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Opening extract from

# Ring of Roses

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For Mackenzie and Nate

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# CHAPTER 1

London, the second week of June, 1665

The great house buzzed with noise and activity. The cook pummelled bread dough in the kitchen. The housekeeper hummed as she folded bed linen. The upstairs maids and downstairs maids came and went with buckets of coal or chamber pots. The kitchen maid sang as she scrubbed the doorstep.

Mrs Beauchurch spoke with Abigail in the best bedchamber. This was a splendid room with hand-painted wallpaper, crystal mirrors and paintings of the Beauchurch family through the ages. Among the pieces of shiny polished furniture, there were two huge wardrobes and a four-poster bed with velvet drapes. There was also a carved wooden rocking cradle.

Abby looked into the cradle, but the baby inside was bundled up and not much could be seen of her. She was awake, however, and her eyes were big and blue with dark lashes all round. Abby gazed at her, and fell in love at first sight.

"This is Grace," Mrs Beauchurch said.

"What a beautiful child!" Abby said. She put out a hand to rock the cradle and remembered her manners. "*Very* beautiful – if I might say so, Madam."

Mrs Beauchurch gave a weak smile. "Of course you may. But weren't your sisters beautiful when they were babies?"

Abby shook her head. "They had screwed up faces, or were scrawny, or always screaming. But little Grace here ... I do believe I never saw a prettier or more contented babe in all my life."

"Well, we are in agreement about that," Mrs Beauchurch said, and sank back onto her feather pillows and linen sheets.

It was rather strange, Abby thought, to have an interview with an employer who was in bed.





But Mrs Beauchurch explained that the long labour and birth of Grace had left her worn out. "I *had* wanted to look after Grace by myself," she told Abby, "but it's as much as I can do to get out of bed by noon – and that's with the help of two maids. I need a nursemaid."

Abby did not reply for a moment. She was gazing round in wonder at the furnishings of the room, at the sparkling mirrors, thick, soft rugs and jewel-coloured hangings. She had never seen such a room in all her life.

With an effort, Abby tried to concentrate on what Mrs Beauchurch was saying. "You shouldn't rush things, Madam," she said. "My mother always takes at least two months to get back on her feet after a little one comes."

Mrs Beauchurch nodded. "Are you called Abigail or Abby?"

"Abby, Madam."

"Well, Abby, I want someone who will give little Grace as much tender love and care as I would."

Abby glanced over at the baby and smiled. "Have no fears on that, Madam!"

Mrs Beauchurch gave Abby a keen look before she spoke again. "You'll answer to Mrs Dimmock the cook, and Mrs Bailey the housekeeper," she said. "You will be in charge of all Grace's wants and needs. It will be your job to play with her, wash her clothes, blankets and bedding, and keep her safe and happy. She must want for nothing."

Abby nodded. "And what about her feeding, Madam?" she asked. Abby knew from experience that this was more important than anything else.

"A wet nurse calls in four times a day," Mrs Beauchurch said.

Abby nodded again. "Very good, Madam."

"Mrs Tomkins is a clean and respectable woman with a baby of her own," Mrs Beauchurch went on.

Abby smiled.

"I know that babies pick up sickness easily," Mrs Beauchurch said. "I don't want Grace to be taken into public places."





"No, Madam," Abby said.

"If you go to market, or run errands, she must stay home in the care of Mrs Bailey or Mrs Dimmock." Mrs Beauchurch paused, then asked, "And where was your last position, Abby?"

"In Kensington," Abby replied proudly. "I had two little girls to care for – the granddaughters of a lord. I looked after them for a year, but then their father said they must have a governess and learn languages."

"I don't think Grace will be ready for that for a while," Mrs Beauchurch said, with a little smile. "But how many sisters did you say you had?"

"Six, Madam," Abby said. "All younger than me."

"Then there are *seven* of you?"

Abby nodded. "Seven so far. Me – Abigail – then Bess, Clara, Dora ..."

Mrs Beauchurch raised a hand for her to stop. Enough!" she said, but her voice was kind. "The idea of having seven little girls makes me feel quite weak. How far does your mother intend to go through the alphabet?"

"I think she will go on until she has a boy," Abby said, and Mrs Beauchurch shook her head in disbelief.

There was a moment's silence while both of them gazed at the baby. Then Mrs Beauchurch said, "I believe you will suit us very well, Abby." She gave her another keen look. "I have waited six long years for Grace and feel that she will be my only child. Do you promise to love and cherish her? Would you put her life before your own?"

"Indeed I would, Madam," Abby vowed.

"Then you may start here tomorrow," said Mrs Beauchurch. "I'll ask Mrs Bailey the housekeeper to have a bed put up in the nursery for you." Then she closed her eyes to signal that the interview was at an end.

Abby dropped into a curtsey (despite the fact Mrs Beauchurch couldn't see her) and left the room.





Belle Vue House was a large Tudor building in the centre of London, with its own barn, stables and carriages. The Beauchurches were just a family of three, but they had a large number of indoor and outdoor servants.

"Rather you than me, caring for *that* precious babe," Lizzie the kitchen maid said when she met Abby the next day. "Infants go down with every sniffle and sickness known to man – and it always turns out to be their nursemaid's fault."

Abby laughed. "I looked after all my sisters as babes and never lost a single one!"

"Besides, there are rumours ..." Lizzie said darkly.

"What sort of rumours?" Abby asked.

"About – you know." Lizzie dropped her voice. "*The Plague*. They say it has started up again. There have been signs in the sky."

"*In the sky?*" Abby repeated. "How can that be?"

"They say an angel appeared in the clouds with a flaming sword," Lizzie said. "And a comet with a tail of fire shot across the sky."

Abby considered this. "But have many people actually *caught* the Plague?" she asked. 'Was this why Mrs Beauchurch didn't want Grace to be taken into public places?' she wondered.

Lizzie shrugged. "Don't know – although rumour has it that the richest families are already leaving London for their country homes."

"But the King is still here in Whitehall, is he not?" Abby said.

Lizzie nodded. "When *he* goes from London, that will be the time to worry."

The cook, Mrs Dimmock, came into the kitchen and clapped her hands at the sight of the two girls chatting. "Lizzie, gossiping again!" she scolded. "I never saw a more idle girl in my life!" Mrs Dimmock frowned at Abby. "I hope you're not going to take after her."

"No, Mrs Dimmock," Abby said.

"Lizzie – clear the ashes out of the grates downstairs and polish them," Mrs Dimmock ordered. "Abby, you can go and make up your bed in the nursery. And use the back stairs, of course."





Abby was about to set off when the cook added, "One baby won't be a lot of work. When you're at a loose end, come to me and I'll find you something to do. There's knives to polish, for a start. And there's 102 of them."

"Yes, Mrs Dimmock," Abby said, and made up her mind that she'd always try to look busy.

Abby had reached the door to the back stairs when two boys about her own age burst in. One had dark hair, and one was fair. The fair one looked perfectly pleasant, but the dark one was so *very* handsome that Abby felt herself blush just looking at him. They were dressed in dark blue uniforms and had a pleasant smell of leather and horses about them.

"Mrs Dimmock!" the fair one said, breathless. "There's a house shut up in Old Street!"

"Next to the church!" the dark one said.

"Planks over the windows and door …"

"… with a big red cross on it that says 'LORD HAVE MERCY ON US'."

The cook sat down with a thud. "Gawd help us," she said. "The rumours must be true …"

"We ran past the house as fast as we could!" the dark boy said.

"They say if you as much as breathe the air from a tainted house you'll die," the fair one added.

"Stuff and nonsense," Mrs Dimmock said, but she didn't sound sure.

"Shall we go into the yard and get some snails?" the dark one asked.

"Whatever for?" Lizzie asked.

"They say that if you keep 12 snails in your mouth when you go out, it's a sure guard against the Plague," the fair-haired one told her.

"More stuff and nonsense," Mrs Dimmock said.

" 'Tis hot enough for Plague," the dark-haired youth said. Then he noticed Abby and stopped and smiled. "Hello," he said. "My name's Toby."

His fair-haired friend shoved him out of the way. "Never mind him – I'm James," he said.





Abby smiled and nodded to each of them in turn. Working here was going to be even better than she'd hoped.

Abby's days fell into a pattern. Little Grace woke about five o'clock every morning, and it was Abby's job to keep her quiet until the wet nurse arrived at seven. Most mornings she would take Grace downstairs. If the day was fair, she would tuck the baby into the cradle, which swung from the apple tree in the yard. Sometimes, with a little rocking, Grace would fall asleep again. Other times, Abby would carry her round the yard, in and out of the stables, and sing to her to try and keep her from waking Mr and Mrs Beauchurch.

Toby and James slept in the big hayloft above the stables. Sometimes Toby would hear Abby singing to Grace in the mornings and get up to keep her company. In this way, they became good friends.