

One Good Reason

Peter Friend

Everything was sweet until I got home and Mum yelled at me. The school had rung her, saying my big brother Jay hadn't turned up again.

Wasn't my fault. He's the one who's always wagging school, not me. And I didn't see why it was such a big deal today, but Mum was real angry, saying he was turning out just like his no-good loser dad.

'I'll go look for Jay after tea,' I said. I had an idea where he'd be. Not that I told Mum. Jay and I look out for each other, especially since Mum and Dad split up.

Later I skateboarded over to the car park by the motorway off-ramp. Yep, there they all were — Jay, Carl, Lucy and Stump. The car park's empty in the evening, and it's not bad for skating, if you avoid the potholes and gravel. You can do tricks on the steps and speed bumps and the big concrete motorway foundations.

'Hey, little bro,' said Jay. His breath stunk of cigarettes and greasy chips.

'Hey,' I said. 'Heard you wagged school.'

Jay shrugged and grinned. 'Gimme one good reason why not. Me and my mates had important stuff to do.'

Typical Jay. 'Gimme one good reason' was his excuse

for anything, and I could guess what they'd been doing all day — hanging around the mall, spending Stump's rich dad's money and getting into trouble, just like all the other times.

'Mum's real angry,' I whispered. Didn't want the others to hear — like I said, Jay and I look out for each other.

His grin disappeared for half a second. 'Stick around, little bro. We'll show you a few skating tricks. Maybe you'll learn something, something they won't teach you at school.'

That was typical Jay too — letting me know he'd come home with me eventually, but he had to look cool around his mates first.

So I stayed and watched them skate.

None of them were that hot. Lucy's pretty good, but her wobbly old board's tragic. Carl and Jay just think they're good. They kept trying to outdo each other with flips and grinds — Jay's always showing off in front of Lucy, and Carl doesn't like that one bit, 'cos Lucy's sort of his girlfriend.

Stump's got a brand new board paid for by his dad, but he's a hopeless skater — he spent ages trying to ollie over some little speed bumps but kept falling over. At least he had enough brains to wear pads and gloves. After a few too many slams, he stopped skating and took photos of the rest of us with a digital camera — another present from his dad, I supposed.

I'm not much into tricks, so I just carved around, jumping steps and kerbs now and then. That's how Jay and I first learnt to skate, racing each other down the hill from our house to the supermarket.

The sun disappeared behind the hills.

'I gotta go soon. My favourite TV programme's on in half an hour,' I lied.

Jay normally would have got the hint, but he was too busy competing with Carl, nose-sliding down a concrete ledge.

Carl lost his balance, bailed and ripped a hole in his

jeans. And his knee. Jay laughed and Carl swore at him.

Lucy looked annoyed at both of them. 'C'mon, Carl, let's go. I'll race you home.'

I sighed with relief, 'cos Carl loves racing, and he usually listens to Lucy.

But he was too angry to think straight. 'A race, yeah. Good idea. But not against you — I want to race funny boy Jay. How about it, Jay? I'll race you . . . um . . . yeah, I'll race you down the motorway off-ramp.'

Stunned silence from everyone. I mean, Carl's come up with some whacked out ideas before, but this had to be the worst ever.

Jay tried to laugh it off. 'You're nuts, man. I don't need no dumb race to prove I skate better than you.'

'Gimme one good reason why not,' sneered Carl.

Ouch. We knew Jay wouldn't back down from that. He'd jump off a cliff if you said, 'Gimme one good reason why not'. He's not stupid, it's just the way he's always been.

'You're crazy,' I told them, getting worried now. 'You can't skate on the motorway. You'll be dead meat in seconds.'

'This time of night, no one uses the off-ramp,' said Carl. 'Anyway, you can watch out for traffic for us.'

Oh great. No way did I want to get involved. But I couldn't just walk away. Jay and I look out for each other, always.

'You're both idiots,' said Lucy. 'I'm out of here.'

And for a moment I thought that would change their minds, but no, Carl and Jay still glared at each other.

Five minutes later, Carl, Jay and I ran past the 'Danger No Entry' sign and onto the empty off-ramp. Stump stayed down below — we'd decided the car park entrance would be the finish line, and he'd photograph the winner. In the distance, I thought I saw Lucy, watching from behind a motorway pillar.

'Don't worry, little bro,' Jay whispered. 'You know I'm the downhill racing king — Carl doesn't have a chance. Straight home afterwards, I promise.'

I had my eyes half-closed up that ramp, terrified that something was going to smash into us, but nothing did. I saw a few cars whizz past to the central city, but none came to the off-ramp. Maybe this was going to turn out okay. Maybe.

I waited until I couldn't see any oncoming headlights then yelled, 'Go!'

Zoom. Neck and neck. I watched them disappear around the off-ramp's curve then I turned the other way, waiting for them to reappear below. I couldn't quite see the car park entrance, but at least I'd see who was in the lead.

A truck roared past me, so close that the backdraught ripped off my cap. I'd forgotten to keep watching the motorway.

'Look out, guys!' I yelled, but I was drowned out by the truck's air horn, then its squealing brakes. No, no, no. Don't hit Jay, please don't hit Jay.

I ran down the off-ramp as fast as I could, screaming my head off the whole way. I guess that's why I didn't hear that car behind me. I don't even remember it hitting me.

Next thing I knew was waking up in this ambulance, with Jay looking down at me and crying. My legs hurt real bad.

'Sorry, Jay,' I whispered. 'Just trying to look out for you, bro.'

But that just made him cry more.