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No Words Needed

She was the most phenomenal trombone player ever to play at Tribute High School. With its long tradition in jazz excellence, Tribute High had seen its share of great players but topping any short list had to be Erin O'Shea, at least in his opinion.

Exactly for this reason Tribute's jazz director, Mr. Perch, chose to work on Billy Strayhorn's *After All*. It was a beautiful, melancholic ballad featuring a trombone and an alto saxophone. After hearing it for the first time, it was apparent to him that this had to be one of his top jazz band's highlighted pieces. It was a natural fit for the players that he had at his disposal.

Markus Johanson wasn't surprised to be handed the second alto part on the day they first sight-read the tune. After all he was the lead alto player and the second alto part contained the big Johnny Hodges solo, which made him the right person to play it. But that didn't make him any less nervous. He reluctantly agreed he was a good player, but in his mind, his ability level paled in comparison to that of Erin's, and the notion that he could attempt to, let alone play toe to toe with her seemed ridiculous.

Erin intimidated Markus, as she tended to do with most other students. And not just for her formidable music skills. She was stunning, with a slight build, long blond hair, and deep brown eyes. Silent and serious, she never wasted her time on frivolous conversations. She was intelligent and mysterious and kept her distance from people. The tremendous air of self-confidence she exuded tended to make others around her feel awkward and insecure.

Markus was quite the opposite. He was friendly and enjoyed talking to people, once he got to know them. His warm blue eyes and slightly tousled brown hair made him very approachable. Extremely likeable, he was smart, talented, and good-looking, but his confidence issues oftentimes prevented him from being able to recognize these qualities in himself.

Perhaps it was these differences that drew Markus to Erin. Perhaps it was her aloof nature that sparked his curiosity and made him desperate to learn more about her. Perhaps it

was because he couldn't seem to find a single fault with her. Whatever the exact reason, Markus found himself increasingly attracted to Erin, in spite of feeling that she barely knew he existed.

That's what made playing *After All* so difficult for him. Strayhorn's composition was a beautiful representation of longing and affection, a musical love story about overcoming and surviving everything after all. In choosing to have them play it, Mr. Perch was essentially asking Markus and Erin to have an intimate conversation between her trombone and his saxophone. How on earth could they possibly have an intimate musical conversation when they couldn't even have a normal one in person?

Since that initial playing, Tribute's Jazz I Ensemble had polished *After All* up as much as they could. Full of young, promising players with quite a bit of talent, it didn't take that long for them to master the technical aspects of it. But as well as they played it, something was still missing. There was just no soul, no spark, no emotion, nothing to pull the listener in. As the practice hours turned into days and the days into weeks it was still a performance and not a story. Whatever Mr. Perch had envisioned, they hadn't quite produced it yet. The concert date was nearing and the connection between trombone and saxophone resembled that of trombone player and saxophone player; imagined but not quite real. Markus wasn't certain, but it seemed like Erin still hadn't bought into his efforts and as much as she respected his playing, he hadn't managed to break through that wall separating her from the rest of the world. Would he ever be able to touch the heart of the immovable, elusive girl just two rows away?

Finally, the day of the concert arrived.

As Markus and the rest of the band pooled onto the stage to the sound of polite applause, it had the feel of just another concert. The band was ready to put the song to rest and move onto something new. But even so, they took their usual places - the stereotypical big band set up with a couple of solo microphones in front. Erin shuffled forward and ran her fingers nervously through her cascading blond hair, which almost appeared to give off a light of its own in the spotlight highlighting her. She blew a few warm-up notes, emptied her spit valve and tested the microphone before raising the trombone to her lips, making eye-contact with Mr. Perch. Making sure everyone else was ready, Mr. Perch raised his arms to cue the band's entrance.

From Erin's first note, it was obvious to Markus that something was different. Erin's playing, always clear and technically flawless, was raised to a whole new level. Every note was amazing, as golden as the instrument from whence it came. Her transitions were smooth as butter, her intensity ebbed and flowed with the direction of the line, and her solo shimmered with emotion.

Markus was captivated. He sat there, transfixed by the angel who stood before him - not only by her gorgeous playing, but by the expressions she played it with. Her emotionless facade dissolved, exposing a much more vulnerable person, releasing an inner beauty that somehow overwhelmed her physical one. Never before had he been so incredibly entranced by anyone.

He was so moved that he almost missed his entrance for the saxophone soli. Begrudgingly, he tore his eyes away from her with just enough time to find his place in the first alto part and take over with the lead line. Markus waited for the saxophone triplet to lead into his entrance, and then began to play with as much confidence as he could muster. If he had to interrupt perfection, he should at least do it right. Every note was open and enhanced with strong vibrato, and gave the melody a rich color. Each descending line sighed beautifully, and Markus knew that it was the best that his saxophone section had ever sounded.

As the soli faded away back into the trombone solo, he looked up at Erin, trusting his muscle memory to take over for him on the last few measures. To his surprise, her eyes were fixed on him with a shy smile playing at the corners of her mouth. As their eyes met she was clearly taken aback because her grin immediately disappeared, her cheeks flushed, and her head snapped away. It all happened within a fraction of a second, but that was just enough time for him to notice the sparkle in her eyes.

Or had he imagined that? Were his feelings for her impairing his judgment, creating signs that weren't really there? Everything he'd ever known about Erin said yes but it wasn't enough to completely drown out that one little strand of hope whispering into his ear. Perhaps his mind wasn't playing tricks on him at all. Perhaps the sudden spike of passion in her playing could be attributed to some sort of feelings that she secretly possessed for him. Perhaps...

Still flustered, he shakily stood up and walked over to the second microphone placed directly beside Erin's. Waiting to play the brief saxophone soli that would transition into his own

solo, he was incredibly aware of just how close they were to one another. And during the last few sweet, mournful notes of her solo, only one thought registered in his mind: This has to be good. Play it for her.

His focus was so great, he hardly even noticed as she concluded her solo and made her way back to her chair within the rest of the band. If Erin didn't already know how he felt about her, she would by the end of this song.

He raised his bell so that it was just kissing the edge of the microphone. His first notes were haunted, full of longing. For the first time, Markus *really* listened to himself as he played. He was surprised at how much he had never noticed. The dissonant chromatic lines clashed in an incredible way, and he embraced them, milking every bend and smeary transition for all that it was worth. The change in the audience was immediate. He could sense that they were totally in tune with him and buying into every note.

But that wasn't enough. To be truly successful, he would need to step it up more. So as he reached the second A section and began the melody again, he intensified it. His scoops were deeper, his blues notes were highlighted, and his tone was more open. He even relaxed a little bit with the melody, seasoning his playing with his own licks and inflections. Anyone listening to him at this moment would have never believed him to be the skittish, inside-the-lines saxophone player that existed only minutes earlier. He was no longer Markus Johanson - he was Johnny Hodges incarnate.

And then the moment of truth: the high D; the make-or-break note of the solo. If he missed this note, every emotion he had worked so hard to instill in the members of his audience - including the one behind him - would have been in vain. His nerves, repressed to this point, threatened to overtake his playing as a trace of self-doubt crept into the corners of his mind. But that self-doubt was immediately combated by the vision of Erin smiling at him, gorgeous, brown eyes twinkling.

An inner serenity settled over him. His fingers took control, nailing every note in the technical run. He didn't just hit the D - he soared up to it. It hung in the air, reverberating throughout the auditorium. The pitch was dead-on, the vibrato was perfect, and there wasn't a soul in the crowd that couldn't feel the intense emotions he was playing with.

As he finished his solo the band took over with their four-bar soli. They were clicking better than ever before. The solos had been phenomenal and the band was playing on an otherworldly level. The rhythm section was locked in, the horns were tight, and everyone was playing with a beautiful, full sound. Markus was just as much in awe by it as the audience.

But he wasn't done just yet. He still had to finish it out, and he had to finish it out strong. This would be his final say in the song and his last chance to express what could not be spoken. He had gotten Erin's attention; now he just needed to hold onto it.

As their lead trumpet player brought the band back down to a mezzo piano, Markus stepped back in. He glissed up to his next sustained note, effortlessly nailing every single note in the chromatic scale. His long note - majestic, powerful, and wonderfully mournful - dripped with emotion. The note following was even more glorious. The beautiful chord tones rang out, their presence remaining long after Markus had stopped playing them. This was without a doubt the best he had ever played.

He finished his solo and stepped back from the microphone. The applause was deafening, and practically drowned out the band's final eight measures. As the final notes fell away from his lips and the gentle tinkling of the piano faded away, Markus knew something very special had just happened. He looked at Mr. Perch who was emphatically mouthing the word, "Yes!" Basking in the audience's ovation as it rose as one, he chanced a glance at Erin. Her soft, warm smile and a glistening in her eyes told him all he wanted to know.

After all, no words were needed.