

Chapter One--Outskirts of London, May 1967

The house looked different than Emerald remembered it. It was an old, Victorian-style home that had slightly gone to seed, with ivy crawling up the walls. It was dark and dismal-looking, the windows dirty and shutters tightly closed. Emerald had remembered it to be a cheerful, rather nice-looking place. She had memories of golden sunshine streaming through open windows, green grass, and a beautiful garden bearing all kinds of herbs, fruits, vegetables, and flowers. But, she guessed, everything is seen through a different lens when one is a child, a lens filled with wonder and beauty, and she had not seen this house since the innocent days of her childhood. It must have just *seemed* glorious.

Now, though, the house was even worse than it had probably ever been anyway. Emerald's grandmother, whom everyone simply called "Ma'am," had been too old and fragile to take care of it for several years, and even poor old Bobby, Ma'am's butler, couldn't have kept up with it. What the house had once been didn't matter anyway, because Ma'am was gone, gone for good, and she had left it to Emerald and her mother to clean up, as they were the only family she had.

The two of them walked up the steps to the front door. It had a sinister-looking knocker on it in the shape of a boar's head. Emerald did not remember that knocker ever being there before, and with its sharp fangs and rusted head, it felt somewhat like a bad omen.

"This place looks like it's been deserted for ages," said Mother as she unlocked the door. "Ma'am always kept it pristine when I was growing up. It's a shame to see her lovely home so dilapidated."

Emerald nodded. She knew that Ma'am's loss had affected her mother deeply, and it made her talk of her childhood often, days of hiding in the bomb shelters during air raids, listening to the late night radio broadcasts, and going to a teahouse every Sunday after the war ended.

Mother opened the door and they stepped inside.

"It seems to be even more gloomy than the outside," Emerald said.

Mother sighed. "It still smells like it used to."

There was a momentary silence. The house smelled strange, as many unoccupied houses do, and the atmosphere was no more comforting. Sheets covered most of the furniture. Dust gathered everywhere, and the dirty, shuttered windows let in little of the outside light.

"Well, best get to work right away," ever-sensible Mother suggested. "Bobby said the kitchen was atrocious, so I'll start there. Can you sort things in the attic, dear? Keep all the pictures and precious jewelry. Throw everything else out."

"Yes, Mother," said Emerald, and she started up the wooden staircase to the attic. She did vaguely remember the layout of the house, and got to the attic easily enough, give or take a misstep or two. The attic was a big, squarish room with large windows on one side, and smaller ones on the other. An old, cracked mirror stood in the corner. Light from the outside, where the gray, cloudy sky and neighborhood streets could be seen, illuminated the dust. It was everywhere: in the air, on the boxes and wardrobe and chests, lining the windowsills and doorknob.

If the dust was bad, the mess was worse. Bobby, who would soon be retiring, had spoken to Mother about the house. If Emerald recalled correctly, he stated that the attic was simply

“bad.” Clearly, he had not been up here in a while. Boxes were everywhere, leaving no room to walk amidst the clutter.

*Where to start?* Emerald began by taking cobwebs off of boxes and clearing part of the floor so one could actually walk through the space. It was tedious and difficult work, and after about a quarter of an hour of labor, she had cleared an adequate, if somewhat small, space in the room. *No use in trying to clear anything else out*, Emerald thought, *I’d better start on the real work.*

And so it began. Boxes and boxes of old artifacts, strings of pearls, faded greeting cards, and other knickknacks had to be dusted off, sorted, and put in their respective piles.

Hours passed. As afternoon crept into evening, and as more and more dust landed on Emerald until she was simply caked with it, she kept on.

At long, long last, Emerald reached the back of the room. All that was behind her were two large piles of attic-y things and many deconstructed boxes. In just a while more, she would be done with the tiresome and endless goings-through of this accursed attic. She continued with her chore. About 10 hours later (or so it seemed to Emerald, though it was only really about half an hour), she came to another seemingly ordinary box.

It was old and dirty, just like the others, speaking of long-ago memories in its silent way. However, when Emerald opened it, she was astonished to discover a rose resting on a jumble of old maps and papers. It was perfectly fresh, most certainly a real rose, for the stem was a deep forest green. Not one petal drooped, nor any part of it showed signs of withering. Yet, the petals were a brilliant gold, unlike any rose Emerald had ever laid eyes on. The smell was sweeter than anything Emerald had ever imagined, enchanting beyond measure.

*How could a rose's petals be golden? And what is that incredible scent?*

Mesmerized, Emerald held up the rose so it would shine in the moonlight coming in from the outside. It was almost as if the petals were made of pure gold themselves, yet light and delicate, lovely in every way, somehow wrapped in their own glory. What was it with this inexplicable, impossible rose? Emerald desperately wanted to keep it. Maybe, she thought, she could ask Mother if she could have just this one treasure.

She walked over to the old mirror in the corner, shaking all the dust off of her and smoothing her yellow dress. What might the rose look like in her hair? Gently, avoiding the thorns, she slipped the stem behind her ear into her wavy brown locks. It shone in the moonlight, but it almost seemed to glow on its own. Emerald smiled at her reflection.

"I'm a fairy princess!" she said aloud, though she knew that 17 was much too old for such silliness. Forgetting herself, she twirled around, laughing. Whatever this rose was, it was simply too beautiful for words, and she felt light and happy for the first time since Ma'am left this world.

She reached up to touch the rose in her hair. Her finger pricked on something sharp. *A thorn!* The trance left her as the pain pulsed in her finger. It hurt much more than it should have. Emerald quickly brought her finger to her lips, trying to stop the pain and bleeding. But instead of the metallic taste of blood, something sweet filled her mouth. Surprised, she looked at her finger. Emerald gasped. Her blood was gold, slightly lighter than the color of the rose's petals.

"What?" Emerald was stunned and scared. How could her blood possibly be golden? For a long while she stood there, in front of that mirror, staring at her finger. What was she to do?

Her bewilderment was interrupted by the sound of Mother's footsteps coming up the stairs. Emerald suddenly did not want Mother to see the rose or her finger. She would most certainly disapprove, Emerald was sure. Being careful to avoid getting pricked again, she hid the rose in the nearest box and hid her hand behind her back.

The door opened and Mother stepped into the room. "You've gotten a lot done, dear. Good work," she said, looking around at her daughter's progress. This was very high praise, as Mother was a stoic and rather quiet person who did not often congratulate the plain duties of other people. Now Emerald felt bad about hiding her newfound secret. She respected Mother like how she had respected Ma'am: with awe, deference, and hope. Because of this, she rarely felt as though she had to keep things from her.

"Thank you," a quiet Emerald mustered, before looking down at her black flats.

"Can you take a break for supper?" asked Mother. "Wash up and meet me downstairs."

"Of course, Mother."

As soon as Mother left, Emerald ran to the rose's box and put it on a chest next to the mirror so she would not forget it (though she doubted she would have forgotten anyway). She promised herself that she would tell her mother about the rose as soon as it was time to leave.

As Emerald walked down the stairs leading to the top floor, she glanced back at the attic once more. The glow from the rose, reflected in the mirror, faintly illuminated the room with a golden hue. *Extraordinary.*

After washing her hands and face in the upstairs lavatory, she went downstairs to find the house looking in much better condition. The dining room table, which had been covered with a

big sheet, was polished and set, complete with two tall candles in the center. Even in the gloomy old house, Mother had not refrained from making the meal beautiful.

The two of them sat down, said thanks, and ate. It was a plain supper, though made special by the herbs Mother had used and the unexpected pie that came with the usual after-supper tea. The splendid treat was a welcome surprise after all their work.

The old grandfather clock in the parlor chimed nine times. Suddenly, Emerald felt quite lightheaded. Her finger, which had stopped bleeding, began to pulse in pain again. She took a sip of tea, trying to calm herself and stop her shaking hands.

“Dear me!” exclaimed Mother. “So late already, and so much to do, with the landlord coming so soon.” She was referring to Mr. Pinch, the stuffy old codger with the terrible comb-over. Emerald had only met him once and had immediately disliked him. He was due to come five days hence to get the keys for the old house. It had to be ready by then, which meant many long hours of work for them.

Emerald, still feeling unsteady, slowly came to her feet and began to bring the plates to the kitchen. As she set the dishes down, she lost her balance and almost fell on the floor.

“Darling, are you quite alright?” asked Mother, looking concerned.

“I’m fine, Mum. Just a bit tired. I’d best get back back upstairs and finish up,” Emerald replied.

“All right, then. Let me know if you need a rest. I’ve still got a great deal of work to do in the kitchen. We may be here a bit late tonight.” Mother had a rare strain of weariness in her voice.

Emerald climbed the lonely staircase, thinking that she would put her rose in the purse she brought and try to get back to work. She really was feeling rather ill. She stepped into the attic and immediately noticed that the enchanting glow was gone.

And the rose had vanished!

Unexpected panic welled up inside of Emerald, and she frantically looked around for where the rose might be. Frantically, she searched, rifling through boxes and piles and oddities. Where could it possibly have gone?

As she walked by the mirror in the corner, she caught a glimpse of a reflection in it. But it wasn't hers.

A boy, perhaps two years older than Emerald, was standing there in the mirror. Frightened, she looked behind her, but there was no one there. She turned back to the boy, more scared than she had ever been in her life. That's when she saw it, and her eyes widened in shock.

The boy was holding the rose.