

*God of my life look gently down,
Behold the pains I feel*

Chapter 1



HE FLINCHED AND SHOT A GLANCE OVER HIS SHOULDER. Nothing there but the empty street, hot and dusty and flooded with light.

Gideon Stoltz faced forward again. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man who normally stood up straight, but now his head hung and his shoulders slumped.

He squinted at the sky.

There it was again—the thing that had *shpooked* him. The strange blurry object hung in the upper right corner of his vision. Like an errant cloud, or a dirty cobweb. It had been there, he reckoned, since he had fallen off Maude and hurt his head.

He didn't remember falling off his mare. He didn't—couldn't—remember much of anything from that time.

He wiped the sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve. His head *schmatzed* him something fierce, and pain also throbbled in his neck.

He checked and made sure no one had been watching when he startled and looked behind himself. He didn't want to appear daft, or scared of his own shadow. He was the sheriff of Colerain County. A sheriff was supposed to be sensible. Brave.

The Dutch Sheriff, they called him. Said he was too young.

Well, he was undeniably *Pennsylvawnsch Deitsch*, Pennsylvania Dutch, unlike most of the other folk hereabouts. Maybe he *was* too young to have the responsibilities of a sheriff—although for the life of him he couldn't recall exactly what those responsibilities might be. Anyway, he wasn't *that* young. He was . . .

He frowned. Why couldn't he remember how old he was? It was

now 1836; August of 1836. He had been born on April 1, 1813. He tried to subtract: thirty-six take away thirteen. He let out an impatient huff of breath. Finally it came to him.

He was twenty-three years old.

Twenty-three and addlepat from a fall off his horse.

Was he daft? Maybe only a *verrickt* man would go out in the sun on a blistering day like this. But he needed to walk around town. Sheriff Payton, his predecessor, had said it was part of the job: to patrol the town and county, to travel about and be seen, keep an eye peeled for strangers and potential lawbreakers, nip any trouble in the bud.

The sun stood high in the sky. He blinked against its glare. He tried to get a look at the gray cobwebby thing, but it leaped sideways, his eyes chasing after it until the object darted off his field of view.

He looked forward again, and there it was, hovering on the upper right edge of his vision. Like it was watching him. Judging him.

He set off down the street, his boots sinking in the dust.

He passed brick and stone and log and wood-sided buildings, stores and shops and dwellings on both sides of the street, some of them separated by empty lots grown up with pokeweed and briars.

Clanging from a smithy beat against his ears, followed by the screech of red-hot iron quenched in a slack tub.

He smelled rotting garbage and cooking meat and wood smoke and burning charcoal.

He trudged three more blocks until a dizzy spell hit him. He found a patch of shade cast by a small barn and steadied himself with a hand pressed against its wall. His stomach felt queasy. Pain rippled through his shoulders, his neck, his head.

After his fall, True said he should go see the doctor. He had nixed that idea right away. Doc Beecham would bleed him or burn him or dose him with some vile potion that would make him gag and puke. No, he wanted True to nurse him. She was his wife; she ought to take care of him. Which she'd done—half-heartedly, it seemed, maybe even grudgingly. He set his jaw. He didn't like this unease that lay between

them. He wished she would get over her grief and return to being a real wife to him. He needed her. Needed them to be together again.

He pushed off from the barn. The heat rose up around him. He went through an alley, intending to head back to the jail. Rounding the next corner, he ran into a wall of stench.

In the street lay a dead horse. Nearby a wagon listed to one side, its tongue in the dust.

He pinched his nose shut. What the devil happened here? Then he remembered. Yesterday, Old Man Greevey's horse bolted and crashed his wagon into the watering trough. The horse broke a leg. Greevey pitched into the street, breaking his own leg. Gideon's deputy, Alonzo Bell, shot the horse. They carried Greevey to the doctor, the old man moaning that they might as well shoot him, too.

Greevey's son said he'd get rid of the horse. Clearly he hadn't done it yet.

Gideon asked himself why he hadn't remembered the horse as soon as he smelled the stench. Or before he went out for his walk. Or maybe he *had* remembered it and had gone out from the jail to check on whether the horse had been removed, and then forgotten why he'd ventured out in the first place.

Why couldn't he remember such things?

Why couldn't he write a clear sentence, or sign his name with facility, or add up a column of numbers?

Why couldn't he remember anything about his own accident, getting thrown off Maude or otherwise falling off her, striking his head on the ground, and (so he'd been told) lying insensible on the road?

He worried about the gap in his memory. He didn't know how far back it went.

He edged around the dead horse until he was upwind of it. The horse lay on its side, belly bloated, legs jutting out save for the left front, whose hoof and part of the cannon bone hung down below the knee, the bone's jagged end sticking out through the hide. Flies

swarmed over the carcass. Greenish fluid leaked from the horse's anus. A Christ-awful stench. Soon they'd be bombarded with complaints to get the thing off the street before contagion spread.

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Gideon realized it was the second time in less than a minute that his mind had registered the exact same thought.

He skirted the broken wheel with its splintered spokes and shattered felloes and twisted iron rim. He stopped at the stone watering trough. Water trickled into the trough through wooden pipes from a spring in one of the brushy hills that hemmed in Adamant. In the past, those hills had been forested; now they were studded with stumps, here and there a single tree standing like a confused and bereft survivor of what had once been a great tribe.

He took off his hat and set it on the wagon's seat. He bent over the trough, cupped water in his hands, and splashed it into his face. He ran his hands through his short sandy hair and wiped the back of his neck. He picked up his hat and put it back on his head.

Setting off down the street, he stared at round marks in the dust made by horses' hooves, straight lines unspooled by wagon wheels, irregular scuffings of human and animal feet.

He passed two hogs lying in the patchy shade of a box elder, their sides slowly rising and falling. He stopped for a cart piled with hay, pulled along by a swaybacked horse, the driver standing in the bed holding the reins in one hand and a sun-shielding umbrella in the other hand.

After the cart he found himself confronted by a dozen gray geese. They waddled along, panting, driven by a hatchet-faced woman carrying a stick. The geese seemed to have angry expressions on their faces, but then all geese looked that way. Beneath her sweat-stained bonnet the woman looked angry, too.

The geese gave Gideon a wide berth. He figured they were butcher-bound.

He passed the courthouse, three stories tall and easily the most elegant structure in Adamant. A portico held up by white columns shaded the courthouse's polished walnut doors. Twelve-over-twelve windows interrupted the gray limestone walls. Dazzle from the building's copper roof struck his face like a slap.

Climbing the hill to the jail, he felt sweat running down his sides beneath his shirt. He took his time ascending.

Inside, the jail was cool and dim. Alonzo sat behind the desk. He looked up from the newspaper lying open on the desktop.

"What are you reading?" Gideon asked his deputy.

"An account of the massacre at the Alamo."

Gideon drew a blank.

"The Alamo," Alonzo repeated. "In the Republic of Texas." He returned his attention to the paper.

"The battle happened back in March," he said. "Don't know why it took our so-called *newspaper* five whole months to print a story about it. Listen to this: 'The event, so lamentable, and yet so glorious to Texas, is of such deep interest and excites so much our feelings that we shall never cease to celebrate it.' Wait, it gets better. 'Who would not rather be one of the Alamo heroes, than the living merciless victors?' Well, that's up for debate, since all of them heroes got bayoneted or shot." Alonzo stuck his face closer to the paper. "'The Mexican force being six thousand strong, having bombarded the Alamo for two days without doing any execution, a tremendous effort was made to take it by force, which they succeeded in doing after a most sang . . . sang . . . *sanguinary* engagement lasting nearly an hour.'" Alonzo looked up again and folded the paper shut. "Them Texians got wiped out. The Mexicans heaped their corpses in a pile and burned 'em."

Gideon vaguely recognized the words "Texians" and "Mexicans," but little else of what his deputy had read made any sense. "Corpses," however, jogged his memory.

He sat down on the couch. There was something he needed to tell Alonzo. Something about a corpse. Or was it a carcass? He gazed

at his deputy, trying to recall. Alonzo was twenty years Gideon's senior. A bachelor, he lived in a boardinghouse but slept at the jail when they had a prisoner. Right now Gideon couldn't remember whether any prisoners were housed in the cells or not.

What was it that he needed to tell Alonzo? Gideon stared. Coarse black hairs bristled from his deputy's nostrils. Alonzo was bald as an egg, built dumpy, competent at most every task. Like cleaning a fire-arm, or tracking down someone to give them a summons, or putting a broken-legged horse out of its misery.

"There is a dead horse on . . ." Gideon paused.

"On Decatur," Alonzo said. "Bill Greevey said he'd borrow a team and drag it off. That horse still there?"

Gideon nodded.

"I'll get after him," Alonzo said.

Gideon blinked. "Can you tell me about my accident?"

"Again?" Alonzo scratched his pate, causing small flakes of dried skin to drift down onto the desk. "All right. 'Proximately 'bout two weeks ago a peddler found you laying in the middle of the road to Sinking Valley. Just before dawn. Said he didn't notice you till his horse stopped short of stepping on you. A Jew man, he was; must've been a Good Samaritan, because he got you up on his cart, which it weren't much more than a yellow-painted cupboard on wheels, tied your horse in back, and brought you here." Alonzo jutted his chin toward Gideon. "The Israelite even fetched your hat."

Gideon reached up and touched his hat's brim. He took his hat off and set it on the couch.

"We laid you down right where you're at. You had a big knot on your head and blood all over your face." Alonzo's bushy eyebrows bobbed. "You don't remember that?"

Gideon shook his head. No memory of a peddler or a cart, yellow or any other color. However, he did seem to recall lying on the couch. Aching all over, pain sheeting through his skull. When he opened his eyes, he saw double: two Alonzos hovered over him, not a pleasant sight.

After a while, a woman came in through the door. She was handsome and shapely, and even in his misery he found her agreeable to look at, though there were two of her as well. He stared up at the woman until the figures coalesced and he realized he was looking at his wife. Something was wrong with her. Her dark hair, usually clean and pinned back, hung drab and lank. Her cheekbones were sharp, as if she'd lost flesh. At about that time, he faded out again. Then he remembered sitting in a chair in the kitchen of their house while True cleaned the blood off his face. She wouldn't let him crawl into bed. She kept him sitting in the chair the rest of that day, a damp rag over his eyes. Now and then she removed the rag and made him drink tea that left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Suddenly he wanted to see her in the worst way. He picked up his hat and got up slowly, in stages, from the couch.

"I'm off home," he said.

As he stepped out of the jail, he saw a boy coming up the street on a mule. The animal's long upper lip stated that it grudged being ridden. No saddle. The boy sat on a girthed sheepskin with the fleece side down. He held a loop of rope tied to the bit rings on both sides of the mule's broad, disgruntled mouth. The boy was small, and his legs stuck out sideways from the mule's sweat-slick barrel—uncomfortable enough, Gideon thought, even for one so young.

The boy's bare feet were mottled with grime. He wore a broad-brimmed straw hat and a pale homespun shirt above breeches held up by a single leather suspender crossing his chest.

The boy halloooed the closed door of the jail, clearly not realizing that the man standing in front of him, his hat pulled low to block the sun, was the sheriff of Colerain County himself.

"Why don't you get down off that mule," Gideon said, tipping back his hat, "and tell me what it is that you want."

The boy looked at him.

"I haff for the sheriff a message," the boy said.

Instantly Gideon recognized the *Pennsylvanisch Deutsch* speech pattern accompanied by an accent even thicker than his own.

"I am the sheriff," Gideon said.

The boy's face opened with recognition. "You came to our farm this spring. The Trautmann farm. In Sinking Valley." The last word came out as "walley."

Gideon groped down in his memory and vaguely recollected going to a farm in Sinking Valley, a place where many Dutch families had bought land. He'd gone there to sort something out, a dispute between neighbors.

". . . dead body," the boy was saying.

It woke Gideon up.

"In the *sinkloch*," the boy said.

The word meant "sinkhole." One of those strange depressions that pocked the land in areas underlain by limestone rock.

"A dead body?" Gideon asked.

The boy nodded.

"Whose body is it?"

The boy looked down at the mule's broad back and shrugged.

"A man or a woman?"

The boy raised his eyes. "A woman," he said. "*Meeglich*."

A woman. Probably?

"And you rode here to tell me."

"Father sent me. Jonas Trautmann." The boy pronounced his father's first name in the *Deitsch* manner: *Yonas*. "You talked with my *dawdy* this spring about the *bissel feld* down by the stream, the one the Rankins own, but they can't get to it because the bank is too steep there. We planted on it corn. You said to pay them for what we harvested."

This gushing of information was too much for Gideon to take in. "Why don't you get down off that mule and have a drink of water and tell me more about this dead body."

The boy shook his head. "I don't know more. They wouldn't let me look. *Dawdy* told me to ride to town and tell you and come straight back."

Gideon studied the boy's face. The Trautmann farm. In Sinking Valley. Likely he would remember how to get there. If not, Alonzo would know.

A dead body in a sinkhole. Probably a woman. Maybe an accident. Maybe something else.

He said to the boy, "Tell your father I will be there tomorrow."

The boy nodded. He pulled on one rein, bending the mule's thick neck. He tapped the mule with his calves. A john mule, Gideon noticed. The mule didn't move; clearly he did not want to go any farther on this hot day. The boy lifted his heels and kicked. The mule kept his big hooves planted in the dust. His eyes hardened, and he laid his ears back. The mule seemed to Gideon to be contemplating the unjustness and perversity of the human race, and weighing whether or not to buck this flea off his back. Then a resigned look slackened his features. The mule sighed, turned ponderously, and started off down the street, walking at first, then, as if exacting a sort of vengeance, commencing to trot, the boy trying to grip with his thighs while jouncing along on the mule's back.

That boy will be very sore tomorrow, Gideon thought.

He went back inside the jail and told Alonzo what the boy had said. He instructed his deputy to have a team and wagon ready first thing in the morning, and to come pick him up at his house. In case he forgot about it.