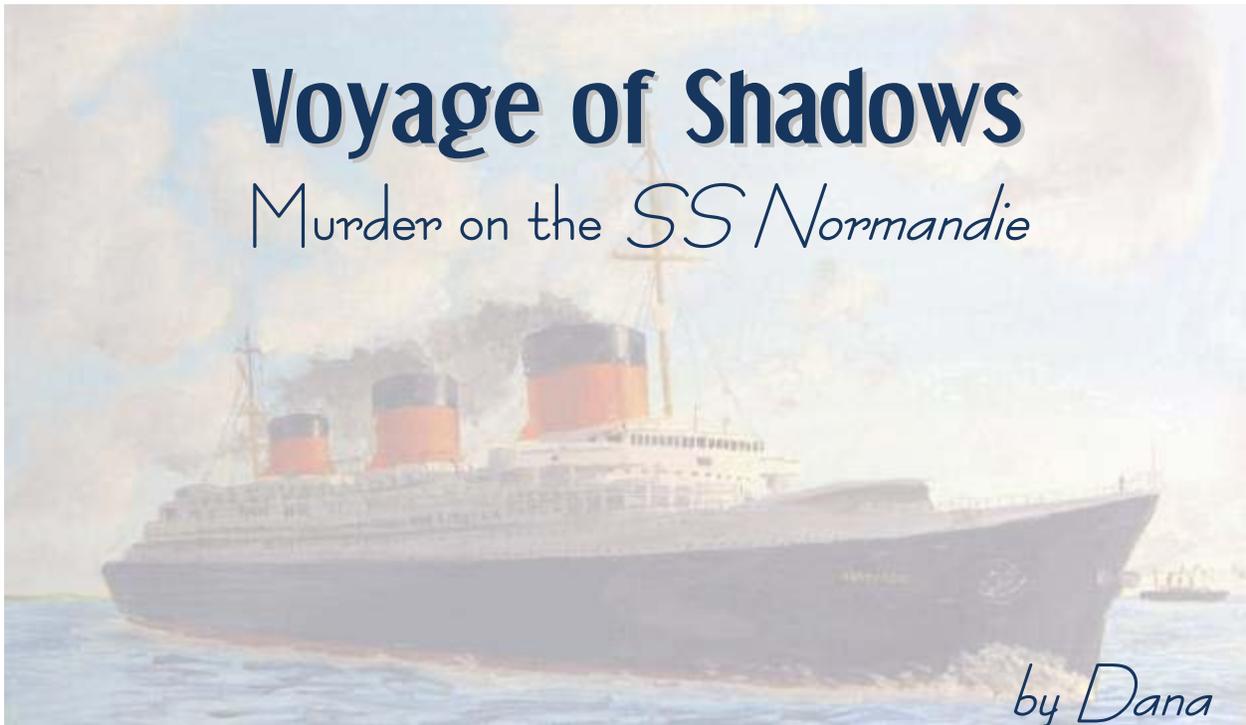


Voyage of Shadows

Murder on the *SS Normandie*

by Dana



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

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Introductory Story Notes

First of all, I apologize for the length of these notes and for putting them on their own page in front of the novel, but I've a lot to say on the occasion of my 15th Jixaversary! :) As the first to reach this milestone as a continuously active Jix author, I can't help but reflect on everything that's led me here, and I feel like these real-life stories are as integral to this novel as the characters and plot.

It was 15 years ago today that I happily (excitedly! trepidatiously!) became a Jix author. It was 77 years ago today that the storied French ocean liner, the *SS Normandie*, landed in New York City from what would tragically become her final voyage.

I absolutely love the World War II era (including the decade leading up to the war). I also love to see how our beloved characters change and also remain the same in different eras—whether I am reading a wonderful fanfic written by the many talented writers we have at Jix or am exploring such a scenario myself (with the characters guiding me, natch!). Add into the mix my insanely strong wanderlust, my love of cruising the seven seas (and any other body of water large enough to support a sea-worthy vessel!), and the occasion of my Jixaversary (can it be 15 years already?!?!), well, it created the perfect recipe to inspire this particular Jixaversary offering.

I came up with this idea while hurtling over the Atlantic Ocean at 650 mph while reflecting on an absolutely epic solo Mediterranean cruise journey last August and was lucky enough to spend some time writing two chapters of the novel last November (this was my 2015 National Novel Writing Month novel) while on a cruise ship that had a champagne bar inspired by the *SS Normandie* herself. (Why, yes, I did break my rule and bring my laptop on vacation specifically because of this fact. I brought said laptop to the champagne bar, ordered Prosecco, and happily typed away while soaking up the art deco atmosphere!)

I'd say that besides my love of travel, another thing that defines me is my love of books, particularly mysteries. All of the chapter titles and the subtitle are riffs on the titles of Agatha Christie novels (or in a couple of cases, the actual titles themselves), which is an homage to a fellow wanderluster, writer, and mystery lover whom I've adored since my beloved grandmother introduced me to her when I was 11 years old (as a direct result of my gushing about my love of mystery-solving Trixie Belden). Given that my grandmother also had an insatiable wanderlust and took me on my first two European adventures when I was a teenager, I love the connection to her, too. And, well, considering my grandmother and I stood in awe together admiring Agatha Christie's wax replica at Madame Tussaud's in London when I was the same age as Trixie when *she* visited London and the museum, well, it's the icing on a very blessed cake. (As an aside to notes that already are too long, I recently discovered that Agatha Christie's favorite author was Graham Greene, who wrote what many call one of the most notable novels about colonialism in Vietnam—which is where I happen to be as Susan announces this story!)

All of this to say...I am truly, *truly* grateful for all of the wonderful, interconnected experiences I have had that have led me to this moment, to this story, to be announced on this occasion.

And, of course, I am even more grateful all of the Jixsters who make Jix a warm, welcoming, close-knit community, especially those who have become my extended family. Thanks to Susan and Julia for editing. An extra thanks to Susan for announcing this for me on my Jixaversary since I'm traveling abroad on my Jixaversary yet again (I just can't help but give in to my wanderlust!). I hope you enjoy this alternate look at the Bob-Whites and what might have been... (Total word count: 59,868)

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

●●●by Dana●●●

Author Notes: The subtitle, *Murder on the SS Normandie*, is an homage to one of my favorite novels of all time, *Murder on the Orient Express*. *Come, Tell Me How You Live* is an autobiographical travelogue by Agatha Christie written during World War II. Another thank you to Julia, Susan, and Mary for making this way stronger. {{hugs}}
Word count: 3,493.

Prologue: Come, Tell Me How You Live

August 28, 1938

Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, England

Hearing a small giggle, Peter Belden looked up from the letter he was intently reading and stared into familiar blue eyes. His wife of 25 years sat across the table from him, a mischievous smile curving her lips now that she finally managed to catch his attention with a very un-Helen-like sound.

“Good news from Harold?” she asked, gesturing toward the piece of paper her husband held before she lifted the elegant Limoges porcelain cup to take a sip of the strong, hot tea it contained. She was still waiting for a response as she placed the family heirloom back down on its matching porcelain saucer. As in other households all over Great Britain, tea time was sacred in the Belden house, so the fact that Peter was reading a letter instead of concentrating wholeheartedly on the afternoon ritual told her that the contents of the letter, from Peter’s older brother Harold in America, was important.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Peter said, a contrite look settling on his dark features. “But since it was a post from the States...”

Helen laughed outright at his apology. “Oh, Peter! You must know I’m not serious. Of course you should read your brother’s letter,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “The tea is here every day; news from your brother is not. What does Harold have to say?”

At his wife’s question, Peter grew serious. “The mining operation he established in Idaho is doing exceptionally well. He wants us to come to America.”

“A holiday in America sounds lovely,” Helen commented as she brought the teacup, with its delicate floral pattern, to her lips once again.

Peter shook his head. “Not for a holiday, Helen. Permanently. He’s been talking to Roosevelt, and he doesn’t think we should stay in Britain. Hitler is...well, he’s not the passing threat that people thought, apparently. Harold doesn’t feel we’re safe here in Europe anymore.”

“Not safe?” Helen asked incredulously, a blonde eyebrow arching as she considered her husband’s words. “But that...that *mad man* is on the *continent*. Surely, here in Britain we’ll be safe. It’s *Britain*.” If anyone embodied the stalwart Brit admonishment to “keep calm and carry on,” it was Helen Johnson Belden.

Again, Peter shook his head. “Harold is sure that Europe will be at war soon, and even our little isle won’t be safe. Apparently, the German army has recently begun mobilizing, and that is never a good sign. Unfortunately, according to Harold via President Roosevelt, our *dear* prime minister is ready to do anything to appease that horrid little man instead of taking the fight to him.” Peter’s sarcastic emphasis in describing the man left no doubt as to how he felt about PM Chamberlain.

Helen's eyes, so full of amusement just a few moments before, clouded. "I have to admit that I do fear that that vile little man is power hungry and can cause quite a bit of damage," she admitted. "And there *are* the children to think of..."

Peter nodded. "Quite. If Roosevelt is concerned... I think we should really begin to consider what is happening on the continent and how it affects our family." His serious dark eyes bored into Helen's troubled blue ones as he said gravely, "And our safety."

August 28, 1937

Manhattan, New York City, New York

"Darling, a continental tour after Honey's debut will be simply fabulous," Madeleine coaxed her husband. "One last summer fling before she has to settle down with one of the eligible young society men she'll surely attract during her debut."

Matthew Wheeler's lips quirked. "A grand tour for Honey—and her mother," he observed, a jovial note entering his voice.

Madeleine's soft features relaxed into a becoming smile as she looked up at her husband, giving his arm a delicate swat with her slender arm. "Well, if I *need* to be a chaperone, then I just need to be a chaperone," she said, a mischievous note entering her musical, lilting voice. It was a voice that matched her graceful, golden exterior to a "T."

At that, Matt threw his full head of red hair back and gave a loud guffaw. "Of course—a young lady on the continent *needs* a proper chaperone. It's so wonderful of you to volunteer to make that sacrifice, my dear."

Madeleine laughed in response, a tinkling laugh that made one think of cherubs and angels. Everything about Madeleine Hart Wheeler was graceful, golden, and composed. She was no mere society woman, though, and so much more than just a pretty face standing next to her husband. Matthew loved her for her intelligence and for her fierce love of their only child, another cherubic girl he adored to no end. Their daughter's name was Madeleine, like her mother, but the girl's sweet disposition and honey brown hair had earned her the nickname of Honey, a moniker that fit the darling young woman perfectly.

"You'll come, of course, won't you, Matthew?" Madeleine asked, becoming serious. "Surely, there's business on the continent that you could attend to."

Matthew's features grew more serious than Madeleine would have expected given their jovial, lighthearted conversation. He forced himself to relax as he said, "I'm sure, with the writing that's on the wall, that there is more than enough business to keep me occupied in Europe for a month or two."

Madeleine raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "The writing on the wall? *That's* a vulgar phrase. You don't mean that Hitler fellow, do you?" Mrs. Wheeler's voice showed exactly what kind of regard she held *that* fellow in—the term "icy disdain" might just about begin to cover it.

Matt nodded, his green eyes infinite pools of knowledge in that moment. "I do. I'm not sure what direction things are going to go. As a matter of fact..." He trailed off.

"What?" his wife prompted him.

“If things escalate, I’m not sure I *want* my wife and my daughter over in Europe.”

Madeleine stared at him, agape. “Surely, you’re overreacting. Things can’t be *that* serious, can they? We’d stay out of Spain, of course.”

Matthew snorted. “That Spanish scuffle? That’s nothing. Especially with Franco being declared head of the Spanish state. That will be over before you know it—a tempest in a teapot, and the world changed not at all. It’s this business between Hitler and that Italian man, Mussolini. I think things could get dicey over there, and there are those in our government who would surely agree. Even with the Brits and their stalwart attitude trying to keep the peace over there, there’s only so much one small island nation can do.”

“Well, I’m going to go ahead and start planning anyway. I want the summer of our daughter’s eighteenth birthday to be magical. World events be damned.” She swore casually and with impunity before she gave her husband a seductive smile. “I want our daughter to have what I had. My coming of age trip was magical.” She paused for effect, changing her smile from seductive to liting and innocent. “You *do* remember?”

Matt’s face softened, and he gathered his wife into his arms. “I do seem to recall meeting a lovely eighteen-year-old experiencing the wonders of the continent for the first time. “ He gazed into the depths of Madeleine’s hazel eyes...sometimes more brown, sometimes more green, but always with a mysterious amber hue underneath. His voice grew husky with love, lust, and remembrance. “The lights of Paris didn’t hold a candle to her. *Couldn’t* hold a candle to her.”

Madeleine smiled, remembering the child she had been when she had met the love of her life, and leaned into her husband’s embrace, appreciating the fact that her husband still whispered sweet nothings into her ear so many years later. “And I seem to remember standing at the Arc de Triomphe and seeing a handsome redheaded man. He was just out of Harvard Business School, eager to take his place in the world and prove to his father that he was able to lead the family business into even higher heights of greatness.”

Matt placed a gentle kiss on his wife’s lips. “And the rest, as they say, was history. Yes, God willing, Honey *should* have a grand tour of the continent. Who knows just who she’ll meet?”

August 28, 1936
Kilmainham, Ireland

“Darlin’, I’m tellin’ ye’,” Edmund Lynch said to his wife, Kathleen, “we need to try to make our fortunes somewhere else.”

“But leave Ireland?” Kathleen asked. “‘Tis our homeland. Our families are here.”

“We’ve some family in New York,” Edmund reminded her. “We wouldn’t be alone. But with de Valera trying to distance Ireland from Britain, things are growing worse and worse. The bloody Brits have put a choke hold on us. We’re losing the Economic War that damned Fianna Fáil’s brought upon us, and things get worse each year. I don’t know what to do anymore!”

“But, Eddie, our home...” dark-haired, blue-eyed Kathleen Lynch protested weakly, her tired but pretty face stricken at the reality Eddie was laying out before her. It wasn’t so much the idea of moving to America, but rather that she knew, deep in her heart, that their beloved country was dying. Things had

gone from bad to worse over the years, and now there was going to be another Lynch mouth to feed. And so soon after the twins had arrived! It was rather shocking how fast the family was growing, especially since their oldest, Diana, had been an only child for so long.

The couple sat at their tiny, scarred wooden table, discussing the possibility of moving across the ocean to America for a better life, their voices low so as not to wake their children. They knew that they would need to save for the voyage, but it was so hard! They were already living on a shoe string, barely eking out a living.

“How are we going to set anything aside for the passage over?” Kathleen fretted. “We’re barely getting by as it is.”

“I can take another job,” Edmund said stoically.

“Eddie!” Kathleen exclaimed and then immediately caught herself and lowered her voice. “You’ve already got two jobs!”

“I know, but I’m going to have to get another one with the new baby coming, anyway,” Eddie said, no accusation in his voice nor even resignation. He was excited about this newest child, no matter what he or she meant to them financially. “If we use the wages from an extra job for expenses for the new baby, and we put anything that’s left over from those wages for passage to America, I figure we can make it across in about two years. I know it seems like a long time, and it will be a lot of work, but I just know that we can make our fortune in America, Katy. I just know we can!” he said, a passion in his voice that moved his wife.

She nodded. Her eyes, as blue as delphiniums, glistened with unshed tears. “Aye, I know you’re right,” she conceded in her gentle Irish lilt. “And I know that Maureen and Donnie have done well over in New York. And I know that if you just had a chance, a fresh start, away from this place where everyone wants to pigeonhole you, that you, Edmund, can do something really, really great. Grand even!” she declared.

Edmund reached out to grasp his wife’s hand. “Thanks for believin’ in me, luv. It means the world to me that I have you and the kids.” He looked down at her belly. “All of our kids, even the wee one not born yet. We’ll make it through because we have each other.”

August 28, 1935
London, England

Jim Frayne walked among his fellow Londonites, trying to blend into the crowd as he strode down the grey sidewalk. Everything here in London was grey. The streets. The buildings. The sky. His life since he had lost both of his parents.

Life had had color before that. Blue skies above their farmland in the Cotswolds. The green fields that stretched out endlessly in all directions. The red poppies in his mother’s garden. The yellow daffodils that grew behind their house.

Losing his father when he had been ten years old had changed all that. That’s when the colors had started to become muted to Jim. Losing Win, a good man adored by his wife and only child, had been bad enough, but even as he and his mother had begun to manage to eke out a meager living, things had gotten worse.

When Katie Frayne met Jones, Jim's world had gone from bad to worse, from sideways to upside down. Sure, the stoop-shouldered little man had taken care of Jim's mother, and Jim had been grudgingly grateful for that, but his stepfather had always made it clear that his love for Katie most certainly did not extend to her son. Jim wondered if it was because Katie had often told her son, within earshot of Jones, that he was the spitting image of his father, and Jones had not wanted any reminders of the man who had come before him.

Out of love for Katie, the two had been able to keep their mutual contempt of each other from her. Katie had gone to her early grave not realizing the depth of the hatred that had grown between her second husband and her son.

On some levels, Jim felt guilty for keeping the animosity from her. They'd always been so truthful with each other. Before Jones, they had told each other everything. But after Jones, well, Jim could see how much it would have broken his mother's heart if she had known the truth. He could never bring himself to intentionally hurt his mother, so he swallowed his feelings and turned his situation into a game. He wasn't an actor, had no desire to be one, but to keep his mom happy, he would play the game. He would see, every day, whether his performance could be just a little bit better than the day before. Playing that game, pretending he was Errol Flynn or Clark Gable or Douglas Fairbanks, made it easier to live with the fact that he was essentially lying to the one person he loved more than anyone on Earth.

After his mum had died, Jim had been able to put up with his stepfather for about three months before he had run away from Jones' truck farm outside of New Malden, a tiny rural village in Surrey. For the thirteen months since then, Jim had managed to survive on the streets of London, taking handouts when he could get them, performing odd jobs for those who needed them. He was a husky lad, familiar with farms, and he would have loved to have found a job on a farm, working the land, but the bleak streets of London were the best he could do as a runaway.

As Jim moved along the grey sidewalks, huddled among the masses, the sky opened up, and it began to pour. Trying fruitlessly to pull the back of his collar up over his head to protect him from Mother Nature's onslaught, Jim darted his green eyes around until they found a covered doorway. He hurried over to it, not caring that most proprietors of establishments frowned on ne'er-do-wells loitering in their doorways and would probably order him to leave. As he hid in the shadows of the sheltering eave, he reflected on how he was going to be able to find a place to stay that night where he could dry off. He usually didn't end up this soaked, and the red-headed young man feared that he would be carrying the wetness around for days.

It was then that he realized that he was not alone in hovering in the pub's doorway. Another young man—about his age, with hair as black as night, dark eyes, sharp cheek bones, and a haunted look—was clearly trying to stay dry as well. His clothes were even more tattered than Jim's. Fleeting, Jim thought of a wounded animal, weary from being hunted and hurt by humans, and he wondered if he, too, sported the same look.

The young man stared at him. In the end, he must have decided that he had found a kindred spirit in Jim, because he offered up, "The name's Dan."

August 28, 1934
Belfast, Ireland

Dan Mangan stood next to the body of his mother, unable to believe that both of his parents were gone. It had been bad enough that his father had died in a training accident serving with the Royal Air Force. He had joined the Defence Forces as a way to provide for his wife and his son. Dan firmly believed that when people acted selflessly, providing for others before themselves, they should be rewarded, not punished. God clearly had other thoughts.

Dan blamed the service for his mother's death, too. If the pension that his mother had received following his father's death hadn't been so paltry, she wouldn't have had to work herself to the bone, and she wouldn't have gotten sick. She would have been healthy enough to fight off the influenza that had stricken her—or maybe she wouldn't have ever come down with it at all.

There were too many “what ifs?” for such a young life.

A nurse entered the tiny cell of a hospital room then. “Son, I’m sorry, but we really do need to take your mother now,” she said, her Irish brogue thick with sympathy for the young lad.

Dan looked up at the stout woman with the fading red hair and tired, watery blue eyes. She had been very kind to his mother as she had cared for her during her final two days, and Dan appreciated that. She'd been very kind to him, too, but now she had to do her job, he supposed.

And, really, what good was it to continue to stare at the lifeless body of Caitlín Mangan? His ma wasn't there. This was just her earthly shell. Her soul was gone, off to join Da. As bleak as Dan felt, a small measure of comfort enveloped him, knowing that his parents were reunited—even if he didn't know what he was going to do here on Earth in their absence. His parents had loved each other. Their feelings were so tangible that even when he was a child, little Danny could palpably sense the love between them. He now could imagine their joy in finding each other again. It was something that he had to hold onto now. It was all he had left.

Of course, the tiny bit of solace that Dan received knowing that his parents were finally together again did nothing in the way of providing shelter or food for the young teenager. He reflected that his own mother had been an orphan. She had had a little brother whom the family had fondly called Liam, short for William. Caitlín had always spoken tenderly and affectionately—and wistfully—of her brother. But she had been much older than Liam and had gone to an all-girls orphanage for those of an age who had no chance of being adopted. When she had left the orphanage at the age of sixteen, two years after she had arrived, she had tried desperately to find her little brother, but he had seemingly vanished. William Regan was nowhere to be found.

Dan's father hadn't been an orphan, but Timothy Mangan's mother and father had died not long after Dan was born, so the young man had never known his paternal grandparents, either. Caitlín had always told Dan that his grandparents had doted on their only grandson before a tragic horse and buggy accident had claimed their lives one dismal, rainy evening.

Dan was truly alone in the world.

He didn't want to let the kind nurse know that, though. He had heard enough stories from his ma to know that he most definitely did not want to be sent to an orphanage. And he was pretty sure that his mother had never told him the truly bad stories.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said to the nurse, standing. He gave his mother’s hand, even now growing cold, one last squeeze.

“I guess I need to tell my uncle the news,” he said.

The nurse just looked at him, something indefinable in her pale blue eyes that Dan didn’t want to think about.

“Thank you for...everything,” he said before quietly slipping out of the room and forcing himself not to look back at the lifeless form of his mother.

He stole out of the front doors of the hospital and disappeared into the Belfast evening.

Author Notes: This title is inspired by the detective novel, *The Floating Admiral*, co-written by Agatha Christie and her fellow members of the Detection Club. How cool is it that Agatha Christie engaged in group round robin stories, too? I have done exhaustive research about the SS *Normandie*, but unfortunately, there just isn't as much information available as I would have liked. I tried to make my depiction of the ship as factual as possible, but there may be instances throughout this story where I had to supply my own best-guess description because of a lack of information. Many thanks to Susan, Julia, and Mary for their edits, which definitely made the chapter stronger. Word count: 4,127.

Chapter One: The Floating Ambassador

August 22, 1939

Le Havre, France

Eighteen-year-old Honey Wheeler took in the sights around her as she and her parents strolled toward the luxury ocean liner docked at the end of the pier. The Wheeler family was being escorted to the SS *Normandie* by an officer employed specifically to escort Première Class passengers to their decadently luxurious suites. Behind them, stewards dealt with some of the family's luggage pieces. A society matron, a debutante, and a captain of industry required a good number of bags to properly tour the continent for two months, but most of their trunks had been sent ahead and would be waiting for them in their stateroom or stored in the cargo hold for the duration of the crossing. The stewards would deliver these few pieces to the state room just moments after the Wheelers themselves arrived, upholding the highest French traditions of impeccable service for which the *Normandie* was legendary.

Honey listened passively to the conversation between the companionable French officer—probably in his late twenties by the looks of him—and her father as the small group moved toward an archway marked “Première Classe,” one of three separate entrances leading to the ship. Two other archways much farther down—and with many less officers escorting many more passengers, who carried their own luggage—were marked “Touriste” and “Cabine.” For a moment, Honey looked longingly at those passengers. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy her family's social status, because she was grateful to live in comfort and have the opportunity to experience the amazing continental journey she had just embarked on, but more and more often she wondered about the fun to be had outside of her sometimes stuffy world.

Still, that world had allowed the young debutante to partake in a whirlwind tour of the continent, despite Matthew's nearly canceling the trip after Czechoslovakia had fallen to the Nazis in March and then again when Hitler had signed his “Pact of Steel” with Italy in May. Matthew Wheeler had given in to his wife's pleading to not cancel, but he had carefully planned their travels to avoid any areas of unrest or tension. Despite the threat of war surrounding her in Europe, Honey remained a young, carefree girl, with Madeleine and Matthew Wheeler keeping as much of the serious war talk away from her as possible.

Although they didn't want her to grow up sheltered, they didn't want any of the mounting tensions to ruin Honey's coming-of-age trip, either. Madeleine had wanted her daughter's trip to be as magical as her own had been, and she had succeeded in that. Honey had thoroughly enjoyed herself and learned so much about the culture of the continent, reveling in the beauty of the art and architecture and scenery of Europe. The Cotswolds in Great Britain and the Alps of Switzerland had particularly captivated her sense of imagination, but she had loved everything, from the fun and rousing beer halls of Bavaria to the stately and sedate Vatican buildings; from the glamour of tropical St. Tropez and the rest of the French Riviera to the quaint canals of casual Amsterdam.

Matthew and Madeleine had chosen not to take their daughter to Berlin, where Hitler was rising in his menacing and twisted power more each day. Instead, the Wheelers had visited the southern part of the country, enjoying high-spirited Bavaria after spending some time in Austria and then moving through Belgium over to the Netherlands. Of course, even in the Netherlands tensions were growing. It was as if the Dutch knew that Hitler would bring his darkness to their country. In the meanwhile, staid and stoic Switzerland was clearly, but quietly, preparing for the inevitable, even with its history of neutralism.

The attitude was much different in other countries, like Great Britain, which was steadying itself for a solid fight. In contrast, the French had seemed completely unaware of the increasing shadow of the Fatherland as it moved toward their country. They laughed and reveled as if no danger lurked around the corner. Paris had been as charming and romantic as ever, although even Madeleine had sensed a faint, tense undercurrent that she had not felt in the past, one that belied the surface frivolity.

Italy and Spain had been different. Those countries already had Mussolini and Franco, respectively, ruling with iron fists. Honey and her parents had enjoyed the rugged beauty of Catalonia, but the mood in Barcelona was rather somber and fearful. The Catalonians were resentful of being dragged into the Spanish state by Franco but too fearful of reprisal to fully revolt. Italy was a chaotic place, full of a passion that contrasted with the stately ancient Roman structures and the ornately baroque buildings standing in testament to Italy's role in the Renaissance. Florence was one of Madeleine's favorite cities, full of breathtaking beauty and life and art, and Honey had found it lovely enough, but it was the natural scenery that spoke to her graceful soul— the magnificent white and grey Alpine peaks or the rolling green English fields dotted with fluffy white sheep nestled beneath a clear blue sky itself dotted with fluffy white clouds that provided a symmetry to the ground below. Madeleine loved that her daughter was so moved by bucolic beauty and wished that she hadn't had to grow up in the concrete jungle of Manhattan.

During their continental travels, Madeleine had had an epiphany while watching her daughter marvel at nature's beauty while only being slightly moved by the historic, and sometimes ancient, art and architecture surrounding her. She planned to speak to Matthew when they got home about purchasing a country house somewhere outside of New York City, a pastoral place where they could escape from the city hustle. Maybe a cute little manor house in a quaint little community along the Hudson in upper Westchester County. Maybe they'd even get a stable full of horses for Honey to ride. She did so enjoy horse riding at camp. When she'd told Honey her idea, the girl had been absolutely delighted, thoroughly loving the idea of a family country getaway.

Of course, these thoughts were far from the socialite's mind as she took in the fabulous ocean liner before her. The black hull gleamed in the sunlight, two of the three red stacks belching out smoke as the engines readied for departure, those tall, red structures towering over the landscape. As the Wheelers looked up, they could see already-boarded passengers strolling along the promenade. Many of them, looking as tiny as ants compared to the hulking luxury ocean liner, waved to the boarding passengers below. Honey smiled and waved back.

Their French Line escort beamed with pride as he noted the awed reactions of the Wheelers. "*Bienvenue!* Welcome to the *SS Normandie*, France's floating ambassador to the world."

Honey turned to her mother, an excited grin alighting her smooth and delicate features. "This is amazing, Mother. She's beautiful!"

Madeleine smiled down at her only child. "A fitting end to a magical trip," she agreed.

Madeleine could hardly believe that their tour of the continent was over already. The two months had positively flown by as they had explored so many European countries. One thing that had not come to fruition for her daughter, and for which she was somewhat disappointed, was that Honey had not met a man who captivated her fancy. Perhaps Madeleine was just romanticizing her own coming-of-age trip, but finding the man of her dreams on it had solidified the magic of the experience, and she had wished the same for her daughter, even though she knew that Honey did not care in the least.

There had been many eligible young men at Honey's coming out party, a magnificent debutante ball held on Long Island in a historic manor, and some of them were genuinely good boys in addition to being "eligible," which was just a fancy term for being "connected" or "well-bred." Matthew and Madeleine had agreed wholeheartedly, however, that Honey's heart would be the most important factor in her marriage—not status, not making the proper business connections among families, nor any of that other nonsense. If Honey was in love, and her chosen beau treated her like the princess that her father thought that she was, that was good enough for her parents. It was important that he was a good man, not that his last name happened to be Vanderbilt or Du Pont or Rothschild.

Honey had had a marvelous adventure across the continent, so her mother was happy enough with that. Honey had just turned eighteen. There was plenty of time for her to find her soul mate. And, as far as Matthew was concerned, that day could come far into the future for all he cared. He'd be happy to have his little girl all to himself in the meantime.

Before they knew it, after marveling at the three-deck-high first-class entrance hall with its walls of onyx accented with bronze and glass, the Wheelers were ensconced in their lavish Première Class suite, one of the so-called Grande Suites de Luxe. They had been booked in the Grand Suite de Luxe Deauville, or simply, the Deauville Suite. It sat on the Sun Deck with its sister suite, the Grand Suite de Luxe Trouville, the only accommodations located on that deck. Also unique to the Deauville and Trouville, each suite also had its own promenade that overlooked the lovely open-air seating of the Café-Grill below.

Honey took a few moments to marvel at the chic and modern art deco décor of the suite, appreciating the rich woods, handsome sculptures, enormous glass panels, and the Gaveau baby grand piano with its blond wood. She then went to go claim one of the suite's four bedrooms as her own. In the meantime, Matthew Wheeler opened a pair of wood-paneled doors to reveal a well-stocked bar. He selected a bottle of champagne that he knew that Madeleine loved, a particularly good vintage of Moët & Chandon, and removed the cork with a loud and celebratory "pop!" Madeleine and Matthew both laughed at the sound, thinking how lucky they were to be enjoying such lavish accommodations before returning to New York and the "real world." Matthew quickly grabbed two crystal flutes to capture the bubbly liquid, and the two toasted a successful—and *safe*—European grand tour.

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As the Wheelers settled into the Deauville Suite, the Beldens, who had planned on settling comfortably in Touriste Classe, which offered midrange, second-class accommodations, were marveling at the luxuriousness of the Trouville Suite, a gracious upgrade paid for by Harold as a gift when his younger brother had decided to relocate his family to the United States. It was a handsome upgrade, and the Beldens, although rather well-off and used to creature comforts, were in awe of the spectacular "apartment," which included a private dining room, a baby grand piano, four large and elegant bedrooms, five bathrooms, servants' quarters, and a private deck on which to enjoy the sea air. Harold had also encouraged his brother's family to cross the English Channel and board the legendary French art deco ocean liner in Le Havre, her point of origin, rather than boarding the following day near

Southampton. It had been an easy sell, especially once the Belden family realized the magnitude of their accommodations.

“This is really too much, Peter,” Helen said in awe as her blue eyes took in the opulence surrounding her, from the Aubusson tapestries to the ivory leather that lined the room. “Harold really shouldn’t have done this! I would have been happy in tourist class! And what exactly are we going to do with a baby grand piano?”

Peter pulled his awed wife into his arms for an affectionate embrace. “I quite agree, but that’s Harold, you know. There were any number of regular first class suites he could have upgraded us to, and I agree that he needn’t have done even that, but putting us into one of the two best suites on the entire ship...”

He paused for a moment as he shook his head. “Harold, since making his considerable fortune, has become used to opulence, and he couldn’t imagine the six of us as a family in Touriste Classe accommodations, which he thought would be too cramped. My goodness! He thought that a family of six would be too crowded in a regular suite in first class! It is nice, though, to be able to spread out a bit during the voyage. Bobby and Beatrix can each have the two smallest bedrooms, and Mart and Brian can share the next largest, or one of them can stay in the servant’s quarters if they want, since Lord knows we haven’t brought any servants onboard! And you and I—” he paused to kiss the top of his wife’s head, her blonde curls tickling his nose, “—will ensconce ourselves in the master bedroom.”

Helen smiled up at her husband. “What a blissful crossing this is going to be!” she said before tucking her head and nestling herself deeper into her husband’s embrace.

“And what a wonderful future we’ll have in the States,” Peter agreed. “I know it may not be a popular course for those who want to stay and ‘give ‘em hell,’ but I’m thankful that we’re escaping before Hitler goes any further, which that madman is bound to do. I know Britain will never fall to his conniving ways, but if there’s a war, I want to know that my wife and children are safe, especially since Harold and Andrew already have migrated.”

Just then, Peter and Helen’s only daughter, Beatrix, who had turned eighteen years old a few months before, bounded through the main door of the suite and into the salon, as the French called the living room or parlor. Although Trixie knew that, outside of Britain, the British were known for their reticence and “stiff upper lip,” her parents belied this stereotype and had never been afraid of showing affection even in front of their children, so it didn’t faze the young woman to see her parents being so affectionate with each other.

“You should see the swimming pool!” she exclaimed without preamble, her sandy blonde curls—so much like her mother’s—bouncing with the vibrant energy that she always displayed, unless it was chore time, of course. Her clear blue eyes—also exactly like her mother’s—were wide with excitement. “It’s amazing, and that’s where I am going to spend *all* of my time!”

Helen let out a laugh. “That’s only because there isn’t a stable full of horses on the ship.”

The young woman’s eyes twinkled at her mother. “That’s probably very true, Moms,” the teenager agreed, using the nickname for Helen Belden that she had been using all of her life. She had been the first to call Helen that, but her older brothers, Mart and Brian, had soon followed suit, and eleven-year-old Bobby didn’t know any other name for his mother.

"It even has a terraced shelf for younger kids, so Bobby will love it, too, and be quite safe," the young woman said, speaking with the authority of an older sister who had spent a good deal of time babysitting and knew exactly the kind of scrapes her younger brother was capable of getting into.

"I do hope that you'll at least join us for a meal or two, Beatrix," Peter said, a twinkle alighting his own dark eyes as he admired her spark of life. This was why they were "escaping" from their little isle off the coast of Europe to America. He never wanted that light to dim—or be extinguished. War could so easily do either.

Unaware of her father's serious thoughts, the young blonde was wrinkling her nose at him. "Can't you please call me Trixie? Please, Dad. Beatrix is so...so...stuffy. Trixie sounds much more American," the girl declared.

Peter smiled, even as a small sigh escaped his lips. He knew he was not going to win this one, no matter how hard he tried, so he might as well give up now—but not without a little token modicum of protest. "But, darling, Beatrix is a family name. My favorite aunt carried the name." He shook his head. "But we are going to America, and you have grown into quite a young woman, so I suppose I should ask, will you be joining us for at least a meal or two, Trixie?"

"It depends," Trixie said, the mischievousness in her voice unmistakable as she handled her victory with grace. "Are the boys going to be in attendance?"

Helen's laugh rang out, even as she tried to look sternly at her daughter. "You know that you enjoy the company of your brothers—no matter how much you try to claim otherwise!"

Trixie grinned at her mother but did not admit to anything, her one-track mind returning to thoughts of the pool. "There's even a shallow end, a sort of training 'beach' for Bobby," she repeated.

Helen nodded approvingly. "He'll enjoy that very much."

"Do I always have to be the one to watch him, Moms?" Trixie asked. "I know it's *technically* a girl's job, but I'd like to have a bit of a chance to explore the ship on my own. Can I split Bobby-sitting duties with Mart and Brian? Just this once?"

Helen smiled. "I think it would be only fair for you to have some time to explore the ship, just as Mart and Brian will. This is rather a vacation for this family, and you deserve to have a vacation, too."

Trixie's eyes lit up and a huge grin split her face. She threw her arms around Helen impulsively. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" she exclaimed.

Helen's youthful laugh nearly matched the exuberance of Trixie's own as she hugged her daughter back. "You're welcome, Bea...Trixie. Now tell me all about this pool," she said as the two settled down together on the lavish settee.

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August 23, 1939

Southampton, England

The next day, after the *Normandie* had traveled across the English Channel and docked off of the Isle of Wight near Southampton to pick up her remaining passengers, the Lynches gratefully settled into their Spartan accommodations. It had been a long three years of scrimping and saving, especially once the “baby” Kathleen had been pregnant with had become “babies.” It shocked Kathleen to think that they had gone from a three-person family to a seven-person family in less than three years. Considering how stretched the family finances already had been before the arrival of Lawrence and Terrence, it was a miracle that they had been able to save enough to make the voyage at all, even with Edmund taking on three jobs and Kathleen taking in others’ laundry and children to earn extra money.

But, by the grace of God, they had done it. Now here they were, traveling on one of the most luxurious ocean liners to cross the Atlantic. Of course, they would not see any of that luxury. Even though the French ship line that had designed and built the *Normandie*, Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, commonly known as CGT or the French Line, had tried to make steerage class sound more glamorous by renaming it “Cabine Classe,” the accommodations still were most decidedly steerage.

The reason that the Lynches had been able to afford this crossing at all was because of the way the ship had been designed. The French Line had put all of its efforts into the first class areas of the ship—and none into the Touriste and Cabine Classes. As a result, only those who could afford to sail in the Première Classe wanted to sail on her. With scant passengers interested in sailing in the tourist and cabin classes, the ship was not commercially profitable. This, despite the fact that many considered the lavish ship to be the one of the greatest of all ocean liners. After all, she had been the largest and fastest passenger ship afloat when she had been launched and no ship had surpassed her yet. The *Normandie* even twice held the prestigious Blue Riband award for the fastest transatlantic crossing. Even with all of her accolades, being unprofitable meant that the French government was helping to subsidize the ship, and fares in the lesser classes were much more reasonable on the *Normandie* than they were on her rival, the Cunard Line’s *RMS Queen Mary*.

Even though the Lynches had to share a tiny cell-sized room with bunks stacked three high, and they had to share a bathroom with several neighboring rooms, they could put up with anything for a week if it meant that they had the opportunity to make their way to America. America was the land of dreams...if you were willing to work hard, and Edmund and Kathleen were. Kathleen was thrilled that her wee ones would have the opportunity to be anyone that they wanted to be, that they wouldn’t know the oppression of their mother country, where the station in life in which you were born was usually the one in which you died. As much as she loved Ireland, and was fiercely proud of being Irish, she was not so blinded by patriotism that she couldn’t see her homeland with clear eyes. She knew the limitations of her beloved Emerald Isle. She would miss the old country, for sure, but now that she had said her goodbyes, she was only looking forward to their new lives.

Kathleen’s oldest, Diana, had helped the family settle into the tiny room. She and the boys would sleep on the floor, while the girls would share one of the bunks. Kathleen and Edmund would take the other two bunks. Kathleen had offered hers to Diana, but blessed child that she was had refused, saying that it would be an adventure to sleep on the floor with her brothers. Kathleen was ever grateful for her oldest child’s good cheer and infinite optimism. Diana was a good sport about just about everything, never complaining and always offering her mother a helping hand around the house and watching her two younger sets of siblings.

To thank her daughter, Kathleen had let Diana go exploring as soon as the twin girls, Rose and Violet, were settled on the lowest bunk sleeping, and Larry and Terry were quietly looking at a picture book in the corner of the room.

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As the Lynches settled into their meager quarters, Jim Frayne and Dan Mangan were excitedly boarding the *Normandie* feeling like the two lucky chaps that they were. Ever since the two had run into each other in the pub doorway while trying to avoid being soaked, the pair ran together around the streets of London, looking out for each other. They had become as close as two brothers, each feeling fortunate to have found someone they could call family after having lost so much so young. It was amazing how similar their stories were—both only sons, both losing their fathers first, and then a few years later, their mothers. Neither with any other family to speak of, both forced to survive on the streets.

Jim's mother and father had often spoke of Win's uncle, James Winthrop Frayne, whom Jim was named after. Uncle James lived in America, outside of New York City, and Jim thought that if he could just reach him, he might have a chance at a house...a home. The trouble was that passage to America cost money. He'd tried to get a job on a cattle boat, but even though he was a strong, husky lad, no one would hire him because he was too young. They wanted a man who had proven himself capable of the work. The fact that he and Dan were a package deal, and Dan was slighter of frame, also had hampered the efforts.

But the day before, something incredible had happened. He and Dan had managed to win a pair of tickets on the *Normandie* in a game of cards. And the ship was going right to New York City! Finally, *finally*, the duo might have a chance at normalcy and a real home.

Even now, as they navigated the narrow corridors of the magnificent ocean liner, it didn't seem real. They had been down on their luck so much in their young lives that it was hard to believe that luck could actually smile on them for a change. They headed down the corridors of Cabine Classe, eager to find their room on the ship that would take them to their new lives.

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One last author note: Please forgive the *Titanic* plot device I used to get Jim and Dan onboard. Originally, I had them getting jobs on the ship, but then I realized that they'd never be around to participate in the mystery, which would never do. I'll leave stories with absent Bob-Whites having to do chores to KK, TYVM!

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 Di'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 Di 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."

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 Grande 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 Grande 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 Grande 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 rascalions. 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 rascalions."

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.

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 Grande 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!”

Author Notes: This chapter title is inspired by the title of Agatha Christie's novel, *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*. I put off doing my edit of this chapter until the day before posting, which means that there was no time to allow my normal trusty editors—Julia, Mary, and Susan—to improve it as they usually do. :(I do have to add that the Rouen Suite, mentioned in this chapter, has special meaning to me as I spent a wonderful girls' day in Rouen itself with my beloved oldest niece. Word count: 8,472.

Chapter Five: Fraulein Eberhart's Dead

Luck *was* on Trixie's side. She, Brian, and Mart entered the Trouville Suite to find that, indeed, the butler was present, having just finished delivering a freshly pressed tuxedo to their father. The first dinner sitting was not as elegant as the second sitting, but black tie was still required. White tie was the *de rigueur* clothing choice for men at the second sitting, particularly for those lucky enough to be asked to dine at the captain's table.

Although Trixie enjoyed the creature comforts of her *Grand Suite de Luxe*, and the luxury of having her own bedroom on the voyage, she didn't enjoy having to dress so fancily for dinner. Her mother had insisted on buying her several new gowns, the most elegant and grownup that she had ever owned, Trixie supposed she fit in, but she would never feel comfortable in such fine attire.

"*Bon jour*, Mademoiselle Belden, Messieurs Belden," the butler said in his charming French manner as he executed a small bow.

"Good evening, Jacques," Trixie said pleasantly before moving forward in her bull-in-china-shop manner. Was there ever a tactful way to introduce the subject of murder? "How are you recovering after that awful tragedy this morning?"

If Jacques was surprised by her inquiry, his Gallic upbringing allowed him to hide it well as he responded, "It is a tragedy, but you young people do not need to concern yourselves over the incident. It is being handled with the utmost care."

Trixie noticed that he spoke in the present, which gave her further evidence that it was murder. Had it been an accident, she was sure Jacques would have said that it "had been" handled.

"We must admit that we're more than a little curious since we were the ones who found the poor woman," Trixie said, hoping to get the butler talking, even though she was sure that, French reticence aside, he had probably been instructed not to discuss the tragic event. She was going to have to be sly in her manner of questioning, which was going to be difficult given her normally direct nature.

Jacques looked surprised at Trixie's revelation. "I heard that a group of young people had discovered Mademoiselle Eberhart, but I didn't realize you were the young people in question."

Trixie nodded, thrilled that Jacques had let the woman's last name slip. It was something to go on, at least. "One of the ship's crew asked us some cursory questions at the scene, but we were wondering if they're going to need anything else from us. We'd be happy to provide as much information as we can, especially if it will help to catch the person who did it to her."

The butler looked at her sharply then. "Who told you that it wasn't an accident?"

"Well, there was so much blood..." Trixie let her voice trail off and opened her blue eyes wide in a look of innocence. "It *was* an accident, then?"

Jacques avoided her eyes as he answered the question—or avoided answering it. “*C’est fou, ça! C’est n’importe quoi!* You should not worry about these matters...it is for the ship’s authority to worry about,” was all he would say, further confirming for the would-be sleuth that foul play was involved.

“Are you sure there’s nothing we can do to help, Jacques?” Brian asked. “We would like to be available if further statements are needed.”

“Please continue to enjoy your vacation, and do not let this tragedy spoil your voyage. The *Normandie*, she is a marvel and the pride of France, and you should enjoy every second on her and experience all the wonders that she has to offer. Have you been to the Winter Garden yet?”

Brian and Trixie, who themselves frequently employed this tactic when they didn’t want to talk about something, recognized immediately that Jacques was trying to change the subject. Trixie’s mind began to whirl, trying to figure out a way to bring the conversation back to the murder.

It was Mart who did so, saying, “I spent a wonderful hour in the Winter Garden the other day, enjoying the exotic birds and fish with a German gentleman. Eberhart sounds like a German name. I wonder if Miss Eberhart was related to the man. There don’t seem to be too many Germans onboard.”

Jacques, apparently not realizing that he was being baited, shook his head and offered, “Miss Eberhart traveled only with her aging mother.”

Trixie felt her excitement soar that Mart’s tactic had worked, and she mentally vowed to be extra nice to her middle brother for the rest of the trip. Or at least the rest of the evening.

“That’s awful,” Brian said. “I assume that she was helping her mother with the voyage, acting as a caretaker for her. If the woman has no one else onboard, perhaps we could help her out.”

Jumping on Brian’s lead, Trixie quickly added, “Brian has medical training and is starting at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons when we get to the States. He’d love the opportunity to practice his skills.”

“That is very kind of you, but I believe that the captain has assigned one of our nurses to see to her for the remainder of the trip,” Jacques said, looking more and more uncomfortable.

“That’s wonderful for the captain to do that,” Trixie said. “I was surprised that we’re continuing on to New York. I was afraid that we might turn around and go back to Europe.”

“It was considered, Miss Belden, but because we were already a few days into the journey, and it would take almost as long to return to Europe as it would to continue on, the captain made the decision to continue to New York City.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, but if you don’t require anything else of me, I should take my leave.”

“Of course,” Brian said. “We didn’t mean to detain you, Jacques. Have a pleasant evening.”

“You as well. Please do not give this morning’s...incident another thought and enjoy the remainder of your voyage.” With a final small bow, the Frenchman left the suite.

Trixie was about to say something to her brothers about Jacques' revelations, but just then Mrs. Belden entered the living room. "There you are!" she exclaimed. "I thought that I heard voices out here. You have just enough time to get cleaned up for dinner. I was afraid that you were going to miss it!"

Mart grinned at his mother. "Miss a meal? Me? Never!"

"I'm sorry, Moms," Trixie apologized. "We were spending time with our new friends, and we lost track of time. Do you need help with Bobby?"

Helen shook her head. "No, when Jacques realized this afternoon that we were traveling without a nurse for Bobby, he had one assigned from the ship, so she has taken him to eat in the children's dining room."

Trixie's jaw dropped. "Bobby has a nurse?"

Helen smiled. "Apparently, families with children who travel in first class, and particularly in the grand suites, usually have their own nurses who travel with them. Of course, our situation is a bit different, so we certainly have no nurse. Late this afternoon after he found out, Jacques seemed to think that was an untenable situation and immediately 'rectified' it, as he said." The woman, who looked almost young enough to be Trixie's older sister, broke into a grin as she looked at her daughter. "That lets you off the hook for the remainder of the trip. Enjoy, young lady."

Trixie threw her arms around her mother. "Thanks, Moms!" she cried. "I really don't mind spending time with the little imp but now that—" Trixie broke off suddenly, about to say "now that we're trying to solve a murder..."

"Now that what, dear?" Helen asked.

Trixie was able to recover quickly. "Now that we've made such wonderful friends on the ship, I'll have more time to spend with them."

"Yes, you will, dear," Helen said. "Now hurry. We don't want to be late for dinner. I'm sure there's some French law, punishable by death, about being late for the seating!"

"Yes, Moms," Trixie said, hurrying into her room, where her mother already had laid out a youthfully cut silk gown the color of sparkling sapphires. Trixie dressed as quickly as she could, and soon the Belden family was headed to the Grande Salle la Manger.

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While the Beldens had been chatting with their butler, Honey was chatting with Pierre, the butler assigned to the Deauville Suite. She had found the perfect opening when the butler had politely asked her how her day was. Normally, Honey would have responded the way most people do when asked that question, no matter what type of day they've experienced: Fine, thank you. This automatic, polite response had been on the tip of her tongue when she caught herself, realizing that the charming French butler had just provided her with a way to introduce the topic of murder.

"Not very well, I'm afraid, Pierre," she said sadly.

“No, mademoiselle?” Pierre responded, surprised and distressed. “But the *Normandie*, she is the finest ship sailing the blue seas. She is the pride of France. And you did not enjoy her this day?”

One thing that Honey had learned in her short time on the ocean liner was that the French were fanatical about this ship, and a good deal of their national pride appeared to be tied to the *SS Normandie*. The French members of the crew seemed personally affronted if one did not view the ocean liner as perfection.

“Oh, no, Pierre!” Honey hastily assured him, not wanting to insult the man from whom she hoped to obtain information. “The ship is gorgeous! I’ve loved everything that she has to offer. It’s just that, well, my friends and I were the ones who discovered that poor woman this morning.”

Pierre’s chocolate-colored eyes went wide. “*Mais non!*” he cried, looking distressed. “Poor mademoiselle! I am so sorry that you had to see that!”

Honey shivered, and it was not for effect. “I keep thinking about her, wondering who she was. I can’t get her out of my head, and I don’t even know her name. I would like to pay my respects to her family, if they’re onboard, and I can’t even do that one small thing.”

“Mademoiselle Wheeler, I should probably not be telling you this, but if it will make you feel better...” Pierre hesitated only a moment while Honey tried not to look as eager as she was feeling. As long as Pierre was feeling sympathetic toward her, Honey had the feeling that she could get almost any information that she wanted from the butler.

Pierre continued, “Her name was Margarethe Eberhart.”

“Margarethe,” Honey repeated. “What a pretty name. Is that German?”

“Yes, the woman was German, traveling with her aged mother as her caretaker.”

“Oh! Her poor mother!” The tears glistening in Honey’s eyes were not manufactured. She did feel for the woman—losing her daughter while traveling. “Who will take care of her now?”

“The captain has assigned one of the ship’s nurses to be Madame Eberhart’s care taker for the remainder of the crossing. As you can imagine, the woman is quite distraught and has taken to her bed.”

“I wonder if she might be up to seeing visitors. I do so feel compelled to pay my respects,” Honey said. “Although, if she’s not up to it...”

“It is a lovely thought, mademoiselle,” Pierre said, “and you are very kind to think of it. Perhaps I could find out for you?”

“That would be wonderful, Pierre. I would appreciate that.”

Pierre gave a low bow. “Anything for such a lovely young woman. Is there anything that you require this evening? I understand that you are to dine with Capitaine Le Commandant Lehuédé this evening.”

“Yes, and I’m quite looking forward to it,” Honey said. “I think it will be a unique experience to dine with the captain. I imagine that he has all sorts of wonderful stories about life at sea and knows just about everything that there is to know about this beautiful, amazing ship.”

“*Mais oui*,” Pierre said. “This is true. You will have a wonderful evening with the Capitaine le Commandant. It will be enlightening and enjoyable.”

“I’m sure it will be. I don’t need anything right now, Pierre. I’m sure my mother has already selected my gown for the evening.”

Pierre nodded. “Indeed she has, mademoiselle. It’s a beautiful emerald green gown. You and your mother have very good taste.”

Honey laughed. “It’s all my mother. She selected most of my dinner gowns in Paris.”

“Ah, *oui*. *La Ville Lumière*, she is a grand place for fashion, is she not?” Pierre asked.

Honey laughed. “*Oui! Très chic!*”

“Honey, you speak like a true French woman!” At that, Pierre bowed. “Your mother and father are relaxing before dinner, and I shall now let you do the same. I wish you an enchanting evening, mademoiselle!”

“*Merci beaucoup*, Pierre,” Honey returned in her best French.

The young woman headed to her room, absolutely ecstatic that she had learned the identity of the murder victim and that Pierre might actually be able to secure a visit with the woman’s mother. Honey truly felt awful for the woman, even though she also felt a twinge of guilt at the deception that she merely wanted to pay her respects. But she consoled herself by rationalizing that if the group was able to somehow solve the murder, they would get justice for her daughter, and so the lie of omission could be forgiven.

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Diana invited Jim and Dan to eat dinner with her family in the crowded, raucous dining room in third class, and Mr. and Mrs. Lynch were pleased to meet some of Diana’s new friends. Diana was forever grateful that Jim and Dan seemed to be good with little kids. Jim had absolutely captivated Rose and Violet, and it was clear that the toddler girls were in the thralls of their first crush, hanging onto Jim’s every word and movement. Meanwhile, Terry and Larry gave Dan their full attention as he told stories about his life in Ireland with his mother. Diana knew that a lot of Dan’s story was sad, but he focused on the happy times, and Terry and Larry loved his tales, loved hearing a different perspective about the home country that they would probably never see again. As a result, dinner was a relatively calm affair with the two younger sets of siblings behaving very well.

The children were so well-behaved, in fact, and Diana’s mother so impressed with the young gentlemen, that she told her daughter that she would put the children to bed by herself and urged Diana to spend the evening with her new friends.

“You’ve not had a lot of time in this world to be a young, carefree woman, Diana, luv,” Mrs. Lynch had said, “and I regret that greatly. I can put the children to bed. You go have some much-deserved fun.” As Di had hesitated, torn between her sense of duty and the desire to enjoy herself, Kathleen had barked, “‘Tis final. Get on with ya now!”

At that, Di had given her mother a fierce hug and thanked her before heading off with Jim and Dan to find some talkative crew members. Unfortunately, they found that most of the third-class crew members did not speak any English, making it difficult to eavesdrop or engage them in conversation.

"I bet Honey can speak fluent French," Di said after yet another disappointing encounter. "She just seems the type who would know French."

"She probably did pick up a little on her trip if she didn't know the language already. She said that she and her parents spent a good deal of time in France while they were over here," Dan agreed.

"Well, what's our next step if we can't understand the crew members? How are we going to get information about the victim or the murder?" Jim asked, running an impatient hand through his red hair.

"Hopefully, Honey and the Beldens have managed to get some information from their butlers," Dan said. "It's about time for Honey's dinner with the captain, too. Maybe she can get some information from him."

"We'll see," Diana said. "If I were Honey, I'd be too afraid to bring the subject up with the captain."

"I've also been wondering how she's going to manage that," Dan said, "but she does seem to possess a lot of tact, so maybe she can pull it off."

Diana gestured toward Jim. "I'm with you, though. No matter what Honey and the Beldens are able to accomplish, I feel like we should be doing something, too!" Suddenly, her face brightened, and a wide grin split her face as she stared at the boys, a decidedly mischievous look on her face.

"What?" Jim and Dan asked in one breath.

"I may have an idea," Di said. "I can fake an illness, distract whoever's on duty in the ship's hospital room, and you guys can sneak in and investigate the body for clues!"

The two young gentlemen stared at the Irish lass before them, their jaws agape. The black-haired beauty continued to grin at them. "What?" she asked with an air of innocence.

Jim and Dan eventually recovered, and Dan's face broke into a slow grin as his red-headed friend exclaimed, "You're worried about initiating a conversation with a captain but you'll distract a ship's officer so we can illegally go explore a dead body?"

Diana nodded, her violet eyes sparkling. "Sounds that way, doesn't it?" she asked, her Irish lilt taking on a playful quality.

Jim's face broke into a slow grin like his brother a few moments before. "I like you!"

"So, are you in? I think I can pull it off," Di said, feeling giddy at Jim's compliment. "At least, I was in a couple of school performances back in Ireland."

"I'm sure your acting skills will be just fine," Jim assured her. "I'm more worried about trying to figure out where they might be keeping the woman's body, not to mention all of the ethical considerations of breaking in and violating a soul's peace."

“We’re not going to do anything to the body except investigate it,” Dan reasoned, “and if we find justice for her, *that* will give her soul some peace.”

In the end, the three developed a plan that they were rather proud of. None of them was exactly sure if the plan would work— or if they would even be able to interpret anything that they might find, but they all felt that they owed it to the dead woman to at least try to bring her some justice. None of them seemed to give any consideration to the ocean liner’s investigation into the incident. For whatever reason, all of them—including the four absent friends—were determined to solve the crime themselves. Deep down, the seven must have known that the exercise was a lark, an effort with little possibility of success, but that didn’t stop them.

According to their plan, Di tried to look as sick to her stomach as possible and asked the nearest crew member where the hospital room on the ship was located. After receiving the answer, the trio was off in the direction that the crew member had indicated. Jim and Di hid while Dan moved stealthily forward to check the place out before Di went in with her act. The pair stood tensely, cautiously peeking around the corner, not daring to speak until Dan returned, a wide grin on his face.

“You look like the cat who swallowed the canary!” Jim exclaimed, and then looked around and lowered his voice. “What did you find out?”

“It was perfect timing!” Dan exclaimed.

“It was?” Di asked. “How?”

“There was someone from the ship’s security talking about the body!” Dan responded, excited but trying to keep his voice down so that no one could over hear them. “Let’s go down the hall farther away so no one hears us.”

When they had traveled some distance from the medical rooms, Dan summarized what he had heard. “First of all, it’s definitely what they call ‘foul play.’ Just as I was about to enter the room, I stopped because I heard the ship’s security man say that his staff was looking into the man the victim had eaten dinner with the night before to see if he knew of anyone who might want to harm the woman. The nurse on duty was surprised to hear that the woman had had dinner with a man the night before. Apparently, she’s traveling with her elderly mother and neither of them has a male companion with them onboard the ship.

“The security officer said that he found that suspicious, too. He and the nurse seemed to think that it was possible that the woman might have met someone on the ship, but neither could imagine why she wouldn’t bring her mother to dinner. She’s elderly, but not room-bound. The best stroke of luck is that the security officer actually said, as he was leaving, ‘Well, I’m off to Room 1013 to interview this Schmidt fellow.’”

“Schmidt!” Jim exclaimed. “That sounds German!”

At the same time, Di cried, “We have a room number and a name for a possible suspect!”

Dan grinned triumphantly at his companions. “Exactly!”

“What a stroke of luck! You deserve to wear Sherlock Holmes’ cap for that one!” Jim stated.

“It was luck more than anything,” Dan protested modestly.

Di shook her head at that. “I don’t think so. You thought to wait outside the hospital room and eavesdrop once you heard the man talking. I would have probably just barged right in without thinking!” she said. “I’m so glad that you went to scout it out in advance and no one sent me in there straight away! Should I still head in there? Or should we try to find this Mr. Schmidt?”

“I don’t think that the room is in third class. We’ll have to go with the Beldens or Honey, I believe. We don’t want to be seen skulking around other areas of the ship, lest we be considered suspects ourselves!”

“Good point,” Di said. “But at least we still have some really great news to share with the rest of the crowd tomorrow.”

“Very true,” Jim agreed. “Were you also able to see enough to figure out where a body might be kept once you went in?”

Dan nodded. “I did. I noticed a large refrigerator, one much larger than anything that they would need to store medications and the like in. I think that would be our best bet.”

“Wonderful! I was wondering what they might do with a body at sea. I was hoping that it wasn’t like the pirates. They had a service and threw the bodies over the side of the ship sewed up into their hammocks.”

“I did *not* need to know that!” Di said with a shudder. She then took a deep breath, saying, “Okay, I guess it’s my turn to go and distract the nurse. What did she sound like?”

Dan responded, “She sounded kind of young. I didn’t think they’d let someone young serve as a nurse on a ship, especially not alone.”

“It’s not like it’s the most desirable shift. The experienced nurses with seniority probably get the day shift,” Jim theorized.

“And the doctors probably only come in when they’re really needed,” Di surmised before focusing on the task at hand. “Well, wish me luck!”

The Irish lass hurried off down the long passageway toward the hospital rooms. Jim and Dan, peering from around their corner, watched her pause for a moment outside of the doorway and take a deep breath before she disappeared into the room. A few minutes later, they watched as the young nurse, her long, dark brown hair pulled into a bun beneath her starched white nurse’s cap, hurried down the hall. The doctor was sure to have quarters not very far from the hospital room and would return in tow soon, so Jim and Dan raced down the hallway.

Jim stood guard outside of the hospital room while Dan hurried in to find Diana studying a medical folder.

“I think we may have what we need here without even looking at the body,” she said, relieved, as she looked up from the folder.

Dan moved to look over Di's shoulder, reading aloud the initial report of death, "Margarethe Eberhart, aged thirty-three. Born in Bergisch Gladbach in the North Rhine-Westphalia state of Germany. Eyes, blue; hair, blonde; weight, fifty-two kilos; height, 173 centimeters. Victim traveling with her mother, Anna Eberhart, in room 2072. Cause of death, blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. Findings indicate that the weapon was thin, most likely something similar to a pipe constructed of a heavy material. Extent of injuries to the cranium could not have resulted from a simple fall."

"I wish we had thought to bring something to write with!" Di said as she frantically tried to remember the details.

"We need to remember Margarethe and Anna Eberhart, Room 2072," Dan summarized. "The important thing is that findings look like Trixie's theory proved correct—there's no way her death occurred from the fall. Looks like some type of a pipe was involved. We just need to remember that."

Just then, Dan and Di heard Jim outside in the passageway speaking loudly. "Are you the nurse? I mean, you must be the nurse, you're dressed like a nurse! I was wondering if you had any advice about handling a crying child. See, my friend's little sister won't stop crying, and my friend won't leave her room, so I volunteered to come here and maybe get some advice."

As soon as Jim had started speaking, Di sat down on the bed and started moaning, getting back into character, while Dan pretended to look after her.

They heard the nurse tell Jim that she would help him in a minute, but she had another patient to tend to. The young nurse in her starched whites briskly entered the room, all business. "The doctor—" she broke off realizing that her young, female patient was not alone. "Oh, I'm sorry. Young man, you can't be in here."

"I'm sorry," Dan said, gazing into her brown eyes with the intense look that he had found to be effective with ladies, young or old. He saw a slight blush tinge her Gallic features, and he knew that his look was having the desired effect. "This is my sister," Dan lied smoothly, glad that he and Di were both what was known as "Dark Irish" and could pass as siblings. "Do you know what's wrong with her?"

"Oh, well, if you're her brother, I suppose you can stay. I don't know what's wrong, but the doctor is on his way."

Just then, Di jumped up. "Is there a bathroom close by?"

The nurse looked startled and pointed to a small door off to the side. Di rushed into it and shut the door. Dan hid a grin as he heard the sounds of Di retching. He knew that they were fake—part of their "extraction" plan to leave the infirmary without Di actually having to be admitted or diagnosed—since nothing was, in fact, wrong with her—but he had to admit that the retching noises sounded very real. Even though logically he knew better, he did begin to wonder if Di was actually getting violently ill. Diana really was quite the actress.

A few moments later, Di exited the bathroom, looking pale and wan, and Dan was impressed anew with her acting skills. She really looked like someone who was feeling truly ill.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized. "But that seems to have helped. The pains and cramps have gone away. Do you mind if I just retire to my room now instead of seeing the doctor? I am so sorry to have bothered you and him. But I think I'd just really like to lie down in my own room now."

The nurse looked at her with concern. "I really think you should see the doctor..." she trailed off.

"Please, nurse," Di pleaded in a pathetic voice. "I just want to go back to my room."

Dan once again gave the nurse "the look" and she relented.

"Well, since your brother is here and can help you back..." the nurse said, still not sounding very sure of herself. Dan and Di realized that they had really been very lucky to have encountered such a young, inexperienced nurse. The two began moving to the door, both thanking her and apologizing to her, and made their escape. As planned, Jim had already disappeared.

Dan continued to pretend to help Di down the passageway, and a few moments later they heard the nurse exclaim to herself, "Now where did that red-headed kid go?"

Dan and Di both broke into grins but did not dare look at each other. "Excuse me!" they heard the nurse call. They slowed and turned around to face her, Di screwing up her face in a look of wan illness. "Did you see a young red-headed man out here just now?"

"No, ma'am," Dan said truthfully. The nurse looked up and down the passageway, and then, shaking her head, headed down the passageway in the opposite direction, presumably to tell the doctor that he was no longer needed, as the situation had resolved itself.

As they made their way back to their quarters, Dan and Di excitedly filled Jim in on what they had found.

"That's bloody wonderful!" Jim exclaimed. "I can't believe that our plan worked!"

"It not only worked, it worked even better than I could have imagined since no one actually had to look over the poor woman's body for clues!" Di returned. "I don't know why we didn't think of just looking for the doctor's files before!"

Jim grinned. "Because we've never investigated a murder before?"

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Meanwhile, Honey was seated at the captain's table enjoying the caviar course, an enormous bronze statue that represented peace standing solemnly behind her. Seated between her parents, the young woman looked much older than her eighteen years, elegant and refined in the emerald green silk organza gown, her honey hair swept into an intricate up-do courtesy of her mother. Filling out the captain's table was a German baron and his wife and two older couples whose names Honey could not specifically remember, but the men had both been introduced as captains of industry traveling with their wives. Honey thought that maybe one of them was in steel and the other one was in aviation, but she had been too busy staring at the wives, who seemed to be wearing their husbands' fortunes quite liberally in the form of diamonds, to truly pay attention.

After the captain had signaled the waiters, standing alert nearby, to begin bringing in the hors d'oeuvres course, he asked the passengers seated at his table how they were enjoying their accommodations. "You all are staying in our finest suites. I hope that they are to your liking."

"Our family is absolutely loving ours," Matthew said immediately. "It's much more luxurious than I could have ever imagined possible on a ship. It's quite remarkable."

The German baron nodded. “My wife and I are quite impressed with the Grand Suite de Luxe Rouen,” he said.

“We feel very privileged to be traveling in such luxurious accommodations,” the baroness added. “We were in Rouen itself last year and were very impressed with the ‘City of One Hundred Spires.’”

The two older couples, who were traveling together in the Grand Suite de Luxe Caen, also commented on how impressed they were.

The conversation lagged slightly near the end of the hors d’ oeuvres course, after everyone had feasted on *œufs farcis à l’aurore* (stuffed eggs with cheese and tomatoes), oysters, foie gras served with toasted bread points, and other delicacies. Dinner was served *service à la Russe*, or in the Russian style, with each course brought separately, as opposed to *service à la Française*, service in the French style, which involved all of the courses and dishes being brought to the table at once in a very impressive display.

With the lull in conversation, Honey realized that it was her opportunity to engage the captain and try to find some information about the tragic incident that had occurred earlier that day in Touriste Classe. Sitting so near the captain and across from a baron and baroness, Honey was suddenly shy about trying to obtain information, especially since she was with her parents—who would rightly frown on her if she displayed anything but the most impeccable manners. Honey had always been careful not to embarrass her parents, and she didn’t want to start now in this most dignified setting where they were guests.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to bring up the unpleasant topic because, as her mind was floundering, one of the dowager women did her dirty work for her, engaging with the captain after the hors d’ oeuvres course had been cleared but before the servers had brought out the decorative salad course.

“So, Captain Lehuédé, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but I’m afraid I just can’t control myself any longer. Can you tell me anything about the rumors I’ve been hearing. Is there really a murderer on board this lovely ocean liner?”

Honey immediately looked to her right toward their host, who sat on the other side of her mother. She saw a slight tightening of the captain’s features at the woman’s question, but he graciously smiled and responded. “A murderer on board the *SS Normandie*?” he asked. “Wherever did you get that idea, Madame Anderson?”

Honey noticed that the captain did not directly answer the woman’s question.

“Well, I heard that a woman in Touriste Classe was found murdered,” Mrs. Anderson responded.

Honey’s attention was drawn to the German baron, who had looked down and suddenly seemed to be very interested in his napkin. Remembering that the victim was a German woman, Honey filed this information away and mentally vowed to keep an eye on the baron throughout the meal to see if she could glean any information based on his behavior.

The captain kept his smile in place as he answered, “Unfortunately, yes, a woman was found lying in the Touriste Classe passageway, and she was quite deceased. Our very capable medical officer is responsible for determining the cause of death, but I assure you that murder is not something that you need to worry about.”

Honey watched as the German baron visibly relaxed at what even she recognized as double-speak from the French captain.

As three servers approached the table with an array of decorative salads, the captain was able to gracefully change the subject. "Ah, here we go with the next course. I think that you will love the terrine salads," he said.

As the guests began to enjoy their terrines, the baroness asked the captain to tell his most interesting sea story.

The captain launched into a tale about his first voyage on the *Normandie*, not as captain, but as the ship's assistant navigator, in of May 1935. Captain Lehuédé's dark eyes glowed with pride as he finished, in his charmingly French-accented English, "It was quite exciting, earning that first Blue Riband!"

Matthew Wheeler lifted his glass of champagne and toasted, "To France's jewel, the *SS Normandie*."

Everyone at the table raised their glasses while the captain beamed with pride. Honey smiled to herself as she realized that her father had just earned the captain's favor with his simple toast. She felt a little giddy knowing that she could possibly capitalize on her father's favor with the captain in the course of the murder investigation.

Finally, after so many courses had been served that Honey had lost count, waiters arrived with dessert, and the young sleuth realized that she would soon lose her chance to speak to the German baron. With a spoonful of delicious ice cream fortifying her, she gathered up the courage to speak to the man and his wife.

"Baron and Baroness," she started, praying that leaving off their last name, which she could not remember, was not some horrible faux pas. "Where in Germany do you live?"

It was the baron who answered after politely patting his mouth with a crisp white linen napkin. "We live in Berlin," he said in his heavily accented German.

The baroness, a nice-looking woman with dark blonde hair that curled gracefully around an elongated neck and a warm and friendly—though plain—face, added, "That's where we live now that Johann's business has brought him to the capital of the Fatherland, but we're from Bayern. I believe it is called 'Bavaria' in English. It's in the southern part of the country."

"Where in Bavaria?" Honey asked, feeling at ease in the conversation now. She had loved Bavaria! "My parents and I recently traveled through there on our continental tour."

"*Wunderbar!*" the baroness exclaimed with a smile. "We are from a lovely, quiet place called Lauf an der Pegnitz, which is near Nuremburg."

"We went to Nuremburg," Honey said. "I fell in love with it! The medieval architecture was absolutely fascinating, and the Pegnitz River was so calm and serene."

What Honey didn't realize was that her father had almost avoided visiting Germany at all. They had not visited Munich because of its reputation as the "Capital of the Movement" and the birthplace of the Nazi Party, where lavish memorial ceremonies were held. The Wheelers also had almost skipped Nuremburg, which held annual Nazi rallies, but Madeleine had put her foot down and said that, as long as it was safe,

she wanted Honey to see Germany. Because Matthew had maintained that visiting the northern portion of Germany was out of the question, Madeleine had declared that they were going to visit either Nuremburg or Munich. Matthew Wheeler had not been happy with either choice, but in the end, he found Nuremburg to be more palatable.

The baroness was beaming at Honey's compliments, and even the stoic and unsmiling baron looked pleased with Honey's enthusiasm. "That river begins in my home town," the baroness explained. "As a girl, its banks were my favorite place in the world."

"I can see why. It's a shame that you had to leave such a lovely place, although I imagine Berlin has its merits, too," Honey said. She moved her hazel gaze ever so slightly to meet the baron's eyes. "And what business are you in that takes you to Berlin, if I may ask?"

"But of course," the baron said, but Honey had the feeling that he was being polite rather than actually interested in talking about himself. Maybe she was being too harsh, especially since she genuinely liked the baroness, but Honey found the man to be ferret-like and secretive. "I'm in finance, and for the past few years my financial dealings have brought me to Berlin quite frequently. Within the past year it became obvious that the best course of action would be to relocate to Berlin."

Matthew, listening to the conversation, was able to read between the lines, and he wondered whether Honey understood the intricacies of the baron's situation. Obviously, the baron was financing Hitler to such an extent that the madman had wanted him to relocate to Germany to give him a prestigious place in the Nazi government as a reward. To her credit, Honey noticed the look of distaste that flitted across her father's face before he quickly masked it, and she realized that there was more to the relocation than met the eye. She vowed to ask her father about it later.

The honey-haired young woman remained pleasant as she responded, "That makes a good deal of sense. I'm glad you're able to spend more time with your wife instead of traveling. Do you have children?"

At that, the baroness, who had been looking rather unhappy at the talk of relocation, began to smile again. Her beaming face left no doubt that she was, indeed, a mother. She answered, "Yes, a lovely ten-year-old daughter who is with her *au pair* now. She's had a grand time during the crossing."

"That's wonderful," Honey's mother interjected with a fond glance at her own daughter. "I remember that age. Honey was just starting to become independent and had so many delightful questions about the world around her. It fun to start introducing her to what I affectionately called the 'real world,' beyond children's parties and schools."

The baroness continued to beam, this time addressing Honey's mother. "That is true," she agreed. "That is why I happen to be on this crossing. Johann had sudden business on the ship, and Heidi is at the perfect age to appreciate an opportunity to travel to New York and experience such a lovely ocean liner. Even though Johann was reluctant at first, I was able to persuade him that Heidi and I should accompany him."

Madeleine smiled up at her husband and then looked back at the German baroness. "Men! They're so protective! Matthew was hesitant about this trip as well, but Honey and I prevailed, and I know that we're *all* glad, all three of us, that we did."

Matt Wheeler smiled indulgently at his wife. "Yes, as always, my better half—" He broke off and looked fondly at his daughter, adjusting his statement. "My better halves, I should say, well, they know better than I ever could about the ways of the world and what is best for this family."

Madeleine let out a tinkling laugh. "You're pretty worldly, Matthew Wheeler!" she protested, but then she grinned up at him, a wicked glint reflecting in her hazel eyes. "Worldly enough to know that women secretly run the world, that is!"

At that, everyone at the table laughed, even the sour German baron, although Honey thought that his laughter sounded forced, and the sentiment didn't seem to reach his watery blue eyes. The captain made a French joke about the cleverness of women, who should never be underestimated, and the dinner ended on a jovial note. The adults were ready to move on to the Grand Salon for dancing and after-dinner drinks, and although Honey would have been more than welcome, she made her excuses and, after shaking hands with the captain and thanking him profusely for a lovely evening and expressing a sincere good-night to the rest of her table companions, the eighteen-year-old attempted to make her leave.

Before she could, however, the captain laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Mademoiselle Wheeler, may I have a moment before you retire?" He looked toward her parents. "If it is permissible for your parents, of course." At their nods, he continued, "I'd like to get a young person's opinion about the ship, which often is geared toward adults or children, but not necessarily young people of your age."

"Of course," Honey murmured demurely. "I'd be honored."

The two waved the others on, although Honey noticed that the German baron was eyeing them suspiciously and had encouraged his wife to move on as he found an excuse to hover nearby. The captain didn't appear to notice, but Honey kept part of her attention on the German.

Captain Lehuédé didn't hesitate to speak to the young woman about the real reason that he had called her aside. "I understand that you are one of the young people who found the unfortunate women this morning," he said in a low voice. At Honey's surprised nod, he continued, "I want to thank you for your discretion at the dinner table this evening. You could have fed Madame Anderson's thirst for gossip, but you did not. I am very grateful for that."

Honey managed to say, "Of course."

"I am sure that you understand the gravity of the matter, and I will not insult your intelligence, as I am sure that even a brief glance told you that there was far too much blood for it to have been an accident. You showed a great deal of poise tonight at dinner, so I am trusting you to be discrete now, and I want you to know that we are looking for the person—or persons—responsible. I do not want you to be frightened that there is a wanton killer on the ship, seeking to harm just anyone whom he may find. Mademoiselle Eberhart was most likely...she may have invited...well, please just understand that I do not think that the typical passenger has anything to worry about, so I do not want this to dampen your trip. I would very much like you to continue to have the fun that a young lady your age deserves to have before she makes her way into the world, especially on such a special ship."

"Why, thank you, Captain Lehuédé," Honey said. "I appreciate your reassurance, and it's comforting to know that there is nothing to worry about. You have a lovely ship, and I am eager to spend the next few days enjoying her."

*“Très bien. Parfaitement,”* the captain said, nodding and grasping Honey’s slender hands in his roughened, seaworthy ones. *“Have a lovely evening, Mademoiselle Wheeler.”*

*“Merci,”* Honey returned. *“Et vous.”*

As she parted ways with Captain Lehuédé, it didn’t escape Honey’s notice that the baron was still loitering nearby. She had watched him out of the corner of her eye, and even as he pretended to remove a nonexistent piece of lint from his impeccable white jacket, fix the hem of his trouser, and buff an already mirror-like black patent shoe, it was clear that he had been stalling—and eavesdropping. That made Honey more convinced than ever that this “gentleman” had something to hide. She was a little frightened to travel back to her suite at that point, wondering if the German baron was truly sinister and would try to silence anyone who had any knowledge of the dead woman and her secrets.

Fortunately, Captain Lehuédé drew the man in. *“Baron von Ottendorf,”* he said, and Honey memorized the name, which she had missed earlier. *“Let us join everyone waiting for us in the Grand Salon.”* The baron meekly followed the captain without so much as a backward glance toward the young woman.

Honey breathed a sigh of relief and headed toward the Deauville Suite. Once safely ensconced in her luxurious “home,” she hurriedly changed out of her gown, which had made her feel somewhat like a princess, and into a silk pajama set, also emerald green and lined with purple silk piping that made her again think of royalty, and hurried on to the private promenade deck, a luxury that only two suites on the ocean liner were lucky enough to possess. She was hoping that one of the Belden teens, particularly Trixie, might be outside on the adjoining deck enjoying the night air, heavy with the pleasant salty sea breeze.

Honey was in luck. Sure enough, Trixie, unable to sleep because of the mystery at hand, was out on her side of the deck. The British teen was thrilled when she looked over the half-wall that separated the two decks to see Honey step outside. She had been pacing the deck, wondering when her new-found friend would return from dinner and, hopefully, head out on to the deck to report that she had exciting news about the mystery.

*“Honey!”* Trixie cried when she saw the young American girl. *“You’re back!”*

Honey grinned and hurried over to her friend. *“Yes, and I think I have good news for us! I learned quite a bit from our butler,”* she reported.

*“I learned a tiny bit from ours, but he seemed very reluctant to talk to us. All I found out was the woman’s last name, which sounds German,”* Trixie admitted.

*“She is!”* Honey said. *“Or, rather, was. Her name was Margarethe Eberhart, and she’s traveling as the caretaker for her mother.”*

Trixie’s hand flew to her mouth. *“Oh, dear! That poor woman! Losing her daughter on what was supposed to be a pleasure cruise!”*

Kind-hearted, empathetic Honey nodded. *“I know,”* she commiserated. *“It’s simply awful!”*

*“Did you find out anything else from the butler?”* Trixie asked.

“Not really,” Honey said. “I told him I wanted to pay my respects to Miss Eberhart’s mother because I was one of the passengers who found the body, and he said that he would see what he could do—and he seemed sympathetic. But I do have other news!”

Trixie leaned forward eagerly, noting the excited twinkle in Honey’s large hazel eyes.

“Do tell!” she encouraged her new American friend, who needed no further urging. In a flurry of words, it all came out, the German baron’s suspicious behavior—and the fact that she knew exactly where he was staying on the ship—the captain’s admission that the German woman had not been an accident, and the fact that she had been targeted for something that she had done or been involved in.

“I bet she was a spy!” Trixie exclaimed excitedly when Honey finished her discourse. “She’s German, and you said this German bloke is working directly for Hitler!”

“I said I *think* he’s working directly for Hitler,” Honey corrected. “It sounded like he finances him pretty heavily, but I can’t be sure until I ask Daddy.”

Trixie waved an impatient hand. “I can!” she declared. “Works in finances? Suddenly moves to Berlin? The guy’s working for that creep!”

Honey smiled at Trixie’s leap—and her absolute faith in herself and the logic that told her that she was right in taking that leap. What Honey wouldn’t give to have that level of confidence! And yet, she herself had been sure that the German baron was working for Hitler. She’d even implied it when retelling her story to Trixie. Was she really so different from this brazen English woman? After all, earlier that evening, she had held her own with a table full of impressively accomplished adults while she sought out clues to solve a murder. The captain of the ship had told her she had poise and had confided in her facts that he had not shared with the adults. In that moment, Honey vowed to stop thinking of herself as “that shy girl” and learn to be more like her new friend—bold, smart, brave...and always ready for adventure.

Author Notes: This chapter title is inspired by the title of Agatha Christie's novel, *Dead Man's Folly*. Many thanks to Julia and Susan for their wonderful edits, which definitely improved this chapter! Word count: 5,001.

## Chapter Six: Dead Woman's Folly

August 25, 1939

*Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean*

The next day, immediately following an early breakfast, the seven friends met at what they were now calling their "usual spot" on the open-air deck in third class. Honey described her conversation with the captain after dinner, and then Di breathlessly told of her adventures with Dan and Jim the evening before. Every so often, Dan or Jim would interject a small fact that Di had left out as Honey, Brian, Mart, and Trixie leaned forward in their seats, absolutely enthralled with the narrative unfolding before them. When Di finished, Mart forgot himself and gave her a huge hug,

"Diana Lynch!" he exclaimed. "That is one of the most amazing stories I've ever heard! What a brave and dedicated woman!"

Trixie, Honey, and Brian added their excited admiration about the trio's exploits of the night before, especially to Di, who had not only come up with the idea, but was critical for carrying it out, as well. Diana, for her part, looked dazed but pleased at the praise, and she seemed especially appreciative of the spontaneous but heartfelt hug that she had received from Mart Belden, who didn't seem fazed at all being on the giving end of a public display of affection with a young woman who was not his official companion.

"We've got all sorts of clues!" Trixie exclaimed when the praising had died down. She used her fingers to tick off the facts as she recalled them aloud for the benefit of the group. "We know the woman's name, that she was German, that she was traveling with her mother as her caretaker and staying in Cabin 2072, that she had dinner the evening before her death with a mysterious man named Schmidt who is staying in Cabin 1013 and with whom she wasn't traveling, that her death was not random nor an accident and she was targeted for a specific reason, that the cause of death was being struck with a pipe-like object, that the German baron probably knows something, and..." She trailed off and looked at her six companions questioningly. She had felt like she had begun to ramble on, and she suddenly felt shy. "Am I missing anything?"

Brian, scientific-minded and always methodically logical in his thinking, shook his head. "I don't think so, sis. I think you've covered all of the pertinent facts." Trixie beamed at the unexpected approval from her oldest brother, even as he asked the group, "So, what's next?"

The seven young people sat in silence for a moment as they considered his question. "We have room numbers. We could pay our condolences to Miss Eberhart's mother," Trixie offered.

"Don't you mean *Fraulein* Eberhart?" Mart asked drily.

"Is it too forward to call on Mrs.—Frau—Eberhart while she's grieving?" Di asked, chewing her lip worriedly as she considered proper etiquette.

"We'd definitely have to walk a fine line," Dan put in. "It's one thing to offer our condolences, but it's quite another to start asking her questions about her daughter, which could very possibly upset her. And she might not know anything anyway. We don't even know if anyone from the ocean liner has told her

the entire truth about her daughter's death. We've been assuming that Miss Eberhart was traveling with her as her caretaker because the woman was simply older and needed a travel companion. What if she needs a caretaker because she's not well? It's possible that she hasn't been told of all of the circumstances surrounding her daughter's death if her health is not good."

"That's a good point." Like Di, Trixie also began to chew her lip thoughtfully. "Honey's butler didn't seem to think that she was incapacitated according to what Honey reported, but he may not know better. Let's consider our other options for a moment and then think about the mother." She paused for a moment. "We *could* stake out the mysterious German man's room and see who comes and goes."

A grin slowly spread across Mart's features as an idea came to him. "Or we could take a page from the fair Diana's book and *make* something happen," he said, his grin firmly in place as he looked around at his siblings and new friends.

Trixie's grin, so much like her brother's, slowly appeared on her own freckled features. "I like the way you think, dear brother mine," she said. "We could pretend to work for the cruise liner and need access to his room."

"Exactly what I was thinking!" Mart exclaimed.

At the same time, Brian scoffed, "And what excuse would we give? And where would we get a uniform?"

The group thought for a few moments before Di said, "I remember that there was a spare nurse's uniform hanging up in the hospital room when I was there last night. What if one of us pretended to be a nurse seeking information on Miss Eberhart?"

"But why would a nurse be speaking to the man?" Jim asked. "The security officer already did—or we know he attempted to, at least. Why would a person from the medical staff be following up? And if a medical person did need to follow up, why wouldn't it be the ship's physician?"

"Good questions," Mart muttered, wishing that he had good—that is, easy—answers.

Again, there were a few moments of silence as the group of young people considered this new obstacle.

"We don't have to say it has anything to do with the murder," Trixie finally said. "What if whoever poses as the nurse pretends that it's a routine health call, just making sure that everything is the way it's supposed to be prior to landing in the United States. What do you think?"

"It *could* work," Mart agreed as he continued to chew on the problem.

"But how can we ask any questions about the murdered woman then?" Jim wanted to know. "We'd have to keep all of our questions strictly about the German man's health."

"Well, what other kind of ocean liner crew could we pretend to be? I can't think of any that would allow us to ask any questions about the murder. Other than posing as the *Normandie*'s security staff, and I'm not really comfortable doing that," Brian said. Then he amended his statement. "Not that I'm really comfortable posing as *any* staff."

Dan and Jim nodded together in agreement. “Too many things could go wrong posing as a security crew member,” Jim added.

“Maybe we do just need to go stake out the room,” Trixie said. “Maybe something will happen that we can take advantage of. You never know.”

“We can make it an event,” Brian said. “We haven’t given the rest of them a tour of first class yet. We can do that while we look to see where his room is located.”

Honey grimaced. “The last time we went on a ‘tour,’ we found a dead body! I’m not sure all of us going on a tour together is a good idea!” she stated, only half-joking.

The group ultimately decided that the tour was the best idea, despite how the last group tour outing had ended, and the Beldens and Honey showed their three new friends the Sun Deck, Boat Deck, and Promenade Deck, with their various attractions. Diana fell in love with the Winter Garden, and even Jim and Dan found the area fascinating, with all of its greenery that practically made the room feel alive. The group also toured the Café Grille and delighted in the brilliantly lit art deco columns and intriguing walls made from pigskin. Also on the tour were the longest promenade afloat on the high seas and a theatre that showed the most exciting shows that Europe had to offer right there on the ship.

Honey and the Beldens even showed their new friends their suites. Those staying in first class had been feeling modest and didn’t want to “show off” the opulence in which they were fortunate enough to be staying, but Diana expressed an interest in seeing the suites. So, with some hesitation, they included the Trouville and Deauville Suites in their tour. Moms happened to be on the Beldens’ private promenade deck, cross-stitching in the lively sea air, and she was thrilled to be able to meet her children’s new friends.

“Please, come sit out here and visit with me for a while,” she invited the young people, a friendly smile lighting up her face, after Mart had made the introductions.

For a moment, Jim couldn’t breathe. Not only did he feel like he was looking at Trixie in twenty years’ time, and feeling an odd sense of seeing into his future, but he also felt like he was seeing his own mother. It wasn’t that Mrs. Belden and his mother looked that much alike. Although their coloring was the same, the physical similarities ended there. Mrs. Belden’s features were more round and vibrant than his mother’s—Katie had seemed so thin and fragile to him, even when she was well—but there was a...motherliness, a genuine warmth common to both women that Jim was feeling wash over him now.

While Jim was trying to process his emotions, Brian was hurrying to respond to his mother’s request before Trixie could make the excuse that he knew she would. “We’d love to, Moms.” He glanced over at Trixie, who was shooting him an impatient, dismayed look. Giving her a significant, steady look, he continued meaningfully, “It must be lonely for you with Bobby gone with his nurse and all of us cavorting around the ship.”

His words had the desired effect, and Trixie immediately relaxed. “Yes, Moms!” she cried impulsively. “We’d love to keep you company.” She turned to her friends. “Have a seat. Honey and Di, would you like to help me get some refreshments?”

The three girls quickly set about piling silver trays high with scones, clotted cream, lemon curd, and tea—a perfect mid-morning snack. The Beldens’ butler had stocked a perfect British pantry as soon as he had learned that the family he would be taking care of on that sailing was from Great Britain. When

the three girls returned to the open-air deck carrying their treat-laden trays, they found Jim and Dan animatedly talking to Mrs. Belden.

As Trixie set down the tray she carried, she noticed an almost hungry look on both boys' faces, and the full weight of their situation settled upon her. These were two men who hadn't known the loving touch of a mother in years. The young girl's heart went out to them, and she felt a little ashamed. She had been annoyed when Brian had agreed to keep their mother company, eager to be on the hunt for clues to the mystery. She suddenly thought of life without Helen Belden, and she vowed to never take her mother for granted again.

"Diana," Mrs. Belden said after Jim had finished a story about hunting pheasants with his father and everyone had tucked into the delicious treats, "I understand that you're from Ireland. Please tell me about your home. I understand Ireland is absolutely beautiful."

With that simple request, Helen drew Di in, and she began to tell her friends' mother about the beauty of her homeland, her shyness at being in such grand surroundings falling away completely.

It was about an hour later, after the trays of food had been decimated and everyone was feeling quite at home with the lovely blonde woman, that Helen said, "This has been a lovely visit, but I won't keep you any longer. I know that you must want to explore more of the fun areas of the ship."

Trixie smiled and gave her mother a fierce hug. "Spending time with you, Moms, is a far better treat than anything we could find on this ship," she said, her voice full of emotion and her earlier resolution still at the forefront of her mind.

Surprised, Helen hugged her only daughter back. "What a lovely thing to say, Trixie."

After the seven young people had cleared away the trays to the small kitchenette for Jacques to make disappear like magic, they left the Trouville Suite and continued their tour, searching for Room 1013 to see if they could find the mysterious Herr Schmidt or some information that would help them solve the murder of the German woman. After a few minutes, Trixie excitedly signaled to her friends.

"Let's look through here!" she instructed, pointing to a door that indicated that it led to a corridor filled with state rooms. "I have a good feeling!"

Within a few moments of entering the passageway, Trixie was gripping Jim's arm excitedly and pointing at a door. Jim, happiness bubbling inside him at the feel of the warmth of Trixie's grip on his arm, smiled down at the animated young woman.

The seven young people came to a halt as they considered the room in question. It was located near the end of the long hallway, not far from a bank of elevators. It would be an easy exercise to watch the room while having a legitimate reason to be loitering about, as they could pretend to be waiting for the elevator. It might be a boring mission, but it was an achievable one at least.

Having "cased the joint," as Trixie insisted on quoting from the detective pulp magazines she was forever reading, the group headed to the nearby recreation room, which held table tennis and billiards tables, to discuss their next move.

Once they were all seated on a couple of the fashionable sofas and settees that bordered the edge of the recreation room, Jim said, "The set up is perfect for watching what goes on in that room. The

elevators give us a really good excuse for loitering, and we can hide around the corner and still hear what's going on. It's perfect."

"Perfectly perfect," Honey agreed. "So should we start watching him as soon as we come up with a plan?"

"We could pair off," Trixie said. "And take shifts."

"That's not a bad idea, sis," Mart agreed.

"And we can have one group of three," Brian added. "Of course we'll want to have at least one male in each pair. For safety."

Trixie saw Brian's serious dark eyes stray toward Honey, and she couldn't help but grin. "For safety," she echoed knowingly.

"Maybe hour-long shifts?" Mart asked, consulting his watch. "Two pairs of us could take a turn, and then we could all have lunch together."

"That's a grand idea," Honey agreed. "We could try out the Café Grille."

As if of one mind, all three of the third-class passengers looked down at their clothes.

There was a moment of silence before Di spoke up. "I'm not sure I feel comfortable eating in first class dressed like this." Her dress was a simple cotton affair in a lovely violet color that perfectly matched her eyes. It was worn and plain, but certainly very well and meticulously cared for.

"You look fine, Di!" Mart, Trixie, and Honey all cried at once.

"Truly, you do," Honey continued, "but if you're feeling uncomfortable, I don't mind if you borrow one of my frocks."

Trixie grinned wickedly. "You're welcome to borrow anything I own, but Moms had to absolutely force me to bring evening gowns for dinner. She knows how to pick her battles, so I don't have many dresses with me. I have a couple of skirt and sweater sets and dressy pants, but that's about it."

Di smiled at Trixie's impish grin. "I'm glad your mom allows you to be comfortable and didn't make you pack a lot of frilly dresses. You definitely don't seem the type."

"I'll say!" Mart said with a snort. Trixie merely sniffed and ignored her almost twin.

Brian looked at Jim and Dan. "You guys are fine, too, for lunch, but if you're not feeling comfortable, Mart and I would be glad to share some of our threads with you."

"Or we don't have to eat in the Café Grille, which is the most popular lunchtime spot," Trixie said. "We could also eat at lunch in the dining room. It's a lot less crowded than the grill and nowhere near as formal as it is at dinner."

Di said slowly, "I've heard that your dining room is absolutely legendary, so I *would* actually like to see it." She looked down at her basic, homemade dress. "If you're sure I'd look and fit in okay with what I'm wearing, I'm game."

“You fit in more than my dear sister does with her notions of still being a tomboy at her age,” Mart said drily. Trixie, proving her brother’s point, stuck her tongue out at Mart.

Jim laughed. “I like tomboys,” he said. “I think it’s great that Trixie follows her own drummer.” He looked at Di. “Obviously, I’ve not had the chance to frequent the dining room in first class, but I think you look absolutely lovely.”

Di blushed at the compliment. “Thank you.”

Dan interjected then. “So, it’s settled. We’ll eat lunch in the dining room at twelve-thirty sharp. I think I can speak for Jim and myself when I say that we wouldn’t mind borrowing some clothes, as our outfits have not been as well-kept as Diana’s—if you’re sure?” Dan looked to Mart and Brian, who both nodded. “Great. Thank you. Then one pair will keep watch on Schmidt’s room for the next hour, and one pair after that until lunchtime. Meanwhile, the others can go pay a visit to Mrs. Eberhart and give her our condolences.”

“That’s a great idea,” Jim said. “We don’t want to descend on her all at once.”

“How about this?” Trixie interjected, her natural leadership instincts kicking in. “Jim, Dan, and I will take the first shift. Mart and Di can have the second shift, which will give Jim and Dan time to change before lunch. Honey, you are definitely the most tactful among us, so why don’t you and Brian call on Mrs. Eberhart? Your butler said he was trying to arrange a visit, right?”

Everyone had their marching orders, so the group hurried in various directions to execute their plan. Jim, Dan, and Trixie headed to the bank of elevators near Schmidt’s room to spend the next hour watching to see if they could learn anything. Honey and Brian followed along with them, planning to take the elevators to the floor that held Anna Eberhart’s room. Mart and Di headed in the opposite direction to take a stroll along the first class promenade and spend some more time in the Winter Garden, which absolutely captivated the young Miss Lynch.

Jim, Dan, and Trixie stationed themselves in the elevator lobby. Dan and Jim took a seat on a nearby bench that was flanked with two potted ficus plants, while Trixie stationed herself near the corner and peered around toward Room 1013. The trio said their goodbyes to Honey and Brian, who disappeared into one of the gilded elevator cars for the ride down to the deck that the elder Eberhart was temporarily calling home. Brian and Honey exited on the correct floor and quietly made their way to Room 2072, an unassuming room in the very middle of the long hallway.

Once they stood in front of the unadorned wooden door, the two paused in nervous anticipation, looking at each other. Suddenly, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do, Brian reached for one of Honey’s slender hands and grasped it reassuringly. Honey felt a tingle travel up her arm as a warmth spread through her belly.

“You ready?” he asked in a low voice.

“As I’ll ever be. You?” she returned, also keeping her voice low and trying to ignore the burgeoning feelings within her.

“As I’ll ever be,” he echoed. With a last squeeze for reassurance, Brian let her hand go and knocked on the door before them. Honey, released from his mesmerizing grasp, took a deep breath and smoothed her hair.

Within a few minutes, they heard the sound of a lock being turned, and a slender middle-aged woman with short grey hair answered the door. She wore a tailored pantsuit and sensible shoes and exhibited a crisply efficient manner. The woman smiled pleasantly but curiously as she said, "Hello. May I help you?"

She sounded very British, and both Honey and Brian were thrown for a minute. They were expecting a French nurse, which this woman didn't appear to be. But neither was this woman German.

Brian recovered first and called on his best manners. "Hello, ma'am. I'm Brian Belden, and this is my friend, Madeleine Wheeler," he introduced, deciding at the last second to use Honey's more formal given name. "We're sorry to intrude, but we were hoping that we might be able to speak to Frau Eberhart."

The woman hesitated for a moment, stepping out into the hallway and shutting the door behind her. "I hate to be rude, but is this about her daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am," Honey responded. "You see, we were the ones who found her, and it made quite an impression on us, and...well, we wanted to pay our respects and enquire about Frau Eberhart's well-being. We can't even imagine how she's feeling, and we completely understand if she's not well enough—or doesn't want—to receive visitors."

At Honey's words, the woman's face visibly relaxed. "Frau Eberhart *is* rather upset," she said, sounding very stiff-upper-lip British in describing a mother who had lost her child as "rather upset," but Brian and Honey immediately understood as she continued, "but I think meeting the young people who found her daughter may actually give her comfort in a perverse way.

"I'm Miss Margery Trask, by the way. Margarethe—the poor thing—was serving as her mother's caretaker during the crossing. Word came my way about the situation, so I volunteered to see to Frau Eberhart for the remainder of the voyage. I often look after my invalid sister, after all. Please do come in," Margery Trask said, moving aside as she opened the wooden door to let the pair of young people into the meager but adequate room.

As Brian and Honey stepped through the threshold, Miss Trask addressed the German woman lying on the bottom bunk. "Anna, a pair of young people are here to see you," she said in a gentle and soothing voice.

There was no movement from the bunk.

"They knew Margarethe."

Brian and Honey were startled at the caretaker's rather audacious words—could you know someone in death?—and looked at each other in a panic, but the gently spoken phrase actually caused the woman to stir. The hazy form on the bunk began to shift and move until the bed's occupant—a stout woman with silvery blond hair that hung long and limp and a face lined with grief and age—turned to face them.

Her eyes, a pale, watery blue so bleak and dead of emotions as they stared at the newcomers, made both Honey and Brian flinch. Before them lay a woman who had given up all hope and had absolutely nothing left to live for. It was absolutely painful to witness.

“You knew my girl?” the older woman rasped, her voice scratchy from disuse or a long cigarette habit impossible to determine, but the mixture of grief and hope dripping from those four words was unmistakable.

Brian and Honey looked to Margery Trask for guidance on what to say next, considering that they didn’t truly know Margarethe Eberhart.

The temporary companion seemed to sense their panic because she stepped up immediately and said honestly, “They’re the ones that found her, Anna, and they wanted to pay their respects.”

There was a beat, and then the grieving, plaintive, German-accented voice asked, “You found my girl?”

“We did, Frau Eberhart,” Brian said, trying to keep his voice strong and masculine. “And we’re very sorry.”

There was a silence. “She was still beautiful at the end, was she not?”

Brian looked to Honey before answering. In response, it was she who grabbed his hand and squeezed it for reassurance this time. It gave him what he needed to continue, “She was indeed beautiful, Frau Eberhart. We thought that she was sleeping at first.”

That had certainly been true in one sense. The seven young people had not been able to comprehend that the woman was dead, so sleep was the only possible explanation their traumatized brains had put forth in that horrible moment. But as each one had processed the violence before them—the blood...*everywhere*—they had known on another level that she was dead. But what harm could it do to tell the poor suffering woman a comforting white lie that was only a lie on a technicality?

“Did they tell you the truth?” the woman asked. Brian and Honey looked at each other in confusion before turning their attention back to the pitiful woman in the lower bunk.

“I’m sorry, Frau Eberhart,” Brian said. “The truth?”

At that point, the woman’s grieving features twisted into something vicious and hateful. “That those bastards murdered her!” she hissed.

Honey gasped as Miss Trask interjected, “Anna, you need to calm down.”

Brian took a few steps closer to the bed, kneeling down and grasping the woman’s hand, which she had stretched out to him even as wracking sobs overtook her. “Frau Eberhart, what do you mean they murdered her? *Who* murdered her?”

“*The Nazis!*” the woman spat out, as if the word “Nazi” was the most vile of profanities that she could have possibly choked on. “She confided in me the night before she died...”

At that, Miss Trask hurried over to the woman’s side and knelt, effectively displacing Brian. “Anna, you’re not feeling well. You’re not thinking straight. Please calm down. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

At that, Anna Eberhart turned venomous eyes on her new caretaker. “I am most certainly thinking straight,” she spat out. “My girl, my Margarethe, she knew the Nazis were evil. She knew they had to be

stopped. She was giving secrets to the British Secret Intelligence Service. It's why we were here, on this cursed French ship. I was her cover. But she was meeting an SIS agent. Giving him Nazi secrets."

At that revelation, Mrs. Eberhart gave a brittle laugh. "Margarethe looked like the perfect Aryan—those icy blue eyes, that flaxen blonde hair, the genealogy. Everything that they wanted in a good Aryan woman, a good Nazi." Again, the woman spat the word. "But they didn't know about our family's distant English connections. I am a good German woman, but my parents sent me to England after all of the upheaval on the continent during the Great War."

At that, a faraway look came into the woman's pale eyes. Miss Trask looked as though she wanted to speak, but Mrs. Eberhart continued her narrative. "As a young girl, Margarethe was so obsessed with doing good, being her best, with knowing my stories of the war, with learning English. It served her well in connecting with the SIS and helping them with their intelligence. It also served her well in getting a job within the Nazis. They drooled over her blonde hair, her blue eyes, and they positively salivated over her knowledge of English, which would help them infiltrate the enemy."

Suddenly, as if everything had just become too much, the older woman let her head fall back onto her bunk, clearly exhausted. It was in a weak voice that she finished, "And that's what killed her."

There was a moment of stunned silence as Brian and Honey tried to process the woman's words, and then suddenly Frau Eberhart turned her head again, struggling to place herself up on her elbow so that she was in a position to stare at them.

"*Bitte*, do not let my daughter die in vain," she pleaded in a newfound strong, clear voice. "Get that bastard she met with. Not the Englishman. I've met him. He was very kind to me. It's that German bastard, Schmidt, who came sniffing around and invited her to dinner. They found out she was spying. I know it."

At that, the woman collapsed on her bed, and Miss Trask was galvanized into action. "Please let me tend to her," she said as she looked directly into Brian's bewildered eyes. "You understand that she is grieving, and she has made up a fantastic story to help her process her daughter's death. You do not need to be worried about secret Nazi spy plots on the ship. I appreciate you wanting to pay your respects, but please take your leave so that I may take care of her."

"Of course," Brian managed to gasp out. He and Honey said hurried good-byes and left, careful to close the door behind them.

Outside of the room, the duo looked around and determined that they were alone. They stood there, speechless.

"Could it be true?" Honey finally asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't know," Brian responded. "It seems strange that a spy would confess to her mother that she was a spy, but maybe she knew she was in danger? On the other hand, the mind protects itself in fantastic and mysterious ways. The whole thing could be a fantasy, as Miss Trask said, and a way for the woman to deal with her grief. Instead of blaming herself for bringing her daughter on the ship that caused her death, it's easier to blame it on Nazis. They *do* rather seem to make a good scapegoat for just about everything these days."

“But if it *is* true...” Honey said, her voice trailing off. The two stared at each other, the gravity of the situation suddenly crashing down around them.

Author Notes: This chapter title is (obviously) inspired by (okay, copied directly from) the title of Agatha Christie's novel, *Evil Under the Sun*. There's also an *X-Files* reference, which also is included in earlier chapters, but I forgot to point that out when I posted, lol. I also couldn't help throwing a shout out to my doctoral advisor. Thank you so much to the lovely Julia, who always helps me find the perfect way to say something and points out that I didn't *really* mean to type the word I typed! {{hugs}} Many thanks to Susan, who squeezed her stellar edit into her very busy schedule. {{hugs}} Word count: 5,867.

## Chapter Seven: Evil Under the Sun

Meanwhile, Trixie, Dan, and Jim were growing increasingly bored as the minutes ticked by and nothing happened outside of the mysterious German man's room. Not that they had expected anything different—it would be too lucky for any major development to happen as soon as they started watching the room. It was nearing the time when Mart and Di were supposed to relieve them when Dan, peeking around the corner, announced quietly that a man was traveling down the hallway toward them.

This did not garner much excitement, as they had seen several passengers moving up and down the hall as they traveled to and fro on the ship. Generally, these had been pairs or groups. Lovers, young and old, strolling hand in hand, enjoying the romanticism of the renowned French ocean liner, or families, chattering happily as they made their way to the pool or the theater to see one of the legendary puppet shows.

As the man slowed near their target's room, Dan's heart began to beat faster, and he hissed to Trixie and Jim, who were flirting innocently with each other, "He's visiting the room."

At that, Trixie and Jim immediately forgot their flirtations and eagerly joined Dan, carefully peering around the corner at their quarry. Trixie noted that the man standing in front of the door looked a lot like the description Honey had given of the German baron. The young blonde sleuth memorized the man's appearance as he hesitated in front of the door and furtively looked up and down the passageway. Clearly convinced that he was alone, the man raised a hand and knocked three times on the door. He paused and then knocked twice. He paused again and then knocked four times.

"A secret knock!" Trixie breathed. "There *must* be something untoward going on!"

Jim and Dan nodded, but neither of them spoke. The trio heard the door open followed by a gruff voice speaking in German. Crestfallen, the three looked at each other. They had forgotten that any conversation would probably be in German, a language that none of them knew!

The man standing in the hallway responded, clearly terse and unhappy. With another furtive glance in either direction, he entered the room, and the door closed loudly behind the two men.

Jim, Dan, and Trixie, who had realized that they had been holding their collective breath, all exhaled and looked at each other.

"What now?" Trixie said, an odd mix of frustration and excitement entering her voice.

"Let's go hang out outside of the room," Dan suggested.

Trixie brightened, clearly not considering the dangers of loitering by the door and eavesdropping. "Okay!" she agreed immediately.

The two set off down the hall straight away before Jim, who had been about to protest about the wisdom of that plan, could even utter a word. Instead, the redhead found himself alone as his friends sped away from the elevator lobby and parked themselves “casually” outside of Room 1013.

Dan leaned against the wall next to the doorway and carelessly took a half-penny coin out of the left front pocket of his worn brown wool pants and tossed it in the air. Anyone walking by would see an air of casualness, but Jim could see the taut concentration his oldest friend displayed as the redhead approached the doorway himself. Dan was a wiry young Irish lad, and right now his lean frame was wound like a tightly coiled spring.

Although the trio could not understand what was being said, they could recognize loud, angry voices in any tongue. Neither German man was happy.

At one point, after a particularly loud outburst, Dan’s face darkened with a sudden look of comprehension, and Trixie wondered what he had understood in that moment. Before Trixie had a chance to ask him about it, loud angry footfalls could be heard approaching the door. The three high-tailed it toward the elevator banks and were just turning the corner when the door opened, and the visiting man said sharply, “*Schweinehund!*” and stalked down the hallway in the same direction from which he had come.

“What did you hear him say?” Trixie asked Dan as soon as the three young people were safely out of sight in the elevator lobby.

“Heard who say?” Mart asked as he and Di joined Jim, Dan, and Trixie in the little lobby area.

“Another German man just visited Schmidt,” Trixie explained. “He looked a lot like the description that Honey gave of the German baron she had dinner with last night. He seemed... cultured. He gave a secret knock and went into the room and then got into an argument with Schmidt.”

“Schmidt’s leaving right now!” Jim hissed. He had continued to watch the room from around the corner while Trixie caught Mart and Diana up on the most recent events.

“Follow him!” Trixie hissed in return, springing into action and acting impulsively, grabbing Jim’s hand and pulling him down the passageway after the man.

Left behind, Dan looked at Mart. “Is your sister always like this?”

Mart nodded ruefully. “She’s pretty impulsive and loves adventure, so...yes. I can’t count the number of scrapes she’s gotten herself into over the years.”

Dan grinned at that but didn’t comment.

Meanwhile, Jim was reveling in the feel of Trixie’s small, soft hand in his larger one. Her palm was silky, warm but not clammy, just right as far as he was concerned. He wondered if he was having the same effect on Trixie that she was having on him.

For her part, in the back of her mind, she was definitely enjoying the excuse to hold the handsome redhead’s hand, but Trixie Belden was so focused on the mystery that it was only a pleasant thought lounging casually at the back of her mind.

They followed the man out onto the promenade deck, where he loitered near a potted ficus plant and took out an elegant silver case and a matching lighter. Extracting a cigarette, he brought it to his lips and lit it. A cloud of smoke billowed around his head and then disappeared into the salty sea air. He had only been there a minute or two when another man joined him. Trixie and Jim were fortunate enough to find a bench near the railing that faced the pair and was also close enough that they could hear the conversation, which they didn't expect to understand.

To their pleasant surprise, the gentleman who joined the mysterious German man revealed himself to be British as soon as he spoke.

"Pardon me, kind sir, would you mind allowing me to borrow your lighter?" he asked, and Trixie was sure that it was some kind of spy code.

Schmidt immediately held out the silver gadget he had just used to light his own cigarette. "It's a family heirloom. Real silver," he responded, his English heavily accented with a guttural German sound.

"And a handsome one at that," the Brit responded.

Trixie was more convinced than ever that the conversation had to be some kind of secret language. Who *actually* spoke like that?

"You're welcome to have a seat if you'd like," Schmidt invited.

"Don't mind if I do," the newcomer said, taking a seat on the bench. "It is a lovely day to take in the sea air."

Trixie studied the British man as he sat. He was slender, with a wrinkled, wolf-like face, silver hair cut very short, and piercing hazel-green eyes. The grey cashmere suit he wore was impeccably tailored to his slender frame, the navy blue silk tie providing the only color to the man's visage.

To Jim, everything about him screamed "predator." He was unpleasantly reminded of the dreadful memories of the predator he himself had been left with after his mother died.

Seemingly satisfied with the exchange, the silver-haired man began to speak in a lower voice. "Well, Schmidt, what do you want? It's not ideal to meet on the ship, you know. Have you learned anything about the gift? The nature of it? Whether it is onboard?"

Trixie was gratified to hear that the name that Dan had gleaned from casing the hospital room had been confirmed. And now they had a definitive face to go with the name.

"Unfortunately, I had to dispose of the package before I could determine anything about the gift," the German man said.

The Brit said drily, "And apparently had no time to dispose of the package properly." There was a long pause as he took a drag on his cigarette and then added disdainfully, "You left a mess."

"I know, but I heard some kids coming down the hallway. Would you have liked me to stay to greet them?" Even with the German accent, it was hard to miss the sarcasm. Trixie and Jim exchanged a glance. They instinctively knew that *they* were the "kids" in question.

“Anyway,” the German continued, “I wanted to talk to you about our friend. He came by my room today. He’s not happy. He didn’t realize how the package would be taken care of, and he wants out. I am afraid he will become what you call...the loose cannon.”

The British man smiled, a grim, determined smile. “There is no out. He should know that by now. I thought his support and resolve had been verified at the highest level.”

“His financial support of the cause is generous and real. Apparently, he is squeamish about certain other aspects.”

“Even though she was a traitor to her homeland?”

At that, Schmidt snorted. “You’re a traitor to *your* homeland, Waters,” the man pointed out.

There it was again. That grim smile, as if the man had no soul. “And I fully expect to be summarily executed if I am ever found out. It *does* go with the territory.” He was eerily calm about that fact as he took another long pull on his cigarette. “Besides, my mother was German. It was my British bastard of a father who raised us on that godforsaken dreary island instead of in the Fatherland.”

Schmidt gave him a look of icy disdain. “Life on the continent was no picnic after the Great War, either, you know.”

“That’s neither here nor there,” Waters said in a bored voice. “I believe I have a lead to determine the nature of the gift. I will keep you informed. Keep an eye on the baron. If he needs to be handled, do let me know.”

The predator stood, extinguishing his cigarette butt beneath his foot. His eyes swept over the deck in what Trixie recognized was a deceptively casual manner, and her heart skipped a beat as hazel, determined eyes paused on her for the briefest second. Fortunately, as soon as the man had stood, Jim had thought quickly and leaned in as if whispering something in Trixie’s ear. To a casual observer, it would look as though he and Trixie were a romantic pair, enjoying the sun and each other, and Trixie was simply looking forward as she listened to the sweet nothings her paramour was gently whispering.

Seemingly satisfied with the scene before him, the wolf-like man turned on a well-clad heel and disappeared through one of the doors that led to the interior passenger areas. Trixie and Jim watched as Schmidt finished his cigarette and lit another one.

“My stepfather smoked like a chimney,” Jim muttered as he watched the man, the distaste in his voice evident. “I’ll *never* smoke because of that.”

“Good,” Trixie said absentmindedly. “It smells really bad, and I’d hate to be around it.”

Jim smiled down at her. “Are you suggesting that we’ll be seeing each other after we land in New York? That you care enough whether or not I develop a distasteful habit?”

Trixie’s heart skipped a beat, and she suddenly realized just how close she was sitting to Jim. And she was tongue-tied again to boot! “I...I...” she stuttered.

Jim followed his instinct of the day before and reached out to tug what he now thought of as *his* curl.

"It's okay," he said, his voice husky. "I know I'd definitely like to see you more when we reach New York. Do you have any idea where you and your family are going to relocate?"

Trixie shook her head, trying desperately to regain her equilibrium. "No," she said, struggling to form a coherent sentence in the face of those brilliant green eyes. "Uncle Harold is out in Idaho, but I know my father is not too keen to settle that far west. Uncle Andrew has a sheep farm in Iowa." Suddenly, her voice took on a wistful tone. "New York sounds lovely. I've been reading about the Hudson River ever since my parents told us that we would be emigrating and landing in New York. The rolling hills outside of New York City, out in the countryside, but being near enough to the excitement of the big city—I think I would really like that!"

"My great uncle, whom I'm going to find, lives in a town along the Hudson River north of the city. Maybe you could convince your father that that's where you need to be."

Trixie smiled shyly. "That would be really nice. Honey told me that her mother was going to talk to her father about buying a house in the country north of the city, also somewhere along the Hudson." Forgetting herself, Trixie reached out and gripped Jim's hand in hers. "Could you imagine if we somehow managed to end up in the same place?"

Jim squeezed her hand in return. "That would be the bee's knees, as I believe they say in America," he said, smiling softly down at her.

Just then, Schmidt ground out his second cigarette and stood up. Trixie and Jim reluctantly turned their attention from each other and their fanciful plans and carefully followed the mysterious German man with their eyes. He disappeared through the same door that his British compatriot had, so Trixie and Jim stood and followed at a safe distance.

The man went directly to his room. Trixie and Jim passed by the man's doorway quickly and headed to the elevator lobby to see if their friends still were there. They were and had been joined by Honey and Brian. Everyone was talking excitedly, and it seemed that there was a great deal of thrilling news to be shared. When Trixie and Jim joined the group, everyone wanted to hear their information as well.

Mart looked at his watch. "It's half past eleven," he said. "How about we get ready for lunch and then share all of our information in the dining room?"

Trixie looked at her brother knowingly and said with a sniff, "Leave it to you to think of your stomach at a time such as this, Mart Belden."

Before Mart could protest and the almost twins could launch into one of their infamous bickering sessions, Brian interjected, "I want to hear all the information as fast as possible, too, Trix, but we were going to luncheon soon anyway, and we'll be more comfortable there." He looked around. "Not to mention that we'll attract a lot less attention sitting at a table in a dignified manner rather than milling about in the elevator lobby not far from the German man's room. Considering the fact that some of us have been loitering here for quite some time, we're lucky we haven't attracted a lot of negative attention as it is."

Trixie grinned at her oldest brother, her ire completely dissipated by his logical comments. "You're right, Bri," she conceded. "And I have to admit I'm a bit hungry, too." She looked around at her friends, a wide and becoming smile curving her cherry lips. "Let's go!"

After a visit to their suites, where Mart and Brian had loaned Dan and Jim, respectively, outfits, and Diana had given in and borrowed one of Honey's pretty frocks, the crowd of seven entered the Grande Salle à Manger with Honey in the lead. The young Wheeler politely informed the *maître d'hôtel* that she needed a table of seven for her herself and her friends, and he was more than happy to oblige for the lovely young woman who had dined with the captain the evening before. Jim, Dan, and Di breathed sighs of relief as the man did not seem to find them out of place with the rest of the group.

The dining room, with its numerous tables, was nearly empty for lunch. The maître d' led the group of friends, who had become rather quiet as those who had not experienced the dining room gazed in awestruck fascination at the opulent decadence surrounding them, to a table in the corner of the mirrored room.

Once seated, the young people were quiet as they studied their menus—something that did not exist in third class, as everyone ate the same soups and stews at every meal. Jim, Dan, and Diana were captivated by the expansiveness of the *carte du jour*, which offered a variety of delights, including hors d'oeuvres, potages, fish, pasta, roasts, a cold buffet of assorted cold-cut meats, lettuce salads, a cheese course, *entremets* (assorted French pastries), and a variety of beverages. It was a veritable feast with a varied selection for any taste, and the seven young people suddenly realized their hunger and ordered with gusto.

After they had given their selections to the attentive server, Trixie and Jim shared what they had overheard on the promenade deck. Honey and Brian relayed the conversation that they had had with Margarethe Eberhart's mother, whose belief that her daughter had been murdered because she had been spying on Germany for Great Britain had been borne out by Schmidt's and Waters' conversation.

"The 'package' that Schmidt and Waters were talking about taking care of must have been Miss Eberhart. They practically admitted to murder!" Trixie exclaimed.

Brian shook his head. "Not quite. Nothing about a package says 'murder,' at least not conclusively."

Dan grinned. "No, but directly talking about murder directly is pretty damning."

Trixie stared at Dan for a moment before realization dawned. "That's what you heard when Schmidt and the baron were arguing! I never did find out what you understood!"

"I did recognize two words said very close to each other," Dan confirmed. "One was the word *Mord*, which means murder, and the other was *Mädchen*, which means girl."

"I wonder if Waters is the Englishman whom Mrs. Eberhart said that she trusted," Trixie mused aloud just as several waiters approached with a variety of foods to place on the table. Lunch was served *service à la Française*, with all dishes served at once in a very impressive display rather than in separate courses, as during the dinner service.

The seven young people tucked into the food with enthusiasm after all of the dishes had been placed on the table. Some of the items were not to their liking, but some of the items they found to be downright delicious. Jim, Dan, and Di were basking in the change in variety of their normal diets. For the last few years, Di's diet had mainly consisted of corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes—and those were the good days, when meat had been available. Most times, the family's diet had consisted exclusively of porridge.

For Jim and Dan, having *any* food, especially fresh food, was exciting. Being on the ship had been a blessing in that regard. Meals were a given, even in third class, and filling meals at that, if not quite as palatable as all of this gourmet food being showered on them now.

As they were halfway through the meal, Trixie said, “We’ve only got two more full days left on the voyage. We should eat here for lunch each day.”

“What a great idea, sis,” Mart agreed as he took a second helping of the leg of veal from an elaborate silver platter. He turned to Di. “And you should invite your parents and the twins, too. And Honey’s parents and our parents could come, so that everybody can get to know each other.”

“That would be brilliant!” Trixie exclaimed. “It would be so wonderful for all of the families to get to know each other and settle nearby! Jim and I were talking about it out on the promenade. His great-uncle lives in a little village on the Hudson that sounds a lot like where Honey’s parents want to buy a place. Do you know where your family is going to settle, Di?”

Di shook her head. “No, but I think my mum and dad figured that we would settle somewhere in New York City. We have some relatives there. We’ve a cousin who lives in Brooklyn and another in the Bronx. They’re both firefighters. We’ve a distantly related uncle in Hell’s Kitchen, a policeman.

“I know my dad is worried, though. He’s too old to be a firefighter or a policeman, so he’s not sure what kind of work that he’ll be able to get. Our family’s lived in Kilmainham for generations, and it’s more rural than industrial. We had a farm, but the bloody English killed that pretty well, they did.” She blushed and began to stammer an apology as she realized that four of her companions were “bloody English.”

It was Mart who waved her apology away. “Understood, Di. Please do go on.”

Somewhat apologetically, Di continued her explanation. “My dad got a job as a janitor in Dublin, and it nearly killed him, it did. I know that his roots are with the earth and that he would love to go back to farming rather than work in a crowded city, but he figures that’s where the jobs are. We haven’t the money to buy a farm when we get to America.” Her voice grew wistful. “But havin’ a farm along the Hudson River sounds lovely, it does. Our farm in Ireland was just south of the River Liffey, the main river that flows through Dublin, and I imagine it to be similar.”

“Our family is more country than city, too,” Trixie said. “Both of my dad’s brothers have settled down in the country, both of them in the more western part of America. I don’t think my dad really wants to live in either of those areas, though. I think he wants to stay in the eastern portion of the States because he figures that it will be easier to travel back to England. I don’t think he really wanted to leave.”

As the seven continued to make their way through the massive amounts of food in front of them, they chatted about how fun it would be if they could all manage to settle near each other in America. After they had stuffed themselves beyond belief, most everyone agreed that they needed to take a stroll around the promenade deck to help them digest their considerable meal.

Only Di had to decline, saying, “My stroll is going to have to be from first class down to third class. Mummy has been absolutely wonderful in allowing me some freedom, but I really need to help her out with the twins this afternoon.”

"I'll escort you, my dear lady," Mart said in a formal voice, holding his arm out for her with a flourish. "And I will help you take care of the twins. I remember when Bobby was that age."

Trixie sniffed, but her blue eyes were twinkling. "You may remember, but not because you had any personal experience with taking care of him. That was *my* job!"

Brian interjected with a smile, "Moms has always done the lion's share of raising us kids, even Bobby, so you can *both* stop right there."

After the laughter had subsided, Mart asked, "Before we leave, tell us the plans for later so we know where to meet."

"I think we should pay a visit to the baron. Honey mentioned that he and his wife are staying in the Rouen Suite. A couple of us could check that out. As for later, I'm not sure. Like Di, I should probably check in and see what's going on with Bobby. I know that the ship was kind enough to assign a nurse for him and that he's been having a wonderful time seeing puppet shows and swimming in the pool, but I still feel like I should spend some time with him. A nurse just isn't the same as family," Trixie concluded.

Honey, who had had her fair share of nurses and governesses over the years, murmured her approval of Trixie's statement.

"We Beldens have been invited to dine with the captain at the second seating tonight," Mart added.

Jim let out a sudden bark of laughter. "That captain doesn't know what he's in for between Honey's clever interrogation last night and Trixie taking a swing at him tonight." Everyone joined Jim in his amusement before Mart and Diana regretfully said their good-byes and departed for the lower deck.

The remaining group decided what to do next.

"I think we should definitely linger around the Rouen Suite and see what we might find," Jim offered.

"You know," Dan said thoughtfully, "if the baron isn't pleased with the new development, he may be willing to talk—or easily tricked into talking."

"Unless the British guy does his job and scares the man, which it certainly sounds like he was going to do," Brian countered.

Honey shuddered involuntarily. "I don't think I'd be brave enough to talk if I knew that there was a potential for death! How much danger are we putting ourselves by pursuing this?" she wondered.

Brian, Jim, and Dan exchanged glances, which caused Trixie to put her hands on her hips and frown at the three young men. "Hey! *Boys!* Don't be looking at each other like me and Honey are fragile flowers!"

Dan and Jim grinned at Trixie's response, even through their unease at Honey's question, while Brian remained unwavering. "We *do* need to be careful, Trixie," he admonished.

"Yes, big brother, *we* do. As in *all* of us. Boys *and* girls." Trixie kept one of her hands on her hips as she raised the other arm and poked her protective older brother with a determined finger. "Don't you go treating Honey and I as anything less than the very capable women that we are!"

Shocked, Brian could do nothing but try to stutter a response as Dan and Jim looked on in amusement.

"It's okay, Trixie," Honey soothed. "It just means that the boys care about us and our welfare."

The moment smoothed over by Honey's tact, the five young people agreed on a plan of action and headed toward the middle of the Promenade Deck, where the Rouen and Caen Suites were located.

As it turned out, they didn't even make it to the Rouen Suite before they met the German baron and his wife out strolling arm-in-arm on the promenade.

"Hello, Miss Wheeler," Baroness von Ottendorf greeted the young debutante with a genuine, charming smile. "Having an outing with your friends?"

Honey focused on the baroness, who looked nothing but friendly, rather than on the baron, who was eyeing Jim and Dan. She didn't even want to glance at Trixie, whom she was sure was bristling at the condescending look on the German baron's face.

"Yes, it's such a lovely day that we didn't want to spend time at the indoor pool or in the Winter Garden when the crisp sea air is so invigorating," Honey responded, a pleasant smile on her face. She gestured toward her companions. "These are my friends. Miss Beatrix Belden and her brother, Brian Belden. These are James Winthrop Frayne the Second and Daniel Mangan, who are relocating from London to New York with Jim's great-uncle." And finishing the introductions, "Trixie, Brian, Jim, and Dan, these are the Baron and Baroness von Ottendorf from Germany."

After a round of polite pleasantries, Honey explained to the rest of the group, as if they weren't already highly aware, "My parents and I had dinner last night with the baron and baroness at the captain's table. We all had a wonderful time."

"That's marvelous," Brian said. "My family is dining with the captain this evening, and we're quite looking forward to it."

"It will be *wunderbar*," the baroness responded. "Captain Lehuédé is a gracious host and a marvelous storyteller with so many fascinating sea tales. And the food! It is, as the French say, *magnifique!*"

Brian chuckled. "My brother Mart will be glad to hear that. He has quite a fondness for both stories and food!"

The baroness laughed, a pleasing sound that was infectious. Given how agreeable and charming she was, it was hard to believe that she was married to such a bland, unpleasant man. Honey briefly wondered whether it had been an arranged marriage, and the baroness had only stayed so pleasant over the years because she was one of those happy, optimistic souls who could make the best of any situation. In any case, Honey's admiration for the woman grew immeasurably during their encounter on the promenade.

"So, your brother, he loves stories. He is a writer?" the baroness wanted to know.

Brian nodded. "That's his ambition, ma'am. We're emigrating to the United States, so I'm sure that he will find a good university in which to study writing."

"Brian, here, will be attending the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons when we arrive in the States," Trixie offered, once again beaming with pride.

“*Wunderbar!*” the baroness exclaimed. “Congratulations for being accepted into such an esteemed university—and for medical school.” Her face clouded a little. “Too bad you haven’t graduated already. We could use a doctor with a good head on his shoulders.”

“Baroness?” Brian asked, confused as to what she was saying. All five of the young people noticed that the bored look had left the baron’s eyes at his wife’s words, and he was suddenly paying her rapt attention.

“*Liebling*, I don’t think—”

The baroness waved an airy hand. “Nonsense! Fraulein Eberhart could use a good doctor to try to get her some justice. That lazy French doctor on the ship is incompetent!”

“Is the fraulein sick?” Trixie asked, already knowing full well the answer, but feeling it was important not to let the baron know that she knew the name of the dead woman. “Brian has been studying medicine for quite some years already, on his own and through his more medically oriented classes at Imperial College London. He might be able to help her get well.”

A sad look passed over Baroness von Ottendorf’s pleasant features as she said, “No, I’m afraid—”

“Franziska!” the baron said sharply. “This is really not something we should be burdening children with!”

Trixie bristled at his comment, but she was too polite to argue that she was *not* a child. And she didn’t need to, for the baroness was in full control of the conversation. Despite her husband’s sharp and disagreeable tone, the German woman laughed her twinkling laugh and waved an airy hand, her fingers long and slender and adorned with only her simple gold wedding band, worn on the right hand as was the German tradition.

“Please! These are *hardly* children, Werner. This one is heading to the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons!”

Trixie knew it wasn’t very polite, but at the baroness’ words, she couldn’t help but grin—a wide, satisfied, cat-that-ate-the-canary, taunting grin.

The baroness turned her attention from her husband to the young people before her. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the tragic incident on board. There was a German national, Margarethe Eberhart, and she was found dead on board under, shall we say, suspicious circumstances.” The baroness turned to Honey. “I know you’ve heard of it because that gossipy woman had the nerve to bring it up at the supper table. And at the captain’s table, no less!”

The baroness shook her head in reproach as she continued, “Well, with her being a German national—and a lovely young woman whom I’ve actually entertained in our house in Berlin—I’d like to make sure that she receives justice. The ship’s medical officer examined her, but he has not acted on what he learned! By the time that we arrive in New York City, I am sure that the American medical examiner will not have much to work with.”

At that, she sighed, not seeming to notice her husband’s discomfort at the turn the conversation had taken. “I wish we had encountered you after you had completed your training,” she said to Brian. “I am sure that you would be an improvement over that French man—who’d rather be flirting with his nurses and lounging about the ship than actually working!” she finished indignantly.

She seemed to realize that she had been rather outspoken in her opinions and suddenly gave an embarrassed smile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be so candid," she said contritely. "I just feel...*passionately* about justice, and it pains me that this poor young woman is not going to receive it."

It was Trixie who spoke up first. "She *will* receive it, Baroness von Ottendorf. I'm...well...I know that I *am* young, but that doesn't have to be a disadvantage." To Trixie's credit, she did not turn and give the baron a withering look as she said this, although she had considered it. "I, too, feel strongly that everyone should receive the justice that he or she deserves. And ever since we discovered that poor woman's body, I, too, have desperately wanted justice for her."

The baroness gasped at the young woman's words. "You found the body?"

Trixie nodded gravely. "We didn't know her name at the time," she explained truthfully, "but yes, we all did. All seven of us. My brother Mart and our friend Diana were with us, too. And we all agreed that we wanted to find that poor woman justice."

The baroness reached out to touch Trixie's arm. "Well, bless you for that."

"Franziska," said the baron, whose face had turned increasingly red throughout the conversation, "justice is a wonderful concept, but these ch...*young people* should not be burdened with such profound notions, particularly when they should instead be enjoying this marvelous ship and all she has to offer. As a matter of fact, we should not be talking their ears off. Let us allow them to go enjoy themselves."

He bowed stiffly at the young people and placed a firm hand on his wife's elbow, leading her away even as he was saying, "Have a pleasant afternoon."

The baroness smiled apologetically at the group and said her good-byes as she allowed her husband to lead her away. Apparently, she did not want to make a scene, because nothing about her previous behavior had indicated that she was the type to just meekly follow her husband—just the opposite, in fact. The five called their good-byes and then turned to stare at each other.

"Guilty conscience, anyone?" Dan asked.

Author Notes: This chapter title is a play on Agatha Christie's *Cards on the Table*, but in this case refers to dinner at the captain's table. Many thanks to Julia for editing and Susan for taking care of Jix and posting this when my life exploded. I am hoping to be back to Jix soon! Word count: 3,778.

## Chapter Eight: Cards at the Table

That evening, during the second seating, Captain Lehuédé entertained eleven individuals at his table, including five of the six traveling Beldens. The remaining six members of the party were couples from England, France, and America. The English and French couples were older and both visiting family in America. The American man and woman, whom Trixie guessed to be in their thirties, were returning home after a "grand continental tour," as the bottle-blonde woman chirped to anyone who would listen.

The beginning of dinner was deadly dull to Trixie, as everyone provided their biographies, explaining how they had all come to be on the magnificent ship. She didn't care that Madame Moreau was pining to see her first grandchild, her only son "betraying" the family by moving to New York City to make his fortune on Wall Street and marrying *la Américaine*. She didn't need to know that Mrs. "Francine but you can call me CiCi" Fitzgerald had managed to visit eight countries in a month. She wasn't even particularly impressed to find that the Englishman was an earl.

During a lull in conversation, the English teen turned to address the captain, who sat at the head of the table three seats down from her. "How long have you been captain of the *Normandie*?" Trixie asked.

The captain finished a bite of creamy brie and then dabbed his mouth with a napkin, answering, "I've only recently taken over from my predecessor, Captain Thoreaux, but I have been assigned to this beautiful ship for more than four years now."

"I bet you have a lot of fascinating stories, sir," Mart commented as he selected some cheese from *la plateau de fromages*.

Trixie smiled affectionately at her brother. "Mart is going to be a writer," she explained to the table. "He loves collecting interesting stories that inspire the characters that he creates."

"That's fascinating," the Englishwoman, who had been introduced as Mrs. Henry Ainsworth, said. "I'm sure that the captain will prove to be more than inspirational."

"I don't know about that," their host said, modestly, "but I do love to tell stories about this beauty I have the privilege of captaining. There was the time, during the summer of 1937, that..." With that, Captain Lehuédé launched into the tale of a storm that had come up rather unexpectedly in the Atlantic and the modern navigation tool, special to the *SS Normandie*, that had been employed to allow the ship to navigate around the storm and ensure that the trip remained calm and pleasant for the passengers.

Brian, ever the scientist, appreciated the use of technology, while Trixie loved the romantic notion of danger on the high seas.

She commented, "This is a beautiful ship—one that makes you forget the real world on land—but I imagine that it can't always be smooth sailing. That just wouldn't be realistic."

The would-be sleuth had meant for her words to have double meaning, and she carefully watched the nautical man's reaction. She was sure that his face clouded for a moment before he said, "The mademoiselle is wise. We like to think that we suspend our passengers in an enchanted world, allowing

them to immerse themselves in pleasure as they are suspended between two continents—two worlds—but you are correct. The real world, as you say, does intrude at times.”

“We were very sorry to hear that it intruded during this sailing,” Mrs. Fitzgerald said with a slight shudder.

The captain’s mouth tightened ever so slightly, but his demeanor remained pleasant. “Rest assured, Mrs. Fitzgerald, that the professionals on this ship are accustomed to handling all manner of situations. For example, our chefs. Did you know that they are capable of serving this delicious food to 700 people all at once during a single dinner sitting?” the captain said just as impeccable waiters approached with consommés that filled the air with rich, delicious aromas.

Dismayed though she was that the conversation had turned away from the topic of the onboard tragedy, Trixie had to admire the deftness with which the French captain changed the subject. Her quarry unattainable at the moment, the curly-haired blonde only half-listened to the conversation around her as she sipped the delectable consommé and tried to figure out a way to obtain more information from the captain.

It was the chirping voice of the American woman that pulled her from her reverie. “His name was Waters, I believe.”

Trixie quickly looked up from her soup to find that the blonde woman was addressing her own father. “Yes, St. Alban’s is rather near where we’re from in Aylesbury, but I haven’t met the gentleman.” He smiled gently as he dabbed his moustache with a napkin and said, “Not all British people are bound to know one another.”

Trixie entered the conversation then, trying to sound casual. “I met a man named Waters. Was he rather thin and distinguished looking? Short, silver hair?”

“Yes, that’s him,” the woman said. “He was most charming, even though he and Charlie had a very long and dull conversation about Charlie’s business.” She smiled sweetly. “I could listen to that accent all day. You all are so lucky to sound so cultured.”

“And what business are you in, Mr. Fitzgerald?” Trixie asked under the guise of politeness, eager to hear why Waters would be interested in having a long conversation about this man’s business.

“I work as an engineer for an American automobile company,” Charlie returned. Trixie couldn’t help but notice how his brown eyes shifted downward at the seemingly innocent statement.

*He’s hiding something!* she thought, but before she could gather her wits and determine how to pursue this particular revelation, her almost twin stepped in for her.

“Would that be the Ford Motor Company by any chance?” Mart asked in what Trixie recognized as a deceptively casual tone of voice. He had finished his consommé, his polished silver spoon resting on the exquisite white bone china bowl, delicately rimmed with gold and emblazoned with the CGT logo.

Neither of the almost twins missed the startled look that came over the American’s face before he masked it with a nervous smile. “Yes, that’s my company,” he admitted.

“That’s fascinating,” Mart said. “I think I might have read somewhere that Ford is expanding into airplane engines.” As he spoke, he lightly tapped Trixie’s foot with his own, signaling to her that this was a significant piece of information.

Trixie was watching Charlie Fitzgerald carefully, and she could see that he looked rather uncomfortable. “I understand that moving into that area is a distinct possibility with the current...political climate. America is Great Britain’s ally, and Ford is an American company,” the engineer replied before he immediately turned his attention to hurriedly spooning up the flavorful beef broth in front of him.

“The French Line is helping, too!” Francine-call-me-CiCi interjected in that annoying twitter that grated on Trixie’s nerves.

At his wife’s words, Charlie Fitzgerald turned to stare at her, *consommé* forgotten, mouth agape.

“Oh?” Trixie asked, staring inquisitively at the Americans.

The atmosphere at the table was fairly crackling with electricity, the guests’ antennae attuned to an undercurrent that spoke of intrigue. All eyes were on the American woman, waiting for her to explain her enigmatic statement, when the next course was served—and the proverbial bell saved either of the Americans from answering.

Captain Lehuédé smoothly entered into the expectant silence, again managing the conversation with deft skill. “Yes, the CGT certainly is doing its part to make its passengers forget the politics of the continent. Please enjoy this delicious poached salmon with mousseline sauce. I can assure you that the chef, trained to the most exacting standards of my home country, has prepared a salmon course that will delight your taste buds!”

Encouraged by their host, everyone turned their attention, if somewhat reluctantly, to their delicious fish with its delicate mother sauce.

Trixie, though she too placed forkful after forkful of the tender fish into her mouth, did not taste the subtle complexity of the dish that the others at the table were raving about. Instead, her mind whirled as the conversation turned to innocuous, vapid topics.

She thought about what had been shared at the table that evening. The subtext of the conversation had been that Ford was gearing up to produce airplane engines for Great Britain. Obviously, this couldn’t have been a great secret if Mart somehow knew about it, but then again, Mart had been traveling and gathering stories for months now. She might be the first to tease him, but she also was the first to admit that Mart had skills, and one of them was ferreting out information that no one else could. That talent was augmented with his steel-trap memory. Trixie knew with certainty that Mart had discovered some important truth during his travels, and it was coming into play now.

As the next course arrived, a delicately roasted duck with *pommes au four*, the sandy-haired sleuth couldn’t help but wonder what sort of specific details that Charlie Fitzgerald might have given to Waters, if he had assumed that the grey-haired man was a loyal Brit and on the right side of the current political mess, during the pair’s “long and dull” conversation.

And what did CGT have to do with it? Trixie had initially dismissed Cici Fitzgerald as a flighty woman not worthy of any attention, even to pass the time with while at dinner. Trixie was certain that this woman

had that effect on most people—which in turn could lead people to dismiss her and speak as if she wasn't even there.

It was entirely possible that Waters had dismissed the woman as Trixie herself had done, underestimating the American woman, and had carried on an important conversation not realizing that his quarry's wife was carefully cataloging everything that he was saying. Mrs. Fitzgerald might know more than she realized. And Trixie knew that this was an important avenue to be pursued.

As the remainder of the twelve-course meal was served, Trixie kept an eye on Cici, but the woman did not make any other enigmatic statements nor let any more interesting morsels slip. All she wanted to talk about were the sights that she had seen in Europe and on the *SS Normandie*. Trixie half-listened as Mart and Brian engaged in a discussion about English literature with the English earl and countess. Although Brian was more scientific minded, he had excelled at all of his courses and was able to speak rather intelligently about a variety of subjects. Meanwhile, the captain was carrying on a conversation with the French couple about the astounding specifications of the Grande Salle a Manger and kitchens, which Trixie heard the captain say had enough ovens to roast 768 chickens at once.

As she kept an ear on the other conversations, she made small talk with her parents, telling them a bit about her friends, and the innocent version of what she and her brothers had been keeping themselves busy doing on the ship during the crossing.

When it was time to retire to the Grand Salon for cocktails and dancing, Helen and Peter were surprised to learn that Trixie wanted to join them.

"Darling, we're thrilled, but are you sure?" Helen asked. "I really thought you'd want to retire to the suite so that you could change out of that gown as soon as possible!"

Mart had caught the significant look his almost twin had sent his way, and he jumped to her rescue. "Being in these swanky clothes is pretty dull, but I know that both Trix and I are dying to see the Grand Salon. It's one area we haven't seen yet."

Peter grinned at that. "Of course! You two are curious as cats, ready to explore. We'd love for you to join us." He looked at his oldest son. "Brian?"

Brian turned dark eyes to Trixie, and reading what he saw in her blue eyes, quickly turned back to his father. A slow smile spread across his quiet features. "I guess I'm just as curious as these two cats."

Peter gave a smile very similar to his oldest son's. "What a wonderful development," he said, turning to his wife. "Well, love, we're going to have to suffer through having our dear children join us in the Grand Salon. Are you up for that?"

Helen beamed at Peter as she offered him a gloved hand, which he accepted. "Quite, quite," she said. Even Trixie, usually so one-track minded when she had the scent of something, found herself softening as she witnessed the amused affection her parents displayed.

*I really am lucky*, she thought, suddenly thinking of Jim and Dan, who had each tragically lost both parents.

*How is something like that even allowed to happen?* she found herself thinking, but she immediately drew her attention back to the task at hand. She needed to get some answers from Cici Fitzgerald.

The Belden family gaily entered the luxurious Grand Salon just behind Captain Lehuédé, and the Belden siblings stood in awe at the opulence before them. The *SS Normandie's* captain witnessed their reaction and once again beamed with pride.

"She is amazing, no?" he asked.

"She is amazing, yes," Mart said as his round blue eyes took in every detail, capturing them for a future story. He knew that this exquisite room would have to enter into one of his writings some day.

Behind them, Trixie heard that twittering voice and knew that Cici and Charlie Fitzgerald had just entered the Grand Salon.

"It looks even prettier at night than it does for afternoon tea!"

Mart and Trixie shared a sly look and secret smile before they turned to the woman. "It is lovely, isn't it?" Trixie said as she deftly moved to stand by the blonde's side. "Shall we explore together?"

Cici giggled and looked at her husband. "I know that Charlie is dying to mingle with the captain away from that stuffy dinner table and have a 'man's talk,' so I'd love it if us gals could giggle and gab!"

Trixie smiled indulgently and winked at Mart, who returned her surreptitious gesture with a sly wink of his own before subtly leading Charlie off in the direction that the captain had taken. Brian noticed that his parents were taking the scene in with sharp eyes, so he moved forward to distract them.

"What did you like best when you were here the other night?" he asked smoothly, his future bedside manner on display.

With that question, the elder Beldens' thoughts strayed from the actions of their two middle children, and they immediately led Brian toward the twenty-two-foot-high windows with their enchanting view of the dark, rough waves shimmering under the glow of the nearly full moon above.

Meanwhile, Trixie was with Cici, and Mart, who had led Charlie Fitzgerald to the captain, had returned to her side. The young Belden woman had been sizing up her prey and decided that there was simply no reason to even try to be subtle in her questioning.

"That was an interesting comment earlier," Trixie said. At Cici's confused look, she explained, "You know, the one about the French Line helping to fight the Nazis."

That hadn't been exactly what the American woman had said, but Trixie figured that it was close enough and would prompt a better reaction.

Cici's puzzled face relaxed into a smile. "Oh, that! Yes, well, that charming British gentleman, Mr. Waters, said that he had heard a rumor that the *Normandie* was transporting a Rolls-Royce airplane engine to the United States so that my husband's company could start making them. He wondered whether that was true. He thought it was silly because it would be so much easier to transport plans."

"He just walked up to you and asked that?" Mart asked incredulously.

Cici gave a tittering laugh. "No, silly! I somehow managed to misplace my cigarette lighter. Mr. Waters was on the deck enjoying a cigarette nearby, so I asked him for a light. He, Charlie, and I got to talking

after that. When he learned that Charlie worked for Ford, he told him about the rumor and wondered if Charlie was responsible for transporting an engine.”

“Is Charlie responsible for the engine?” Trixie asked.

“No. At first, he didn’t even seem to be aware of it. But he and Mr. Waters kept talking, and Charlie did end up saying that Ford was considering the possibility of manufacturing Rolls-Royce engines.”

“Can that be true? Henry Ford isn’t exactly shy about saying that he opposes any U.S. involvement in a ‘European war.’” Mart had learned a lot about how various countries felt about the current state of European politics during his year interviewing anyone and everyone who would talk to him. Trixie had never been more grateful for Mart’s “year of exploration,” as he had called it when justifying it to their parents.

Cici shrugged. “I don’t know about that. I just know what Charlie and Mr. Waters spoke about. Charlie said that as far as he knew, he was the only Ford employee onboard, and he certainly didn’t have an engine, or even plans for one. Charlie did mention that he had seen a particular crate that, for some reason, had made him think of an airplane engine. The size or the shape or...something.” The woman gave a sigh. “Occupational hazard. *Everything* reminds Charlie of engines! Anyway, that seemed to confirm for Mr. Waters that an engine was onboard. I don’t think Charlie believes that, though.”

Trixie and Mart shared a glance. Given how ruthless they knew Waters to be, Charlie was probably better off knowing as little about the engine as possible.

“I need a glass of champagne. Would you two care for one?” Cici asked, clearly bored with the subject.

Trixie and Mart smiled politely and shook their heads. “No, thank you, but you go enjoy,” Trixie said.

Cici gave the pair a little wave and headed further into the expansively decorated salon, disappearing behind one of the Lalique “tower of lights” that adorned several of the first class areas of the ship.

“Well, what do you think?” Trixie turned to Mart.

“I think ‘keep mum, she’s not so dumb,’” Mart quoted. Trixie looked at him questioningly. “It’s an admonition that speaking around anyone, even someone you don’t think can do harm, is dangerous. That woman could repeat that rumor all over the ship without thinking twice about it because ‘dear Charlie’ spoke openly about it.” He mimicked the woman’s chirp as he had said the words “Dear Charlie.”

The spot-on impersonation brought a brief smile to Trixie’s lips, but she quickly sobered. “Do you mean like the *Lusitania*?” she asked, paling.

Mart shook his head. “No, I don’t think we have to worry about anything like that. Germany warned that the *Lusitania* would be fair game before the ship even left New York. Plus, Germany torpedoed her in a declared ‘zone of war.’ Not to mention the fact that I really doubt a French ship is carrying tons and tons of munitions, like the *Lusitania*, especially not to America. That would make no sense.”

Trixie breathed a sigh of relief as Mart continued, “But those rumors about the *Lusitania* that ultimately led to her downfall—and all those deaths—had to start somewhere with someone who was talking out of turn in front of the wrong people.”

“But you don’t think a Rolls-Royce engine is worth torpedoing the *Normandie*, right?”

Mart shook his head just as Brian joined them. “No, I don’t.”

“Don’t what? What sort of gems did Mrs. Fitzgerald drop during your conversation?” the dark-haired Belden sibling wanted to know. Trixie and Mart filled him in.

“I agree with Mart. I really don’t think that the ship is in danger. Possibly Charlie Fitzgerald is if Waters thinks that he has secret information for Ford that will help the Allied war effort. He’d want to get that away from him and give it to the Germans.”

“Why would Rolls-Royce send an engine?” Trixie wanted to know. “Couldn’t they just send over the plans? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“You’d think,” Brian agreed, “but since I’m not an engineer, I don’t know. We don’t even know that there *is* an engine onboard.”

“Should we find out?” Trixie wanted to know.

“I think we need to focus on solving the murder. If the engine had something to do with that, then maybe...” Brian said.

Mart nodded. “I agree. “

“So, we didn’t really learn anything tonight that could help us with the murder,” Trixie said, disappointed. “We know that Waters is a spy and that he’s interested in an engine. Maybe we should just go to the captain with what we know.”

“We need proof,” Mart argued. “We can’t just go making accusations without evidence to back it up. If the captain even did do anything in response, all it would do is tip off Waters that we’re onto him.”

Suddenly, Trixie clutched Mart’s arm. “The gift!” she said.

Mart and Brian looked around, confused. “What gift?” Brian asked.

“When Waters and Schmidt met, Waters wanted to know if ‘the gift’ was onboard and what the ‘nature of it’ was. Then, Schmidt responded something to the effect that he hadn’t been able to get information about the gift before he disposed of the package, which we know is Margarethe Eberhart. Maybe she had information about the engine! Maybe the engine is the gift!”

Mart gave a low whistle. “It’s certainly possible, Trix. And the ‘nature of it’ was whether it was plans or an actual prototype engine.”

“But *why* would they send an engine?” Trixie wondered again. “It would be so much easier for someone to carry plans.”

Mart shrugged. “It would be, but then those also would be more easily stolen. No one is going to steal an airplane engine from a ship!”

“True, true,” Trixie agreed. “But they *could* sabotage it. Maybe that’s why Waters is so eager to find out where it is!”

“That’s probably not far off, Trix,” Mart agreed with a proud look at his sister. She had never gotten the highest marks in school—the subjects just didn’t hold her interest—but he had always known that his almost twin was smart in figuring things out. He’d never admit it, but he loved watching her brain whirring and clicking.

Unaware of the pride her brother was feeling, the young blonde was practically vibrating with excitement. “Maybe we’re on to something! Maybe we have a clue that we can pursue! I can’t wait to tell the rest of the crowd tomorrow!”

Author Notes: This chapter title is a play on Agatha Christie's *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* This is self-edited because I am not together enough in any way in my life right now to get the chapter to my editors on time (I'm already a month's behind in posting for goodness sake!)! There's a tiny Cherry Ames reference in here, too, but not about one of the volumes Julie Campbell wrote. Darn! Word count: 5,039.

## Chapter Nine: Why Didn't They Ask Miss Trask?

August 26, 1939

*Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean*

The next morning, the seven young people were gathered on the Beldens' private promenade deck following breakfast, and Trixie was telling them about the information that Charlie and Cici Fitzgerald had let spill the evening before.

"We need to find out more about that engine!" Di exclaimed after Trixie had finished telling her tale.

"Captain Lehuédé must know something about it. Aside from the fact that he *is* the captain, he was very eager to change the subject when Mrs. Fitzgerald put her foot in it," Mart observed.

"That's true, but it's not like he's going to tell *us* anything," Brian returned.

"I agree. So then what's our next step?" Honey wanted to know.

Brian immediately answered. "A swim in the pool." He quickly held up a hand before Trixie, whose face had gone absolutely mutinous, could argue with him. "Not only will it be absolutely fun, but I also happen to think that a nice dunk in the water will help us clear our heads. And you," he reminded Trixie, "said that you wanted to spend some time with Bobby."

At this reminder, some of the air went out of Trixie's argumentative sails, and she found she didn't have a good argument. She *did* need to spend a bit of time with Bobby, whether he had a nurse attending to him or not.

Mart nodded his head. "Sage advice from our eldest, very sagacious sibling. Taking time to relax and plan our next move will be more productive than running around the ship without a strategy."

"I love to swim," Honey said, "and I haven't even seen the *Normandie's* swimming pool yet."

Dan grinned. "I've never seen *any* swimming pool."

With that, it was settled.

When they arrived at the pool—the third-class passengers having borrowed proper swimming attire from their friends—they found that Bobby and his assigned nurse, a pleasant French woman named Lilian, were indeed at the pool. Trixie was delighted to see how much her younger brother's swimming had improved in the few days that he had been on the ship. Given that it was his favorite place on the *Normandie*, and he seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside the echoing, chlorinated chamber, it was not surprising that he was swimming almost as well as any fish in the ocean. He still loved to visit the Winter Garden to view the exotic birds, but only swimming seemed to have captured his attention as an activity to be engaged in for long periods of time. Bobby was delighted to meet Jim

and Dan, happily showing them his new ability to do the “dead man’s float” and other aquatic tricks he had learned during the crossing.

While the boys and Diana horsed around with Bobby, and Honey swam lap after lap of the most beautiful crawl stroke that Trixie had ever seen, the would-be sleuth sat with Bobby’s nurse and had an interesting chat. Trixie was bursting to tell her friends and brothers the details, but it would have to wait because suddenly it was time to get changed and meet the elder Beldens, Wheelers, and Lynches for lunch in the first-class dining room, just as Mart had suggested the day before.

Matthew and Madeleine Wheeler had already met Helen and Peter Belden in the Grand Salon, and the two couples enjoyed seeing each other again, chatting about England and New York, and in the case of Matthew and Peter, world finances. Edmund and Kathleen Lynch had clearly been in awe of the luxurious surroundings, looking rather uncomfortable, but the Trixie and Honey’s parents drew them into their conversation so warmly and graciously that the Irish couple soon began to relax and enjoy the meal and the company. Their four youngest children were off playing with Bobby and his nurse, so it was quite a treat for them to be involved in an adult conversation with no juvenile interference, as much as they loved their children.

Trixie was gratified that everyone was getting along so swimmingly, but she was about ready to burst with the information she had been carrying since her encounter with Bobby’s nurse at the pool. She didn’t know how she was possibly going to survive until her crowd was alone so that she could share the exciting news.

Finally, *finally*, after a delectable meal and a wave good-bye at the older generation, Trixie found herself and her friends alone on the third-class open-air deck, where she described her earlier conversation with Lilian Moray.

*“We were very surprised but grateful that the line was able to assign a nurse to my brother,” Trixie said to the plump, middle-aged French nurse.*

*“It is my pleasure. I am very pleased that I was available after Jacques realized that young Master Bobby did not have an official attendant,” the nurse responded. She had a plain but pleasant face, and Trixie could see that the woman would have a great bedside manner. Her French-accented English was impeccable.*

*“They don’t need you in the onboard hospital?” Trixie, always curious, wondered.*

*“I signed on as a companion nurse,” the woman replied as she smoothed a lock of faded brown hair tinged with grey. “I’m available for any passengers who come to need my services on the trip.”*

*“That must be interesting,” Trixie said. “You must have unique experiences and get to meet fascinating people on each new voyage. I think I’d like that much better than being stuck in the medical ward the entire trip.”*

*Lilian smiled indulgently. “Often times there are very interesting things to see in the hospital, too.”*

*Trixie nodded, her blonde curls dancing with the effort. "Like during this voyage..." she said, hoping that her leading statement would cause the nurse to fill in some blanks she so desperately wanted filled.*

*Sure enough, the French woman's pleasant face turned serious. "Yes, this voyage had some unwanted excitement. But I am pleased that the colleague of Mademoiselle Eberhart stepped in to look after her mother after her tragic accident. It allowed me the freedom to look after your delightful little brother."*

*Trixie's mind churned at this unexpected statement. "Miss Trask was Miss Eberhart's colleague?" she asked, surprised. Miss Trask, when she had spoken to Honey and Brian, had not mentioned that fact. Trixie was sure that if she had, Honey and Brian would have reported it to the rest of the crowd.*

*The nurse was surprised. "You know Mademoiselle Trask?"*

*Trixie briefly explained how Honey and Brian had come to meet Anna Eberhart's new companion.*

*"I don't know what to say. Mademoiselle Trask approached me and said that she was a friend and colleague of Margarethe Eberhart and she felt responsible for the girl's mother as a result of their friendship. I agreed that it would be much better for Anna to be with someone she knew, and she didn't require the services of a registered nurse, just a companion, so I agreed that Mademoiselle Trask would be perfect given the situation."*

*"Interesting," Trixie said. "Perhaps my brother and Honey misunderstood her."*

*"Perhaps they did," the companion nurse responded in her accented tones, and then she turned the conversation to focus on Bobby and his activities, particularly his love of swimming. Trixie half-listened to the woman she went on about the youngest Belden, but her mind was spinning, processing the new information that Miss Trask had claimed to know the murder victim.*

*And if the British woman was indeed the dead woman's colleague, did that mean that she was a spy, too? And might she know something about the gift?*

"I think it means that she is and she does!" Mart immediately exclaimed when his sister had finished her narrative.

Honey and Brian exchanged glances, as if trying to remember exactly what the crisp, middle-aged woman had told them. "I'm sure that she didn't mention that she knew the Eberharts. She implied that she had merely heard about the situation—which we readily believed because everyone on the ship is gossiping about it—and decided to volunteer. She even mentioned that she often cares for her invalid sister."

"Almost as if she was trying to convince you of her credentials," Trixie mused.

"I don't know about that, Trixie," Brian reasoned.

"Why else would she volunteer that information?" Trixie contended. "Why wouldn't she just say that she knew the Eberharts and that was why she was looking after Mrs. Eberhart?"

"It does seem like a lie by omission," honorable Jim agreed, earning a grateful look from Trixie.

"And the only reason that she would need to lie by omission..." Di began, her voice trailing off as she turned large violet eyes toward the group.

"Is if she's a spy, too," Dan finished.

"But if she wanted to hide the fact that she was a spy, why tell the nurse that's she knew the Eberharts?" Brian asked.

"Because if some random woman came and asked to be Mrs. Eberhart's companion, the nurse wouldn't have a reason to give up the post," Trixie reasoned. "But if she says she's a friend and colleague, that strengthens her position to take over as caregiver."

Jim nodded, his red hair glinting in the sun streaming down on the group. "That sounds logical to me. And it's not like she could predict that the nurse would be assigned to the brother of three of the people who found Miss Eberhart and that her stories might be compared."

The smile that Trixie gave him in response nearly took his breath away, and he grinned delightedly back at her. The moment passed when Mart interjected, "No matter what the actual story is, there's more than what meets the eye here with this Miss Trask, and we need to investigate."

His friends and siblings agreed as they tried to develop a plan to learn more about the now-mysterious Miss Margery Trask.

"We could visit Mrs. Eberhart again," Honey offered. "One of us could visit with her while another one of us corners Miss Trask."

"That's a good idea," Brian agreed, winning a sweet smile from the young lady with the idea. "We can ask if there's been any new news about Miss Eberhart's death."

Trixie grinned and started to rise. "And that will give us an opening to see how Miss Trask reacts and maybe get her to say something."

Mart put a hand on his sister's arm. "Wait a minute, Trix. We can't go in there half-cocked. And if Miss Trask *is* a spy, her training wouldn't allow her to just spill the beans to a group of 'young people' like us."

Trixie fell back into her chair, chewing her lip. "You're right, Mart. She's most likely too smart to let anything slip," she acknowledged with a deep sigh.

"Unless we take advantage of the fact that we're 'young people,'" Brian mused. "Honey has done a pretty good job of getting information from Miss Trask, Anna Eberhart, the Deauville suite butler, and the captain of this ship. Part of it is because she's young, so people don't put their guard up, and part of it is because she's really very innocently clever about asking the right questions."

Honey blushed at Brian's assessment.

Trixie nodded her head vehemently, her sandy curls dancing. "It's true!" she exclaimed. "I wish I had one-tenth of your tact and poise. It immediately puts people at ease so that they're willing to share with you. I bet if anyone could make Miss Trask let something slip, it's you, Honey."

Honey's pink-tinged cheeks at the compliments only made her that much more attractive. "I'm glad you guys have faith in me, but..."

"No 'buts,'" Mart said. "Honey is hereby elected chief interrogator of this club."

Mart's words had the effect of changing Honey's focus from self-consciousness to excitement.

"Oh, let's do have a club!" the honey-haired girl exclaimed, and then looked embarrassed as six pairs of eyes turned toward her. "Oh, I suppose it's silly, and we're a little too old for that sort of thing. When I was in boarding school, I was fond of books about boys and girls who had secret clubs and were always having heaps of fun. But we're too old for that now," she repeated.

Di smiled shyly. "I like the idea. I was forever reading those kinds of books when I was younger, too. I did so want to belong to a club of people my age!"

Trixie grinned as well. "I think it would be marvelous to have a club! Ever since I met you all, well, I just feel so close to you. Like we were all *meant* to meet and be friends. I've been calling us 'our crowd' in my head, which is practically the same thing as a club."

"It's settled, then," Jim spoke. "We're a club, dedicated to finding justice."

Dan nodded. "I like it," he said, and Brian and Mart added their agreement.

"Don't we need a name? And a motto? And some kind of super secret handshake and signal and secret code?" Trixie asked, eagerly getting into the spirit of the idea of a secret club.

"I don't know about handshakes, but there's a game bird, a sort of quail, that's native to America but was introduced in Europe when I was a kid," Jim explained. "My dad thought it was a fascinating bird—he was a naturalist before he died—and it's named for its peculiar whistle, which sounds an awful lot like the bird is saying 'bob white.' My dad taught me how to whistle like the bird to flush it out when we went hunting together." He demonstrated the call. "That could be our signal. It was...well, it's special to me because it was sort of a signal my dad and I shared."

Without thinking, Trixie reached out a small hand and cradled Jim's larger, freckled hand. "I think having a signal that celebrates your dad is a swell idea," she said. As the others murmured their agreement, Jim smiled gratefully at his newfound friends.

"Thanks," he said, his deep voice even huskier with emotion.

"I love that it's a bird that is native to America but introduced to Europe. Like me!" Honey said with a smile.

Trixie laughed. "It is perfect that it encompasses the bi-continent facet of our crowd...club," she corrected herself, relishing this new development.

"So, does that make us the Bob-Whites?" Mart wanted to know.

Trixie grinned. "I do believe it does." She looked around at the others. "Hello, fellow birds. Now let's have a bevy and figure out how exactly we're going to extract information from Miss Trask!"

Brian twisted his normally handsome features into a fake grimace. “You sound absolutely evil, Trixie! Extract information, indeed!”

The sandy-haired blonde stuck her tongue out at her older brother before getting down to business. “So, we agree that Honey should definitely be the one to follow up with Miss Trask. Who should go with her?”

“Brian, you went last time, so maybe you should go again, since Miss Trask knows you,” Diana offered up.

“But maybe if Honey goes with one of you girls, it’ll let Miss Trask’s guard down even more than if a fellow accompanies her,” Dan pointed out.

“What if all three of the girls went?” Mart asked.

Trixie shook her head. “I am *dying* to go, you guys know that, but I don’t want Miss Trask to connect me with the case since the nurse is now assigned to my brother. Di should go.”

Mart gave a low whistle. “Smart thinking, Trix. That lets Brian and me out, too.”

Brian sighed. “I suppose it does, but I’m not crazy about Honey and Di going there alone.”

Trixie gave her own sigh at her brother’s over-protectiveness. “They won’t be alone. We’ll be down the hall. And it’s not like we suspect Miss Trask of anything really nefarious, do we?”

“I don’t think so, but if there is funny business afoot, who’s to say it isn’t going to show up on Mrs. Eberhart’s doorstep?” Brian argued.

At that, Honey and Di looked decidedly nervous about their role, while Trixie rolled clear blue eyes. “It’s highly unlikely that anyone would do anything to Mrs. Eberhart or do anything near her room. There’s already a cloud of suspicion surrounding her daughter’s death. A second incident on this ship within the same family would draw too much attention. The murderer does *not* want that.”

After some more discussion, the members of the newly formed club decided that it would be best for Honey and Di to go calling. Instead of trying to plan out a list of questions to maneuver Miss Trask into letting something slip, Honey would use her natural intuition to guide the conversation. The remaining five club members would station themselves around the corner at the end of each corridor. Trixie, Jim, and Brian would stand guard on one end, Mart and Dan on the other. That way, they would be ready if trouble approached from either direction.

It was only minutes after adjourning their impromptu meeting that Honey and Di found themselves in front of Cabin 2072, knocking somewhat hesitantly on the door.

They heard the sound of the doorknob being unlocked, and once again, it was the crisp grey-haired woman who answered the door. “Hello, Miss...Wheeler, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Honey returned politely. “And this is my friend Diana Lynch. I wanted to check on Mrs. Eberhart, to see how she is doing.”

Margery Trask, as she had done the last time, stepped out into the hallway and pulled the cabin door shut behind her. "That's very kind of you, dear. Mrs. Eberhart is doing as well as can be expected after having such a shock."

Honey had a sudden inspiration, hoping to catch Miss Trask off guard. "What was Margarethe Eberhart like in life?"

The middle-aged woman turned startled grey-blue eyes on Honey. "Why do you ask?" she inquired carefully.

"Ever since I saw her, I can't get her image out of my mind. I was hoping if I had a kind of portrait of what she was like in life, maybe I could concentrate on that, and the awful image I have of her might fade," Honey explained.

Miss Trask's face softened, but she pressed on. "No, I'm sorry. I mean why do you ask *me*?"

Without specifically implicating the nurse, Honey replied, "I thought that you were acquainted with Miss Eberhart, and that's how you came to take over as Mrs. Eberhart's caretaker."

Miss Trask smiled at this. "I didn't mean to give you the impression the other day that I knew Miss Eberhart when I explained how I had come to be caretaker."

"You didn't," Honey said, wondering how Miss Trask would react to this bit of information. She took a deep breath and decided to be bold. "That's why I was surprised to learn that you and Miss Eberhart had been colleagues. What was she like when she was alive?"

Honey and Di watched as, for just a fraction of a moment, annoyance and apprehension flitted across Miss Trask's features before she visibly worked to relax her face into a neutral expression. "I'm not sure where you heard that," she said.

*But you still haven't denied it,* Honey thought before persisting, "But it *is* true?"

Miss Trask laughed, but to Honey and Di's ears, the sound was forced. "I'm afraid not," the older woman said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I really need to get back to Frau Eberhart. I'll let her know that you stopped by."

Before either girl could utter another word, Miss Trask had slipped back into the room, and they heard a lock clicking in finality.

The two girls turned toward each other, eyes wide. Honey whispered, "If she truly didn't know Miss Eberhart, there's no way she would have reacted like that."

"I agree," Di murmured, even her whisper unable to mask her lovely Irish lilt.

"You go get Mart and Dan," Honey continued in a low voice. "I'll get the others. We can meet in the Winter Garden."

Di nodded and slipped silently along the corridor in the direction Mart and Dan were waiting, while Honey hurried along in the opposite way. Di was just rounding the corner when she heard a door

opening. She paused for a moment to look. She saw that Honey had already disappeared around the corner, and Miss Trask was entering the hallway and heading in Diana's direction.

"Mart! Dan!" she whispered urgently as she met her companions in the corridor. "Miss Trask is coming this way! She'll recognize me, but you need to follow her! Meet us in the Winter Garden when you're done!" With that, Di quickly darted down the passageway and entered a stairwell to avoid the British woman.

Mart, thinking quickly, said to Dan, "Let's go to the elevator lobby. Chances are that's where she's headed." Dan nodded, and the two hurried toward the elevators. When they reached the lobby, Mart stared for half a second at the call buttons before siding with chance as he pressed the up button. That was where most of the public areas were, so that was most likely where Miss Trask was heading.

"What are you doing?" Dan whispered.

"If we hide and then come out, we'll look suspicious. If we're already here, it doesn't look like we're following her."

"What if she's not going up?"

Mart looked at his friend with large, troubled eyes.

*Then they would lose her...*

*And I'll disappoint Di.*

Mart didn't have a chance to respond out loud because a trim, grey-haired woman entered the lobby just then. She looked at the call buttons, and Mart held his breath. She appeared to be satisfied with the selected option, and she smiled at the two young men. Dan and Mart smiled back in relief and waited with Miss Trask for the car to arrive.

The doors opened to reveal an empty car, and the young men allowed their quarry to enter first. She pushed the button for the deck she wanted and turned to them.

"Which deck, gentlemen?" she asked.

Mart nodded toward the button she had just pressed. "Same as you, ma'am," he said with an innocent smile. She smiled back at him, and the three settled into the self-conscious silence that envelopes elevator rides with strangers. When the doors opened at their floor, Miss Trask turned and gave them a slight smile as she exited ahead of them.

They followed behind her, keeping up innocuous conversation about the ship, and were relieved to see that she was headed toward the Tourist Class lounge, as they could ostensibly be on their way there, too.

After watching Miss Trask go through the doors, the pair entered the lounge, which was not nearly as breathtaking as the first-class lounge. Still, it was a handsome space, pleasant and comfortable. The room was flooded with natural light from the wall of windows, and the leather chairs that outfitted each table beckoned one to lounge with one's fellow passengers. Some of the tables sported backgammon

and cribbage boards to entertain guests. Mart and Dan watched as Miss Trask settled into one of the creamy leather chairs at a table for two in the corner of the room.

Fortunately for her pursuers one of the nearby tables, which held a backgammon board, was empty. Under the pretense of playing a game of backgammon, the two sat down, and Mart began to set up the board.

“It’s great of you to offer to teach me to play backgammon,” Dan said, letting Mart know that he had no idea how to play and yet still keeping their cover with Miss Trask.

“I have no idea how to play,” Mart uttered under his breath. At Dan’s horrified look of dismay, the towhead grinned. “Just kidding!” he breathed quietly. Dan shot him a dirty look and vowed to get back at him later.

“It’s a great game,” Mart said in a normal voice, keeping up with the charade. “Did you know that it’s thousands of years old and was played by the Ancient Romans, Egyptians, and Persians?”

“I had no idea,” Dan said honestly.

“Chaucer and Shakespeare both mention the game in their works,” Mart continued as he finished setting up the board. “Now, here’s the basic rules...” he began as he launched into a lengthy explanation. He had no idea how long they would have to keep this up, so better to err on the side of long and boring than brevity. He was just finishing the fundamental instructions and was about to start on strategies and a history of the game when a blond man, looking to be in his thirties or so, joined Miss Trask. He was wearing dark-brown trousers and a tan, short-sleeved, casual sport shirt with a pattern of brown chevrons.

“Margery,” the man said in a smooth British accent, sounding surprised. “How nice to see you here. Do you mind if I join you?”

“Edward,” Miss Trask returned pleasantly. “What a surprise. Yes, please do join me.”

As the tall, thin man sat down in the chair opposite her, Miss Trask continued. “I thought I’d get out of the room and change my view, perhaps even have a spot of tea here in the lounge. How has the voyage been treating you since we last spoke?”

Mart and Dan continued to pretend to concentrate on their game, with Mart offering explanations every so often and Dan capitalizing on his novice backgammon status to draw out the silence by pretending to study each move very intently. This allowed them to easily listen to the adjoining conversation

“And how is your charge doing?” Charles asked after he and his companion had engaged in chitchat about the weather and the quality of the food.

“She’s doing as well as can be expected, I’m afraid. She’s had a rather interesting repeat visitor,” Miss Trask said.

Mart and Dan’s eyes met. They both surmised that she referred to Honey. Mart tried hard to keep up the pretense of a friendly board game as he gave Dan an instruction about rolling the dice, but it was hard when he just wanted to listen to the conversation.

"Someone who knows her?" Charles asked. "I didn't think that she knew anyone on the ship."

"A lovely young woman, actually," Miss Trask responded. "The poor thing found Frau Eberhart's daughter, and she feels responsible for checking in on the woman."

"That's very nice of her," the man responded, "but surely that's not unusual. I can imagine what a shock it must have been for her."

"Quite," the woman said with a nod. "I feel badly for the poor dear. She's somehow gotten it into her head, though, that I was a colleague of the dead girl."

Dan, who had the best view of their quarry's table, watched out of the corner of his eye as the man reacted to that statement. It was obvious that the man was surprised—and not pleased.

There was a beat before Charles responded, "That's unfortunate. I wonder where she could have gotten such an idea."

"Perhaps from the nurse that I relieved?" Miss Trask offered, more as a question than anything else.

"Perhaps," Charles murmured. "And when you told the visitor that that wasn't the case? I assume that she was satisfied."

"I believe so," Miss Trask responded. "As I said, she's a lovely girl, that Miss Wheeler. I wouldn't want her inviting any trouble because she had the wrong impression of me."

Dan and Mart exchanged a worried glance. Was that a threat? Or true concern? Was she passing on Honey's name so that the man would take action? And would that action be protection...or something sinister?

"No, that *would* be rather unsatisfactory," Charles agreed. He gave a small cough and changed the subject. "What of the parcel we spoke of the other day?"

"Its delivery is still on schedule when we arrive in New York," Miss Trask responded. "Have you been hearing the interesting rumors that have been circulating?"

"Rumors? Do tell," Charles leaned forward as if he was ready to receive a bit of particularly juicy gossip.

"The wife of an American engineer has mentioned that there is a Rolls-Royce aboard this very ship," Margery said. Even from his vantage point, Dan could see the significant look she gave her companion.

"Interesting. Has she seen it?"

"Not that I know of, but I did think it was of note."

"Quite. A Rolls-Royce aboard a ship would be fascinating to see. There was a Renault Coupe de Ville onboard the *Titanic*, you know," Charles said.

"I did not know that," Miss Trask returned. "Perhaps determining who is the most interested in seeing the Rolls-Royce will provide some answers."

"That would be beneficial," the blond man said with a nod. "Our friend deserves answers."

“Quite,” Miss Trask murmured, sipping the hot tea that had been delivered by an attentive lounge attendant.

“It’s been lovely chatting with you,” Charles said, standing. “I promised a proper British gentleman I met on the ship a game of tennis. I certainly do not want to keep him waiting.”

“Of course not,” Miss Trask said with a smile. “We Brits are nothing if not punctual. I won’t detain you. Have a wonderful tennis match.”

“I will. It was nice seeing you again,” Charles returned. With that, he was off. It wasn’t long before Miss Trask stood and headed toward the lounge exit.

After Dan and Mart watched her go, Mart turned to Dan. “I think that proves that she’s a spy. I’m sure the parcel that she was talking about was the engine.” As Mart spoke, the two abandoned their game to follow the middle-aged woman.

Dan nodded as the two causally moved through the second-class lounge, staying well behind their quarry. “They only pretended it was a car, I’m sure,” he said. “And their ‘friend’ is probably Margarethe Eberhart. They want to find out who killed her and get her justice.”

Mart agreed. “Probably even more than we do.”

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Additional notes: I feel obliged to note that I did a bunch of research on elevators to determine what type of automation and call buttons would have been available in the 1930s. Automated elevators were available in the late nineteenth century and began to be installed more and more starting in the 1930s (as a result of elevator operator strikes that left people stranded in big metropolises; they weren’t common before that because people didn’t trust automated elevators, convinced they would be plunged to their death in a small cage, I suppose, lol).

The *SS Normandie* was built in 1931, so she was on the cusp of this new wave of automation. I can’t tell you how much I’ve lived and breathed the *SS Normandie* for the last 2 years, but information on her elevators themselves are scarce (although her elevator lobbies were apparently the stuff of art deco dreams, and I saw lots of pictures of *them*, but not from an angle where I could actually see the buttons). Since so many celebrities adored her and the French spared no expense in making her—and making her modern and record-breaking—I took creative license and made them automated.

Why not just employ an elevator attendant since that was common in the day, you ask? I wanted to be authentic, hence all of the research. If she had elevator attendants, by golly, so would my story. If she didn’t, then she wouldn’t. Ultimately, I really wanted to have Mart not know which button to push for that split second and then have to hope that his gamble paid off while Dan looked at him like he was crazy. If he could just hit one button to call an elevator operator, there wouldn’t have been the drama. *angelic smile* So, when I couldn’t find a definitive answer, I went with what worked for the story. Please excuse my dramatic license if you happen to know a lot about 1930s elevators and, specifically, the *SS Normandie*’s elevators.

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 mind 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.

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*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."

Author Notes: This chapter title kind of speaks for itself. Many thanks to Julia and Susan for editing. Word count: 4,943, although to be fair, a few of them are Julie Campbell's or paraphrased from her.

## Chapter Eleven: Curtain

Even through the fear that threatened to paralyze her, Trixie's mind churned. Obviously, Waters had been lurking around the cargo hold and had heard her announce that she had found the engine. The would-be sleuth's heart sank at her own carelessness. She prayed that she was not going to get her brothers and friends killed because of her recklessness.

*There has to be a way out of this!* her mind screamed. *Take a deep breath and think, Trixie Belden!*

Trixie's inner monologue helped, and the sandy-haired blonde was the first to regain speech. She was going to keep the man talking as long as possible until she could figure out how to get them all out of this scrape she had gotten them all into.

"So, Mr. Waters, you *are* a murderous spy after all."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Honey and Di gape at her. She didn't know what had made her say that. She just knew that she had to keep him talking. She needed to keep him as off-balance as possible. Trixie stayed calm as an unbidden, fantastical image of distracting the criminal by throwing pots and pans leapt to her mind.

As bizarre as it was, the thought gave her comfort. The seven of them outnumbered him, so if he was distracted, it just might be possible to get that gun away from him and turn the tables. A passenger just needed to enter the passageway—or Miss Trask needed to exit Mrs. Eberhart's room.

The Bob-Whites just needed a little intervention, and they could escape this, Trixie knew. In the meantime, she would keep calm and carry on

"So, you know my name, do you?" the man was saying, an icy sneer curving his thin lips. "Turns out you're more of a nuisance than I thought you were."

Trixie shrugged, hoping her casual gesture belied the fear roiling inside of her. "You should take your own advice and tell your colleagues to keep their voices down," she returned, turning the man's own words around on him. "*You never know who might be listening.*"

The look of anger that passed over the man's distinguished features was breathtaking in its intensity, and for a moment, Trixie wondered if she had gone too far. But then the man laughed—a genuine laugh that was all the more startling—and frightening—in its sincerity. "You're quite a worthy adversary. Too bad you're not going to live long enough to hone your meddling talents."

"That's enough of that," Jim growled, taking a step forward. "You're not going to do anything to us, and you know it. There's seven of us. That's too messy, even for you."

"That's where you're wrong," the man said in a calm, cold voice. "Unlike my colleague, I know how to clean up *my* messes. There'll be no bodies for the French Line to find. Young people are *so* reckless. A group dare gone wrong. Tragic, really, how so many of you managed to fall overboard."

Dan glared at the man. "There's no way that you can get *all* of us."

Mart scoffed. "And even if you could, no one will believe that we all managed to fall overboard as part of some peculiar accident."

"Really?" Waters asked with the same tight, cold smile. "You've kept your parents informed of your sleuthing? They would know to suspect foul play instead of a tragic, *tragic* accident?"

Trixie's heart sank as she realized that the man had a point. *None of their families did know what they had discovered.* If this man's plan succeeded, the Bob-Whites' families probably would never know that the seven friends had knowledge that had left them vulnerable to the vicious Nazi war machine. It would be far easier for them to believe in an accident than that the group had stumbled onto a deadly spy plot. *That was the stuff of fiction books.*

*Like those that Mart wants to write some day,* Trixie thought as her mind swirled. *And he will live to write them!* she vowed.

The young woman knew that Miss Trask might suspect something, but without evidence, it wouldn't matter. And it would be too late for them anyway. Justice was a nice concept, but in that moment, Trixie realized that justice didn't matter if she and her friends were dead.

*I can't let that happen!* she thought fiercely.

Again, she did her best to keep her voice calm and steady. "But you're wrong, Mr. Waters," she said, using his name since it had so incensed him before. "There *are* two people onboard who know exactly what we've discovered," she bluffed, referring to Miss Trask and the blond gentleman with whom Mart and Dan had seen her. "So, you won't get away with it. I have a better plan. You let us go, and we won't reveal to British intelligence what a traitor you are to your country."

It was the older man's turn to scoff. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

"You believe that we value our lives. Correct?" Trixie responded.

"I believe that you'll say anything to save your lives, yes," Waters returned. "I do not, however, believe you'll honor your word if I were to let you go."

"That's only because you are not a man of honor, and you've never kept your word in your life!" Jim interjected hotly, unable to control himself anymore. "*Some* of us live and die by our honor."

"That's certainly true in this case," the double agent acknowledged. He waved the gun, motioning them to move. "Now, before someone interrupts our little gathering, let's go."

"Go where?" Trixie asked, genuinely confused.

She was no longer stalling. The young British woman couldn't imagine where the British man would take them. Any place that he could attempt to push them overboard was sure to be filled with people. The open air decks were the most popular places on the ship during the day and up into the evening, when people gathered to gaze in wonder at the amount of stars whose light shown down in the middle of the dark ocean.

“The cargo hold. You’re going to show me exactly where that engine is,” Waters instructed.

Trixie’s blue eyes bore into the man’s pale ones. “Fine. But you have to let my friends go.”

“This isn’t a negotiation!” the man snapped as the Bob-Whites’ voices rose in protest. “I’m starting to lose my patience with you!”

“I have knowledge you want,” the young blonde sleuth stated confidently, even as her heart beat wildly. “And I want something for that knowledge. *This isn’t a negotiation.*”

Red spots of anger stained the man’s hollow cheeks, and Trixie was gratified to see that he was beginning to lose control. If he became distracted enough...

Trixie didn’t have time to finish her thought because right then an earsplitting whistle filled the air.

*Bob! Bob-white!*

Dan seemed to intuitively know exactly what his “brother” was going to do, because before the rest of the group could react to Jim’s whistle, the wiry Irishman had already kicked at the distracted man’s pistol, and the gleaming black-and-silver object sailed through the air as a few passengers *finally* began streaming into the passageway to see what the commotion was about.

Diana was closest to where the gun landed, and without thinking, she dove for it even as Brian and Jim tackled Waters. Honey instinctively began pounding on the door to Anna Eberhart’s room, but she knew that Miss Trask probably wasn’t there. She surely would have had to have heard them talking and would have stepped out earlier. The young American had spent the last few terrifying minutes praying that Miss Trask would enter the hallway and end the nightmare unfolding before her, but the crisp British spy had not materialized in answer to her prayers.

Mart took the gun from Diana—who later admitted she didn’t know she had it in her to dive for a deadly weapon and was amazed at the instinct that had kicked in—and, seeing that Brian, Jim, and Dan had successfully subdued the treacherous spy by sitting on him, he immediately emptied it of its bullets.

Trixie turned to an onlooker who stood on the outer edge of the small crowd that had gathered. “Please! Go get help!” she urged. The man, who had unkempt black hair and a ferret-like face, hesitated. “Please!” she repeated, and the man sprinted off.

Before the dark-haired man returned with help, however, two French Line stewards came hurrying down the hallway from the opposite direction.

“*Qu’est-ce qui se passe ici?* What is going on here?” one of them, an older gentleman with a worn face and gray sprinkled throughout his otherwise dark brown hair, demanded. “What is this disturbance?”

Mart immediately stepped forward, presenting the pistol and the bullets to the steward and explaining, “This man tried to kidnap us.”

“That is nonsense!” Waters replied, his voice filled with outrage as he lay helpless. “This group of hoodlums tried to rob me at gunpoint!”

The Frenchman pursed his lips and looked at the crowd. "Did any of you see anything? Who is telling the truth?" He then repeated his questions in French. "*Est-ce que vous voyez quoi que ce soit? Qui dit la vérité?*"

There was a ripple of murmuring among the crowd, but no one had seen anything definitive, and no one came forward.

The older French steward turned to the younger steward and issued an order in French. Jim could hear the terseness in the command as the younger steward nodded his head and turned on a sharp heel and hurried down the passage.

"Will you please get these hooligans off of me?" Waters said.

Honey turned pleading hazel eyes toward the steward. "Please don't let him go," she implored in her best French. "He really is dangerous."

"That will not be for me to decide," the steward responded in impeccable English, haughtily indicating that he knew that Honey's French was not native. "You will all wait here," he demanded of the Bob-Whites before he turned to the gathered crowd. "Please disperse now. This is being handled." He then repeated his words in French. The crowd began to dissipate, although Trixie could tell from the disappointed looks on their faces that they wanted to stay and have their collective curiosity satisfied.

As the last passengers disappeared back into their staterooms, two security officers came hurrying down the corridor with the young French steward following on their heels. Not far behind them was an official-looking man in a mariner's uniform, whom Mart suspected was the ship's first officer or some other high-ranking CGT official.

"*Laissons l'homme. Vous viendrez tous avec nous,*" one of the security officers said to Jim, Dan, and Brian. At their blank looks, he translated, "Let the man go. You will all come with us."

"Will you please handcuff him so that he does not try to escape?" Jim requested. "Sill voo plate," he added in halting French, praying that he was correctly remembering—and pronouncing—the French expression for "please."

At that, Waters bellowed. "This is bloody ridiculous! I demand that you remove these ruffians from me and arrest them immediately!"

The French steward passed the gun and bullets to one of the security officers, who immediately checked the pistol to confirm that all of the bullets had indeed been removed. He and the steward engaged in a hushed conversation in their native tongue. Apparently, the older steward was inclined to believe the young people, because as the conversation ended, the officer took out a pair of handcuffs and approached the prone British man.

Seeing this, Waters went absolutely mad, shouting obscenities at the security officers, the stewards, and the Bob-Whites as he struggled against the young men restraining him. Finally, the French Line officer was able to successfully handcuff him, and the two security officers flanked him, each taking an arm as they led him down the passageway.

The French steward with the salt-and-pepper hair signaled toward the group of young people. "You will follow as well," he commanded them in English. Meekly, the seven obeyed.

Trixie was relieved when they entered a doorway marked "*Personnel*." She didn't need to be an expert in French to realize that they were going to take a staff passageway rather than walking through the ship. This passageway, unlike the grandiose first class areas of the ship, was starkly utilitarian. Eventually, they navigated down a narrow, gray stairwell. The two security officers did their best to remain in control of their prisoner as they descended the cramped space.

Soon, the group found themselves in the brig. It was a modest area, with two small cells lining the back of the main room, which held a desk and chair off to the side and a table surrounded by four chairs in the middle. The security officers, over the protest of Waters, placed the man in one of the cells, shutting the door with a loud clank and locking it. They then turned their backs on the man and stood in front of the cell, facing the main room.

The First Officer said something in French to the two stewards who had followed them down to the brig area, presumably excusing them, because they both nodded slightly and left the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Ladies, please be seated," the first officer said, gesturing toward the table. Trixie, Honey, and Di did as they were told. The boys stood behind the girls.

Despite the fact that there was one open seat at the table, the officer remained standing as he asked, "What are your names, please?"

"Beatrix Belden, sir," Trixie said. She motioned toward her brothers. "These are Brian and Mart, my brothers."

"Madeleine Wheeler," Honey, sitting next to Trixie, replied.

Sitting on the other side of Honey, Di said in a nervous voice, "Diana Lynch."

The first officer turned his eyes to the redhead who stood behind Trixie. "And your name?"

"James Frayne, sir," Jim responded.

As the Frenchman turned his eyes to him, Dan immediately spoke up. "Daniel Mangan."

"They're hooligans! I want them arrested! And I will be suing the French Line!" Waters protested vocally from his cell.

"And your name, sir?" The ship's officer raised his voice slightly as he turned to speak to the man in the cell.

"Reginald Waters," the man responded immediately. "I am a British national, and I resent how I am being treated. You will pay for this."

"Quite," the First Officer said dryly. The Frenchman's keen gray-blue eyes took in the group before him before settling on Brian. "Please, Monsieur Belden, tell me your version of events."

"It began when we discovered the body of Anna Eberhart, sir," Brian began. If the mariner was surprised to hear that this was the group of young people who had discovered the dead body, he did not show it.

Trixie had specifically watched his face for signs of surprise, and she was impressed when his solemn façade did not change one bit at her brother's words.

Brian detailed their activities from meeting with the dead woman's mother and her conviction that her daughter had been murdered by spies right up through to the Bob-Whites' visit to the cargo hold. He left out any mention of Miss Trask, as he did not want Waters to guess that she might be a spy if he already hadn't. He may have already deduced or known this, but Brian would never be able to forgive himself if he was the one to give her identity away.

"When we returned to Mrs. Eberhart's room to let her know what we had found, Mr. Waters appeared, aiming the gun at us and demanding that we show him the engine."

At that, Waters gave a derisive snort. "Quite the contrary," he objected from behind the barred doors. "I was returning to my room when these thugs jumped me and demanded that I give them my wallet. Now, let me out of this cell immediately!"

The first officer again regarded the group of young people with inscrutable blue eyes. He was so stoic and composed that Trixie was becoming increasingly unnerved and frustrated at not being able to read him.

Finally, the Frenchman spoke. "I am faced with a dilemma. It is your word against his. There is no proof of what either of you say."

"May I speak to you in the hallway, sir?" Brian asked.

"*Mais oui*, of course," the first officer said, motioning toward the door. "After you."

Trixie fidgeted while Brian was out of the room, although she assumed that he was describing Miss Trask's role to the first officer. At first, she had been confused that Brian had not mentioned the woman, but then she realized that he had not wanted to give her identity away in front of the prisoner.

Within a few minutes, Brian returned to the room. The first officer said something in French to the security officers and then disappeared, shutting the door behind him.

Honey translated softly, "He told them not to let us leave, that he'll be right back."

The group sat in uneasy silence as the minutes dragged on. Trixie became increasingly fidgety until Jim put a calming hand on her shoulder. "It'll be okay, Trix," he said in a low voice.

A warmth flowed into Trixie, and she looked up at the redhead gratefully. "Thank you," she murmured in response. With Jim's reassuring, steadfast presence acting as a relaxant, the blonde was able to maintain, if not a serene composure, at least a more composed one as the group waited for the first officer to return.

When the door finally opened, and everyone straightened eagerly, they were surprised that the person who entered the room was not the first officer but the captain himself.

"Mesdemoiselles Wheeler and Belden, Messieurs Belden," Captain Lehuédé said in a neutral voice, "I had not expected to have the pleasure of meeting up with you again." He nodded toward the other

three, “Messieurs Frayne and Mangan, Mademoiselle Lynch, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, even under these circumstances.”

Jim, Dan, and Di nodded mutely, shocked that the captain of the luxury ocean liner knew their names. “We are in the process of straightening out this situation. Everyone is waiting for you in Mademoiselle Wheeler’s suite—that includes your parents, Mademoiselle Lynch. Please travel directly there.”

“Who is watching the twins?” Di couldn’t help but blurt out. She was horrified that her activities might cause a hardship for her family.

“Please do not fret, mademoiselle,” the captain assured her. “Young Master Belden’s nurse has taken all five of the children to see a puppet show. Now, please go, and leave the gentleman behind bars to me.”

The seven young people hurried out of the room. Trixie, realizing that Waters had been uncharacteristically silent during the exchange with the captain, turned in curiosity before she exited the brig, but the two French security officers blocked her view into the cell.

The Bob-Whites hurried to the Deauville Suite, where three sets of parents anxiously awaited them. On seeing their children, the older couples jumped up, pulling their offspring into relieved embraces. Madeleine, noticing Jim and Dan standing awkwardly off to the side, motioned to them. “You two don’t get to escape this. Come here!” she demanded, and the two young men sheepishly let the women fold them into the family’s hug.

It had been a long time since either Jim or Dan had been held in a maternal way, and they each felt tears spring to their eyes. The two, brothers in spirit, exchanged a glance charged with emotion, small smiles curving their lips.

Once the hugs had ended, and Helen Belden, British to her core, had made sure that everyone had a cuppa tea with the help of Kathleen Lynch, the seven young people were called on to tell their tale. Level-headed, staid Brian once again served as the spokesperson, and during this telling, he included their encounters with Miss Trask. Although the six adults remained silent throughout the account, their faces reflected an array of emotions—disbelief, amazement, fear, and even a little pride.

“And so you think this Waters fellow is a spy?” Matthew asked when Brian was done.

“Along with the baron and that Schmidt character?” Peter added.

Everyone nodded. “We do,” Trixie stated. “I do hope that the French Line will be able to prove it.”

At that, Honey’s father spoke up. “It’s my understanding that the French Line has dispatched security to search their rooms. With any luck, they will find the evidence that they need.”

“And if they don’t?” Di asked in a scared voice. “If they let Waters go...”

Kathleen and Edmund, sitting on either side of their daughter on the plush ruby settee, hugged the black-haired beauty protectively. “Don’t you fret, luv,” Kathleen said, her voice full of emotion. “We’ll not let that scoundrel harm a hair on your head.”

“Indeed,” Peter said. “We will do everything in our power to ensure that you are all safe.”

“As a matter of fact, none of you will be returning to third class,” Matthew Wheeler announced. “We have two unused bedrooms. Jim and Dan, you will be sharing one of them, and Diana, you will use the other one.”

“But where will my family stay?” Di asked immediately, turning worried violet eyes first toward her father and then her mother.

“You’ll not be worrying about us, m’dear,” Kathleen reassured Diana. “The Wheelers and Beldens, in their infinite graciousness, have offered us accommodations. Apparently, each of these magnificent suites has an additional, adjoining two-room suite for any staff that may be traveling with the lucky suite guests.”

“Ours has remained empty, as we certainly don’t have staff traveling with us,” Peter interjected with a warm smile, which caused Helen to laugh.

“Certainly not!” she agreed. “I’m still amazed at my brother-in-law’s generosity in treating us to these grand accommodations.”

Matthew smiled. “Had I been traveling on business, I might have had an assistant or two with me, but this was a vacation with my two beautiful girls. Our additional suites are empty as well. Diana, your mom will stay in ours with your sisters, and your father will stay in the Beldens’ with your brothers.”

Trixie clapped her hands together, her smile wide. “Why, everything’s just...” She looked at Honey. “What’s that phrase you said the other day?”

“*Perfectly perfect!*” the three Bob-White girls chorused.

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The seven Bob-Whites and three sets of parents were just finishing their dinner, which Madeleine had ordered from the ship’s main kitchen to be served in the Deauville Suite’s dining room, when a knock sounded on the door of the suite. Honey hurried to answer it and immediately found herself unexpectedly face-to-face with the captain of the ship for the second time that day.

“*Bonsoir, le capitaine,*” she greeted him.

“*Bonsoir, mademoiselle,*” Captain Lehuédé returned with a bow. “I hope I am not disturbing your family.”

Honey smiled warmly. “Of course not. Please come in,” she invited him.

“*Merci,*” he said as he entered the suite.

“We were just finishing another wonderful meal,” Honey explained, as everyone else entered the living room.

“Yes, your chefs are absolutely spectacular in their talent, Captain Lehuédé,” Madeleine said, moving forward to welcome the ship’s captain into her suite.

“*Merci,*” the older gentleman said. “We are proud of the exceptional food that we serve on the *Normandie.*”

“With good reason,” Matthew said, extending a hand to the captain. “Welcome to our suite. I think that you’ve been introduced to most people here, but please let me present Edmund and Kathleen Lynch, whom I do not believe you have met.”

The Lynches moved forward timidly, the awe apparent on their faces. When they had boarded the fabled ocean liner a mere five days before, they never could have imagined that they would be meeting the *Normandie*’s captain in one of the ship’s most luxurious suites. It was difficult for them to grasp. They stuttered out a gracious greeting and then retreated to a more anonymous position in the room.

“We don’t want to keep you, though, Captain,” Matthew said. “I am sure that you must be very busy, but would you like a drink? Whiskey? Some of your fine French wine?”

The captain shook his head, a gracious smile on his lips. “No, but I thank you for your kind hospitality. I do have quite a few issues to attend to, but I wanted to provide you with an update. Monsieur Waters remains in custody, and Monsieur Schmidt has been taken into custody as well. I am not at liberty to say what evidence was found, but we were able to obtain proof of the veracity of the young people’s version of events.”

“What about the baron?” Trixie couldn’t help but ask.

“The baron should not be a problem,” Captain Lehuédé assured the young woman. “He has not been implicated, but it is my understanding that he is more of a financial supporter rather than an active participant in, shall we say, political issues.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. “The British and French governments thank you for your diligence in this matter, and you can rest assured that Mademoiselle Eberhart will receive justice.” His manner became stern, though, after offering this gratitude. “In the future, however, I implore you to please allow the proper authorities to handle matters such as this.”

Matthew spoke up. “Next time? Let’s hope that there *isn’t* a next time. I think stumbling into a mystery is more of a once-in-a-lifetime type of event!”

Even as the other parents heartily agreed, Trixie and Honey couldn’t help but exchange glances. The incident with Waters had certainly been frightening, but the intense feelings of excitement and satisfaction that the two felt at solving the mystery and bringing Anna Eberhart justice could not be ignored by either girl.

Mart leaned over to Trixie. “I saw that look, Moll Dick,” he said softly, not without affection.

Trixie grinned at him briefly and then turned her attention back to the captain, who was saying his good-byes. After he had exited the suite, Madeleine turned to the group.

“Now that I know that the danger has passed, I feel like celebrating!” she said. “It’s the last evening, and I hear the Grand Salon is the place to be. Who would like to join me?”

The elder Beldens readily agreed to join Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler for the final night’s festivities in the Grand Salon. Both couples then persuaded Di’s parents to join them, pointing out that both sets of twins were happily playing with Bobby, and the nurse was more than capable of taking care of the lot. Helen was able to loan Kathleen a dress that only fell a little long on the Irish woman, and Matthew produced an extra tuxedo for Edmund. It was slightly ill-fitting on the former farmer, but it would do.

The seven young people decided that they would much rather spend their evening sitting out on the Wheelers' open terrace enjoying the last night of the refreshing, briny sea air than dressed to the nines in the luxurious but somewhat intimidating salon. They were sitting on the deck, enjoying the salty breeze on their faces, when Matthew poked his head out.

"We're heading out to the Grand Salon now. I know you're all adults, but could I please request that you stay here tonight? It will make the ladies feel better if they know you're all here safe. Of course, please help yourselves to anything in the pantry or the bar."

Honey got up and impulsively hugged her father. "Of course we'll stay in, Daddy. The last thing we want to do is worry you more on this trip!"

Matthew returned his daughter's embrace. "I appreciate that. Have a wonderful—*safe*—evening."

His exit was serenaded with a chorus of "We will!" and "You, too!" and "Thank you, sir!"

After the red-headed man's departure, the talk turned to their imminent arrival in New York, and the hope that they would all be able to keep in touch.

"I hope you're able to find your uncle in...what was the name of the town, Jim?" Honey asked.

"Sleepyside-on-Hudson," the husky redhead answered.

Mart grinned wickedly at his almost twin. "I hear Sleepyside would be a great place to start a moll dick detective agency."

Trixie stuck out her tongue at her brother.

"Moll dick?" Brian asked. "Mart, I think you've been watching too many gangster pictures at the cinema!"

"I'm not the lamebrain Belden who wants to start a detective agency!" Mart protested.

"It's not lamebrain! Honey and I will find a way!" Trixie retorted. "Just you wait and see, Mart Belden!"

Jim smiled. "I like the idea. You can call your agency Moll Dicks, Incorporated. I can just see your business cards. 'When the Secret Service gives up, we take over!' printed in red."

Everybody laughed. "Is it called the Secret Service in America, Honey?" Trixie wanted to know.

"I believe that's who protects our president," Honey responded. "I think it's the Federal Bureau of Investigation that investigates crimes."

"That doesn't sound as good," Trixie stated. "Too many syllables!"

"They go by FBI for short," Honey offered.

They looked at each other, grins alighting their happy faces, all of one mind. "When the FBI gives up, we take over!" the seven Bob-Whites chorused.

Amid the resulting laughter, the three girls added an impeccably synchronized, "Perfectly perfect!"

Author Notes: The prologue was named after an autobiographical work by Christie, so I like the symmetry of the epilogue being named after her semi-autobiographical work. Unfinished portrait? Could this be the start of a new universe? If so, heaven help me! If not, I hope you enjoyed the story and that the epilogue brings some closure...or a jumping off point for your imagination. The symmetry of posting it on the anniversary of the actual final landing of the SS *Normandie* makes me happy, too. Add in the fact that it's my birthday, my Jixaversary, and the 1-year anniversary of when I began posting this story, and my geeky heart is bursting with symmetrical happiness. *g* Many, many thanks to Julia, Mary, and Susan for taking this journey with me and providing such wonderful edits. Word count: 211.

Epilogue: Unfinished Portrait

August 28, 1939

Approaching New York Harbor, Manhattan, New York City, New York

As the seven friends stood together on the Promenade Deck, it was bittersweet seeing the skyline of New York come into view as the magnificent ship approached Manhattan's Pier 88. So many exciting things lay ahead for all of them, but it was hard to say good-bye to friends who had come to mean so much. Friends who had been through so much together in such a short time. Friends who were definitely fox-hole material.

It would be lovely if Honey's parents did buy that country house out in Westchester, especially if it was near Jim's great uncle—assuming the elder Frayne took Jim and Dan on as charges. Peter Belden could easily find employment in finance in Westchester, allowing him to remain on the East Coast while escaping the rat race of New York City. In rural Westchester, Di's family could establish that farm Mr. Lynch dreamed of.

How wonderful it would be if they could all end up as neighbors in Sleepyside-on-Hudson. It was a glorious dream, one that they all held tight to as the ship drew nearer and nearer to the land of opportunity.

After all...

Sometimes, dreams do come true.

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