



## Chapter Three

Mr. Darcy looked at me and I nodded. He picked up the white box from the mantle and handed it to the Marquess.

“You don’t shock easily, I presume?”

“Never,” the Marquess said.

He opened the box said, “Aha,” and dropped his languid pose. He placed his face close to the ears and pulled out a magnifying glass set with cabochon stones on an ivory handle.

“Interesting, very interesting,” he said as he gently lifted one lobe with his index finger and then prodded the other. “Absolutely remarkable. An exquisite problem, my dears.”

He picked up the box and inspected it and did a thorough once over of the brown paper wrappings. The magnifying glass never left his eye for one quarter of an hour. At one point he took a vial of liquid from another pocket and dropped a minute amount on the lobe with the tinge of blood. Darcy and I sat enthralled, afraid to take a deep breath, less we interrupt the Marquess’ musings.

Finally, I could stand it no longer.

“My lord,” I said, “are those ears real?”

“You mean human ears?”

I nodded.

“No, they’re not,” he said with a frown. “A remarkable fraud, however, even down to the real blood on the lobes. Now, Miss Bennet, who do you think sent you the ears and most importantly what does it signify?”

I gasped and Mr. Darcy visibly stiffened, teacup in midair.

“My lord, how should, how should I know?” I stammered indignantly. “I’m not in the habit of associating with criminals or people pretending to be murdered!”

“Quite right, quite right,” the Marquess said. Mr. Darcy let out a breath and put the teacup down quite sharply. “So you think someone was murdered, do you?”

I was at a loss for words momentarily.

“Well, what else could it be?” Darcy said. “It’s got to be some sort of message.”

“But I don’t know anyone who has died recently.” I said.

“Don’t you?” the Marquess asked pleasantly. “These ears appear to have been made quite recently.”

Darcy nodded. “Yes, the wax appears most fresh,” he said, getting into the spirit of analysis.

I found my voice. “I don’t know anyone recently deceased and I don’t know anyone who would play such a cruel trick on me,” I protested.

Darcy turned to me with an arched brow.

“Don’t you? Are you sure of that, Miss Bennet?”

I stirred the spoon around and around in my cup. “I have no enemies, at least I don’t think I do,” I said, the blood rushing to my face.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you Miss Elizabeth, but I can think of several.”

The Marquess waited, his long thin nose twitching in anticipation.

“First of all, Mr. Wickham may be paying you back for dropping your affections from him and turning them to .....” he began to cough and hastily picked up his teacup.

The Marquess smiled indulgently but remained silent. My cheeks were flaming I am sure, as red as the sealing wax on the box before us.

“Next, perhaps Miss Bingley”

“Miss Bingley!” I cried. “Oh, that’s too absurd! Caroline Bingley having the nerve to secure a pair of fake human ears for a joke?”

Darcy had the grace to look abashed. “You’re right. Although women may do strange things when spurned,” he said, half to himself.

The Marquess looked at us both expectantly as if waiting to wish us both joy. “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive,” he intoned and picked up a piece of seed cake.

We both were silent and watched him devour it in two bites.

“Who is next on your list?” he said, his eyes filled with merriment.

“If your lordship is amused by my suppositions, I can stop and we can send for the magistrate,” Darcy said in a most dignified and sepulchral tone.

Marquess or no, no one could out-ice Mr. Darcy when he was in high dudgeon.

“Don’t fly into the boughs, Mr. Darcy, I am sorry to offend. I rarely get to spend time with such intelligent people in the country that I quite forgot myself there for a moment. Please accept my apologies, both you and Miss Bennet. I am not amused by your plight only intensely curious and engaged by this most singular problem.”

Darcy visibly relaxed and I smiled. The situation was bizarre and at least the Marquess was trying to inject a bit of humor into this most unhappy and perplexing turn of events.

“No offense taken,” Mr. Darcy said.

“And you Miss Bennet, do you forgive me, too?” I looked into his steel gray eyes and saw the depths of the ages.

“I do,” I said quietly.

“Splendid!” he said happily. “So who is next on your list?”

I laughed and even Mr. Darcy looked momentarily joyful.

“You will forgive me, Mr. Darcy, but is it possible that Lady Catherine’s daughter Anne might have sent the ears?” I said carefully.

“Anne? But where would she get the ears and why?”

“You were just talking about unrequited,” I coughed discretely, “affections, and she was supposed to be betrothed to you at birth,” I said.

The Marquess looked very happy.

“Capital! Capital, this is just what we need to do. Go through everyone who has even the remotest motive,” he said.

“Motive?” I asked.

“A reason, a subtle or not so subtle animus against you, Miss Bennet. However far-fetched the impetus, please think back and recount them all to me.”

I was feeling braver and stronger.

“Then what about Lady Catherine herself?” I said.

Darcy nodded gravely. “She is not very fond of you, Miss Bennet, but even I have a hard time believing she would stoop to such a ploy.” He took out a small notebook from his pocket, a pencil and began to make a list.

“So far we have, Miss Bingley, Mr. Wickham, Lady Catherine, her daughter Anne de Bourgh. Anyone else?” he said to me.

“You’re forgetting one person,” I said. “The most obvious of all.”

“Who is that?” asked Darcy.

“Myself,” I said. “Perhaps I wanted to draw attention to myself to secure the regards of certain persons in the area.” There I said it. Let him think what he will.

Darcy jumped right in. “But how could you ever be sure that the person in question would know about your situation? I know news travels fast in this county but you or someone in your family could have destroyed the box before its contents were made known.”

“True, Miss Bennet,” the Marquess agreed. “If you had wanted to stage a “show” you would have at least invited over a group of people and then had the box delivered to you. Otherwise, the dramatic impact would be lost. And why were you here today, Mr. Darcy?” he added without pause.

Darcy coughed again and I wondered if he would have a spot of apoplexy before the tea was over.

“I had stopped by Sir William’s to inquire if Miss Bennet would like to attend a recital that my sister Georgiana is giving with some ladies of our acquaintance,” he said carefully. “But as Miss Bennet had left the party early, I found my way over to her home to inquire as to her health and inform her about the musicale.”

“Sounds reasonable,” the Marquess said, removing a small, thin cigar from a tooled leather case. “May I?” he asked.

I nodded. Men rarely smoked in our house. I wonder what Mama would say when she smelt the smoke later. I shrugged. Papa would not mind.

After lighting his cigar which emitted a particularly sweet and not altogether unpleasant aroma, the Marquess spoke.

“So we can assume that Miss Bennet receiving the box and Mr. Darcy arriving at the house just at the time the box was opened can only be a case of coincidence and not premeditated. Otherwise Miss Bennet could have stayed at the tea and had the box delivered to her there. Now that would have caused a sensation,” he chuckled.

I thought of Mama, Lady Lucas, Charlotte and my dithering younger sisters being exposed to a pair of human ears, which appeared freshly severed and bloodied, delivered to me in a box and almost had apoplexy myself. There would not have been enough physicians in the county to tend to them all!

“So we are discounting Mr. Darcy and myself from this ruse,” I said.

“I think we can,” the Marquess said pleasantly.

“I know we can,” Mr. Darcy said firmly.

I glanced at the clock. “So let me quickly reiterate,” I said. On Mr. Darcy’s list we have Mr. Wickham, Miss Bingley, Lady Catherine and her daughter and may I add, Mr. Collins for revenge, my sisters Kitty and Mary because they crave attention, and perhaps even Charlotte Collins neé Lucas herself because she may be quite angry at me for refusing Mr. Collins?”

“And getting herself wed to him instead,” Mr. Darcy mused and our eyes met.

“I don’t really believe that for one minute,” I hastened to add.

“All excellent and possible choices, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy said warmly, “and may I add my sister Georgiana, to give you the cachet of a lady in distress?” I looked shocked for a split second and then nodded in agreement. “But the most prominent question remains—how did this person or persons get a hold of a pair of such amazingly life-like human ears? And whose ears are they supposed to be?”

There was commotion at the door.

I could hear the high pitched squeal of my mother’s voice, the chattering of Kitty, and the low quiet murmur of Jane telling Mary something soothing, no doubt. A crescendo of female voices, accompanied by the swishings of silk and lace and the woofings of Ajax assailed the quiet calm of our deductive tea party.

Mrs. Bennet sailed into the room, paused for a surprised look at Mr. Darcy and the Marquess and burst into tears.

“Oh, Lizzy, Lizzy,” she wailed. “Lydia is missing, she’s disappeared into thin air!”

Mr. Darcy, myself and the Marquess of Bath all turned to stare at the open box of ears sitting on the tea table.

“And,” said Mary earnestly and quite importantly, “Uncle Gardiner thinks Mr. Wickham has done it!”

