

JAMIE GETS A SECOND CHANCE

By Felix Mayerhofer

Chapter 1: Trapped!

While workmen and trucks were waiting outside ready to tear down the old Lincoln School, I walked through the halls one final time thinking about both the good and the bad times I had spent here. I stopped at room 6, the study hall where Mr. Force, the principal, changed my life.

I clearly remember that day 30 years ago when he entered the room. All heads turned towards the door as this tough principal stepped into our study hall. His entrance into a classroom could mean only one thing--someone was in big trouble! His eyes scanned the room and fell upon me.

“James Johnson!” he said in a commanding voice, “I want to see you outside!”

Oh, no! I thought. What did I do now? Pushing myself out of my chair, everyone stared as I slowly walked out of the room.

Standing in the hallway next to Mr. Force was a small, ball-headed man with a round pleasant face.

Pointing his long finger straight at me, Mr. Force said, “James, you’re in the band!”

“No! I’m not in the band!” I responded in surprise.

“You are now!” said Mr. Force. “This is Mr. Jacobs, our new band director. I think playing an instrument might be just what you need.”

“I don’t know anything about music,” I declared desperately.

“Don’t worry about that,” answered Mr. Force. “Mr. Jacobs will teach you everything you need to know. Your wonderful mother will be proud of you when she hears you play.”

My shoulders drooped in defeat as I realized I was trapped.

“I’ll leave you in the good hands of Mr. Jacobs,” Mr. Force said, as he turned on his heel and left.

Looking at me kindly, Mr. Jacobs said, “Let’s go downstairs and find you an instrument.”

Walking unsteadily over the ancient, warped, wooden floors, we went down two flights of stairs.

The dark dank basement looked like a dungeon in a horror movie. I had never been down there. It was scary, and I was glad Mr. Jacobs was with me. Approaching an unpainted door at the far end of the tunnel-like hallway, we forced the squeaky door open. A swirl of dust came shooting out as Mr. Jacobs pulled the chain attached to a hanging light bulb.

Chapter 2: A Gift From Heaven

Mr. Jacobs checked the shelves to see what instruments were available. I spotted an old dented trumpet and asked Mr. Jacobs if I could try it. My heart was pounding when Mr. Jacobs handed me the dusty horn. Raising the trumpet to my lips, I blew with all my might, my eyes bulging and cheeks puffing. I was disappointed when no sound came out.

“Don’t puff out your cheeks,” said Mr. Jacobs, “and keep your lips together.”

I tried again, this time with explosive results, as the sound almost blasted Mr. Jacobs out the door.

“This is going to be fun,” I said with a big grin.

“I can tell you won’t have any trouble blowing the trumpet,” answered Mr. Jacobs. “Let’s go to the band room next door and get you started.”

Mr. Jacobs showed me how to hold and finger the instrument and then taught me to play a few notes.

“I think you’re going to be a natural,” he said. “With a few lessons, you and the other new members should be ready to play as a band in no time at all. You can take the trumpet home to practice.”

Thanking Mr. Jacobs, I excitedly ran back to the study hall. Bursting into the room waving the trumpet over my head, I totally disrupted the entire class. Everyone started asking a thousand questions. Before the situation got out of hand, Mr. Atlas, the teacher,

said loudly, “Jamie! Deposit that trumpet in your locker until the end of the day!”

When school let out, I blew the trumpet all the way home. Looking for my mom when I entered the house, I yelled, “Hey Mom, look what I have!” She’d heard the trumpet before she saw it. This was the most excited she had seen me in a long time. I showed off the few notes I’d learned.

“You sound good already,” my mother said.

“Mom!” I exclaimed, “Mr. Jacobs, our new band director loaned me this trumpet.”

“I’m happy for you,” she answered. She would forever be grateful to the “band man” if this kept me out of trouble.

“What a nice tone you’re getting,” praised my mom. She was a single parent working as a domestic. As a black woman that was one of the few jobs she could get. She felt sad that she couldn’t devote more time to me and was worried because I was making bad friends.

I went to bed exhausted from the exciting day. After I fell asleep, Mom pulled out a scrap of blue velvet from her sewing basket that she’d been saving for something special. With loving care she began making a bag with a drawstring for my trumpet. When she finished, she quietly placed it beside the instrument on the chair, next to my bed.

The next morning, hugging the bag with the trumpet against my chest, I ran into the kitchen and exclaimed, “Thanks Mom, this is fantastic! Mr. Jacobs will be ‘knocked out’ when he sees it!”

Chapter 3: Do Your Homework or Else!

I was going to take my first real trumpet lesson that day and I couldn't wait to get to school. As the morning progressed, I kept looking anxiously at the clock on the wall. Running up to my English teacher, I excitedly said, "It's time to go to my music lesson!"

"I'll let you go Jamie as soon as you finish your work," answered a stern Miss Allsmart. "You haven't done a stitch of work in weeks."

I knew she was right and if I wanted to play in band I'd have to make more of an effort. Somehow managing to finish the lesson, I hurriedly handed in my paper.

Miss Allsmart looked at it and said, "Okay Jamie, you tried. That's more than you've done in a long time, so I'll let you go."

After a few days, I realized that if I did my schoolwork, I'd have no trouble getting out of class to go to band.

I loved the trumpet right from the start. That's all I could think about. I made lots of friends during the first weeks of band and Charlie was my favorite. He was a stocky kid who made me laugh.

Charlie and I made plans to meet in the band room to practice. We were both learning to play quite well, Charlie on his trombone and I on the trumpet. I drifted away from my bad friends as the two of us became good buddies. We had the same interest--band!

The day finally arrived when all the players came together for our first full band practice. Noise and excitement filled the air. A few of

the kids blasted away on their horns. Others were talking loudly as Mr. Jacobs started bringing the group to order.

Getting us quiet, Mr. Jacobs asked the band to play the song we'd been learning, "Three Blind Mice." The mention of our favorite piece brought more happy hoots and cheers.

"All right kids," Mr. Jacobs said, "I want you to put your instruments to your lips." Excitedly jerking our horns up, he slowly began counting-
-One, two, three, four. The screeching noise coming from the instruments would have made a dog howl, but the kids in the band loved it.

Mr. Jacobs was a patient man and after a few rough weeks I could hear the band improving. We had already started preparing for our Christmas Concert and that inspired us to work even harder.

Chapter 4: The Golden Reward

One morning Mr. Jacobs displayed a large chart listing each student's name. Pointing to the chart, he explained, "Each of you will receive points for attendance, citizenship, and for events in which you perform. This includes solos, concerts and parades. The students getting the highest scores by the end of the year will become members of the BLUE KEY SOCIETY. This is an honorary music society for 'Outstanding Musicians.'"

"Wow!" I exclaimed to Charlie, "that's for me! I'm going to get a solo from Mr. Jacobs, right now!"

"Me too!" answered Charlie.

When I got home, I immediately began working on my solo. Boy! This is rough, I said to myself. Getting into the Blue Key Society is not going to be easy. I'm going to have to work hard.

Since joining band I did my homework every night. It was a struggle at first but it had been worth it. My mother was thrilled at the change she'd seen in me.

The months flew by and the Christmas Concert was only hours away. I'd just finished dressing when my mother called, "James, will you please come here!"

I ran into the living room and came to a screeching halt as my mother handed me a shiny new trumpet case.

I was speechless! Now I'd have a real case in which to carry my horn. Anxiously fumbling with the latches, I opened the case and

couldn't believe my eyes. Sitting in rich blue velvet was a beautiful golden trumpet. Lovingly lifting the brand new horn out of the case, I put it to my lips and blew. It was the best blowing horn I'd ever played. This had to be the most wonderful day of my life. I knew my mother had made a big sacrifice, and it would take her a long time to pay for this wonderful gift.

"It's your reward for all the practicing you've done," said my mother, "and for doing so well with your school work. I'm proud of you James!"

"Thanks Mom!" I said, as I gave her a warm hug. "Christmas couldn't be any better than this."

I was still in a state of shock when my mother and I arrived at school. Leaving her, I ran to show Mr. Jacobs and Charlie my new horn.

The program began and the band's performance was a huge success. The students followed Mr. Jacob's baton as if it was a magic wand. The parents were all smiles as they listened to their talented musicians play the final song of the concert.

I went to sleep that night with the new trumpet in its case sitting next to my bed.

Chapter 5: The Big Surprise

The next scheduled event was the “Solo Assembly.” Charlie, myself, and the other players had been practicing hard with the solos Mr. Jacobs had given us.

Everyone was a bit nervous when the day of the big event arrived and the student body took their seats in the auditorium.

The audience enjoyed the music and gave each soloist lots of applause. When my turn came I was so scared I had trouble breathing. Closing my eyes, I took a big breath and began playing. All of a sudden a calming effect fell over me and my solo came out perfect. I received a rousing round of applause.

I knew I had done well. I felt a new pride in myself because I could play an instrument. My grades had improved and now I had “real” friends. I noticed my teachers didn’t yell at me any more, and most importantly my mother was proud of me.

Charlie was the last one on the program. His knees shook as he bravely began his trombone solo.

Charlie’s playing pretty good, I thought, as he came to a fast passage.

Reaching out for a low note, the slide to Charlie’s trombone slipped out of his hand and sailed high in the air right into the audience.

“Oh, no!” I exclaimed in astonishment.

Miss Allsmart my teacher let out a scream as the slide plopped right into her lap. Charlie was never so embarrassed in all his life. He dashed down the steps and ran to Miss Allsmart's seat as she handed him his slide.

"Sorry Miss Allsmart," Charlie said, as he put his slide back onto his trombone, then ran back up the steps and finished the solo.

The audience loved Charlie. He got the biggest laugh and they applauded wildly as he left the stage. I heard someone in the audience say, "His act was better than watching TV."

The next morning Mr. Jacobs congratulated us for our fine performances at the "Solo Assembly."

"All of you got extra points for the Blue Key Society," he said. "Those points will be added to your scores for our first 'Band Award Party' in a couple of weeks."

The two weeks went by fast as the band gathered for the party.

Mr. Jacobs stood up and asked for the band's attention. "First, you're all going to get gold medals for the concerts you performed this year," he said.

After passing out the medals, Mr. Jacobs began reading the names and the scores of those band students who had made the effort to become members of the new Blue Key Society.

Name after name was called and Charlie and I were getting worried. Mr. Jacobs neared the end of the list and we still hadn't been called.

"Charlie Rush," called out Mr. Jacobs.

"Whew!" Charlie sighed, as he ran up to get his key.

Mr. Jacobs continued, "Having the same score as Charlie Rush, the final Blue Key goes to Jamie Johnson."

I felt a sense of relief as I walked up to receive my key.

Quieting the excited kids once more, Mr. Jacobs said, "I have a surprise for you. I'm going to present a very important award to the person that in my judgment has been the 'Outstanding Musician Of The Year.'"

Mr. Jacobs pulled a beautiful red trophy out of a large box. Displaying the trophy with lots of oohs and aahs from the band, he announced, "It's my pleasure to present this trophy to--Jamie Johnson!"

The award ceremony took place years ago and I still cherish that trophy. It isn't often a teacher is asked to teach at the school he attended as a child, but that's exactly what happened. When Mr. Jacobs retired, I was selected to replace him as the new band director. To top it off, the first black principal in our community and of the new Lincoln School, will be none other than my old friend, Charlie Rush.