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Opening extract from

The Master of the Fallen Chairs

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Chapter One

Advent
1962

He came on the shortest day of the year between the storms that carried the smell of the sea twenty miles inland and the great snow of that winter. But before his arrival there was an equally mysterious disappearance.

Bella Brown went missing without a word to anyone. She was my friend and she worked in the house. A few of her belongings vanished with her, which led police to believe that she had run off with someone. This didn't seem likely because Bella was extremely shy: she barely looked anyone in the face and when she came across me in my first weeks at Skirl, she found an excuse to hurry away. Those that knew her continued to imagine that she had suffered a terrible fate, perhaps crushed by a falling tree in the storms, or something even worse.

Around this time, there were a number of sightings of a stranger in the valley, a sinister type, bundled up against the weather in some very odd clothes indeed. The police came to search a broken-down barn but found no trace of him – no footprints in the mud and no sign of anyone camping out there. Amos Sprigg, who looked after the sheep, swore that he had seen a pile of old sacks rise up and a man emerge covered in dust, as though a bag of flour had been tipped over him.

Someone – maybe the same character – was glimpsed hurrying across moorland at the head of the valley, then a day or two later, standing at the edge of a spinney observing the house. He seemed to be covered in hides and a big black hat. This time, Amos was joined by Simon Vetch, a big ruddy-faced cowman. Armed with an axe handle and pitchfork, they crept up to the spot, but the man slipped away into the murk of the winter afternoon long before they got there. The police were telephoned again and a constable came but Amos and Simon couldn't agree about what they had seen and the officer, who still had several blocked roads to deal with, wondered aloud whether they had been at the cider. They shook their heads and stumped off. Both of

them knew that someone – or something – had been out there: they *knew* and the dogs *knew* and no damned policeman was going to tell them different.

After that an unease settled on Skirl, the ancient home of the Drago family which was owned by my cousin and guardian, the Colonel. It was a huge, despondent place, hidden from the world in the deep U-shaped valley made by the Skirl River. Few people came to visit, but when they did they rarely noticed the house until they rounded some large laurel bushes and found themselves staring up at its sightless windows, startled by the size of the place and its brooding silence. The forest of ornate chimneys that stood high above the roof were mostly smokeless, the stone of the building was covered with ivy, lichen and moss, and the courtyard on the eastern side, where carriages once drew up and servants sprang from the doors with lanterns and umbrellas, was choked with weeds and saplings.

At the centre of Skirl was another very old building founded 600 years before, maybe even more – no one knew. In some places you would come across bits of old wall that were made out of a much darker stone, and there were doorways that had been bricked up and painted over.

One house lay within the other, like the kernel in a nut. When I was bored I would try to work out exactly where the ancient house had been, but its shape and plan somehow always eluded me. Every time I followed a stretch of that dark stone, which sparkled with tiny crystals of feldspar and was damp to the touch, it would abruptly disappear behind a newer wall. It was as though the old house didn't want to be discovered.

There was no hint of this secret house when you entered Skirl, as I did for the first time one beautiful day in July, just eight weeks after my mother's death. She had died a week after my thirteenth birthday in May, and I was at boarding school in England when they told me. And now I was at Skirl, not in Kenya on our farm, and nobody had said how long I would be staying or if I would be there forever.

This is perhaps why it made such a deep impression on me when I walked through the front door and came to a huge hall, at the end of which was a staircase that divided and rose through three floors past windows of mottled glass. I remember letting my case drop to the floor and gazing up those stairs and wondering at the number of rooms in such a house.

Later I would discover two more floors but these could only be reached by one of the many other stairways that threaded through different parts of the building.

To the left of the hall was a drawing room and the dining room, to the right more reception rooms, a snooker room and many smaller chambers that were packed with clutter, and furniture covered in dust sheets. I felt there were more rooms than any single person could visit in a lifetime. Each time I went exploring I discovered new rooms and passageways, and these were all hung with pictures of every description – landscapes, portraits, studies of flowers and animals, mythological scenes, battles and slaughter – but because it was so dark it was often difficult to make them out, especially the higher ones.

The kitchen was at the back of the house, along with the pantries, storage rooms, servants' quarters and a laundry that had once served a household of up to fifty or sixty people. Here the stone floors were worn and at a lower level than in the rest of the house, and in some places you could see drainage channels carved into the stone, which meant that this might have been part of the old house.

There was never a building with more stairways, galleries, hidden thoroughfares, corridors that doubled back on themselves, dead ends and doors that led nowhere. The place was alive with noises – the wind whining through the doors and windows, the creaking of tired wood, things flapping and juddering in the breeze high up in the house, the clank of pipes and gurgling of drains, the scratching of mice, the tolling of clocks at different times and, more sinister, the fits of unfathomable whispering and scurrying that sometimes filled the darker corridors for a few frantic seconds.

Skirl became gloomier and more mysterious as the winter fell upon the valley, a universe that seemed to expand without limit into the night. I spent most of my time in the kitchen, in the company of Tom Jebard, who looked after the place and was the only person who knew every inch of the house and did not get lost, and the cook Alice Camm, an unstoppable talker with a fascination for disasters. Earthquakes were her speciality, closely followed by plagues, thunderbolts, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, meteors, freak waves and the mysterious disappearance of ships. She saw an omen in everything and during those dark December

evenings, she often muttered that the storms and the disappearance of silent, sweet-natured Bella Brown heralded much worse to come.

And she was right.

Just as the last light faded over the moorland in the west, a stranger came to the front door. He walked up, bold as brass, tugged at a handle and sent bells trembling in different parts of the house. Jebard stirred from the kitchen where we were sitting and looked up at the bell quivering on the spring contraption above the door. The two terriers, Applejack and Trumpet, a spaniel named Thistle and an old sheepdog named Black, all searched his face. His eyes narrowed, his hands rubbed his worn brown corduroys until a second ring came and he pushed himself out of the chair. The dogs needed no further invitation and raced off through the house, followed by Jebard and me carrying a storm lantern, which saved us the bother of feeling for light switches on the way.

By the time we got there, the terriers were snorting and scratching at the bottom of the door. Jebard handed me the lantern, picked up a heavy stick, turned the lock and began to draw back the bolts with his free hand. Then he took the lantern back and held it up high. 'Now you stand

back, Kim. I don't want you hurt. If there's trouble you're to go and find someone to tell.'

'Who?' I asked, thinking that if there was trouble, Colonel Drago, who lived in his rooms a long way off in the house, and Alice Camm, would be no use whatsoever.

'Never you mind,' he mumbled. 'Just you tell someone. You run to Simon's cottage. That's what you'll do.'

The light swept over a figure padded with layers of coats and jackets. His boots were wrapped in cloth and his hands were gloved and folded in front of him. By his feet stood a perfectly cylindrical kit bag balanced on its end. We could see nothing of his face because it was hidden in the shadow of a peaked fur hat, which had large earflaps. With my head still full of Bella Brown's disappearance and the stories of a stranger skulking around the place, it occurred to me with a thrill that perhaps there was no face beneath the hat.

'What you want here?' demanded Jebard roughly.

There was no answer.

Jebard moved back a little and brandished the stick. 'If you've got nothing to say for yourself, you'd best be off, or we'll telephone the police.

Do you hear? We don't want your kind here.' He began to turn into the house, but the dogs had shot from the doorway, down the stone steps, and were running round in circles, barking hysterically. 'Shut up, the lot of you,' he shouted, then peered at the stranger again and pointed to a brass light-switch inside the door. 'Let's have some more light on this gentleman, Kim. Is it you that's been watching the place?' Jebard demanded, peering under the peak of the hat.

Still no answer came.

I turned on the light. The dogs came back up the steps and began sniffing around the man's feet and bag with interest. He glanced down and made a sort of mewing sound to them. They cocked their heads and moved away. Then he reached up and undid something at his neck. The earflaps sprang outwards and he removed the hat. A wide, flat face was revealed. His head steamed gently in the cold air: strands of damp black hair were stuck to his forehead. He gave us a broad smile; his eyes almost disappeared, his nose wrinkled and his lips parted to show an even set of teeth which seemed astonishingly white against his dark skin. He nodded with an odd familiarity, as though he had known us for a very long time, then he performed an elaborate bow

in which the hand holding his hat drifted out behind him.

He advanced two paces and spoke, 'Igthy Ma-tuu Clava. My name is Igthy Ma-tuu Clava.' He repeated it again as though it was explanation enough for his arrival, and nothing more needed to be said.

'I don't care who you are,' growled Jebard. 'There's nothing here for you. Understand?'

The man smiled again. 'It's very cold. I would like to come in, if that would not displease.' His voice was high and there was a kind of shine to it. I couldn't place his accent, but his English was quite good.

'You can't stay here. We don't let any stranger into the place just because of a bit of cold,' Jebard added with a slightly menacing note. I could see he was trying to work something out.

'I am not stranger. I brother of this house. Look, I show you now.'

He removed a glove, opened his outer garment and began to search among the layers underneath. After much fumbling, he found what he was looking for and, giving me a wink, pulled out a small brown paper parcel, which he offered to us. Jebard took it. 'You will see, I am your brother,' said the man.

Jebard managed a weak smile. 'Whatever you are, sir, you aren't that. My only brother, Bert, s'been lying in the churchyard these twenty years, and a good thing too most would say.'

'In manner of speaking, I am your brother,' the stranger insisted.

The paper had come off easily and now Jebard was looking down at a Bible with soft leather covers that had curled back at the corners. 'What's this supposed to mean?'

The man was humming. 'It is the book which came from Skirl many years ago. It will prove who I am.'

'It don't prove nothing,' said Jebard.

The man's eyes came to rest on me; he seemed to be considering something. 'You are not my brother,' he said, wagging a finger at Jebard, 'but I think this small man is my brother. What is your name?'

'Leave the lad out of it,' said Jebard.

'Kim,' I said.

Jebard shot me an angry look. 'Where did you get this Bible from?' he asked the man

'From my father before three.'

Jebard shook his head. 'What's that mean?'

The man shook his head as though Jebard was being extremely slow. 'His name was Clava.'

Jebard held the book up to the light and read the inscription. 'To Clive Endymion Francis Drago, on the occasion of reaching his twenty-first birthday. From his loving father, Clive Drago, 4th April, 1855.'

The man leaned forward to place a finger on the first name. 'This is my father before three and this,' he said, touching the second name, 'is my father before four.' He nodded enthusiastically several times.

Jebard shook his head.

'I think he's saying he's a member of the Drago family,' I suggested.

'I know that, but it don't mean it's true, do it?' said Jebard. 'This Bible has been out in the world for over a hundred years. Anyone could've got hold of it and dreamed up a tale to make monkeys out of us.'

The man was now looking up at several large snowflakes swirling in the light above him. 'Nevertheless,' he said, wrinkling his nose as one or two landed on his face, 'I am Igthy Ma-tuu Clava, son of Clava, son of Clava, son of Clava.'

'That don't get us nowhere,' said Jebard. 'I've told you now – there's nothing here for you.'

The man began to feel in his clothes again and produced a small bag, which he held in the flat

of his hand. He undid a leather tie with a sharp tug. 'I have money. Look, see this money.' With each shake of the little bag a gold coin fell into his glove.

Jebard picked one up and examined it. 'Is this really gold?'

'Yes, these are Victoria's gold sover-reens.' He showed me the head of the young queen on one side. 'See, I am rich.'

Jebard was silent for a few moments. 'You say these are sovereigns. Where d'yer get them?'

'Father before four. He gave them to father before three and he gave them...'

'Yes, I understand that,' said Jebard testily. 'You say father before three was Clive Drago of Skirl House?'

'Yes.' Igthy Ma-tuu Clava nodded sympathetically as though it must be very hard being as stupid as Jebard. 'Then you will let me pass and come inside to warm myself,' he said, returning the coins to the bag.

The sight of the sovereigns shining dully in the light seemed to have altered something in Jebard. Curiosity replaced suspicion.

'Why've you come here? What's your business?'

'To meet with my brothers; to bring greetings,' the man said simply.

Jebard shook his head and looked down to the ground. The cold had drained his jowly face of blood; his eyes were busy with calculation. I knew he was thinking that turning this man away might get him into more trouble than allowing him in, especially since I had seen the sovereigns. 'Well,' he said, raising his head and looking from beneath his brow, 'it's five mile to the nearest village...and...well, they speak of snow tonight.' He paused to add weight to what he was going to say. 'But get this straight, Mister Mactullaver, or whatever you name is, you've got no brothers here – no relations of any sort. I mean...look at you, man.' His eyes ran over him. 'The master of the house – Colonel Drago – will speak to you when and...*if*...he sees fit. You'll have a roof tonight and a bowl of soup, but then you'd best be on your way, soon as you've said what you've come to say and the weather's cleared.'

Igthy Ma-tuu Clava smiled and gave another bow, then put his hat on with the flaps sticking out and hoisted his bag to his shoulder like a sailor. There had never been any doubt in his mind that he would be allowed into Skirl.