



CHAPTER 1

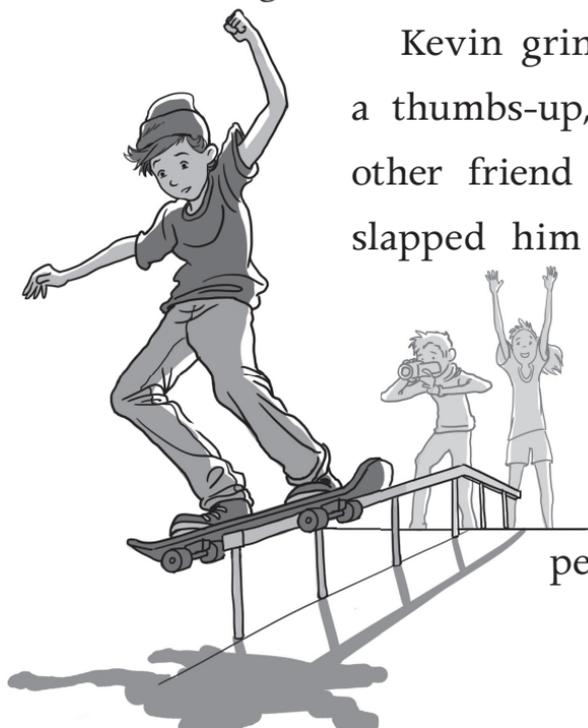
Ten-year-old Joey Flores stood on top of the ramp. He took a deep breath, adjusted the strap to his helmet, and motioned to his friend Kevin Chen to begin filming.

He pushed off on his skateboard, and when he'd gained enough speed, ollied up onto the foot-high railing. He slid sideways on the rail, down the entire length of the ramp, then popped off the end, knees

bent, landing with a satisfying clatter and pumping his fist in the air. “Did you catch that?” he yelled to Kevin. Joey had gotten the skateboard for his last birthday, and even though he spent all his free time at the skate park, with its half-pipes, railings, ramps, and jumps, this was the first time he’d actually landed this trick without falling.

Kevin grinned and gave a thumbs-up, while Joey’s other friend Fiona Rollins slapped him on the back as she skated past him on her board.

It was the perfect moment.



Until . . .

“Woo-hoo, way to go, honey!”

Joey’s mother waved at him from the grassy area at the edge of the park. In front of her, his baby sister, Allie, sat in her stroller, chewing and drooling on a rubbery teething ring.

“Yes, way to go, honnnn-ney,” Dylan Jones whispered, sneering at Joey as he skated by.

Dylan lived in the same apartment complex as Joey and had a habit of giving him a hard time ever since . . . well . . . ever since Joey could remember. Dylan’s mother was good friends with Joey’s mother, which meant that even though Dylan was two years older than Joey, their moms often forced them to spend time

together. When they were little, Dylan would take Joey's toys from him. Then as Dylan grew older he learned to tease. He wasn't really a bully; he was more like an annoying big brother, as hard to ignore as a pesky giant mosquito. Right now Joey was trying his best to pretend he didn't hear Dylan, but, man, was he steamed!

Joey also tried his best to avoid eye contact with his mother. The skate park was only about a fifteen-minute walk from his house. All the other neighborhood kids could hang out without some worried adult hovering over them. Unfortunately, Joey's mom thought he was too young to be left at the park unattended. It was totally embarrassing.

But a beautiful afternoon awaited him, so instead of getting upset with his over-protective mom, Joey focused on the fact that it was 4:30 on a Friday. The school week was over, and he was at his favorite place in the world: the skate park. Plus the sun was shining, the sky was blue, it wasn't too warm or too cold — just the perfect spring day in his neighborhood, located on the outskirts of downtown Los Angeles.

Now that he'd mastered the foot-high rail, it was time to move on and try some new tricks. He was on a hot streak, he could feel it. Maybe he would even try to drop in off the half-pipe!

Joey skated over to it and found Fiona was already curving her board up and

down the rounded sides. She flew up and held her board still for a moment on the top edge, then glided back down effortlessly.

Kevin was filming her every movement with his handheld cam. Kevin wanted to be a filmmaker when he grew up. He saw the world through a lens, and capturing the action at the skate park was good practice. He would take home what he shot and upload it onto his computer. Then he'd edit it, put it to music, and add special effects.

Joey was impressed that Kevin could make even him look good. Joey hadn't been skateboarding that long, but his friend made him look almost like a pro.

He had a long way to go to be as good as Fiona, though. Even without Kevin's fancy editing, she was amazing. She had been skateboarding since she was four. Her dad used to be a competitive skateboarder, so she got an early start. Now her dad was a graphic designer and artist. But every once in a while he would stop by the park and wow everyone. He could even do a flip off the half-pipe! He was really cool . . . for a dad.

Joey's dad was an accountant. It had to be the most boring job in the world. He was a nice guy and all, but he dressed, well, like a dad. Fiona's dad sort of looked like a rock star.

Fiona finally came to a stop, and Joey

tried to gather his courage. He'd never gone down the half-pipe from the top edge before, but he felt like today would be the day. So he flipped his board up and caught it, then started walking toward the stairs that lead to the top.

But he was stopped cold in his tracks.

"Joey, sweetie," his mother yelled. "We need to go! I forgot to bring an extra diaper, and Allie needs to be changed!"

The park was suddenly silent, and it felt like every single eye was on him. Then some boy laughed, and soon lots of kids joined in. Joey just wanted to melt into the ground and disappear.

But his embarrassment quickly became aggravation. Skateboard in hand, he ran