

A Crazy Little Thing Called Death

A Blackbird Sisters Mystery

By Nancy Martin

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Chapter One

Everyone ought to be forgiven at least one mistake.

I gave my nephews Harcourt and Hilton a sum of birthday money I figured couldn't possibly buy anything that might endanger a pair of fourteen-year-old mad scientists. Unfortunately, I hadn't counted on them squirreling away cash for months, because as soon as they ripped open their cards and found the modest gift, they jumped on the internet and purchased a fetal pig.

When their gruesome investment arrived--in a large carton packed with dry ice, bubble wrap and clearly marked BIOHAZARD—they rushed over to my house to set up their laboratory in my basement where they began its long and loving dissection.

“They're weird, Aunt Nora,” said their sister Lucy, already an astute judge of character at the age of six. She had wide blue eyes that saw the world clearly.

In complete agreement, I hugged Lucy and said, “Let's go to a party.”

Like all Blackbird women, Lucy had a few eccentricities of her own. She asked, “Can I take my sword?”

I hadn’t been able to wrestle it away from her yet, and I didn’t feel up to a battle. “Why not?” I said.

Lucy waved the foil. “If we meet any bad guys, I’ll give ‘em lead poisoning.”

When Lucy and I were suitably dressed and accessorized for an outdoorsy Saturday in April, we left the twins and their infant brother in the capable, if slightly distracted custody of seventeen-year-old Rawlins who was trying to teach himself Texas Hold Em from a book. Lucy and I tiptoed outside to the waiting car and hit the road. In the car, she shared her Hello Kitty lip gloss with me.

Life had hit me with a few body blows in the last couple of months. A day with my niece felt like good medicine. Even if we were headed to a party celebrating death.

Eventually, we arrived at Eagle Glen, an estate owned by some elderly, eccentric cousins of ours and located in an expensively bucolic enclave outside Philadelphia where green pastures rolled from one exquisitely landscaped mansion to another. On the tallest hill, Eagle Glen commanded a river view. The neglected estate included a topiary garden with bushes as big as Macy’s parade balloons, a green swimming pool full of three-legged frogs, and the grass on the tennis court where Billie Jean King once beat the stuffing out of Richard Nixon looked like a wheat field.

But behind the tennis court lay the polo field, recently mowed for the party. The lower lawn, however, was an ocean of April mud, the result of poorly maintained drainage. Surrounded by a profusion of forsythia and waves of naturalized daffodils, but it was mud nevertheless. Hundreds of luxury cars were swamped in it. A couple hundred

well-dressed Philadelphians had unpacked elaborate picnics suitable for the first annual Penny Devine Memorial Polo Match. It was a pageant to behold.

Each party had a different theme. As Lucy and I picked our way across the swampy grass in our Wellies, we saw a Chippendale table laid with fine linens and silver under one pretty striped tent. Next to it, another hostess had thrown long boards over sawhorses for a barbecue. Champagne cooled in crystal buckets that sparkled in the sunshine, while barrels of cold beer appealed to other guests. One well-known socialite was treating her guests to a circus, complete with cotton candy, a clown on stilts, and an organ grinder with a monkey that fascinated my niece. The scents of chateaubriand and expensive perfumes mingled in the air with the fragrance of freshly churned up muck. The mud, in fact, seemed to be the only reason guests were sticking close to their vehicles. If the ground had made better footing, I was sure all the parties would have mingled into one spectacular bash.

Lucy pointed at a hired chef in a white coat and toque as he grilled shrimp over an apple wood fire. “Look, Aunt Nora. Is that Emerald?”

“I don’t think so, Luce.”

At the next party, a violinist in tails entertained a party of blue bloods sitting in camp chairs beside a mud-spattered Bentley. They had wisely spread out a large blue plastic tarp on the wet ground, then laid a beautiful Persian rug on top of it. They raised their glasses to me and called my name.

Waving back, I thought that half of the city’s so-called high society had decked themselves out in designer finery to come watch each other instead of polo.

The competition for Best Dressed was fierce. I spotted two women in Gauthier designs worth more than fifty thousand apiece. Lucy counted six gentlemen in ascots. And there was enough extravagant millinery to give the Queen a migraine.

My own choice received a rave review.

“I like your hat best, Aunt Nora. The long feathers look like a fairy’s tail.”

I simply hoped the damn thing wasn’t going to blow off and end up in a puddle. I had carefully unpacked the hat my grandmother wore in the Royal Enclosure the day Princess Diana stepped on her toe—presumably because Grandmama had out-shone her.

“Hey, Sis!”

Lucy and I turned to see my sister Emma emerge from a crowd of young men all dressed in matching bow ties--the members of the nearby university glee club. Emma, of course, wore no party dress or picture hat. Her white riding breeches clung to her like rain on pavement. In one hand, she carried a polo mallet, the shaft resting on her shoulder. In the other, she dangled a helmet by its strap, and her short, punk-style hair stood out in windblown tufts. Her loose polo shirt bore a large paper number on the back, but managed to hint at a figure that would have put Lara Croft to shame. The entire glee club ogled her butt as she walked away from them.

Tartly, I said, “Are those boys old enough to vote yet?”

“Maybe for Homecoming Queen. Think I have a shot?” As usual, my little sister had a gleam in her eye. “That’s some chapeau you got going there, Sis. How many peacocks died to make it happen?”

“None. They were cockatoos, and all volunteers.”

“I see you got my phone message about the mud.” She glanced at our boots, hardly a fashion statement, but definitely practical on a day like today.

“Yes, I owe you big.”

“Good. Then you can tell me all about your vacation. And,” she lowered her voice so Lucy couldn’t hear, “don’t skip any details, especially the sexy stuff.”

“The vacation was very nice,” I said without rising to the bait. Indicating the mallet, I said, “I see you’ve been playing your own game?”

Emma twirled the mallet and grinned. “One team is short a player. Apparently Homeland Security worried he might terrorize the social set, so they detained him at the airport. Which means I’m an honorary Brazilian today. Raphael Braga asked me to play.”

“Raphael--?” I endeavored to keep my composure as my stomach took a high dive.

Emma misinterpreted my expression. “Don’t worry about me, Sis. I’ve got Raphael’s number.”

“So do half the women in Europe, not to mention South America.”

“Think I can’t handle him?”

Emma could probably handle an African lion with one hand tied behind her back, so the male animal of her own species was no problem. With her combination of long legs, perfect figure and eyes that glowed with the promise of a dirty mind, I wasn’t surprised that a Brazilian ladykiller like Raphael had come calling on Emma.

I said, “Raphael and his friends play world class polo, Em. The rough stuff. You could get hurt.”

“I can ride rings around most of them, even in all this mud. What idiot chose April for a polo match, anyway? The field manager still isn’t sure we can play today. It’s too wet.”

“I suppose Penny Devine’s family chose the date.”

Emma shook her head. “If she’s still alive, Penny would never pick April. That crazy old bitch knew there would be too much rain this time of year.”

Lucy, who had been slashing at invisible enemies with her weapon, piped up. “Mummy says a crazy bitch is the neighbor’s beagle that won’t stop barking. Or the lady who’s the mother of the president.”

Emma ruffled Lucy’s blond hair. “Nice duds, Luce-ifer. What’s with the sword?”

“It’s a foil,” Lucy corrected, flourishing the weapon I used on my college fencing team. She also wore her favorite Fair Isle sweater—unraveling at the elbows--and a somewhat tattered tutu. Her outfit had drawn a few smiling glances from the fashion-conscious crowd, but Lucy didn’t seem to mind. “I’m learning to fence instead of going to stinky ballet class today. But Aunt Nora won’t let me take the button off.”

“She’s no fun.” Emma prudently tipped the foil away from her own ear.

“Where’s your mom?”

“Mummy had a date last night,” Lucy volunteered. “So we all had a sleepover at Aunt Nora’s house. The twins got to stay in the basement.”

“Chained up like Quasimodo, I hope.” Emma sent me a raised eyebrow. “And where is Mummy today?”

“We don’t know,” Lucy said cheerfully. “Maybe she had a sleepover, too.”

I asked, “Have you seen Libby, Em?”

“Nope. What’s up? Has she taken a fancy to someone new?”

“Actually, she’s been in bed for a week. Alone,” I added, “except for her depression. The kids have been staying with me.”

Emma frowned. “Anything serious?”

Lucy piped up. “Mummy just likes to take naps sometimes, and read magazines and watch that food channel on television a lot.”

I answered Emma’s inquiring glance. “Libby’s been feeling a little low. The fireman she was dating disappeared in his own puff of smoke.”

“But she went out last night? That’s a good sign, right?”

“It was a meeting with her accountant. But, uhm, Lucy says she wore her lucky sweater.”

“Oh, boy.”

“Exactly.”

The Libby Alert System just went to Code Red. Sometimes our older sister Libby was a dormant volcano in recent weeks. But it was only a matter of time before Vesuvius blew.

Lucy poked the foil at the muddy tire of a Rolls Royce that was guarded by a uniformed chauffeur with a disapproving glower. Ignoring him, Lucy said, “I don’t think he’s a counting man. Mummy called him hot stuff and maybe her next paramour.

What’s a paramour?”

“A man who brings expensive presents for little girls,” I said.

“I want a sword of my own,” Lucy said promptly. “A big one that’s sharp, like Captain Hook’s.”

She executed a lunge and decapitated an imaginary pirate.

Although I dearly loved my niece and her four brothers, I often thanked heaven they were not mine to manage more often than the occasional few days when my sister took her hormones for a stroll.

I caught Emma scrutinizing me. She said, “So you’ve got the monsters to look after. That must be a dose of reality after your cruise. How was it? Did the Love Machine keep you below decks the whole time?”

“We—It was a lovely getaway,” I said.

It had been more than lovely, of course. Sailing the Caribbean on a borrowed yacht had been almost heaven. Fourteen days of sun, sparkling waters, azure sky and three meals a day prepared by a private chef had been therapeutic, but endless champagne and long, passionate nights had been a real sojourn from reality. I’d hated to come home. But I told myself it was time to face the world. To get on with our lives.

So I summoned some cheer. “What about you, Em? You haven’t been to Blackbird Farm since I got back. Did you find a new apartment?”

“Nah, I figured I’ve give you and Mick some space at the Love Shack. You know—in case you want to howl at the moon or tie each other to the headboard once in a while.”

“So where have you—?”

“Don’t spend any energy worrying about me. I’ll be back when I run out of other pillows to rest my head. Anyway, I’ve been busy. I’m holding down a couple of jobs these days, plus some extra curricular stuff that keeps me on my toes.”

I didn't smell liquor on her breath, and Emma seemed quite clear-eyed. But even if she was busy with assorted jobs, there was no telling what kind of trouble she could get herself into. And if Raphael Braga was hanging around, trouble was definitely in the wind.

A mob of little girls suddenly splashed up and engulfed us—a flock of chattering ten-year-olds in britches and boots and riding helmets. Their nearly identical French braided ponytails dangled between their shoulder blades, and their freckled faces glowed with excitement. They clamored for Emma's attention, half of them jumping up and down. I stepped back to avoid the mud. If my sister had been the latest teenybopper sensation, they couldn't have been more adoring. Lucy scrunched herself back into me and stared at them with sudden-onset shyness.

"Hold on, hold on," Emma snapped with mock irritation. She towered over the children. "Who let all the elves out of the Keebler factory?"

"Emma, Emma, we want the pony!"

"Can we let Brickle out of the van?"

"You said we could take turns riding him!"

"Not if you're all acting like a bunch of ninnies," she said. "What did I say about staying out of the way of the polo players?"

"But we have, Emma! We've been perfect, just like you said."

"Not one person has yelled at us."

"Except you," one brave little girl piped up.

"We want to ride Brickle!"

"We'll keep him away from the other horses, we promise."

“We promise!”

“All right, all right,” Emma said gruffly. “I’ll come down and unload him.”

“We can do it! We know how!”

“Forget it.” Emma was firm. “The last thing I need is for one of you princesses to get her front teeth kicked out in a horse trailer. Go get the tack out of my truck. And make sure it’s clean or somebody’s head’s gonna roll!”

They took off in a pack, running downhill toward the cluster of horse trailers and vans parked below all the tailgaters.

“I’ll be there in a minute!” she shouted after them.

“Cute,” I said. “Since when did you go back to teaching pony classes?”

She shrugged. “Paddy Horgan needed an instructor, so I took him up on it.”

“Sounds promising. The kids obviously love you.”

“What little girl doesn’t love the person who lets her ride ponies every day?”

Emma shook her head. “I’m a glorified babysitter most of the time. But it pays the bills.”

“Paddy paid you to bring them here today?”

“Hell, no, I just let them tag along.” A slight blush of pink colored her cheekbones, but she wasn’t going to admit how much those little girls must have reminded her of herself not too many years ago. She said briskly, “I bought a new pony in case I decide to freelance. Brickle needs some exercise, so I figured I’d take advantage of the free labor. After today, I’ll be boarding him in your barn. Hope you don’t mind. ”

Now and then, Emma brought her various rescue projects to Blackbird Farm where she cured their ills and nursed them back to usefulness. I hadn’t heard about her

latest patient, but I wasn't surprised. The really good news was that my little sister seemed to be getting her life together since her husband's death. She'd been on a two-year bender. The thought of her teaching little girls to ride made me smile.

I said, "I'm glad you have a steady job again."

"For the moment." Emma raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What about you? Did you put on your party hat today to cover the social set for the *Intelligencer*? Or have you been fired like half the other reporters in town?"

"I'm still on the payroll. The publisher used to be a shopping buddy of Penny Devine, so I'm here to make her memorial—well, memorable in my column."

A few years ago, I might have come to an event like the polo match as a guest of wealthy friends, or even hosted my own small group of pals for drinks and a picnic. But in the last couple of years I had been reduced—thanks to my parents setting out on a mission to blow every last cent of the Blackbird family fortune on a worldwide spending spree—to attending such festivities in my role as the society reporter for a Philadelphia rag.

"So it's officially your column?" Emma asked. "The publisher gave Kitty Keough's job to you at last?"

"Not officially," I conceded. "I still have to prove myself, try not to make mistakes. I'm not a trained journalist, after all."

"What are you going to write about today? The whole concept is kinda tacky, don't you think? A party instead of a suitably weepy funeral service for Philadelphia's most famous kiddie star?"

“Penny loved parties. Almost as much as she loved polo, so I think this was a good solution. And she would have adored the clothes. Besides, there’s a charitable angle to the whole thing, so I’ll play that up.”

The newspaper’s owner had insisted I devote serious space to the life and memory of film star and Philadelphia native, Sweet Penny Devine. The world-famous actress—best known for her role as Molly, the plucky parlor maid in the Civil War blockbuster *Suffer the Storm*--was an American film icon. She’d been rushed to Hollywood at an early age to begin her career as a tap-dancing child star. After a short awkward period in her adolescence, she’d grown into a decent character actress—often playing the wholesome best friend or the jilted lover of a cad. But she finally received an Oscar nomination (lost to Meryl Streep the year she played Benazir Bhutto) as the maid who looked after Charlton Heston’s version of Abe Lincoln.

As her weight grew increasingly out of control, though, Penny had played a few adorably quirky oldsters in romantic comedies. Before her death, she specialized in playing Sandra Bullock’s grandmother, and her popularity soared again.

So today, a few hundred Philadelphia aristocrats and film lovers had come out to celebrate the life of one of their own—a local girl who made it big in the movies. My job was to make the event sound lovely despite the mud.

Emma smirked. “Oh, yeah, the charitable angle.”

“Yes.” I pulled my invitation from my handbag to double-check. “Proceeds from today’s tickets go to—here it is--a foundation that helps treat eating disorders.”

Emma grinned broadly. “You know what everybody’s calling this thing, right? Chukkers for Chuckers.”

“Emma!”

From several yards away, a musical voice hailed us. “Darlings!”

Out of the crowd burst a vision of excess estrogen in a leopard print suit cut down to reveal her bountiful bosom as blatantly as imported cantaloupe in a Whole Foods display. Our older sister Libby waved a champagne flute overhead as she waded toward us with what were clearly a pair of her son’s hiking boots on her feet. On her head she sported a wide-brimmed yellow hat festooned with daffodils—one of which was already trying to curl around her nose.

Emma said, “What are you doing? Getting ready for a mammogram?”

Libby ignored her and cried, “Lucy! My stars, what have you done to your tutu? And who in the world let you have that weapon?”

“Aunt Nora did!” Lucy nearly stabbed her mother through the heart as she flung herself into her Libby’s open arms. “She let me have ice cream for breakfast, too!”

“Blabbermouth,” I said.

“Nice going,” Emma muttered to me. “What’s next? Showing them how to rob banks?”

“It was all the food I had in the house! How was I to know I’d have to feed the horde, not to mention store lab specimens in my refrigerator?”

Libby chose not to hear me. Bending at the waist, an act that nearly spilled her breasts like a truckload of warm marshmallow fluff, she used a lace handkerchief to wipe a smudge from her daughter’s less than pristine cheek. “Did you brush your teeth after the ice cream, sweetheart?”

“Aunt Nora ran out of toothpaste.”

“Heavens. Well, you won’t have to stay there ever again, Lucy.”

“You’re welcome,” I said tartly. “No charge for the babysitting.”

Libby straightened and adjusted her hat to dislodge the pesky flower once and for all. “Don’t apologize, Nora. I’m sure your mind is scattered after such a long vacation. We began to worry you’d run off permanently with That Man.”

“He has a name, you know.”

Blandly, Emma said, “You’ll notice she’s wearing the Rock of Gibraltar again.”

Libby seized my left hand and goggled at the giant, emerald-cut diamond ring that flashed on my finger. “Oh, sweet heaven, what have you done?”

“Be careful,” Emma warned. “You could endanger the Hubble telescope with that sparkler.”

“It’s huge!” Libby cried. “It’s not stolen, is it?”

“No,” I said tartly, “I think he won it in Vegas.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re kidding!”

“Of course I’m kidding.”

She peered more closely. “A diamond that size can’t possibly be real.”

“You actually gonna marry Mick this time, Nora?” Emma asked.

I took a deep breath. “Yes.”

Libby dropped my hand and cried out in anguish. “Nora, think of your family! You can’t besmirch our good name this way!”

“Hell, think of Mick,” Emma said. “You realize this is his death sentence?”

The Blackbird women all shared such genetic traits as auburn hair, an allergy to cats, and well-documented widowhood at a young age. Emma and I had lost our

husbands before we turned thirty, and Libby's marriages—three so far—had all ended in disaster. The joke around our social circle was that the only men interested in marrying us must be suicidal.

I had fallen hard for Michael Abruzzo, however, and he insisted he was strong enough to withstand a little family curse—even one that dated back more than a hundred and fifty years. I had refused to endanger his life, of course. But after months of holding out, I was finally weakened by too much champagne and a glorious Caribbean sunset. When he'd asked me again, I said yes.

The fact that he was the son of New Jersey's most notorious mob kingpin didn't matter to me anymore. Not much, at least. But our love match was going to turn Philadelphia society upside down. The Blackbird family had been welcomed into sedate drawing rooms since the days of the Continental Congress, and a union with the Abruzzos—known for racketeering, not racquet club memberships—was going to be the scandal of the season.

Libby groaned. "We'll never live this down!"

Emma patted her shoulder. "Take it easy. Maybe the mayor will get caught with a hooker or something."

Libby nodded. "Let's hope there's a catastrophe so we won't suffer the glare of the spotlight."

"Let's hope," I agreed, only half joking.

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Will arrive in your bookstore March, 2007