

The Inheritance

Nina Bell

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Chapter 1

Bramble Kelly slept with her curtains open. She had learned it from her father, who liked to stay close to the weather, and, besides, there was no one outside who could see in. There were only endless rows of low apple trees, dotted with tiny crimson apples, many now fallen in sad, untidy mounds like old ladies' discarded red flannel petticoats. Her father Edward Beaumont had sold the land five years ago but the new owners, a company in Ashford, sometimes didn't bother to harvest the fruit.

That morning Bramble saw a low-lying mist creeping through the orchards, snaking between the trees as if searching for something. Suddenly, she thought she saw evil.

She struggled to shut the window, which was a rickety Georgian sash that stuck and rattled, only responding to careful jiggling. Closing her eyes for a moment she told herself that it was simply an early autumn fog. When she opened them again the mist had gone and she could see the horses jostling by the gate in the paddock, their breath pluming in the air. The young ones danced, their long, elegant legs like springs. Her gaze rested on Sailor, the yard's mischief-maker, a handsome bay gelding with a coat as soft as cashmere. He looked restless and uneasy.

'Horses stop listening at blackberry time,' her father always said. 'They know everything's about to change.'

'They know it's breakfast time, more like,' Bramble muttered to herself as she pulled on her jeans and hurried downstairs.

She paused on the stairs to look through the great arched window over the front door. Lorenden, the house Bramble had lived in since she was born, had been a farmhouse since Elizabeth I's ships had conquered and plundered the Spanish Armada. The house had been built, according to legend, by a crew member of one of the victorious English ships. Only a few brick chimneys remained of that Elizabethan house, but a Jacobean one had been built around them.

The layers of time were tangible. Everyone who had lived there had left a little of themselves behind. At the back of the house there were four steeply pitched clay roofs, while at the front a wealthy Georgian farmer had added a fashionable classical façade, with a pillared portico of a front porch. Bramble, like every inhabitant of the house for hundreds of years before her, looked out of the window at the top of the stairs, checking the sweep of the drive in front of the house and the horses in the field across the narrow lane.

That morning something was not quite right. She stopped and studied the familiar scene. At the end of the gravel drive there were white-painted wooden gates, over which she could see the horses, including her father's retired Olympic champion Ben and Patch, her daughter's old pony. There was nothing wrong, nothing she could put her finger on. She sighed. Tiredness could make you imagine disasters that hadn't happened. Luckily it was nearly the end of the eventing season and the long, dark, cosy evenings of winter beckoned. She clattered down the broad oak staircase, keeping an ear cocked for her father's footsteps. They'd argued last night – bitterly – and she was still angry.

Downstairs in the kitchen Mop and Muddle, the terriers, scuffled eagerly at her toes and Darcy, golden, elegant and lurcher-languid, yawned and smiled his way out of his basket. Darcy was a sofa hound, her father always joked, bred to get to the sofa first. He had been found as a puppy, tied up with a piece of string, his skin raw with mange and his ribs stark through his matted coat. The careless, ignorant cruelty of it had tugged at Bramble's heart and Darcy had come home to the scruffy warmth of Lorenden.

If anything was wrong, Bramble told herself, the dogs would

have known. She struggled with her boots – she must get a new pair, but the farrier's bill came first – and, letting the dogs burst through the door ahead of her, she stepped out into the damp silver light of a September dawn and walked to the stables, the triumph of the Victorian Beaumonts.

Bramble's great-grandfather – who had been a gypsy, Cornish or was the illegitimate son of duke, depending on which family legend you believed – had won a large sum of money on the horses as a young man, and had bought Lorenden to turn it into a stud. With the real gentry out of his reach, he married the only daughter of a wealthy local solicitor. They, too, added their legacy to the house, planting the orchards to ensure an income, creating gardens and building stables that would have befitted a much larger establishment. An Edwardian Beaumont wife had insisted that the house be updated, adding a bay window to the drawing room and a bathroom wing with a spacious cloakroom below. This bathroom had a high claw-footed bath set on a black-and-white floor, and still smelt of talcum powder and linoleum. Bramble's mother had added another bathroom suite, in avocado green, in the sixties. This, like the rest of the house, was a time capsule of its age.

The stables were near the house, through a wooden gate in the garden wall, and were built of red brick in a U shape. A hayloft and dovecote, now a flat for the groom, commanded the centre block, with a weathervane of a racehorse – Mountain Rocket, the one whose winnings had funded the house's purchase – on top. It had been a progressive design in its day: each horse was in a loose box with a view rather than tied up in a narrow stall, and inside the stables there were iron mangers, stone water troughs and cobbled floors sloped for easy drainage. The high roof, in Kent peg tile, was designed for maximum ventilation on hot summer days. Outside, Bramble's father had installed a sand school and a big metal horse walker.

As Bramble went through all the familiar routines, running an eye – or a hand – over each horse to check that nothing had happened in the night and portioning out the feeds, she expected her father to appear, complaining and snuffling as he always did first

thing in the morning. ‘Have you seen Edward?’ she asked as Donna, the groom, came out of her flat, rubbing last night’s mascara out of her eyes.

Donna’s bleached-blond ponytail bobbed as she shook her head. ‘I’ve only just got up. Bit of a heavy night. Sorry.’

Most of Donna’s nights were heavy. She worked hard and played hard.

Bramble measured out the feeds almost on autopilot: competition mix in the blue bucket for the horse that was still eventing, and a quieter barley blend in the bright green bucket for the mare who’d bucked her owner off three times that week. There were other buckets: purple, lilac, pink, orange and yellow, each allocated to a different horse. Nine horses in all, not counting the pensioners or the youngsters in the field who hadn’t been broken in, bringing the count up to fourteen. Bramble tied up a small haynet in each stable to keep the horses occupied, while Donna mucked out, piling up the steaming manure on the muck-heap at the back and sweeping the whole area until it was sparkling clean.

Edward wasn’t in the kitchen so she went upstairs to his room. He was always up by seven o’clock at the latest, and usually much, much earlier than that. She tapped on his door then carefully pushed it open, composing the words of her argument in her head as she did so. The bed was rumpled and empty.

‘Pa?’ she asked.

There was no answer.

‘Savannah, have you seen Grampa?’ she shouted to her daughter.

‘What?’ Savannah came slowly out of her room, her mane of curly brown hair tangled with sleep.

There was a direct genetic line – clear grey-blue eyes and thick, irrepressible, corkscrew-curved muddy-blond hair and the build of a racing greyhound – running from Edward to Bramble and from Bramble to Savannah, although Savannah had inherited the colouring without the build. She had Dominic Kelly’s – her father’s – stocky, broad-shouldered body. Everyone in Martyr’s Forstal remarked that Edward was a remarkably good-looking man for his age, but that Bramble could make more of herself – her curls were cut short in a severe, boyish cap and her style was neat

and professional, but hardly feminine. Savannah was curvy, and would have to 'watch it'.

'It's long past time to get up. It's almost eight o'clock,' said Bramble reprovingly to her daughter. 'And do you know where Grampa is?'

'Isn't he in the stables?' replied Savannah.

'No, and he isn't in his room either.'

'Well, he must be somewhere,' said Savannah, closing the door again.

Bramble leant her head against the hall window and sighed, her gaze, out of habit, drifting over the field once again to check the fences, the road and the grazing horses. She'd been looking at horses in fields for so long that she could read their body language from a distance, and could tell from their outlines whether they were frightened or ill.

Something was definitely wrong out there. Bramble remembered the sinuous curves of the mist in the orchard and the sense of dread that had taken hold of her heart. There was the same opaque quality of the air out there. Not quite a mist, but not clear either.

She screwed up her eyes and shielded them with her hand in an attempt to see better against the pale, watery sunlight. 'Savannah,' she shouted. 'What do you think of this?'

Savannah flounced out of her room in too-short, recently outgrown pyjamas, muttering: 'Why do you always have to make such a fuss about everything?'

In the field Ben was alert, his ears forward and tail high, moving restlessly round in a circle and occasionally dropping his head to nudge something on the ground.

'Nothing there,' said Savannah. They looked at each other. 'Well, you know what Ben's like.'

'I might as well check.'

'I'll get dressed.'

They crunched down the gravel drive in silence, Bramble half-believing they were wasting their time.

'That's funny,' said Savannah as they crossed the lane.

'What?'

'There's a parcel on the ground. Or some sort of animal. Perhaps it's a dead badger.'

Bramble saw it too, a dark shape in the long grass. She pulled her mobile out of her pocket as they strode over the tussocky grass and pressed her father's number. He would know what to do.

She could hear a ringing in the grass. 'Pa's dropped his mobile here in the field,' she said.

Savannah ran ahead of her, then crouched down over the dark shape.

For one endless second, Bramble couldn't understand what she was looking at. Time slowed down and hovered in the air.

Edward Beaumont was lying in the damp morning grass at the feet of his old friend Ben, motionless. The horse blew through his nose in a sigh of distress.

Bramble dropped to Edward's side. 'What's happened? Are you all right?' They were, she could see, futile questions.

He mumbled something.

'What?' She leaned down. 'What did you say?'

His voice was thick and indistinct. She couldn't understand.

'I'm calling a doctor. Right now.' Bramble had to concentrate on getting the numbers right. Nine. Nine. Nine. 'Is it the same for mobiles?'

Savannah shrugged, dropping down to hold her grandfather's hand.

Bramble could barely breathe as she gave her name and address. Lorenden, she said, the familiarity of the name calming her. Off the A2 past Canterbury. Follow the signs for Martyr's Forstal, it says a mile but it's more like two and a half, there's an oast house after the railway bridge . . .' Even people who had lived here all their life sometimes got lost in the Bermuda Triangle of fields and lanes, first doubling back on each other then spreading out in an ancient patchwork of meadows, woodland and fields.

The voice pressed her for a postcode. The numbers and letters she had known for so many years jumbled in her head. Eventually she got them straight, her tongue dry and swollen in her mouth.

Is he breathing?

'Yes.'

Is he conscious?

'I think so, he's trying to say something,' she shouted, wanting

them to come immediately. 'Please stop asking questions. Just come and help.'

'We need to know the answers,' said the voice. 'They're not slowing down our response. We're on the way. Are there any signs of violence?'

'Violence?' Bramble thought of the evil of the mist, then of her own furious words the night before. 'I don't think . . .' Her voice rose in a sob.

'Please stay calm. We can't help you if you panic.'

'No.' Bramble forced herself to slow her breathing but her voice was still shaking. 'Maybe he fell. Or a heart attack. Or a stroke. I've got a First Aid certificate. What can I do?'

They trailed through endless rounds of questions. There was no bleeding. He was a fit man, he rode every day. He hadn't complained of pain. He hadn't seen a doctor recently – indeed he had hardly ever seen one. He was sixty-nine but you wouldn't think it – he could still do a full fourteen-hour working day. Questions that rolled on and on while Bramble's knees grew damp on the muddy grass, the mobile hooked under her chin as she held her father's dry, papery hand.

'Are you on your own?'

'There's my daughter, Savannah,' she said.

'It would help,' Bramble was told, 'if someone could stand outside the gate so that the ambulance can find the house.'

'We can manage. We'll be waving from the field. But the lane is difficult to find,' said Bramble, trying to see the familiar route through a stranger's eyes – the White Horse pub half a mile before the house, the narrow track winding past the last few hop fields, the caravans for the student workers of a neighbouring farm tucked away behind a beech hedge and the occasional house or farm in the flint and stone mix of the North Downs. The humbler buildings nestled into the landscape as if they had grown out of it. These were the cottages where her father's farmhands had once lived. They had been sold off now: two to second-home owners from London who would not be there on a Wednesday, one to a determined young woman who was prepared to spend two hours commuting to the City on the six o'clock train, and then there was the barn, which was in the

process of being converted by an award-winning architect, but was currently a roofless wreck.

‘The house has a big, long yew hedge, all curving and bumpy, along the front of the garden,’ she said. ‘There are some old white gates – they’ll be open – and then you can see Lorenden at the end of a short gravel sweep. It’s got a Georgian frontage and is painted white. There’s a big cedar tree in front . . . the field is exactly opposite the house, on the other side of the road.’

Once again the voice stemmed the flow of pointless detail.

Finally the questions were over and the ambulance, according to the voice, was only about twelve minutes away.

Edward Beaumont moaned softly as he stirred and his daughter looked at her watch. Please come, she silently begged the ambulance, taking off her sweater and folding it carefully under his head. Please come soon.

Edward raised his head and put out a hand. ‘Felicity.’

‘No, it’s Savannah, Pa,’ soothed Bramble. ‘And Bramble.’

‘Felicity,’ he mumbled. ‘Tell Felicity . . .’ The rest of the words were muffled, as if in a rustling paper bag. ‘I’m . . .’

Savannah knelt down, and took her grandfather’s hand again. ‘What is it? Tell me.’ She leaned towards him. ‘Tell me, Grampa.’

He seized Savannah’s arm with surprising strength. ‘Felicity,’ he murmured again. He said a word that they couldn’t hear. They looked at each other and shook their heads. There was another mumble, and then, quite clearly, again, her name. ‘Felicity. Tell her . . .’

Bramble saw the light leave his eyes.

‘He’s still breathing,’ Savannah indicated a feather-light rise and fall of his chest and, holding his empty gaze and limp, dry hand, they watched the irregular fluttering of his mouth, the harsh rattle of his breath and then the gradual falling away into stillness.

Suddenly, Bramble remembered her First Aid training and began to work on him, furiously pumping his chest and alternating it with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while Savannah hovered, frightened. The effort of trying to breathe for two tore at Bramble’s lungs, and every time she tried to compress his chest it felt more like trying to knead a lump of meat and gristle.

But she wouldn’t give up. She thought that if you kept going

long enough you could win. You just had to keep going. You could never give up. Down, down. In, out. Down, down. In, out. Although she knew, in the rational part of her brain, that she couldn't bring him back.

A woman from the ambulance service, dressed in thick, crackly waterproofs, gently took her shoulder and pulled her away. 'He's gone, love.' Bramble heard the words spoken in a Kentish accent above her. 'He's gone. Let us take over now.'

Bramble knew about death. She was an eventer. Seven years ago her husband Dom had ridden into a sunny day and had never come back. He had been killed by every event rider's worst nightmare – a classic slow rotational fall. His horse, taking off a little too fast and a little too soon, had dropped his front legs between the double rails of a log fence and had somersaulted over it, crushing Dom underneath as horse and rider fell. Bramble, who had been waiting to ride the same cross-country course, remembered how time had slowed to a series of heartbeats, remembered the moment when she had known something was wrong, the faces of the people around her, the way no one seemed to know exactly what had happened. The minutes had stretched out then they compressed, suddenly, into a shocking jolt of reality. She had seen the spectators drifting away from the course and back to their cars, silently, with sombre expressions that echoed the numbness in her own heart. From a distance she had heard people offer help and consolation, and she had shaken her head, knowing that she was strong enough to survive.

Looking down at her father's still face, his mouth hanging open and his eyes staring upwards, she wondered if she had been numb ever since.

The ambulance team – a man and a woman – were both crouched over Edward's body, but they straightened up and the man looked at his watch. 'Death pronounced at 8.36 a.m.,' he said formally.

'We'll have to call the police, love,' said the woman, and Bramble nodded. 'Just because it's a sudden death.'

The next half-hour was a jumble of cars arriving and careful, muttered conversations. Looking back on it later, Bramble thought she remembered a marked police car and two young uniformed

officers, then an ordinary car and a man in a suit, who asked most of the questions. Bramble and Savannah held hands, but felt embarrassed so Savannah went back to the house to tell Donna what had happened. Bramble offered everyone cups of tea, which they all refused. Eventually the man in the suit, who, she thought, had introduced himself as a detective from the CID, asked Bramble if she was all right. Bramble nodded. Of course she was all right. 'I just feel a bit sick,' she added. 'But it's nothing.'

The detective had a word with the ambulance man, who nodded. 'The ambulance will take . . . your father . . . to the hospital mortuary,' said the detective kindly, and Bramble just nodded again. 'There'll have to be an inquest, but there's no sign of this being anything other than natural causes. The funeral directors will tell you what happens next. And here's my card.'

Bramble put the card in her pocket. It all made very little sense. Inquests, detectives, ambulances . . . this was supposed to be a normal morning.

'Have you got someone who can look after you?' enquired the detective. 'You're shocked, you need to take it easy.'

Bramble looked at him as if he was mad. 'I've got the horses to do,' she said. 'There's my daughter and the groom to help. We can manage . . . but . . . what could have caused it?' She didn't want to admit to their heated dispute the night before. 'Could it have been . . . er . . . stress?'

The ambulance man looked down again, at the now-yellow, waxy face. 'There'll be a post-mortem. Don't worry about it. Edward Beaumont.' He shook his head. 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.' It was only then that Bramble realised that she knew him. Mike Tubbs. Of course – Brian Tubbs's son. Brian did some work on the Lorenden roof from time to time. The old countryside where everyone knew everyone else was now enmeshed in the new centralised countryside, where ambulances and fire engines might come from thirty miles away. The woman Mike worked with was a complete stranger, a solid, kindly looking person he addressed as Glenda.

'He was a real local hero, he was,' said Mike to Glenda. 'He did so much for us kids when I was in the Pony Club. We all wanted to be like him.'

Bramble hugged herself tightly. 'Yes, he still does a lot for the

Pony Club.' She swallowed. 'Did, I mean.' It was the first time she had spoken of him in the past tense.

Glenda and Mike rolled his body onto a stretcher, so practised they barely needed to say 'one, two, three'. 'There's a lot of paperwork after a death. Have you got someone to help you?'

'I can call my sister, thank you,' said Bramble. 'My sister, Helena . . .' Her voice choked in her throat, and the rough grass blurred beneath her. 'She lives in London,' she added irrelevantly. 'She'll come down as soon as she can.'

She didn't dare cry, because if she started she might never stop.

As Mike drove the ambulance down the lane he caught a glimpse of a moving shape on his left.

'Bloody hell,' he said to Glenda. 'I haven't seen that before.'

Ben, the old horse, was shadowing the vehicle in a brisk, if uneven, trot along the fence. As it accelerated he broke into a rusty canter. At the corner he stopped, tail swishing, and stood stock still, as if standing to attention while his master was driven away for the last time.

The horse watched the ambulance until it disappeared behind a tangled mess of blackberries and brambles.

'D'you reckon he understood?' asked Glenda.

'He knows. Animals always do.'

Glenda opened the glove compartment and took out a boiled sweet, and offered one to Mike. 'It's always so sad, isn't it?'

Mike managed to remove the sweet paper while driving and popped it in his mouth. 'It's more than sad. Edward Beaumont kept that place together. I don't know what they'll do without him. Mind you, he was a great man but he wasn't easy. That's what I heard.'

'What sort of "not easy"?' enquired Glenda.

'Dunno exactly. I was too young to understand when it all happened, and people didn't used to gossip then the way they do now. They were loyal.'

Glenda thought that people were probably exactly the same as they always had been, but decided not to say so. 'Oh, well, everyone makes mistakes,' she said comfortably. 'Still, there's nothing like a death in the family to stir everything up again.'

‘Turns everything right over,’ agreed Mike, adding a shout as he was forced to brake suddenly.

The mist had suddenly reappeared, curling over the road in a thick white shroud. Barely able to see six inches in front of his face, Mike slowed to a crawl, guided only by the scratching of brambles against the windows. ‘Bloody hell,’ he muttered. ‘It won’t be the last death round here if that mist has anything to do with it.’