

CHAPTER ONE

The Jurassic Coast

“Come on, Sparky!” I called as I ran onto the beach.

Sparky, my Labrador puppy, was still in the car park, nose to the ground, his little tail wagging in excitement. He scrambled down the steps and jumped onto the soft golden sand. The beach was crowded with sunbathers and the sea full of people surfing and splashing in the waves.

“Let’s go exploring, Sparky. Race you to those cliffs over there!” We ran across the sand, onto the pebbles and over to the large rocks at the base of the cliffs. In front of us was a sign that read:



I looked up at the tall cliffs. They were made of a soft crumbly stone, light grey in colour, with darker streaks running through them. A man was standing at the base of the cliffs hitting the rocks with a hammer. I walked along the pebbles past some children playing in the rock pools.

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Sparky ran over to the sea. This was the first time he had been to the seaside and he barked when a wave crashed onto the beach and splashed him.

“It’s OK, Sparky, it won’t hurt you!” I said, laughing at the look of surprise on his face.

Sparky shook himself, looked at me and then plunged back into the water. He swam around in circles and then ran back onto the beach. He came over to me and wagged his tail proudly as if to say, “Look at me – I can swim!” He shook himself vigorously, spraying me with water!

“Oh, Sparky! I’m soaked!” I cried.

I bent down to wipe the water off my legs. When I looked up Sparky had gone. He had run over to some rocks at the base of the cliffs and was nosing in someone’s bag.

“Sparky, stop that,” I shouted, racing towards him. “Come here!”

A girl looked up. She had long fair hair and was wearing a bright T-shirt with a rainbow on it.

“Sorry,” I said, pulling Sparky out of her bag.

“That’s all right,” the girl said, smiling. “He was probably after my sandwiches.”

She stroked him gently. Sparky wagged his tail and licked her hand.

“He’s a lovely puppy. What’s he called?”

“Sparky,” I replied, “and my name’s Peter.”

“Hi, I’m Tara.”

Sparky went over to Tara’s bag and sniffed it again. As I gently pushed him away I noticed a collection of small broken stones lying next to her bag.

“What are you doing, Tara?” I asked, looking curiously at the pile of fragments.

“Looking for fossils,” she replied. “Here, have a look.”

Tara reached into her bag and handed me a small stone. I turned it over in my hand and examined it carefully. It looked like a large snail with a spiral pattern on the shell.

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“What is it?” I asked, puzzled.

“It’s an ammonite,” she replied. “They used to live in the sea around here, millions of years ago. Their shells turn into stone and make the fossils.”

“Here’s another,” Tara said, giving me a pencil-shaped stone.

“Looks like a large hedgehog spine,” I said, looking at it curiously. “Big hedgehog though,” I added jokingly.

Tara laughed. “I’m not sure what they are but there’s a lot on the beach around here.”

“Have you ever found a dinosaur fossil?” I asked, fascinated by these strange stones.

“Not yet,” Tara replied. “But I did find a shark’s tooth once!”

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“A shark tooth!”

“Yes, and it was this big!” she said, holding her thumb and first finger about two centimetres apart. “It was really sharp. I found it in one of the rock pools over there.”

“Do sharks still live in the sea here?” I asked.

“No,” Tara replied. “Not any more. The tooth I found was millions of years old.”

“Well, that’s a relief!” I laughed.

“It’s great fun looking for fossils,” Tara continued. “You never know what you’re going to discover.”

“Are they easy to find?” I asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “There are lots here on the Jurassic Coast – it’s a really famous place for finding fossils. People come from all over the world to look for them. Do you want to try?”

“OK,” I replied enthusiastically.

Tara gave me a small grey stone. “You have to break the stones open to get the fossil out,” she said, putting the stone on a large flat rock. “Then you need to hit it with this.” She handed me a piece of pointed flint. “But not too hard,” she warned, “or you’ll smash the fossil.”

I hit the little grey stone gently and it broke into three pieces. We carefully examined them.

“Nothing,” Tara said. “It’s often like that. You just have to keep trying.”

I found another grey rock and hit it hard with the piece of flint. A little piece of the rock broke away to reveal part of a fossil.

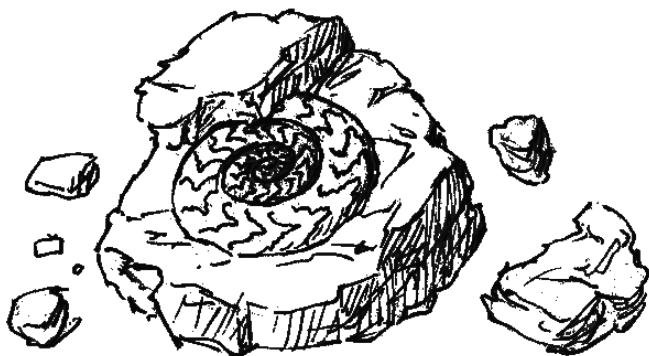
“I think I’ve found one!” I cried excitedly.

“You have!” Tara said. “Be careful not to damage it.”

I hammered the rock and chipped away small pieces of it until the whole fossil was revealed. It fitted snugly into the palm of my hand.

“It’s a good one,” Tara said, her brown eyes shining in delight.

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It was great fun looking for fossils with Tara. Sparky tried to help us by splashing into all the rock pools and scrabbling at the stones with his paws. He looked on curiously as we broke the stones apart to find the fossils.

After a few hours we had collected a small pile of ammonites, lots of the ‘hedgehog spines’ and some fossil shells.

“I need a rest now,” Tara said, wiping her brow. “I’m hungry.”

She sat down on a large rock, opened her bag and took out a yellow lunch-box.

“Have you got any lunch, Peter?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. “I was going to buy some sandwiches in the village.”

“You can share mine if you like,” she said kindly, “save you going to the shops. I’ve got plenty.”

“Thanks,” I said, sitting down beside her.

Tara gave me a sandwich and an apple and poured some water into a cup for Sparky.

“I love looking for fossils,” she said, munching on a pear. “I used to come here fossil hunting with my dad all the time when we were on holiday.”

“Aren’t you on holiday now?” I asked.

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“No. I live here,” she replied happily. “We moved a few weeks ago.”

“I live here too,” I said excitedly. “We moved today – to Seaview Close, on the new housing estate by the caravan park.”

“That’s where I live!” Tara exclaimed in surprise. “I’m really glad we moved. We used to live inland about twenty miles away. Where have you come from, Peter?”

“London,” I replied. “I’ve never even been here before, until today.”

“You’ll really like it,” Tara said, smiling. “It’s great living by the sea. Do you like surfing?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’ve never tried.”

“Oh, it’s great fun!” Tara said, jumping up. “I’ve got a spare board – do you want to borrow it?”

“OK,” I replied. “Come on, Sparky, we’re going surfing!”

We quickly tidied away our lunch things, packed the fossils carefully into Tara’s bag and raced back along the beach. We had almost reached the large Jurassic Coast sign at the end of the cliffs when there was a sudden loud bang. Sparky barked in surprise and startled seagulls flew away from the cliffs.

“What was that?” I said in surprise.

“It sounded like an explosion,” Tara replied. “I think it came from up there,” she added, pointing to the cliffs.

“Let’s go and see!” I said, running towards some steps.

Tara and I climbed up the steps in the cliff. Sparky scrambled up after us. When we got to the top I stopped to catch my breath and look around.

“That’s odd,” I said, panting. “There’s no sign of an explosion.”

“Where do you think it came from?” Tara asked, gazing out over the open fields.

“There!” I shouted, pointing to a small wood in the

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distance. “Look, smoke! Coming up out of those trees.”

We ran along the footpath and down the hill towards the trees. As we got closer I could see the smoke more clearly.

“The smoke,” I cried in amazement. “It’s purple!”