



MARVEL
**MILES
MORALES**
SPIDER-MAN

by Jason Reynolds

MARVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

Miles set the good dishes on the table. The white porcelain with the blue detailing glazed over the top—ornate flowers and intricate images of old Chinese villages that nobody in his family had ever been to. *Good china*, his father called it, passed down from his grandmother only to be used on Sundays and special occasions. And though it was Sunday, today was also a special occasion for Miles, because it was the last day of his punishment.

“My suggestion to you, mijo, is that you make sure you get it all out before his class,” Miles’s mother said, lifting a window and fanning the smoke from the stove out with a hand towel. “Because I swear, if you get suspended again for something like this, it’s gonna be you I’m fanning out the window.”

Miles was suspended for having to pee. Well, for *saying* he had to pee. After his history teacher, Mr. Chamberlain,

said no, Miles begged. And once Mr. Chamberlain said no again, Miles left. So he was actually suspended for leaving class. But here's the thing—Miles didn't really have to pee. And no, he didn't have to do *that* either. Miles had to rescue someone.

At least he thought he did. Truth was, his spider-sense had been on the fritz lately. But Miles couldn't risk it—couldn't ignore what he considered his responsibility.

"I don't always have time to pee before class, Ma," Miles replied. He rinsed forks and knives in the sink, while his mother hung the towel on the oven handle. She grabbed a pair of tongs and lifted chunks of chicken breast from the sizzling grease.

"Yeah, you used to say that every night, and guess what? You wet the bed more than any boy I've ever seen."

"The boy could've set a record," Miles's father chimed in from the couch. He was flipping through Friday's *Daily Bugle*. He only got the Friday edition; his theory was that if he were to actually read it each day, he'd never leave the house. Creatures everywhere were threatening civilization—and those were just the articles about reality TV. "Miles, I swear you were the most bed-wettingest kid in Brooklyn. Matter fact, back then I used to get this trash paper every morning, just so we could line the top of your mattress with it in the evening." Mr. Davis closed the paper, folded it in half. He shook his head. "And *then* your pissy butt would come waddling into our bedroom in the middle of the night smelling like two-hundred-year-old

lemonade, talkin' 'bout, *I had an accident*. An *accident*? I'ma tell you right now, son, be thankful for your mother, because if it were up to me, you would've been lying in the wet spot until it was a dry spot."

"Be quiet, Jeff," Miles's mother said, positioning the chicken on a serving plate.

"Am I lying, Rio? You were always savin' him."

"Because he's my baby," she said, laying a paper towel on the first layer of meat to sop the grease from the glistening skin. "But you not *a* baby no more. So figure out what you need to do to keep your butt in that seat."

Miles had already made up his mind that that wouldn't be a problem. He was going to stay in his seat in Mr. Chamberlain's class and ignore his beehive brain whenever the bees up there got to buzzing. His spidey-sense had always been his alarm, the thing that let him know when there was danger close, or when someone needed help. But since the beginning of this school year, his junior year at Brooklyn Visions Academy, his spidey-sense seemed to be . . . broken. Almost like his powers were wearing off. He'd been dashing out of Chamberlain's class over and over again for fake bathroom breaks, bolting down the hallway and out the door, a gust of wind, only to find . . . nothing. No monster. No mutant. No madman. Just Brooklyn being Brooklyn, left with a new awkward excuse about what took him so long in the bathroom.

Perhaps, for a kid like him, being a Super Hero had an expiration date. And it wasn't worth being punished

by his folks—it wasn't worth failing a class, or being expelled—if he couldn't even guarantee he'd still be able to be Spider-Man by graduation.

The buzzer buzzed just as Miles finished setting the table for four. He scooted past his mother, who was scooping yellow rice from a pot into a bowl, and stuck his head out the open window.

“I don't know why you look to see who it is like you don't already know,” Miles's father said, washing his hands in the sink. He kissed Miles's mother loudly on the cheek. “Smells good, baby. Matter fact, it smells so good that our son's knucklehead friend could smell it on the other side of Brooklyn.”

“Be nice. You know he's going through some changes,” Miles's mother said.

“We going through some changes, too—nickels, dimes, and quarters.” Miles's father rubbed his thumb and index fingers together. “I'm just sayin', I love the kid, but we can't really afford another mouth at this table.”

Miles's mother faced his father, placed her hands on his chest, and sighed. “Love is deed, papi. Not just fine phrases.” She planted a peck on his lips.

“Yo!” Miles, grossed out by his parents, yelled down to the stoop. “Hold on.” On the other side of the room, Miles hit the button that automatically unlocked the front door. Then cracked the one leading into the building, the sound of heavy footfalls climbing the steps.

“Yo,” Ganke said, almost falling into the apartment. Ganke, a burly Korean kid, was Miles's best friend,

confidant, and roommate at Brooklyn Visions Academy. He immediately inspected Miles's face, right cheek, left cheek, then whispered, "You okay? I'm surprised your folks didn't kill you," before moving past Miles to greet his parents. "Hey, Mrs. M., Mr. Jeff. What's for din-din?"

"I'm not sure, Ganke, but guess who would know? *Your* parents," Miles's father said. Mrs. Morales slapped her husband on the arm.

"Oh, I know what they're having for dinner, Mr. Jeff. I already ate it," Ganke said with a shrug.

"Um, Ganke, wash your hands and sit down. You know you're always welcome here, even if it's for dinner number two. Tonight we're having chicharrón de pollo."

Ganke sent a confused look to Miles's father, who now stood behind a chair at the head of the table. "Fried chicken," he said, his face volleying back and forth between annoyed and sympathetic.

"Oh, sweet."

"Not like it would've mattered," Miles's father jabbed, sliding out his chair and taking a seat.

"Got that right, Mr. Jeff."

Miles set the chicken, the rice, and the greens on the table, then took his seat. His mother put big spoons in the rice and greens bowls, and tongs on the chicken plate. Then she sat down as well.

"Bless the food, Jeff," Mrs. Morales said. Miles, his father, and Ganke instantly snatched their eager hands back from the bowls and spread them wide to grab hold of the person sitting next to them.

“Yep, yes, of course. Bow your heads, boys,” Miles’s father said. “Lord, please help our son, Miles, behave himself in school. Because if he doesn’t, this very well may be the last home-cooked meal he ever has. Amen.”

“Amen,” Miles’s mother said seriously.

“Amen!” Ganke said.

Miles sucked his teeth, shot Ganke a look. Ganke leaned in for the chicken tongs.

Sunday dinner at Miles’s house was a tradition. Throughout the week Miles was away, staying on campus at the Brooklyn Visions Academy, and on Saturday, well . . . even Miles’s parents knew that there wasn’t a sixteen-year-old in all of Brooklyn who wanted to spend Saturday evening with his folks. But Sunday was perfect for an early family meal. A lazy day for everyone. As a matter of fact, besides his mother making him get up for early morning mass, Miles typically had the rest of the day free to loaf around and watch old sci-fi movies with his dad in the afternoon and pray his mother was making his favorite for dinner—pasteles.

But this Sunday hadn’t been quite as relaxed. Nor had the rest of the weekend. After being suspended Thursday afternoon, Father Jamie down at the church would’ve just given Miles a few Hail Marys to make penance and sent him on his way. But “Father Jeff” gave him a few Hell Nahs and sent him to his room.

It all started Friday, when Miles had been awakened at six in the morning and dragged outside on the stoop by his father.

“What are we doing out here, Dad?” Miles asked. He was wearing a wrinkled BVA T-shirt, holey sweatpants, and flip-flops. Trash cans and stuffed bags lined the block, some torn open by stray cats searching for scraps, others rummaged through by canners who sneaked around at night, looking for cans and bottles to trade in for dimes and quarters.

His father didn’t answer him, at least not right away. Just sat there on the top step, holding a napkin, sipping a cup of coffee.

“So . . . about this suspension.” Sip, swallow. “What exactly happened?” There was steel in his voice.

“Well, um, it was . . . my head was doing the . . . I had a . . . a feeling,” Miles stammered. His dad also knew his secret and had been keeping it from his mother for a while now. But his father was still a . . . father. Not of Spider-Man, but of Miles Morales. He made that clear to Miles as often as possible.

“So this was about you saving somebody, huh? Yeah, well, let me ask you something, Super Hero. . . .” He took another sip from his mug. “Who’s gonna save you?”

Miles just sat there, silent, searching for an answer that would satisfy his old man, while at the same time praying for anything to change the subject.

The sun had just started to rise, a line of gold streaking across the red brick of the brownstones, when a miracle happened in the form of rumbling trash trucks. *Saved*, Miles thought as he and his father shifted their attention, watching the garbagemen slowly move down the

street—one driving, two walking alongside the truck sling- ing bags, dumping cans, and throwing them back onto the sidewalk. Plastic forks, chicken bones, toilet paper gaskets and other remnants that had slipped through holes in the bags were left strewn up and down the sidewalk. It had been ten minutes and Miles still had no idea what he and his old man were doing out there. Until the trash truck was done with their block.

“You know what, we’ll talk about this more later. For now, son, why don’t you tidy up.”

“What you mean?”

Miles’s father stood, stretched his legs, and took another sip. He pointed up and down the street. “See all these cans? Be a good *hero* and put them back where they belong. Helping your neighbors is the most heroic thing you can do, right?”

Miles sighed.

“Oh,” his father continued. “And get up all this trash that our wonderful garbagemen left behind.”

“With what?” Miles asked, instantly grossed out. He wished he had one of his web-shooters on so he wouldn’t have had to actually touch, or even get close to, the plastic baggies of dog poop and fish guts. Not that he could sling web in his pajamas anyway.

“Figure it out, son.”

And that was just the beginning of his punishment. After that, Miles had to clean the apartment, schlep loads of clothes to and from the Laundromat, and make dinner for himself, which ended up being Top Ramen with hot

sauce and toast. Saturday, his father walked him up and down the block, knocking on doors asking neighbors if there was anything they needed done. He got stuck dragging an old mattress out of Ms. Shine's basement—where her junkie son, Cyrus, used to live—hanging pictures in Mr. Frankie's house, and walking all the neighborhood dogs that needed walking. Which meant there was poop that needed bagging. Lots of it.

And on and on with the neighborhood “heroics.” Chore after chore. Job after job. Ramen pack after ramen pack.

Now, over Sunday dinner, Miles shuddered at the memory and reached for a second helping of rice and another piece of chicken. For the first Sunday in a long time he was out-eating Ganke and his father. And that wasn't just because of the delicious flavor of his mother's cooking. But also because of the sweet taste of his punishment—his torture—finally being over.

Until Miles's father chose to douse the dinner with current affairs.

“Read in the paper earlier that kids are getting beaten up and robbed for their sneakers,” his father said, randomly. He pushed greens into his mouth, chewed, swallowed. “I'm talking to you, Ganke.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I haven't had no problems. Just walked here from the train like I always do, and nobody seemed to care,” Ganke said.

Miles's father leaned to the side to check out Ganke's

sneakers. “No, I’m thinking maybe you’re the one stealing shoes.”

“Ha!” Miles’s mother yipped, pushing herself out from the table. She put her plate in the sink and threw over her shoulder, “You know Ganke couldn’t hurt a fly. Miles couldn’t either.” Ganke and Miles’s father both flashed a quick glance at Miles. His dad made a funny face at him at the same time his mom turned around. “Jeff,” she huffed, catching him in the act. “It’s like I’m raising *two* boys. Matter fact, just for that, *you* washing dishes.”

“No I’m not,” Miles’s father said like a disobedient child. He chuckled, and set his fork down on the plate. “Your baby, Miles, is gonna do that. Call it punishment dessert. A cherry on top.” Ganke blew a raspberry. Miles gave him a stone face. “Or, son, we can trade if you like. I’ll do the dishes, and you pay all those bills over there,” he added, pointing to the stack of envelopes rubber-banded on the coffee table.

“I know,” Miles groaned. He knew what was coming next.

“And like I always say, *it takes wages, not wishes, to stop washing dishes.*” Miles’s father added, “*And you gon’ take out the trash.*”

After dinner, Miles grabbed the trash bag, ran down the stoop, and tossed it into the can. When he turned around his dad was sitting on the top step, the same step where he’d sat on Friday. It was like a game of Simon Says, except

with Jeff. *Jeff says sit down, Miles. Jeff says don't talk until I ask you a question, Miles.*

Neither of them said a word for a minute, the silence sizzling in Miles's stomach, as if the chicken he had just eaten were refrying itself.

"You know me and your mother love you," his father said, finally.

"Yeah." Miles could feel the setup coming.

"And you gettin' ready to go back to school, so listen, I need you to understand. . . . I just need you to, like . . ." Miles's father was the one doing the stammering now, searching for the right words. Finally, he just shot it straight. "You know your uncle was suspended. A lot." Miles's father pressed his hands together. "He didn't think he ever had to follow rules. And it got him killed. And the last thing your mother and I want is for you to be . . . like him."

You're just like me.

The words pierced Miles, lodged in his neck. *Suspended. Rules. Killed.* Miles swallowed hard, washed his guilt down with confusion. He was used to his uncle being brought up in times like these, but it stung every time. In fact, the *only* time Uncle Aaron was brought up was when his father was trying to explain to him all the ways *not* to be. His father and uncle were street kids—Brooklyn jack-boys—who were always robbing and hustling, going in and out of court and juvie until they were old enough to go in and out of jail. Miles's father met his mother and

ended up choosing a different path, but his uncle Aaron kept chasing fast money in dark alleys. Now Uncle Aaron was the standard for stupid, the example for all things wrong in their family, as far as Miles's dad was concerned.

“You understand?” Miles's father asked.

Miles sat there gnawing on the inside of his cheek, thinking about Uncle Aaron. What he knew about him. Not just what he had been told by his father over and over and over again. But what he knew firsthand—that he was there when his uncle was killed. That three years ago, Uncle Aaron had accidentally killed himself while trying to kill Miles.

“I understand.”



CHAPTER TWO

Miles rolled the mask down over his forehead, over his eyes. For a split second, darkness. Then he lined up the holes so his vision cleared and continued stretching it over his nose, mouth, and chin. He looked at himself in the mirror. Spider-Man. Then he rolled the mask back up, again, that quick moment of darkness. He'd been doing this—the back-and-forth with it—for a few minutes. Miles's father had told him time and time again that when he and Uncle Aaron were young, they used to take their mother's dark stockings and pull them over their heads, cut the rest of the leg part off and tie it in a knot before pulling robberies. He said it was uncomfortable, and took a second to get used to, like being trapped in some kind of cocoon. "Aaron didn't become no butterfly, though," he would say. "He became something else."

You're just like me.



Uncle Aaron lived in the Baruch Houses, a few blocks from a Ray's Pizza. Baruch was a huge housing development running along Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive. Right on the East River. If it weren't for the fact that there were over five thousand people living in fifteen blocks of brick high-rises, it might've been considered prime real estate. Waterfront property. Miles would always meet Uncle Aaron on the corner of East Houston and Baruch Place at a bodega, where Aaron would buy grape soda. Then they'd go and get a whole pizza, before walking through the forest of skyscrapers to get back to Uncle Aaron's apartment. Because you never walk through projects by yourself unless you live there.

If Miles's parents had known that he used to spend time with Uncle Aaron, he'd be on punishment for the rest of his life. As in, forty years old with kids of his own, still not allowed to go outside. So Miles would tell them he was going to hang out with some friends at Ray's Pizza. Which was technically true . . . even though there were like a hundred Ray's Pizzas in New York. And this "friend" was, in fact, his uncle. And Miles always made sure he wasn't in Aaron's apartment when he had to call his parents to check in, that way he wouldn't have to lie. He couldn't. It just wasn't his thing.

Uncle Aaron's apartment—4D—had nothing in it but a mattress, a few fold-up chairs, a rickety TV stand with a TV on top, and a small coffee table with a few packs

of panty hose on it. There was also always random shoe boxes, size nine, which Miles knew was too small for his uncle, and he hated the fact that they were also too small for him. Probably just merch to be boosted on the block. *Fell off the trucks.*

Everything else, like all of Aaron's clothes and things, were in trash bags lined up along the wall. He was all the way moved in—as a matter of fact, this was the only place Miles had ever known Aaron to live—but always seemed like he was ready to move out.

While Miles and Uncle Aaron ate, sitting on the fold-out chairs with the pizza box on the empty corner of the coffee table, they talked about family, school, and girls. Well, really Uncle Aaron would talk about girls, but he'd do it in a way that made Miles feel like *they* were talking about girls, even though Miles really didn't have nothing to say about them besides *I don't really have nothin' to say about them*. The one thing Uncle Aaron never—*NEVER*—talked to Miles about was “business.” He never told him about the banks, or the stores he had hit. He never talked about how he'd stalk around Wall Street, the only late-night ghost town in New York, waiting to catch unassuming, stiff-suited stockbrokers working overtime. And he definitely didn't tell Miles about the biggest hit of all, the one he made just before Miles came for a visit one afternoon. The one that would change Miles's life, and ruin their relationship. OSBORN Industries. The home of the most cutting-edge innovation when it came to defense, biomedical, and chemical technologies. And

spiders. Genetically mutated, chemically enhanced spiders.

It was forty-five minutes before Miles would have to leave to make the phone call home. TV playing midday talk shows. *Are you ready to see her new makeover?! Gina, come on out!* A duffel bag on the floor next to Miles's chair, full of money and pieces of technology Aaron thought he could sell on the black market. And from the bag emerged a spider, one that crawled up the leg of the chair and bit Miles right on the top of his hand, sending a sizzle down to his fingertips.

"Ouch!" Miles hissed, flicking the spider onto the floor. Uncle Aaron jumped up and stomped it dead.

"Sorry, kid," he said, with absolutely no embarrassment in his voice. He smeared the spider on the wood floor like chewing gum on the sidewalk. Miles saw him square himself to get a look at the guts. The goo that was aglow. "But you know how it is. Baruch ain't no brownstone."

There was a bang on the bathroom door.

Miles instantly camouflaged, blending in with the Pepto-pink tile of the wall.

"Miles? You fall in, son?" his mother shouted. After he'd come back in from taking out the trash and getting the *You know your uncle was this and that* talk, he'd left his parents and Ganke in the living room. His father, opening mail—mainly bills—from the day before. His mother, flipping through TV channels looking for Lifetime. And Ganke, a belly full of chicken and rice, sitting on the couch, waiting for Miles so they could get going back to Brooklyn

Visions Academy. Miles shook his head and came out of camo mode—he was way too on edge.

“Um, no!” Miles yelled. “I’ll be out in a second. Just, um . . . brushing my hair.” He knew she wouldn’t believe that. It was the one time he took comfort in knowing she probably assumed he was having some . . . alone time. Miles pulled off the mask and used his hand to try to smooth his hair down.

“Rio!” his father called. “Come see this!”

“Hurry up, Miles. I don’t want y’all leaving too late. You heard what your father said about those punks robbing kids.” His mother walked away from the door, zipping a “What is it?” to his father.

Miles listened for his mother’s retreat before dashing across the hall to his bedroom. He stuffed the mask into his backpack and grabbed his brush off the table so he could keep up with the whole *hair-brushing* story.

“Aight, I’m ready,” Miles said, entering the living room acting like he hadn’t been in the bathroom forever. *Brush, brush, brush*. The top goes forward, down on the left, down on the right, down in the back. In that order. His mother was standing beside the couch reading a piece of mail that she pressed to her chest once Miles walked in the room. Miles figured it was another bill—there was always another bill. If he asked about it, he would just trigger another lecture about how important it was that he do well in school. And after the last three days he’d had, he couldn’t take another one of those.

“All that brushing ain’t gon’ get it, son,” his father said,

tapping Miles's mother on the leg to snap her out of her trance. "Rio."

Startled, she folded the letter, stuffed it back in the envelope, and handed it back to Miles's father.

"Um . . . sorry," she said, approaching Miles. She ran her palm along his head. "You need a haircut, papi."

"This weekend when you come home, we're going to the barbershop. Can't have you out here woofin'," his father teased.

Miles kept brushing his hair and brushed his parents off. "You ready?" he asked Ganke, who had gotten up from the couch and flung his backpack over his shoulder, a goofy grin spread across his face. Ganke always loved these moments with Miles and his family. More ammo for jokes.

"Yep. Take care, Mrs. M." Ganke came in for a hug.

"Bye, Ganke. Keep him in line, please."

"I always try, but the boy's crazy."

"Whatever, man," Miles said, hugging his mother and kissing her on the cheek.

"Mr. Jeff." Ganke reached out his hand. Miles's father took it, squeezed it tight. Ganke's face wrinkled with pain.

"Next Sunday we're having an all-veggie dinner. You in?"

"You know it!" Ganke chimed.

Miles's father looked at his mother, shook his head. "I tried, honey. But it didn't work." He laughed.

"Okay, okay, you boys be safe, please. Ganke, tell your mother I said hello. Miles, call us when you get there."

“Of course.” He slipped his brush in his bag.

“Don’t forget, mijo.”

“I won’t.”

Once outside, Miles was about to ask Ganke how his weekend had gone, especially since he knew time at home had been weird for Ganke since his parents had split up. But Ganke had a way of sensing those kinds of awkward questions, so before Miles could get it out, Ganke countered with a doozy of his own.

“So there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you for, like, ever.” Ganke had just finished tying his shoes at the bottom of Miles’s stoop. Miles took the concern on the tip of his tongue and slipped it underneath it, like gum—to be saved for later. Miles knew Ganke was probably setting him up for some joke he’d been thinking about for the last thirty minutes. He was one of those friends you couldn’t leave alone with your parents because he would ask all kinds of ridiculous questions, digging for secret embarrassing things that your mother and father would see as cute. Stuff like *Miles used to cry every Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Not because of what happened to Dr. King, but because the television and radio would play clips of his speeches and Miles always thought he sounded like a ghost. Or Miles had irritable bowel syndrome and crapped his pants until he was ten.*

“What?” Miles groaned as they passed Ms. Shine’s house. He remembered the way that mattress smelled when he’d moved it out for her, the way it felt to have

those mystery stains and globs of matted white cat hair brush against his cheek. *Ugh.*

“Aight, don’t get mad,” Ganke prepped Miles, “but . . .”

“Just say it.”

“Okay, so . . . your last name. It don’t really make sense to me.”

“What? Morales?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m half–Puerto Rican.”

Ganke stopped walking and twisted his face up at Miles, like *Duh.*

“So . . .”

“So, your *mother’s* name is Rio Morales, right?”

“Correct.”

“And your father’s name is Jefferson Davis.”

“Two for two.”

“So then why isn’t your name Miles Dav—” Ganke’s eyes widened. “Oh . . . snap. *Miles Davis!*” He stopped walking again, this time in front of Mr. Frankie’s house. Ganke folded himself in half, exploding into laughter. “Wait . . . wait!” He tried to catch his breath while Miles laser-stared him down. “Miles. I’m sorry. Wait . . . Miles Davis? I just . . . I never thought of that until just now. . . . Oh . . . man . . . hold on. . . .” The laughter tapered off. “Okay . . . *woo.* Okay . . .”

“You done?”

“I’m done. I’m so done. Sorry, man, it just caught me off guard.” They continued down the block.

“Anyway, that’s not even the reason,” Miles said. “But I’m glad you think that’s so funny.”

“So then, why?”

“Ganke, why you actin’ like you don’t know my mother? Better yet, why you actin’ like you don’t know my abuela?” Now Miles laughed. “Nah, seriously, I don’t know. I kind of think it’s something else.”

“Like what?”

Miles shrugged. “Back in the day, my pops and my uncle did enough dirt in their lives to make Davis a bad word in some circles. I look just like them both and live in the same neighborhood, so, I don’t know, I wonder. . . .”

“Gotcha,” Ganke said, the funny finally all faded.

There was an empty quarter-water jug on the sidewalk. They were shaped like small plastic barrels, but Miles always pretended they were grenades when he was younger. He kicked it, and it rolled ahead in front of him. He cleared his throat. “That’s also why I think my super-powers are messin’ up.”

“Uh . . . you think they’re messing up because of your last name?” Ganke asked.

“No. But because of what my last name *means*. I mean, what that part of me is. Like, what if I’m not cut out to be . . . I don’t know . . . good?”

It all just made so much sense to him. Like how really tall people usually have really tall parents. Or how you can be predisposed to be an alcoholic if one of your parents is. Miles had what he always considered complicated

genetics: *bad* blood. And, to make it worse, his father and uncle were sixteen when they got started in crime, which was Miles's age now. So maybe that part of his bloodline was fighting whatever changes to it the spider bite had caused, like some kind of grimy blood cell fighting off anything awesome inside him.

"Dude, shut up."

"I'm serious, man."

"You're also stupid. Like, that's just silly. That's like saying if you play basketball, your kids are gonna play."

"Good chance," Miles said. He used his thumb and index finger as a pincer claw to pick up the empty jug he'd kicked, residual responsibility from Friday's trash cleanup.

"When's the last time you've seen Michael Jordan Jr.?"

"I'm not sure if Michael Jordan has a junior, Ganke." Miles tossed the grenade in a neighbor's open garbage bin.

"Exactly. And do you know *why* you don't know if Jordan has a little Jordan?" Ganke asked. "Because Little Jordan didn't grow up to be . . . Little Jordan." Miles didn't reply. "I mean, you don't even know why your buzzy head-alarm thingy is all outta whack. Might be because . . . it's just wearing off. Like maybe the super stuff from the spider venom, or whatever, was like a virus that took a few years to finally pass through your system. Or maybe it's just hiccuping because you're growing. Shoot, for all we know, you could mess around and lose *all* your superpowers when you finally get a girlfriend!" Ganke's jaw dropped.

“Sounds like something my uncle would’ve said.” Miles stepped over a pile of dog crap.

“Lucky for you, the girlfriend thing ain’t happening no time soon,” Ganke fired off, tapping Miles on the arm.

“Yeah, for you either!” Miles shot back.

“Look, the point I’m making is, true, you don’t know what’s causing it, but worrying about it probably isn’t helping. You gotta de-stress. Relax a little bit. Have some fun with it.” Ganke sent a wave through his arm as if he were breakdancing. “Shoot, if I had what you have . . .”

“Man, what? What would you do?” Miles asked, his tone short and sharp.

Ganke stopped walking for the third time. The train station was to the right. Ganke peered down the street, then looked left to make sure no cars were coming. “Let’s go straight, and I’ll show you.”

Two blocks to the basketball court. When they got there, a two-on-two was in play.

“What we doing here?” Miles asked as he and Ganke strolled up to the gate.

“Just a little pit stop. You asked me what I would do.”

“Ah. Maybe next time, man,” Miles said, peering through the gate. “They’re already runnin’ a game.” But Ganke wasn’t having it.

“Let’s go.” Ganke headed in.

“Nah, man.” Miles grabbed his arm.

“Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“Ganke, I—”

“Hey, guys! Guys!” He walked onto the court, strutted right into the middle of the game. Miles followed behind him but stopped at the sideline.

“Time-out, time-out!” Ganke called, jamming the fingers of one hand into the palm of the other, making a *T*.

“Yo, what you doin’?” a short guy with a puffed-up chest asked, picking up his dribble. “You not playin’, so you can’t call time-out. Matter fact, you can’t call nothin’.” He flared his nostrils. Miles shook his head. He wasn’t in the mood for a fight and couldn’t risk having his eye blacked or anything like that.

“Get off the court, Bruce Bruce Lee,” the short guy said.

“Who is Bruce Bruce Lee? You mean, *Bruce* Lee?” Ganke said.

The guys all looked around at each other, bewildered. “You don’t know who Bruce Bruce is? The comedian?” Shorty Puff-Chest put his arms out and blew out his cheeks to do his best and worst imitation of a fat person. “Fat funnyman. And Lee, because—”

“Because that’s my last name,” Ganke deadpanned. Miles stifled a laugh.

“Wait . . . your last name Lee, forreal?” Shorty Puff-Chest asked.

“Yep. And *his* name”—Ganke pointed back at Miles—“is Miles Davis.” Miles sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Like the jazz dude?”

“Nah, like the dude who’s about to take your money,” Ganke cracked.

“Oh, word?” Another one of the guys spoke up. He was light-skinned, the color of flu mucus. And slimy, too, from sweat. “And how he gon’ do that?”

“Dunk contest.”

“Wait . . . *what?*” Miles squawked, now stepping timidly onto the court.

Mucus Man smiled and tapped the dude standing next to him. A man built like . . . well . . . like a Super Hero spoke up.

“Now you talkin’ my language. I don’t know if you know who I am, but ain’t too many cats around here can out-jump me,” he bragged.

“Yeah, Benji got bunnies. Jump out the gym.” Mucus Man played hype-man.

“No doubt. And little jazzman over there look like he ain’t even got nut-fuzz yet. He also look like he ain’t got no money.” The last guy on the court finally chimed in. He’d been standing off to the side drinking water. He was . . . a bear. Not an actual bear, but not far from one either.

“He don’t.” And as soon as Ganke said it, the guys laughed and shooed him and Miles away like pesky flies. “But,” Ganke added, “I’ll bet these.” Ganke slipped out of his sneakers. “Air Max 90s. Infrareds. OGs. Apparently everybody wants them, and this is my first time wearing them. They probably worth, like, three hundred.” Ganke wasn’t a sneakerhead, but his father was. Yeah, his dad. His two favorite hobbies were hounding Ganke about school (he and Miles’s parents had that in common) and collecting rare sneakers, the bulk of which he gave to his

son when he moved out, under the condition that Ganke took care of them. Of course, Ganke never had to. Because Miles took care of them for him.

“*What?*” Again, from Miles.

“What size?” the man called Benji—the one built like a Super Hero—asked.

“Size ten.” Ganke, ignoring Miles, eyeballed Benji’s feet. “Your size.”

Benji smiled, revealing a space between each jagged tooth. He dug into his sock and pulled out a wad. His buddies reached into their own pockets, socks, bags, and put up their own cash, too. After counting out the three hundred bucks, they laid it all out on the court, placing one of the sneakers on top to keep the evening breeze from turning dollars into feathers.

Then everyone cleared out in front of the hoop to give Benji and Miles space. Benji dribbled the ball intensely, as if he were pounding a head against the pavement. Miles got the drift. He shot a glance at Ganke, who was now wearing Miles’s backpack on his front. Ganke smiled, followed by his usual shrug.

“Little man probably can’t even grab the net,” Benji said. He held the ball in both hands, took two steps and effortlessly jammed it through the rim. No warning. No warm-up. “Should be a piece of cake.”

“Or a piece of steak,” Ganke said from the sidelines. Miles swung around, ice-grilled him. Ganke mouthed, *Sorry, sorry*, as Miles called for the ball. But as soon as

Benji threw it to him—zipping it as if he were shooting a fireball from his hands—Miles realized he knew very little about basketball.

He bounced the ball fumblingly, slapping at it with a stiff hand. Okay, no more dribbling. Dribbling wasn't his thing. He gripped the ball, the tips of his fingers instantly becoming sticky. It felt like there were tiny cannons firing off inside him. A tingle in his elbows and fingertips. A surge of electricity shooting down the back of his legs, throbbing in the soft spot behind his knees. And then, as if it were nothing, he took two steps, jumped eye level with the orange ring, and easily dropped the ball in.

“Yo . . .” Mucus Man said, shaking his head. That's all he said. No follow-up. The others didn't say anything, but all their faces were saying the same thing: Yo . . .

“Aight, little man. I see you,” Benji said, taking the ball. “So let's just get this over with, forreal this time.” He started from the three-point line, took off running, jumped, and turned his back toward the rim midair. Holding the ball with both hands, he brought it down between his legs, then flung it up over his head and behind him, hammering it into the net with a grunt.

“*Ungh!*” Shorty Puff-Chest repeated the grunt, again, like a good hype-man. He grabbed his chest and howled dramatically. “That was so hard you almost took *me* out!”

“*Woo!*” Mucus hooted.

“Don't get no better than that, lil' man,” Benji boasted, kicking the ball over to Miles.

“Oh, it does,” from Ganke.

“Yeah, whatever, Bruce Bruce. We’ll see.”

Miles went back to the three-point line. Again, no dribbling. He eyed the rim. But right before he was about to take a running start, Ganke, of course, waved him off.

“Hold on, hold on, hold on.” He skittered to the foul line, shoeless and double-backpacked. “Listen, fellas. This is fun and all, but the truth is, we don’t have all night. So, how about we just get it over with?”

“We will as soon as your man makes a fool of himself by trying to do what I just did.”

“Yeah . . .” Ganke held one finger up, then pointed it at Benji. “No. How about this: if he can do the dunk you did, without all that running, we win.”

“Wait,” Shorty Puff-Chest spoke up. “So you saying if he can do the back dunk that Benji did, on a vertical jump, y’all win.”

“Exactly. And if he can’t—”

“We win, and y’all get your corny asses outta here?”

“Yep,” Miles said. The whole thing had been a bad idea, but this was the only part of the bad idea that sounded like a good idea. They still had to get back to school. Miles still had to make a phone call to his parents. And even though he could say the train was messed up—because the train’s *always* messed up—he didn’t want to lie.

Benji looked surprised, but everyone backed off the court again as Miles stepped up to the rim. He looked up at it: the familiar webbing of the net, the rusty orange

circle, the dirty glass backboard. He glanced at Ganke, then at the court goons—Shorty Puff-Chest, Mucus Man, Benji, and the Bear.

In all the movies Miles had watched, there was always some kind of pep talk or intense battle drum rhythm playing in the hero's mind in these kinds of situations, but in Miles's head, he heard silly music. Like, whistling, and the theme song to *Super Mario Bros*. Whatever. All the staring up at the rim "concentration" was just for show, anyway. After the tension in his body had built enough, Miles sprang up. He twisted in midair before spreading his legs into a full split, dropping the ball down, then drawing it up over his head and into the net with such force that veins of cracked glass traveled through the backboard.

No big deal. To Miles. Or Ganke.

But from the looks on the faces of the court goons, they might as well have just witnessed the second coming of Jordan. Or maybe the second coming of Earl "The Goat" Manigault—everyone in New York had heard the legend about how, at only 6'1", Earl had snatched a dollar bill off the top of a backboard and left change. Benji and his boys were completely stunned.

Until Ganke reached for his shoes. And the money. Then the howls turned to barks. And the astonishment turned to anger.

"What you think you doin'?" Benji pressed up on Ganke as he slipped his feet back in the sneakers and picked up the cash.

“Y’all lost. I mean . . . nobody’s beating that,” Ganke bragged.

“Maybe I can’t beat that, but I can beat *you*. So I suggest you leave the cash.”

“Y’all hustled us,” Mucus Man cried. Streetballers always cry about being hustled, even though they hustle people nonstop. Nobody likes to lose.

“Oh, so it was okay for y’all to take advantage of kids, though?” Miles said. “You just couldn’t resist what you thought was an easy come-up on a fresh pair of sneakers. I mean, we got *backpacks*, man.” He didn’t necessarily care about the money—this was all just Ganke’s attempt to get him to take his mind off being Spider-Man and all the Super Hero mumbo-jumbo. But now it was about principle. About these clowns keeping their word.

“Don’t matter. Leave the money, and leave with your lives.”

Ganke looked at Miles, nodded. Miles shook his head. Ganke nodded again. And again, Miles shook his head.

“No.”

“*What?*” Ganke now was somewhere between a nod and shake.

“Yeah, *what?*” Benji repeated. The rest of the lumpheads gathered around.

“I said no,” Miles confirmed.

It’s amazing how quiet the basketball court gets when things are about to go south. There’s a stillness. A dead air. The streetlights had flickered on by now, and what

was left of the sun was just about gone—only the faintest recognition of blue in a black sky.

“Guys, you don’t have to—”

“Shut up,” Benji shot back at Ganke, pointing at him. “Hold him!” Shorty Puff-Chest and Mucus Man instantly flanked Ganke, grabbing him by the arms.

“Miles!” Ganke called. But before Benji could even sucker-punch Miles’s best friend, or reach for the shoes, or do whatever he was going to do, Miles had already stepped in front of him. There was a tingling just behind his kneecap. In his ears. His palms and fingertips, too.

Benji flashed that raggedy, reptilian smile—Miles could hear his mouth curve, hear the thick saliva on the back of Benji’s tongue—and pushed against Miles’s shoulder to move him out of the way. But as soon as his hand touched Miles, Miles grabbed it and flung Benji around, away from Ganke. Benji shook his head clear and charged, but Miles leaped over him, a clean jump clearing Benji’s head. He ran toward Ganke and speared himself into a jump-kick, spreading his legs at the last minute to miss Ganke’s face, but catching Mucus and Shorty straight in the jaws. It wasn’t enough to hurt them bad—Miles wasn’t trying to—but it was enough to get them to let go of Ganke, who then ran back to the side of the court. Benji grabbed Miles from behind, and in a flash, Miles delivered three elbows to Benji’s breadbasket. *Zoop, zoop, zoop!* Benji doubled over. Miles didn’t finish him. Wanted to give him a chance to chill out—call off his dogs.

Shorty stalked over, his hands up, assuming the hood boxer pose. “I don’t want no trouble,” Miles said, his body still firing tiny rockets through his veins. Shorty didn’t respond, just continued to set up his stance, then reset it. He finally threw a jab. Miles bobbed. He threw another. Miles leaned back, moved from side to side, his arms down, letting Shorty know he didn’t want to fight.

“Hit his ass!” Benji squealed, still trying to catch his breath. Shorty threw a third jab, but this one Miles caught. He grabbed Shorty’s wrist with one hand and used his other one to cup the joint of Shorty’s elbow so that Shorty would have no choice but to punch himself in the face. A clean fist to the nose. His own fist. Miles heard the septum snap.

“ARGH!” Shorty yelled, slapping his other hand to his face. Blood, lots of it, started pouring from his nostrils. For a moment, Miles was stuck. The sight of blood startled him—he didn’t mean for the hit to be so hard.

Mucus backed off, and instead of coming for Miles, he went for Ganke. Ganke made a bumbling dash across the court, yelling at the top of his lungs, while the Bear came toward Miles.

“You have nothing to do with this, man,” Miles said, trying to talk him down.

“You hustled us,” he growled. Then he rocketed toward Miles. Miles, again, jumped over him and kicked him in the back of the head, using the leverage to push off and dart over to Ganke. He grabbed him under the arm like a toddler and hopped up on the fence, dragging Ganke

up the metal grate with him. But not before Mucus Man grabbed the backpack. The one Ganke was wearing on his front—Miles’s backpack.

“Miles!”

“No, Ganke. Don’t let it go!” Miles yelled, one hand clawing the iron gate, and the other clutching the armpit of his friend. He needed that bag. His secret was in there, red and black.

“Give it to me,” Mucus Man growled. “Y’all leaving *everything* here!”

“I can’t . . . I can’t hold it!” Ganke yelled, as Mucus Man yanked and yanked on one of the straps, the other strap pressed into the crook of Ganke’s free arm like it was going to rip straight through it.

“Ganke, do *not* let that bag go!”

Ganke looked up at Miles, his face full of worry. “Miles . . .” Mucus Man tugged again and Ganke’s arm dropped, the bag dropping with it.

Now loose, Miles climbed farther up the fence, yanking Ganke up with him.

“I’m sorry,” Ganke panted.

“Just hold on and stay up here,” Miles ordered as Ganke gripped the gate, looking down from the top. Below, Mucus Man started unzipping the bag as the rest of the goons waited like alligators in basketball shorts. They weren’t going to get out of this the easy way. Miles took a deep breath, and dove into the gator pit.