


More THAN
MEETS THE *Eye*



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To Jeff and Kristie Gilliam

Some might call it coincidence, but I call it providence. Only God could cross our paths at just the right moment to bring such blessing to all concerned. Your appearance in that Lubbock bookstore two years ago brought me genuine joy. I hope to return the favor with this long-awaited story. May the love reflected in these characters be reflected in your lives until Christ calls us home.

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

—Ephesians 4:31–32

Prologue

1879 — FANNIN COUNTY, TX

“Don’t lose heart, children. We have several strong families lined up in Bonham. I’m sure we’ll find good homes for each of you.”

Four-year-old Evangeline Pearson smiled at the sponsor from the Children’s Aid Society as the lady made her way down the train car aisle, bracing her hand for balance against one empty seat after another. Seats that had been filled with children when they’d left New York.

Miss Woodson always made Evie feel better. Even after seven . . . eight. . . . Evie scrunched her nose and unfolded her fingers one at a time as she tried to count. How many stops had they made? When she ran out of fingers, she gave up, huffed out a breath, and flopped back against the wooden bench seat. It didn’t matter. No one had wanted her at any of them. But Miss Woodson had promised to find her and Hamilton a home, and Evie believed her. She was such a nice person, after all. Nothing like the lizard lady sitting stiff and straight at the front of the train car.

As if Mrs. Dougal had heard Evie’s thoughts, she twisted her

neck around and scowled, her bulging eyes and pursed lips making Evie shudder. She buried her face in her brother's shoulder.

"Don't let her scare you," Hamilton whispered as he gently lifted his arm and wrapped it around her. At nine, Hamilton was ever so much bigger and stronger, and not afraid of anything. Even when Mama and Papa died. Or when Children's Haven had decided the Pearson siblings would be riding the orphan train west. Never once did he cry or fret. He just hugged her tight and promised that everything would be all right. He was the bravest boy who ever lived.

"She doesn't like me." Evie snuck a peek at the lizard lady, found her still scowling at her, and burrowed deeper into her brother's side. "It's 'cause of my eyes, isn't it?"

Hamilton slid his hands under her arms and lifted her onto his lap. He tipped her chin up and looked straight into her face. "There is nothing wrong with your eyes, Evie. They're beautiful. God's gift. Remember what Mama used to say?"

Evie's chin trembled slightly. Thinking of Mama always made her sad. Made her wish everything would go back to the way it had been. Mama holding her in the rocking chair and singing lullabies. Papa swinging her high into the air and laughing with that deep belly laugh that always made her giggle. Her room with rose paper on the wall. Her bed with the pink quilt and soft pillow. But it was gone. *They* were gone. Forever.

"What did Mama say?" Hamilton insisted.

"That only special little girls get eyes with two colors," Evie mumbled. She wanted to believe it was true. She really did. But if having two different eyes made her so special, why did no one want her?

Hamilton nodded. "That's right. And you know what?"

Evie glanced at her brother, envying his normal, matching brown eyes. "What?"

“I wish my eyes were the same.”

“As mine?” Evie leaned back, her forehead wrinkling. “Why? Then no one would want you, either.”

Hamilton smiled and bopped a finger on the tip of her nose. “Every time you look in a mirror, you see both Mama and Papa looking back at you. Mama from your blue eye, and Papa from your brown one. And you know how much they both loved you. It’s kind of like getting one of those hugs where they sandwiched us between them. Remember those?”

Evie nodded slowly. Oh yes, she remembered. So warm. So safe. Her in her nightdress in Mama’s arms, her legs wrapped around Mama’s middle. Mama smelling sweet, her long braid tickling Evie’s bare toes. Papa growling like a hungry bear, saying he needed an Evie sandwich, before he grabbed Mama and squished Evie between them. Their three heads jostled together. And their eyes . . . Mama’s bright blue ones to Evie’s left and Papa’s twinkling brown ones on her right. Just like hers!

A smile broke out across Evie’s face. “Oh, Ham-ton, you’re right! I have the bestest eyes ever!”

He folded her into a hug—not quite as bearish as Papa’s, but still warm and safe and full of love. “Don’t ever forget it,” he said as he squeezed her tight.

As Evie rested in her brother’s arms, voices drifted to her from the front of the railcar.

“Bonham’s the last stop,” Lizard Lady grumbled as Miss Woodson slid into the seat next to her, “though I don’t know why we should bother with it. No one’s going to take these misfits. Zacharias scares the women and angers the men with his hostile, defiant manner. Seth is so sickly, most families assume he’ll not make it through the winter. And Evangeline. She behaves well enough, but those unnatural eyes of hers unsettle decent folk. Heavens. They unsettle *me*.”

“Lower your voice, Delphinia,” Miss Woodson urged. “The children can hear you.” She twisted in her seat to smile an apology at Evie. The smile didn’t take away the sting of Lizard Lady’s mean comment, but it gave Evie just enough gumption to ignore it while considering for the first time what the other leftover children must be feeling.

Evie straightened away from her brother and turned around in her seat to look at the two boys behind her. Three rows back sat a boy close to Hamilton’s age. He looked nothing like her brother, though. He was so pale and skinny. The new coat the Children’s Aid Society had given him hung on him like it would a scarecrow. He stared out the window, his shoulders slumped, chest caved. And every time a puff of soot found its way into the railcar, he coughed.

The other boy sat in the very back of the car on the opposite side. His back was pressed sideways into the corner, one long leg drawn up onto the bench, his hat pulled low on his face. Not so low she couldn’t see his eyes, though. They were dark, just like the rest of him. Dark clothes. Dark hair. Darkly tanned skin. He even had dark whiskers growing on his cheeks. But those dark blue eyes made her shiver. Especially when he stared straight at her. Like he was doing now.

She didn’t think Zach had any friends. He was always by himself, even when the train had been filled with children. She had Hamilton. Zach didn’t have anyone. That was sad. Everyone needed a friend.

Evie smiled and wiggled her fingers in a timid wave.

Zach glared at her and showed his teeth like a growling dog.

Evie snatched her fingers back and spun around in her seat. Maybe some people didn’t need friends after all.

“I’ve had great success placing children in Bonham before,” Miss Woodson said. “I’m sure everything will work out.”

Mrs. Dougal harrumphed. “The only kid you might place is the Pearson boy. Several have offered for him already. All you have to do is separate him from his sister.”

Separate her from Hamilton? Evie’s heart pattered so hard it felt like it might break out of her chest. She grabbed her brother’s hand and held on for all she was worth.

“But it’s so hard on the children when we split them up,” Miss Woodson protested.

“It’ll be harder on them if they end up on the streets in New York. If we can save one, I say we do it. Sometimes the hard decisions are the right ones.” Mrs. Dougal tossed a quick look over her shoulder at Evie and Hamilton before sniffing and turning back to Miss Woodson. “There’s no reason to kill the boy’s chance at a promising future just to stave off a few tears. They’ll recover.”

Evie stared hard at Miss Woodson, begging inside her head for her champion to tell Lizard Lady she was wrong. But she didn’t. Instead, Miss Woodson bit her lip and nodded.

“You can’t let them split us up, Ham-ton!” Evie wailed in a desperate undertone, careful not to let Lizard Lady hear. “You can’t!”

Hamilton squeezed her hand, his chin jutting out. “Don’t worry. I won’t.” Keeping hold of her hand, he slid off the seat and made his way into the aisle. “Come on. I need to talk to Zach.”

The scary boy in the back of the railcar who’d just snarled at her? Evie dragged her heels. “I don’t wanna—”

Hamilton huffed out a breath and gave her one of his don’t-be-such-a-baby looks. “He’s just a kid like the rest of us, Evie. And he can help.”

He was most certainly *not* like the rest of them. She wasn’t even fully convinced Zach was a kid. Not with whiskers and

legs nearly as long as Papa's had been. But she wasn't about to let her brother think she was scared, so she pressed her lips together and let Hamilton drag her along.

"What d'ya want?" Zach lowered his leg from the bench to sprawl across the opening between his seat and the rear-facing one across the way, barring Hamilton from getting close.

But that didn't stop her brother. He just climbed over the barrier and sat in the seat facing the other boy, leaving Evie to clamber up beside him.

"I need advice," Hamilton said, his voice firm like Papa's used to be whenever he was instructing them on proper behavior. "The sponsors think to split us up at the next stop, and I can't let that happen. So I need to know how you get people not to claim you."

Slowly, Zach sat up and leaned across the open space between the two seats. His dark blue eyes narrowed, and the edge of his mouth lifted in a smile that looked downright scary. Evie's stomach clenched.

"I tell them that I'll kill them in their sleep."

Evie gasped. How could someone say such a terrible thing? Surely he didn't mean it. Did he?

Zach smirked at her. Evie whimpered.

Hamilton, on the other hand, nodded. "Right. Threaten to kill them. Got it."

What? Evie's gaze jerked to her brother. He couldn't!

Zach must have thought the idea outrageous as well, because he shook his head and sighed. "Look, kid, just because it works for me doesn't mean it'll work for you. You got one of them angel faces. No one will believe you capable of murder."

"Maybe he can cough, like me." Seth wandered down the aisle, a sudden hacking making everyone turn to look at him. "Act"—he coughed into the handkerchief the sponsors insisted he carry—"sick."

Zach shook his head. “Nah. He looks too healthy. They’ll assume he’ll get better.” The older boy lifted his hat and scratched at a spot on his head, the meanness leaking away from his face. “We gotta find something else.”

Evie looked from one boy to the next. Was Zach actually *helping* them? Maybe Hamilton was right. Maybe he just *pretended* to be awful. Though why someone would want everyone to hate him, Evie couldn’t understand, not when she tried so hard to get people to like her.

Zach eyed Hamilton up and down, then crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his seat. “Spoiled rich kid. That’s your angle.”

Hamilton frowned. “But I’m not rich. All I have are one spare set of clothes and the cardboard suitcase the Children’s Aid Society gave me. Same as everyone else.”

Zach unfolded his arms, a devious light twinkling in his dark blue eyes. “Yeah, but with names like *Hamilton* and *Evangeline*, it’d be easy as pie to get people to think you come from money. Farm folk resent rich folk. Think they’re spoiled and have no work ethic.”

Evie had no idea what a work ethic was, so she probably didn’t have one. Maybe *that* was why no one wanted to take her home. Hamilton must have one, though, since people liked him. He’d have to find a way to hide it.

“Start throwing demands around. Then throw a fit. Yell. Scream. Flail around.” Zach was grinning now. A smile that actually looked happy instead of scary.

“And if all else fails, bite ’em.” Seth offered that bit of advice once his cough settled. “Whenever I wanted the nurses to leave me alone, I bit ’em. They stayed away for a good long while after that.”

Zach slapped the frail boy on the back, nearly sending him to

the floor. “Good idea! May have to try that one myself someday.” He started chuckling, and the other boys joined in.

Evie laughed, too, even though she didn’t think biting was particularly funny. A kitten had bitten her finger once, and it hurt for two days afterward. But if biting would keep her and Hamilton together, she’d bite someone, too.

“Get back to your seats, children,” Miss Woodson called from the front of the car. “We’re almost to Bonham. You’ll need to gather your belongings.”

Evie shared a look with Hamilton, then climbed off the seat and headed back to where they’d been sitting. Her tummy twisted and pinched at the thought of what might happen when the train stopped, but she remembered what Mama had always told her to do when she felt afraid.

Once in her seat, she folded her hands in her lap, bowed her head, and closed her eyes.

Don’t let them take Hamilton away from me. Please. I need somebody down here who loves me.



An hour later, Evie stood on a raised platform in the local courthouse with Hamilton, Seth, and Zach, waiting for the families to come in and look them over.

“Stand tall, don’t fidget, and speak only when spoken to.” Miss Woodson gave the same instructions she did at every stop as she walked the line to inspect them one last time. She paused to tug Seth’s coat sleeves down over his wrists, then ran a smoothing hand over Evie’s hair. When she moved toward Zach, he gave her such a mean look that she backed away without touching him. “Smile,” she said as she shot a chiding look at the boy slouching in the corner, “and mind your manners.”

The families started coming in, and Evie's heart raced. *Please let someone want me. And Hamilton. Together. Please.*

She did everything Miss Woodson had told her. She didn't fidget. Stood tall as she could manage. Smiled. All while hiding her eyes. She kept her face downcast, watching feet instead of faces move through the courthouse lobby.

Hamilton stood a few feet away, talking with a man and his wife.

"We really only want a boy, one who can help in the fields," the man was saying.

"Remember the agreement you signed, Mr. Potter." Miss Woodson joined the group. "Any child you receive must be treated as a member of your family. And if you expect a farmhand's labor from him, you must offer a farmhand's wages."

"I know. But he's talkin' about me takin' on his sister as well. She's too young to be much help on the farm, and if I'm payin' wages, I won't have the funds to feed and clothe another child."

"Let's just look at her, John. Please? She's got the same reddish-brown hair Nellie did. Maybe if I had another girl around the kitchen, I wouldn't miss our daughter so." A gray skirt swished in Evie's direction.

Evie smiled as wide as she could stretch her lips. *Please want me. Please want me.*

The lady in gray stopped in front of Evie, then hunkered down. Determined to hide her eyes, Evie kept her gaze focused on the lady's skirt.

"What's your name, child?"

Evie swung back and forth, then remembered she wasn't supposed to fidget and stopped. "Evangeline."

"That's a pretty name. You remind me of my daughter, Nellie. She's grown now. Married a man from two counties over, so

I don't get to see her very often. I miss having a little girl around. I could teach you how to cook and sew. Would you like that?"

Evie nodded, her excitement building. "Yes, ma'am."

A pair of rough boots plodded up beside the gray skirt. "Look at a person when you speak to them, girl." The hard, manly voice made Evie jump.

What should she do? If she showed her eyes, they might not want her anymore. But if she didn't look up, they'd think her defiant.

"Maybe she's just shy, John," the gray lady said. Her hand came up to cup Evie's chin. "My Nellie had such lovely brown eyes. Are your eyes brown?"

Evie nodded. It wasn't a lie. She did have a brown eye.

"Let me see." The lady pushed Evie's chin up.

Maybe she could just show one eye. Evie tried to open her right eye while squeezing her left eye shut, screwing up her mouth in concentration.

"Quit making faces, girl," the man barked.

The sharp tone startled Evie, and she forgot to keep her left eye shut.

The lady gasped and pulled her hand away. "Her . . . eyes. Miss Woodson, what's wrong with her eyes?"

Evie immediately shuttered her gaze, blinking back the tears that rose.

"Nothing's wrong with her eyes!" Hamilton rushed to Evie's side and grabbed her hand. "She can see just fine. That's all that matters, isn't it? That they work. My sister's smart, cheerful, and strong for her size. You'd be getting a deal if you take us both on. You wouldn't even have to pay me any wages. I'll work for free if you take Evie, too."

"So her eyes won't ever . . . fix themselves?" The lady in gray stood, backed up a step, then rubbed her arms against a shudder.

Miss Woodson's familiar blue skirt came into view. "Hamilton is correct. Evangeline's vision is not impaired, and she truly is a darling child."

"But those eyes are so . . . peculiar." The woman backed away another step. "They give me the shivers."

"That decides it," Mr. Potter said. "We'll take the boy. Not the girl. One extra mouth to feed is all I can afford anyway."

"Very well." Miss Woodson sighed. "Mrs. Dougal can assist you with the paper—"

"No!" Hamilton stomped his foot. "I'll not go without my sister."

Evie stared at him. That fierce voice didn't sound anything like the kind brother she knew.

"Don't sass your betters, boy." The man pointed a finger in Hamilton's face.

"You're not my better!" Hamilton shoved his nose in the air. "I'm a Pearson. My papa used to hire people like you to work in his factory. People too stupid to do anything more than simple tasks, like planting seeds and watching them grow."

"Hamilton!" Miss Woodson's shocked voice echoed Evie's disbelief.

The man glowered, his face turning bright red. "You better watch your mouth, boy."

"Or what?" Hamilton challenged. "You'll whip me? Beat me? Chain me up in your barn? I'd expect nothing less from a man who probably can't even read."

Mr. Potter shook with rage, and Evie worried that her brother had gone too far.

"He doesn't mean it." Miss Woodson placed her hands on Hamilton's shoulders and pulled him away from the man, who looked like he was about to strike. "He's just afraid of being separated from his sister."

“I do too mean it.” Hamilton jerked away from Miss Woodson’s grip and stepped straight up to the farmer and his wife. “And it’s not just him who’s ignorant. His wife is, too. Why else would she be scared of something as trifling as eyes that are two different colors?”

The man’s hand fisted.

Evie lunged for her brother and wrapped her arms around his middle. “Stop, Ham-ton. Stop!”

“He’s a child, John.” The lady in gray had stepped in front of her husband as well and stared up into his face as she placed a staying hand on his arm.

“I’ll not tolerate anyone speaking about you that way, Georgia. No matter his age.” He set his wife aside and jabbed his finger into Hamilton’s face. “If you ever speak ill of my wife again, I’ll—”

Hamilton lurched forward and bit down on the man’s pointed finger.

The farmer howled, then cuffed Hamilton across the head with his other hand. Hamilton toppled. Evie fell with him. Women screeched. Men yelled. And all Evie could do was hang on to her brother and pray that everything else would go away.



“Well, that was a disaster.” Lizard Lady’s pronouncement bounced around the interior of the railcar as it rattled down the tracks, taking them back the way they had come. There’d be no more stops. No more chances at finding families.

“That weren’t no disaster,” Zach said with a grin as he punched Hamilton lightly in the shoulder. “That was brilliant! Well done, Ham-bone. I’m impressed.”

Hamilton grinned as if he’d just been named king of the mountain. The boys had all chosen to sit together in the back

of the railcar, Zach actually making room for Seth on the seat next to him as Hamilton and Evie sat in the rear-facing seat in front of them.

Evie thought them all crazy to be so proud of themselves for such awful behavior, but she and Hamilton were still together, so she wouldn't scold them. Lizard Lady had done that enough already.

The boys recounted the event over and over until Evie grew bored. And sleepy. Being scared wore a girl out, and she'd been more scared today than any day she could remember. The rocking of the train made her eyelids heavy, and her head started to loll toward her chest.

"Here, Evie." Hamilton set his back against the window like Zach had done earlier and made room for her to nestle up against his chest.

She curled up against her big brother and slept until a harsh jolt tossed her onto the floor. Her head bumped against someone's bony knee, and she cried out as the terrifying sound of braking train wheels screeching against the rails pierced the air.

Luggage fell from the overhead racks. The sponsors screamed. Hamilton called Evie's name before he dropped down over her and wrapped his body around hers.

"Crawl under the seat, Evie, and hold on to the chair legs."

She did what he said, hugging the ornate iron leg that connected the bench to the floor with all her might. Then the train slammed into something. Hard. So hard, the force tore Hamilton away from her.

"Ham-ton!"

A loud groan rumbled, and the railcar started to tip. Evie wailed her brother's name.

"Hold on, Evie! Don't let go!"

She did. Until the railcar tipped on its side, throwing her

against one of the windowpanes. Metal ripped. Glass shattered. The train tore itself apart as it slid sideways down an embankment. Evie cried, trying to find something to hold on to. The train slid over a rock, the jagged surface knocking out the glass of the window next to Evie's and bouncing her into the air. Something hard stabbed against her side. She whimpered but grabbed for the hat hook, her little fingers clinging desperately to the metal hanger.

It seemed to take days for the train to stop its slide. When it did, Evie called for her brother and waited for him to come for her.

He didn't come.

"Ham-ton!" Where was he? Was he hurt? Evie started to cry. He couldn't be hurt. She needed him. "Ham-ton!"

Letting go of the hat hook, she got to her hands and knees, then slowly pushed to her feet. "Ham-ton!" She took one step. Then another. Broken glass crunched beneath her shoes. Her legs shook. Her head ached where she'd banged it against the luggage rack. Her eyes searched through tears that wouldn't stop flowing.

Suddenly a pair of arms wrapped around her.

She turned, ready to hug her brother tight. Only it wasn't Hamilton. It was Seth. His chest made a funny noise as he breathed, almost like it was squeaking.

"You're hurt." Evie touched his head where blood matted his hair.

"It's all right," Seth said, holding her close. "Stay here . . . with me . . . Evangeline." His chest heaved as he gasped between words.

"I have to find Ham-ton." She tried to pull away. His skinny arms were surprisingly strong, though, and he held her fast.

"Not yet. You . . . need to wait."

He was scaring her. The way his eyes looked at her. Sad. Sorry. The way people had looked at her after Mama and Papa had gone to heaven.

Evie struggled. “Ham-ton! I want Ham-ton!”

She stomped Seth’s toes and broke free. She stumbled forward, tripping on a window frame, but grabbed the edge of a sideways bench to keep from falling. Everything was sideways. Crumpled. Broken.

She spotted Zach hunched over, a giant plate of glass in his hands that he yanked upward and tossed aside.

“Zach?”

She was going to ask if he knew where Hamilton was, but when he turned to look at her, his face made her forget her words. He didn’t look mean or tough now. He looked . . . lost.

“He saved my life,” he mumbled, his stare blank. “Pushed me out of the way and saved my life.” Zach blinked, then seemed to recognize her. He jumped to his feet and tore at his coat as if it had suddenly caught fire. Finally, he flung it from his back and tossed it on top of a pile of something behind him.

Seth joined them. “We need to get . . . her out. Shouldn’t . . . see this.”

Shouldn’t see what? Evie looked from one boy to the other. What were they hiding from her, and where was her brother?

“She needs to say good-bye,” Zach argued.

Say good-bye? To who?

“Evie?” A weak voice cut through the argument, stilling everyone.

Hamilton!

Evie pushed past Zach and found her brother at last. He lay on his back, not moving. Zach’s coat covered him up. She stumbled up to where his head lay and wrapped her arms around his neck. But he didn’t hug her back. Didn’t rub her hair and

tell her everything would be all right. He just lay there. Still. Too still.

“Ham-ton? You gotta get up.” She grabbed his shoulder and tried to pull him into a sitting position. “Get up, Ham-ton!”

“Easy, princess. You don’t want to hurt him.” Zach crouched beside her and patted her back. It felt awkward and stiff, but it was warm, too. And Evie felt so cold, as if her heart had turned to ice.

“Zach’s gonna . . . take care of you now,” Hamilton said, struggling to open his eyes. “He made me a promise, and I trust him . . . to keep it. You can trust him . . . too.”

“I don’t want Zach to take care of me. I want you, Ham-ton!”

Her brother smiled, or tried to. “I know, Evie, but I can’t stay. I have to . . . go see Mama . . . and Papa.” He coughed, and something red came out of his mouth.

Terror seized Evie, shaking her from top to bottom. Hamilton couldn’t leave her. He couldn’t!

Zach helped Hamilton turn his head and wiped away the blood, the tenderness so strange from the rough boy. Once he was done, Hamilton looked at Evie again.

“I love you, sis. Always . . . and forever.”

“Don’t leave me, Ham-ton.” Her voice broke as she collapsed on his chest and cried out her heartache. “Don’t leave me.”

Something gurgled in his lungs; she could hear it beneath the coat. But she also heard voices. Seth and Zach arguing.

“They’ll never let you stay with her,” Seth was saying. “As soon as we get back to New York, they’ll divide us up again.”

“That’s why we’re not going to New York.”

“What?”

“We’re making a run for it.”

“But we’re just kids. How can we—?”

“If you don’t want to come, don’t come. But I made the kid

a promise, and I never go back on my word. I'm gettin' the girl out of here. If I can survive on the streets of New York, I can survive in Texas. We'll make do."

"But they'll search for us."

"So we change our names. Become our own family with our own name."

The boys quieted, leaving nothing but the shallow gurgles of her brother's chest to echo around Evie. Then even that stopped.

"Ham-ton," she moaned, knowing he'd left her.

"Hamilton's a good name," Seth said.

"Yeah," Zach answered. "Hamilton it is."



CHAPTER

1



JULY 1894—PECAN GAP, TX

Logan Fowler dismounted outside the Lucky Lady Saloon, anticipation thrumming in his veins. Seven years. That was how long he'd been waiting to enact justice. Seven years of loss, sacrifice, and preparation. And today represented the beginning of the end—for Zacharias Hamilton.

"I'll make it right, Ma," Logan vowed beneath his breath. He patted his chestnut's neck before wrapping the reins around the hitching post. "For Pop."

Logan tugged his hat brim a little lower on his forehead. The long white scar that slashed diagonally across his left eye from halfway up his brow to a spot close to the top of his ear tended to draw attention, and he'd rather be inconspicuous while gathering information. Not that the scar didn't have its advantages. Especially in saloons. Looking dangerous gave a man an edge. Demanded respect.

At only twenty-three, Logan had worked hard to cultivate a stony bearing to match the hard heart he'd spent seven years

callousing. He wore a beard to disguise his youth and a gun to keep folks at a distance.

He squinted toward the west, where the sun still hovered well above the horizon. A mite early for a crowd to have gathered in the saloon, but then, he'd timed his arrival for precisely that outcome. An inveterate gambler like Hamilton wouldn't bother to put in an appearance until the whiskey had been flowing for a couple hours, softening the brains and the inhibitions of his marks. Which made now the perfect time to collect intelligence.

With slow, swagger-heavy steps, Logan strode up to the batwing doors and pushed through. He moved just inside the entrance and stood with his back to the wall as his eyes adjusted to the dim interior.

A woman with henna-red hair and a bodice that left little to the imagination stood with her hands on her hips atop the small stage at the front of the room, haranguing the piano player about rushing the tempo of her song. A group of four men—farmers, judging by their overalls and serious expressions—sat around a corner table, discussing the necessity of getting a Populist elected to Congress. But it was the man behind the long, polished counter that Logan found most intriguing.

“Thirsty, mister?” the barkeep asked as Logan approached. He finished drying a tall glass, then used the dish towel to shine up the counter in front of the stool closest to Logan. “Delta County is dry, I’m afraid, but I’ve an assortment of switchels and shrubs, ginger water, sarsaparilla, coffee, or tea. Also got a full menu of food options if you’re in need of a meal.”

The barrel-chested fellow smiled warmly enough, if cautiously, as he took in Logan’s appearance, but when Logan pushed his hat back and fully exposed his scar, the disgust that registered in the barkeep’s face before he could hide it stirred Logan’s ire.

“Coffee’s fine.” Logan leaned an elbow on the bar, keeping his body angled so he could see both the barkeep and the door.

The Lucky Lady was a tame watering hole compared to the dives he’d frequented over the last four years, a necessary training ground for one who wanted to master not only cards but faces—learning to read tells and ferret out cheats. Consorting with the worst scoundrels humanity had to offer also taught a man a thing or two about survival. The recollection of the broken bottle that had been used to decorate his face kept Logan from underestimating anyone in the room. Even the flame-haired songbird making eyes at him as she conspicuously adjusted the scarlet garter holding up her black stocking. Women could be just as treacherous as men.

The barkeep set a brown ceramic mug on the counter in front of Logan, then retrieved a pot from the stove behind him. As he poured the brew, he peered up at Logan with a questioning arch of his brows. “So, you passin’ through?”

“Nope. Bought a spread up by the North Sulphur River. Plan to stay a spell.” At least until Zacharias Hamilton got his comeuppance.

His host eyed him with skepticism as he plopped a tin cup onto the counter. A small set of tongs rattled against the rim of the makeshift sugar bowl. “Ya don’t exactly strike me as the farmin’ type.” His gaze darted to the men at the corner table and back.

Logan shrugged and dropped two cubes of sugar into his coffee. “You got a spoon . . . ?” He drew out the pause, waiting for the barkeep to supply his name.

“Dunn. Arnold Dunn.” He wiped his hand on his pant leg, then extended it across the bar.

Logan shook it. “Logan Fowler.”

Dunn showed no recognition of the name. Not surprising.

Seven years ago, the town had been brand-new, barely a post office to its name. Dunn probably hadn't even been around. It wasn't until the railroad came through in 1888 that people started flocking to the area. Which made Hamilton's crime all the more severe. Logan's father's land would have tripled in value with the railroad's arrival, but Hamilton had stolen it from him before that could happen. Had stolen his father's *life* as well.

The barkeep extracted his hand, then found a spoon and set it on the counter next to the mug. As Logan stirred the dissolved sugar into his coffee, he cast a quick glance around the room to ensure no one was paying him any particular attention. Then he casually brought up the topic he most wanted to discuss.

"You get many high-stakes games in here?"

Dunn chuckled. "Didn't call her the Lucky Lady for nuthin', did I? Highest stakes in town. You a gamblin' man?"

Logan took a sip of his coffee, studying the other man. "When properly motivated."

"Only go for the rich pots, huh?" Dunn's mouth curved in a sly grin.

Logan just sipped his coffee, letting the barkeep think what he would. In truth, Logan despised gambling. Hated the greed that accompanied it, the unnecessary risk, the completely irrational belief that one could actually control fate. He'd learned to count cards, to run probabilities in his head, to read the faces of those sitting at the table around him, but he still lost. Not as often as most, and not more often than he won, but often enough to remind him that control was an illusion. No man controlled fate. God alone claimed that honor.

He eyed Dunn over the brim of his mug. "You got any big players around here?"

Dunn shrugged. "Most of the folks in these parts don't have

much ready cash. The boys from the mill will get up a good game when they've got wages burning a hole in their pockets, but the rest play friendly games as a way to pass the time. Play runs deeper here than at L. A. Campbell's place, though. I don't put no limits on the stakes or kick people out if things get a little rowdy. Unless someone starts breakin' up the place. That's just bad for business."

"A fellow by the name of Hamilton ever play here?" Logan's gut clenched even as he forced his expression to remain cool. He wouldn't want the man to think him *too* interested in the answer.

"*Zach* Hamilton?" Dunn's eyebrows arched.

Logan lifted the coffee to his mouth in a carefully measured display of nonchalance. "Man has the reputation of a player, and I heard he lived around here."

"Oh, he lives around here, all right. Probably'll be your neighbor, seein' as how his spread backs up to the river, too. But a player?" Dunn shook his head. "I can't picture it. Oh, I've heard the rumors that he might have gambled in his younger days, but I ain't never seen him so much as touch a deck in my place. Nowhere else in town neither, as far as I know."

Logan froze, the cup halfway between his mouth and the counter. *Never touched a deck?* That couldn't be right. The cardsharp his father had described would never just hang it up. The thrill of the game? The addicting rush of power that came with each win? Logan himself battled the pull, and he despised the pastime. It made no sense for a gamester like Hamilton to simply retire.

"Maybe he rides over to Ben Franklin to play," Logan gritted out as he slowly lowered his cup. It would make sense. If Hamilton had set up permanent residence in Pecan Gap, he'd not want to stir up trouble amongst his neighbors. Beggaring them with his underhanded gameplay would make any aboveboard

business dealings next to impossible. It'd be wiser to conduct his confidence games elsewhere, and Ben Franklin was only a few miles' ride farther from the homestead than Pecan Gap. Or he could even ride to Cooper. Bigger city. More anonymity. The fact that he didn't gamble here didn't mean he didn't gamble at all. It didn't mean Logan's scheme would fail. It just meant Logan would have to be patient. Learn Hamilton's habits. Get under his skin. Hamilton was smart. Cagney smart. Logan would have to be smarter.

"I wouldn't know anything about what Hamilton does over in Ben Franklin," Dunn was saying, "but he don't exactly seem the socializin' type. All them Hamiltons keep to themselves."

"*All* the Hamiltons?" The question jumped out of Logan's mouth before he could mask his surprise. He quickly swigged another mouthful of coffee and forced his spine to soften back into a more casual position after springing to attention at Dunn's statement.

"There's three of 'em." Dunn glanced around, then placed an elbow on the bar and leaned close, lowering his voice to a raspy half-whisper. "Odd bunch. Claim to be siblings, but if you ask me, there's no way they're related. Not by blood. None of 'em look a thing alike. And that girl?" He turned and spat at the floor.

Hoping there was a spittoon back there somewhere, Logan hid his repulsion at the barkeep's abysmal manners and lowered his mug to the counter. Somehow, the coffee seemed a lot less appetizing after that display.

Dunn swiped the back of his hand beneath his lower lip, then eyed Logan with a grim expression. "I ain't the superstitious sort, mind you, but if I were, I'd swear that gal was a witch. A freak of nature, she is. Eyes that don't match. And I'm not just talkin' about eyes that are slightly different shades. No, this gal has one eye as brown as chocolate and another so bright blue,

it pierces a man's soul." He shivered. "I can feel that blue eye of hers following me whenever she's around. Cursing me." He turned his head and spat again.

Logan arched a sardonic brow. "And here I thought you weren't the superstitious sort."

"Scoff if you like, mister, but you'll see what I mean if you stick around long enough. Get those eyes trained on you, and you'll change your tune. See if you don't."

Logan didn't care about some girl with mismatched eyes. He cared about Zacharias Hamilton. Although, if Hamilton was claiming this girl as his sister, Logan might be able to use that to his advantage somehow. His honor wouldn't permit him to threaten her in any physical way, but if Hamilton had an emotional tie to the female, she might be a weakness Logan could exploit.

A good card player used every weapon at his disposal to win, only two of which were the actual cards and the chips in the pot. Rattling one's opponent with a few well-placed barbs, using the hint of a grin to sell a bluff, complimenting a player who took a round through sheer luck on his exceptional skill in order to elicit overconfidence on the next hand—they were all strategies of emotional warfare. Strategies Logan had honed to a razor's edge.

He pulled a coin from his trouser pocket and tossed it onto the bar. "Thanks for the coffee and the conversation."

"Leavin' already?" Dunn bristled. "Ya ain't even finished your brew."

"I'll be back." Logan winked. The barkeep might have the manners of a cockroach, but his information was solid. Best to keep him an ally for now. "I got a bit of a ride ahead of me. Time to get after it. But I hope to sample some of your other entertainments before too long."

“Ah.” Dunn gave him a knowing grin. He nodded toward the redhead on stage. “Like what you see in Arabelle, huh? She may not have the best set of pipes in the county, but her set of—”

“I was thinking of the tables,” Logan interrupted. Good grief. The last thing he needed was a female in his way, complicating his mission and causing trouble. Unfortunately, the scantily clad Arabelle must have had ears like an owl, for she was clambering off the stage and heading his way with disconcerting haste.

Tugging his hat back down over his scarred eye, Logan straightened away from the bar. “Catch up with you later, Dunn.” He offered a wave in parting as he stretched his stride, choosing speed over swagger. At this juncture, self-preservation outranked image.

Once the saloon doors safely swung closed behind him, Logan relaxed. But only for a moment. His mind cranked through the new information he’d gained and what it might mean.

He unhitched his horse and mounted in a smooth motion while his brain churned. Hamilton wasn’t acting as Logan had expected. He’d need to modify his timetable, adjust his plans. Learn the man’s habits and ferret out his weaknesses.

So be it. Logan wouldn’t blow his chance to achieve justice for his father by getting in a hurry. He was willing to play the long game.

He clicked his tongue at Shamgar and headed off at a trot. Time to investigate the homestead. He might have bought the property as bait to lure Hamilton into a high-stakes game, but it would serve equally well as a place to conduct reconnaissance.

Hamilton wouldn’t remain a mystery for long.