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A Twist of Fate

Written by Joanna Rees

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A Twist of Fate

JOANNA REES

PAN BOOKS



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For my sister, Catherine

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East Germany, 1971

The grubby white Trabant pulled to a stop in the forest, the shuddering brakes sending a flurry of birds screeching into the night sky. When the noisy engine cut, a cloak of inky silence descended once again.

Inside the car, Sebastian Trost kept the lights on, illuminating the frozen track ahead, which disappeared deeper into the forest. There was no moon tonight and a light snow had started to fall.

Sebastian had hunted here with his father as a boy and knew this seldom-used route to the outskirts of Schwedt on the Polish border well, but in the dark the familiar woods felt hostile and he wished again that he was back home in his apartment.

He cupped his hands and blew on them, trying to get some warmth into them after the long drive, then stole another glance in the rear-view mirror.

Volkmar, his boss, sat behind him with his hat pulled down low. Sebastian had heard whispered stories at the steel factory where he worked about how Volkmar's family had been

imprisoned and tortured by the Stasi, and that Volkmar himself had been born in jail. His face was thin and rat-like. The face of a man who would do whatever it took to get by.

Sebastian had only been Volkmar's driver for two weeks – recruited against his will after he'd witnessed Volkmar stabbing a man in the loading dock at the steel works. Sebastian, fearing for his own life, had looked the other way. He knew the score only too well. If he kept his mouth shut, then his family would live.

Sebastian sparked up a cigarette, trying to cover up his shaking hands. He glanced in the rear-view mirror again, this time looking down towards Volkmar's right.

On the back seat next to Volkmar was a bread crate containing two sleeping babies, each one bundled up in a crudely knitted blanket. With a stab of guilt, Sebastian wondered how long it would take his wife, Martina, to notice that those precious blankets had gone. He remembered his own sons and how they'd been wrapped in those very blankets as babies.

'Where the hell is Solya's man? He should have been here,' Volkmar said, checking his watch, before taking a pistol from inside his coat pocket and weighing it in his hand.

Solya.

The most feared man around. Even to know his name would mean a brutal execution for Sebastian and his family at the hands of the Stasi.

Sebastian forced the thought away. Instead, he thought of Martina at home and the rabbit stew she had prepared for him. He tried to imagine sleeping beneath the fur throw on their hard bunk later on, his hand cupped around her ample breast. How he'd match his breathing to hers. How he'd never tell her that he'd come here tonight. Or why.

But try as he might to think of other things, the same

questions kept queuing up in Sebastian's head, as he stared out into the tunnel of snow. Where were the babies from? Who were their mothers? How had Volkmar come to be in possession of the two of them?

One of the babies snuffled and stirred. A soft mewling sound that wrenched Sebastian's heart.

'What?' Volkmar growled impatiently, as if sensing his unease.

'I was . . . I was thinking . . . Where will they go?' Sebastian asked, trying to make it sound as if he was interested, and not terrified at being complicit in all of this.

'What does it matter? I get a thousand marks for each one,' Volkmar said. 'But it is rumoured one child is destined for America.'

Sebastian heard a flash of pride in his tone. 'Don't they have enough babies of their own in America?'

'Not anonymous ones. Not ones that look small like these, with no paperwork and no past,' Volkmar said.

'And the other one?'

Volkmar shrugged and, in his dark look in the mirror, Sebastian understood the fate of the other child. He'd heard that Solya's underground network was linked to Bolkav, the orphanage in the hills, a place shrouded in secrecy, where many children went in, but few ever came out. Sebastian had heard talk in the clocking-out room at the steel works of some of the orphans ending up in films. Horrible, sick and violent films that would haunt a man forever.

If that was one of the children's fate, then tonight would probably be the only taste of freedom she would ever know.

*

Lights appeared through the trees ahead. Sebastian blinked, blinded by them as they drew up closer and an old Mercedes ground to a halt on the track ahead. Only then did the headlights cut.

Sebastian felt Volkmar's pistol barrel jabbing into the back of his seat.

'Get out and help me with the crate,' he said.

Sebastian hurried to do what he was told. The quicker this was over, the better.

Outside it was no colder than inside the car, but the conspiratorial silence of the forest made Sebastian shudder. Compared to the town in which he lived, where the air was always acrid with industrial smog, here the air was penetratingly clear and he felt all his senses on alert. Peering into the darkness of the stationary Mercedes, he could make out the silhouettes of two men.

He dropped his cigarette on the ground, where it hissed in the fresh dusting of snow, and quickly opened the back door of the Trabant and lifted out the crate, instinctively holding the babies close to protect them.

Then he heard the slam of car doors. Turning, he saw two men walking towards them. One was huge – a great bear of a man with a black beard. The other was wearing a long leather coat. Sebastian saw that he was young, in his early thirties at most, and was broad-shouldered and athletic-looking, with cropped blond hair. He might have been called handsome, had it not been for his pale-blue eyes. They were predator's eyes, as if, given half a chance, he'd strip the meat from your bones and leave them to bleach in the sun.

'Solya,' Volkmar said, stepping up beside Sebastian. 'I wasn't expecting you.'

Sebastian felt his throat constrict with fear.

'Volkmar, old friend,' the smaller man – Solya – said, spreading his arm out wide and stepping forward to hug Volkmar. His teeth, Sebastian noticed, were perfectly white. 'You have them for me?' he asked, pulling back and altering the cuff of his coat to reveal a thick gold bracelet.

'Yes. They are both here. As you requested,' Volkmar said, nodding to Sebastian, who stepped forward, holding the crate as if he was proffering bread rolls to be inspected.

Solya's pale eyes glinted as he looked down at the babies. 'Good.' He smiled. From inside his coat he produced a clean white envelope. He pressed it to Volkmar's chest. Sebastian saw the edges of a stack of crisp bank notes inside its open flap.

Then Solya raised one gloved hand to his minder behind him. 'The vodka, Udo,' he said, waggling two fingers in command. 'For our friend.'

Solya handed Volkmar the bottle that Udo passed him. A black glove against a silver label.

'As a gesture of goodwill,' he said.

'Thank you. Thank you, sir,' Volkmar told the younger man, taking it and curtly bowing his head.

Solya clicked his lips and then turned towards Sebastian. Two dewy rosebud noses poked out from the top of the green and yellow blankets that Martina had made all those years ago.

'So which one shall it be?' Solya said in his Berlin accent. The lightness of his tone made it seem as if this were all a joke. 'Because, in fact, I think both are adequately small for the purpose. You choose,' he said, his eyes locking on Sebastian's. He took a coin from his pocket and flipped it up in the air, catching it and slapping it onto the back of his hand. 'Which one of these sisters should have the good life? And which the bad?'

Sisters? Nobody had told Sebastian anything about the babies being sisters. Somehow that very fact made this all so much worse. Sisters born so close together in age – no mother could bear such a loss.

Sebastian felt his heart begin to hammer. Solya cocked his head to one side as if he could almost hear the noise. His ice-blue eyes seemed to pierce Sebastian's soul and he knew with absolute certainty then that this man was a devil and that he, Sebastian, was damned.

He stared down at the two innocent girls. He wished he could grab them both and run away, deep into the forest and never come back.

'I . . . I can't,' he said, his voice cracking. At first he thought Solya would be angry, but then he saw that he was smiling.

'Yes,' Solya said, finally inspecting the coin, 'you're right. If anyone should play God, it should be me.' He reached inside the crate and scooped up the babies, holding one in each arm. The crate felt desperately empty in Sebastian's hands.

It was only now that Sebastian noticed that one of the babies was awake. The bigger sister.

She made no sound. Just stared up at Solya, her eyes shining like black pebbles.

'I like this one,' Solya said. 'Yes, this one I'll keep for myself. Now say goodbye to your little sister.' He turned the babies momentarily towards one another, as if it was all a game. 'And this other one, the lucky one, we'll give to Walchez. He'll know what to do,' he told Udo, the guard, handing over the younger sister in the yellow blanket.

The baby looked impossibly small and vulnerable in the big man's arm. She didn't wake.

'It is done,' Solya said, nodding, before turning away and

walking back to his car, with Udo trudging heavily behind him.

Sebastian looked towards Volkmar. He was examining the label on the vodka bottle, approvingly.

Could it really be that simple? That this terrible thing they had done here was now to be forgotten and mentioned no more?

No, Sebastian thought. *He would never forget.*

He held the empty crate in his hands, watching the men get into the Mercedes. Then the engine started and the car reversed back up the track, and the babies were gone.

Volkmar slipped the bottle into his coat pocket and rubbed his hands together. 'What are you waiting for?' he asked. 'We have celebrating to do.'

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

October 1979

Unlike the name suggested, there was nothing diminutive about Little Elms. In fact, the 125-hectare estate with its grey turreted castle and ornamental lakes was famed for its majestic elm trees, which now, in mid-October, were the pride of New England.

At the front of the house, at the centre of a vast gravel turning circle, Theadora Maddox was up early for her riding lesson. Dressed in an immaculate red riding jacket with cream jodhpurs and black riding hat, she sat with her back ramrod-straight on Flight, a grey Welsh cob. She breathed in the fresh morning air, looking at how the sun was melting the frost on the lawn and turning it into a field of diamonds. She loved it here and she already knew that today was going to be another perfect day.

In the distance, past the avenue of gleaming gold and copper trees, was the block of stables where her father, Griffin Maddox, had once housed Showbiz, the three-times Kentucky Derby champion. And Starburst too, the show jumper that Thea's mother, Alyssa, had ridden to gold in the 1960 Rome summer Olympics.

But Maddox – renowned newspaper editor, businessman

and now CEO of Maddox Inc., the rapidly expanding global media group – was a betting man of a different sort these days. He rarely rode his thoroughbred horses, or drove the customized Lotus or vintage Aston Martins in the estate's garages, preferring instead to stay in Manhattan in the week, from where he could control his burgeoning empire more efficiently.

And Alyssa Maddox? Well, she was the reason Thea was up so early. Thea was determined to learn to jump before Mama came home from the hospital. She knew it was her mother's heart's desire to get back on a horse and ride with her only daughter, and Thea was going to make it happen. No matter what.

Mama had grown up in England, but had moved here when she'd inherited Little Elms from her grandparents, the McAdams, who had made their fortune in Manhattan real estate. They'd built this estate as an embellished replica of their ancestral home in Scotland. Her inheritance had coincided with Alyssa falling for Griffin Maddox, and she'd left England behind and had moved her heart and home here to Little Elms.

Thea never forgot how lucky she was to live here and, like her mother before her, felt that this place was her soul-home. A place where everything was right with the world.

Yes, everything would soon be back to normal, Thea was sure of it. Just as soon as this stupid cancer thing that her mama had got was over and she came home. Then Alyssa and Griffin Maddox would be the toast of New England once more. There'd be the gymkhana in the spring and then, in the summer, all of Mama and Daddy's glamorous friends would flock to the annual Maddox ball.

Below her, Johnny, the head groomsman, slipped her polished boot into the stirrup and then patted her leg.

'All done,' he said, in his English accent, smiling at her. He was wearing his usual uniform of a mud-splattered Barbour jacket and riding boots, and when he looked up at her, she saw that his tanned cheeks were flushed from the effort of readying her horse and bringing it up this early to the house.

Johnny and her mama had grown up together in England, and it had been Johnny who'd brought over the McAdams' horses and had somehow never left to go back home.

'Where's Michael?' Thea asked.

'Probably finishing his chores,' Johnny said, rubbing Flight's flank and moving round to take the reins.

'But you will show me *exactly* the jumps you taught him, won't you, Johnny?' Michael Pryor might be twenty months and five days older than she was, but he was a boy, and Thea was determined that anything he could do, she could do better.

Johnny Faraday rubbed his eyebrows and smiled to himself. He might have known that as well as wanting to put a smile on her poor mother's face, beating Michael was Thea's motivation for insisting on this extra lesson. He'd never met a child so tenacious or competitive as Thea. She was nearly eight years old, but she had the determination of an eighteen-year-old.

Johnny often wondered, like the other staff did, where her relationship with Michael would eventually lead. The Maddoxes had decided to home-educate Thea at Little Elms since Alyssa had been diagnosed. But in this rarefied environment Michael Pryor was the only child her age and, at Thea's insistence, they shared their lessons, as well as all their recreation time together.

Johnny couldn't see it ending happily. Bright as Michael might be, he was still just the housekeeper's son, and Thea Maddox was . . . well, just that, Theadora Maddox, an heiress

with a glittering future ahead of her. And the sky was the limit for a girl like Thea, with her ingrained belief that she was just as strong as any boy. Hell, Johnny thought, maybe she was right. After all, if they could elect Margaret Thatcher as prime minister back home in England, who knew where Thea might land up one day, with all the opportunities she had here in the States.

The sad thing was that, personality-wise, she and Michael made a perfect match, despite coming from opposite ends of the social scale. God only knew what would happen once they hit puberty in a few years' time.

But that was the future, Johnny reminded himself, and for now Thea was just a little girl. So what if sparks flew when she and Michael rubbed each other up the wrong way? Johnny knew his job could be a whole lot duller if Thea didn't have the personality she did. She took after her mother, Johnny thought affectionately. The two of them were as tough as teak.

'I sincerely hope you're not encouraging Thea to attempt jumping anything too high,' Mrs Douglas said, stepping out from the open back door.

Johnny put his hands on his wiry hips and smiled. Thea's governess always looked as if she were dressed for church and chewing a sour lemon, and today was no different.

'Now don't work yourself up, Mrs D,' Johnny replied, knowing how much this abbreviation of her name annoyed Mrs Douglas, who thought she was owed extra respect for having been Alyssa Maddox's governess back in England, as well as being her daughter's now. 'I've told you before, I'm perfectly capable of supervising Thea's riding lessons.'

Thea smiled, grateful as ever to anyone who would stick it to Mrs Douglas. Seeing the adult staff squabbling over how best to educate her was a common amusement.

'Do be careful,' Mrs Douglas called out, as Johnny led Flight across the gravel driveway towards the paddock.

'We will,' Johnny called back, saluting without turning around. 'Now listen up,' he told Thea, 'don't you let me down, or give her the satisfaction of proving me wrong by getting hurt or anything.'

But Thea didn't think for a second she would. Mama had been a famous show-jumper, so it only stood to reason that Thea should take after her.

Half an hour later Thea was out of breath, having cajoled Flight into jumping over the small bar ten times, without clipping it once.

'Can Michael do it like that?' Thea asked Johnny, circling round towards him.

'Oh yes, Michael can do it just like that,' a voice said, impersonating her.

Thea turned to see her best friend and rival, Michael Pryor, riding into the paddock on Buster, the scruffy and stubborn brown pony that was the joke of the riding stables, but which Michael always managed to ride like a dream.

Unlike Thea, Michael didn't have any correct riding attire. He was wearing tatty old jeans and a checked shirt under a denim jacket, and his honey-blond hair curled down across his brow from beneath his green woolly hat.

'He can do it just like that, but faster,' he goaded, riding up beside her with a twinkle in his eyes.

'Oh, really?' she said, her cheeks burning. 'You mean faster than *this*?'

She kicked her heels into Flight and took a run up at the jump, willing her horse to make it over without a mistake. He

did it and she felt a flush of satisfaction as she turned and saw Michael sitting back on his saddle, applauding her.

'Too easy. She can go higher, right, Johnny?' Michael called. 'I'll help you raise the bar.'

Johnny nodded. In spite of Mrs Douglas's earlier warning, he knew that Thea was more than ready to take on the bigger jumps. Plus he knew there was no way in hell that she'd shirk from Michael's challenge now.

'You OK?' Johnny asked, seeing the dark circles under Michael's eyes, as he helped him with the jump.

'I did Guido's shift,' Michael said in explanation.

Guido the gardener had a bad back, so Michael had covered for him, but Johnny knew he'd never let on to Thea that he was exhausted. It just wasn't in the boy's nature to complain.

From the other end of the paddock, Thea watched Michael and Johnny stand back. The bar seemed at least two feet higher than before.

'We can do it,' she said, patting the soft neck of her horse, before circling once more, then setting Flight off cantering straight towards the jump.

This time, though, she got it all wrong. Instead of sailing majestically over the jump, before rounding on Michael and grinning in triumph, as she'd planned, Flight missed his stride coming into the fence and, worse, landed awkwardly, throwing Thea clean out of her saddle and hard onto the ground.

Michael was the first to reach her. 'Thea, Thea,' he gasped, sliding to a halt on his knees by her side. 'Oh God. It's all my fault.'

Thea took a breath, determined not to cry in front of Michael. So she'd messed up. So what? That didn't mean she'd give him the satisfaction of seeing her be a baby about it. But then she saw that he wasn't laughing at her at all.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, staring into her eyes.

She'd never noticed how lovely the golden specks in his hazel eyes were.

'It's not *your* fault.' She managed to sit up. 'Don't they say: pride before a fall?'

Johnny arrived just as she was saying this and smiled with relief that she was clearly OK. He reached down and ruffled her blonde hair. It broke his heart that she sometimes said such grown-up things when she was still only a little girl. He helped her to her feet.

'Nothing broken, I hope?' he said, picking up her riding hat and handing it back.

'Not this time,' Michael said, putting his arm around Thea's shoulder and giving her a hug.

'Ow,' she winced, knowing her shoulder was almost certainly going to bruise. But she knew Michael hadn't meant to hurt her, so she said more gently, 'Get off, or I'll get boy fever.'

'Yeah. Well, just don't tell Mrs D or your father what happened, or he'll probably fire me,' Johnny said. He was smiling as he said it, but he meant it. Griffin Maddox could be a tough bastard to work for, and this little girl was the apple of her father's eye.

Thea laughed. 'Of course not.' The thought of ever getting any of the staff in trouble appalled her. She'd always thought of them being almost like family too.

But just as they were both about to help her back onto Flight, something snagged Thea's attention. She shielded her eyes against the bright sun, with her now-muddy white riding glove.

A sleek black limo flashed between the avenue of trees. 'Look! It's Daddy.'

'I'd better go warn Mom,' Michael said, flashing a look at Johnny. 'She wasn't expecting them back till the weekend.'

But Thea wasn't listening, she was already running away from him, diagonally across the paddock, her hat toppling from her head, as she waved her arms, with a wide happy smile on her face.

She arrived, breathless, at the paddock gate as the black limousine drew up parallel with her on the gravel drive. She stood up on the wooden rung of the gate, her heart beating with anticipation. She hadn't seen her parents for the best part of a month, but surely, them being here could only mean one thing: her mother was better.

Mama was home.

But her hope fluttered and faded as Anthony, her father's chauffeur, got out. He usually had a wink for her, or a smile, but today he wouldn't meet her eyes. He walked quickly around the car and opened the far passenger door.

Griffin Maddox stepped out, blinking into the morning light, and placed his black trilby on his head with a weary sigh. When she thought of her father, Thea always remembered him dressed in a cowboy shirt – throwing her up in the air and laughing. How he always told her that she was the light of his life. How he'd one day teach her everything he knew. How everything that was his would one day be hers.

But today the shadow of dark hair on his cheeks made his usually handsome face look haggard and worn.

'Daddy,' Thea called, but all he did by way of response was weightily lift his forefinger to his lips to signal her to be quiet. He was a tall, powerfully built man, who'd rowed for Harvard in his youth. He was dressed in a fine camel coat, opened to

reveal an immaculately tailored suit, but he moved stiffly as he walked around the car.

As she climbed quickly over the gate, Anthony opened the nearside passenger door and that's when Thea saw her mother's familiar leg stretch from the car down to the ground.

Thea stumbled and stopped, still five yards from the car. She felt her breath catch in her throat, as Anthony and her father helped her mother to stand.

Her mother looked so different. So desperately frail. She was wearing a brightly coloured swirly silk scarf wrapped around her head, but it only served to emphasize how much paler and more gaunt she was.

Thea ran up to her mama and threw her arms around her, pressing herself against her fur coat. Her mother felt terrifyingly thin beneath it.

'You're home,' Thea said, finally stepping back and forcing a brave smile onto her face.

'Oh, Thea, my Theadora,' her mother said softly. 'My beautiful gift from God.'

She took Thea's head in her hands and gently kissed her brow. Thea's nose wrinkled. Despite her familiar perfume, her mama smelt strange – of chemicals and something else Thea couldn't put her finger on.

Her voice sounded different too. A scratchy, difficult whisper. She reached out her hand to Thea's face. Her touch was so cold that Thea couldn't help recoiling as she stared into her mother's sunken eyes.

'Didn't they make you better, Mama?' Thea asked. She couldn't stop herself. Everything she'd dreaded, everything she'd prayed for each night not to happen, was coming true.

Her mother didn't answer. She didn't need to. As Thea

looked into her eyes, she saw something terrible there, magnified by the pools of tears. Something she had no name for yet, but which she'd one day come to recognize as sorrow of the deepest kind. The sorrow of saying goodbye.

Thea felt anger swell up inside her. Her father was Griffin Maddox. He had all the money in the world. As well as Dr Myerson, their family doctor, he'd paid for the best physicians. Grown-ups like her father were meant to be able to fix everything. So why hadn't they fixed her mama?

Thea felt her chest shudder, that familiar prelude to tears, but knew instinctively that she had to be strong. That this was the only way to make her mama happy. And being happy could fix a person, right? Thea was certain it could.

She reached inside her pocket, remembering the present she'd made. She'd been carrying it around for weeks now, hoping and praying that Mama would be home, or that at the very least her father would let her go to the hospital to visit her there.

She'd cut the red silk herself and had embroidered it with careful stitches as Michael's mom, Mrs Pryor, had taught her. It was covered in fluff now from the inside of her pocket, but it didn't matter, she supposed. She pressed the small heart into her mother's hand.

'I made it for you, Mama. I knew you'd come home,' she said.

Alyssa Maddox gripped the heart in her hand and held it to her chest, then closed her eyes. Thea's father held her shoulders as she started to shake.

'Getting you was the best thing that ever happened to me,' Alyssa Maddox whispered, her eyes now glistening with tears. 'Whatever happens, I want you to know that, Thea.'

Why was Mama talking like this? Like she'd run out of hope. They'd just have to get her new doctors. Better doctors, who could make her well.

'Come, Lis,' Thea's father said, gently. 'You mustn't be out in the cold.'

He tried to turn her back towards the car, but she stood her ground.

'No. I want to see Thea ride,' Alyssa Maddox said, with a hint of her old defiance. 'Just . . . just once,' she said, her voice turning paper-thin again.

'OK, watch,' Thea said, her eyes shining brightly, determined to lift her mother's spirits again.

She turned and, knowing she had to go fast, she half-climbed, half-vaulted the paddock fence, landing with bent knees, knowing that she had to perform – that this somehow was the most important thing she would ever do for her mother.

She took off, running, back towards Johnny.

Mrs Douglas was waiting for her in the paddock, holding Thea's riding hat ready for her. The old woman looked strange, standing in the middle of the mud in her sensible black coat. Why was she in the way, *again*? But Mrs Douglas wasn't taking any notice of Thea for once. She was looking behind her towards her parents.

Thea pulled the hat down on her head.

'I gotta show Mama how well I can jump,' she called to Johnny.

He nodded, helping her up onto Flight's saddle, securing her feet into the stirrups.

'Give me a moment to lower the bar,' he said.

'No, I can do it,' Thea told him sternly, yanking on the reins

to force Flight to raise his head from where he'd been cropping the grass.

They circled around and Thea stared at the jump. Then, digging in her heels, she raced Flight right at it. Her heart soared as they sailed over.

She couldn't have done it better. A broad grin broke across her face.

A second jump was blocking her view of the limousine. As she brought Flight around it, she looked at Johnny for approval, but saw that he too now was staring towards the driveway.

Thea's smile died then. Her mother hadn't seen her jump. She'd collapsed and was lying stretched out on the ground. Thea's father and Anthony were kneeling on the gravel beside her. Together, they raised Alyssa Maddox up and quickly bundled her into the back of the car.

Thea galloped the horse to the paddock fence, just in time to see the limousine completing its turn and setting off at speed away from her and the house, towards the road that led back into town.

And that's when Thea saw it: the red heart she'd made for her mother, lying forgotten on the gravel, abandoned, crumpled and torn.