



Chapter Four

Mr. Darcy, the Marquess and myself were all besieged by an attack of temporary paralysis. I couldn't speak or move. Mr. Darcy's lovely brown eyes widened enormously and for once he was at a loss for words. The Marquess did not look amused and his aquiline nose wasn't twitching. He looked stupefied.

"Whatever do you mean, Mary? Done what?" I asked her.

At that my mother sailed into the room, hands fluttering, tears filling her prominent blue eyes.

"Oh Lizzy, Mr. Wickham has gone and done it, he's gone and killed Lydia!"

I gasped. "Surely not, Mama," I said. "Where did you get such an idea?"

"I'm going to faint," Mrs. Bennet said, leaning heavily on Jane and Kitty for support. "Take me to my room, inform Mr. Bennet, I need my salts!" she said hysterically. Her daughters began to usher her out of the room, one halting step at a time. "Oh, the flutterings, the palpitations!" Mrs. Bennet cried.

"Should we call for the physician?" Mr. Darcy said to me, my rock in this personal maelstrom of Bennet emotion.

"Yes, please," I said meekly. I looked at Jane for enlightenment.

"I'll be back," she mouthed at me and disappeared with Mama, Kitty, Mary and our two housemaids propping Mama up as she shuffled out of the room.

I let out a sigh.

“Whatever can they mean?” I asked Mr. Darcy directly, knowing full well that he knew the history of Mr. Wickham’s relationship with my silly, vain, youngest sister Lydia.

We all tried not to look at closed box that Mr. Darcy held tightly in his right hand.

“Oh no.....” I cried, “that couldn’t be possible! Why would Wickham want to kill my sister?”

I already knew the answer to that question. Lydia only brought to the matrimonial table a mere 100 a year and that was small beans to a man with reckless tastes and a roving eye. But still, I couldn’t believe he would kill her. Why not run away with another willing wanton woman like he had done with Lydia herself?

Darcy coughed apologetically. “He is not the most stable of men,” he murmured. “I’m sorry, Miss Elizabeth, we should call in the magistrate immediately.”

I thought of the scandal that would surround my family and grimaced. Besides the shame and embarrassment to my dear Papa, and the perpetual grief of my mother, a murdered sister would not enhance the reputations of my three unmarried sisters and me. We would be social pariahs in a society that prided itself on respectability and appearing to be perfect.

I looked at the Marquess for help. “Couldn’t we try to figure this out before we call in the authorities? Isn’t there a chance this isn’t Lydia or anyone we know but just a cruel prank?”

“Let me see the box again, Darcy,” the Marquess commanded.

He opened the box and did another thorough inspection. This time I couldn’t look and scratched the ears of Ajax who sat by my feet, looking confused by the wealth of Bennet emotions that had upset his nap.

“Miss Bennet, does your sister have pierced ears?” the Marquess asked.

“Why yes, we all do,” I said.

He looked disappointed. “So do these,” he remarked. “But that doesn’t signify because I’m sure every lady of fashion has her ears pierced for the wearing of earrings, wouldn’t you say, Darcy?”

Darcy looked askance like he had never thought of the ear lobes of delicately raised ladies and I stifled a giggle. He shot a look at me and I tried to look abashed but felt hysterical laughter tickling the back of my throat. I pulled a handkerchief out of my reticule and buried my nose into the lavender scented lace.

“Please don’t have the vapors on me, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said coolly.

I lifted my head just enough to mutter, "I never have vapors!" and then coughed violently which ruined the effect of sang-froid I was trying to maintain, in order to impress the Marquess and my nemesis.

"Where is your sister living at present?" the Marquess asked.

"She is with her husband and his regiment stationed in Shropshire," I said.

"When have you communicated with her last, Miss Bennet?" the Marquess asked.

I had the grace to look ashamed.

"We are neither of us very good correspondents," I said. "I would have to ask Mama when she received her last letter from Lydia." I tried not to meet the surprised eyes of Mr. Darcy who knew I could write letters for hours to Charlotte Lucas or to his own dear Georgiana.

"When will Mrs. Bennet be able to communicate with us?" the Marquess asked politely but I knew he was eager as his nose was air borne and his whole body practically quivering in anticipation.

I thought of Mama in her bed crying piteously and hesitated. Should I go and demand an answer?

Jane walked in at that moment and I let out a sigh. At last someone coherent and sensible to shed some light on this thoroughly bizarre situation.

"May I present my sister Jane?" I said to the Marquess. "The Marquess of Bath, Miss Jane Bennet."

"My lord," Jane said and dropped a curtsy.

The Marquess bent over her hand. "Enchantée," he said, looking impressed. Jane is most definitely the beauty of the family.

"How is Mama?" I asked her.

"She is— resting," Jane said carefully. "She has taken a tonic and is reposing most comfortably."

I knew Mama's tonics were composed of laudanum, brandy and barley water and she would probably be "reposing" for some hours so we could speak in peace.

"Jane dearest, do you know when Mama last heard from Lydia?"

"We were trying to find that out, before she fell asleep, and it seems that she hasn't heard from Lydia in several weeks. Usually that isn't any cause for alarm, because Lydia only writes when she and Mr. Wickham have settled into a new place and they were bound for Shropshire a month ago," Jane said.

“Hmm,” the Marquess said. “Does your sister have no other friends or family she might have communicated with?” He smiled at my sister and I wondered if he was forming a tendresse for her, another conquest in her long line of admirers.

“She might have written to Mrs. Phillips, don’t you think, Lizzy, I mean Elizabeth?” said Jane looking adorably flustered.

“Yes, possibly,” I said, “although she would have written Mama too,” I think. But who knew with Lydia?

“Let’s send a message to her,” Mr. Darcy said. “Mrs. Philips lives in Meryton,” he explained to the Marquess.

“I don’t wish to distress her,” Elizabeth said, knowing full well how her aunt’s tongue could also wag alarmingly.

“Can I send my carriage to fetch her?” Mr. Darcy asked.

“I’ll get Kitty and Mary to go get Aunt Philips,” I said.

“Do you think that’s wise?” Jane asked. “Maybe I should go, Lizzy, yes, I think that would be best.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said and escorted her to the door.

The Marquess stood by the fireplace tapping his toe. He looked pensive and impatient.

“We don’t have a lot of time, Miss Bennet,” he said, “we must get answers before the magistrate hears about this.”

I nodded. But what answers would a pair of severed ears yield before the day was out?

Jane returned with Aunt Philips in tow. Never a favorite of Mr. Darcy he however greeted her graciously, made the introductions and waited until she had been comfortably settled into a chair, with tea and biscuits called for in case she needed reviving.

“Aunt Philips,” Jane began cautiously, “we would all like to know very much, please, when you last heard from Lydia?”

“Lydia?” she opened her reticule and pulled out a sheaf of note papers. “I’m sure I have a note right here from her, Jane, dearest.”

After a moment of shuffling and peering at the papers, for no lady of consequence would wear her glasses in polite society, she said, “aha! At last!” and waved a paper in the air at us. The faint aroma of jasmine oil tickled our nostrils.

“Dear Aunt—” she began, “I think, no, Wicky and I are— no, where is it now,” she said plaintively. I longed to snatch the paper out of her hands, but the stern eye of Mr. Darcy prevented me from performing such a rude action. Lydia would have grabbed the letter by now, that I knew for certain.

“Ah! Here it is!” she cried triumphantly. “Wicky and I are leaving for the she doesn’t name the place, or is that a blot of dried egg?” Aunt Philips mused, “on Thursday. Don’t know when we’ll return. It’s all very secret and too thrilling! Tell my mama and father and sisters that I’ll be back very soon!”

“Thursday,” the Marquess said. “That was five days ago. How can we track the location of Wickham’s militia, Darcy?”

“I can make inquiries,” he said smoothly. I looked at him. He was so self-assured, so knowledgeable and powerful. Of course he could find out where Wickham and Lydia were stationed. Us mere mortals could only wonder.

Our footman appeared at the door.

“Mr. Bingley,” he announced to Jane.

Her composure was only marred by the beautiful flush that stained her lovely cheeks.

“Mr. Bingley, how good of you to call,” Jane said as we both curtsayed and smiled.

“Good news travels fast, what?” he said with a rueful smile. “I hope you’ll let me in on the sleuthing,” he said to us all.

“Of course, old chap,” the Marquess said. We were just talking about finding a suitable location to set up our headquarters during this most puzzling affair.”

A second passed and then a boyish smile lit up Mr. Bingley’s face.

“You must come to Netherfield,” he said. “All of you. You must dine with me tonight and we can see how things are getting on,” he said with a careful look at Jane.

“Wonderful idea, Bingley,” Mr. Darcy said. “Perhaps you can accompany me now to make my inquiries, we can divide and conquer.”

Bingley looked crestfallen. I’m sure he had been ready to settle down to a lengthy chat with Jane but he rallied beautifully.

“Oh, right, of course, I’ll come,” he said doubtfully. “Are you sure I can be of help?”

He spied the box in the Marquess’ hands. “Oh, is that them?” he said ungrammatically. “May I see them?”

The Marquess handed Bingley the box.

“Careful,” he warned him. “Don’t spill the contents.”

Bingley gingerly flipped open the lid of the box and gasped.

“This is absolutely thrilling,” he said with a quick look at us all. “Have you heard of Professor Marvel and his traveling circus? He has a display of curiosities, pickled babies and brains and Siamese twin panthers, but I think they’re all made of clay.”

“Charles, you are such a wealth of information,” Mr. Darcy said slowly, with a light of amusement in his eyes. “When did you go to the circus?”

“Oh, the last time I was in Bath to pick up a saddle,” he said with a cough, looking a bit flustered. We all knew Charles enjoyed entertainments that Darcy considered absolutely primitive.

Bingley avoided our amused eyes and instead was poking his finger in the pile of salt under the ears.

“Hello, what’s this?” he said with a look of amazement. He stuck three fingers into the salt and pulled out another artifact that amazed us.

A lock of hair, long and curled and tied with a baby blue ribbon.

I jumped up and flew across the room. I almost snatched the hair rudely from Mr. Bingley’s fingers but stopped myself just in time as I saw Jane’s eyes widen in shock.

“Please, may I see that?” I asked. Mr. Darcy was standing right behind me, I was happy to notice.

Mr. Bingley handed me the lock of hair and Jane and I inspected it closely. The color, the scent of jasmine and the blue ribbon all reminded us of Lydia, but who could tell for sure?

“May I?” Mr. Darcy asked. I handed him the hair.

He studied it for a moment and then handed it to the Marquess.

“My lord? Any thoughts?” I asked nervously.

The Marquess studied the hair like a bloodhound. He even drew out his magnifying glass and inspected each strand one by one.

He smiled at us. “Why would someone take the trouble to take a lock of horse hair and infuse it with oil and scent to make it seem human?”

“Horse hair!” I exclaimed.

“Impossible!” said Darcy.

“Are you sure?” both Jane and Bingley exclaimed together.

A benevolent grin was bestowed upon us.

“Yes, dear hearts, I’m afraid someone has gone to great lengths to trick you into thinking your dear sister is dead. Now who can that be?”

We stood frozen. At whose feet would we dare lay the blame for this outrageous and most injurious deed?

“I have my ideas,” Mr. Darcy said darkly. I looked at him and seemed to feel the enmity rolling off his broad superfine clad shoulders.

He glanced at me and I felt a chill. We were both thinking of Wickham of that I was sure. Was my ne’er do well brother in law capable of removing my troublesome sister from his life?

I swallowed. He was.

“We have many things to discuss tonight at dinner,” the Marquess said happily. Indeed we did.

