

New York Times Bestselling Author of *A Curious Beginning*
DEANNA RAYBOURN



A PERILOUS UNDERTAKING



A VERONICA SPEEDWELL

MYSTERY

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Whisper of Jasmine (prequel to *City of Jasmine*)

The book cover features a light gray, repeating floral and leaf pattern that serves as a background. A white rectangular frame with decorative scrollwork at the corners is centered on the page. Inside this frame, the text is arranged vertically. At the top is a stylized letter 'A' with flourishes. Below it is the title 'PERILOUS UNDERTAKING' in a large, bold, serif font. A small decorative flourish is centered below the title. Underneath is the text 'A VERONICA SPEEDWELL MYSTERY' in a smaller, all-caps serif font. The author's name, 'Deanna Raybourn', is printed in a large, elegant serif font. At the bottom of the frame, the publisher's name 'BERKLEY NEW YORK' is written in a small, all-caps sans-serif font.

A

**PERILOUS
UNDERTAKING**



A VERONICA SPEEDWELL
MYSTERY

Deanna Raybourn

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entirely coincidental.

Version_1

To the readers

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I would earnestly warn you against trying to find out the reason for and explanation of everything . . . To try and find out the reason for everything is very dangerous and leads to nothing but disappointment and dissatisfaction, unsettling your mind and in the end making you miserable.

—QUEEN VICTORIA TO HER GRANDDAUGHTER,

PRINCESS VICTORIA OF HESSE,

22 AUGUST 1883





CHAPTER

1

London, September 1887

or the love of all that is holy, Veronica, the object is to maim or kill, not *tickle*,” Stoker informed me, clipping the words sharply as he handed me a knife. “Do it again.”

I suppressed a sigh and took the knife, grasping it lightly as I had been taught. I faced the target, staring it down as if it were an approaching lion.

“You are thinking too much.” Stoker folded his arms over the breadth of his chest and looked down his nose at me. “The entire purpose of this exercise is to train you to react, not to think. When your life is in danger, your body must know what to do, because there is no time for your mind to engage.”

I turned to face him, not lowering the blade. “Might I remind you that I have, upon many and various occasions, been in mortal danger and I am still here.”

“Anyone can get lucky,” he said coldly. “And I suspect your continued survival owes itself to a combination of good fortune and sheer bloody-mindedness. You are too stubborn to die.”

“You are a fine one to talk!” I retorted. “It is not as if that scar upon your face were a love bite from a kitten.”

His lips tightened. I found it entertaining that such a hardened man of the world could have gained so much experience as scientist, explorer, natural historian, naval surgeon, and taxidermist and still let himself be nettled by a woman half his size. The thin, silvered scar that trailed from brow to jaw on one side of his face was not at all disfiguring. Quite the opposite, in fact. But it was a constant reminder of the failed Amazonian expedition that had destroyed his career and his marriage and nearly ended his life. It was not entirely sporting of me to mention it, but we had begun to pluck one another’s nerves in recent days, and it had been his idea to train me in the combative arts as a way to exorcise our bad tempers. It almost worked, not least because I pretended to be entirely inexperienced in the matter. Men, I had often observed, were never happier than when they believed they were imparting wisdom.

Stoker had set up a target in the gardens of our friend and benefactor, Lord Rosemorran, and we had taken the afternoon off from our various duties in the Belvedere. Situated on the grounds of his lordship’s Marylebone estate, Bishop’s Folly, the Belvedere was a singularly extraordinary structure. It had been built as a sort of freestanding ballroom and storehouse for an eccentric Rosemorran ancestor, and it served our purposes beautifully. The Rosemorrans were tireless collectors and had stuffed their London mansion, Scottish shooting box, and Cornish country seat clear to the rafters with treasures of every description. Art, artifacts, natural history specimens, mementos—all of them had found their way into the grasping, aristocratic hands of the Rosemorrans. After four generations of acquisition, the present earl had decided the time had come to assemble a formal and permanent exhibition, and Stoker and I had been given the task of establishing the museum. The fact that we were somewhat qualified to undertake such a feat

—and recently homeless as well as in need of employment—had spurred the earl to make the thing official. The first order of business ought to have been a thorough inventory of all the Rosemorrans had acquired. It would be tiresome, backbreaking, tedious work, but necessary. Before the first display cabinet was built, before the first exhibit could be sketched or the first tag penned, we must have a complete accounting of what we had to work with.

So naturally we planned a trip instead. We had spent all of July and August of that year charting an expedition to the South Pacific, poring over maps and happily debating the relative merits of each location with regard to my interest in butterflies and Stoker's rather less elevated interest in shooting things.

"I do not shoot things for my own pleasure," he had argued indignantly. "I only collect specimens for the purposes of scientific study."

"That must be some consolation to the corpses," I returned sweetly.

"You do not hold the moral high ground there, my little assassin. I have watched you kill butterflies by the hundreds with just a pinch of your fingers."

"Well, I could pin them first, but I am not an enthusiast of torture."

"You might have fooled me," he muttered. I passed off that bit of ill humor for what it was—sulking over the fact that our patron had sided with me in choosing the Fijian islands for our expedition. The location was a veritable paradise for a lepidopterist but offered little excitement for a student of Mammalia.

"Don't grumble. The Fijian islands are rich with specimens for you to study," I told Stoker with more kindness than veracity.

He fixed me with a cold look. "I have been to Fiji," he informed me. "There are bats and whales. Do you know who is interested in bats and whales? Precisely no one."

I waved a hand. "Feathers. The Fijians boast a very nice little fruit bat you might enjoy."

What he said next does not bear repeating in a polite memoir, but I replied casually that Lord Rosemorrans had mentioned calling in at Sarawak

as long as we were in that part of the world. Unlike Fiji, this destination would afford Stoker everything from panthers to pangolins for study.

He brightened considerably at this, and by the time our preparations were concluded, any casual observer might have been forgiven for thinking the destination had been his idea from the first. He threw himself into the planning with enthusiasm, arranging everything to his satisfaction—arrangements I quietly reworked to *my* satisfaction. The travel documents were in order, the trunks were packed, and a fever of anticipation settled over Bishop's Folly. All that remained was to depart, and Lord Rosemorran made a protracted leave-taking of his home, his children, his sister, his staff, and his beloved pets. It was the last that was to prove our downfall.

Returning from one last walk in the gardens where he housed his snail collection, his lordship managed to trip over his giant tortoise, Patricia, a tremendous creature who shambled about the grounds so slowly she was often mistaken for dead. How Lord Rosemorran managed to trip over an animal whose nearest relation was a boulder mystified me entirely, but the cause was not the concern. It was the effect which proved devastating. His lordship sustained a compound fracture of the thigh, a painful and thoroughly disgusting injury which Stoker assured me would take many months to heal. His experience as a naval surgeon's mate had qualified him to take one look at the protruding bone and turn to me with instructions to see to the unpacking. The Rosemorran–Speedwell–Templeton-Vane expedition was officially canceled.

Whilst Stoker was extremely useful in a crisis, his medical expertise was soon usurped by that of his lordship's own physicians and we were left cooling our heels in the Belvedere, sniping at one another in our frustration. We had each of us hoped to be shipboard once more, sea breezes blowing away the stultifying air of England as tropical climes beckoned with balmy winds and star-blazoned skies. Instead we were cooped up like hapless chickens nesting on our disappointed hopes. Even the opportunity to clear out the Belvedere did not entirely restore our good humor, although I should point out that Stoker's fit of pique lasted far longer than mine. But then, in

my experience, gentlemen are champion sulkers so long as one doesn't call the behavior by that name. It was in such a state of heightened irritation that he—mindful of our previous perilous encounters—took it upon himself to instruct me in the defensive arts.

“Splendid idea,” I had replied enthusiastically. “What shall we shoot?”

“I am not giving you a firearm,” he told me in a tone of flat refusal. “I do not like them. They are noisy, unreliable, and can be taken away and used against you.”

“So can a knife,” I grumbled.

He pretended not to hear as he extracted the blade he regularly carried in his boot. He erected a target—an old tailor's dummy unearthed from the Belvedere—and set about teaching me with maddening condescension how to murder it.

“It is one smooth motion, Veronica,” he said for the hundredth time. “Keep your wrist straight, and think of the knife as an extension of your arm.”

“That is a singularly useless piece of instruction,” I informed him, affecting a casual air as the knife bounced off the dummy's groin and flopped to the grass.

Stoker retrieved it. “Try again,” he ordered.

I threw again, skimming the dummy's head as Stoker explained the desirability of various targets. “The neck is nice and soft, but also narrow and unreliable. If you really want to hinder a man, throw for his thigh. A good hit to the meat of his leg will slow him down, and if you happen to nick the femoral artery, you will stop him for good. You could try for the stomach, but if he is a stout fellow, it will merely lodge in his fat and make him angry.”

He proceeded to lecture me for the next hour, about what I cannot say, for as I flung the knife with varying degrees of effort and success, I had leisure to be alone with my own thoughts.

“Veronica,” he said at last as the knife sailed past the dummy altogether. “What the bollocking hell was that?” He fetched the knife and handed it back, suddenly blushing furiously.

The cause of Stoker's distress was the unexpected appearance of his lordship's sister, Lady Cordelia Beauclerk. I turned and waved the knife at her.

"Forgive his language, Lady C. Stoker is in a terrible fuss. He has been sulking ever since his lordship broke his leg. How is the patient today?"

Mindful of Stoker's baleful glance, I lowered the knife with exaggerated care.

"A trifle feverish, but the doctor says he has the constitution of an ox, although you would never know it to look at him," she said with a smile. That much was true. His lordship resembled a librarian in the latter stages of anemia—pale and stooped from too many years poring over his books. But blood will tell, and Beauclerk blood was hearty stuff. Lady C. always looked the picture of health, from her English rose complexion to her slender figure. But as I assessed her, I noted an unaccustomed furrow to her brow, and her usually pink cheeks seemed lacking in color.

"You must be working yourself to death taking care of him as well as the house," I observed.

She shook her head. "Things are a bit at sixes and sevens," she admitted. "The doctor has ordered trained nurses in to tend his lordship, and I am afraid Mrs. Bascombe doesn't care for the extra work of looking after them." I was not surprised. His lordship's housekeeper put me in mind of unripe quinces—plump and sour. Lady C. went on. "And of course it's time to pack the boys up for school and the girls have a new governess to settle in."

"For the moment," Stoker murmured. The Beauclerk girls had a habit of driving away hapless governesses with well-timed hysterics or the odd spider in the bed. I rather thought it a pity that no one had told them about the efficacy of syrup of figs dribbled into the morning tea, but it was not my place to tutor them in misdemeanors.

Lady Cordelia smiled her gentle smile. "For the moment," she agreed. "But everything seems in hand this afternoon—so much so that I have decided to pay a visit to the Curiosity Club."

My ears pricked up. Known formally as the Hippolyta Club, it was an intriguing place, founded for the purposes of free discourse amongst accomplished ladies without the strictures of society limiting their conversation. That might have been the *raison d'être* of the club, but like most high-minded institutions, it was entirely bound by its own set of Byzantine and impenetrable rules. Lady Cordelia had been admitted on the strength of a series of papers she had written on the subject of advanced mathematics, and it was good to see that her talents—frequently wasted in arguing with Mrs. Bascombe about the grocer's bills—were once more carrying her into the circles where her intellect was most appreciated. Her own family thought of her as a sort of performer, conjuring numbers as a dancing bear waltzes to a tune. Her grave, calm eyes never belied the frustration she must have felt at being so frequently ignored or brushed aside, even by kindly and well-meaning hands, but I harbored outrage enough for both of us.

Lady Cordelia gave me a benign look. "You have put on a brave face, but I know how disappointed you must be at not embarking upon the expedition," she began.

"Not at all." I did not make a habit of lying, but it was not Lady C.'s fault the expedition had been beached, and she had never been anything other than gracious to me. I had sensed in her—if not a kindred spirit—at least a sympathetic one.

"You lie very well," she said mildly. "But you are a world explorer, Miss Speedwell. I have heard you speak too eloquently of your travels not to understand how much you love the chase."

"Well, perhaps," I temporized.

She went on. "I know you have much work to do here, but I thought you might like to visit the club, as my guest. A little change of scene to sweeten the mood," she added with a glance to Stoker.

I pursed my lips. "If you want to sweeten the mood, you would be far better placed taking *him*. But it is kind of you to offer. Yes, thank you. I would like to go."

The little furrow between her brows smoothed, although if anything she seemed even less at ease than she had before I accepted. “Excellent. If you would like to collect your things, I will meet you in the drive.”

I blinked in surprise. “Now?”

“Yes. I thought we could go for tea,” she said. Her gaze drifted over my working costume. “Perhaps a change of attire?” she suggested gently.

I glanced at the enormous canvas pinafore swathing me from collar to ankles. It was an unflattering garment, to be sure, and streaked with paint, blood, dust, and the remains of a profiterole Stoker had flung at me earlier. I whisked off the offending pinafore to reveal a simple gown of red foulard. It was not a fashionable creation by any standards, but I eschewed fashion, preferring to have my working clothes tailored to my specifications rather than the latest whims of the rich and idle. Narrow skirts and an unobtrusive bustle were my only concessions to modernity.

Lady Cordelia gave a vague smile. “Very charming, I’m sure.” She paused and looked to my hair, her lips parted as if to say more, but she left us then, as swiftly as she had come.

I turned to Stoker, shoving a few errant locks into the heavy Psyche knot at my neck. With a smile of deliberate malice, I turned and—in a single liquid motion—flung the blade, lodging it firmly between the target’s eyes. “I am off to take tea at the Curiosity Club. Mind you take good care of that dummy.”



CHAPTER

2

I settled myself comfortably opposite Lady Cordelia in one of the Beauclerk town carriages, mindful of her maid, Sidonie, who watched balefully from an upstairs window of Bishop's Folly.

"I thought Sidonie accompanied you on all your outings," I remarked.

Lady Cordelia smoothed her black silk skirts, her expression carefully neutral. "I do not require Sidonie's company today. She is inclined to be indiscreet at times."

I raised a brow in interest. "The Curiosity Club requires discretion?"

Almost against her will, it seemed, Lady C. smiled. "Frequently."

She seemed disinclined to conversation, but I felt obliged to speak. "I do not know if you have considered the ramifications of being seen with me in public," I began.

"Why should there be ramifications?"

I suppressed a snort. "We both know that my life is an unconventional one. I might look and speak like a lady, but my choices have placed me beyond the pale of propriety. I have traveled alone. I am unmarried, I live without a chaperone, and I work for a living. These are not the actions of a