

## Chapter One

### The Rockhounds

Casey Hilliard crouched behind the thick shrub near the porch steps and peeked out. So far, so good. His cousin Josie was nowhere in sight. Casey stayed hidden for another minute. You could never tell about Josie. Just because she was eleven too, and he was the only cousin her age, she stuck to him like a burr. What a pain! To make matters worse, she was spending the whole summer with them.

His mother, his older sister, Sharon, and his little brother, Toby, were down at the lake, swimming and playing on the beach. Josie had been out on the float when he slipped away. He couldn't see her now, but on such a hot day, Josie was probably more interested in keeping cool than tagging around after him.

The coast was still clear. Casey sprinted for the back steps and tiptoed across the screened-in back porch. He peered into the hall. Nobody was there. He dashed into the kitchen, snatched the phone off the wall, and dialed the number of his best friend, Myca Jordan.

Myca lived next door, but Casey wasn't taking any chances on being seen crossing the yard. "Mom says I can go. Come right away," he said in a low voice when Myca answered the phone.

"I'll meet you out front in two minutes," Myca said, and hung up.

Casey grabbed his rock bag from the cupboard on the porch. He made it as far as the corner of the house before Josie caught up with him.

"Where are you going?" Josie demanded.

"None of your business," Casey answered, wondering how she got dressed so fast. "Why don't you go for a swim with Sharon?"

"I already did. Now I want to go with you."

Sometimes, Casey wished they'd never moved here to the lake. He folded his arms across his chest and glared at her. "Well, you can't. Myca and I are going rockhounding with Mr. Beckerman. So get lost."

Josie put her hands on her hips and glared back at him. "I will not. And you can't make me. If you don't let me come, I'll follow you anyway," she threatened. "I know Mr. B. lives right over there on the other side of the hedge. I talked to him a lot of times last year by the beach, and he's nice. He won't mind if I come along."

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Casey pressed his lips tight together and scowled his fiercest scowl. He knew it wasn't going to do any good to argue with her. Josie's hair was as red as his, and she was just as stubborn. But he wasn't going to tell her she could come with him and Myca.

"Beat it!" Casey snarled. He turned on his heel and stalked off, hoping she'd go away. No such luck. Josie was right behind him.

Myca, tall and thin, with skin the color of rich milk chocolate, was waiting at the edge of the driveway. "How come she's here?" he asked, motioning to Josie.

"She thinks she's my shadow." Casey slid a dark look at Josie and turned his back on her. "If we ignore her, maybe she'll go away."

"I will not! I'm coming too."

"You and Mr. Beckerman are the lucky ones," Casey muttered, hoping Josie would get tired and leave. "The only relative Mr. B. has is a grandson he hasn't seen for about twelve years. And you don't have any relatives at all. But me" - Casey clamped a hand to his bony chest - "I have relatives by the dozen. The lake and the Hotel Hilliard," he flung his other hand toward the house, "attract them like bare arms attract mosquitoes."

"Now hold on there, I never said I didn't have any kinfolk," Myca told him. "Most of them live down in New Orleans. But one of these days somebody will come for a visit and find out what a great place Oregon is. Then, look out!" Myca threw his arms up and jumped back in mock surprise. "There's gonna be Jordans all over the place."

Josie laughed. "See, not everybody is as mean as you, Casey."

Casey ignored her and turned to Myca. "Let me see the new rock you found. What is it?"

"I'm hoping it's a geode, but it could be a thunderegg." Myca held out a lumpy round rock about the size of a tennis ball.

"Could be either one." Casey took the rock and turned it over in his hands. "But I think it's a thunderegg."

"Geodes? Thundereggs? Let me see." Josie snatched the rock out of Casey's hand. "Looks like a plain old rock to me."

"Well, it's not." Casey grabbed it back.

"A geode is hollow in the center, and it's lined with crystals. Some of the crystals are amethyst and some are smoky quartz. But a thunderegg is solid agate inside. There are all kinds of colors and patterns," Myca explained.

Josie looked at the rock with new interest. "How can you tell?"

"You have to test 'em," said Myca.

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“Show me what it looks like inside,” said Josie.

Myca gave her a sheepish grin. “I’m afraid I’ll break it. Geodes have a thin shell on the outside, and if you hit ‘em too hard they break into a hundred pieces.”

“That’s why Myca is waiting until we get over to Mr. Beckerman’s,” said Casey. “He knows all about rocks.”

“He surely does,” Myca agreed. “Mr. B. is the best rockhound around here. He’s been teaching us all about rocks. Let’s get on over there; I’m itching to see the inside of this rock myself.” Myca turned and started down the driveway.

“Mr. B. has the best collection of thundereggs in the whole state. They are the official rock of Oregon,” Casey added.

“That’s a dumb name for a rock,” said Josie. “Why do you call it a thunderegg?”

Casey heaved a big sigh. “We didn’t name it that. The Indians did a longtime ago. It’s Indian folklore. Mr. B. told us about it. He said in ancient times the Indians believed that when the thunder spirits of Mount Jefferson and Mount Hood got mad at each other they would grab the eggs from the thunderbird’s nest and throw them at each other. The Indians found these rocks all over the place, so they called them thundereggs.”

“That’s interesting,” said Josie. “But it’s not really true.”

“Of course not!” For a minute Casey had forgotten what a pain she could be. “The thundereggs were made when volcanoes erupted thousands of years ago.”

They turned in by Mr. Beckerman’s mailbox and made their way up his long, curving driveway. The big old Victorian house with its gables and tall chimneys, set back among the shrubs and trees, seemed to doze in the hot morning sun.

Josie stopped to stare. “Boy, this house is really old.”

“It’s the oldest house on the lake,” said Casey. “Mr. B.’s family built it, before he was born, as a summer home. But he’s lived in it year-round for a long, long time.”

The house didn’t look the least bit rundown or spooky. Mr. B. had given it a fresh coat of paint last spring. The bright sun glaring off the white walls made the wide porches look even deeper in shadows. They couldn’t tell if Mr. B. was in his favorite chair, where he liked to look out over the lake, until they got closer. He wasn’t.

Myca looked around. “I don’t see him anywhere, do you? I surely do hope he hasn’t forgotten about going rockhounding with us.”

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Casey shook his head. “Mr. B. never forgets anything. Maybe he’s out in his workshop.”

“Rockhound. Sounds like some special breed of dog,” said Josie, as they followed the white gravel path that curved around past tall shrubs and trees to the old carriage house.

“It’s a name for folk who go looking for rocks,” said Myca.

Mr. B. used half of the carriage house for a garage. The other half he had turned into a workshop for his rock collection and projects. He had rock-cutting machines and polishing machines. Even at this distance, they could hear the familiar clatter of rocks tumbling in the drum of the small electric rock polisher. Mr. B. kept it running most of the time, filled with pretty stones and pebbles Toby found and brought to Mr. B. to be polished.

“Hello, there,” Mr. B. called. “Ready to go, are ya?”

At the sound of his voice, Casey looked up. Mr. B. was old, in his seventies, but Casey wasn’t a bit surprised to see him up on the ridge of the steep roof. He stood there as straight and slim as a lodgepole pine, his white hair blowing in the breeze. He was wearing a pair of jeans, a blue work shirt with the cuffs turned back, and a pair of old red, high-topped tennis shoes.

“Hi, Mr. B.,” Casey called back, squinting up at him.

“Hey, Mr. B.,” Myca called too.

“What are you doing up there?” Josie shouted.

“Enjoying the view.” Mr. B. shaded his eyes with one hand and peered off into the distance like an explorer scanning the horizon. “I can see clear across the lake from up here. Should have brought my binoculars. Then I could tell what the folk over at the picnic grounds are having for lunch.”

“You coming down soon?” Myca asked, trying not to sound impatient.

Mr. B. chuckled. “Found something, did ya?” He held up a couple of new shingles and a hammer. “Got a little more repair work to do; then I’ll be right down.”

He walked along the ridge with his eyes on the roof as if he were looking for something. Then he took a few steps down the steep roof and braced himself with one foot. Tearing out an old shingle, he replaced it with a new one. He stood up and walked down the roof to the ladder as surefooted as a mountain goat.

“Why are you repairing the roof now?” Josie asked.

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“Best time to fix a leaky roof is when the sun is out,” Mr. B. said when he came down. “Don’t get wet that way.” Josie giggled.

“Now let’s see what you’ve got there,” he said, turning to Myca.

“I hope it’s a geode,” said Myca, holding out the rock. “I found it over on Sawmill Creek Road where the road crew widened that curve.”

Mr. B. nodded as he studied the rock. “New road cut is a likely place to do a little rockhounding. No telling what you’re apt to turn up.” His blue eyes twinkled as he said, “I suppose you’re wanting to see what this thing looks like inside.”

“Yes, sir, I surely would!” Myca was grinning and bouncing from one foot to the other.

“Well, now, let’s see what kind of rockhound you’re getting to be.” Mr. B. opened the door of the workshop. “Come on in.”