

*HIS GIFT* by Joan C. Benson

Chapter One—Ready or Not

*The audition, the audition, the AUDITION ...* October 12, 1929, was only two days away, but it had been penned in my diary for two years. With almost a thousand hours of practice behind me, I knew my destiny hung in the balance.

The bell rang. I scooped up my things and made a beeline to the door. The staff at the Music Conservatory frowned upon tardiness. Could I prove I was ready for Saturday?

“Molly White—a word, please.” Mr. Hill stepped into my path, blocking my exit from class. I glanced at the clock, but I didn’t need a reminder. I only had fifteen minutes.

“I have to run, Mr. Hill. Remember my permission for early-release on Mondays and Thursdays?”

Draping the lab coat over his arm, Mr. Hill looked aloof, yet stern. He towered above me with his tall, skinny frame. He ignored the students edging around us to get on to their classes. Some students called Mr. Hill ‘the teacher with no soul.’ I would add he had no heart, if he made me late for my pre-audition at the Music Conservatory.

“I’m confused, Miss White. Why are you taking this chemistry class?” he said, as if to pique my defense.

*Good question. Did he think I would admit my parents insisted?* I held my tongue. My parents drilled respect into me from childhood.

The fleeing students glanced with curiosity as they brushed by. Talking. Laughing. Being normal. My instinct was to escape this confrontation, but I stood rooted to my spot.

“I believe you’re a smart girl,” he said. The smell of stale coffee wafted in the air as he

waved his hand in exasperation.

*Apparently, I was not smart enough to escape his little lecture.*

“Thank you, sir,” I replied, with dramatic pretense.

“You can do so much better. You know that you need a passing grade to be accepted by a worthy college.”

*So they say.* “With all due respect, sir, my goal is to win the competition with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.” *Everyone knew that. Even the principal.* “College is not in my sights after graduation,” I stated with conviction. “At least not right away.”

I stepped forward. Surely, we were finished.

Mr. Hill held up one hand to stop me. “And, if you don’t win this audition, Molly?”

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra held one student competition each year. Only one. My hopes hung on this audition. As a senior, I needed to win. This time. I knew many girls hoped to marry when they graduated. A few would go to college. Not me. Not now.

“You’re way behind in this class, Molly.”

Wiggling his fingers in the air as if playing an imaginary piano, his head shook and his eyes crinkled shut. “Your entire life is about—*this*.”

“I am serious about *this*, sir. What is wrong with concentrating on one’s strengths?”

“You are shortsighted, Miss Molly. Out of balance.” He tossed his coat a few feet behind us, barely landing it on the lectern.

“Excuse me,” someone whispered. By now students from the next class were squeezing in.

“With respect, I do have goals and priorities, Mr. Hill.”

“Do you even take time for friends, Molly?”

*“Thank you for your wise advice, Mr. Hill.”*

By then, my words were dripping with sarcasm. His disapproving black eyes glared back, and for an instant, his bushy eyebrows raised.

*Mama and Father would be furious if they had heard me speak to a teacher in this manner. But what was he thinking to insult me like that? No friends? What did he know about my life? My words spilled out before I could snatch them back.*

With a sigh, Mr. Hill spewed out his final chiding remark. “You may be an expert with the keys of the piano,” as he did his finger wiggling again. “But I fear you know nothing about the keys to life. You’d better find a tutor before the next grading period.”

Arguing at this point would prolong my agony. I kept my mouth closed. I nodded, giving a polite, but phony, smile.

*“Miss White, do you understand me?”* he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, glancing at the clock again. In silence, I made clear I was finished. My fifteen minutes of travel time was now down to ten. Besides, the seats were filling up with his next class. He had no choice. He had to release me from captivity.

“All right, Miss Molly. Don’t force my hand. If you fail another test, the principal has agreed that your privilege for early release must end. I’ll spell it out for you. No more piano lessons on school time, no matter how gifted you are.” This time he looked at me with a sorrowful expression. Or maybe it was *pity*. He stepped back and waved his arm toward the doorway.

Was he sad because he wanted me to see the error of my ways and embrace his fervent zeal for chemistry? This self-appointed “resident scientist” presumed nothing in the world was more important than chemistry. Yet he lectured me on balance? “The keys of life,” I should say.

Maybe he had breathed in too many chemicals hanging over Bunsen burners. I couldn't worry with his attitude right then. Mr. Clancy had precious few extended timeslots for advanced students, so I had to protect my chance to train with such an experienced professional.

I fled for my locker, grabbed my music, and pushed through the massive double doors of Royal Oak High. Freedom. Ahhh—delightful. Brisk fall breezes whipped at my open wool jacket. I flung my scarf around my neck as an added layer while I buttoned up.

No more thoughts about school. The tension with Mr. Hill must not ruin my lesson. The concerto's familiar melody began playing in my mind, pushing my steps ever faster to its pulsing rhythm. As the upcoming competition demanded my attention, I wondered if this is how Olympic athletes felt. Excited? Tense? A little bit anxious?

If I won, I would perform with the Detroit Symphony at their annual student performance concert in January. As a young classical pianist, this concert would be my best hope for recognition.

Rachmaninoff's Concerto #2 possessed me, but in a good way, not like Mr. Hill described. If I closed my eyes, I imagined the bold and beautiful sounds of the concerto with the orchestra accompanying me. Mama had taken me to the symphony last winter when Rachmaninoff played his own masterpiece. I fell in love. In that moment. I knew that someday I *had* to perform this magnificent composition.

I wanted to show Mr. Clancy I *was* ready. This would be like a pre-audition audition. I needed to prove I could do this for myself even more than dear Mr. Clancy. I stretched my fingers open and closed in preparation for the keyboard gymnastics and quickened my gait to more of a controlled dash.

In the distance, I could see the Music Conservatory. The building overshadowed the

bungalow-type homes nestled around it. Teaching rooms were in the front of the house and living quarters for the teachers in the back. The studio *seemed* warm and bright, even during our long, cold winters. I took the front steps by twos, and could hear Mr. Clancy playing while he waited. A familiar Mozart Sonata intermingled with another student's repetitive finger exercises from an adjacent studio.

"Mr. Clancy?" I called as I entered the front hall. I closed the front door firmly so the chilly air would not seep in. "It's Molly."

"Yes, yes, my dear, but you are late. Time is wasting. Come right on over to the piano." Mr. Clancy, already seated at his prized Steinway grand, ran his leathery, wrinkled fingers up and down the keys with ease as if to encourage me to begin.

His sharp, distinctive nose swept in the direction of the baby-sized grand piano as my signal to sit down. The small studio was crammed with two grand pianos filling most every inch, but for me, it was a place of great joy. I slipped between the gleaming instruments to find my place. Busts of the masters, Beethoven, Mozart, and Rachmaninoff, watched me with their marble gazes. To prepare my hands for the challenge, I ran through some warmup exercises. Then Mr. Clancy stood, nodding for me to begin. I lifted my hands over the keys and whispered, "Please God." He knew.

I pressed into the dramatic opening chords, Rachmaninoff's invitation to enter his composition. Nothing less than perfection was necessary to perform the many intricate runs to follow. Each note had to sing, producing the unique resonating tones of a Steinway grand piano. In a matter of seconds, my left hand stumbled on a lengthy run. I stopped and glanced nervously at Mr. Clancy.

"I am so sorry," I blurted. "I had a problem at school, which also caused me to be late."

Mr. Clancy calmly held up his hand. “Breathe deeply, and begin again.”

*It sounded simple, yet ...*

*Okay. I refuse to let anything derail me, even for one moment.* Mr. Clancy stood waiting. Tilting his chin upward, he closed his eyes. *Did he believe I was capable of winning? Did he worry that I might embarrass him?*

I began playing the deep, resonating chords again. This time, as the sounds swelled to a crescendo, my confidence rose. At last, my hands took charge in an inexplicable way as a consequence of mastery. My fingers nearly operated without my conscious mind controlling their movement.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. Clancy settle back at his piano. Like the master he was, he knew where to join in, accompanying me with the orchestra melody. Before long, the passion of Rachmaninoff’s creation spilled into every inch of the room from floor to ceiling. From keyboard to keyboard, the moving musical theme tossed back and forth. The thrill of creating such beauty with a full symphony orchestra captured my imagination even as I played in this tiny studio.

Leaning into the keyboard, I formed the spirited chords with precision, thundering into the final stretch of the first movement as Rachmaninoff had done. Then silence. Utter silence. The first third of this mighty work was gloriously finished in barely over 30 minutes. Though there was not time enough to play all three sections, my need was to demonstrate preparedness. Resting my hands on the keys for a moment, I relaxed and set them in my lap with a quiet sigh. Anxious for his approval, I stole a fleeting look at Mr. Clancy. He rose with the awkward stiffness characteristic of many his age. His mouth gaped open in gleeful delight. My fond old mentor lifted his arms heavenward and began clapping. At first lightly, and then with

unrestrained abandon.

“Bravo, Molly! Bravo! Outstanding. What an accomplishment.”

“Thank you,” I said struggling for composure. “If only I can play so well on Saturday.”

My mind and heart were shouting and dancing, though I restrained myself as the maturing young adult I wanted to be. But I did get up and give Mr. Clancy an enthusiastic thank you hug. Before I left, Mr. Clancy gave me some practice tips before the audition. He warned against only practicing “the piece,” but instructed me to play a variety of music to maintain my finger agility. Oh, how I wished I had the artistic and physical skill of Rachmaninoff himself. Writing this concerto for his own oversized hands, Rachmaninoff was capable of reaching across large spans of keys. His music presented so many physical challenges for pianists, especially a girl with a smaller frame like me.

“I don’t know how to thank you enough. You’ve been so helpful. Are you going to make it to Detroit for the audition?” I asked.

“I’d love to be there Saturday, but my old arthritic back won’t allow it. Believe me. I know auditions. There will be lots of hours of waiting around characteristic of all auditions.” He raised one of his white bushy eyebrows, and leaned in closer to me.

“I’ll come hear you play with the symphony after you win the contest,” he whispered as if telling a secret.

“Do you believe I could possibly win?”

He smiled his gentle kind of smile accompanied by an assenting tilt of his head. With the polite bow of a gentleman, Mr. Clancy then escorted me to the door with a performer’s send off.

“Believe in yourself. And, don’t stop breathing,” he said chuckling.

Though Mr. Clancy was a gifted professional musician, he was so much more to me—a

friend, a grandfather-type, an encourager, and a sweet old man. With a wave and smile, I skipped down the front steps of the Conservatory, my feet floating like feathers. I knew I had Mr. Clancy's affirmation so all I had to do was believe and breathe, and I might add, pray. I'd done my homework on this one.

The fall sun had already dipped below the horizon when I began the walk home. The glowing lights and savory smells of burning fireplaces in the homes along the way invited my curiosity. I wondered what real life dramas would take place inside those bungalows in the coming days.

I knew I had my own melodrama to work out. Father and Mama were usually supportive of my music, but I also knew their concern for my future. Everyone acknowledged my lack of interest in academics. Of course, even I would be embarrassed if I didn't graduate. But, study? Right now? Oh, gee. It was sure not one of my priorities. I would catch up in chemistry somehow enough to pass, at least. But most of all, I *would* become a concert pianist. Maybe I would cross over on a great ship to London, or Paris, or perhaps I would perform in Vienna, Austria, like many great musicians.

Spotting our porch light a few doors down, I slowed my steps. An uneasiness jolted me back to my present-day realities and the confrontation with Mr. Hill. But there seemed to be something more. Mama always talked about her woman's intuition as she seemed to have a double dose of it. Maybe I had it too. Things didn't look right as I approached our house. Father was home.

It wasn't time for Father to be back from work, yet I saw the old Packard parked in the drive. I circled around to the back porch, and saw Mama through the kitchen window. Wait. She was crying. Not onion-tears. Real tears. I could hear the thumping of my anxious heart.

As I crept up the back steps, they let out a warning creak. Mama glanced up as I cracked open the door. She looked back at the skillet where she had been stirring the hash. Mama swiped at her eyes with the apron like she always did when she chopped onions.

“Mama, what in the world?”

