

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

●●●by Dana●●●

Author Notes: This title is inspired by the Agatha Christie novel, *Postern of Fate*. I like to think that the Bob-Whites are absolutely fated to meet, and since they're meeting on this ship, well, it's the ship of fate. :) Can I say how tickled I am that Julia catches my Americanisms? So important in a story like this! Thank you, sweetie! Mary always seems to know just the right word to pick to improve the sound of a sentence. Thank you, sweetie! And, of course, Susan always keeps me on track, correcting those stupid little mistakes I always manage to make! Thank you, sweetie! All three of you make my writing so much better, and I can't thank you enough for that! Word count: 5,283.

Chapter Two: Ship of Fate

August 23, 1939

Off the coast of Southampton, England

Diana Lynch found herself wandering about on the open deck available to the third-class passengers, taking in the salty air and bustling sounds around her as her fellow travelers explored the ship. Her placid demeanor contrasted the hurried passengers who scurried about, trying to find their rooms so that they could settle in for the week-long voyage to America. The young woman took a deep breath, enjoying the slight breeze that blew through her shoulder-length bob of blue-black hair, and her violet eyes drank in the foreign sights that surrounded her.

Until a few days before, when her family had set out on the long journey to Southampton via ferry and train, Diana had never stepped foot outside of her home town of Kilmainham, a small village south of the River Liffey and west of Dublin. It had been a tiring journey, especially with the four young ones, but it had also been exciting and exotic to the young woman, eager to finally be free of the confines of her village.

And to now be traveling on a fancy French ocean liner about to cross the vast Atlantic Ocean to the promise of America! There was nothing more romantic to her mind's eye.

As she strolled along, her eyes sparkling and her sculpted cheeks kissed with an attractive flush, Diana made such a striking picture that she caught the eye of many men, young and old alike. One of those men was an adventurous lad from first class, exploring every inch of the ship that he was allowed, looking for ideas to spark his writing.

Mart Belden was young for a writer, only nineteen. He may not have had the extensive life experiences of some of the classic writers whom he admired, but his passion for writing and for life more than made up for that, and it showed in his work. He had impressed each of his English teachers and professors over the years. The young man had thought about attending university, but in the end, he knew that it was not to be.

First, even with the partial scholarship he had been offered and his parents' financial status, it still would be a stretch on the family finances to send him, especially as his older brother Brian was finishing up university and looking toward medical school. Even though his quiet and studious older brother had secured a scholarship, his living and textbook expenses were not insignificant. The many scientific tomes that Brian toted around were thick and heavy, and their prices reflected that. Despite the oldest Belden sibling's protests, his parents were determined to help finance these expenses.

Second, Mart's keenness to attend university had waned when he learned that his parents were seriously considering a move to the United States. The second Belden son, with his love of adventure,

was excited about the prospect of moving across the pond. He could not force himself to remain in Britain knowing that his family was having new and exciting adventures in a foreign land! And why begin an education at an institution if you knew that you weren't going to finish?

Third, and perhaps most importantly, he felt that he could get a better writing education through life experiences. Did Hemingway go to college? Did the Bard? Did Dickens even finish school? No—they had lived their lives and drew from their experiences. And written some of the most compelling, lasting prose the world had known. Mart planned on soaking up every experience that he could in the “real world” and then channeling these experiences into his stories and novels. The School of Hard Knocks would be his personal institution of higher learning.

For the past year, his plan had worked out well. He had secured a job on a ferry that went back and forth across the English Channel, interacting with a large cross-section of the population—both from the continent and the British Isles. He had found the inspiration for enough characters to fill a hundred novels. In his off-time, he was able to explore the French coast, from Brittany's rugged, rough beauty to Normandy's peaceful beaches to Bordeaux's rolling hills and vineyards. It boosted his morale to know that he was contributing to the family finances, earning somewhat of a living, even if it was not one that could support him completely.

But best of all, he was seeing so many new things and meeting so many wild and wonderful people of all stations of life. He had seen those fleeing from Hitler's maniacal grip, quiet and somber families with a heart-breaking mixture of terror, exhaustion, and sadness clearly etched on their faces—even the faces of young children reflected a knowledge of evil that was far beyond their years. He had seen playboys escaping to England “incognito” to carouse the streets of London, bored with the pleasures that Paris offered up so freely. There were businessmen and politicians traveling back and forth brokering who knew what kind of deals.

Mart had written about twenty short stories, each one based on one of the more colorful characters whom he had met in the course of his year-long tenure on the ferry. Collectively, he called these stories *An Anthology of Crossings*. He had also started a novel about a young man trying to find his way in the world while living in the shadow of his perfect older brother. It wasn't strictly autobiographical, because Mart didn't feel that he lived in Brian's shadow *per se*, but he did have a lot to live up to considering how responsible and reliable his older brother was.

But now, staring at this gorgeous black-haired, violet-eyed stunner in front of him, he knew that he had the heroine for his next novel. He was actually speechless in the face of her beauty. Her ebony hair shone in the pale English sun, and her eyes were large in her heart-shaped face, giving her beauty a vulnerability that spared her from looking too cold or inaccessible.

Martin Andrew Belden was instantly smitten. He knew that he had to talk to this wondrous creature or he would regret it for the rest of his life.

Without a conscious thought, he suddenly found himself on his feet and being propelled across the deck, his limbs seemingly not moving of their own volition. Even as his legs took one step after another toward her, his brain was panicking. *What are you going to say to this beautiful creature? What if you offend her? What if she's afraid because there's no chaperone present? What if she thinks you're crazy? What if you are crazy? What if she has a beau? Of course, she has a beau. A girl as beautiful as that must have a beau!*

But even as his brain raced with a million questions, his feet still continued to move, one after the other, step by step, until he was suddenly right next to the pixie-like beauty.

Mart lost his breath anew. Up close, the young woman was even lovelier than he had realized. Her eyes were such an unusual shade, and they sparkled with life and optimism. Her long hair looked so soft and inviting that Mart had to fight the urge to reach his hand up and stroke it.

“Hello,” he said, completely tongue-tied, his love of words failing him for the first time in his life.

“Hello,” the young woman said in return, a smile curving her full red lips. She didn’t seem to be the least bit worried talking to a strange young man.

“A lovely day for a seaside stroll,” Mart said, wondering if he could sound any more inane.

And whether she could hear the wild tattoo of his heart.

The woman’s smile deepened in agreement. “It is. I can’t believe the amazing weather today. The sun is shining on us and gracing the ship with its beauty.”

Before Mart could stop himself, he found himself saying, “It is you who are gracing the ship with *your* beauty.”

The young woman blushed becomingly. “Why, thank you,” she said, seeming truly flattered.

“I’m sorry,” he stuttered. “That was rather forward of me.” He held out a hand, determined to show a modicum of decorum. “I’m Mart Belden.”

Soon, the softness of her flesh was pressed into his hand, and Mart felt a jolt of electricity flow through him that turned into a pleasing warmth, filling his insides. He had read about this in novels, scoffing at the ridiculousness of such a romantic notion, but now, in that moment, Mart Belden was a believer.

“Diana Lynch,” the young woman said. Mart gave her hand a gentle squeeze, forcing himself to let go of the delicate hand lest she become frightened of him.

“And what, pray tell, Miss Lynch, brings you aboard the *SS Normandie*? Relatives in the United States? A holiday?”

Di shook her head. “Neither, actually. Well, my family has distant relatives in New York City, but no one particularly close. We’re hoping to meet up with them when we arrive, but mostly we’re probably going to set up starting our new lives with just my immediate family.”

Mart nodded. “And who is in your immediate family?” he asked, wanting to know every detail about this enchanting creature, and not just as fodder for one of his stories.

“My mother and father,” Di explained in her Irish lilt. “And I have two young sets of twin siblings—one set of brothers and one set of sisters. The boys are five years old, and the girls will be three in a couple of months.”

“Wow,” Mart said, “they must be a handful! I have a younger sister, but she’s only eleven months younger than I. I also have a younger brother who is eight years younger than me. He’ll be eleven next month.”

"It must be interesting having a sister who is the same age as you for one month of the year," Diana remarked.

Mart grinned ruefully. "Our mum calls us the 'almost twins.' Trixie and I are actually a lot alike. And, unfortunately, apparently everyone thinks we look alike, too!"

Diana laughed, and Mart loved the melodious sound. "That's interesting. Does she keep her hair in a crew cut, too?" she asked, her lips quirking into a mischievous grin.

Witty with a sense of humor, as well as beautiful, Mart thought.

"She does wear her hair a tad bit longer than mine," he admitted. "But we have the same blond curls, blue eyes, and freckles as our mother. Well, I have the same curls when I allow my hair to grow out, which is not often! Our younger brother Bobby takes after my mum, too. My older brother, Brian, was lucky enough to inherit our father's dark coloring and features. Tall, dark, and handsome, that's my brother."

Diana said, "I hope you don't think me rude, but that actually sounds rather boring to me. I like quirks. I don't like things to be so perfect."

Mart grinned. "I like quirks, too. And Brian may have inherited my father's dark good looks, and he is a rather studious type, but he knows how to have fun, too. He's not a bore. He couldn't be, not with Trixie and me around to lead him astray!"

Diana giggled at that. "You sound like a fun family. Are you on holiday? Or visiting relatives?"

"You could say we're rather like you. My dad's brother has a mining operation in the western part of the United States, and he's been urging us to move across the pond for a while. I don't know how seriously my parents took him at first, but ever since this whole mess with Germany, and even Italy now, I think they finally decided that, as much as they love Great Britain, they're more worried about the safety of their children than anything else.

"With Uncle Harold constantly urging them to move to 'the land of riches and freedom,' they figured now was as good a time as any to follow his lead. That's Dad's older brother. Dad's younger brother moved to the States at the same time as Uncle Harold. He settled in the middle of the country and established a quite-right farming operation. I think Dad misses his brothers more than he lets on, stiff British upper lip and all that, you know, and that's as big of a factor as any in us moving to America." Mart paused, aghast, as he realized that he was rambling in very much the same way that his sister did. "Wow. I hope I didn't just bore you with all that family history."

Diana smiled, and Mart could tell it was genuine rather than polite. "Not at all. And I think it's wonderful that your dad misses his brothers. He may have a family of his own now, but it's nice to have other family ties. My mother was an orphan, and my dad was an only child, so we don't really have many close relatives since Nanna and Grandad died a few years ago. Like I said, we've some cousins in New York City, but I've always wanted one of those large, extended Irish families like you always read about in books."

Mart's sandy eyebrows raised in hopefulness. "You like to read?"

"I love to read!" Diana exclaimed. "It can be a wonderful escape..." she said, her voice trailing off, not wanting to admit that sometimes her family's poverty got to her. Or that as much as she absolutely adored and doted on her four younger siblings, sometimes it was nice to be alone in the peace and quiet with a good story to occupy her mind and make her forget the emptiness of her stomach when she went without so that her brothers could have a heartier portion of dinner.

"I quite agree," Mart said enthusiastically, unaware of Diana's inner turmoil. "I love a good story. As a matter of fact..." It was his voice that trailed off this time, as he suddenly grew shy about admitting to Diana that he was a writer. Or trying to be a writer. He didn't want to come off as a braggart or pretentious.

"As a matter of fact, what?" Diana prompted him, noting the shyness that had suddenly overtaken the young man's features, which had been so animated up until a just a moment before. She found it endearing.

Mart gave her a bashful smile and said, "I actually aspire to be a writer. I've always loved to write, and during the last year I've done a bit of traveling along the coast of France, and a little bit into the center of the country, too, as a result of my job. I've been gathering anecdotes and characters for my stories and novels."

The sheer look of marvel that settled on Diana's lovely features was intoxicating to Mart. He wished that she would look at him like that every day for the rest of their lives.

"That's wonderful!" Diana breathed. "What types of stories do you write? What kind of job did you have that allowed you to travel?"

"I worked on the ferry that went back and forth across the English Channel from Southampton to Le Havre. Whenever I had two days off in a row, I would hitchhike up and down the French coast, exploring. Sometimes, when I'd saved enough, I'd take a train into the interior of the country. I took my notebook with me and wrote about the colorful characters I met along the way."

Diana's eyes shone, and she looked at Mart with such admiration that the young writer was heady with the attention. "That's wonderful!" she exclaimed again. "Do you have your notebook with you? Could I read some of your stories? Would you mind?"

Would I mind? Mart's brain screamed.

"I don't have it with me right now," he said ruefully. "I, uh, rather slipped out of my family's suite hastily this morning so that I didn't have to watch my little brother," he admitted sheepishly.

Diana grinned. "I know the feeling. I love my brothers and sisters, but..."

"But sometimes it's good to have a nice, quiet sit all by yourself," Mart finished.

Diana nodded, grateful that she had met such a kindred spirit. She'd never felt like this before, even though there were many young men in Kilmainham who had counted themselves as her admirers. But they had never inspired in her the feelings that this handsome young blond man did. Diana hoped that she would be able to spend more time with him throughout the crossing, even though it had not escaped her notice that he had referred to his family's "suite." She hoped that he would not learn of her station and decide that she was not fit company.

Of course, he didn't seem to be that sort of a man, especially seeing as he had taken a job as a deckhand on a ferry, and he was, indeed, wandering around the third-class deck, so he must understand that most of the passengers that he would meet would be traveling in this class and not in the rarefied air of first class.

Her mind fluttered back to his notebook, and Diana said, "Well, maybe some other time during the crossing I might have a chance to read a story or two." Her eyes once again gave that mischievous twinkle that had already smitten Mart, and she finished, "When you're able to avoid childcare duties."

"I knew it!" a female voice exploded off to the left of where Mart and Di had stood in such rapt conversation. Neither had noticed the approach of a young blonde woman—her blue eyes and freckles marking her immediately for Diana as Mart's "almost twin."

Mart groaned out loud when he saw his sister, who continued, "I knew you slipped out this morning before breakfast because you wanted me stuck with Bobby-sitting duties!"

Mart sighed. He was caught, and there was no sense denying it. Trixie, as mercurial as always, however, turned her attention from her brother and toward Diana. Suddenly, her annoyance at her brother vanished, and she was all smiles and friendliness as she stuck her hand out. "Hi!" she said brightly. "I'm Trixie, Mart's sister, as if you couldn't tell that already!"

Diana laughed, instantly liking Trixie as much as she already liked Mart. "Hi, Trixie. I'm Di Lynch."

"It's wonderful to meet you!" Trixie said enthusiastically. "It's absolutely brilliant to meet another girl who's not upstairs gossiping about the most eligible men of the season." The vivacious blonde's derisive snort and roll of her blue eyes indicated exactly what she thought of the shallow conversation she'd had to endure from the debutantes in the Première Classe.

As incredible as it was to be traveling in such style, the last twenty-four hours had taught Trixie that she didn't really want to have anything to do with that world on a permanent basis. The girls were shallow, and none of them seemed to know how to have fun. She *had* seen one pretty girl with honey-brown hair who was with her parents. She'd seemed shy, but Trixie had noticed how the girl's hazel eyes had taken in everything around her with an intelligence that Trixie respected. She had watched the girl's face as she encountered other knots of privileged debutante girls, and the honey-haired girl didn't seem any more inclined to want to socialize with them than Trixie herself did. She had made a mental note to introduce herself to the girl when the opportunity next presented itself, but so far, that hadn't happened.

Bored with first class, Trixie had left to find people whom she thought she would find infinitely more fun and preferable to the stiff society girls. She also had had a hunch that she would find her brother there, looking for fodder for the stories that he was forever writing in that silly notebook of his.

Speaking of notebooks, Trixie thought as she reached into her pocket and pulled out the leather-bound tome that Mart rarely was without. She knew that he must have been in quite the hurry to vacate the Beldens' suite that morning if he had forgotten his usual appendage.

"I thought I might run into you here, dear brother of mine, and I thought that you might be wanting *this*," she said smugly, thrusting the notebook toward him.

Mart looked gratefully at his sister. They often bickered, being so similar in age and temperament, but they understood each other on a level that went far beyond that of normal siblings. "Thanks, sis," he said. "You're not so bad."

Trixie grinned at her brother, and Di noted that the similarities between them were highlighted in their smiles. She instantly loved their closeness and wondered what it would be like to have a sibling her age.

Trixie suddenly turned her attention to Diana, impulsively reaching out and touching the Irish beauty's arm. "I'll leave you two, but I hope I'll see more of you this crossing." She leaned in conspiratorially. "My uncle upgraded us to first class, and he's a total dear for doing so, but those girls are *so dull!* I am going to absolutely *die* of boredom if I have to spend too much time up there. You don't mind if I come visit you from time to time, do you? And if you like to swim, you're more than welcome to swim with me upstairs, too."

Di was touched at the invitation. "I'd love to spend time with you, Trixie. That'd be wonderful." She named off her cabin number for Trixie, who responded, "We're in the Trouville Suite. Just let them know that you're paying a visit to the Beldens. I'll speak to the concierge and let him know that you're an expected guest. *Puh-leeze* come save me from those boring biddies!"

With a cheerful wave, Trixie bade them farewell as she went to explore more of the ship. As she made her way along the open-air deck in third class, she turned to look back, noting with satisfaction that her brother and new friend had moved to a pair of chairs overlooking the beautiful ocean view, their heads, one so fair and the other so dark, bent together over Mart's notebook. With a warm feeling in her heart, Trixie turned her head back around in the direction that she was walking...just in time to bump into a solid mass of muscles.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed as she looked up at the owner of the muscled body. As her brothers so often teased her about, she was plowing ahead full steam without being mindful of where she was going.

Her breath caught as she stared into mesmerizing eyes the color of emeralds. She had never seen anything so green before, and she was lost in them for a moment before taking in the freckled face and fiery red hair the pools of green belonged to.

The young man broke into a grin as he took in the blonde whirlwind in front of him.

"No problem, miss," he said, his eyes gazing over her shoulders. "Something fascinating on the promenade?"

Trixie blushed. "Just looking at my brother and his new friend," she replied.

The young man's eyes twinkled as he spied a young blond man sitting with an attractive brunette. "He seems rather engrossed, to be sure."

Trixie didn't turn and look, instead admiring the ruggedness of the young man in front of her. She liked his strong jaw line and charmingly crooked grin. "I'm Trixie. Trixie Belden," she blurted out, rather at a loss of words in this moment.

"I'm Jim Frayne," the young man said easily, offering her a hand.

“Hi, Jim,” Trixie said, feeling more shy than she ever had in her life. Was *this* what her mother was talking about when she said that someday she would discover that not all boys were her brothers or simply “pals”? Her heart was beating out of her chest, and she could think of absolutely no sane reason why that should be. “Are you visiting relatives in the States?” she asked, hoping she didn’t sound as silly as she felt.

“Maybe,” Jim said—rather mysteriously, Trixie thought.

“Maybe?” she asked with a curious tilt of her head and what she hoped was a flirtatious smile—but having absolutely no experience with this sort of thing, instead, she had a feeling she looked downright ridiculous.

“I have a great-uncle who lives outside of New York City,” Jim explained. “I’m hoping to look him up and meet him for the first time.”

“So he doesn’t know you’re coming?” Trixie asked, her famous—or infamous as her family would say—curiosity making her forget her uncharacteristic self-consciousness.

Jim shook his head. “No, but I’m named after him, and when he and Aunt Nell left for the States, he encouraged my parents to keep in touch. He and my aunt often sent letters to my parents and gifts to me, but then my aunt died in a tragic accident, and the letters stopped. My mom and dad said that my uncle thought the sun rose and set in my aunt, so they could only imagine the devastation that he felt on her death.”

“So your family is traveling to visit him now?” Trixie asked. When the shadow briefly passed across Jim’s face, she wondered if she had said the wrong thing, and when he answered, she felt badly but didn’t know exactly why.

“It’s just me and my brother,” he said without elaboration.

This was the point at which her family would remind her that “curiosity killed the cat,” but Trixie’s intense curiosity and one-track mind often made her forget the manners that her mother and father had tried so valiantly to instill in her.

“I’m sorry. Why couldn’t they make it?” Trixie asked. Too late, her manners kicked in, and she realized that—once again—she had spoken without thought and recognized that she probably had put her foot in her mouth. Her hand flew to her mouth as she let out a small gasp. “That was so horribly rude of me,” she apologized. “My family is forever trying to get me to think before I speak, but I fear that my overdeveloped sense of curiosity tends to get the better of me.”

Jim grinned at her, his easy and friendly grin putting her at ease despite her thoughtlessness. Trixie knew that her impulsive need to ferret out information could be defined as rudeness, but she liked to think that the lack of malice behind her inquisitive nature could be generously reclassified as “thoughtlessness.”

“It’s okay. It’s refreshing for someone to be so direct and honest in their questions. I lost my father when I was ten and then my mother when I was fourteen, so it’s just me in the world. Well, me and Dan. He’s become a brother to me the last five years or so.”

“Is he an orphan, too?” Trixie blurted, already forgetting the discomfort she had felt just a half a moment before.

Jim didn’t seem to mind Trixie’s straightforwardness, and he answered equally straightforwardly. “He is. He’s actually originally from Belfast, but he managed to make his way to London by way of Scotland. I also had escaped to London after my mother died, and we managed to meet up. We’ve been looking out for each other ever since.”

Trixie did not miss the fact that he had said “escaped to” when describing his pilgrimage to London, but her sense of decorum had finally kicked in, and she did not pursue that line of questioning. Instead, she said, sincerely, “I’m glad you guys managed to meet up and look out for each other.” She paused for half a beat. “So, since I’ve already been so forward, do you mind if I ask you another question?”

Jim laughed out loud at this, but before Trixie had a chance to feel self-conscious again, he said, “I meant what I said, Trixie. I love your honesty and directness. It truly is refreshing.”

The young blonde smiled. “I’m glad you think so,” she said, feeling reassured.

“What’s your question?”

“How’d you end up on the *Normandie*?”

“Now *that* is a fun story. I started thinking about Great-Uncle James, wondering what would happen if I traveled to the States to find him. I turned the idea over in my mind for quite some time before I mentioned it to Dan. We started talking about it. How we could find passage over to America. That sort of thing. We decided to head to Southampton, where we knew the ships left for transatlantic crossings. We thought that we could sign on as boiler-room workers or deckhands or stewards, or well, just about anything.

“We finally made it to Southampton yesterday. Dan heard about a card game, so we joined in, thinking we’d have one last fun evening before we headed to the docks to try to find jobs. Next thing I know, we’ve won passage across on the famous *SS Normandie* of all ships! We were going to try to get even the most menial jobs on the most basic of ships, and next thing I know, we’re passengers on one of the most luxurious ships to ever sail the Atlantic Ocean!”

Trixie smiled. “That *is* a fun story. I’m so glad that you can cross as a passenger and not be stuck in one of the boiler rooms. That would be awful, I imagine!”

“I’m no stranger to hard work, and I don’t mind working, but I can imagine that would be pretty awful, too,” he agreed with a nod of his fiery head.

“How do you plan to find your great-uncle once we land in New York?” Trixie asked practically.

“I remember most of his address. If he’s still there, he lives in a village north of New York City on the east bank of the Hudson River. A place called Sleepyside-on-Hudson. I can’t remember the house number, but I do remember that he lived on Glen Road. I remember because one of the boys in my class was named Glen, and it’s always stuck with me. When I was a kid, I thought it was absolutely hysterical that there was a road named after a kid in my class. Anyway, I figure if I wander along the road I can look for names on mail boxes. With any luck at all, I’ll find his house and he’ll still be living.”

And willing to take in two strays, he added in his head but not out loud.

"I wish you the best, Jim Frayne," Trixie said, feeling as though she'd known this boy forever... and wishing that she would know him forever more.

Jim's eyes left hers and focused on something behind her. Trixie swiveled her head and saw that Mart and Di were leaving the open-air deck together, the Irish girl's hand firmly tucked into the crook of Mart's arm.

"Your brother certainly seems to have made a new friend," he commented, and then he looked down at Trixie, his emerald eyes boring into her sky blue ones.

His gaze was so intense that Trixie found herself suddenly holding her breath as she stared up at this handsome man.

"I hope I have, too," she breathed.

Jim's crooked grin had vanished and an intense, serious look had taken hold of his ruggedly handsome features. "I think you have, Miss Belden."