



CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST TIME BADGER SAW SKUNK, HE THOUGHT, *PUNY*, and shut the front door.

Badger didn't normally shut the door on animals that knocked. But there was too much slick in this one's stripe, too much puff in his tail. Also, there'd been that grin, and the way he'd stuck out his paw as if he had been looking forward to meeting Badger for a long, long time.

Badger knew what to make of that. He shut the door before the fellow got any ideas. "Not. Buying. Anything," he said through the keyhole.

When the knocking continued, Badger added, "Ever."

Then he drew the bolt.

And the double bolt.

And latched the chain.

Quartzite! Badger thought briskly as he padded back into his rock room.

Aunt Lula's brownstone row house had not come with a rock room. Badger had made improvements. He had dragged out the sofa and cushy chairs. He'd boxed the books and board games. He'd closed up the fireplace. Then he'd pushed in his rock table and his stool and aligned his work light. Over the fireplace, he had hung his rock hammers and saws. His rock tumbler fit on the window seat. The bookshelves had been a good place for boxes of rocks and minerals. He'd shelved them alphabetically with the most delicate specimens wrapped in tissue paper. In the fireplace, Badger had piled geodes in a pyramid. (*Artistic!*) Finally, Badger had shoved open the pocket doors, clearing a path into the kitchen for a paw-full of dry cereal, and declared his rock room complete.

Now Badger pulled his stool up to his rock table. He adjusted his work light. He picked up a magnifying glass with one paw and the quartzite with the other.

Rap-rap. Rap-rap-rap.

The sound came from the front door. Badger stopped. It was that fellow again.

Badger put down the magnifying glass and the quartzite, and opened his calendar. No appointments. No fix-it animals. The Yard Sheep grazed the lawn on Saturday. In fact, today's calendar square contained an X. X meant "IMPORTANT ROCK WORK."

Of course, this being Aunt Lula's brownstone, Aunt Lula could stop by anytime. But she would not knock. Aunt Lula had a key.

Badger remembered how Aunt Lula had helped him out: Three years ago, he had been a rock scientist without steady rock work or a good den to live in. The situation worsened until one day, Aunt Lula offered her brownstone as a place for Badger to live.

"Until you get back on your feet," said Aunt Lula, who was a pine marten and said everything quickly.

Aunt Lula offered the brownstone for free. "You are family! My nephew!"

Scientific funding! A long-term residency! A grant of time and space! Badger had thought.

Anyway, Aunt Lula almost never visited. She wrote letters. An image of the mail pail sitting on the desk in his bedroom flashed into Badger's mind. It contained two, if not three, unopened letters from Aunt Lula.

Must read those, Badger thought.

Rap-rap-rap. Rap.

Badger frowned. Surely the fellow wouldn't keep on knocking?

Rap. Rap. Rap.

Badger decided he would ignore the rapping. The fellow would be forced to go away. He rotated the quartzite, held the magnifying glass over a promising crystal, and leaned.

“Badger?” came a voice through the keyhole.

Badger froze.

“Badger? Are you in there?” came the voice again.

Badger dropped the quartzite. The quartzite shattered.

“Sludge and slurry!”

“Badger?” *Rap-rap-rap.*

Badger stared at the shards of quartzite. He looked in the direction of the front door. Then he set down his magnifying glass, stood up, and walked to the rock tumbler. He flipped the switch to On. The water in the tumbler sloshed. The grit in the tumbler ground. The rocks chip-chip-chipped and the motor whined as the tumbler turned *ErrrrrRRRRR* over . . . and *ErrrrrRRRRR* over . . . and *ErrrrrRRRRR* over again.

Badger sighed. His shoulders settled. He swept up his shattered quartzite and selected another rock. He sat down at

his rock table, picked up the magnifying glass, and held it over the rock.

Concentrate, he told himself when he sensed movement in the windows behind him.

Badger concentrated for one (*one-thousand*), two (*one-thousand*), three (*one-thousand*) seconds and then thought, *How does he know my name?* The nameplate on the letter box read, LULA P. MARTEN.

A thought followed: *What if he is Someone Important?*

Badger raced through the front hallway, threw back the bolts, unlatched the chain, and opened the door.

No one was there.

“Hello? Anybody?” called Badger.

A bird sang. A breeze twisted past. The air smelled of honey.

He stepped out onto the stoop. The letter box and flowerpot were empty. He did not find anything tacked to the back of the door. Badger frowned. *Someone Important would have left a note.*

On the sidewalk below, a gray-and-white-speckled chicken stopped. It eyed Badger—first with the left eye, then with the right.

A chicken? In North Twist? Badger never saw chickens.

“Bock bock,” the chicken said. It stood with its neck upstretched, eyeing him right-left, left-right.

Badger had the oddest feeling he was supposed to say something. *To a chicken?*

“Bock?” said the chicken.

“Shoo! Shoo!” When the chicken didn’t move, Badger waved his paws. “Go on now—shoo!”

“Bock!” The chicken fluttered off, past a small red suitcase tied shut with twine. The suitcase sat at the bottom of Badger’s stoop.

Badger moaned. *Quick—inside!*

But that was when the fellow came around the corner, picked up the suitcase, and dashed up the steps. Before Badger knew it, his paw was being given a vigorous shake.

“Badger, I am Skunk! I have heard much about you. It is so good to finally meet!” Skunk’s grin was so large, and his paw-shaking so energetic, that Badger’s insides warmed.

“Oh,” said Badger, blushing.

And in that moment, Skunk squeezed past Badger and entered the brownstone.

Like that! thought Badger.

As Badger shut the door, he knew there’d be no stopping Skunk’s game plan. The red suitcase would be popped open to reveal something guaranteed to change everything. Next would come the patter, the pitch, the easy payment plan. “A real game changer!” he’d be told. The talking would go on and on.

He found Skunk in his rock room. (*My rock room!*) Skunk peered. He poked the pile of geodes in the fireplace.

“Great place. Nice kitchen.” Skunk nodded appreciatively. He twirled one of Badger’s rock hammers in his right paw.

Badger took the hammer. “Rock hammers are not toys.”

Skunk shook his head. “Definitely not! It would be good for mashing potatoes, though.”

Badger put the hammer away with emphasis, and noticed the red suitcase tied up with twine. The suitcase sat in the center of the room. Badger looked at it suggestively.

Skunk followed Badger’s gaze to the red suitcase, looked back at Badger, and gave him a wide smile. “I am here!”

“You are,” said Badger.

There was a pause.

Followed by another pause.

Skunk pointed at the rock tumbler. “I switched it to Off. That machine is loud. It sounds like it is shaking rocks. Ha!”

“It is a rock *tumbler*,” said Badger. “It *polishes* rocks.”

“Oh,” said Skunk. “May I see a polished rock?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Skunk blinked, sighed, and sat down.

On my rock stool! thought Badger. Badger stared at Skunk sitting on his rock stool.

Skunk stared back at him, and then set his chin in a paw, and began to twist ever so slightly, back and forth, on the rock stool.

“Ahem,” said Badger.

Skunk glanced up.

Badger looked pointedly at the suitcase.

Skunk also looked at the suitcase, frowned at Badger, and said, “This is a good stool. It spins. You must like spinning. I also like to spin. Watch!” Skunk gripped the sides of the stool and kicked off.

“You must stop now!” said Badger.

Skunk stopped with a skid.

And said nothing!

Badger began to pace. “Look, there are not ten steps that will improve my life. I already manage my time. I do not spend money on raffles or lottery tickets. I have no holes in my socks. I do not believe in X-ray glasses or fungus powders. Fake diamond rings fail to impress. I do not need a blender, and I certainly do not need a shoehorn. Unless you are here with money to fund a rock scientist doing Important Rock Work—which, I might add, I do relentlessly, tirelessly and with more grit than a wad of gum—there is nothing you can offer me. Not interested. No thank you.” Badger stopped in front of Skunk. “So may we get on with our lives now?” He moved in the direction of the door.

Skunk sat up. “Horns for your shoes? Shoehorns sound necessary.”

Badger laughed. “Har! That’s true! Good one! Shoehorns!”

Then Badger realized he’d been diverted. He crossed his arms. “No more funny business. Do you have rocks in that suitcase? If you have rocks, I’m interested.”

Skunk gave him a look. “Why would I have rocks in my suitcase? Everyone knows rocks are heavy.” Skunk took in the room. “You do like rocks. There are *a lot* of rocks in this room.”

Badger gasped in exasperation. “So what’s in the suitcase?”

Skunk blinked. “My storybook. A chicken whistle. Pajamas.” Then he grinned. “I get it! Is there a secret code word? Aunt Lula forgot to tell me the secret code word.”

Badger swayed on his feet. “Aunt Lula?”

“Yes, Aunt Lula said you would give me a room and a key.” Skunk hopped off the rock stool. “I am your new roommate, Skunk!” Then Skunk tilted his head. “Did you think I was a door-to-door sales skunk? That is funny. Ha!”

“Har-har!” Badger laughed politely, while inwardly everything lurched. *A roommate? No! Not possible!* Aunt Lula would have told him.

Badger remembered—again—the two (maybe three?) unread letters from Aunt Lula sitting in his mail pail.

But then a piece of information, something he’d read, came to mind. He *chuck-chucked* at Skunk and shook his head. “Aunt

Lula? *Aunt?* You're a skunk. I am a badger. We are not family. That's scientifically proven!"

Skunk laughed. "I know! But Aunt Lula insisted I call her 'aunt.' I thought it best to agree. Have you ever won an argument with Aunt Lula? Pine martens speak so fast." Skunk added with a shrug, "Aunt Lula did know my mother."

Badger blurted, "Don't you have your own home?"

Skunk flinched and took a step back.

"Well?" Badger heard himself say.

Skunk looked at Badger and rubbed a paw through his stripe. "I did have a home," he said.

Badger raised an eyebrow.

Skunk looked away, fiddled with his tail, and then deflated. He met Badger's eyes and whispered, "Not everyone wants a skunk."

As soon as he finished whispering those words, Skunk jerked upright. With a hop, he snatched his red suitcase off the floor. "I am sorry. This is so-so, so-so, *so* embarrassing. Aunt Lula said she had written and told you. Maybe she forgot? I would not like to think she forgot, but maybe she did? Pine martens do everything fast. Sometimes I wonder how they remember to do what they said they would do, especially when they say things so speedily. Aunt Lula said it like this: Skunkyoumust

go and live with Badger in my brownstone in North Twist. You will like him. You will be good good good good good friends. I will write him immediately!”

Badger had to admit that this sounded like Aunt Lula.

Also: He had not read those letters.

Also: The brownstone belonged to Aunt Lula.

Therefore: There was nothing to be done.

Skunk, though, was making for the door. “I will find somewhere else to stay. You did not know I was coming.”

Badger raced in front of Skunk and said what needed to be said: “Oh, you’re *that* Skunk! Come in, come in! It is good to finally meet you!”