

When the students were finally given the go-ahead to leave the dorm wing, it was as if they had unleashed a fury of rumour and innuendo onto the campus. Some brave souls attempted to reach the outskirts of the crime scene only to be turned away by teacher and officer alike, others feared the prospect of seeing blood or even the now-removed body of Professor Prier. They were going to investigate it closely. This was one of, if not the most prestigious educational institution in the nation. There were too many important people here to let a murder pass untested.

From the outside, I was the very image of calm grace and composed cool. All of my biggest fans were simply beside themselves with blind admiration. My mind was elsewhere. If Felipe was already in a dangerous situation, then my proximity to him would presumably make him safer. I protected him from Prier's first shot using the rifle – but what would have happened if I wasn't there? It was with that concept that I decided to break with my previous strategy and get closer to him.

Felipe had already completed much of the groundwork. He had ignored many of the rumours and approached me for open discussion about my studies. It would be simple enough to convince others that we were friends, or that he was taking care of an underclassman and guiding her through the weeds. The problem was that I was not the most sociable person. I could convince people that I meant to be somewhere I wasn't, but being open and emotionally attached to them posed a different set of challenges.

I sought him out by heading into the other study which was closer to the upper years' dorms. He was sitting at one of the tables with his head between his hands. I cleared my throat to catch his attention. He looked up to me with clear anxiety written onto his features, plainer than the black ink in the books that lined the walls around us. He stood from his seat and addressed me.

“Can we speak in private, please?”

“Of course – lead the way.”

Felipe led me away from the hustle and bustle of the study and to an isolated area outside in the corridors. It wasn't one-hundred-percent secure, but it would be enough to keep curious ears away for our purposes. Out of sight of everyone else, he leaned up against the wall and sighed wearily.

“Did you hear the news? That the Professor is dead?”

“Yes, they gave the same speech to us as well.”

Felipe swallowed and shook his head, “I can’t believe it. I understand that they asked us to keep quiet about the person trying to kill us – but now someone else has paid the price for that silence. If they had done things properly, perhaps Professor Prier would still be alive now.”

Felipe was suffering under some kind of survivor’s guilt. The last thing I wanted or needed was for him to start acting irrationally now that Prier was dead, but I couldn’t reveal to him that Prier was the man trying to kill us. Sharing a secret like that was liable to make things even more complicated. The best course of action was to say nothing and use simple logic to unpick the way he was feeling.

I nodded to affirm his perspective but offered a contrary opinion, “Sir Prier was aware of the situation himself. If he found it so distasteful, he would have aired his objections to the other teachers before they agreed to it.”

The truth was that Prier would have eagerly accepted a vow of silence. He must have been in a panic about the failed attempt on Felipe’s life – because it meant that the information game was taken out of his hands and put into ours. The headmaster offered him a second chance to do things right. None of them were going to talk out of fear of losing the custom of our wealthy parents and the alumni benefactors who funded the school. That strategy had been blown wide open by Prier’s death. The press would be all over it like a pack of starving vultures.

“Aye. But suppose he did so under the threat of losing his job, they could have coerced him to take action he found unpalatable.”

“You need not blame yourself, Felipe. The culprit is the one who committed the crime, not the ones who evaded their ire. We are not expected to seek and capture the murderer ourselves. There is nothing to suggest that our survival led to his death. It is easy to draw lines between disconnected events in the aftermath.”

Felipe exhaled, “You’re right, but I still feel terrible. I keep thinking about what might have changed if we spoke out. Maybe they would have suspended school and got him out of harm’s way.”

“Indeed. I think that the headmaster’s actions have little reasoning behind them now that the consequences have become clear.”

I had successfully navigated the issue for the time being. I was not an empathetic soul at the best of times, so it came as a relief that Felipe wouldn't drive himself crazy over it. The practical purpose behind it was to disassociate him from the tangled web that was starting to weave around us. A lot of money was riding on Felipe dying and Beatrice Booker being left a girl in waiting once more.

I had pieced together some of the events that led to him being marked. Several different families were in the running to marry Beatrice because she was the only descendant in the family, and no more heirs were on the horizon. She would inevitably inherit the gigantic business empire that her Father and Grandfather had built over hundreds of years. With that on the line various noble families had thrown everything into wooing them and taking her hand in marriage. The Escobarus family had slipped in at the last moment and shocked everyone else with an unusual offer. Felipe was to be married matrilineally to Beatrice and take her last name.

Not quite the hostile takeover that the others were proposing. It would ensure that the Booker family would retain a certain level of independence from the Escobarus house, while still forging an important business relationship between them. In their eyes, it was better to have something from the deal than being left with nothing. Suddenly, the non-inheriting son had been inserted into the line for a serious treasure trove of money and influence. That was why he was so important, and why so many other families were furious with them.

Felipe's old man had managed to piss off just about every family in the country with his chicanery. Matrilineal marriages were extremely rare and often done in low-stakes situations with members of the family who were not expected to lead the house in the future. It was a savvy call to offer one to Beatrice's father – who was not seeking a merger with another family at the time.

This posed a problem. There were too many suspects to count. Every family who had forwarded their kin now had cause to try and kill Felipe to annul the arrangement. Potentially billions of Walmarks were on the line, even more if the family in question had a business that would benefit from integrating with the Bookers'. That kind of money was enough to drive anyone to desperate measures. The payoff was too great to think twice about being implicated in an assassination plot.

Felipe forced out a chuckle, "Did you come to make sure that I was okay? I didn't expect that from you, Maria."

I frowned, “I didn’t realise that our relationship was so cold. This much is to be expected of acquaintances, is it not?”

“I have no idea why so many of the others call you ill-mannered. I was thinking that you didn’t care about making many friends. Though Talia has been saying positive things about you for some time now. Don’t tell her I said that.”

I brushed my fringe aside and motioned to my chest proudly; “Consider this a display of friendship, then. You are in rare and privileged company.” Felipe was in a much better mood now that I had spoken with him. It was the only thing I could do. None of the other students were aware of the original incident.

“I’m honoured, honestly.”

There was a moment of silence as I glanced out of the window and into the gardens. We weren’t at the correct angle to see the greenhouse, but the police officers and detectives were scurrying back and forth in a wild search for whatever evidence was left. It would be a twisted tale to piece together. A man shot by his own gun, in a greenhouse that he and only a few others had access to. The low rumble of the other students speaking at volume could be heard echoing through the halls.

“I assume school will be suspended for a few days, if not longer. Our parents are going to be outraged about all of this.”

“Yes, there’ll be no covering this up,” I commented. To be a fly on the wall in the staff room at this moment. The headmaster must have been turning greyer by the second as he was forced to deal with the media and the parents. There was no spinning this one into a positive, someone had died on the campus and it was no accident.

Felipe straightened himself out and tried to put on a smile. “I knew you were composed, but it was still something of a shock to see you walking into the study so unaffected. You really do have nerves of steel.”

I made an excuse, “I can feel uncertain, just as you can. I merely present myself confidentially even when the situation is dangerous.”

“How many dangerous situations do you get into?”

“Nothing quite as dangerous as being shot at with a gun.”

Felipe and I drifted back towards the study as the discussion returned from Prier's death to something more casual. Beatrice was waiting at the door for him. She hurried over and took his hands into hers, "Are you okay, Felipe?"

He grinned, "Yes. It's difficult to stay moody with you and Lady Maria looking out for me."

Beatrice regarded me with a friendly curtsy, "I do hope that the incident has not upset you, Maria."

"Upset? She was the one consoling me!" Felipe chuckled.

"You were just the young Lady that I wanted to speak with," Beatrice continued, "We are hosting a ball at our estate soon and I'd like to extend an invitation to you and your Father."

"A ball?" I repeated, "Where will you find the time between lessons?"

"Beatrice's estate is very close to the academy," Felipe explained, "Tis' only an hour's walk from here, and even faster by carriage. A lot of the girls were hoping to host a ball before the final year graduates, and Beatrice offered to utilise her estate for the event."

"I see. Then I would be happy to attend, of course."

That was the biggest lie of the day so far. I'd been to a few balls in my years, and each and every one was a profound exercise in boredom. They were essentially networking events with a fancy top-coat and expensive dresses. It was where a lot of matchmaking and deal brokering happened between the families. Most of the girls wanted to compete and see who had the nicest outfit. I was not interested.

Beatrice clasped her hands together in delight, "Wonderful! I hope to see you wearing your best. I'm sure you'll look amazing, Maria."

"I will endeavour not to disappoint you."

The words tainted my mouth with a sour taste.

---

"I'm telling you that something fishy is going on here," Claudius opined. Around the table sat Talia, Samantha and Maxwell. "First the teachers start acting strangely, and now one of them has been killed. It must be connected."

Maxwell shrugged, "There's no evidence that they're connected. I'm still not even sure what you mean when you say the teachers are acting differently."

Talia piled on too, “And it’s easy to claim that things are strange after they happen. Why wouldn’t it be strange? One of the teachers just got rolled out of here under a white sheet...”

Claudius clicked his tongue disapprovingly, “All I’m saying is that I’ve been on the trail of this case for some time now. I thought that things were odd, and now there’s even more evidence to support that.”

Samantha was withering, “This isn’t a game. Someone is dead.”

“I’m not treating it like a game. I don’t know if the professor had any family or friends waiting for him, but I’m going to get justice for them one way or another.”

Claudius’ special perspective was going to be badly needed. He didn’t trust those police detectives to correctly deduce the real culprit behind the murder. Claudius had put together a list of his prime suspects. Though simple in nature, it was a good starting point. He had managed to assemble the names and years of every member of the shooting society, as well as award-winning competitors like Maria Walston-Carter and Adrian Roderro. He could begin to eliminate the suspects one by one as evidence came to light through his investigation. With a campus occupied by a thousand plus students and staff members, eye-witness testimony would be essential.

Even if a lot of those people wanted nothing to do with him.

Claudius had a fairly negative reputation for nagging people about gossip and rumours. While they were happy to indulge in that with friends, a stranger from the first year did not have the social capital to do so without charge. One of them accused Claudius of trying to claim Maria as a romantic partner while tracking her movements. He was offended by the suggestion; it was all for the purpose of protecting people from her wicked ways!

“The police detectives are going to figure it out before you do,” Max concluded, “They’ve got all that fancy equipment, and people are actually willing to speak with them about the day of the crime.” He knew exactly how to rile Claude up with snide comments like that. Claude brushed it off and continued to jot down notes in his book for later.

“I heard that Prier was shot using a gun. That means that the culprit must know how to use one.”

“Huh? Isn’t it just as easy as pointing it and pulling the trigger?”

“Not so, Max. Even at close ranges, an inexperienced shooter is more likely to miss than hit their target. If the gun wasn’t loaded, it would also take them some time to discover how the

mechanism works. These factors reduce the likelihood of an uninitiated person killing him. They had to be in the greenhouse at the time – so the pressure to shoot before he could escape or fight back would be high.” Max curled his brow at the reasonable path that Claude was taking. It was almost enough to make him forget the hundreds of other insane theories he had posited over the years.

“So, who’s your prime suspect?”

“The best shooters in the school are Maria, Adrian, the members of the shooting society, and some of the faculty members. I haven’t been able to put together a definitive list of which teachers participate though.”

“How did you find out that he was shot?” Talia asked under her breath.

“One of the other students overheard a detective talking about it.”

“And what if he wasn’t shot?”

Claude hummed, “I’ll just have to change my theory. That’s what a good detective does.”

A good detective wouldn’t be relying on an overheard whisper from an unreliable source for the basis of their case, but the rest of the gang knew that trying to argue with him was a waste of breath. Claudius was going to follow through with it no matter what they said to him. There was no harm as long as they weren’t dragged along to help.

Talia sought to change the subject, “Anyway – Beatrice is putting together a ball and she said I could invite a few friends. Would you like to come with, Samantha?”

Samantha’s face lit up, “A ball? That sounds interesting. I’ve been to dances and harvest festivals, but never a ball.”

“They’re interesting the first time you go. There’s food, dresses, and dancing. The hardest part is making conversation with people you don’t like.”

“I’d love to.”

“Great! It’s always better with friends. Make sure you have a nice dress to wear. I’d lend you one of mine, but you’re... a little too large to fit into them.”

Max laughed, “That’s rude.”

“Not what I meant!” Talia scowled.

