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Opening extract from  
**Black Cats and Butlers Rose**  
**Raventhorpe Investigates**

Written by  
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# PROLOGUE

Watchful the cat leapt frantically from rooftop to rooftop. He slithered on to a window ledge, righted himself, and sprang to the cobblestones. A carriage rattled past, and Watchful whisked his tail away just in time. He raced to the back door of a mansion, and meowed until the door opened. A butler smiled down at him.

‘Hungry, old thing? Here you are – a nice bowl of cream.’

The cat ignored it, swishing his tail. Surprised, the butler stroked his head.

‘What’s the matter? Been chased by a dog?’

Watchful yowled.

‘Fussy this morning, eh?’ said the butler. ‘Well, I must serve breakfast to the master. If you wait like a good kitty, you can have the kipper bones.’

Just as he lifted his tray, he heard a knock at the back door.

‘Bother,’ said the butler.

The cat ran in front of him and nipped his ankle.

‘Hey!’ said the butler, offended. ‘You nearly tripped me! Out of the way, for goodness’ sake.’ He picked up the wriggling, protesting cat, and shut him in the pantry. ‘Sorry,’ he whispered.

Then he went to open the door. Watchful scratched and hissed, knocking over tins and canisters.

The butler saw the face of his visitor.

But did not see the sword blade until it entered his chest.

## Chapter 1

# MURDER AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

‘Dear me,’ said Lady Constance Raventhorpe, lowering the newspaper. ‘Another butler murdered. How very uncivilised.’

Her daughter Rose dropped her toast. ‘Did you say murder, Mother?’

‘Oh, it’s not as if it’s anyone we know,’ said her mother, bored. ‘My goodness, the climate of Yorke kills off people all the time. Look at all those sickly governesses.’

Rose glanced anxiously at their own butler. He

sliced the top off a boiled egg with mathematical precision. ‘Another cup of tea, madam?’

‘Yes, thank you, Argyle,’ said Her Ladyship. ‘And perhaps another egg.’

‘How can you say that, Mother? It’s horrible!’ cried Rose.

‘I agree. The eggs are decidedly under par,’ said Lady Constance. ‘Argyle, tell Mrs Standish to boil them half a minute longer.’

‘I meant the murder,’ Rose said. ‘Pass me the newspaper.’

‘Pass me the newspaper, *please*,’ her mother corrected. ‘Or better still, ask Argyle to do it.’

Argyle gave a wry smile and resumed arranging the bowl of eggs.

Rose stared down at her plate. She took a deep breath. ‘Please.’

Argyle went to the sideboard and lifted a new, perfectly pressed newspaper, smoothing it carefully before placing it to the side of Rose’s plate. He swept crumbs from the tablecloth with

a brush and pan, and poured more tea for Lady Constance. Then he added milk, and stirred the tea with a delicate silver spoon.

‘My hand mirror, please,’ ordered Lady Constance.

Rose repressed a sigh as Argyle fetched the item from the sideboard. Lady Constance held it up to admire her flawless complexion, chestnut tresses and slender neck. Rose, whose pointed chin, freckles and ordinary hazel eyes were the despair of her mother, did her best to ignore this. Quickly she turned the pages of the newspaper. She noted an article about her father, Lord Frederick, the Baron of Yorkesborough:

**Our Ambassador to the Crown, Lord Frederick Raventhorpe of the ancient Yorke family, continues his fight against the opium trade. ‘I know this is a sticky matter in our nation, where a great deal of cash is made on the stuff,’ His Lordship stated. ‘However, I have learned**

**about the nasty effect of this drug in the Far East, and I am dashed if I will allow it to go on. Shameful business in all respects.'**

Rose smiled. Father had been remarkably polite in the newspaper. At home, he ranted at length about the corruption of people in high places, and their cruel abuse of underlings. She had learned some impressive Arabic swearwords from him.

Then she found the article about the murders.

SILVER SERVICE STABBING, screamed the headline. WAS IT FOR THE CUTLERY?

The victim was the second butler to be stabbed in a week. ('Second!' whispered Rose. 'Did the newspaper not even bother to report the first one? I bet it was because he was a servant.') Both had been killed on their employers' doorsteps. A black glove had been left at each scene. The police believed the attacks – now called the Black Glove murders – were botched burglaries. Inquiries were continuing.



‘Now Rose,’ said her mother, raising an eyebrow. ‘Do not get worked up. Newspapers always exaggerate.’

Argyle presented a napkin on a tray. Lady Constance patted her lips. ‘I shall be going out this morning to have my portrait painted. If you go for a walk, Rose, I expect you to be back in time for tonight’s party.’

‘Oh,’ said Rose. ‘That.’

‘I’ve completed the menu,’ her mother continued, giving her a list. ‘As you requested, I am keeping it simple.’

*Pour l’anniversaire de Rose*

*Potage à la Raventhorpe*

*Parsnip and truffle soup*

*Sole à la Raventhorpe*

*Sole fillets baked with horseradish cream*

JANINE BEACHAM

*Pigeonneau Raventhorpe*

*Pigeons poached in Raventhorpe champagne*

*Mousse à la Raventhorpe*

*Mousse of quail from the Raventhorpe estate*

*Rôti de chevreuil Raventhorpe*

*Roast venison with truffle sauce and  
potatoes Dauphinoise*

*Sorbet à l'abricot Raventhorpe*

*Apricot sorbet with brandy cream  
and toffee baskets*

*Soufflé à la fleur d'orange*

*Orange-flower soufflé*

*Meringues à l'eau de rose avec crème chantilly*

*Rose-water-flavoured meringues  
with cream*

*Gâteau napolitain*

*Twelve-layered birthday cake on three tiers  
with icing roses*

*Fromages*

*A selection of thirty cheeses from France*

*Coffee and fine wines*

‘Ah,’ said Rose. ‘Yes. Very simple!’

‘Only fifty guests or so,’ agreed her mother. ‘But they are all important. So no showing off with silly languages.’

‘Mother, I wouldn’t—’

‘I was mortified at how you behaved to your cousin last year. Mortified! Talking in Arabic. What on earth possessed you?’

‘Marjorie was being rude to Argyle, Mother. I only called her a daughter of a snake. I know it wasn’t polite, but she didn’t understand a word—’

‘Rose.’

Argyle busily folded napkins into fans. Rose looked at the tablecloth. ‘I’m sorry, Mother.’ *Na’am*, she added in her mind. *Yes, Mother.*

‘Your father will be home tonight for the party.’ Lady Constance dropped a kiss on her daughter’s head. ‘Happy twelfth birthday, Rose.’

‘Thank you,’ said Rose. She swallowed, knowing that was as much affection as she’d receive from her mother, even on her birthday.

Lady Constance finished her tea and rose to her feet. The embroidered tulle of her peach silk gown swirled around her. Silver beads glittered on her bodice.

Rose waited, holding her breath.

With a stately rustle, and trailing of lily-of-the-valley perfume, Her Ladyship left the room.

When the door closed behind her, Rose turned around so fast her plait whipped her shoulder.

‘Argyle! Did you hear about this?’ She stabbed

a finger at the newspaper. ‘Murdered butlers! Did you know the victims?’

Argyle replaced the devilled kidneys in their dish, and frowned.

‘I can’t say for sure, lass. But it’s troubling. I never heard the like of it.’

Rose rested her chin in her hand. ‘I don’t believe it’s a botched burglary. Wouldn’t most burglars break in through a window at dead of night? They’d hardly knock at the door and wait for the butler to answer.’

Argyle picked up the paper and pointed to a line. ‘It says the latest murder was in Vicarsgate. Let me see, who do I know in Vicarsgate?’

Rose knew that street. She and Argyle had spent many happy hours exploring Yorke’s medieval walls and twisted, ancient thoroughfares. It was astonishing to think of murder happening in quiet, respectable Vicarsgate.

Ordinarily Rose would have loved to hear more, but she was too worried to be amused.

‘Several families,’ mused Argyle. ‘Including the Bagtree sisters. Twins. They live at opposite ends of their mansion. The ladies never agree, so they have two butlers. The old fellows spend all day passing messages between them. “Tell Miss Serena Bagtree she is an old bat.” “Inform Miss Eleanor Bagtree that she is a hollow-toothed viper.” They only see each other at church and at Christmas. Then they fight over dinner while the butlers decorate each sister’s Christmas tree.’

‘Just don’t answer the door to strangers,’ she ordered Argyle.

‘I can hardly help doing that, lass,’ said Argyle drily, placing the newspaper back on the table. ‘It is my duty as a butler.’

‘But what if it’s the murderer at the door?’

‘Oh, no murderer would bother with the likes of me.’ Argyle rearranged the flowers on the table and inspected a candlestick for dust. He seemed completely unconcerned.

Rose frowned. ‘All the same . . . I shall talk to Father about it.’

She drank some tea, and felt calmer. As long as Argyle was around she could not panic. Argyle feared nothing.

‘Now, before you leave—’ Argyle cleared his throat. ‘I don’t go in for fuss. But I thought you should have a wee token for your birthday.’

He held out a small box. Rose opened it. Nestled in velvet was a cameo necklace, carved to depict a black cat. Rose opened a catch to reveal a small space behind the carving. A locket.

‘Oh, Argyle,’ breathed Rose. ‘It’s perfect. Absolutely perfect!’

‘Aye, well,’ said Argyle, coughing again. ‘Just a small remembrance of the—’

There was a knock at the front door.

Rose’s smile faltered. Argyle glanced at her, then back towards the door.

Another knock.

Rose stared at him. ‘Argyle, don’t . . .’

The butler set his jaw. He stalked into the hallway and opened the door. Rose heard voices. Murderers? She pushed back her chair and ran out into the hall. A black-clad figure loomed on the threshold.

‘Happy birthday!’ squealed Emily Proops.

Rose sagged against the wall in relief.

Emily Proops always wore mourning from top to toe. This was in memory of her late Pomeranian dog. She was a tall girl of fifteen, older than Rose, but Rose preferred her as a friend to most of the girls in Yorke.

‘Are you coming for a walk, Rose? It’s a perfect day for it. I have a new black parasol, and I’m dying to show it off.’

Argyle held the door open wider, and smiled at Rose. Beyond Emily, she could see the sunny blue skies of the city, and the skyline with its towering cathedral. The whole city was embraced by ancient grey stone walls, built in ancient times to protect it against attack. ‘Enjoy yourself, lass.’



## BLACK CATS AND BUTLERS

Rose beamed back. Then she put on her favourite hat – crammed with pink and cream roses and topped by an ostrich feather – and went out with Emily into the sparkling sunshine of Yorke.