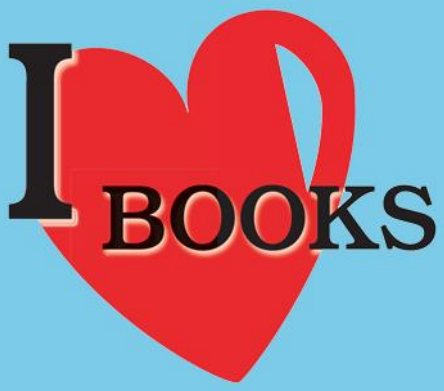


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Opening extract from

Rubies and Runaways

Written by

Janine Beacham

Published by

Little, Brown Books for Young Readers an imprint of Hachette Children's Group

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JANINE BEACHAM

LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
www.lbkids.co.uk

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First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Hodder and Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 5102 0131 6

Typeset in Bembo by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper and board used in this book are made
from wood from responsible sources.



Little, Brown Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder and Stoughton
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

For Rory, with love

Prologue

It was Yorke's coldest winter in living memory. The cathedral roof almost cracked under its weight of snow. Icy winds tore through the skitterways. The cat statues of Yorke, the guardians of the city, were hidden in drifts. Only the black cat on Ravensgate was free of snow. It looked uncannily lifelike, as if it had just shaken off its frosty coat.

A boy bolted down the street. Ragged and wide eyed, gasping for breath, he stopped in a skitterway – an alleyway of Yorke. His heartbeat throbbed in his eardrums. He wiped his nose with his hand.

A black cat leaped down from a windowsill, and

gazed at him with golden eyes. The boy stared back. He was dizzy from tiredness and hunger. That must be why he was seeing things. He thought that cat had been a statue just a moment ago.

He heard footsteps, and glanced wildly about for somewhere to hide. He had to keep running. He had to find help, somewhere.

As he took to his heels, he heard children singing in the distance.

If you want to save your skin
Don't let strangers take you in!
You'll go to the undertakers
once you meet the Angelmakers.

Chapter 1

The Orphan's Warning

Rose Raventhorpe felt like throttling her cousin Herbert. Or as she called him, Ghastly Herbert.

She usually adored Christmas. Carols floated through the cathedral, and shop doors wore plump green wreaths. Mrs Standish, the Raventhorpes' cook, made an iced fruitcake that needed two people to carry it to the table. But this Christmas her cousin Herbert had come to visit.

Tall, pale and languid, Herbert was thirteen years old and maddeningly superior. He boasted of his

father evicting a whole village to make room for a new mansion. He told Rose to 'stop gabbling foreign languages and speak proper English'. He scoffed at Lord Frederick Raventhorpe's work as an ambassador: 'Your father should go fox hunting, or gamble, like a proper lord.' He even called Mrs Standish's glorious Yorkesborough puddings 'tasteless'. Back in the kitchen, the cook had taken to pounding herbs with unnecessary force. Rose played loud piano pieces to drown out the sound of Herbert's voice.

Heddsworth the butler found Herbert in the pantry tasting from six jars of jam with the same spoon, and smashing the ones he didn't like. 'A London ditch-digger could run a household better than this one,' he sneered. Heddsworth confessed to Rose that he was sorely tempted to put laxatives in Herbert's dinner.

But that was not the worst of it. Herbert had brought his own butler to Lambsgate. Bixby was a sniffy man with heavy-lidded eyes and a tiny moustache. He criticised Heddsworth's

napkin-folding, housekeeping records, choice of wines and brand of silver polish. He even refused to let Heddsworth unpack Herbert's suitcase, saying it must be done *his* way.

Rose's black cat, Watchful, hated the visitors. Watchful was an uncanny creature, with the ability to turn into … well, *something*. Rose still wasn't sure about what she had seen, months ago, in the cathedral. She only knew that some nights Watchful did not sleep on her bed, but went out prowling. Presumably consorting with the other uncanny cats of the city – the statues which kept watch over Yorke.

Now, Rose sat with her family at dinner while the two butlers glowered at each other. Heddsworth had laid the table, but Bixby had tried to change the settings.

'No other butler, no other person, should ever change a table setting, Miss Raventhorpe,' Heddsworth had told Rose, pale with indignation. 'It is an insult.'

As Heddsworth, like many of the city's butlers, was a secret Guardian of Yorke and highly skilled at swordsmanship, insulting him was dangerous. The air crackled with tension.

'Honestly, your butler is a joke,' said Herbert loudly. 'Pay attention, Heddsworth! I wanted cream sauce on my potatoes, not this buttery slop.'

'Shall I take over serving?' suggested Bixby.

'No,' said Heddsworth, glaring at him.

'How are your fencing lessons coming along, pet?' Lord Frederick asked Rose.

'Very well, Father,' she replied.

'I don't approve of it,' said Herbert. 'It's unladylike! You might as well take up boxing.'

Heat crept up under Rose's collar.

'Fencing is a perfectly acceptable sport for ladies,' she retorted.

'Hear, hear,' boomed Rose's father. 'Exercise gives a girl her bloom. She'll be posing for portraits soon, like her mother. What was the last one called, Constance darling?'

'*The Black Swan in the Heather,*' answered Lady Constance Raventhorpe with a proud smile. She touched her perfect coiffure. 'I wore a plaid, a Scottish tartan.'

'Enchanting!' said Lord Frederick. 'Ought to be painted in that dress you're wearing now, my dear. Dashed pretty thing.'

'Oh, I couldn't, Frederick,' cooed his wife. She smoothed her trailing green silk gown; it had a silver lace train. 'I bought it a month ago in Paris. Quite out of fashion now. It's hardly fit for wearing out of the house.'

'I wouldn't want you out in this weather anyway, dear,' said Lord Frederick. 'Jolly bracing, isn't it? Still, a Raventhorpe is never cowed by the elements. I know! You two cousins could have an outing – go to the Mistletoe Service at the cathedral.'

'The cathedral?' groaned Herbert. 'What a bore!'

'Hmph,' said Lord Frederick, put out. 'Yorke Minster's a sight better than anything in London. Heddsworth can go with you.'

'I really can't be bothered,' drawled Herbert. 'Pass the gravy, Rose.'

Rose stared at him stonily. 'Pass the gravy, *please*.'

'You heard me, Miss Rose. Or are you going deaf from all your terrible piano practice?'

'Excuse me,' said Rose. 'You didn't say please.'

'Don't be stupid, Rose.'

There was a long pause. 'Please,' said Herbert sulkily.

Rose passed the gravy.

'Don't think you can act like that forever,' sniffed Herbert, pouring gravy over his meal. 'You will have to get used to doing what I say. After all, you're going to marry me one day.'

There was utter silence at the table. Heddsworth froze in the act of spooning mustard on to Herbert's plate. Behind him, Bixby smirked.

'*What* did you say?' gasped Rose.

'You have to marry me,' said Herbert, with his mouth full. 'When we're of age. You're the

Raventhorpe heir, and I'm my parents' only son. You will be the Countess of Dundragan.'

Just at this moment Bixby took the opportunity to joggle Heddsworth's elbow. Mayonnaise splashed on Herbert's front. Herbert yelped.

'Really,' sighed Herbert. 'I do think you should sack Heddsworth. Bixby would be far better. Don't you agree, Rose?'

After dinner, Rose rushed to her father's study.

'Father, you can't expect me to marry Herbert!'

Lord Frederick looked uncomfortable.

'He's my cousin,' Rose cried. 'And he's horrible!'

'Well, yes,' said Lord Frederick. 'But your uncle has always been adamant that the boy marry into the family. And it would give you an excellent position in society.'

'I am *not* marrying Ghastly Herbert!'

'He might improve,' said Lord Frederick doubtfully.

'He won't. Not ever.'

'Well, perhaps we needn't say anything at this point? You're not old enough for marriage yet. And Ghastly – I mean *Herbert*, might find a more suitable bride.'

Rose muttered something unladylike in Arabic.

'Now, now,' chided her father. 'That was poor pronunciation.'

'You didn't promise me away, did you?'

'No, no. But your uncle is very prominent in the House of Lords, and he is a perfect nuisance when I try to change outdated laws. I wouldn't ever push you into an unhappy marriage, my dear,' he added quickly. 'In the meantime, just try to get along with him.'

Easier said than done, Rose thought bitterly.

'And you wouldn't ever sack Heddsworth, would you?'

'Of course not!' said her father. 'Though your mother is rather fond of Bixby, I'm afraid.'

Feeling sick, Rose went to Heddsworth in the kitchen.

'Could you duel him?' she begged. 'You could still teach him a lesson!'

'Tempting as that sounds, Miss Raventhorpe, it would be wrong.' Heddsworth was polishing silver. 'Bixby is not trained in battle as we Yorke butlers are. Nor does he know about our being Guardians of Yorke, or follow the Silvercrest code of honour. No, he would try to provoke me into some outburst, then run off to Her Ladyship and complain about my behaviour, and get me fired.'

'I won't let it happen!' said Rose.

'He'll do his best,' muttered Heddsworth.

'Beastly Bixby,' growled Rose. The kitchen smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg-sprinkled eggnog, but she had never felt so lacking in the Christmas spirit.

'I'm not going to a freezing cold cathedral!' moaned Herbert, the next morning. 'I'll die of pneumonia.'

Rose gritted her teeth. 'You don't have to come

if you don't want to. Heddsworth and I can go by ourselves.'

'Oh no you won't,' said Herbert. 'My future bride can't go about Yorke with only a butler for company!'

'Stop all that nonsense about marriage. I don't have to do anything you say,' snapped Rose.

Heddsworth tactfully intervened. 'I am sure we can wrap you up well, Master Herbert. The service should not take long.'

'Fine,' Herbert huffed.

They climbed into the carriage, and set off through muddy, slushy streets. Local urchins threw snowballs at the carriage. Rose longed to hurl snowballs back, but Heddsworth wouldn't let her. ('Though it would be rather fun, Miss Raventhorpe.')

The cathedral was lit by hundreds of candles and decorated with holly, ivy and mistletoe. Red and white berries shone by candlelight on the altar.

'Beautiful,' breathed Rose.

'I hope there's hassocks,' said Herbert. 'I'm not sitting on a cold pew for an hour.'

Rose heard someone call her name and turned to see her friend Emily Proops – now Mrs Dodge – who rushed up to her, beaming. Formerly fond of mourning clothes, Emily now wore a striped black and green dress.

'How is newly married life?' Rose wanted to know.

'Magical!' said Emily. 'We read Gothic poetry to each other every night. And darling Harry is managing the Clarion Theatre now.'

'Marvellous!' said Rose.

'We'd better find our seats,' said Emily. 'I do wish it was warmer in here. Winter is wonderfully atmospheric, but a cold in the head isn't very dramatic.'

Rose entered the Raventhorpe pew. Herbert pulled his cloak tightly around him, and snapped at Heddsworth for not bringing a hot water bottle.

Rose gazed around the packed cathedral, and spotted her friends from Silvercrest Hall, Bronson and Charlie Malone. Bronson, the only female butler of the Hall, looked as demure as a Sunday school teacher. However, Rose knew the long pocket in her dress concealed a rapier. Charlie, handsome and golden-haired, had a permanent limp from a fencing injury. He winked at Rose, who smiled back.

The service began. The Archbishop welcomed the congregation.

'Today we honour the Mistletoe Service,' he intoned. 'Since medieval times, the people of Yorke have offered forgiveness and peace to the wrongdoers who come here on Christmas Eve. This is a time of goodwill, of gratitude, and of kindness towards one's fellow man. Those who come in a spirit of penitence are asked to approach the altar.'

The congregation waited patiently. Nobody was actually expected to speak. Rose wiggled her toes

in her boots, and thought of Mrs Standish's apricot scones with cinnamon cream. There was nothing like hot scones and tea after an out—

Footsteps echoed down the aisle. A wild-eyed boy sprinted towards the altar.

The congregation stirred uneasily.

The boy was ragged and spider-limbed. One eye had been blackened by a punch, and there were other bruises on his chestnut skin.

'My sister's disappeared!' he gasped out. 'From the orphanage! Someone has to help me find her!'

Rose heard the congregation murmur in disapproval. 'Shame on him, interrupting the Archbishop!'

'Your sister?' The Archbishop sounded completely lost.

Before he could reply, a man burst in at the back of the cathedral and galloped noisily along the aisle. Everyone in the cathedral stared, too shocked to move. The man knocked the boy down. Rose almost leapt to her feet.

'That's for running off, brat!' the man hissed.

Heddsworth's hand went to his rapier. His blue eyes were colder than the winter sky.

'Apologies, apologies, your Grace,' said the strange man, cringing greasily. 'Escaped lunatic – won't 'appen again.'

The boy struggled, landed a punch on the man's jaw, and bolted out of the cathedral. The man angrily rubbed his chin and stormed out after the boy.

The shaken congregation fidgeted with their hymn books. Rose noticed Bronson and Charlie Malone exiting their pew.

'How disgraceful,' muttered Herbert. 'Common riffraff.'

Rose dropped her heavy book of prayer on his foot.

'Ouch!' yelped Herbert.

The congregation shushed him and the Archbishop cleared his throat.

'Does – does anyone else wish to seek pardon?'

Nobody responded. With visible relief, the Archbishop invited everyone to sing a carol.

Rose glanced at Heddsworth. She was desperate to join the other butlers, but they couldn't leave Herbert. Heddsworth drummed his fingers on his hymn book all through *Good King Wenceslas*.

When Rose was almost ready to scream with impatience, the service finally ended, and people began to depart. Emily gave Rose a worried look before leaving with her husband. Herbert was asleep, drooling on his collar. Rose shot to her feet.

'We have to find him, Heddsworth!'

'Bronson and Mr Malone have gone after him,' the butler replied. 'We had best wait until they return first.'

'Was he from an orphanage?' Rose demanded.

'The boy probably escaped from such a place. Very resourceful of him. If his sister is missing from an orphanage, I hope she hasn't been kidnapped by an Angelmaker.'

'What is an Angelmaker?'

Heddsworth's face was pale and set. Only his voice betrayed his anger.

'There are many people who are paid to care for infants and small children. Some are employed privately, some in institutions like orphanages. Most of these people are good, kind-hearted souls who take care of their charges, but not all. If a child dies, there are carers who don't report it and will keep taking the money. The worst deliberately murder their charges. That way they still get paid but don't have the expense of caring for the child.'

'And they're never caught, these Angelmakers?'

'I'm afraid the murders can be hard to prove, Miss Raventhorpe. So many children die of real illnesses.'

As he spoke, Bronson and Charlie Malone entered the nave. Charlie limped heavily, and Bronson looked furious.

'We lost him,' she said, shaking snow off her

clothes. 'I only hope that beast of a man didn't catch him.' She noticed Herbert, who was now snoring. 'Is that your cousin?'

'Yes,' said Rose. 'He expects me to marry him.'

Charlie gave a snort of incredulous laughter.

'It's not going to happen,' said Rose. 'I swear.'

'I should hope not,' said Bronson. 'Well, what are we going to do about the orphan boy and his sister?'

'As the Guardians of Yorke, we should inform the other butlers at Silvercrest Hall,' said Heddsworth.

'We could go there now,' said Rose eagerly. Then she scowled at her snoring cousin. 'I forgot. We have *him* with us.'

'We could leave him in the carriage, I suppose,' mused Heddsworth. 'With a fur rug and some sweets. If he wakes, we'll tell him we're shopping for Christmas presents.'

Rose cheered up. 'What an excellent idea!'

Heddsworth picked Herbert up and carried him

outside. Rose touched the locket she wore on a chain: a cameo carved with a black cat.

She hoped the cat statues were keeping watch on the city. Were they protecting the boy and his missing sister?

Be safe, she thought. *Help is coming.*

Chapter 2

Hall Above, Stairs Below

Rose's heart lifted when she saw Silvercrest Hall. The dignified old building, with its black cat-shaped weather vane, was an academy for butlers of distinction. Few people knew that the butlers also studied fencing and pistol shooting, and helped to keep the city criminals at bay.

They climbed out of the carriage, and the driver took the horse and carriage into the stables, along with a flask of brandy.

Rose and her friends did not go straight indoors.

They were too busy admiring the ice sculptures standing on the front lawn. Two lifesized ice butlers stood frozen, duelling with ice rapiers. There was an ice grandfather clock, complete with ticking pendulum. In one corner reared a beautifully sculpted ice horse and a fierce ice dragon sparkling like polished crystal.

'Who made these?' Rose exclaimed. 'They're the best sculptures I've ever seen!'

'We did,' said Bronson modestly. 'We butlers. It's part of our training.'

Miss Regemont, the imposing head of Hall, met them at the door. She wore a red velvet gown, and a ruby comb in her steel-grey hair.

'Ah, there you are,' she said to the arrivals. 'About time. I need help with arrangements for the Butlers' Ball.'

'*Butlers' Ball*?' said Rose.

'Oh yes, Miss Raventhorpe!' said Heddsworth. 'I was going to tell you about that. We hold a ball every year. You will be invited, I assure you.'

'Me?' said Rose, delighted. 'But I'm not yet old enough to go out in society.'

'Ah, but this is not a regular society ball,' put in Charlie Malone. 'It's quite private – only for the butlers and whoever we decide to invite.'

Rose wondered if Charlie would dance with her. Then she remembered his bad leg.

'I don't go for the dancing,' Charlie added, too heartily. 'I go for the fireworks and the supper.'

Miss Regemont cleared her throat. 'If you haven't come to discuss the ball, then we had better go inside.'

In the ballroom, swags of ivy and holly hung over the fireplace, and a huge Christmas tree glittered with silver baubles. Everyone gathered around a roaring fire. Heddsworth fetched a tray of refreshment, including hot spiced wine, cocoa, and cucumber sandwiches.

'Cucumber sandwiches? In winter?' said Rose.

'Our cucumber sandwiches are a tradition,' said

Miss Regemont firmly. 'I am very particular about them. I once had to expel a student butler for making inferior sandwiches. Now, what brings you here? I gather it is not merely a friendly visit.'

'There was a scene at the Mistletoe Service this morning, Madam,' Heddsworth explained, giving her a full report.

'A missing child,' muttered Miss Regemont. 'From which orphanage?'

'We don't know,' answered Charlie Malone, between sips of cocoa. 'But we can visit them and find out. Most of the orphanages are located around the Muckyards.'

Heddsworth nodded. 'It is our duty as Guardians of the city of Yorke to investigate. I suggest we take the Stairs Below.' He took his pistol from his coat and dusted it off. 'We had better be well armed.'

Charlie Malone drew his rapier and flourished it. 'Sharpeners at the ready!' he crowed.

'What on *earth* is going on here?'

Everyone spun round.

Herbert stood in the doorway, gaping at them all.

'What is this place?' he demanded. 'Rose? Are you consorting with *servants*? Why are they *armed*?'

Rose tried to stay calm. 'Herbert, these are friends of mine. Everyone, this is my cousin Gh— Herbert.'

'Herbert George Ernest Rambleton de Martinet, in line to be the sixth Earl of Dundragan,' corrected her cousin.

'Yes. Well. Herbert, this is Miss Regemont, Charlie Malone, and Bronson.'

Herbert frowned, taking in their uniforms, and the elegant setting of the ballroom. 'Servants?'

'Good evening, Master Herbert,' said Miss Regemont coolly. 'I am the head of this academy. Bronson is a fencing teacher and butler, Mr Malone is a secretary—'

'Butler?' said Herbert, looking Bronson up and down. 'Don't you mean housekeeper?'

The atmosphere in the room dropped ten degrees.

'No,' said Bronson quietly. 'I can serve wine, iron newspapers and manage the staff on an entire

estate. I am a butler, *not* a housekeeper.' She drew her rapier. 'And I'll duel the next person who argues with me.'

Heddsworth winced. 'Bronson—'

Herbert turned radish red. 'I knew Heddsworth was useless, but this is ridiculous! This is not fit company for my future wife.'

'I'm not your future wife – I wouldn't marry you if you dragged me to the altar!'

'You should reconsider that, if you want me to keep quiet about *this*,' sneered Herbert, gesturing at the company in the ballroom. 'I heard some talk about Guardians. Your father might have funny modern ideas about acceptable acquaintances, but your mother does not. Butlers wielding weapons – it's revolutionary. It's a threat to the Crown!'

'Master Herbert, there is no need to be upset,' soothed Heddsworth. 'We are simply looking into the matter of some missing children. You can wait in the library while we talk.'

'I will not,' said Herbert. He turned to Rose.

'If you want me to keep quiet about these violent maniacs' – he waved to indicate Bronson's rapier – 'you'd better agree to our engagement. No-one turns down a de Martinet!'

Rose gulped down her outrage. She didn't give a fig about Herbert's pride, but she knew how nasty he could get. If he had Heddsworth sacked, she would be to blame.

'I will consider it.'

Herbert smirked. 'That's better. When we get home, I shall write to inform my father.'

Heddsworth gave Rose a sympathetic glance. She bit her lip. There were more important things to worry about, she told herself. Like the boy from the orphanage. First they would find him, and then she could deal with Ghastly Herbert.