

**A GATHERING
OF BROTHERS**



CALEB PASCAL & THE PECULIAR PEOPLE

A GATHERING OF BROTHERS

KERSTEN HAMILTON

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Bringing The Word to Life

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Summary: Caleb, an orphan traveling throughout Texas and the Midwest in the late 1800s with Mr. Bartlebee's circus, encounters dangers as he assists Guillaume in caring for the animals and when he tries to help his troubled best friend, Thaddeus "Mighty Midget" Stone, find God's love.

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Dedication

for my own Magilly



Peculiar People in the title of this series is what is known as a play on words.

Today the word *peculiar* has the meaning of being strange. An odd or unusual thing or person is described as peculiar.

But there's an older meaning of the word *peculiar* too. The *King James Version* of the Bible (published in the year 1611) used *peculiar* in this older meaning.

“The LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure” (Psalm 135:4).

Jesus “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us . . . and purify unto himself a peculiar people” (Titus 2:14).

“Ye are a chosen generation . . . a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9).

In these verses, people who follow the Lord are called “peculiar.” But it doesn't mean they are strange. What *does* it mean? It means that the Lord's people are his treasured possession, his very own, singled out to belong to him.

In this series you'll follow Caleb in his adventures with all kinds of people—people who are . . . well, peculiar!

1887



CHAPTER 1

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

—1 Corinthians 1:27-29

“Is that Twin Nightshade?” Caleb squinted at the figure walking across the prairie.

The cabin of the parked locomotive was the highest spot in Booley, Texas, and the best place to post a lookout for escaped lions.

Tannakin Jones the Pig-Faced Girl turned her binoculars toward the lone figure. “It’s Twin, all right.”

Thaddeus Stone the Mighty Midget stopped polishing the brass dials and gauges and pulled himself up where he could see.

“What is Twin thinking? No one is supposed to walk out there alone. Any sign of the beasts?”

Tanni’s eyes swept the horizon. “No.”

Ten days before, a loose railroad rail had bounced up, ripping through the bottom of Daggett and Bartlebee’s Phantasmagoria of Dangers and Delights. It was the worst train wreck in the history of Trickum County, turning most of the circus train into a twisted ruin. Three lions had escaped. Karoom the Cannibal had rented the only thing in town big enough to carry him—a riding mule—and had gone looking for them. He’d found cat tracks, poop, and the carcass of an antelope. The lions were making their way toward Booley, following the path of the circus animals and performers who had walked the twenty miles to town.

“Twin’s headed this way,” Tanni said. “He’s been worried. His brother is delivering the new train cars. Nicholas is—”

“Evil.” Caleb finished her sentence. Nicholas Nightshade, the circus front man, had a voice that hung in the air like spiderwebs, a shrunken human head in his pocket, and something wicked in his eyes. Twin had been just as bad until a few days ago. Maybe worse. He’d shared his fancy Pullman car with a mummified woman he’d named Nefertiti, a dozen shrunken heads from the Amazon . . . and demons. Caleb shuddered. The demons hadn’t just been inside Twin’s train car; they’d been in Twin himself.

Thaddeus Stone believed that a rival circus, Clark’s Incredible Show, had sabotaged Daggett and Bartlebee’s train because they wanted to take over the territory. Clark’s roustabouts had attacked Bartlebee’s train in Boggsville, but

Caleb wasn't so sure they had caused the wreck. Thad hadn't been in Twin Nightshade's car at the time. He hadn't heard the demon voices—or Twin's scream.

"I wasn't going to say that Nicholas was evil," Tanni said gently. "I was going to say 'very lost.' Twin has been praying for Nicholas. They've always been close."

Thad wiped his hands on a rag. "Oh yes, Twin is a Christian now, so that makes it safe for him to be out there alone? The last time I checked, Christians were right up there with prime rib on a lion's menu of choice."

"After what happened to you," Tanni said, "I don't know how you can be so . . . so . . ."

Thad turned to the dials and gauges. "Clementine needs coal." He started down the steps. Clementine was the steam engine, and Caleb wasn't sure which Thad loved more—Tannakin Jones or the iron monster.

Thad hadn't talked to anyone about what had happened to him during the wreck. Not even Tanni. Tanni seemed to have been a Christian all of her life, and she was good at it. She was good at loving and forgiving, even when people laughed at her. Thad had read the Bible, all right. He knew it better than Caleb did. But that didn't mean he believed it. Thad said he preferred Thor, the Norse god of vengeance.

Caleb followed his friend over to the tender behind the firebox. They both picked up shovels.

"Tell me again why we have to do this?" Caleb scooped up a shovelful of coal. Joe, the engineer, had left Clementine in Thad's care for the afternoon.

"We keep the fire burning"—Thad slammed his shovel

into the coal—“because Clementine must stay hot.” He threw the coal into the firebox, and Caleb threw his shovelful in as well. They both scooped up more. “She is a precision machine,” Thad went on, “designed to work with fire in her belly. Metal expands when it is hot. Her working parts only fit together when they are the right temperature. Without fire they cool, and she will be—”

“Dead?” Tanni had followed them down.

Thad frowned. “Unable to function until she is brought up to temperature again. We are keeping her warm so she will be ready to go when Nicholas gets here with the new coaches and cars. Of course, we could always borrow steam—that means using the steam from one engine to heat up another that has gone cold. It’s faster than starting her fires again. I thought you were watching for lions.”

“Twin’s headed back,” Tanni said. “And there are no lions in sight.”

“I suppose he does have a lot on his mind.” Thad wouldn’t admit she was right about Twin needing to pray, but he was clearly trying to make peace. “His brother is coming . . . and Twin’s lost his meal ticket.”

“What?” Caleb asked.

“He buried Nefertiti, didn’t he? How is he going to make a living without his sideshow tent full of curiosities?” Thad paused. “Dash it all! What do *they* want?”

Caleb turned to follow Thad’s gaze. Four people were walking down the dusty road toward them. Ham, a big redhead who worked at the Booley station, was leading Apollo Maximum the lion trainer, Richard Bartlebee the circus

owner's son, and a thin cowboy Caleb had never seen before. That wasn't surprising. Cowboys blew through Booley like tumbleweeds, in ones and twos, and most of them wanted to gape at the stranded circus.

"That's him!" Ham said, pointing at Thad. "The little guy. He was dead at the wreck."

"Cold dead?" the cowboy asked.

"I don't think he was cold yet," Ham said, "but he was dead, sure enough."

Tanni sucked in her breath and looked at Thad, but he kept shoveling, as if he hadn't heard a word.

Caleb chewed his lip.

Thad claimed that Ham was not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and it was true. But this time Ham was right. Ten days ago, Thaddeus Stone had been dead, his stomach taut from internal injury, his eyes blank—no breath, no life in him. Then Twin Nightshade, a brand-new Christian, had started to pray.

Apollo laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, man. Did you actually see the midget come back from death?"

"No," Ham admitted. "I was outside the tent. But—"

"Of course you didn't see it," Apollo said. "No one but freaks saw it, or thought they did. Their defects have made them weak-minded."

"I've been saying the same thing!" Richard laughed. "No one would listen to me!"

The cowboy was staring at Tanni's flat face. Thad slammed his shovel viciously into the coal.

"Twin saw it," Tanni said, ignoring the cowboy's stare.

“Yes,” Apollo said. “Well. Mr. Nightshade is . . . an unusual person, isn’t he?”

“I saw it,” Caleb said. “I was there.”

Apollo studied Caleb for a moment. “And you appear normal enough. On the outside.”

“If he were normal,” Richard’s lip curled, “why would he want to spend his time with freaks?”

“Good point,” Apollo said. “He could testify at a tent meeting, I suppose. I hear they like repentant sinners. If he *is* repentant, that is. I’ve heard that before the old clown Guillaume* adopted him, he was a liar and a thief.”

“I heard that too,” Richard said.

“Is that true?” Ham was looking more confused than usual. “I thought you looked like a nice feller.” The cowboy seemed to be enjoying the show.

“It *was* true,” Caleb admitted. “But it’s not anymore.”

Richard snorted.

“How long have you been with the circus?” Apollo asked. “Three whole months? Is that really long enough for a cat to change his spots? I wonder. I think you and your ugly, little, flat-faced—”

Thad stepped between Tanni and Apollo, the coal shovel in his hands. “Let the kids alone, Maximus.” Thad was sixteen years old, even though he stood only three foot five. If the heavens had opened and God himself had asked, “Caleb, who do you want to be your brother?” Caleb would have chosen Thaddeus Stone because inside, Thad was nine feet tall and made of pure courage.

*(pronounced GHEE-ome)

“Leave them alone?” Apollo asked. “Now why should I do that?”

“Perhaps because you’d been with Daggett and Bartlebee’s only three days before the wreck,” Thad said. “You have not earned the right to criticize, condemn . . . or be trusted. Or perhaps because if you hurt them in any way, I will personally deal with you.”

“I get it.” The cowboy had been looking from Thad to Apollo. “The miracle thing is gonna be part of the freak show, right? The midget who came back from the dead?”

“Of course it is part of the freak show,” Apollo said. “If God was going to do a miracle, you think he’d pick people like them to do it for? Freaks and idiots?” Apollo practically spat the words. “Churches, grand cathedrals, temples . . . those are the places for miracles. Not some gathering of defective people in a tent.”

“I guess that’s right,” the cowboy agreed.

Ham had been shaking his big head as if a fly-sized idea was buzzing around in his skull. “Wait,” he said. “Wait. Was you dead? I just want to know that one thing.”

“Yes, Thad,” Apollo said. “As my large friend asks, ‘Was you dead?’ Everyone is talking about it, but no one seems to have heard it from you.”

“Tell him, Thad.” Tanni flipped her hair. “The truth!”

“I will answer your question honestly, Apollo, if you will answer mine.” Thad glanced at Tanni. “You can’t argue with that, Tanni. Jesus did this very thing in Luke”—he looked back at Apollo—“when dealing with dishonest men. Where were you, Apollo, immediately after the wreck? Where were

you when Guillaume Pascal, his arm shattered, was holding Twin's head out of the water so he wouldn't drown? Broken, hurting people were crying out for help. You weren't even scratched, but you didn't help anybody. Where were you?"

Apollo's face flushed. "I was hunting the lions."

"I've heard that when you realized your lions were loose, you climbed a telegraph pole and clung for dear life, jabbering like a frightened monkey."

Now Ham and the cowboy were studying Apollo. Apollo's flush grew darker, and he shot Caleb a look of pure malice. Caleb winced. He was the only one who had seen Apollo up that pole, and the lion tamer knew it.

"You have taken the word of a liar," Apollo said. "Fortunately, no one else will listen to a freak or a liar. They will believe *me*."

"Interesting," Thad said.

"What?" Richard looked from Thad to Apollo.

"He didn't say 'They will believe the truth.' Only, 'They will believe *me*.'"

"If you was dead"—Ham was still working on the thought—"how did it feel?"

"My life flashed before my eyes," Thad said.

Ham nodded, happy to have an answer at last.

"How'd it look goin' by?" the cowboy asked. He clearly didn't believe a word of it.

"Short," Thad answered.

Ham blinked. Then his lips twitched, and he broke into a smile. "Short! I get it!" He roared and slapped the cowboy's back so hard, he staggered. "He's a funny little guy!"

“Yes,” Thad said, “that’s the way I make my living. Being a funny little guy. You were looking for us for some reason?”

“Not for you freaks,” Richard said. “My father wants the beast boy.”

“Mr. Bartlebee wants *me*?” Caleb frowned. Caleb’s new papa, Guillaume, owned two elephants, a goat, and a dog that performed in the circus, and Caleb helped take care of them, as well as two camels that belonged to Thad.

“No one wants *you*,” Richard said, “but that crazy old man and your freak friends. We need the goat.”

“What do you need Nadine for?” Tanni asked.

Caleb had a crawling feeling in his gut. Whatever Apollo and Richard wanted Nadine for, it wouldn’t be good. Nadine wasn’t a very nice goat, even before she lost her best friend Thunder, the ancient pony, in the wreck. Guillaume said every creature had to grieve in its own way. Nadine’s way was butting anyone who came near.

“My father has come up with a plan to catch the lions.” Richard emphasized the words *my father* as if Caleb needed reminding that Mr. Bartlebee owned half the circus.

“What does it have to do with Nadine?”

“We need bait for the lions, of course,” Apollo said. “Goat is their favorite meal.”

“I don’t even need to ask Papa,” Caleb said. “I can tell you his answer will be no.”

“Guillaume is not going to let Nadine be dished up as lunch for your lions,” Tanni added.

“Maybe he won’t have a choice.” Richard’s eyes narrowed. “My father is Guillaume’s boss.”

“There’s always a choice, Ricky,” Thad said. “Why didn’t you ask Guillaume yourself?”

“Because he knows what Guillaume will say!” Tanni’s eyes flashed. She couldn’t stand anyone being cruel to an animal, even to a mean goat like Nadine. “And Richard doesn’t want to carry bad news back to his father. This way, Guillaume will have to show up to say no himself.”

“We’ll see,” Apollo spoke to Caleb, as if Tanni did not exist. “My lions bring in more money than any three acts put together.”

“You mean the lions that are out there somewhere on the Texas prairie?” Thad leaned on his shovel. “I don’t think they’re making much money.”

“We are going to rectify that!” Apollo snapped. “Go get Guillaume . . . and tell him to bring the goat.”