



BUS 99  
B7288

QUICKREADS

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Waiting at the bus stop, Jamal Johnson was lost in his own thoughts. His long fingers fiddled with the straps of his backpack. A quiet young man of 22, Jamal was an art student at the local university.

He smiled as he thought of his mother, Letty. The bacon and eggs she'd fixed him that morning made him feel a little better. The tall, thin young man was tired. The night before, he'd crammed for an art history test until well after 1:00 A.M.

"A young man like you needs lots of protein," she'd declared. "The Lord knows you could use a lot more meat on those ribs, Jamal!" He laughed as she playfully poked him in the chest.

Jamal's older brother Luke was drinking coffee and reading the morning paper. He looked up with a grin and said, "What about me?"

"*You* don't need more protein, pal," Jamal teased. "With all your rippling muscles, you look like you *live* in the gym! Some people are just born lucky."

Luke never worked out, yet he had a near-perfect physique. Sometimes he tore the sleeves off his shirts just to show off his muscular arms. The tattoo on his left forearm—a heart, with "Mom" in the middle—looked good on his dark skin.

"Your father was big and strong like you, Luke," their mother said softly. "He always made me feel so safe." She wiped a tear from her eye.



**J**amal felt a lump in his throat as he remembered what his mother had said. After eight years, she still missed his father so much.

Letitia—called Letty by her friends—was proud of both her sons. As a family, the three of them had pulled together to get through a terrible time.

The boys' father, Jake, an architect, had died in a car accident. He, Mom, and Jamal had been on their way to a sporting goods store to buy track shoes for Jamal. An 18-wheeler had run a red light, slamming into the driver's side of their car.

At the time, Jamal had been 14 and Luke, 16. Letty had been seven months pregnant. A few days after the accident, she'd lost the baby. Jamal, who'd been in the back seat, had gotten a deep gash over his left eye.

Now 22, Jamal was studying art. He was learning to design large architectural sculptures. Luke was a mechanic at a garage called Import Doctors. They serviced Jaguars, BMWs, Porsches, and Ferraris.

Friends sometimes teased Jamal and Luke about living at home with their mother. After all, they were single guys in their twenties! But living at home allowed them to save

money. Luke dreamed of opening his own repair shop one day. And Jamal needed all of his money to pay for art supplies, books, and tuition.

But the real reason they still lived at home was their mother. Letty was still very sad sometimes. They couldn't bear to move out and leave her alone to struggle with her grief.

Ever since the accident, she'd had a very rough time. She had loved her husband so much! Losing both Jake and the baby so suddenly had been too much for her to bear. For a while, there were some days when she couldn't even get out of bed. Her lack of dependability had cost her several jobs.

These days, though, Letty was working regularly and starting to make some new friends. Her sons thought she seemed happier. Maybe the cloud was finally beginning to lift.



**J**amal glanced at his watch. The bus should be there any minute.

His thoughts turned to the big architectural project his sculpture class was working on. A talented man named Nick Sanders was the professor in charge. Sanders had received a grant to build a towering sculpture for J&M, Inc., a giant corporation. The students in Jamal's class were excited. Under Sanders' supervision, they were being allowed to create the design and help oversee construction.

Once completed, the 30-foot-high, glass and steel structure would stand in front of J&M's office building. It would be the proud symbol of the company, which made machine parts. J&M would pay for the materials and the construction labor. Any money left over would go into the art students' scholarship fund.

The students had nearly finished the CAD (computer-aided design) drawings of

the structure. When the company president approved the plans, construction would get started. It would take the better part of a year, or two semesters, to complete the project.

Jamal loved working with CAD. Like magic, it could show what a sculpture would look like before it was ever built. And, any part of the design could be changed with a few clicks of the mouse.

Jamal wondered what his father would have thought of CAD. He felt sorry for architects working in the old days before computers. What a waste of time to have to make drawings and blueprints by hand! At the time Jake Johnson had died, architects were only just beginning to use computers for drawing.



**W**hen the bus pulled up to the curb, Jamal reached down and grabbed his backpack.

A wiry guy in tight, electric-blue shorts

and a T-shirt was clamping a bicycle onto the front of the bus. A few people got off. Jamal stepped into the line of people crowding onto the bus.

He took a seat toward the back, where there was more room.

The ride to school usually took about 45 minutes. Jamal was grateful to have the time to cram for his art history test. He cracked open his book and tried to study.

Suddenly the driver slammed on the brakes. Some kind of commotion was going on outside, but Jamal couldn't tell what it was.

Then a man near the front spoke up. "I think it was a dog. Looks like he got out of the way just in time."

The bus started moving forward again. Jamal glanced out the window and saw a strange-looking little beast with a black and white spotted coat. *What in the world is that thing?* Jamal wondered. It looked a bit like an exotic monkey that might have escaped from the zoo.

The small creature was clutching some kind of shiny object. Then, suddenly, the creature raised its head and looked squarely at Jamal. An impish smile appeared on its face as it raised the shiny object. A bright flash from the object blinded Jamal for a moment. When he looked out the window again, the creature was gone.

*Had that really happened?* Jamal couldn't be sure. He looked around the bus, but no one else seemed to have noticed the incident.

He tried to go back to his book, but he couldn't concentrate. He just couldn't stop thinking about that weird little creature. *Just what was that thing? And what about that blinding light?* Jamal hoped it hadn't permanently damaged his eyes. Also, there now seemed to be a strange kind of low-level electricity crackling in the air inside the bus.

Again, Jamal looked around the bus. Several passengers were people he saw every day. They didn't seem any different. Everyone was reading, or looking out the window, or

talking to other passengers. They acted like nothing out of the ordinary was happening. He glanced at the passing scenery, and it looked the same too.

Then Jamal blinked in surprise. Hank's News 'n' Views was on the wrong side of the street! On the way to school, the newsstand had always been on his left. Now it was on the right! Other businesses, though, were in the same places they'd always been.

Jamal began to feel uneasy. Was it possible that Hank had actually moved his newsstand across the street? Maybe he'd thought he'd sell more papers over there. The hard-working old guy was always trying to think of ways to make more money. Once he'd even tried handing out balloons that had *Hank's News 'n' Views* stamped on them. After a while, though, Hank had realized that the balloons were costing him too much money.

*But to move the stand clear across the street?* It would take a lot of people to do that. They'd have to tear down the stand, board by