

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 Mysterious Affair at Styles*. I hope you like my mysterious affair, cooked up just for the Bob-Whites. :) Many, many thanks to Julia, Mary, and Susan, who not only make my writing better, but also offer lovely words of encouragement! Word count: 3,943.

Chapter Four: The Mysterious Affair in Touriste Classe

The group happily explored the second class areas together, finding that the French Line's "Touriste Classe" was more similar to third class than it was to first class, despite the line's promotional materials to the contrary. The tourist class had a longer promenade deck than third class, which meant more outdoor space, but the rooms were the same size, with two bunks instead of three. The dining room was nowhere near as grandiose as the storied Grand Salle à Manger, but instead of the long, shared, dorm-style tables with benches in third class, it did offer individual tables for families.

After exploring the second class dining room and lounge, the group of young people headed aft to explore the swimming pool allotted to Touriste Classe passengers. They turned a corner, all of them laughing at something humorous that Dan had offered up in his witty, deadpan way—and then, as one, they all stopped suddenly, trying to grasp the scene before them.

A blonde woman, who looked to be in her thirties, lay on the floor of the corridor, her trim frame akimbo. A small black purse lay next to her, its contents scattered about. Trixie, even as she stared at the incongruous scene before her, mentally noted the silver lipstick case, silver cigarette case engraved with the initials "ME" in an ornate scroll, bright red leather eyeglass case, white cotton handkerchief with the initials "ME" embroidered in red, and silver compact engraved with a pattern of curved flourishes.

While Trixie was cataloging what she assumed to be the woman's belongings, another portion of her brain was seeing and reacting to what her six friends were seeing and reacting to: a dead woman with dark red blood oozing out from under her head, the thick liquid slowly seeping into the hall carpeting. There were a few moments of absolute dead silence before a shrill scream ripped through the air. Trixie remained frozen in place, staring at the scene, even as Diana's panicked cry drew onlookers from the nearby cabins and second class common areas.

Then, despite the horrifying scene in front of her, Trixie's lightning-fast brain took another turn. Suddenly, there was a mystery to solve. The would-be sleuth didn't stop to think about whether or not the ship line would want her help, whether or not society thought it appropriate for a young woman of her age to get involved—and whether or not she had to look after Bobby in less than an hour.

Trixie Belden so desperately wanted to be a detective...and this was her chance.

She lifted her blue-eyed gaze and realized that she was staring into Honey's wide hazel eyes. Honey looked just as shell-shocked as Trixie herself felt, but the young English woman also recognized something simpatico in the young American's gaze. Trixie was sure that Honey, too, wanted to solve this mystery. The honey-haired girl hadn't laughed earlier when Trixie had said that she wanted to be a detective. And now it appeared that her new friend might want to join her in the endeavor.

The pair of budding detectives stared at each other, and even as the ocean liner's crew began to push the young people out of the way so that they could deal with the situation, a silent communication passed between the girls. They *were* going to solve this mystery.

Unfortunately, Trixie's "big" brothers, Mart and Brian, also happened to see the look.

"Oh, no, *dear Beatrix*—" Mart began, purposely using the name that he knew Trixie hated to garner her attention.

At the same time, Brian was trying a different tactic, all sugar and spice instead of vinegar. He spoke at the same time as Mart, but in a soothing voice that spoke of the quality of his future bedside manner. "Trixie, I know what you're thinking...."

The net result of these simultaneous words was that each of the brothers both stopped and looked at each other—which provided their younger sister the opportunity to stop them and their lectures in their tracks.

"What I'm thinking is that it is time for me to relieve Moms and attend to Bobby," their younger sister returned in a pert, no-nonsense voice. She turned to Diana and Honey, her smile and voice deceptively sweet. "Would you ladies mind accompanying me to my family's suite? I'm afraid that we've all had a bad fright and could use some tea."

With that, knowing that they shouldn't leave the scene of the crime without speaking to the crew—but also knowing it would be a confusing tangle for quite a while, and the crew would find them eventually—the three girls moved along the passage toward the forward staircase, fighting their way against the crowd of onlookers that was gathering to glimpse the gruesome sight of the dead woman. The four young men left behind by the smooth exit stared after the girls and then exchanged glances.

"How much trouble can they *really* get in?" Dan asked.

At that, both Brian and Mart snorted. "Trixie? A lot," Mart stated. Four worried gazes turned toward the spot where the girls had just disappeared around the corner. Jim made a move to follow them, but Mart grabbed his arm, explaining, "And chasing her down and trying to protect her will just make her more determined. We need to consider our next steps carefully, gentlemen."

Feeling somewhat frustrated and outmaneuvered, the four men decided to retire to the first class library to determine their next move. Brian had suggested the location given its quiet atmosphere—and proximity to the Beldens' suite, where the girls were now...doing whatever it was girls did when they plotted. As the four young men settled into comfortable leather chairs, with Jim and Dan feeling very aware and trying to ignore the fact that they were not dressed to the specifications of the other passengers in the room, they began to discuss what they had seen in the hallway—and what Trixie's intentions might be.

As Mart and Brian spoke about Trixie's "grandiose" and "unrealistic" desires to become a detective, Jim thought about his impressions of the blonde hurricane he had met only the day before. James Winthrop Frayne II had already determined that Trixie Belden was a free spirit, a plucky young woman who did not care about the social or gender norms of the day. That had been obvious to him after spending a mere three minutes in her presence, and that impression had only solidified as he had spent a little more time with her. Mart and Brian's observations of their sister did not come as a surprise to him. What surprised him more was that their observations were not complete, and he began to understand that he saw more in their sister than they did.

Trixie didn't consider her goals to be grandiose or unrealistic. And because she didn't, Jim didn't either. He had absolutely no doubt that Trixie would make a fine moll dick someday, despite the fact that it wasn't a "woman's profession." She had the fire, drive, and determination to make it happen.

Which made him also realize that she would view this shipboard death, unfortunate though it was, as an opportunity to prove that she had the chops to make her dreams come true. He had no doubt that she would be a terrier in pursuing this "case" to justice. Jim also had no doubt that she would sacrifice her personal safety to do so. At that moment, he vowed to protect her as best he could. Too many people already had died on his watch. Trixie Belden would not be one of them.

His thoughts turned to the other two young women he had met on the *SS Normandie*. Although Trixie was a natural-born leader, Jim could tell from the limited time that he had spent around Honey Wheeler and Diana Lynch that they also had a great deal of fire and enthusiasm. They would be easily led into following Trixie in her schemes, not because they were gullible or malleable, but because they also clearly had a thirst for adventure almost as deep as Trixie's.

Jim turned away from his internal observations and listened as Mart and Brian concluded theirs. Jim considered his next words carefully. "From what I can tell—admittedly, from the small amount of time I've known your sister—she's got some serious fire inside her. I'm sure she means to investigate this woman's death."

Mart sighed. "You're right. Her biggest desire is to become a private dick. She's *definitely* going to try to solve this murder."

Brian looked at his brother in shock. "Murder? How do you know it wasn't an accident?" he asked sharply.

Mart shrugged. "There was too much blood for it to be an accident. There wasn't a lot that she could have hit her head on accidentally in that hallway that would cause all of that blood."

Brian shook his head. "Mart, even a small head wound can bleed a lot. The amount of blood doesn't necessarily point to anything nefarious." He sighed then. "Of course, you're right that there wasn't a lot in the hallway that she could have hit her head on to cause such a wound..." His voice trailed off.

Mart looked at his brother. "Thanks. Jim has a very valid point, too. Trixie may seem scattered to us at times, but she really does have an amazing ability to focus when she needs to. And now that I think about it, she's been playing some memory game with herself to increase her recall." Mart sighed again, running a worried hand through his practically nonexistent hair. "I can guarantee you that she took in every little detail that she saw—and that she retained it all. She's going to try to solve this, and she's going to be a terrier about it, tenacious as she always is when she sets her mind to something."

Jim grinned inside, glad to know that Trixie's almost-twin recognized his sister's qualities.

"Well," Dan began, "then we have one of two choices, it would seem. We can try to stop her—and I don't even want to know what her wrath would be like if we tried a dirty trick like that." He paused and looked at the three other men with somber dark eyes. "Or we can help her so we that we can keep her, Honey, and Di safe."

Mart and Jim nodded vigorously, agreeing with Dan's assessment and both clearly inclined to adopt the latter option. It was Brian who leaned back in his chair, shaking his head and gesturing with his arms.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa,” he said, as if speaking to a high-spirited and disobedient horse. “We cannot encourage her!”

Mart disagreed, now seeing his sister more clearly through Jim’s assessment of her. “You know Trixie. She’s absolutely going to do what she wants anyway. She’ll find a way to slip away and investigate—possibly putting herself or the other two girls in danger in the process. If we’re all in on it together, then we can keep an eye on all three girls and make sure that they’re safe.”

Brian looked at his brother incredulously, and then his shock turned to accusation. “You’re just saying this because *you* want in on the adventure!”

Mart had the audacity and good humor to grin at his brother while offering no denial. “That definitely is a side benefit.”

At that, Brian shook his head and muttered something about the almost-twins being entirely too much alike for his taste.

Mart defended himself then, his countenance turning serious. “But, first and foremost, I *do* want to keep the girls safe. If there *is* a murderer running about, and they cross paths with him...”

“I agree that we need to keep the girls safe,” Dan spoke up before he allowed a sly grin to curve his angular features. “But it would be kind of keen to investigate a murder.”

Jim’s green eyes twinkled. “We owe it to the girls to keep them safe, but if we also have an adventure and can help to find some justice for that poor woman in the process...”

Brian snorted at that, but he was beginning to catch the enthusiasm of his three companions. “Very honorable of you, Mr. Frayne, to think of the girls’ safety as well as justice for a poor soul.”

Jim’s lopsided grin grew wider. “Honorable is my middle name, Master Belden,” he returned in his haughtiest imitation of an upper-class British accent.

“So we’re agreed?” Mart asked, leaning in. “We’re going to investigate this mystery together?”

“Aye,” Dan immediately said, and Jim echoed him straight away.

Brian looked heavenward. “I don’t know why I’m agreeing to this,” he grumbled in a low voice.

“Swell!” Mart cried. “Now, how do we go about implementing this little plan of ours?”

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It wasn’t until late that afternoon, not long before the dinner hour, that the group was able to sit down in the open air of the third class deck to plan how to investigate what Trixie had convincingly deemed as murder rather than tragic accident.

“What’s the first step?” Diana asked. She had readily accepted Trixie’s opinion that it was murder even before the boys had agreed. As she had stood there, taking in the scene with shocked eyes, there was a sense of...malice in the air. She could feel it, and when Trixie had said that there just seemed to be too much blood for it to be a simple case of the woman falling and hitting her head on the carpeting, Di had instinctively agreed with Trixie’s assessment.

“How do they do it in those film noir motion pictures you’re forever spending your pocket money on, Trix?” Mart wanted to know.

Trixie grinned at him triumphantly. “You’ve always told me that spending my money on those films was a waste of money. And now you’re admitting that they may come in handy. Ha!”

Mart shook his head ruefully. “I admit defeat. But in my defense, how could I have ever known that I would be faced with a dead body and a murder to solve?”

Brian agreed. “It’s not exactly a normal situation one finds oneself in.”

Honey shivered suddenly, voicing a fact that no one else had wanted to admit out loud. “We’re on a ship. There’s no way off. That means the murderer is still onboard. We’re essentially living with a murderer for the next few days.”

“All the more reason that we need to solve this,” Trixie said determinedly. “If we find out that the motive was personal, then at least we know we’re safe. But if it’s some insane lunatic…”

Trixie’s voice trailed off, and she didn’t finish the sentence, but she didn’t need to. Her friends and brothers knew that if someone onboard was set on killing random people in some sort of twisted game, everyone on the ship was at risk.

Brian took Trixie’s logic a step farther, though. “Actually, if we find out the motive and, by extension the killer, then we *aren’t* safe. We’ll have put ourselves directly at risk because then we’d be liabilities.”

“Well, I don’t think the killer could ever get away killing seven additional people, so I don’t think we have to worry about that,” Trixie countered.

Jim spoke up. “You never know. I think, if we’re really going to do this, we need to stick together. We should stay in a group as much as possible, but at the very least, no one should *ever* be alone.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mart said. “It would be best if, when we’re unable to be a group, the girls were escorted by a male. Trixie, you have me and Brian, but Honey doesn’t have any brothers, and Di’s brothers are too little to be protection.” He turned to Diana, who sat next to him on his left. “Miss Lynch, would you allow me to be your escort for the remainder of this voyage?”

“Why, Mr. Belden, I would love that,” Diana returned, adopting Mart’s overly formal manner and giving a small, mock curtsy from where she was seated.

“And, Miss Wheeler, it would be my honor if you would allow me to escort you for the remainder of this voyage,” Brian said to Honey, eager to volunteer to escort the honey-haired American before anyone else could.

A becoming flush rose on Honey’s cheeks as she replied daintily, “Why, Mr. Belden, it would be my honor to be escorted by you for the remainder of this voyage.”

“Hey!” Trixie objected. “Mart, you pointed out that I have two brothers to look out for me—*not* that I think I need protection, mind you—but now you’re both otherwise occupied!”

"I'd be happy to escort you, Miss Belden," Jim said with a grin, not even bothering to adopt the mock formal tones the young Belden men had used. Instead, his voice was casual, light, and teasing.

Trixie grinned back at the red-headed young man. This was working out splendidly. She'd much rather spend time with Jim Frayne than with her brothers! "Why thank you, Mr. Frayne. That sounds like a very agreeable plan."

Jim looked at Dan. "And you can fill in and escort any of the girls when one of us isn't available. Is that okay?"

Dan smiled, a happy smile that reached his dark eyes. "Be the escort for three beautiful women? Yeah, that's okay by me."

All three girls blushed at his words, and Trixie further tried to dismiss them by protesting. Diana was absolutely gorgeous, so she was probably used to compliments such as this. And, though not classically beautiful like Diana, Honey had a pretty face. But her? Trixie? With unruly curls and freckles?

Jim didn't like to see Trixie so dismissive of the compliment when he thought that her beauty was obvious. There was a fire to her that was attractive all on its own, but add in the lively blonde hair and wide blue eyes...any man would be lucky to be noticed by her.

He leaned over to her and, ignoring the fact that everyone else was present and it might not be the most proper thing to do, he reached out to tug a curl that he had come to be fascinated by in the short time that he had had the pleasure of knowing Trixie Belden. It was always present on her forehead, hanging there enticingly above her sky-blue eyes. He had noticed that she often impatiently tried to tuck it away, but it was persistent and always managed to immediately fall back into place on her forehead. He had had the urge to reach out and tug it since he had met her the day before, and now he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"Hey," he said softly as he leaned toward her so that only she could hear him. "Dan doesn't lie. Us men folk are going to have the pleasure of escorting three beautiful women during this voyage, and you most certainly are one of them, Trixie Belden."

At his words, Trixie flushed a bright red, and she felt a warmth spread through her. Jim thought she was beautiful!

Trixie had never been good at accepting compliments or having attention showered upon her, so she quickly changed the subject. "So, to investigate the murder," she said, regaining control of her voice and the situation, "I had a thought. The ship's crew is sure to be talking about it. If we eavesdrop on the right crew members, we could probably learn a lot."

Meanwhile, Jim was pleased at the reaction his words had on the vivacious blonde. He felt very fortunate that their paths had crossed, and he had a strong feeling that Trixie was going to be in his life for a long time to come.

"That's a great idea," Brian responded to Trixie's statement. "The ship's medical officer would be a great source from which to get information."

"Exactly!" Trixie exclaimed, her eyes bright with excitement, not only from Jim tugging on that wretched curl of hers, which she had to admit she despised a little less now, but from the knowledge that they

were beginning to form a plan to solve the murder—as a team. Honey and Di had agreed earlier that they wanted to help investigate the woman’s death, but the three girls had all thought that the boys would be resistant to the idea. “And since you’re our resident medical expert, you should definitely be the person to explore that route.”

“Medical expert?” Honey asked, turning her large hazel eyes toward the handsome young man who had so charmingly offered to be her escort.

“Brian doesn’t like to brag about himself,” Trixie responded before Brian had a chance to utter a word, “but he’s going to be a doctor. A year ago, when our parents began talking of relocating the United States, Brian was in his last year of university at Imperial College London and beginning to look at medical schools, so he broadened his search to include those across the pond. He applied and was accepted to several, including Harvard.” She looked at her brother, the obvious pride on her features and in her voice unmistakable. “He decided on New York, so he’s going to be starting at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons after we dock.”

There was a chorus of congratulations, as Trixie beamed at her brother and Brian looked uncomfortable but pleased. “Thanks, everyone,” he said, and then he used Trixie’s tactic of changing the subject to remove attention from himself. “Now, I’d be happy to go pick the medical officer’s brain. I was going to anyway at some point, since I want to be prepared for medical school. Now, I can do that and hopefully find a way to get him talking about the murder.”

“Excellent,” Dan said. “That’s a really great start.”

“We need to find out the woman’s identity,” Mart said. “I wonder how we can do that.”

“My parents and I have been invited to sit at the captain’s table tonight during the second dinner seating,” Honey said. “I could try to make some discreet inquiries. The captain ought to know her identity and most of the details about her death, since that’s part of his job.”

Trixie clapped her hands. “Excellent!” she cried, repeating Dan, albeit much more animatedly. “This is really coming together!”

Mart agreed. “It looks like we have two solid sources of information. I guess the rest of us will skulk around listening to crew members’ conversations. We could even strike up a conversation with them if we don’t overhear anything useful.”

“We have the ship’s butlers we can talk to, too,” Honey said. “I don’t know if the butler in our suite is dedicated to us or if we share him with the Beldens, but there’s another potential source of information. Ours is Pierre.”

“Ours is Jacques,” Mart said.

“So, now we have *two* additional sources of information!” Trixie again clapped her hands happily, thrilled with these developments.

It was Brian who brought her down to earth after he dutifully checked his watch. “Unlike the Wheelers, we Beldens are scheduled for the *first* dinner seating, so we should get going.”

As the group stood up, Trixie said. “Hopefully, we’ll catch the butler in our cabin. He was there before dinner last night making sure that we had everything we needed. Let’s hope we get lucky and he’s there again now!”

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