's on their way, Sheriff," Ellie Troyer said, her voice frayed with tension.

"It's a mess, Ellie," Robertson's voice cracked staccato over the radio. "One buggy, maybe more. Can't tell yet. A semi jackknifed. Cab upside down in the ditch. The trailer has taken out at least one car and it's burning now," followed by, "For crying out loud, Ellie, where are my squads?"

"On their way," Ellie said, managing to sound calm.

"Schrauzer's unit is up there right in the middle of the whole thing," Robertson shouted into the microphone. "Can't see him anywhere. Going closer, Ellie. Get those fire trucks down here NOW!"

The mic clicked off for a bit and then Robertson called in again, more subdued. "Get the coroner, too, Ellie."

Branden pulled his buggy up sharply, set the hand brake, scrambled down onto the driveway, and took the radio off the buggy seat. He paced in a circle on the drive as he made his call. "This is Mike Branden. Over."

Ellie's voice came back. "Signal 39."

"Township 412 at the Hershbergers." As he spoke, he gathered his things from the buggy and walked quickly to his small pickup.

"It's right there, Professor," Ellie said. "You're practically on top of it. 515 south of Trail."

"Roger that," Branden said and started his engine. "515 south of Trail. Ellie, I'll be right there!"

He pulled the door closed, fish-tailed on the gravel lane, waved at Ben, and heard Robertson come over the radio.

"Mike, you come in from the north. South of Trail. That'll put you on the other side. I'm farther south, the other side of the pileup, and I need someone on your side to stop traffic."

"I'm coming up on Trail now," Branden said, steering with his left hand, holding the handset with the right.

"Turn right at Trail, Mike," Robertson said. "Slow. We're down in a little valley and if you don't come in slow, you'll run us all over."

Branden dropped south out of Trail on 515, came around a sharp curve and over a hill, and saw a tall plume of black smoke beyond the next rise in the road. He came up to the top of the hill, stopped abruptly, stepped out of the truck, and leaned forward on

the open door, shaken by what he saw some hundred yards below.

A semitrailer rig sprawled across the road, the cab overturned in the right-hand ditch, the trailer laid across the road on its side, its rear wheels spinning slowly over the left-hand ditch. The truck driver lay twisted on the pavement beside the overturned cab.

A monstrous gasoline fire engulfed a sedan pinned under the far side of the trailer, and dense smoke drifted up and trailed west over a field of stunted corn. The flames leaped from the road to the grasses in the roadside ditches and spread rapidly into the withered crops in the fields on each side of the road. Even at this distance from the wreckage, Branden could smell the smoke and the gasoline. He heard a car approaching behind him and turned to stop it with a palm held outward. A second car pulled up, and then a third. He took up a position to block the passing lane and turned back to view the wreckage.

Just beyond the burning sedan was Phil Schrauzer's cruiser. Something long and bulky had punched through the windshield. Further back there was a line of two pickups and a produce truck, all apparently uninvolved in the wreck. Two of the three drivers stood helplessly beside their trucks. The third had stooped to open a briefcase on the pavement. As Branden watched, the man took a cell phone out of the briefcase, stood sweating profusely while he dialed a number, and talked as he turned his head this way and that, looking with astonishment at the wreckage that lay around him. The man fixed his gaze on the house at the end of the driveway, spoke for a moment longer, switched off the cell phone, and dialed another call. He spoke for perhaps a minute, listened briefly, and tossed the phone into the briefcase on the pavement. Kneeling down, he closed the case, and stood to drop it through the open window onto the front seat of his pickup.

The sheriff's black-and-white 4x4 was stopped in the passing lane beside the produce truck, door hanging ajar. Another sheriff's unit was parked at the top of the next hill, turning cars back toward Walnut Creek. A cruiser from the state highway patrol came past the roadblock and pulled in behind Robertson's 4x4.

Branden stepped over to his pickup, reached in under the seat, pulled out binoculars, and turned the dial back to a full wide-angle view. He turned momentarily to check on the line of cars and trucks that had stacked up behind him and saw that his roadblock was self-regulating, as some cars turned back to find another route.

When he first held the binoculars to his eyes, black smoke filled the eyepiece. He trained right and found the bottom of the overturned cab, its front wheels hanging awkwardly in the air, the driver motionless on the ground. He moved the binoculars up and left and found Robertson waving the state trooper closer to the fire.

Robertson pushed toward the fire with his forearm over his eyes and reached Deputy Schrauzer's cruiser. Branden cringed as he saw the sheriff start to work at whatever had pierced the windshield, struggling to pull it back out with his left hand, while he tried to steady Schrauzer with his right hand through the driver's-side window.

The fire in front of Robertson flared violently, and Branden, startled by the massive orange fireball, sucked in air through his teeth and stumbled backward. There was a shattering crack of glass as flames expanded out and upward. Robertson turned his back and bent low beside the cruiser, shielding himself from the flames. But after a

few seconds the big sheriff lumbered up onto the hood of the cruiser, and the trooper dashed up to take charge of Schrauzer, still pinned in his seat. As writhing gasoline flames spread toward Robertson, the sheriff pulled what looked like a tight bundle of wooden poles out of the windshield. He tossed it onto the pavement beside the cruiser and climbed down from the hood. Shirt ablaze, he helped the trooper drag Schrauzer out of the cruiser and along the pavement, away from the flames. Once Schrauzer was clear, Robertson threw himself onto his back and rolled from side to side, while the trooper beat at the flames with his hat.

There was another flare-up over the burning car, and Branden heard the first squad's sirens out on the high Walnut Creek hill. The ambulance crested the hill, sped into the valley, and went directly past the trucks to where Robertson and the trooper crouched beside Schrauzer, who was laid out on his back.

Branden watched as the highway patrolman began to help Robertson out of his uniform shirt, still smoldering. Robertson bent suddenly backward and appeared to cry out in pain as the shirt stuck to the skin on his back. A paramedic hurried forward and cut the shirt loose from patches that had fused to ugly burns on the sheriff's skin. Nancy Blain, in jeans and a T-shirt, stood back from the sheriff, snapping photos for the *Holmes Gazette*.

A team of paramedics loaded Schrauzer into an ambulance and headed back toward Millersburg. Robertson turned and surveyed the crash scene, as a paramedic from a second squad tended burns on the sheriff's back and arms.

Branden watched Robertson, bare-chested, directing fire department volunteers to the burning car, with pieces of his uniform shirt clinging to his back. The sheriff took a step toward the fire, and the paramedic pulled him back by the arm. Gratefully, Branden sensed that Robertson then seemed content to stand back and let the squads do their jobs.

The first fire truck to arrive had started laying foam on the burning car. Nancy Blain darted here and there among the wreckage, taking photos with her black Nikon. Up on the hill behind the wreck, the professor trained his binoculars on the ground at Robertson's feet, then in wider circles on the ground in front of the semi. In every direction on the opposing hill, both on the pavement where Robertson stood, and sprayed over the vehicles and terrain not directly damaged by the impact of the crash, Branden saw a vast scattering of black fabric and wooden splinters. Back up the hill there lay a thin axle. Smashed and twisted buggy wheels lay in the ditch beyond, two of them still attached to a second bent axle. The largest fragment of the buggy lay in the field at the edge of the road, some twenty yards away from the cab of the semi. In its tangled mass, Branden made out the torn and twisted fabric of Amish attire. Nancy Blain's slender figure came into view, as she aimed her camera at the buggy. She lingered for several shots there and then stood and began firing off frame after frame as she pivoted full circle in place.

A second pumper arrived on the scene. Having extinguished the fires at the car, the firefighters ran their heavy hoses out into the burning fields and sprayed a broad arc of water on the outlying ridges of fire burning through the crops. Branden looked again for Robertson, and found him kneeling beside the road, near the overturned cab of the truck.

He was holding the head of the downed horse by its bridle. The horse's back legs

had been mauled by the impact, and the right hind leg was torn loose at the hip. The horse's coat was matted with blood and its flesh was ripped open, exposing the bowels. The front legs of the horse pawed uselessly at the air. Branden saw Robertson draw his sidearm and point it at the head of the horse. There was a puff of smoke at the muzzle, followed abruptly by the report of the gun, and the horse lay immediately still.

Monday, August 7  
4:30 P.M.

PASTOR Cal Troyer crested a hill on a gravel lane south of Walnut Creek and turned left into a crushed stone driveway, where a two-story white frame house with a green roof stood in the lee of a mature stand of blue spruce mixed with wide oak and tall hickory. He parked his old gray truck off to the right of the drive, where a small patch of gravel normally was occupied by a buggy. Out of the barn to his right, two teenage boys drove a pair of draft horses hitched to a manure spreader, waved briefly, and turned toward the field beyond the trees.

On the lawn at the side door, Cal greeted two small children, a boy and a girl, about four or five years old, splashing in full Amish garb in a round plastic toddler's pool. They stopped when he spoke to them, but, obedient to their teaching, they did not reply.

He stepped up onto the small porch, rapped his knuckles on a wooden screened door, and was admitted by a young girl in a long purple dress and a white cap, who let him in and kneeled immediately to sweep a small mound of dust into a dustpan on the gray wooden floor. Behind her, the floor into the kitchen was bright and clean, and before Cal took another step, she caught him gently by the sleeve, produced a weak smile, and pointed to his shoes. Cal nodded, untied his white cross trainers, and slipped his feet out of them, saying, "Is Andy Weaver staying here?"

The girl stood up with her dustpan and broom, said, "For a spell," and pointed the end of her broom handle toward a door on the other side of the kitchen. She had never met Cal Troyer, but recognized him from stories of his long, white hair. Like everyone in her community, she knew of the preacher's reputation as a friend to her people. She stood respectfully and studied his powerful arms and large carpenter's hands. He thanked her in a gentle voice and stepped over his shoes.

In the kitchen, uncomfortably warm from the wood stove, a mountain of rising dough nearly two feet abreast and a foot high lay on the open door to the oven. In a corner behind an icebox, another daughter was scrubbing the floor with a damp towel wrapped around a pine two-by-two board, switching from one side of the board to another as each became soiled.

Cal asked again for Andy Weaver, and the teenager said, "On the back porch."

Cal pushed through the heavy walnut door the first girl had indicated and entered a large dining room with several china cupboards and a round dinner table with ten chairs and one highchair. The only other door in this room led to a moderately sized sewing room, where three women—eldest daughter, grandmother, and mother, Cal guessed—sat leaning over a square wooden quilting frame. As they took small stitches in the ornate patchwork of cloth, only the mother looked up from her work.

Cal asked, "Andy Weaver?" and she wordlessly nodded toward a screened door behind her.

The door led Cal to a long concrete walkway connecting a Daadihaus to the main house, and on the porch of the little house, Cal found Bishop Andy R. Weaver sitting on a three-legged stool, mending tack, or rather holding it in one hand while he gazed, lost in thought, at a distant fence line.

Weaver's hair was pushed down over his ears by a battered straw hat. His shirt was dark blue, and his trousers were of denim. His long gray beard fell loose and uncombed on his chest, and he was shaved around the mouth, though some stubble was evident.

"Andy," Cal said, and approached. Weaver turned, saw Cal, and rose to offer his hand happily, saying, "You're white, Cal," indicating Troyer's shoulder-length hair and full beard.

"Been a long time, Andy," Cal said. He shook his old friend's hand and added, "So it's *Bishop* Andy, now."

Weaver nodded self-consciously and said, "Thought I had gone to Pennsylvania for keeps, Cal. Take a walk?"

Cal retrieved his shoes, and the two strolled through a swinging iron gate and along a rusted fence bordering a sunbaked field of hay. The bishop's old straw hat was broken open at the front of the crown where he had pinched it so often, putting it on and taking it off. His vest hung limply over rounded shoulders. The leather of his boots was split and scuffed, encrusted with patches of dried manure.

Cal drew a pair of sunglasses from his shirt pocket and put them on. After they had walked a ways, he said, "What made you decide to come home, Andy?"

Weaver stopped, stuck his thumbs in his suspenders, and studied his boots. He kicked at some dirt, looked at Cal somewhat ambiguously and said, "They've all promised to change."

"And your brother?"

"So, you remember."

Cal nodded and Weaver said, "He's been out for a long time, now."

"Bishop Yoder kicked him out?"

"Should have," Weaver said, passing judgment.

Cal's fingers toyed with his long white beard. He stood thinking silently in the bright sun about the old days, about the crusade against cults that he and Weaver had organized some years ago. After a moment, Cal shook loose from his memories and asked, "They're all going back to Old Order?"

Weaver shrugged unhappily. "Not all. I lost one family already."

"I doubt you'll lose that many more."

"The rest are waiting to see how I'll rule on various things."

"They asked you back to help after Yoder died?"

"The most of them did. A few holdouts, I suppose," Weaver said.

"But you're bishop now. They'll align themselves under your authority."

"People here have gotten too far along into modern ways, Cal. Getting back to Old Order will be hard."

"They all knew you well enough before you quit for Pennsylvania. Wouldn't have asked you back if they didn't mostly want Old Order."