

*And if on earth we meet no more,
O may we meet on Canaan's shore*

One



GIDEON STOLTZ STOOD IN THE DARKNESS, SHOTGUN IN HIS HANDS. His breath clouded in the chill air. He didn't see light in any of the windows in Judge Biddle's house. Had the judge overslept?

Yesterday, on the way home from hunting grouse, they'd passed a pond where ducks were coming in. The judge had stopped the wagon and, in the evening light, they had sat side by side on the hard bench seat and watched the ducks fly over, heard the rapid *whick-whick-whick* of their wings, then splashes as one, and another, and another lit on the water and began quacking.

Gideon had suggested they come back first thing the next morning. He was the county sheriff; young for that job. He respectfully pointed out to his friend and mentor, Judge Hiram Biddle, that the pond was no more than a quarter hour's walk from town. They wouldn't need the wagon. Tramp there, get in a quick hunt, and be back in time for the day to begin.

Finally, the judge had nodded.

Now Gideon stood fidgeting in the dark outside the judge's house. In his mind's eye he could already see the ducks floating on the water, bright as jewels. He and Judge Biddle would creep up on the pond. At first light they would rise up together on the brushy bank. Startled, the ducks would lift off. He imagined the brilliant streams of water trailing from their bellies as their wings grabbed the air, mallards with emerald heads and sprigs with long pointed tails and wood ducks with ruby eyes and speckled breasts. How many would they get? He could practically taste roast duck already.

He waited for what he figured was another five minutes. Clearly the judge wasn't out of bed, and his housekeeper, Mrs. Leathers, hadn't arrived yet.

Five more minutes passed. Still no sign of activity from within: no sudden glow as a lamp was lit, no muffled footfalls, no creaking of stairs.

He walked around back to where the judge kept Old Nick. The red setter danced at the end of his chain and whimpered and licked Gideon's hand. When Gideon returned to the front of the house, the dog started barking. Surely that would rouse the judge.

Nothing.

He tried the door. Unlocked. He knew it was a presumptuous thing to do, but he let himself in anyway. He closed the door behind him and stood in the entry. All he could hear was the ticking of the big walnut-cased clock in the judge's study. Gideon knew how the house was laid out: the judge had invited him there for drinks and conversation. They were friends, improbable as that sometimes seemed, the young sheriff from away and the senior jurist who'd had a long and distinguished career in Colerain County. Friends united by their love of sport, the admirable hunt, the gentlemanly art the judge called "shooting-flying."

He called out: "Judge Biddle?"

Nothing.

He leaned his shotgun in a corner, felt his way down the hall, and turned left into the kitchen. Well, they'd be late, but maybe the ducks would still be on the pond. He put his hand on the stove, felt a remnant warmth. A lamp sat on the table. He opened the stove's door. He picked up the poker and prodded around inside the firebox until he saw an orange glow. He got a splint from the tin box on the mantel, held it to the ember, and blew on it gently. He smelled brimstone as the splint flared. He carried it to the lamp, lifted the globe, and held the flame to the wick.

"Judge Biddle?" he called again.

Dead silence. And now he began to worry.

He told himself that Hiram Biddle must still be asleep in bed. The fact that his calling had gotten no response didn't necessarily mean there was a problem. The judge was old. A bit hard of hearing. And no doubt worn out from slogging through the brush all yesterday. Or maybe he was ill—maybe he'd been stricken with an attack of some sort, maybe even expired in his bed. Gideon shook his head and tried to banish that thought.

Holding the lamp in front of him, he went down the hall. He looked into the dining room. Chairs were neatly positioned on both sides of the drop leaf table. He checked the parlor. No one there. The door to the judge's study was half-open. He pushed it the rest of the way.

His nostrils flared at the acrid smell of combusted gunpowder. The tang of blood, like wet hay gone sour, hung in the air. Cutting through those scents, the stench of *dreck*.

Judge Biddle sat sprawled in a chair. He didn't move. In the center of the judge's chest a fist-sized hole punched through his vest. At the edges of the hole the green woolen cloth was charred black.

Gideon groaned. He almost dropped the lamp but managed to set it on the table with a clatter, the flame leaping wildly. He felt a weird prickling sensation gather in the center of his back, then spread out across his shoulders. It almost took his breath away. He knew the feeling, remembered it from the past.

Judge Biddle's eyes were half-open. His head lolled back. His cheeks and forehead were chalk white, his nose pinched and greenish. Blood had pooled in his mouth, run down the side of his neck, and dried there. The chair in which he sat faced the table. The judge's shotgun lay on the table, its buttstock braced against the wall, its twin muzzles aimed at the judge in his chair.

Lieber Gott.

Gideon felt his spine stiffen. Looking at the judge, he no longer saw the body of his friend. Instead he saw something that had dwelt

in the back of his mind for years, crouching there like some fearsome ungovernable beast, always ready to spring forth.

“*Memmi*,” he whispered.

He saw her plain as day. Lying on the floor, her skirt rucked up around her waist. Her one leg, bruised, wedged against the *brodehonk*. Right there in the *kich* where she always was, where she cooked their meals, where she baked those pies—he liked shoo-fly the best, the gooey kind with plenty of *molosich*—all the goodies she knew he loved, cookies and cobblers, cakes and pies. They smelled like she did, warm and good. Now what he smelled was blood and *dreck*. The air in the kitchen had seemed to be blinking. It pulsed with yellow and purple light. The world had held still for a moment; then it had shuddered into motion again, a new and terrifying place.

He shook his head, forced a deep breath, and made himself return to the here and now. *This is not my mother. But it is bad. Jesus Chrishtus, it's bad. Judge Biddle. Dead! Killed by his own hand.*

He heard a rustling and jerked his head around. He came back solidly to the present when he found himself staring into the face of Alma Leathers, Judge Biddle's housekeeper. She stood in the doorway of the judge's study, in the elegant house on Franklin Street, in the town of Adamant, Pennsylvania, in the year 1835. And Gideon was not a ten-year-old boy any longer, but a man of twenty-two.

Mrs. Leathers had hold of the doorjamb. Slowly she slid down it until she was kneeling on the floor, her legs hidden beneath voluminous skirts. She pulled her eyes away from the judge and fixed them on Gideon's. Their gray irises were ringed with white.

“No,” she said. She looked at him, seeming to beseech him—as if he could somehow turn the clock back and make things right again.

So many times he had wished he could do that for his *memmi*.

“I waited around for a while and then let myself in,” he stammered. “We were going out hunting. Ducks. A big flock of them on a pond. We saw them last night.”

“No!” she said again.

He helped her to her feet. The room was growing light from the day coming on. The tall clock in the corner ticked loudly, implacably, ticking away the seconds, ticking away life.

“Go out to the kitchen,” he told Mrs. Leathers. “Start the fire. Make some coffee. I will take care of things here.”

She turned and walked woodenly down the hallway.

He looked back at the judge, his friend and hunting partner, the man he most admired in the town, slumped in the chair, dead.

He tried to unkink his shoulders and draw air into his lungs. He looked around the room. A poker lay on the floor beside the judge’s chair. No overturned furniture, no belongings strewn about, nothing suggesting that an assault or a robbery—or a murder—had taken place.

Next to the judge’s shotgun lay a paper with writing on it, held down by a book. He set the book aside, picked up the sheet, and read: a date, some legal verbiage about this being the last will and testament of Hiram Biddle, and superseding all others, and being of sound mind—*How could anyone of sound mind have done this?* His brain barely registered the words until he saw his own name.

I leave my setter, Old Nick, to Gideon Stoltz, Sheriff of the County of Colerain, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I leave my Manton shotgun, including gun slip, case, and contents thereof, to Gideon Stoltz the same. I leave the spring wagon, my shooting brake, to Gideon Stoltz, also the bay horse Jack, along with harness and tack. The remainder of my estate, house and grounds, carriage, furniture, household goods, and personal belongings, shall be sold at auction and the proceeds used for the upkeep and betterment of the County Home for the Poor and Indigent.

Instructions for a coffin, funeral, headstone. The judge's signature at the bottom of the page. Nothing else. No reason given why Judge Biddle had killed himself.

Gideon read through the will again. It seemed carefully written and logically ordered—although it must have issued from a deeply troubled mind.

A mind he thought he knew. A keen mind that dispensed a balanced justice in court. A mind that planned their hunts with an almost military precision. He remembered the judge just yesterday saying in his even, matter-of-fact tone: "The wind has now turned into the north. Let us hunt up the steep gully and give Old Nick the advantage of having the scent in his nose." Gideon wished they were there now, on the piece of ground the judge called Seek No Further on account of an apple tree of that variety growing near the cellar hole of a failed homestead, beneath which there always seemed to be a grouse. He wished they could wade into the brush following the setter. A breeze combing the maples, their leaves fluttering red-white-red-white, the tang of fallen apples, the toasted-bread scent of frost.

Instead he smelled blood and *dreck* and the musty air of a cold room.

He said to himself: *You have tasks. Now do them.*

But what could he do beyond saying a prayer, informing the state's attorney of this dreadful event, and seeing to it that Hiram Biddle's body went gentle into the ground?