

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

●●●by Dana●●●

Author Notes: This chapter title is inspired by the title of Agatha Christie's novel, *The Big Four*. I'm sure I don't have to explain how the big four became the big seven. :) Again, many thanks to my fantabulous editors, Susan and Julia, who improve my writing in ways I will always be thankful for. Word count: 6,067.

Chapter Three: The Big Seven

August 23, 1939

North Atlantic Ocean, somewhere off the coast of Europe

That night, during cocktail hour in the decadent, red-hued Grand Salon, Matt and Madeleine sat sipping a martini and a glass of French pinot noir, respectively, as they marveled at the beauty and splendor surrounding them. Glowing Lalique crystal fountains filled with light caught the eye, while twenty-two-foot high windows displayed an impressive view of the sea during the day and the twinkling night sky after sunset. Murals etched into glass partitions throughout the room showcased images of ships. An orchestra played, and several couples danced elegantly to a low French waltz.

The Grand Salon was nearly as astounding as the Grand Salle à Manger, the formal dining room in Première Classe, where the Wheelers had just eaten dinner during the Second Sitting, the most elegant of the *Normandie's* two dinner sittings. Dinner had begun at nine o'clock, as opposed to the seven o'clock start time of the First Sitting, and the *SS Normandie's* captain was in attendance, entertaining dignitaries, industrialists, and celebrities at his table, which sat just in front of an enormous bronze statue representing peace. The Grand Salon was not as bright as the Grand Salle à Manger, which glowed with the brilliance of lights equal to the brightness of 135,000 candles that were further reflected in the endless walls of hammered glass. The twelve illuminated Lalique torchère pillars and thirty-eight matching wall panels in the dining room were quite spectacular and had earned the *Normandie* the nickname, "Ship of Light," just as Paris had been nicknamed the "City of Light" when she had become the first city to be illuminated with electric lights.

France had chosen to outdo herself with this ship, and had spared no expense in doing so, attempting to build a "floating palace of dreams and art deco elegance." As a result, the dining room was an absolute spectacle, sixty feet longer than the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles and three decks tall, with the ability to serve 700 guests at 157 tables. The remarkable dining experience began before the diners even entered the Grand Salle à Manger, awed on their approach by the impressive bronze door medallions decorating the dining salon's monstrously tall, ornate doors. Madeleine and Matthew had dined in luxury all over the world, but even they had been in awe at the opulence of their surroundings as they enjoyed the array of sumptuous dinner courses, from caviar to soufflé.

It was here, in the gorgeous Grand Salon, that they had finally relaxed enough to truly take note of their fellow passengers. Matt recognized the U.S. ambassador to France, with whom he had met with in the past in the course of business, and his wife. He knew that their two young girls must have been elsewhere on the ship, probably attended to by a nurse or a nanny. He saw a film star, quite recognizable from his films, along with a lovely young blonde—who was not his wife.

He recognized three presidents of steel firms gathered in a corner, all of them from the United States, and he surmised that they had been in France or England brokering deals, given the fact that there certainly would be a need for steel in the coming months. He had hidden a lot of his knowledge of current events in Europe from his wife and his daughter, almost cutting the trip short several times during the course of their two months abroad, but ultimately he had not had the heart to do so, and it

appeared that that had been a good choice. Honey had been able to have her complete trip with no horrible incidences to mar it. But Matthew Wheeler couldn't help but feel that his family was escaping the continent just in the nick of time.

His sharp green eyes alighted on a handsome-looking couple. The man was tall, his dark hair wavy, his brown eyes managing to take in his surroundings in a keen and intelligent manner even as his attention was focused on a charming looking woman with blonde curls and bright blue eyes. Matthew did not recognize them from the media or his personal business dealings, as he did many of the people in the lounge, but the man looked vaguely familiar. Also, despite their other-worldly surroundings, the couple seemed quite down to earth. The man was dressed elegantly but simply, his dark suit well-tailored but not exceedingly expensive. The woman wore an attractive blue gown that brought out the color of her eyes, but even to Matthew's untrained eyes, he could tell that it was an off-the-rack garment and not a bespoke creation, which was *de rigueur* for most society matrons traveling in the Première Classe. He wondered what their story was, especially since he had seen the woman exiting the Trouville Suite. As it was one of the two Grande Suites de Luxe, clearly they had to have come from serious money.

Matthew found the couple refreshing among all of the other glittering couples in attendance. Madeleine enjoyed dressing up and attending fancy galas, but she was just as happy reclining in their penthouse suite reading a magazine whilst listening to Honey practice the piano. Matthew, on the other hand, didn't mind attending the galas and functions that their social station often required, but he also couldn't say that he enjoyed them all that much, either. He considered them necessary evils. But at all of these functions, there was one thing in common—the men and women were dressed to the nines in their very best bespoke clothes, ensuring that no other woman at the event would be wearing the same gown. And yet, this lively looking blonde woman did not seem to care about that sort of nonsense, wearing a gown that was most attractive on her womanly frame, bespoke or not.

Matthew glanced at his wife and saw that she had taken notice of the couple as well. She seemed to sense that her husband was looking at her, and she turned her graceful features toward him. He raised his eye brows in the direction of the couple, and she nodded slightly. Without any spoken communication, the two mutually made their way over to the pair, who Matthew realized looked slightly ill at ease, now that he was closer to them. Matthew found that fact charming, as well.

The Wheelers greeted the couple warmly as they arrived at their side, Matthew speaking first. "Hello. I believe I saw you exiting the Trouville Suite earlier. I'm Matthew Wheeler, and this is my wife, Madeleine. We're staying in the Deauville Suite, next door to you."

Helen Belden shook hands with Madeleine and Matthew, her husband following suit. "Hello. I'm Helen Belden, and this is my husband, Peter. We are indeed staying in the Trouville Suite."

"Belden...Belden..." Matthew mused, and then a light of memory lit his eyes. "Are you by chance related to Harold Belden? The miner?"

Peter looked surprised. "Why, yes. That's my brother. You've done business with him?"

The red-headed man nodded. "Indeed I have. Heading to the United States on holiday to visit him?" Matthew had a feeling that he knew the answer to the question, especially if Peter Belden was half as intelligent as his keen eyes indicated.

Peter smiled at his new acquaintance and said straightforwardly, “No, as a matter of fact, we’ve decided to take my brother’s advice and relocate to the United States. He and my younger brother have lived in the States for quite some time, and they’ve been trying to convince me that my family needs to live there as well.” Peter’s serious brown eyes met Matthew’s intelligent green eyes, and the men exchanged a knowing glance. “Now seemed as good of a time as any to take them up on their offer to host us.”

Matthew nodded, a solemn look on his chiseled features. “I don’t blame you. I think you’ve selected a...most beneficial time to discover all of the wonders that the United States has to offer as a place of permanent residence.”

At his words, both Madeleine and Helen laughed out loud. Both Peter and Matthew turned startled eyes toward their wives.

Madeleine’s laugh subsided as she grinned up at her husband. “You might as well just say, ‘You’re getting out of Dodge just in time, man, before that Hitler bloke makes a mockery of the continent.’”

Matthew’s shocked expression lasted only a moment before he began to laugh at his wife’s words. “Get out of Dodge? Have you been watching those B Westerns that are so popular nowadays, my dear?” he asked rhetorically, and his wife grinned at him, her eyes full of mischief.

Meanwhile, Peter’s features were slower to move from surprised to amused, but in that moment, he decided that he really liked this couple and the wife’s straightforward way of stating things. She didn’t beat around the bush, like he would have expected a society matron of Madeleine Wheeler’s status to do—if said society matron had even bothered to keep up on current events at all. So many spoiled wives of captains of industry did not do so.

Helen chimed in. “You know very well, Peter Belden, that that’s why we decided it was time to move to America, and yet you pretend that Harold and Andrew waved some other carrot in front of you to get you to finally follow in their footsteps and cross the pond.”

Peter shared a smile with his wife. “Quite right you are, my dear. And I should have known better than to say that we were leaving our home in Great Britain for any other reason.” He turned amused eyes to Matthew Wheeler. “Our wives are much less delicate than we pretend, so we might as well be frank in our words, eh, man?”

Matt nodded his head, a twinkle in his green eyes. “They do seem to be much more aware than the average society woman.” He looked down at his wife, his adoration unmistakable. “Thank goodness for that. I should know never to be equivocal in your presence.” He looked back at Peter. “Sometimes, I think that Madeleine knows more about current events than I do!”

The four shared an easy laugh, and the conversation, instead of turning toward Hitler and his increasingly terrifying actions, turned instead to the couples’ children. When the two pairs realized that they each had daughters of eighteen, they were excited at the prospect of getting them to spend time together.

“Your Honey must meet my Bea...Trixie,” Peter said, proud of himself for remembering to use the name that his daughter would have wanted him to use.

“Beatrix?” Madeleine guessed. “And she doesn’t want to be called Beatrix anymore?”

Peter nodded ruefully. "I was informed yesterday that she preferred to be called Trixie, as that was much more fitting for a young girl living a life in the United States."

Madeleine smiled. "Honey never requested her nickname. It just rather grew from her personality and her honey-brown hair, but she's actually Madeleine. I can't even imagine calling her Madeleine at this point. She's definitely much more of a 'Honey.'"

"Beatrix is a family name," Helen explained, "but if you know my daughter for even half a second, you'd never think that she was a 'Beatrix.' Trixie is much more descriptive of her exuberance and joy for life. Quite frankly, I'm surprised that we didn't start calling her something more playful than Beatrix years ago!"

"Honey could use some of that," Matthew commented. "She's a happy and well-adjusted enough young lady, but she's an only child, and I would love for her to have an exuberant young companion to be friends with. Right now, her best friend is a horse named Lady!"

Helen laughed delightedly. "Young girls and their love of horses! Trixie is madly in love with horses as well!"

"It sounds like our daughters may have a great deal in common. If you don't mind, I'll have Honey call on Trixie tomorrow. Would that be all right?"

"That would be lovely," Helen said. "Trixie will like that. She spends a good deal of time with her two older brothers and babysitting her younger brother, so I do believe that I've raised a bit of a tomboy. I'd love it if she had another girl to pal around with."

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*August 24, 1939*

*Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean*

True to her word, Madeleine sent Honey over to the Trouville Suite to call on Trixie, who was delighted to find that the girl on the other side of the door was the honey-haired girl who had so intrigued her.

"Hi," Trixie greeted her enthusiastically. "You must be Honey. I'm Trixie."

"Hi, Trixie," Honey said with a shy smile.

"So, my mum and dad say that you're my new best friend," Trixie said, ushering her new acquaintance into the salon of the Trouville Suite.

As Honey entered the suite, which was a companion of sorts to her own, she was surprised to note that it was completely different to the one that she shared with her mother and father. The two suites were identical in the grandeur of the décor and luxuriousness of the accommodations, but the similarities ended there.

Each Grand Suite de Luxe on the *Normandie* was decorated completely differently, down to the last detail. Whereas the Wheelers' suite was done in rich jewel tones, the Beldens' suite offered a starker color scheme—whites and blacks with decorative metal accents. Both could be described as art deco in nature, but where the Wheelers had a plush ruby chaise lounge and matching settee, the Beldens had a

large comfortable couch with a reclining chair. Both suites were equally attractive and comfortable, but each had its own personality, which was exactly the point—suite holders were able to revel in a place uniquely their own. It was one of the many touches that set the *Normandie* apart from other ocean liners. She was France's pride, and that pride was apparent in every little detail.

"Wow," Honey said as she took in the differences. "Our suite is as luxurious as yours and yet so enormously different," she marveled.

"Really?" Trixie asked, inquisitive and curious as always. "How so?"

"Well, ours looks about the same size as yours, but everything is done in jewel tones with a gold accent color. The furniture grouping is different, too," Honey said. "I like them both."

"Have you spent a lot of time in France?" Trixie wanted to know as the two settled themselves into the comfortable salon couch.

"Not that much," Honey said. "We traveled a bit throughout the countryside and in Paris this summer," Honey explained, "but this is the first time that I've visited Europe. What about you? Do you get to visit France a lot since you're so close?"

Trixie shook her head ruefully. "Unfortunately, no. I've only been to Paris once on a family holiday before my little brother was born. I was only five years old. One of my other brothers has traveled a lot in France, though, up and down the coast, because he decided to take a job instead of going to university straight away." Trixie grinned suddenly. "That caused a bit of a dust-up in the Belden household. Not *too* much because my parents are actually very supportive of us children living our dreams, but a bit of one, nonetheless. But Mart decided that since we were moving to the United States, and he wanted to move with the family, he didn't want to start university and have to transfer. Plus, he wants to be a writer, so he thought that taking a year off and getting some 'life experience' would be a good thing."

"That's fascinating that he wants to be a writer. What a wonderful profession!" Honey exclaimed.

"I suppose it is," Trixie acknowledged, "although I never really thought about it. Mart's been carrying around a little notebook of story ideas and scribbling away in it ever since we were young pips, so I've always just accepted writing as a part of him. I've never thought about the actuality of him becoming a writer and publishing novels, but it *is* kind of fascinating when you think about it."

"So, what do you want to do with *your* life, Trixie?" Honey asked, sure that this vivacious blonde would aspire to be more than just someone's wife or mother.

Trixie grinned at her honey-haired visitor. "If I had my druthers, I'd love to be a detective, but I'm pretty sure that *that* particular scenario is unlikely to come true. So, we'll see what I fall into in America. What about you? Ready to find that perfect young man and settle down and produce the next generation?"

Honey pretended to shudder, sensing that she could be completely honest with the young woman sprawling on the couch before her. Trixie Belden did not seem to be someone who would ever want to bend to society's norms, and Honey appreciated that.

"I came out last spring," Trixie's guest admitted. "In attendance were many *eligible and suitable young men*." She parroted the last five words in a caricature of a high-voiced society matron, and Trixie

chortled delightedly, knowing in that moment that she absolutely adored this American girl whom fate had seen to throw in her path. “But not one of them seemed so suitable to me.”

Trixie nodded. “I know what you mean. I didn’t have a formal coming out or anything like that, but I too am fearful of the dearth of what I consider ‘suitable’ young men. I’m just not ready to settle down!” She leaned forward and lowered her voice as she asked her new friend, “Are your parents pressuring you to find someone?”

“Oh, thank heavens, no!” Honey said emphatically with a vehement shake of her head. “Fortunately, my mom and my dad had a very romantic story about how they met, and my mom is a *big* romantic, so even though she’s never said anything, I know that she’s hoping for one of those ‘love at first sight’ scenarios for me. I’m grateful that she feels that way, but I’m also afraid of disappointing her. What if I never find that love-at-first-sight, heart-pounds-out-of-your-chest kind of love that my mother professes she felt for my father?”

Trixie couldn’t help herself. Her mind immediately flew to her meeting with Jim Frayne the day before, and she couldn’t help but thinking that *maybe* she had just had that same kind of experience. Her heart had certainly beat faster at the sight of him.

She didn’t realize that she had been quiet—or that a flush had risen on her cheeks—but she became conscious of the fact that Honey was looking at her with a strange smile.

“What aren’t you telling me, Trixie Belden?” her guest demanded. “You suddenly look so...giddy almost. Like you had the most pleasant secret in the world.”

“Oh, Honey!” Trixie cried, not believing that she was about to reveal something so private—and something that she didn’t understand herself—to practically a complete stranger. But maybe that was for the better. Maybe it would be easier to share this little tidbit with Honey, whom she did not know well, rather than someone like Emma or Rebecca, two of her school chums whom she had known since practically birth.

So, she took a deep breath, gave Honey a smile, and said, “I didn’t believe in any of that malarkey. Love at first sight—ha! Boys have just always been a nuisance to me. I have to look after my younger brother Bobby, you see, and he’s forever getting into scrapes. Looking after him can be so tiresome and dull! Spending time with Brian and Mart, my older brothers, can be fun, but they’re such boys that they’d rather not have their younger sister tagging along, and they can be pretty rude about it. Although I do think that Brian and Mart are both pretty swell, as brothers go, anyway.” Trixie paused before stating, “But yesterday something strange happened.”

Honey leaned forward, breathless with anticipation. “With a young gentleman?” she asked eagerly.

Trixie nodded. “I was watching my brother Mart flirt with a pretty girl from third class. We were on the open-air deck down there. I was looking at Mart and the girl—her name is Di, and she seems to be a lovely girl, and I think we three girls could have loads of fun hanging out together—” Trixie realized that she was getting side-tracked. Her family was forever teasing her about the way that she told stories, all jumbled up with whatever thought happened to enter her brain at any given moment.

“Anyway, I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going, something that I’m afraid I do pretty often, and I ran into this fellow. He was about our age, maybe a little older, and he was...handsome. Very handsome. And after having grown up with three brothers, I am not usually very impressed with young

fellows, but there was something different about him. He...I don't know. I felt as though I was tongue-tied. And you may be able to tell this about me, but I can talk a blue streak given the chance! And, I don't know, but I felt...odd. My heart was racing, and, well, all I could think about was spending more time with Jim," Trixie finished.

Honey gave a little squeal, hugging one of the couch's throw pillows to her as she leaned forward toward Trixie. "That sounds like love at first sight to me! Lucky you!" She paused and then said, "You've given me hope that maybe it can happen, and not just to people like my parents."

"Maybe you can meet Jim with me and see what you think about him. He has a best friend that he considers a brother with whom he is traveling."

"It *would* be nice to meet them," Honey agreed. "I had actually planned on spending as much time as possible with my parents, as unnatural as that sounds, because I have absolutely no desire to spend any time at all with the other girls I've seen up here. It didn't even occur to me to wander elsewhere on the ship to find more interesting people."

Trixie jumped up. "I don't need to watch Bobby until after lunch, thanks to your parents suggesting that we meet up, so why don't we head down to third class now and see what fun that we can scare up?"

Honey stood up, following her new friend's lead. "That sounds wonderful."

Before they could leave, Trixie's eldest brother Brian entered the salon from the bedroom that he shared with Mart.

"Hi, Brian," Trixie said. "Did you finish your book?"

"I did," Brian said. "It would have been nice to have finished it somewhere more exotic than in my room, but I found it too breezy on the promenade, and too noisy in the fumoir, not to mention that all of the Egyptian murals in there were absolutely fascinating...and distracting as a result. And it was too...decorous in the library."

Trixie laughed at her brother's descriptions of the ship's various amenities. "Brian, meet Honey Wheeler. She and her parents are staying in Deauville Suite next door after a grand tour of the continent. Honey, this is my brother, Brian Belden."

Brian smiled at the honey-haired girl before him as he took her hand in his. She was very pretty, and her time exploring the French Riviera had left her skin glowing with a healthy tan. Her large hazel eyes drew him in immediately. "Nice to meet you, Miss Honey Wheeler," Brian said, and Honey felt herself blushing under his gaze.

Brian was extremely handsome, but he also exhibited a-down-to-earth quality that the "eligible" young society men whom Honey knew, with their slick patinas and almost predatory solicitousness, didn't have.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Brian," Honey said with a shy smile.

Trixie pushed herself unknowingly into any chemistry that might have been developing between her newfound friend and her older brother, saying, "Honey and I were just about to head down to the third-class deck to scare up some fun. Mart and I've already met some really swell people down there. The

average age of that deck is about one-tenth that of this deck, with its stuffy old dowagers.” Trixie wrinkled her pert, freckled nose. “Honey is as hopelessly bored with the selection of decent people with whom to associate in this particular class, so I was going to take her down and introduce her to a much better ‘class’ of people, ha ha.”

“And you want me to join you?” Brian asked.

Trixie hadn’t really thought of asking Brian to join them, but one look at Honey told her that the girl was rather hopeful that Trixie’s brother would accompany them. Thinking about their conversation about love at first sight, Trixie said, “That’d be grand if you could join us.”

Brian looked around the empty suite. “Where are Moms, Dad, and Bobby?” he asked.

“Moms wanted to go down to the Winter Garden,” Trixie responded. At his confused look, she continued, “You know, the conservatory onboard? You know how crazy Moms is about plants and stuff. She thought that it would be especially fun for Bobby because of all of the rare fish and exotic birds there. Moms can take in all of the greenery that she could ever want, and Bobby will be amused with the animals. Dad, of course, is just happy to be anywhere that Moms is.”

Trixie had explored the Winter Garden the day before, but she wasn’t surprised that her brother wasn’t aware of it. It was located on the Promenade Deck, and one had to pass the theater and the library to reach it. She knew that Brian would have stopped at the handsome room full of thick tomes.

The Winter Garden was actually quite a sight to see. It was a virtual tropical jungle of foliage spilling about everywhere one looked, but the marble fountains that delicately splashed water put the room over the top. Because it was in the forward portion of the ship, it had an open-air feel, as though the exotic birds in their gilded cages could escape into flight right before their eyes. Trixie thought that it was the perfect place for her mother, who absolutely loved anything green and growing. The riot of greenery was sure to be a source of peace and calm for the older woman.

“Sounds like a perfect place for Moms,” Brian said. “And, yes, I would love to accompany you and Miss Wheeler to the nether regions of the ship.” He wouldn’t admit this even to himself, but he found himself quite intrigued by the young ingénue who had found her way to his family’s suite. Maybe he had a lot more to thank Uncle Harold for than he knew.

The three young people left the suite and made their way gaily down to the third-class deck. It was a whole different world, and Brian, who had not been down here as of yet, could certainly see why his younger brother and sister preferred it to first class. As gorgeous as the *Normandie’s* Première Classe was, it was also intimidating, making it difficult to completely relax and enjoy oneself in such opulence.

Here, children ran about the deck laughing and screeching playfully, something that would have been unheard of on the upper decks. Brian, who planned on becoming a pediatrician, loved the sound of carefree children and looked about admiringly at the little rascals romping about, having already made fast friends on the crossing.

His dark brown eyes followed a particularly boisterous pair of five-year-old boys, eagerly trailed by a younger little girl, and that’s when he noticed his brother sitting on a deck chair next to an absolutely breathtaking dark-haired young woman. The two were leaning in toward each other, their faces close as they looked at a small worn book that Brian recognized as the notebook that Mart carried everywhere. Each looked so completely relaxed with the other, clearly having made a real connection, that Brian felt

a small pang of jealousy that his younger brother had found something that had eluded him so far. True, he had always been rather single-mindedly focused on his studies, but he had still noticed the opposite sex. He had always thought that he would find that someday...when he had graduated from medical school and had an established practice as a medical doctor.

But for some reason, seeing his brother so close to a lovely young woman, someone who obviously shared the feelings that Mart had for her, made Brian suddenly wonder what he had been waiting for. What he might have missed during the last several years of university. What companionship he might have found. He forced these thoughts from his head as they approached Mart and the girl, Trixie calling out to her almost twin as they grew close.

Diana and Mart both looked up immediately at the sound of Trixie's voice, and each of them smiled widely at the newcomers.

"Hi, Trixie!" Diana greeted.

"Hi, Di!" Trixie returned. "I've brought some fresh blood since I know that character there must be boring you to death!"

Mart pulled a face at his sister, and Di laughed.

"You're just in time!" Di said, falling into Trixie's teasing mood. "I was ready to have last rites said!"

Everyone laughed as Mart threw a dramatic hand to his chest, pretending to be mortally wounded. "My fairest Diana!" he protested with a dramatic flair. "I expect this sort of churlishness from my uncouth sister, but from my loveliest of companions who has been so constant and faithful to this point?"

Diana reached out a delicate hand and gave Mart a light punch on his arm. "Silly!" she said with a laugh, declaring, "You'll live."

"That's what I'm forever telling him," Brian joined in merrily.

"Smite by my own brother," Mart said with a shake of his flaxen head. "What will be next?" He turned suddenly to Honey, who was taking in the merriment with an amused look in her hazel eyes and a bit of wistfulness on her face, as if she wanted to join into the gaiety but was unsure exactly how to do so. "Please, good maiden," Mart implored her with an overly dramatic tone, "please tell me that you have come to save me from these rapsallions. I need someone to be on my side!"

Honey laughed out loud at that. "Well, good sir, I can certainly try to save you, but I rather like these rapsallions."

Mart shook his head, pretending to be defeated. "Like every great mind, I am destined to not be appreciated in my time!"

After the group had settled down and Trixie had introduced Brian, Mart, Diana, and Honey to those who hadn't met each other yet, the young British woman suggested that the group go find Jim and Dan. She hadn't finished her sentence when she sensed a masculine presence behind her. Trixie whirled to find the red-haired object of her conversation standing before her, and without thinking she cried, "Jim! We were just about to come looking for you!"

Jim grinned the lopsided grin that set Trixie's heart pounding afresh and brought an attractive flush to her cheeks. Neither of her older brothers missed their sister's uncharacteristic reaction, but while Mart was accepting of his sister's obvious admiration, Brian felt a protectiveness kick in that he was not accustomed to.

"What's Jim done now?" a deep masculine voice, laced with a combination of an Irish lilt and a cockneyed drawl, asked. All eyes turned to look at a young man with sharply chiseled features, longish dark hair, intelligent black eyes, and a cocky smile playing on his thin but attractive lips.

"You must be Dan!" Trixie cried happily. "I've been wanting to meet you since Jim told me about you! We've got quite the crowd here, and we wanted both you and Jim to be a part of it!"

Dan's dark eyes took in the "crowd" as he smiled and was introduced to each of them in turn. Diana, darkly beautiful, was wearing worn clothes that had clearly seen better days but that were also meticulously cared for. Honey had the face of an angel and looked sweet, but her expensively tailored clothes screamed debutante. Brian, Mart, and Trixie were dressed in clothes of the latest style that were well-made but not as expensively tailored as Honey's.

Dan was assessing the new people based on their clothes, but he did notice one thing as he looked into the five new pairs of eyes—not one pair stood in judgment of his own threadbare clothes, not nearly as well cared for as Diana's. They were all open and friendly and seemed eager to welcome him into the crowd. That meant the world to him, and it was all that he needed to know about them. He knew better than anyone that clothes didn't make the man.

Diana, who had been listening intently to Dan's accent as he said a few bits and pieces with each introduction, spoke up. "You're Irish, but your accent..." she trailed off, trying to identify the difference that she heard in Dan's lilting drawl.

Dan grinned at her. "That's nearly five years spent in London, luv," he said. "After things went downhill in Belfast for me, I decided to try my luck in Scotland and somehow managed to find myself in the heart of enemy territory—London!" he said jokingly, as he jerked a casual thumb at Jim. "Turns out, an Englishman can be your friend, 'cause I found this guy, who was willing to look after this Irishman despite all the bad blood 'tween our ancestors, and we've been fast friends ever since. But," he concluded, "to answer your unspoken question, his bloody accent has rubbed off on me!"

"Well, Irish accent tainted by the bloody English or not, it's a pleasure to meet another soul from the Emerald Isle," Diana said as the laughter at Dan's comment subsided.

"And 'tis a pleasure to meet a lovely Irish lass. And a dark Irish lass at that," Dan returned. "We're a rare breed, we are."

"That we are," Diana agreed with a wink even as she unconsciously moved slightly closer to Mart. It would be unseemly for her to reach out to him and place a hand in his or settle her arm around him, even in a friendly manner, but she wanted it to be clear that he was the beau who had caught her eye and that this friendly conversation with Dan was only that—friendly.

Mart seemed to understand because he caught her eye as she moved closer, and he smiled at her.

"So, what shall we do to pass the time?" Trixie interjected into the brief silence. "I only have until after lunch before I need to go relieve Moms and save her from Bobby. Our younger brother," she explained

to those in the group who might not have known who Bobby was. “What about exploring Touriste Classe? I haven’t been there yet.”

“Oh, let’s do go and explore the Touriste Classe,” Honey agreed. “I haven’t been there yet, either.”

Everyone found the plan agreeable and moved toward the aft stairs. Trixie turned up her nose at traveling on one of the gilded elevators because “they move at a snail’s pace—and that’s after having to stand and wait for them for forever!”

Mart and Brian were used to their sister’s impatience, but they were amused to watch as Jim, Dan, Diana, and Honey realized that the boisterous girl couldn’t stand still for even the few minutes it took for an elevator to arrive. Secretly, Mart agreed with his sister, although he’d never admit that to her. Why stand still waiting for a ride when one could easily and more quickly traverse a few meager steps? Plus, he *would* admit that he rather liked the view of Diana as he followed her up the stairs toward the deck where they would find the Touriste Classe lounge and other second-class amenities.

It was a happy, boisterous group that looked forward to an adventure together, already knowing deep down that this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.