

chapter one

THUNDER EGG

On the first day of summer, Jesse, his cousin Daisy, and his uncle Joe went to High Peak. Uncle Joe had come to look for rocks. Jesse and Daisy had mostly come for the ride. Upon reaching the windy summit of High Peak, Jesse took one look at the view and bent over to pick up a rock. It made him feel dizzy to look down from the mountain, which was doing a pretty good job of living up to its name. Besides, maybe the rock would actually weigh him down enough to keep him from blowing away.

From Goldmine City (a big name for a small town), High Peak was sometimes visible. It rose in the distance like a delicious dessert topped with whipped cream. The whipped cream was snow, which was always there, even on the hottest day of the year.

Jesse was on the mountain for the first time. Up close, the snow didn't look so good. It looked sort of crusty and dirty, and it was much colder on the mountaintop than it was down in Goldmine City. Jesse's sweatshirt was not doing much to keep him warm.

Jesse had been living in Goldmine City with Daisy, Uncle Joe, and Aunt Maggie since Easter vacation in March. His parents were in Africa, setting up a children's clinic in a village in Tanzania. Jesse had traveled with his parents his whole life, but on his tenth birthday he decided that he wanted to live in America. He wanted to eat American food, go to an American school, and have adventures with Daisy, his favorite cousin, who he had been visiting for three weeks every summer of every year of his life.

These days, Jesse wore two watches on his left wrist, one with a blue band and one with a black band. The watch with the black band told him the time in Goldmine City. The watch with the blue band told him the time in Tanzania. It was two o'clock here and midnight there. He imagined his parents asleep beneath mosquito netting in their hut, surrounded by snakes as long as cars and bugs as big as chipmunks. On the whole, even given the extreme elevation, he was happier here with Daisy.

Jesse went over to where Daisy was sitting to find out what she was doing. Anyone seeing them together would think they were friends rather than family, because they looked nothing alike. They were both ten years old, but Jesse was small for his

age and sturdy, with brown eyes and shaggy brown hair. Daisy was fair-haired and tall and thin. The wind whipped her hair, which was as pale and fine as corn silk. The tips of her ears, which poked through her hair like an elf's, were bright pink. The tip of her nose matched.

Daisy looked up and smiled at Jesse through lips blue with cold. Then she went back to sketching a flower that was poking out of the snow. Her pencil was sticking out of the sleeve of her sweatshirt, which she had pulled over her hand to keep it warm. A wildflower handbook was open, its pages weighted down at the edges with small stones. Her eyes went from flower to sketch to handbook and back again. What rocks were for her father, flowers were for Daisy. She liked to say: "Not knowing the names of the flowers is like not knowing the names of your own brothers and sisters."

"What kind is it?" Jesse asked.

"I'm pretty sure it's *Prunella vulgaris*," she said.

"It's totally magical. Its folk name is self-heal."

"Cool," he said. "What does it heal?"

"The Indians used to put it on boils," she said.

"Boils. Gross," he said.

Daisy carefully picked the wildflower and laid it between the pages of her notebook, right next to her sketch. She printed the name in neat block letters beneath the sketch and then turned the page. At home, she would transfer the specimen to her wildflower press, and, when it was dried, she would frame it. She had over twenty varieties of wildflowers already framed, her contribution to their Museum of Magic. The two cousins' way of keeping in touch over the years had been by reading the same books of fantasy. They were convinced that sooner or later they would have a magical adventure of their own. While they waited, they saw magic in everything around them: in flowers and seashells, in birds and animals, even in old bottles and doorknobs.

Daisy gave Jesse a sidelong look. "You okay?" she asked. She knew about his fear of heights. On the hike up the mountain, she had stopped practically every tenth step to ask him the same question.

Jesse nodded and held up the rock to show her that he was keeping busy, but Daisy had already moved on to the next wildflower. Jesse closed his eyes and thought about the e-mail

message he would write to his parents when he got back to the house:

Dear Mom and Dad, I finally got to High Peak. It is pretty high for an old volcano. But it is frozen stiff now. The snow looks sort of like whipped cream—

Jesse stopped cold.

"Let me out!"

Jesse's eyes snapped open. The voice sounded close and far away at the same time, like the music leaking out of somebody else's earphones. Jesse looked around. Daisy and Uncle Joe were the only other people on the mountaintop. Uncle Joe was bending over, tapping a boulder with a small pickax. Daisy was flipping back and forth through her handbook. Then Jesse saw a man standing not far away. The man was poking around with a stick, the tail of his long black coat trailing in the snow. He was a bit strange-looking, but he clearly wasn't calling to Jesse.

"Jesse!"

There it was again!

"Jesseeeee! Let. Me. Out!"

Jesse looked down. Either he was going crazy or the voice was coming from the rock in his hand. He held it up to his ear.

"Let! Me! Out!" said the rock. Or was the voice coming from something *inside* the rock?

Jesse held the rock at arm's length and stared at it. Uncle Joe liked to say: "If you see a rock that talks to you, pick it up and bring it home." Jesse had always been pretty sure that Uncle Joe did not mean this for real. But now he wondered. The rock looked ordinary. It was round and nubby, the color of oatmeal with blackberry bits in it, including the green leafy part. It was warm from the sun and fit his hand like a softball.

"Jesse. Tiger!" said the rock.

"Huh? What did you say?" he whispered to the rock. Almost no one knew that Jesse's middle name was Tiger.

"Jesse! Tiger!!" said the rock again, vibrating in Jesse's hand.

"Daze?" he called out to his cousin, holding the rock up over his head. "This rock—" He stopped. He didn't know quite how to put it. He didn't want her to think that his fear of heights had made him wacky or anything.

Then again, maybe that's exactly what's happening, he thought.

Daisy took one look at the rock, then leaped up and ran over to him. She did a dance, like a happy little prospector who

had just struck gold. “Jesse!” she said. “You found one! A thunder egg!” She pounded him on the back.

Uncle Joe was always talking about thunder eggs. There were lots of them in the area. They were also called geodes, and they were filled with agate. When you cracked one open, there were beautiful crystals inside.

“Do thunder eggs talk?” Jesse asked, trying to make his question sound like a joke.

Daisy grinned at him and gave him a playful shove. “Sure they do. This one’s saying, ‘Take me home, Jesse. Take me home and open me up.’ Come on. Let’s show my pops.”

She dragged Jesse over to Uncle Joe. “Poppy, look what Jesse just found.”

When Uncle Joe saw Jesse’s rock, he straightened up. Then he took off his cap and tugged his long, graying ponytail. His cap was purple, with the words ROCK STAR inscribed in orange letters on the bill. It was a pretty funny joke, if you were a geologist like Uncle Joe.

“Sure looks like a geode to me,” said Uncle Joe.

“Congratulations, Jesse. She’s a beauty.”

Jesse squinted up at his uncle. “How do you know it’s a girl?”

“Because,” said Uncle Joe with a wink, “I speak the secret language of rocks.”

Then how come this rock is talking to me instead of to you? Jesse wanted to ask. But he didn’t say anything. Instead, he wrapped the thunder egg in a clean blue bandanna and gently placed it in the pouch of his sweatshirt.

“Okay, guys!” said Uncle Joe. He put his cap back on. “I think we can call it a day here. Let’s head back down and take Jesse’s thunder egg to the Rock Shop.”

As they made their way across the summit back to the hiking path, they passed the strange man in the black coat, who stopped poking with his stick and stared at them as they went by. The sunlight glinting off his round wire-rim glasses made him look eerily as if he didn’t have any eyes. Jesse quickly looked away. In the pouch of his sweatshirt, the thunder egg zapped him so hard he yelped.

Daisy turned and gave him a look. “Are you *sure* you’re okay?”

“I’m fine!” he said, his face burning.

The Rock Shop was an old garden shed behind the house. It had a worktable, shelves for Uncle Joe's rocks, filing cabinets for his notes, and all the tools of his trade, including a special one for cutting open a thunder egg.

Uncle Joe had cut open thousands of thunder eggs in his life but he still got a kick out of doing it. He put on his goggles and heavy work gloves before picking up his big band saw. Jesse wasn't convinced that cutting open the rock was the right thing to do. What if doing that hurt whatever was inside? He covered his mouth, pretending to stifle a yawn as he whispered to the thunder egg, "Are you okay with this?"

The thunder egg vibrated warmly in his hand. Jesse decided to take that as a yes.

Jesse was still hesitant to hand the rock over to his uncle. "You'll be careful, won't you?" Jesse said. "I mean, this won't, um, hurt or damage the crystals inside, will it?"

Uncle Joe smiled kindly. "I won't harm a single one of them. I promise." He held out a gloved hand.

Daisy gave her cousin a gentle shove. "Come on, Jessie Tiger. Let's get a look at those crystals."

"Goggles first, guys," Uncle Joe said.

Daisy went to a shelf and got two pairs of goggles. She tossed a pair to Jesse. Jesse almost dropped them, because just then the rock hissed, "*Jesssss—Jesssss—Jesssss—Jesssss.*"

Jesse's glance slid from Daisy to Uncle Joe. Neither one of them seemed to have heard the rock. Arm trembling, Jesse handed the thunder egg to Uncle Joe. He winced as his uncle set down the saw and placed the rock between the iron jaws of a vise. He winced again as Uncle Joe spun the bolt and tightened the jaws around the thunder egg.

"Stand back, guys," said Uncle Joe.

Jesse and Daisy took one step away from him. Uncle Joe picked up the saw and turned on the motor. It roared to life, vibrating mightily. Then Uncle Joe put the whirring blade to the top of the rock.

"*Wait!*" Jesse hollered over the noise of the machine.

Uncle Joe looked up. He switched off the saw and pushed up his goggles. "What is it, Jesse?" he asked.

Jesse faltered. "It seems like a pretty delicate thing," he said. "I really, really, *really* don't want to hurt it."

Daisy rolled her eyes. "Poppy's only cut open a million rocks. I think he knows what he's doing, Jesse. *Really.*"

Uncle Joe spoke very calmly. "How about this? How about if I use the machine to cut a shallow groove in the rock? Then I'll turn it off and we can crack it open the rest of the way, carefully and gently, with a small chisel and a soft mallet."

Jesse's chest heaved with relief. He nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Uncle Joe. That sounds good."

Uncle Joe smiled at Jesse. "Okay if I switch on the saw?"

"Sure," said Jesse. "Go ahead." But he regretted this decision as soon as he heard the rock scream again above the noise of the saw. Just as Jesse was about to lunge over to Uncle Joe, the saw coughed and made a crackling sound.

Uncle Joe switched it off. "Well, I'll be," he said, holding up the saw so Jesse and Daisy could see it. The blade had split in two. Jesse and Daisy stepped toward the worktable. The egg wasn't even nicked.