

The Gifted Ones

The Dream

P.G. Shriver

The Gifted Ones: The Dream by P.G. Shriver
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This series is dedicated to those who were
influential in aiding me in the development of ideas,
those who I will love and miss until...

***For
Anna Velin,
Cassandra Wachsman
and Jennelle Boen.***

Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1

"Get away from me! How many times I gotta tell ya'? Quit followin' me! Go home!" he spun around and pointed up the path. "What is wrong with you? Ya' stupid or what? You can't go with me! Just go back where you came from!" The anger he'd felt for weeks released in a rush of spittle filled words.

For the third time since this problem arose, he jabbed his finger in the direction from which he had just come, speaking as if to an unruly puppy. He could tell, even before their eyes briefly met, that the girl didn't have it all together upstairs. He didn't know what frustrated him more, that she wouldn't (or couldn't) talk or that she didn't seem to understand what he was telling her. In spite of his annoyance, deep inside, guilt welled from the harsh words he had just spoken. He hadn't been raised to be rude to others, and never had he bullied anyone.

She created a dilemma, though. *"It's a rock and hard place,"* his grandpa's voice filled his mind. *"Figure it out, son."*

Maybe he could call the cops anonymously. Hope gleaned while he patted his empty pockets, yet he knew full well he had used all his money to fuel that monster, gas-guzzling boat his grandpa called a car. Inside his worn pockets, his fingers collected flat blue lint.

He should never have run away in the first place. He should have stayed and fought it out, found a way to protect what was rightfully his. What could he have done, though? After all, he was just a kid, a kid on a farm he loved and now missed.

"Nathan! Nathan!" the teen rolled to his stomach and pulled the covers over his head to smother the sound.

"Not yet, Mom! I'm so tired. I worked hard with Grandpa yesterday."

"No, Nathan, I'm not your mother. Wake up, Nathan. You have to wake up."

Nathan squeezed the blankets in his fist and mashed them with his knuckles against the pillow. "No," he may have replied. A slight, sleepy smile turned the corners of his lips as a cute girl with long, brown hair filled his dreams. Her hair gently blew back from her face in a delicate breeze, just like the supermodels he'd seen briefly on TV. The girl's soulful eyes reached deep into his heart. He had the urge to hug her, comfort her, make her smile.

She looked so familiar, yet not.

Nathan's brows drew down in concern.

Why wasn't she smiling? She should smile.

The wind spun her hair about her face; stronger and warmer it grew, spiraling the long tendrils upward.

Her mouth opened, "Get up, Nathan! You have to leave now! You're in danger. Get up! Get your Grandpa and go!"

Grandpa? What about Grandma?

Her urgency confused him, and he rolled to the other side keeping his covering close.

Why should he leave Grandma?

"Now, Nathan!" she yelled, her eyes turning angry. Then the fire erupted, the hot wind growing.

"No--no--no," Nathan mumbled in his sleep, tossing to the other side, "Not him. Not this again."

The heat rose around him and Nathan began to sweat. He threw off the covers seeking cool air.

A loud noise downstairs jolted him from the damp sheets and jarred his sleeping body upright.

He listened.

Through his sub-conscious state, semi awake now, she tugged at his flight sense. "Now, Nathan! Leave, now!"

After what happened, that girl in that stupid dream he'd had the night he left turned out to be right; it had become a matter of life and death and he had chosen life.

Yet, his selfish desire to sleep brought him more guilt as he thought of his grandparents.

He shook it off. There wasn't anything he could have done. It had been too late. He didn't even have time to try before—

He shook his head; his too long, greasy, dark hair swung side to side about his ears, and he frowned angrily at the poor girl who had been following him. He'd tried getting through to her with motions instead of words, but she continued to stare blankly someplace beyond him.

For the first time since their encounter, he took a long look at her, at the stringy, unkempt golden hair, half still in a ponytail from the night before, half poking loose, looping wildly out of its tie. Her filthy, thorn-torn pajamas covered a thin frame. House shoes, two sizes too big, donned her pale feet, and her thin hands dangled at her sides, fair fingers smeared in a deep red—blood?

Blood! The boy scanned her again, inching closer; her blank expression static while he searched for the source from which the smears had come, hoping to find a bleeding wound, but his instincts told him otherwise. A fleeting hope that the blood came from an animal dispersed with his intuition. It was never something that simple for him.

He knew.

A long, sighing circle around the girl only brought a curse to his lips, "Dang it!" Now he truly had a dilemma: a not-right-in-the-head girl with blood on her hands who wouldn't let him be on his way.

In his rock star dreams, he'd always found girls fawning over him and following him, but not like this.

What was he going to do?

How was he supposed to handle this situation?

How could he make her understand that he couldn't help her right now, and that she couldn't go with him? More importantly, how could he quell the desire to find out what had happened to her?

It was all about the timing, and no matter how much he wanted to help her, he didn't have the time.

"Rock and a hard place, boy," the gruff old voice echoed through his thoughts.

No, she would slow him down and he had to return to the farm, finish what they started, and avenge his grandparents.

Contemplating, he turned and paced away from her again.

Strands of hair slapped his cheekbones with each refusal. His clenched fists bounced in front of him with each, "No!"

Taking her back to her house wasn't an option.

It would take too long.

He didn't know where she lived, and she couldn't tell him.

Thoughts of the blood on her hands momentarily curtailed his steps.

He stumbled over a stump, catching his balance before he injured himself.

The blood...

A mystery it was, but he couldn't get involved in her problems. Every time he'd involved himself, caught himself up in a mystery, or simply tried to help someone in the past, it turned out bad for him.

"Okay, okay..." he turned, taking a few steps toward her. "Listen. I need to go home, back to my grandf ...? You have to stop following me and go home. Do you understand me? You have to go home. Somebody else will find you," his voice softened with empathy as he moved closer to her; her head tilted sideways. He gazed into the absent stare of her cerulean eyes. "Home. Go home. Do you understand?"

She issued no response or recognition of his request, no motion to his compassion.

Standing inches from her, well within her personal space, he was filled with desperation for an answer or some kind of acknowledgment.

He waved a hand before her vacant stare. He smiled, "Hello? Anybody in there?"

Finally, she turned away shuffling her slipper clad feet across the autumn dried grasses and leaves.

"Good. Thank you God!" he spoke the words sarcastically spinning on his heels in the opposite direction. He needed to get out of this town and its weird happenings, back home to Paradise. Though content with the recent outcome, a vengeful scowl creased his forehead at the thought of his last night at the farm, of the killers.

The crunch of dead leaves behind him halted his steps again.

How long did he have to play this ridiculous game until she understood?

His shoulders drooped in defeat as he turned, trying to hide his annoyance. She was following him again. His angry eyes flashed.

"Look, I thought we had this cleared up! You were going home! You can't go with me!" his voice held firm as he reduced the distance between them to less than two feet.

He wanted to grip her shoulders and shake her, make her understand. Before he could act on his urge, she turned away, moving down the same path where they had connected.

"Good, good. Let's try this again. You go on home and I'll go home, t..." how could he refer to it as home, now? His grandparents were gone. He had to stop referring to them. He didn't know what he would find when he returned to the farm, but a desperate need to return fueled his ire.

He waited warily, watching her walk away until she was twenty paces from him, then he spun, ran, but the dragging noise of her feet behind him followed, *shoocrunch... shoocrunch... shoocrunch*.

"No!" he screamed in a whirl of rage.

Run, he told himself, but his body wouldn't respond. He dropped his gaze to his worn shoes. She couldn't fend for herself. She'd get lost in this place and die, or worse, some out-of-town crazy, some perv would find her wandering the town in her torn pajamas.

"Please, keep going, please! You can't go with me!" On the verge of indecisive tears, he charged toward her, again, and attempted to scare her away by waving his arms like a lunatic. "Leave me alone!"

She turned calmly and walked away, not in the least frightened by his torrent of emotion. When he didn't follow this time, however, she stopped and turned back toward him, head never straying from its slightly cocked angle, the forever blank stare taking her thoughts somewhere in the distance behind him, the thin shoulders sagging the message, "Well, come on then."

He thought he saw a championed flicker buried deep in the calm sea of her gaze, the tiniest of taunting motion in her narrow hand.

His weariness played tricks on his vision, that was all.

No, that wasn't all.

In defeat, he finally caved.

She wanted him to follow her, most likely to her house, where the source of all that blood on her hands laid waiting for an answer. Silently without much conviction, he prayed it was not human blood.

This disaster would get him in more trouble with the law, like all of the other incidents since his parents died; the turned-over headstones, the vandalized school, the burglarized cars, all events he tried to prevent in his friend's life. He hadn't participated in any of them, hadn't even touched a can or slipped through a door; he just wanted to help the only person he considered a friend, but it hadn't worked out like he planned.

His grandpa told him to let it go. "*Some people can't be fixed, son,*" he'd warned. He didn't understand, though.

Nobody understood.

His parents were the only ones who knew anything about him, about his lack of trust because of his abilities, about his knack for turning people in the right direction. Now he was the only one who knew... well, except the girl in his dream.

He didn't have time to deal with this problem before him, but he would anyway; his conscience wouldn't allow him to leave this girl to herself. The blood on her hands, the way she waited for him to follow, the sense that she understood more than he gave her credit for, all left him no choice but to help her. It was the right thing to do. Regardless of the trouble it would bring him, he always did the right thing.

She needed help.

He would help.

He let her lead him into more trouble.

From behind, he watched her closely as she stayed some distance in front of him, walking into the leafless, near winter brush without a thought for pushing it aside and protecting herself from cuts or scrapes. No wonder her clothes were so torn.

Before long, a small, white, wood frame house appeared at the end of a narrow driveway perpendicular to the lonely road they crossed. The girl moved straight into the front door, so he gulped air assuming this was it.

She paused at the door, holding it open for him to enter, a statue, staring at the doorjamb opposite her.

Trapped—that's how he felt. He knew for certain now that somebody in that house was hurt, but he didn't know how badly, didn't know what he could do to help them, or even if he could. After the incident with his friend, he no longer believed in himself.

What if he couldn't help the person waiting in there? What if this was a trap?

Reluctantly, he stepped onto the porch and reached for the screen door. As his hand touched the cool metal, the girl pulled back her bloody hand—leaving no smears behind—and shuffled through the house.

Cautious sable eyes followed her into the gloom, all curtains and blinds closed tightly, all present rooms lightless. Other than the gaping hole of light left behind by the door through which they had entered, there wasn't a beam of sunlight filtering through the house.

"Jake, what're you doin'? Get out of there! Come on!"

"Oh, don't be such a baby. The door's open. I just want to look around, maybe see if the science lab is open, too."

"The door wasn't open, Jake. Come on; let's go to my house, hang out until my parents get home. It's really dark in there, and creepy."

"Yeah, schools are creepy at night," his voice grew fainter as he moved farther into the darkened halls. "Come on, Nate! Hey, the science lab is open! Come on."

The loud crash of breaking glass drew him through the door, though he knew it was too late. He had to stop Jake from doing anything else foolish. He'd already been to Circle Court twice. This time he'd go to Juvenile Hall.

"Jake! What are you doing? You idiot! Let's get out of here before the cops get here!" Nate surveyed the room of broken glass beakers, smashed computer monitors, toppled computers.

"Teach him to fail me," Jake mumbled as he bent, gripped the bottom of the teacher's desk, and straightened his legs, forcing the desk on its face.

"Man, Jake, you're already in enough trouble! Let's go!" Nate turned from the room and into the chest of a security guard just before he switched his flashlight on.

"Run, Nate!" Jake said as he flipped the latch on the nearest window, raised it up, and slipped through it.

"Too late," the security guard grimaced down into Nate's face.

Chapter 2

Nathan cautiously flipped the switch on the wall, illuminating the living room, expecting to see a police officer standing before him. When his memory didn't hold true, he followed the girl into the house, pushing the door closed behind him. In the kitchen, his right hand located another switch and tipped it upward, lighting the scene before him.

It was exactly what he thought it would be.

Not a dog, cat or pet of any kind.

There, in the middle of the floor, laid an older woman, gray hair matted with congealed blood, face pale gray with death. He knew that look. His grandmother looked that way when he last saw her the night he left, the night she was k...

He turned away fiercely shaking the thought of his grandparents from his mind.

After surveying the room, he deduced that the old woman had fallen off the tipped over chair placed in front of one cabinet, probably trying to reach something. The girl knelt next to the woman, pushing on her as if to wake her up. Then she stood and took a place at the kitchen table, an empty bowl set before her.

She sipped her slightly warm milk through the straw, waiting for her meal, dried blood flaking and sprinkling the table, the bowl, the spoon beneath her reaching hand.

Nathan could see the handprints the girl had left earlier on the floor in the pool of blood. When he thought about how many times she must have tried to wake up the woman, the rawness of his own haunting visions cut through him like the bitterest of Antarctic winds, chilling the heat of angry emotions roaring through him.

The pot on the stove cracked and smoked, filling the room with a burnt soup aroma, and the young man stepped around the old woman, clunked the hot pan against the back of the range, turned off the red burner, and knelt down on a clear patch of floor next to her. He felt for a pulse as he had learned when his grandmother was sick.

Once he had thought his grandmother dead, instead of sleeping heavily, and he felt around at her throat until the pumping blood pushed into his fingertips.

He knew instantly, though, that he would find no pulse on this throat at his fingertips. She was already cool to the touch, her eyes taking on the appearance of dark, glazed, donut holes.

With two fingers he pressed against the eyelids to close the sightless eyes, stood, and cast a sympathetic look at the girl who peered over the table into empty space.

He didn't know this girl, but now they had a common bond.

He knew what he had to do.

It was the same he would have done for his own grandparents, had he had time before fleeing the scene.

Stepping carefully around the bloodstained parts of the floor, through the kitchen, and to the right of the living room, he entered a hallway ending in a bathroom.

In the bathroom, he located a linen cabinet, where he pulled a flowery sheet from the back and a neatly folded, pine-green, worn washcloth from the front. After wetting the washcloth in the low sink, he returned with the sheet, his intention to cover the woman's body.

His eyes stung with stilled tears when he found the girl kneeling beside the woman again, pushing gently on the cold shoulder as if to wake her. He would have done the same.

Obviously, the girl wasn't stupid as he had so thoughtlessly assumed earlier.

And though he felt stupid at that moment, he wasn't, either.

By the time, she returned to her place at the table, he had recognized her state of denial and hunger. The sheet billowed as he fanned the corners above the woman, then it settled like a falling feather atop the still body. He tugged the edge over her face, considering for a moment the possibility of dragging her into the living room, but he knew he shouldn't disturb the scene further, just in case.

He was going to have to call the police. There was no other choice. They would know what to do with the girl—the old woman.

Of course, he knew the police would not have reason to investigate her death. Even to him, a fourteen-year-old, it appeared an accident. For a moment, the boy wondered what would happen to this girl, whether she had any other family to care for her, or if she was like him. If there were no other family, when the cops came to pick up the woman, they would take the girl to a h...

He shook the thought away. What if it were him? What if he'd been picked up after the murder of his grandparents?

Anger flowed freely through his limbs as he glanced around the kitchen and thought about the future of this girl. The authorities no longer cared about poor people. One look around this falling-down home—the tattered clothing both inhabitants wore—would be enough for them to close the case just on the basis that the two of them weren't worth the effort of investigation or a relative search.

He stepped around the sheet, stood before the girl and gently lifted her hands from her lap, but she pulled them away from his grasp. It took three attempts before she quit flapping her hands about and allowed him to wipe at them with the washcloth while she remained calmed to her placid, distant stare, deep in her own mind, thoughts and grief.

Dried blood flaked onto her striped pajama pants and smeared the delicate hands with each damp swipe. He wished he could lead her to the sink, but she wouldn't budge from her seat no matter how he coaxed her.

After the third warm rinse in the sink, he watched the diluted blood swirl with running water into the slow drain. The girl's hands were their normal beige color.

Wringing the cloth out once more, he wiped away the flakes on the table.

The wet, balled cloth flew across the kitchen and into the sink before he began his search for another can of soup, finding one in the cabinet above and to the right of the stove; he found another pot in the cabinet next to the sink, the can opener on the counter. He heated the chicken noodle soup on the burner he extinguished earlier until steam rolled from the opening and filled his stomach with pangs. Then he poured the hot soup into the girl's bowl.

Next, he opened the saltines on the table and placed them before her. His hunger twisted into nausea as he recalled having administered the duties of death, so he pulled a cracker free and nibbled it to calm his stomach. He found little relief, as he watched the girl eat and considered how best to handle her situation.

"You can't be bringin' home strays all the time, boy," his grandpa's words quenched the urge to take her along, save her from whatever horrible life awaited her outside these walls.

A brief memory tempted him as he thought of the two stray dogs he'd brought home. His grandfather had relented to keeping them, but cut off further adoptions.

On the table to his right were two opened letters, lying beside their envelopes. The woman must have been reading them before the girl entered the kitchen for something to eat. He eyed the length of the body, the height of the fallen chair, and the soup cabinet.

She hadn't needed a chair to get a can of soup.

So, why would she get up on a chair?

While the girl slurped soup from her spoon, his eyes skimmed the top row of cabinets. Many platters and items that were too large to fit inside the cabinets sat atop, hanging past them in the four-inch space below the ceiling.

In an empty space between two stacks of platters, in direct line with the chair, was a book of some sort, the corner barely poking over the edge. He tipped the chair upright and stepped up on the seat.

Reaching upward, his fingers grasped the book and slid it from its hiding place. That was what the woman had been trying to reach when the chair tottered backward, spilling her to the floor, her head bouncing off the sharp corner of the heavy table that he now scanned for blood and hair.

There wasn't any.

Stepping down from the chair, he searched the counter edges.

Nothing.

"What happened to this woman?" his low words enticed his puzzle-solving mind, bringing a determined frown to his features.

The girl's spoon plunked into her bowl and movement from the corner of his eye startled him, but when he looked her way, she had picked up the spoon and resumed the task of eating.

Was she about to answer his question?

Did she know what happened?

If so, then that could be bad for her, especially, if like him, she had seen the killer.

Returning to his seat across from the girl, he turned the leather book over in his deeply tanned hands.

It was larger than a sheet of notebook paper.

It was old, with a button clasp on the front cover, the kind that the owner wound string around to tie the front and back together, like the diaries he had seen neighborhood girls get for their birthdays when he was younger, except it revealed no pages on any edge all the way around.

He wondered whether he should open it; a sense of intrusion stopped his fingers from unwinding the string, but then, the girl couldn't answer his questions, and he certainly wouldn't get answers from the old lady.

Perhaps there were no answers in this book, either.

His mind paused with indecisiveness; his finger twirled the slack string around its tip; his eyes turned to the letters on the table. Twice he read a phrase at the bottom of one of the letters before the words chipped away at his thoughts and comprehension enlightened. He never was much for reading.

But he read the words again:

I told you, if you don't leave me alone and stop pressing the issue, I'm gonna drive over there and take care of the problem. Then you won't have to worry about takin' care of that idiot kid.

Idiot kid? He frowned at the girl he had earlier called stupid.

Ashamed, he skimmed the words again.

Picking up the letter, he began reading at the top.

I never did claim that stupid child. She's your daughter's child, not mine! And since your daughter's dead, that makes her yours. And you can stop using that officer of the law crap on me, cuz it ain't gonna make me feel guilty. I don't care about her or you or your dead daughter.

Being a cop just makes it easier for me to take care of the problem unnoticed if you understand what I mean.

I ain't sendin' you any money, either. I never will, so quit askin'. That's it! She's not my kid! None of my kids would be stupid like that!

Nathan closed his eyes to dam the hurt, then shook his head and continued to search for answers.

His own father had been so good to him.

His own father would have stood up for this girl.

He scanned the letter, again, turned it over in his hand, and laid it on the table in disgust. Running his fingers through his hair, frustration flared with the realization that there wasn't a name at the end of the letter, and nowhere in the letter did it mention the girl's name. If he could find her name, speak her name to her, maybe she would respond.

He opened the book; inside were letters just like the two on the table, filled with hateful words about the girl and her mother, written by the same man who called himself a cop.

Her mother was dead.

He looked down at the sheet covering her grandmother and squeezed his eyes shut to block the image of his own grandparents, the thought of his parents.

The boy's option to call 9-1-1 deleted itself from his mental list, and his mind raced with other possibilities for her.

Sadness overcame him as he watched the girl slurp her soup and nibble crackers.

She had no one, just like him. They were alone in the world.

What now?

When the girl finished eating, she pushed away from the table, her chair scraping the cracking linoleum below.

She carefully stepped around the sheet and walked down the hall. He followed her curiously, stopping outside a bedroom door, a peeping-tom sense causing him to avert his eyes.

The girl removed clothes from a drawer, laid them over her arm, and then slid past him and into the bathroom at the end of the hallway, pushing the door closed behind her.

Moments later, he heard the shower running and returned to the living room, questioning her predicament.

Perhaps old photos would provide some answers, if he could find some. He remembered his mother writing the names of the people in pictures on the back. Maybe he could find her name that way—although, he didn't know if it would actually do any good to have it. It probably wouldn't even help with her understanding him or communicating with him, but he searched anyway, stalling the inevitable decision.

Reviews

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