

1

There was something evil about the Third Avenue bus. It stood there, almost taunting, as Jackson Opus came tearing along the sidewalk, dodging pedestrians, yelling, “Hey! Hey! Wait!”

He was no more than six feet away when the door folded shut, the air brakes hissed, and the long accordion-style vehicle eased out into traffic.

Jax stopped short, utterly defeated. A second later, he was rear-ended by Tommy Cicerelli, who had just enough breath left to shout a few choice words at the zit-cream ad on the back of the disappearing bus.

“We’ll be late,” Jax predicted. “Coach is *so* going to kill us.”

“We can’t be late for the championship game!” Tommy ranted. “Maybe there’ll be another one soon.”

Sure enough, another M33 crested the rise. The boys rushed to the stop only to watch in despair as the driver went by without so much as a glance at them out of the corner of his eye.

Tommy slammed his gym bag against the pole. “Hey, man, what about us?”

“No way another bus is going to come now,” Jax mourned. “Not after two in a row.”

Yet only a minute or so later, there it was — the route number in the front windshield clearly read M33. Even from down the avenue, Jax and Tommy could tell it was packed to the roof. The driver was concentrating on the horizon, without even looking at the stop where they were waiting.

“He’s blowing us off!” Tommy wailed.

In desperation, Jax stepped out into the road, waving madly until he caught the driver’s attention. Standing there in the lane, he had a brief flash of how he must have looked to someone on the bus — a twelve-year-old kid in the path of tons of roaring machinery. It was more vivid than a daydream. For an instant, he actually *saw* himself through the glass of the windshield, growing larger and larger as the bus bore down on him.

He held his ground. Not for a regular game; not even for the playoffs. For the championship.

With a screech of metal on metal, the huge vehicle lurched to a halt. Hefting their duffels, Jax and Tommy squeezed aboard.

“Opus, you are the *man*!” Tommy exclaimed in awe.

“I’m the man, all right. If I can’t get us uptown by seven thirty, I’m the *dead* man.” As Jax leaned over to swipe his MetroCard, he caught sight of the driver. The man was staring at him, his face expressionless.

“You freaked the guy out,” Tommy whispered. “Even in New York, it’s not every day some idiot steps out in front of a speeding bus.”

Jax flushed. “Sorry, mister. We’re just really late. You have to get us to Ninety-Sixth Street as soon as possible.”

The door hissed shut, and the bus started north, gathering speed. It beat the yellow light at Fourteenth and sailed up the avenue. The stop-request bell rang several times, but the driver kept on going.

“Hey!” came a voice. “You missed my block!”

There was no response from the driver, who hunched over the big wheel, weaving through the evening rush, accelerating to the speed limit and far beyond. Horns sounded and tires squealed as frightened motorists swerved to get out of the way. Pedestrians ran for their lives.

Jax gawked at the driver. Was he nuts? This was an accordion bus, not a race car! City roads were crowded, with stoplights on every corner, and the guy had the pedal to the metal!

“Dude, this is the best bus in New York!” Tommy exclaimed. “We might just make it after all.”

Wordlessly, Jax watched out the window as the blocks flashed by. Lights turned red, but the driver plowed straight through. Cross traffic screeched to a halt. There was a crunch as a taxi tried to reverse out of the path of the hurtling M33 and bashed in the front grille of an SUV.

The passengers’ reactions morphed from surprise to anger to outright panic.

“Are you crazy, mister?”

“You caused an accident back there!”

“You’re a mile and a half past my stop!”

“You’ll get us all killed!”

“I’m calling the cops!”

As they barreled across Fifty-Ninth Street, a slow-moving garbage truck lumbered directly into their path. The driver yanked the wheel so abruptly that his head bumped against the side window. Passengers were tossed from their seats, and standees swayed violently, hanging on for dear life. Screams rang out and cell phones hit the floor. Jax clung to the rail to avoid being thrown down the entrance steps. Tommy was pressed against the door. The whole interior vibrated like a guitar string.

The bus shot the gap between the truck and a row of taxis, rattled over some construction plates, and rocketed on. They were now the undisputed kings of the road. Pedestrians and cars scattered to get out of their way. It took no more than a peek in the rearview mirror to convince a motorist that he or she wanted no quarrel with this speeding juggernaut plowing up the avenue, its accordion-attached back oscillating like the tail of a shark.

Inside was pandemonium — angry shouts, terrified screams, and even prayers. One man was out of his seat, trying to wrestle the wheel away from the driver, who was holding him off with a stiff arm.

Jax's wide eyes met Tommy's. At this point, basketball was the last thing on their minds. What was going on here? Exactly how scared should they be? Both were city kids, tough to impress. Yet they'd heard stories of people snapping and doing crazy things. Was that what was happening to the driver? And was it just bad luck that had put them on this bus the very day he chose to flash out in a blaze of demented glory?

The shrieking of brakes was earsplitting. Pocketbooks and loose objects were airborne. Businessmen went down like dominoes. Jax was slammed into a bulkhead. Tommy was tossed on top of him. At the last moment, Jax held up his gym bag, preventing a head-to-head collision that would have knocked both of them unconscious. In a few devastating seconds, the bus had jolted from speeding missile to a shattering, complete stop.

The door hissed open. “Ninety-Sixth Street,” the driver announced pleasantly.

Cries of pain and whimpers of fear filled the long vehicle. Buried under Tommy, his heart pounding in his throat, all Jax could manage was “Huh?”

“Ninety-Sixth,” the man repeated. “Have a nice day.”

Jax and Tommy disembarked, and they weren’t the only ones. Passengers, gasping and wheezing with relief, joined the stampede to the safety of the sidewalk. The fact that most were far from their destinations didn’t bother them anymore. They had fully expected to be dead. Being alive was a definite plus for the day.

His bus completely empty, the driver moved on with a friendly wave. It prompted a chorus of angry shouts from his former riders.

Jax could hear sirens in the distance. He labored to get his breathing under control. “How weird was that?”

But Tommy was looking past him at the clock tower on the corner. “We can still make it! Let’s run!”