



Chapter One

Amber jiggled about on the front doorstep, waiting, her skin tingling with excitement, though she didn't know why. After all, this was just Mrs Heggety's place ...

There was a click and the door opened.

'Oh, hello, Amber.' Mrs Heggety pushed her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose and squinted in the bright afternoon sunlight. 'What a lovely surprise. Come on in, dear.'

Amber stepped into the gloomy hallway of the old house and waited as Mrs Heggety closed the front door.

'Come on, dear. Let's go down to the kitchen. I'll get you a glass of milk and I think I've got some cream biscuits somewhere.'

Amber's stomach rumbled as she followed Mrs Heggety down the hallway. Mrs Heggety always had cream biscuits. The sort her mother didn't buy.

'How is school going?' asked Mrs Heggety as she rummaged through her pantry, opening tins until she found what she wanted.

Awful.

'Good,' muttered Amber, nibbling at a ragged fingernail she'd broken at netball practice the day before. 'We're having the annual fete in a few weeks.'

'Well, that should be fun,' said Mrs Heggety as she poured Amber a glass of cold milk. 'Would you like me to bake some cakes again?'

Amber smiled. Mrs Heggety made the best cakes. They were always the first to be sold at the cake stall and she always made something special ... unusual ... as first prize in the raffle. One year she'd made a piano, and another year, a cactus. Last year she had made a cake in the shape of a witch's hat and Amber's best friend Bethany had won it. Now Amber felt her insides clench. *What was she going to do at the fete without Bethany?*

'Our class isn't doing cakes this year, Mrs Heggety,' she murmured. 'We're doing the jumble stall.'

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, then flattened it out and pushed it across the table.

‘It tells you all about it in this note. We need to collect lots of old jumble that people don’t want anymore and sell it to someone who does want it. I was wondering if you had anything we could use.’

Mrs Heggety gave a chuckle as she pushed some of her wispy white hair from her forehead. ‘I’m sure I have,’ she said, lifting her nose so she could peer through her glasses at the note. ‘I tell you what. I’ll give you a box and you can look through Mr Heggety’s shed. I’m sure you’ll find plenty of useful things in there.’

Amber hadn’t been in Mr Heggety’s shed since he had died a few years ago, but she could remember the mountains of junk piled everywhere. For just a moment she felt her body tingle with anticipation.

‘Come on. Finish your milk and we’ll see what we can find,’ said Mrs Heggety, passing the note back. ‘And have another biscuit before you go.’

The shed was a mess. In one corner, stacked against the wall, were garden tools, lengths of timber and an old wooden ladder. There was an

old cot full of bags, pieces of wire and buckets with no handles. An ancient mower, a broken chainsaw and something that might once have been a bike were dumped together on the floor. And boxes were stacked everywhere, crammed full of junk that was no longer needed. At least, not by Mrs Heggety. Amber wondered where to start.

She found plenty to fill the box – a vase, coffee mugs, an old recipe book, a game of Ludo and a couple of jigsaw puzzles, and a small china tea set that must have belonged to Mrs Heggety's daughter, Vera, a long time ago. Amber liked Vera. Whenever she came over to visit her mother – nearly always wearing her police uniform – she brought Barney with her.

'Come and play with Barney, Amber,' she'd say, poking her head over the fence, laughing. Barney would rest his huge paws on the top railing next to her. Barney was the biggest dog Amber had ever seen. So somehow she just couldn't imagine Vera ever playing with a tea set.

Amber looked at the box of junk. *Was something missing?* She shook her head, not knowing why she had even thought that.

It was getting late. She heaved the box up into her arms and was making her way to the door

when something caught her eye. Something shiny. Something red. Rich red. Ruby red.

Holding the box, Amber craned her neck. *What was catching the fading light?*

And at that moment, a bold streak of sunlight flashed through a crack in the wall of the old wooden shed and shone through the glass of the most beautiful bottle she had ever seen.

Standing by the door with the box of jumble in her arms, Amber was spellbound. As the light from outside dulled, the bottle brightened, its rays fanning out, striking objects with deep red beams, just as a sun catcher would in the early morning sunlight.

She had no idea how long she stood there, but when Amber glanced out the grimy window she noticed that night was falling. Yet she could still see the ruby bottle. Very clearly. *How was that possible?*

Carefully, Amber placed her jumble on the floor. She pushed her way through a stack of boxes and reached out. As her fingertips touched the glass she felt a shiver run through her body. Her arm tingled, and she knew instinctively this bottle was meant for her.



Chapter Two

'Are you alright in there?' called Mrs Heggety.

Amber jumped. 'Yes,' she cried, clutching the bottle to her chest.

The door opened. Amber could see Mrs Heggety's shape silhouetted in the light spilling from the kitchen. *Was it that late?*

'Did you manage to find anything useful, dear?' asked Mrs Heggety, peering into the gloom.

'Yes thank you, but I'm not sure about the tea set. Or this old red bottle. You might want to keep them. They look ... valuable.'

'Bring them into the kitchen, dear, and we'll have a look at them.'

Amber carefully placed the red bottle in the box and carried everything back to the house.

She pulled out some of the jumble and showed Mrs Heggety.

‘Oh, that old tea set,’ said Mrs Heggety. ‘That was Vera’s. Gosh, that must be, what ... almost fifty years old now.’ She picked up one of the cups. ‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘some of these pieces are chipped so you might as well take them. You know, if Vera had had a daughter, I would have passed it on, but no, she had to go and have five boys, bless them.’

Amber smiled. Mrs Heggety adored her grandsons. She was always talking about them.

‘Oh, and the ruby bottle!’ exclaimed Mrs Heggety. ‘Why, I haven’t seen that in years. That was a good find, dear.’

She held it up. In the light, Amber could see just how dusty it was, but it was still beautiful with its curved grooves swirling around the broad base and tapering up to the neck. She had never seen anything quite like it.

‘Where did it come from?’ she asked.

‘Oh, it belonged to Mr Heggety’s Uncle Roger. He used to live with us and he kept this up on a small shelf in his room. There was a bit of a story to it, I think, but I can’t remember what it was right now.’ She gave the bottle a rub with her apron.

Light from above caught the red glass, making it gleam. Amber, eyes wide, reached out and touched the bottle with the tips of her fingers. There was that strange tingle again. Had Mrs Heggety felt it as well?

But Mrs Heggety just put the bottle back in the box. 'I suppose it will come to me in time,' she sighed.

Amber nodded, and for a moment she wished the bottle was hers.

And almost as if Mrs Heggety had read her mind, she said, 'Why don't you keep it instead of putting it in the jumble sale? And keep the tea set, too, if you like.'

Could she? 'Ah, I'm not sure ...' stammered Amber. *And wasn't she a bit old to play with tea sets?*

There was a knock at the front door. 'Just me, Mrs Heggety,' called a voice. 'I'm looking for Amber.'

Mum! How late was it?

'I'm coming, Mum.' Amber lifted the box from the table and turned to Mrs Heggety. 'Thank you very much for all of this,' she said.

'No trouble, dear.' And as Amber and her mother left, Mrs Heggety called after them, 'And I'll make some cakes for your fete, too.'

Later that night, as she curled up under her doona, Amber could make out the shape of the ruby bottle perched on top of the jumble in the box. And as her eyes drooped, she imagined it began to glow, ever so slightly. It made her feel warm inside ... safe ...