

# *Lottie's Gift*

JANE M. TUCKER



ST JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

LOTTIE'S GIFT

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For more information on Jane M. Tucker, please visit — [JaneMTucker.com](http://JaneMTucker.com)

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To Jon, who said, “Write.”



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Last, and best, I give glory to *God* for the ability to write, and for a story to tell.

# Prologue

April 1984

The usher tapped her shoulder. "Message for you, Miss Braun."

Lottie turned from the crowd of backstage admirers and plucked the envelope out of his hand. "Thank you."

She slipped her finger beneath the flap.

*Dear Lottie,*

*You played well tonight. I always did like Chopin. I'll be at Lombardi's until midnight. I hope you'll join me.*

*Helen*

Every five years, the same note. Every five years she fought this wave of fear and longing.

"No answer."

The usher melted into the crowd.

Lottie shoved the note into her pocket. She had a long, sleepless night ahead of her. And her sister would wait at Lombardi's in vain.

She left the concert hall an hour later, followed by an eager young violinist. "You're sure you won't come?" he said. "We're only inviting a few friends. Very intimate."

She smiled. No doubt he'd been assigned to look after her. "I'm going back to my hotel. I have an early flight tomorrow."

His face fell. "Well, in that case, let me call you a cab."

She inclined her head. "Thank you." The attention felt good tonight,

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though she seldom had trouble hailing a taxi outside Carnegie Hall. Her lofty height and crown of snow-white hair were easy to spot.

A yellow cab slid to a stop at the curb, and the young musician opened the door. "Have a good evening, Miss Braun." He waited politely as Lottie stepped in. Then, closing the door, he ran to catch up with his friends.

"The Plaza Hotel, please." Lottie sat back and breathed a sigh of relief. That young man would have suffered a shock if she'd accepted his invitation. Instead of the fascinating celebrity he expected, he would find only a dried up spinster, longing for her bed.

Helen would be the better dinner guest.

She shook her head at the unwanted thought and leaned forward. "Turn here, driver. Don't go down the next block." Don't go past Lombardi's.

The cabbie looked at her in the rear-view mirror. "Whatever you say, lady."

She read the disbelief in his eyes and looked away. Why should she care what he thought? Everyone knew the great Lottie Braun was crazy. Her eccentric reputation formed a shield around her life. If she chose to stay in Europe for ten years, the classical world blamed her eccentricity. If she refused to live in New York, well, what could they expect? She'd always been odd.

"Here we are, ma'am." The cabbie looked at her expectantly.

"Thank you." She dropped several bills into his hand and walked away before he could make change.

The lobby stood empty at this time of night. Eleven o'clock was too late for families, and too early for the rest of the free world. She rode the elevator alone. Any other day, she'd have taken the stairs to the twelfth floor, but tonight she wanted to reach her room as fast as possible and lock her door against the outside world.

The concert had gone well, aside from one error. She closed her eyes and relived the missed trill in the second movement, a result of wrong fingering. Years of self-discipline kept her from showing any sign of trouble, but she felt chills of embarrassment. She'd missed the notes again in the repeat.

She sighed. Repeated errors were a new development, a product of



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her aging memory, she supposed. She'd have to find a way to prevent them, perhaps a new method of practice or memorizing. Her assistant might know of something that would help.

Maybe this was the beginning of the end of her public performances, a bleak thought. There was nothing so fulfilling as playing with an orchestra, the wave of music bearing her along on its crest, filling her heart and mind with emotion. It brought out feelings that she didn't allow at any other time. Grief. Joy. Loneliness.

The elevator door glided open. Lottie walked briskly down the hall, let herself into her room, and bolted the door. She pulled off her good pearl necklace and dropped it into its case. Slipping off her shoes, she padded to the sink to wash her hands and caught her reflection in the fluorescent light. Had Helen been shocked at her appearance? Her ivory skin sagged slightly now, and short, prematurely white hair replaced the blonde braids of her childhood. Her eyes were the same bright blue, but Helen wouldn't have seen them from the audience.

She turned from the mirror in disgust. Helen must have seen a picture of her in the last forty years. She couldn't have avoided every magazine article or album cover.

Lottie removed her long black concert dress and reached for the thick terry robe with its Plaza insignia. Tying the belt securely around her thin frame, she looked around in satisfaction. Now she was packed, ready for quick departure, and she didn't have to come back for a long time.

She smiled ruefully. New York always made her want to flee, so she only played here every few years. Her New York fans considered themselves lucky. She wouldn't play Los Angeles at all.

Lottie turned out the lights one by one, and opened the curtains. One of the benefits of staying at the Plaza was the view of Central Park. At this time of night it cut a restful swathe of darkness through the city's perpetual glow. She pressed her forehead to the cool glass to drink in its stillness.

She liked the park, but felt sorry for the children who went there to play. They spent their childhoods on concrete sidewalks, instead of roving over miles of open fields. They shared their playground with thousands of other people, never knowing the joy of a solitary day.

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Even the sky overhead was hemmed in by tall buildings. Not so in the country, where earth met heaven on an endless horizon.

Lottie shook herself impatiently. When had she become such a sentimental fool? Without leaving Iowa, she could not have become a concert pianist. She'd done the right thing when she left home.

But she hadn't known she could never go back.

# One

November 1936

*I*t's here! It's here!" Lottie flew through the house, her cousin Harvey at her heels.

They found Harvey's mama in the kitchen, kneading a batch of bread. "Calm down, children. You'll wake Mona from her nap." Aunt Cora wiped her hands on her apron.

"Come on, Aunt Cora," Lottie said. "The truck's here and the men are asking for you."

Lottie and Harvey each took a hand and tugged her to the front door, where two burly men waited on the porch. One of them said, "Are you the lady who ordered the piano?"

Aunt Cora's smile was wry. "I'm the one who's stuck with the piano. It amounts to the same thing." She hadn't known she was getting a piano until a few days before, when a telegram came at lunch time. Lottie had been there when she read it aloud to Uncle Otto.

CAN'T KEEP PIANO STOP SENDING IT TO YOU STOP PAPA

Lottie had never seen gentle Aunt Cora look so mad. "The nerve of that man," she'd said, "assuming I'll take his precious baby grand."

Uncle Otto patted her hand. "Look at it this way, Cora. At least your father's not coming with it."

Aunt Cora softened right up, like she always did when Uncle Otto talked to her in that loving way.

The man on the porch shifted his weight. "Are you taking the delivery or not, ma'am?"

"I am." Aunt Cora turned to lead them inside. "Follow me, and shut

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the door behind you. It's too cold to leave it open."

The second man cleared his throat. "Uh, ma'am? What about the old guy?"

Aunt Cora whipped around so fast Lottie had to skitter out of the way. "What old guy?"

Suddenly they heard singing coming from inside the truck. The cousins took off across the lawn with Aunt Cora right behind. "He wouldn't dare," she muttered as she reached the curb.

One of the moving men shot back the safety arm and opened the back of the truck. Out fell a round-bellied man in a brown plaid suit, tipping backwards off the truck and into the street. He held a cane in one hand and a square silver canteen in the other, and he was singing at the top of his lungs, "Oh, don't you remember Sweet Betsy from Pike, who crossed the wide prairie with her husband Ike?"

Harvey dissolved into fits of giggles, but Lottie was interested. This was the same song Pop sang on Sundays when he shaved for church. She nudged her younger cousin. "Be quiet."

The old man caught sight of Aunt Cora and stopped singing. Flinging his arms wide, he shouted, "What's the matter, Cora? Cat got your tongue? Come give your papa a kiss."

So he'd come with the piano after all. Wouldn't Uncle Otto be surprised?

Aunt Cora didn't look like she wanted to kiss anyone. Glancing at the crowd of neighbors gathering in the street, she said, "What is the meaning of this, Papa? Have all the trains from New York stopped running?"

The strange man grinned. "Trains to the frontier are unreliable, my love, so I hijacked a piano truck."

Aunt Cora primmed her mouth. "You missed the Iowa frontier by a good eighty years, and you know it. Stand up. I'll take you inside."

Aunt Cora's papa struggled to his feet and bowed to the neighbors. "She's a good daughter, folks. She's taking me in."

There was a little bit of laughter as Aunt Cora led the unsteady old man up the front walk, scolding all the way. "You've got a nerve, Papa, moving that piano in this cold weather. You might have damaged it."

At the door he called out, "Don't forget my suitcase, boys."

The moving men looked at each other with a what-now shrug. Lot-

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tie wondered what they'd do without Aunt Cora to give directions, but just then Uncle Otto walked up, puffing like he'd run all the way from Westmont National Bank. "Can I be of assistance?"

The men looked relieved. "Where do you want this?"

"Right this way." Uncle Otto led the men into the front room, with Lottie and Harvey right behind. He stopped short when he heard the racket coming from upstairs, but started moving again when he noticed the men were listening too. "Come along, boys," he said, and they did. Most people did as Uncle Otto told them.

The rest of the afternoon, Lottie sat on the staircase landing and watched through the glass doors of the front room as the men put together the big piano. She liked the way it looked, all brown and shiny, and wondered about those pedals at the bottom. Did they make it go, like the pedals in the Ford? She'd love to see that.

When the moving men finished up and left, Uncle Otto went back to the bank, saying, "You kids stay out of the front room until Mama gives you permission."

After a while, the strange old man grew quiet, and Aunt Cora started downstairs. Her legs stopped next to Lottie for a moment and she sighed. "Who could imagine such a beautiful instrument would bring so much unhappiness?"

"Can we try it, Mama?" Harvey asked.

Aunt Cora shrugged. "I don't see why not."

He charged into the front room, but Lottie followed more slowly. She didn't want to treat the piano like a toy. It was too beautiful.

Aunt Cora sat on the bench and settled Harvey on her lap. He pounded away at the keys with flat hands, mashing a bunch of them at once, which made his mama laugh.

Lottie covered her ears against the noise. Harvey was doing it all wrong. She knew because she'd watched Mrs. Swift play the Sunday school piano in the church basement, and she used different fingers at different times. True, that piano looked a lot different, with greenish wood and yellow keys, but she was pretty sure it worked the same way.

After a few minutes of Harvey's noise, they heard a bunch of thumps from overhead. The thumps were so loud that they shook the chande-

lier above the piano. Aunt Cora looked up at the ceiling and slid Harvey from her lap. "That's it, I'm afraid, Harvey. I need to check on your grandpapa." She left the room quickly, and Harvey ran after her.

Lottie could hardly take her eyes off the black and white piano keys. Humming softly, she slid onto the bench and tried one. "Oh —" She stopped. No, that wasn't right. She tried another. "Oh —"

She nodded, happy with her key. "Oh don't —" It didn't take as long to find the second note. That was good, because she needed to use it a bunch of times in a row. "Oh, don't you remember —" She hunted for the next note.

Pretty soon she had all the notes for the first two lines. She played them through several times, then set to work on the next two lines. When she figured them out, she thought a minute. Didn't Mrs. Swift do something with her other hand, too?

"Cora!"

The bellow from above broke Lottie's concentration. She looked up to find Aunt Cora watching her with a frown. "Where did you learn to do that, child?"

Lottie ducked her head, a little shy. "It's the song Pop sings every Sunday when he shaves."

Aunt Cora looked impatient. "I know the song, Lottie. I want to know where you learned to play it."

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Cora!"

Aunt Cora glanced toward the stairs. "Don't go away," she said. "I'll be right back."

Lottie nodded. She wasn't going anywhere.

By the time Aunt Cora came back, Lottie had found a note to play with her other hand. It sounded good with the rest of the song, and that made her happy.

Aunt Cora stared at Lottie's hands. "Play it again, from the beginning."

Lottie started over.

"You're in D major," Aunt Cora said in a quiet voice, "and you found C sharp."

Lottie looked up. "What does that mean? D major and C sharp?"

"It means —" Aunt Cora broke off with a distracted smile. "I think

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it means you're ready for piano lessons. Play it for me once more before I start supper."

Lottie started the tune, but stopped right away and looked at the ceiling. "Did you hear that?" she whispered.

Aunt Cora looked mad. "Ignore him," she said with a snap in her voice. "Let him sing if he wants. He won't feel much like it tomorrow."

Lottie started again, and the old man's rumbling voice drowned out the notes.

"Oh, don't you remember sweet Betsy from Pike  
Who crossed the big mountains with her husband Ike  
Two yoke of oxen, a big yeller dog,  
A tall Shanghai rooster and one spotted hog."



"The piano came today," Lottie told Helen as they walked up the lane after school. She'd have mentioned it sooner, but Helen always sat with her friends in the back of the school bus, while Lottie sat up front near the driver. She felt more comfortable there because the rest of the kids went to school together, while she was only allowed to ride as a favor to Pop.

"I know." Helen pulled her hood close against the cold. "The delivery truck drove by when we were outside after lunch."

"Oh." Lottie never got to tell the big news first. "I bet you didn't know Aunt Cora's going to teach me to play it."

Helen tweaked one of Lottie's braids. "Well, then you'll know how to do something I don't, kiddo."

"Yes, but you know how to sing like Mama did, right?"

"Nobody sang like Mama," Helen said, "but I like to try."

Lottie took her sister's hand. Helen always looked sad when they talked about Mama. "Aunt Cora's papa came with the piano. He smelled like rotten fruit. And he sang and laughed and made a bow to all the neighbors."

"Was Aunt Cora glad to see him?"

"No." Lottie remembered her aunt's tight lips when she led the old man inside the house. "She took him to his room and made him stay there."

"Huh." Helen dropped her sister's hand. "I'll race you home."

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The girls ran toward the white clapboard farm house, Lottie's legs pumping hard to keep up with Helen's easy jog. They reached the front porch door at the same moment and burst into the house, laughing and arguing about who won the race.



"I learned to play the piano today," Lottie told Pop at supper.

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Lottie nearly burst with importance. "Aunt Cora is going to start giving me piano lessons on Monday."

He raised an eyebrow. "You'd be better off practicing your snowman-building. They say it's going to be a real snowy winter."

Lottie grinned. "I already know how to build a snowman, right, Helen? Remember the one we made last winter?"

Helen began stacking plates. "Speaking of things I've taught you, it's time to clear the table."

While the girls washed dishes, Pop tuned the radio to WHO's *Barn Dance Frolic*, as he did every Saturday night at eight. This was Lottie's favorite hour of the week, when her family sat together and listened to the show out of Des Moines. She didn't understand the jokes that made Pop and Helen laugh so hard, but she loved the music. Sometimes a new song would take her fancy, and she'd sing it all the time for the next week, until Pop grabbed her up in his arms and said, "Stop it, or my head will explode." Then they laughed together because this was the funniest joke of all.

Sunday morning Lottie saw Aunt Cora's papa again at church. He sat across the aisle in his brown suit, his beard a little shaggy. Aunt Cora sat next to him, a wiggly Mona on her lap. Once in a while Mona nudged her grandpa's arm, and he pulled away. Aunt Cora pulled her arms tighter as if to say, "Mona, behave."

Mrs. Swift started the prelude on the big organ up front, and Lottie scrunched up her face to try to block out all the mistakes. She reached up to cover her ears, but Pop noticed and shook his head. It was rude to cover her ears in church.

Lottie peeked across the aisle. Had Aunt Cora's papa noticed her



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bad manners? He couldn't have, because his eyes were squeezed shut and he was plugging his ears with his fingers. Lottie felt for him. Mrs. Swift took some getting used to.

Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked straight at Lottie, and she stared back, interested. The organ gave another groan and they both made a face. The man chuckled, and she looked away. There was no laughing in church.

After the service, Aunt Cora's papa stopped in front of Lottie. He leaned heavily on a silver-headed cane and swayed a little as he spoke. "What did you think of the music this morning, little girl?"

His fierce expression made Lottie feel shy. "It was all right, I guess," she said softly.

Aunt Cora's papa looked disappointed. "Oh. Ish that sho." He turned and stumped down the aisle.

Pop put a hand on Lottie's shoulder as he watched the old man walk away. "That fellow's going to give Cora a run for her money," he said.

"Why does he talk like that?" Lottie whispered.

Pop's eyes flickered to Helen and back. "I couldn't tell you, honey." He took Lottie's hand. "Let's go home to dinner."

Lottie nodded. "My stomach's growling."

But they couldn't leave yet because Aunt Eloise, Mama's sister, was sailing down the aisle with her eye on Pop. "Oh, George, a moment please." She looked at the girls. "Helen, be a dear and take Lottie outside."

Helen glanced at Pop, who gave a little motion with his head. Taking Lottie's hand she said, "Let's go, kiddo."

Aunt Eloise lowered her voice as they walked away, but it carried anyway. "I just met Cora's father, and I think he was drunk. In church! Why, he had the nerve to insult poor Olivia Swift to my face. He said, and I quote, 'he won't come back to church until she's punished for her crimes against the canon of sacred music.' I've never been so insulted! You know I was the one who got the elders to hire her."

Lottie glanced over her shoulder as she reached the sanctuary door. Pop looked like a rabbit in a trap.

"What'd Aunt Eloise want?" Helen asked when he finally reached the car.

Pop made a face. "Nothing important."

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Monday morning Lottie jumped off the school bus and ran across the square to Aunt Cora's, her mind on the piano. When she reached the warm kitchen, breakfast had started already.

"Hang up your coat, young lady," Aunt Cora said. "Your oatmeal is getting cold."

Lottie hurried to the back hall and unbuttoned her coat. As she hung it up she heard a booming voice from above. "Where's my breakfast? What's taking so long?"

Aunt Cora rushed past, a loaded tray in her hands. Lottie stared at her. She'd never seen her aunt wait on anybody before.

The kitchen was quiet as Lottie slipped into her chair. Uncle Otto bent over his oatmeal with a grim look on his face. Harvey and Mona didn't say a word.

After breakfast, Aunt Cora set the children up at the kitchen table with some salt dough for making shapes. They had fun for a while, but soon Harvey got bored, and poked his fingers into the girls' work. Lottie pushed him away, but Mona stood on her chair and screamed, "Ma! Harvey ruined my dough."

Aunt Cora ran into the kitchen and took Mona by the arms. "Be quiet this instant, Mona. Remember, Grandpa can't stand the noise." She shook her daughter ever so gently. "Promise you'll be quiet now."

"I promise." Mona started to cry.

For the second time that morning, Lottie stared at her aunt in surprise.

That afternoon on the way up the lane, Helen asked, "Did you have your piano lesson?"

Lottie shook her head. "Aunt Cora didn't have time today, and I didn't want to ask."