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DEANNA RAYBOURN



A TREACHEROUS CURSE

A VERONICA SPEEDWELL
MYSTERY

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Deanna Raybourn

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Acknowledgments

*To Danielle Perez,
for befriending Veronica
and taking her farther than I ever
imagined she could go . . .*



CHAPTER

1

London, 1888

“I assure you, I am perfectly capable of identifying a phallus when I see one,” Stoker informed me, clipping the words sharply. “And that is no such thing.”

He pointed to the artifact I had just extracted from a packing crate. It was perhaps three feet in length, carved of some sort of exotic hardwood, and buffed to a smooth sheen. Bits of excelsior dangled from it like so much whimsical decoration. It was oddly festive.

“Of course it is,” I said. I brandished the item in question at him. “Just look at the knobby bit on the end.”

Stoker folded his arms over the breadth of his chest and looked down his nose at me.

“Consider, if you will, the length. Improbable, you must admit. *Most* improbable.” He was doing his best to avoid the appearance of embarrassment, but a touch of rose still bloomed in his cheeks. I found it winsome 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 manage a maidenly blush when confronted with a fertility icon.

“Stoker,” I said patiently, “both male and female genitalia have been celebrated in ritualized art since the beginning of time. And frequently their proportions are exaggerated in order to convey their importance to the peoples in question.”

He curled a handsome lip. “Do not invoke ethnography, Veronica. You know how I feel about the social sciences.”

I shrugged. “There are those who maintain the study of culture is just as important as the examination of a bit of bone or a fossilized snail. And do not

pretend that you are immune to the seductive siren call of the humanities. I have seen you mooning over journal articles about the role of religious ritual in the decreasing populations of certain South Sea turtles.”

“I do not moon,” he retorted. “And furthermore, those journal entries—”

He proceeded to lecture me for the next quarter of an hour, about what I cannot say, for I turned my attention to the contents of the packing crate. I had long since discovered upon my travels that men are largely the same no matter where one encounters them. And if one is prepared to let them discourse on their pet topics of conversation, one can generally get on with things quite handily without any interference.

The packing crate was the newest arrival at the Belvedere, the budding museum Stoker and I had been commissioned to organize under the aegis of our friend and benefactor, the Earl of Rosemorran. Situated on the grounds of his lordship’s Marylebone estate, Bishop’s Folly, the Belvedere was either a glorious trove of undiscovered treasures or the storehouse of a family of madmen, depending upon one’s perspective. The earls of Rosemorran had been an acquisitive lot, haring around Europe to amass a collection of art, artifacts, zoological specimens, books, manuscripts, jewels, armor, and a thousand other things that defied description. How we came to live amongst such treasures is a story that merits its own volume.*

To investigate one murder is a curiosity. To investigate two is a habit. Stoker and I had fallen into the practice of murder when our mutual friend, the Baron von Stauffenbach, had been slain the previous summer. We had uncovered some difficult truths and made a cautious alliance with Sir Hugo Montgomerie, the head of Special Branch, Scotland Yard’s most prestigious division. When, at the end of that investigation, Fate had proven to be an unkind hussy and left us without home or employment, the current Lord Rosemorran had graciously invited Stoker and me to work for him, living on the grounds of Bishop’s Folly and cataloging his collection with an eye to one day opening the Belvedere as a public museum. It was arduous work, consisting of unpacking, inspecting, reviewing provenance, cleaning, and registering each item—the beetles alone could take years—but it was enchanting. Every day offered its own surprises, and as word spread of our undertaking, donations to the collection began to arrive. It seemed that Lord Rosemorran’s project was the perfect opportunity for his friends to rid themselves of items they no longer wanted. They would never send anything truly valuable—the English aristocracy are nothing if not sharply attentive to financial advantage—so we received instead a steady stream of decrepit hunting trophies and wretched oil paintings. They were of no use to us, so Stoker regularly burnt the moth-eaten trophies in the garden whilst I arranged the portraits into a grim sort of family, giving each a pet name and taking particular delight in each baleful new addition.

But the shipment that arrived that morning had been the most peculiar yet. The large packing crate had been stuffed with excelsior to cradle an array of phalluses, each more impressive than the last. Clay, leather, marble, wood—the materials were nearly as varied as the objects themselves, and the assortment of sizes was frankly extraordinary. From a modest little fellow about the width of my handspan to the enormity I brought to Stoker's attention, they represented a thorough study of that particular piece of anatomy. At the bottom of the crate nestled a leather box with a piece of card affixed to the lid.

Personal gift to Miss Veronica Speedwell. I have not forgot my obligation. With my compliments and heartfelt gratitude. Miles Ramsforth

Suddenly, the mysterious collection made perfect sense. Our second investigation* had saved Miles Ramsforth from the hangman's noose, and I was not surprised he had chosen to repay the debt with part of his extraordinary array of erotic art.

Understandably, Ramsforth had quitted England immediately upon his release from prison and we had never met in person, but he had sent an effusive letter of thanks with a splendid silver watch chain for Stoker and a promise to remember me with something even more noteworthy.

My curiosity piqued, I extracted the box carefully and opened it with a rush of anticipation. I was not disappointed. Wrapped lovingly in cotton wool was yet another phallus, this one a masterpiece of the Venetian glassmaker's art. Of clear blown glass, it was striped with luscious violet color that gleamed like a boiled sweet as I held it to the light. I remembered it well. I had admired it when Stoker and I first studied the collection, although how Ramsforth happened to know of my appreciation was a mystery. It was a testimony to both his gratitude and his puckish sense of humor that he would present me with the costliest specimen from such a deliciously lurid collection.

I brandished it at Stoker. "I was quite right about the hardwood piece," I told him. "This was at the bottom of the crate. It is the doing of Miles Ramsforth. A personal gift," I added with a waggle of my brows.

Stoker blushed furiously. "For the love of God, put that thing away."

"I cannot imagine why you are so bashful on the subject of the male genitalia of *Homo sapiens* when you are the only one of us who can boast of owning it," I muttered as I replaced the offending item carefully into its box with a mental note to examine it more thoroughly in private.

"I heard that," he said as he returned to the task at hand—hollowing out the remains of a badly mounted platypus. The task was messy but not

arduous, so he had kept on his shirt, a rare occurrence given his penchant for working stripped to the waist. I regretted the fact that he was fully clothed, but I contented myself with the occasional appreciative glance at his muscular forearms, bared to the elbow. His shirt was open at the neck, and he seldom wore a waistcoat and never a coat if he could help it. His hair, black and waving and badly in need of a barber's attentions, was punctuated by a slender streak of silvery white, a souvenir of our most recent foray into detective pursuits. It had ended when he had been shot in the temple in a ridiculous attempt to shield me from a murderer, and the result was a single snowy lock where the bullet had struck him. Gold rings glinted at his earlobes, and one of his many tattoos, relics of his days as a surgeon's mate in Her Majesty's Navy, peeped from the edge of his rolled sleeve. He wore a patch over his left eye, a habit since an accident in the Amazon had nearly taken it from him, leaving him with slim pale ribbons of scars that marked him from brow to collarbone and beyond. He looked like precisely what he was: a man in his prime with a good deal of experience and precious little regard for Society's expectations.

"Stop scrutinizing me as if I were one of your damned butterflies," he said in a conversational tone.

I sighed. "It has been a year since my last indulgence in physical congress," I reminded him in a wistful tone. "Admiring your physique is my only consolation."

He snorted by way of reply. I had made no secret of my perfectly sensible approach to relationships between the sexes—namely that marriage was a ridiculously outmoded institution and that sexual exercise was both health-giving and revivifying to the spirits. In the interest of respectability, I never indulged whilst in England, preferring to satisfy my urges during my trips abroad, a discreet and wholly efficient arrangement. The fact that it had been more than a year since my last expedition had begun to try my resolve. Stoker did not judge my predilections any more than I judged him for living as chastely as any medieval monk. A brief and hellish marriage followed by a period of Bacchanalian overindulgence had soured him on romance, although I regularly recommended to him a restorative bout of coitus, preferably with a strapping dairymaid—a course he had yet to embrace.

I considered the various phalluses, uncertain of where to begin. "Ought I to arrange them by size? Or shall they be grouped according to geographical region of origin? Or material?" I asked. Stoker and I frequently quarreled about various methods of organization within the collection. I preferred a chronological approach whilst he maintained a firm preference for theme.

This time he merely flapped a hand, clearly finished with the subject of phalluses. I hefted the largest, the hardwood piece from the Pacific, scrutinizing it with a practiced eye. "You know, I am rather reminded of a charming American fellow I met in Costa Rica," I said with a nostalgic sigh. I

made a point of never keeping in contact with my paramours once I had finished with them, but I had very nearly made an exception for the American . . .

I did not pursue the conversation. Stoker was in a good mood for once, something that had been sorely lacking of late. February had been thoroughly nasty, with snowfall of apocalyptic proportions and temperatures that would have caused a polar bear to shiver. We had made the best of the situation, applying ourselves diligently to our work, but both of us had suffered bouts of ennui, longing for balmy climes and sea-scented winds. Our planned expedition with Lord Rosemorran to the South Pacific to search for new specimens had been thwarted by accident—namely his lordship’s unfortunate collision with his Galápagos tortoise, Patricia. She lumbered around the estate with all the grace and speed of a boulder, so how the earl managed to fall over her was a matter never fully explained to my satisfaction. But the result had been a broken femur and months of recuperation. We sympathized with his lordship and told him we did not mind in the least, but I drank a significant amount of strong spirits as I unpacked my bag, and I suspected Stoker sniffed back a manful tear or two as he put away his maps and charts.

Saving Miles Ramsforth from the noose had been a diverting occupation, but a Christmas spent with Lord Rosemorran’s unruly brood of children underfoot and the rigors of a perilously long winter had nearly undone us both. Stoker had amused himself by unearthing the most ludicrous of the taxidermy mounts while I had taken to reading sensationalist newspapers. One, *The Daily Harbinger*, had proven useful during the Ramsforth case, and I had resorted to bribing the hall boy, George, to bring me the copy each morning before his lordship had a chance to read it.

This morning he skipped in, bearing the newspaper and the first post, whistling a merry tune. George broke off as he caught sight of the object in my hand, his eyes round with interest and his errand forgotten.

“Here, now, miss, that looks like—”

“We know what it looks like,” Stoker cut in ruthlessly.

George peered into the packing crate. “Where are these from, miss?”

“All around the world,” I told him. “They were amassed by a gentleman named Miles Ramsforth, a famous patron of the arts and a suspected murderer.”

He blinked. “Imagine that.”

I put out my hand. “*Harbinger*, please.”

He gave me the newspaper before wandering to where Stoker was bent over his trophy. “That’s a funny old stoat.”

“It isn’t a stoat,” Stoker corrected. “It is a platypus.”

“Why has it got a duck on its face?” George put out a tentative finger and Stoker flicked it aside.

“This is *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, the duck-billed platypus, native to Australia.”

“But why has it got a duck on its face?” George persisted.

“It hasn’t got a duck on its face. That is just its face.”

“Are you taking the duck off its face?”

Stoker’s nostrils flared slightly and I knew he was about to say something unpleasant.

“George,” I called as I skimmed the front page of the newspaper. “What is the latest news of the Tiverton Expedition?”

George trotted over, his face bright with interest. He had a penchant for the most outrageous stories in the *Harbinger*—and the *Harbinger*’s stories were already more outrageous than most. But he was a good lad and took great pride in his budding literacy, so I encouraged him.

“Oh, miss, you ought to read it. They say the expedition is cursed,” he said with an unholy gleam in his eye.

From behind his platypus, Stoker gave a snort.

“You don’t believe in curses, sir?” the boy asked.

Stoker opened his mouth—no doubt to hold forth on the subject of superstition—but I anticipated him. “Curses are not rational, George. There is no scientific basis for them. However, there is good reason to think that the belief itself in a curse can create deleterious effects.”

“Dele—what?” the boy asked.

“Deleterious. It means bad. I was saying that the mere belief in a curse can give it power.”

“Hogwash,” Stoker said succinctly.

“It most certainly is not. There are well-documented cases of individuals —”

“Exactly that. Individuals. There has been no empirical study done on the subject.”

“And how, precisely, would one conduct such a study?” I asked in an acid tone. He did not bother to reply, and I turned back to George. “Tell me about the curse.”

George and I had become fascinated by the exploits of the Tiverton Expedition in Egypt. Led by Sir Leicester Tiverton, an excitable baronet of middle years, the group had found a cache from the Eighteenth Dynasty. The burial was incomplete, but the sarcophagus of a princess and an assortment of grave goods were enough to ignite a furor of international interest. Sir Leicester had become something of an instant celebrity. A series of calamities had forced the early return of the expedition, and stories of their misfortunes had kept the reading public enthralled.

“It is said that the site of the dig was visited by one of the Egyptian gods. Can’t remember his name, but he wears a dog on his head,” George said,

gesturing to the lurid illustration in the newspaper. I skimmed the article quickly.

“Anubis,” I told him. “God of the underworld, and that is not a dog on his head. It is a jackal.”

I pointed him to the Greco-Roman sarcophagus Stoker and I used as a sideboard for our meals. Incised on its side was a parade of ancient gods. George had little trouble spotting Anubis.

“Is this cursed too?” he asked.

“I doubt it. The thing is a late Greco-Roman copy of a much older piece.”

“Is there a mummy inside?”

“I’m afraid not,” I said absently as I studied the drawings in the newspaper. “Just a collection of early prosthetics.”

“Pros—what’s that, miss?”

“Prosthetics, George. Fake arms and legs meant to replace those that have been lopped off.”

“Blimey! But no mummy?”

“No mummy,” I assured him. “And don’t say ‘blimey.’ It’s common.”

“I’m common, miss,” he returned cheerfully.

Of that I had no doubt. For all I knew, Lord Rosemorrán’s butler, Lumley, had found him squatting in a gutter under a cabbage leaf. But the boy was bright, nimble in understanding, and blessed with a solid ear and a head for figures. If he could curb his tendency to slang and the dropping of ‘h’s,’ he might well make something of himself.

George turned back to the illustration. “They say that this Anubis fellow came into the workers’ camp at night, looking for a soul to take.”

“Rubbish,” Stoker said succinctly.

“No, sir, it’s true,” George maintained stubbornly.

I held up a hand. “The boy is right. The director of the excavation died a few weeks ago, and now the expedition photographer has disappeared along with a diadem belonging to the mummified princess. Apparently, the Egyptian workers blamed their troubles on a curse inscribed on the princess’ sarcophagus.”

“Horsefeathers,” Stoker replied.

“George, you’d better get on before you learn any new words of which Mr. Lumley wouldn’t approve,” I told the boy. He grinned and went on his way as I finished the article.

“You oughtn’t to encourage him,” Stoker said as he returned to his platypus. “The boy already has a febrile imagination.”

“No more than this reporter,” I said absently. “I do not recall seeing his name before, but J. J. Butterworth has made quite a reputation for himself writing about the Tiverton Expedition.”

“Our man in Cairo?” Stoker asked.

“More like ‘our man in London.’ This was filed here in town. Apparently the Tivertons have returned to England after John de Morgan’s disappearance.” I would have said more, but I broke off as soon as I caught sight of Stoker’s face. Still bent over his platypus, his features had frozen into an expression so thoroughly devoid of emotion, it was impossible to interpret. His complexion had gone perfectly white, then flushed a quick and violent red. I feared he was well on his way to an apoplexy. “Stoker, what is it?”

“Nothing,” he answered after a long moment and a visible effort. “Afraid I was woolgathering. What did you say?”

I pressed my lips together, holding back the question that rose to them. Whatever had caused him to react so strongly, he had no wish to share it, and I had no wish to pry.

(I have pledged myself to honesty in these pages, gentle reader, so I will admit that in point of fact I had a rather ferocious wish to pry, but I had learnt through painful experience that Stoker responded far better to the oblique approach than to more direct methods. Considering my extensive experience in hunting butterflies—notoriously skittish and elusive creatures—Stoker was less trouble than a Chimaera Birdwing.)

I went on. “I said that the Tivertons, Sir Leicester and Lady Tiverton, have returned to England. The death of their excavation director loaned credence to the idea of the curse. The local workers have refused to reenter the tomb, and the director of antiquities in Egypt has agreed that it is best they seal it back up and leave things to settle until next season.”

“And there is no sign of the photographer?”

“John de Morgan? No. Apparently he disappeared from the dig site with his wife. At the same time, the jewel of Sir Leicester’s find, a diadem belonging to the dead Princess Ankhset, went missing, and no one knows if de Morgan and his wife stole it or if they met with foul play.”

Stoker said nothing. His color slowly returned to normal, and his hands resumed their work. I turned to the post, sorting the various envelopes into pigeonholes. **BILLS TO PAY. BILLS TO PRETEND I HAVE NOT RECEIVED. LETTERS TO ANSWER. LETTERS TO IGNORE. LETTERS FROM TEDIOUS PEOPLE.** The rest I consigned to the wastepaper basket.

But the last demanded my immediate attention. I will admit to a small groan as I recognized the imperious hand of our sometime friend and occasional sparring partner at Scotland Yard.

“Sir Hugo?” Stoker guessed as I took up the lion’s tooth I used as a paper knife.

“Sir Hugo,” I confirmed. “How did you guess?”

“He is the only person of our acquaintance who could excite such a reaction. We are invited to call?”

I skimmed the brief message. “We are not invited. We are instructed. He wishes to see us, but he is ill at home, and he summons us to his sickbed. Gird yourself, Stoker. We are about to meet Sir Hugo in his nightshirt.”