

Voyage of Shadows: Murder on the S.S. Normandie

●●●by Dana●●●

Author Notes: This chapter title is a play on Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House*. Again, self-edited, too much crap going on, yadda yadda yadda. Word count: 3,634.

Chapter Ten: Peril in Touriste Classe

Mart and Dan arrived in the Winter Garden, weaving their way among the abundant foliage and gilded bird cages, to find Trixie fidgeting impatiently in one of the room's wicker chairs. Jim, Honey, Di, and Brian surrounded her in wicker chairs of their own and—from what Mart could deduce during his approach—were trying to keep his sandy-haired sister's impatience in check.

As soon as she spotted them, the vivacious blonde jumped up. "*There* you are!" she called. "Quick! Come tell us what happened!"

Brian smiled and said drily, "Yes, quickly, before our dear cat here dies of curiosity!"

Trixie stuck her tongue out at her oldest brother as she urged Mart and Dan to move two more wicker chairs over to their spot so that they could talk.

"So, what happened?" she asked eagerly, even before they could fully sit.

"Calm down, Trix," Mart admonished before he and Dan eagerly launched into their story of following the suspected British spy to the tourist-class lounge and pretending to play backgammon as Miss Trask spoke with the blond Englishman.

After Mart and Dan had finished their narrative, the rest of the club agreed that "the parcel" of which the spy duo had spoken referred to the engine—which seemed to confirm its existence onboard—and that Margarethe Eberhart was the "friend" to whom Charles had referred.

"And we have news for you, too!" Trixie crowed. At Mart and Dan's expectant looks, the vivacious blonde continued, "Di and Honey are *so* smart!"

Her statement caused both Honey and Di to blush with pleasure as Trixie continued, "You see, once Miss Trask had—"

"Trixie!" Brian interrupted. "Maybe Di and Honey would like to tell the story. They were the ones who were there, you know."

Properly chastised, Trixie looked sheepishly at her friends, realizing her mistake. "Yes, they absolutely should. I'm sorry."

A suddenly placid, contrite Trixie was so unnerving that Di and Honey immediately jumped into the silence.

"It's no big deal," Di assured Brian. "I...actually, well, I wouldn't have even *thought* of being so bold if I didn't know your sister." She turned her attention to Mart and Dan. "Honey and I visited Mrs. Eberhart in Miss Trask's absence."

"That's fantastic!" Mart exclaimed. "What happened?"

Di and Honey exchanged a look before the Irish beauty turned back to Mart and grinned. "Well, she seemed to know a lot more about her daughter than Miss Trask let on. She's so eager for anyone to listen that we didn't even have to ask about Margarethe. Mrs. Eberhart immediately started talking about her. Apparently, Margarethe was afraid for her life, so she confided in her mother. She told her that there's an engine on the ship that the Germans don't want getting to America. It's supposed to serve as a prototype for the Ford Motor Company to use to build airplane engines. The problem is that Henry Ford is a pacifist, and he wants America to have nothing to do with a European war. But his son wants to fight, to help with the war he sees as inevitable."

"How sure are we that she's not...well, telling fanciful stories?" Dan asked.

Trixie couldn't help it. She let out a decidedly unlady-like guffaw. "*She* mentioned the engine. Not Di or Honey. How *fanciful* is that?"

Dan, nonplussed, gave her a mischievous grin and, in an exaggeratedly thick Irish brogue, returned, "No more fanciful than a leprechaun takin' ye' hostage and demanding a pot o' gold fer yer return."

Everyone gave in to Dan's humor and laughed, as he meant for them to.

After the laughter had subsided, Jim asked, "So, what do we know about the engine?"

"Well," Honey answered, "Mrs. Eberhart said that Margarethe told her that a colleague of hers was on the ship keeping an eye on it because she was responsible for ensuring that the engine was not intercepted or sabotaged."

"Did Mrs. Eberhart know how the colleague, which I presume is Miss Trask, was checking on it?" Brian asked. "Something that large must be in the ship's cargo hold, which passengers presumably don't have access to."

"The French Line must grant access for special exceptions," Mart reasoned. "The real question is whether or not the company is complicit with the transfer."

"Why wouldn't they be?" Trixie wanted to know.

"Well, like I said, I'm sure they grant some exceptions. They may not know what it is exactly that Miss Trask is checking on. Plus, the Brits are gearing up for a war with Hitler, but the French are not. They keep, well, being French and going on as if nothing is happening," Mart explained with the knowledge of someone who had been mingling with the French for the last year. Trixie trusted his judgment implicitly.

"But you said that Mrs. Fitzgerald said that the French Line was helping," Honey pointed out.

"And the captain was very eager to change the subject," Mart mused. "Hmm. Perhaps the company *does* know what is being transported."

Brian reasoned, "Well, if anyone would be granted special access, I would think it would be those staying in the Trouville and Deauville Suites. We shipped our major belongings ahead on a specialized cargo ship so we didn't store anything in the *Normandie's* cargo hold. What about your family, Honey?"

Honey nodded slowly. "Mother *did* purchase several art pieces in France and Italy that are being stored in the cargo hold."

Trixie grinned excitedly. “Well, Miss Wheeler, I think you have an urgent need to check on the state of the paintings! At least, to see if you can be granted permission to check on them.”

“If they say no, it doesn’t necessarily mean that passengers aren’t granted exceptions,” Dan said. “Maybe only Mr. or Mrs. Wheeler would be allowed access since they’re technically the owners of the art, not Honey.”

Trixie nodded. “True, true,” she said, looking very thoughtful.

“What happens if we need to get Honey’s parents involved?” Jim wondered.

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” Trixie declared. “Honey can still try.”

“I think I may have an idea,” Mart said, with a questioning look at Diana. The dark-haired Irish pixie blushed slightly, but she smiled.

“If you think it will help,” Di answered, knowing exactly to what Mart was referring.

“What? What?” Trixie asked, leaning forward in excitement.

“Well, while I’ve been showing Di my writing, she’s been showing me some of her own works of art. Besides reading in her free time, she draws a bit, too, and the drawings are pretty impressive,” Mart explained with a look of pride toward his new friend.

During the chorus of “That’s amazing!” and “How wonderful!” that enveloped her, Diana went from attractively pink to bright red, waving a delicate hand. “It’s nothing,” she said. “It’s just something I do to pass the time. Pencils and paper are provided by the school, so they’re very affordable. Now that I’m finished with school, I plan to swipe Terry’s and Larry’s!” she exclaimed with an impish grin that made everyone around her laugh.

“We’ll get the Wheelers to show Di the art since she’s a budding artist!” Trixie exclaimed.

“Yes, that was my plan, my dear Watson!” Mart returned, a twinkle in his blue eyes.

Trixie snorted. “Who says *you* get to be Holmes?”

“My superior intelligence, natch,” came Mart’s prompt reply.

Trixie chortled. “Whatever you need to tell yourself, dear almost twin. But everyone knows that you wear your hair in that funny crew cut because your tiny brain would collapse under a normal amount of hair!”

Everyone laughed at that. Mart pretended to look offended, but then he gave in good-naturedly and joined his friends in their merriment.

Trixie, however, did not laugh for very long. As usual, her one-track mine was on one thing—in this case, the engine.

“That excuse can work well for Honey to ask for permission, too. Actually, it may work out better since Honey is friends with Di. Now that we have a plan, I think we need to be serious about finding that

engine. Confirm it's there, maybe get some clues," Trixie stated, an adventurous twinkle in her ocean blue eyes. "Let's go!"

Brian looked at his watch. "It's almost time to get ready for dinner. We Beldens are dining at the first service tonight."

Trixie looked so absolutely crestfallen at this until Jim said, "It will be better to go during the day anyway. I think it will be less suspicious."

She and the rest of the club agreed with Jim's assessment, Trixie somewhat reluctantly, and the events of the next day were firmly set into motion.

~~~

*August 27, 1939*

*Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean, approaching New York Harbor*

Immediately following breakfast, the group gathered in the Winter Garden. Honey reported that she had told her mother that Di was a budding artist and very interested in art, and she wondered if it was possible to show her new friend the paintings that the Wheelers had purchased in Europe.

*"What a lovely idea!" Madeleine exclaimed. "I think it would be wonderful for you to show your friend the paintings. What kind of art does she do?"*

*"Just pencil drawings for now."*

*"Well, do you think she might be interested in seeing that small sculpture that we purchased in Rome?" Honey's mother asked.*

*Honey shook her head. "I know that everything is sealed up, and I'd hate for it to become a bother."*

*Madeleine waved an airy hand. "Nonsense! CGT is probably used to this sort of thing—people wanting to check on their property. They told your father and I that we could check on the art anytime that we wanted. A CGT employee will accompany you with the tools to open the crates and seal them again."*

*"Well, I'm glad that we can show her without too much hassle," Honey said. "But I still would rather just have them open the crate with the paintings. That's more to Diana's interests, I think."*

*"Whatever you say, dear," the older blonde woman said. "Would you like me to arrange a visit for you and Diana?"*

*"Can everyone go?" Honey asked quickly. Then, realizing that she might seem too anxious, she explained, "We're all having such a grand time palling around together that I'd hate to leave the others out."*

*Madeleine smiled approvingly. "I like that idea. I'm so glad that you've made some friends on this voyage. And they all seemed very nice at lunch the other day. Your father and I have spent some time with the Beldens in the evening, and we find them quite delightful."*

*“I do, too, Mother!” Honey confessed excitedly. “They’re all so wonderful. Mart and Trixie are so witty, and Brian is so serious and smart!”*

*Madeleine looked at her daughter slyly. “And tall, dark, and handsome, too.” She smiled as Honey immediately began to blush. “I think he’s a very nice young man, and I couldn’t help but notice the way he looked at you at lunch.”*

*“Mother!” Honey exclaimed, shocked. “We’re just friends!”*

*Madeleine laughed her tinkling laugh. “I’m sure you are. But I think he would like to court you. And I think you’d like him to.”*

*Honey blushed even more furiously and was at a loss at how to respond.*

*Madeleine was very much in favor of an intelligent, serious, reliable man such as Brian Belden courting her daughter, but seeing that Honey was too shy to discuss the matter, she tactfully changed the subject. “But let’s arrange a visit for all of you to see those paintings.”*

*Honey nodded gratefully, not trusting herself to talk after her mother’s observations.*

In retelling the story, Honey deliberately kept this last part of the conversation to herself, but as she thought about it again, a slight blush tinged her cheeks. Nobody noticed but Brian, and he wondered what had caused the young woman to flush so prettily.

At the end of Honey’s recap, the gang was very excited to learn that their appointment to see the art, aka Operation Find the Engine, was in less than 30 minutes.

“We’re to meet a French Line employee outside of the cargo hold entrance on Deck 3,” Honey reported.

Trixie chewed her lip. “But how are we going to search for the engine if we have an employee with us?”

“Can we send him away for some reason?” Mart wondered.

“That would be pretty suspicious,” Brian commented, unconsciously running a hand through his dark, wavy hair as he considered the situation.

Dan, Jim, and Diana exchanged a glance. “We were pretty good at creating a distraction the other night,” Dan said.

“That’s right!” Trixie exclaimed. “When you snuck into the infirmary! Wonderful!”

“With so many of us, it should be easy to create a distraction,” Jim said, catching Trixie’s enthusiasm. Once they had agreed that—after some argument from too-overprotective older brothers and a...Jim—Mart and Di would create the distraction so that Trixie could sneak off, the Bob-Whites headed down to the appointed place.

Along the way, Brian and Jim were grumbling about Trixie heading off by herself, while she kept reassuring them that she would be safe. Meanwhile, Dan reminded the two oldest boys that two of them disappearing would be noticed more easily than one tiny girl. Adding to the din, Honey kept stating that Jim, with his red hair, was sure to be missed, so he couldn’t go.

Finally, unable to take the debate any longer, Trixie stopped abruptly as they approached the cargo door. "I thought we settled this upstairs!" she hissed, the exasperation in her voice practically bouncing through the passageway.

Just then, the middle-aged CGT employee assigned to take Honey to her parents' cargo appeared and introduced himself as Monsieur Legrande, cutting off all further discussion—much to Trixie's immense satisfaction.

Honey kept up a pleasant stream of conversation as the Frenchman led them through the maze of cargo to the wooden pallets that held her parents' artistic purchases.

True to their word, Mart and Di created a distraction, managing to cause all of the nails that Monsieur Legrande had so diligently removed to fly in all directions. As Di exclaimed how sorry she was, and the Frenchman scrambled to collect the nails, Trixie hurriedly made her escape, feeling Brian's worried eyes following her as she ducked behind a nearby crate.

Once free, she made her way through the cargo hold, seeking out crates of only a certain size. Brian had described the dimensions of the box she would be looking for. When she impatiently informed him that merely providing measurements didn't help her visualize *anything*, her older brother had blurted out that the engine would be about the size of two coffins stacked one on top of the other but a little wider.

In the surprised silence that followed his rather morbid comparison, Brian had defended himself. "It's all I could think of." He then turned to his sister. "Let's make sure none of us end up in a coffin on this trip!"

Now, as Trixie's eyes darted about the cargo hold, the pressure of completing her mission was heavily upon her, as Honey and Di couldn't keep talking about the four paintings the Wheelers had purchased for forever.

She began to grow frustrated and desperate as she looked around at all of the assorted boxes surrounding her. She felt tiny and lost among the boxy, wooden crates. What had possessed her to think that this would be easy? Had she truly been expecting a gaudy, flashing neon light to light her way?

Finally, her desperate eyes fell upon a crate hidden in the far corner of the hold that looked to be about the same size as what Brian had described. She hurried over to it and read the manifest attached to the outside of the box. Although the documents on Honey's family's crate had said "WHEELER" quite distinctly and prominently, the name field was left blank on this crate's documentation. The cabin number had been left off as well. Instead, there was only a serial number, which Trixie quickly committed to memory: 1939-28-08-201811911.

Satisfied she had found what she was looking for, Trixie made her way stealthily back through the maze of crates in the cargo hold and joined the group as unobtrusively as possible. She gave a quick inspection to the other manifests she passed along the way. All of them, to a one, had a name and cabin number. None of them was tagged with a serial number. This strengthened her conviction that the crate that she had found held the elusive engine.

As Trixie rejoined the group, she assessed the situation. The CGT employee was standing off to the side, clearly bored while carrying out his duty to "protect" the paintings while his passengers admired them. He wasn't even watching them, clearly lost in his own thoughts.

Honey, in the meantime, was carrying on valiantly about impressionism, her eyes sweeping around the room as she spoke. The young American debutante was relieved to see Trixie and locked eyes on her new friend. Meeting Honey's gaze, Trixie nodded slightly, and Honey immediately started to wrap up her lecture on the painting before her. Fortunately, it was the fourth painting, so Monsieur Legrande was not suspicious when the group suddenly decided that they had had enough art for the day.

Truthfully, the man was relieved, as he had grown bored rather quickly and had retreated into his thoughts about his wife in Normandy, not paying the least bit of attention to the group before him. He had never even noticed the curly-haired blonde's absence.

"Can we help you put this away?" Honey asked politely.

The Frenchman waved her off. "It will be but a simple task to nail the crate together. Please enjoy yourselves on this magnificent ship!"

The club thanked him and made their way out of the cargo hold. As soon as they were out of earshot of the CGT man, Trixie exclaimed, "I found the engine!"

"Shhh," Mart warned. "Someone might hear you!"

"There's no one around, Mart!" Trixie reassured him, looking back and forth along the corridor.

"We should still discuss this somewhere else. Winter Garden?" Jim asked. Everyone nodded their assent.

Once were ensconced in the handsome wicker chairs in the exotic space, Trixie filled the others in on what she had found.

"I wonder what the serial number means?" Dan wondered.

"Some kind of a code?" Jim offered.

"Well, I think the 1939-28-08 is pretty self-explanatory," Mart said. "That's the date we're scheduled to reach New York."

"But the rest could be a code, like Jim said." Trixie was quick to agree with the handsome redhead.

"Do you have one of your notebooks on you, Mart?" Dan asked. "And something to write with?"

"Of course," Mart said, drawing a small notebook and pencil out of the back pocket of his trousers and handing it to the Irishman.

"I have an idea," Dan said. "What are the numbers again, Trix?"

Trixie recited the numbers, and they all looked on as Dan began to scribble in the notebook. Trixie fidgeted constantly throughout the process but tried to keep her impatience in check. After a few minutes, the other five also began to show signs of curiosity, but they all remained quiet as Dan worked.

Suddenly, he looked up, triumph glistening in his dark eyes. "It's a simple cipher. It says Trask."

Stunned, the group stared at him.

Finally, Trixie asked, "Seriously?"

Dan nodded. "My da was really into codes and ciphers and used to talk about them at home all the time. That's why I immediately began to wonder if the numbers translated into letters."

"And they do? And they say Trask?" Di asked, breathlessly.

Dan nodded.

"That makes no sense!" Trixie declared. Everyone looked at her, surprised. She waved a hand at their questioning gazes. "Not that it says Trask," she said an exasperated tone before continuing. "That it was so easy to decipher! What kind of a respectable spy agency would make a code so easy to break?"

"The French Line isn't a spy agency," Jim pointed out. "Maybe they were asked to identify the crate without a name and room number, and that was what they came up with."

"Make sense," the three Beldens murmured at the same time, causing everyone to grin.

"What do we do now?" Honey wondered.

"I think we need to go to Miss Trask with what we know. *We* know Waters and Schmidt are spies, but maybe she doesn't. If she did, I think she would have taken care of them by now," Trixie stated.

Brian looked at her skeptically. "Not all spies handle things the way Schmidt did, Trixie."

"Well, if she knew they were responsible for her colleague's death, I don't think she'd be sitting around letting them go free!" Trixie declared hotly.

Honey jumped into the fray before it could get out of hand. "I agree that going to Miss Trask is the best course of action."

The others agreed, and after minimal more discussion, everyone stood and wound their way through pathways lined with exotic plants and gilded bird cages. After exiting the Winter Garden, they headed directly to Frau Eberhart's room in Touriste Classe.

Just as Trixie was about to knock on the door, a cultured British voice said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Seven startled gazes turned to see Waters standing before them. The sinister, grey-haired man aimed a gleaming silver and black pistol at the group.

Hazel-green eyes glittered dangerously as he looked at Trixie. "Your brother's right. You should keep your voice down. You really never *do* know who might be around."