



MICHAEL R EMMERT

GIFTED HEART

WHEN TROUBLE ALWAYS FOLLOWS

Dedication:

My wife

Lottie

My Daughter

Cheryl

My Granddaughters

Anna

Grace

Rebekah

Caitlyn

Bethany

Rachel

Disclaimer

Gifted Heart is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. However, the events of World War II, the Japanese invasion of China, and the annihilation of civilians in Nanking (Nanjing) were very real. After the Communist takeover, China closed its doors to Western travel, trade, and government contact; which is sometimes called the Bamboo Curtain. President Nixon normalized relations with China in 1972 and the flow of people and goods increased slowly.

China outlawed slavery in the early Twentieth Century. But it's known that vestiges of the practice continued in remote regions of the country and I included this impression within the story. This author conducted a great deal of research into the wide variety of customs and practices of the many Chinese cultures during the book's time period (1947 – 1973), and hopefully have represented them in an honest and accurate fashion.

During the story's time period the bitter animosity a few folks in the US displayed toward people of Asian ancestry is quite authentic. To my knowledge, any events in this story that take place in Dallas, Texas never happened. For the purpose of this novel, I included part of California's ban on interracial marriage. I've adjusted the story and that law's details to coincide with the state's Supreme Court invalidation of it in 1948.

The views and opinions expressed in this novel are those of the characters only and should not necessarily reflect or represent the views held by the author.

Book Synopsis

In 1947, Ray Petriani flees Texas in the middle of the night with a wife and young family. Desperate for work, he takes a job in California and is sent to inland China on a business venture. A gift exchange with the local potentate provides him with two things he doesn't want, things he cannot reject, and things he is forced to protect. Those gifts change his life.

Through his research of the first item, a gilded antique music box said to have belonged to a Chinese Emperor, only uncovers additional shrouded historical doubts which raise further problems as to its real intent. Ray refuses to give up his investigation and believes the meaning of its significance lies hidden in the way it was presented.

But it's the possession of the second gift, a pretty female slave, which rocks his world and generates friction with his wife that reaches atomic proportions, and plants a minefield of impossible complications. Town's people, officials, family, and associates, all full of righteous-hatred toward Orientals due to the recent war, seek to purge the area of this Asian beauty who clearly doesn't belong, but who is forbidden from returning to her homeland.

Can Ray, his family, and this newly freed slave navigate the corridors of bitter animosity from the people of their two countries, attempts on their lives from both sides of the Pacific, and bungling government bureaucracy, to uncover the deep Chinese secrets that have come to entwine their lives?

Chapter 1

Apartment Kitchen, Sacramento, California
Tuesday, September 16, 1947

Lynn plopped into a chair across from me and slapped the kitchen table. “Confound it, Ray, get a job. We can’t live like paupers.”

Had my wife gotten out of bed on the wrong side?

The red clock above the window reached the half-hour.

She flexed her hand and glared. “And get one today!”

I rotated the newspaper and pointed to yesterday’s want ads. “Come on dear. There hasn’t been steady work for the past two months, only an occasional day job. I can’t dig trenches with my bum knee and haven’t the foggiest idea how to safely cut down a tree.” My pencil scratches encircling the newspaper ads resembled a half-finished crossword puzzle.

Lynn grumbled, “We’re flat broke and you mope like a cur with a tail between her legs.”

She was definitely in a bad mood. “Dear, I don’t sulk and yesterday I called on five businesses. Nobody ...” I tapped the paper, “is hiring.”

My wife snatched the empty Skippy peanut butter jar from the counter and swiped a finger inside the rim. The oily scent flooded through the room. “The boys asked if there’s something else to eat besides sandwiches ...” She pointed at the bowl of last night’s stale kernels. “... or popcorn.” Her brown eyes squinted. “Find a job Ray or I’ll take the boys back to Texas.” She banged the jar down. The spoon beside my cereal bowl wobbled.

I cringed. Dark circles protruded under her eyes, she hadn’t been sleeping well. She always made me the fall guy for our problems. “Lynn, I’ve been walking the streets every day, knocking on doors, and answering ads for any kind of work. Nothing’s available. You know that already.”

Her face grew red and her neck veins turned purple against her pale skin. “You better try harder or I swear, I’ll hitchhike back. The police will love it if I talk about what happened. They’ll blame you for—”

“Stop it!” My hands balled under the table. “We agreed not to discuss what they did!”

Our fathers had colluded in their illegal activities. The local newspapers were filled with allegations of them stealing from clients. The stories dominated the headlines. No one would have discovered anything except for my unexpected intrusion into the scheme. If Lynn returned home, the authorities would implicate me by association.

Her eyes hardened into slits. “Watch me. Our situation is that bad.” She tapped Dad’s diary perched on the table beside me. “If you hate him so much, why do you read his journal? He’s dead.”

“Because some of his advice is solid, like this line: *Never seek a job through newspaper adverts*. But I’m forced to do it anyway.”

“I mean it, Ray. You better find a job.” She tucked a strand of blond hair behind her ear as her lips thinned.

Edward R. Murrow’s voice crackled from a radio in the apartment next door.

“I’m looking for work. You know that.”

“Maybe you should accept the janitorial job at the warehouse,” she said, fiddling with her wedding ring.

“No. You said you didn’t want me cleaning toilets after midnight. You and the boys wouldn’t see me with those work hours.”

She leaned forward and squinted. “You have to swallow your pride, Raymond. We need money, and we need it *now*.” Her final word exploded like a gun blast.

Her mood was more unsettled than I thought. She never called me by my first name.

Our need for money was a correct assessment. She couldn’t handle the stress of being poor, at least not very well. In Dallas, money was never a problem. Since moving to California, the past two months had distorted me into a freeloader with a family. We were paupers possessing sixteen dollars and thirty-five cents, all jingling in my pocket. The rent was due in a week, our food would be gone before then, and the car’s tank was empty. What were my choices?

I said, “I’ll fetch today’s paper. Let’s pray to the Lord he’ll open up something.”

“Yeah, good,” she sneered. “Go buy one. But that god of yours has absolutely nothing to do with getting a job. He’s nothing more than a fairytale in the wind.”

My Christian faith was a point of contention between us. Would she ever understand?

“I’m going.” I shrugged into my denim jacket with the tattered collar and ignored her glares boring into me. She could stare holes through a stone wall.

I passed our boys in the other room. Four-year-old Dennis remained focused on his favorite picture book, and little Joel, two years younger, smiled up at me.

Outside, the nippy air bit my ears as I trudged toward downtown Sacramento. A gray 1941 Dodge whizzed past, towing a cloud of leaves and spinning them in a whirlwind. As always, the tawny mutt growled from behind the picket fence in front of a neighbor’s green clapboard house.

The past two months had been difficult. Because our fathers were deeply involved in the firm's shady dealings, we decided to leave Texas. My wife couldn't stomach the blackened family name.

I sauntered along a row of gray, tacky-tacky prefab houses. Two women chatted while hanging laundry on ropes threaded between their two buildings. Further down the street, the new soda fountain at the Rexall Drugstore looked busy. If we had the money, I'd take the kids for an ice cream cone, get Lynn a cherry Coke, and myself a root beer float.

A block later, at a corner on Sixth Street, a scruffy, unshaven street vendor with down-at-the-heel shoes pocketed my coin in exchange for the most recent edition of *The Chronicle*.

I rubbed my chin whiskers. How long before my appearance equaled his? If I didn't find a job, my car would be our rusty residence under the bridge. I lifted my eyes to the sky. *Lord, we need help and we need it now.*

The newspaper's headlines screamed about people in the film industry being subpoenaed before the HUAC for anti-American activities. The whole nation was in an uproar, and Congress was on an active quest for Communist sympathizers.

After a quick turn to the last two pages in the newspaper, I browsed the want ads. My finger froze mid-page on two lines of block type.

WILSON INDUSTRIES. IMMEDIATE SALES OPENING.
CALL FOR AN INTERVIEW. PH CH3-8331

My heart leaped at the possibility, no matter how remote. *Help me, God.*