

THE MATTHEW CHANCE  
LEGACY



This book is dedicated to my wife Jay, for everything.  
L.L.L.



Stephen F. Clegg

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AUSTIN MACAULEY  
PUBLISHERS LTD.

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 184963 398 7

[www.austinmacauley.com](http://www.austinmacauley.com)

First Published (2013)  
Austin Macauley Publishers Ltd.  
25 Canada Square  
Canary Wharf  
London  
E14 5LB

Printed and Bound in Great Britain

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my special band of readers, Jean Dickens, Jayne Miles, Michele Norton, Lorraine Middleton, Ted Wylie, and especially Nicola Drake, whose ingenious idea inspired one of the central themes of the story. Thanks guys, I am indebted to you all.

I would also like to thank my 95-year-old mother Jocelyn, who made my earlier life so much richer by the expanse of her mind.





## Preface

*Monday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2006. Rushworth Moor, Lancashire*

Naomi checked her mirror and then pulled over to where she'd stopped on her first visit. She took out her binoculars, walked across the lane to the dry-stone wall, and looked down Lark Hill. She put the binoculars up to her eyes and tried to see if she could spot the remains of any digging near the side of the lake.

For several seconds she scanned the area, looking for signs of latent activity, and then every hair on her body stood on end.

The same gaunt looking figure that she'd glimpsed before stepped out of the trees at the bottom of the hill and looked right back at her through another pair of binoculars.

Her first instinct was to drop hers and to look the other way, but she was made of much sterner stuff; she kept them trained on him and waved. The man, whom she presumed to be the sinister and creepy Les Spooner, didn't respond, but kept on looking.

Naomi tried waving again but still drew no response.

The Chance family throughout history had been known as the 'Iron Chances' because of their inherent resolve and tenacity, and some of that kicked in. She knew that she had permission to be on the site, and ignoring the voice in her head that kept repeating '*No, don't...*' she walked back to her vehicle, put the binoculars inside, and locked it, with a steadfast determination to climb over the wall and confront the gamekeeper.

She turned to cross the lane and her heart leapt into her mouth.

Spooner was standing behind the wall that she had seconds earlier been leaning on.

The shock of his appearance was so great that she jumped back, yelled “Jesus Christ!”, and banged into the side of her car. There appeared to be no way that he could have got to the wall in such a short time.

As her heart rate slowed she stared at his fearsome appearance. He was wearing a long black coat and wide-brimmed hat, his skin was thin and pallid, and appeared to be stretched over his bony face and hands. His dark, sunken eyes looked weird, more like an animal than human, and he looked as though he had been dragged out of a Victorian mausoleum.

In a raspy, hollow sounding voice Spooner said, “Don’t you ever step onto this land again, or I’ll shoot you where you stand...”

## Chapter 1

*January 1790. Chance Hall, near Rochdale, Lancashire*

“’Tis the same each time you look at it boy; ‘tis but a box and not much of one to look at either.”

Alexander Chance lifted the tails of his day coat, clasped his hands behind his back, and strode across to his son in the ‘unstately’ drawing room of the run down but spacious Chance Hall, on the Scarred Earth Estate near Rochdale in the District of Spotland.

Fourteen-year-old Valentine looked at the chest on the sideboard; it stood in the same space that it had occupied for as long as he could remember. It tantalised him beyond measure, but he had never been allowed to touch it, let alone see inside it.

It wasn’t very large, measuring just eighteen inches long by eight inches wide and twelve inches high. It was unremarkable except for one thing – carved into the lid was the depiction of a cow’s head with horns that had been pollarded, leaving only a couple of small stumps.

“But grandfather told me that my inheritance is in there,” he said, looking up at his father with his large appealing brown eyes.

Alexander looked down at his son, thought for a second, and said, “Well, in that at least, he was imparting the truth.”

“Then if it truly is my inheritance, why may I not see inside?”

The feeling of discomfort spread through Alexander once again. He closed his eyes for a second and wondered how long he would be able to keep the vile secret.

He looked down at his son and said, “You may not see, Val, because therein lies the Caput Mortuum, and as long as you don’t ever open the lid you will be spared the brute consequences of your grandfather Matthew’s legacy.”

Valentine stared at his father's face devoid of understanding.

For a while neither spoke and then, with a slight nod of his head, Alexander walked towards the drawing room door.

"Father," said Valentine, "what is the Caput Mortuum?"

"Ah!" said Alexander.

He returned to where his son was standing and bent down. He looked into his son's face and lowered his voice to give it just the right amount of gravity.

"Caput Mortuum, Valentine, – 'tis Latin and means, 'Head of the Dead'."

Valentine gulped as his father remained motionless just inches in front of his face. He cast a nervous glance in the direction of the chest and decided against opening it.

Alexander could see from his son's reaction that he'd instilled the correct level of foreboding, and drew himself up.

"Good," he said. "Now that that is settled, I shall withdraw to..."

The conversation was brought to an abrupt halt as they heard the unmistakable sound of a cane banging on the ceiling above.

Alexander looked up and shut his eyes.

"Would you like me to go, father?"

"No, thank you son," said Alexander heading for the door. "'Tis probably nought but another of your grandfather's whimsies, which I swear he is able to conjure up with unerring accuracy each time your mother and the servants go to market."

Upstairs the floorboards creaked as he walked towards his father's bedchamber. The carpet was threadbare beneath his feet and the wallpaper hadn't been replaced for years. The colours were yellowing and becoming monotone, showing clear signs that the grand old lady that had been Chance Hall had not only reached the top of the hill, but had gone a considerable distance down the other side.

He reached the bedchamber, turned the door handle, and stepped in.

"Father," he said, "what is your desire upon this beautiful morning?"

“I want a shit and my pot’s full, so get down on your knees and get it from under my bed. It needs emptying.”

Alexander recoiled at the thought of such an odious task, and his father was quick to spot it.

“We all do the same,” he said with harshness, “so stop being such a bloody namby-pamby, and get on with it.”

“Can’t it wait until the maid gets back?” said Alexander in near total despair, “I do have...”

“No it can’t!” cut in Matthew, relishing his son’s anguish.

Alexander took a deep breath, walked across to his father’s bed, and retrieved the object of his total disgust.

With perverse pleasure, Matthew watched as his son cautiously made his way to the bedchamber door and then said, “And be sharp about it or you’ll be cleaning shit out of my bed too.”

Alexander could feel his top lip curl. He wanted to say, “Why don’t you hurry up and die, you repulsive old bastard?” But that was out of the question, his whole future depended upon his father. He’d threatened many times over to leave the Scarred Earth Estate to Valentine alone, and that would have had serious consequences upon his ability to repay his numerous debts.

Ten minutes later he returned to the bedchamber with the clean pot, and in an effort to distract his father from his stated intent said, “Valentine’s becoming more inquisitive about the contents of the chest.”

Matthew stared with contempt at Alexander for a moment. He couldn’t believe that his wastrel of a son had produced such a fine upstanding boy as Valentine.

“Well take his mind off it,” he said. “Give him some work to do.”

“You know that that will only distract him for a short while. We should confide in him.”

“He doesn’t even know about the Whitewall Estate, so what is there to confide?”

“Now you are just being evasive,” said Alexander. “So far, providence has been on our side with Cousin Joseph knowing nothing of his true inheritance, but should Valentine ever learn

the truth, we will be undone and he will never trust either one of us again.”

Matthew looked out of his chamber window. The moors always looked their most stark at this time of year. They hadn't had any significant snowfall so far, but it was just a matter of time.

Images started to flash before his ageing eyes; images of boyhood, of joyful days playing in the snow with his brother John. He could hear the tinkling laughter of his beloved mother and recall the long happy hours they'd spent together as a family, – a privileged, moneyed family.

And then he recalled the fateful day that their father had informed him and John about their joint inheritance, Whitewall.

He shivered at the thought. Whitewall that had ripped apart his family; Whitewall that dogged every day of his life, and Whitewall, the one place on earth about which Valentine must never learn.

He looked across at his son. It was too late for him, but maybe not for his grandson.

“Then we'll have to send him away,” he said.

“Away? What do you mean, away?”

“I mean away from here, from us, from Spotland.”

Alexander was mortified.

“You cannot be serious, father. I won't hear of it! Think of the effect it would have upon him if we were to suggest such a terrible course.”

Even the idea of sending his thoughtful and gentle son away horrified him. Valentine may not have had all the privileges that he'd had as a child growing up in Chance Hall, but in general terms it was superior to most children of his age.

“Think about it boy,” said Matthew, cutting through Alexander's thoughts. “It makes sense. He doesn't seem drawn to our way of life; he's never shown any interest in the running of the estate, and he's always got his head into one book or another.”

Alexander looked at his father and had to admit that that was true. Valentine could always be found in the library during

his numerous periods of self-imposed solitude immersed in books about travel, and adventures in far off, exotic places.

He said, “Where did you have in mind for him, Oxford, Cambridge...?”

“The Royal Navy,” said Matthew.

Alexander didn’t think that he could have been more shocked; the suggestion rendered him speechless.

“I have an acquaintance that has influence at The Admiralty. He owes me more than one favour, so we shall contact him and see if we can get Valentine aboard one of his vessels.”

Alexander was dumbfounded, and stood looking at his father with an open mouth.

It had been a donkey’s age since he’d seen him so animated. Indeed, over the last five years his father had become so insular and selfish that he couldn’t wait to get out of his company, and now here he was talking about “having an acquaintance with influence at The Admiralty”!

His father still had the power to shock, and it was almost too much for him to take in.

“It’s the perfect solution,” said Matthew. “With young Valentine gone from here, it’ll take his mind off speculating about his future, and it may give us some time to make amends for those things that we should not have done.”

Alexander found his tongue and said, “Have you taken leave of your senses? Have you not read the newspapers and been following the events around us? Good Lord above, father, Valentine could be posted anywhere! Perhaps you’d like him to go to the New World where there’s considerable unrest with the French, Spanish and colonial Americans, – or how about France, where the common rabble have started a revolution?”

Matthew was uncompromising.

“Listen to yourself boy!” he said. “Whose fears are you giving voice to – your own, or Valentine’s? Do you deem me to be such a bad judge of character? He’s made of much sturdier stuff than both of us are, he is cooler headed, and brighter. This could be just what he needs.”

Alexander’s volatile emotions began to settle; he conceded that the idea *did* have merit. Maybe his father was right – it

could give them time to make amends, and it would have the ability to take Val's mind off of things at Chance Hall. Furthermore, it had the potential to lift him out of the rural environment and allow him to live his adventures, instead of reading about them.

He turned to face his father and was surprised to see him staring back. They looked into each other's eyes and, with the briefest nods, agreed upon something for the first time in years. Both men lapsed into a comfortable silence, happy to be in one another's company.

Neither man, however, could have known on that cold January morning, that by those simple actions, they had set in place a chain of events that would not only result in Valentine never being able to return to England again, but one that would generate greed, rivalry and murder for more than the next two hundred years.



## Chapter 2

*Friday 24th March 2006. Walmsfield Borough Council  
Offices, Lancashire*

The telephone rang on Naomi's desk and caused her to jump. She'd been immersed in filing endless reams of paperwork and lamenting that being a historical researcher was to a lesser degree a researcher, and to a much greater one, a filing clerk. Even in her absence, the paperwork had built up to such an extent that for fear of it toppling and scattering across her office floor, she'd been forced to dedicate time to filing it.

The phone rang a second time; she reached over her mini-Mount Everest and picked up the handset.

"Good morning, Walmsfield Historic Research Department, Naomi Wilkes speaking."

"Ah, Naomi," There was a fleeting pause on the telephone. "Er, I hope that you don't mind me calling you by your Christian name instead of Mrs Wilkes?"

"You can call me anything you like, as long as it's not late for dinner!" said Naomi with a smile on her face.

"What? Oh, of course – yes, very droll," said the caller. "We haven't been introduced, but my name is Craig Brompton. I'm a Professor and close friend of Gordon Catchpole, whom you may recall..."

"Led the investigations into the findings at Whitewall Farm," said Naomi. "How could I ever forget?"

"Hmm, it was one of the, er, more fascinating cases, I recall." Brompton paused for a second and then said, "Yes, well, now, I seem to recall from those days that not only were you involved in the historical research, but you are also a member of the Chance family by birth. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

“Good. And would I be right in assuming that you are still the person to contact with reference to historical research relating to your area, including the Whitewall Farm?”

“You would.”

“Excellent!” said Brompton now satisfied with the antecedents. “Then I have something here that may interest you.”

Ten minutes later, the door to Carlton Wilkes’ office burst open as Naomi charged in.

“Whoa! What the devil...?” said Carlton.

“Cal. Cal. Shush!” Naomi quelled her husband’s objection. “You’re not going to believe this. Over in Newton, they’re building a new complex called the Vical Centre, and part of the site is being recorded for posterity. There’s a team of archaeologists and conservators there who have been recording and cataloguing the entire finds...”

“Darling,” interrupted Carlton. “This is all very interesting but I have a hellish schedule and...”

Naomi leaned over her husband’s desk and pinched his lips together with her forefinger and thumb.

“Shush!” she said brimming with enthusiasm. “You’re going to be just as excited about this as I am.”

Carlton adored his wife. No other woman he had ever known did the same silly, affectionate things that his wife did. He no longer resisted and was happy to sit there with her fingers still pinching his mouth shut.

“Mm, mm,” he mouthed, accepting defeat through half-smiling lips.

Naomi frowned and said, “Shush! I’ve told you, you are going to be just as excited by this as I am!”

She stopped speaking for a second until she realised that she had her husband’s full attention.

“Now,” she said, “during the excavations, a hidden wall safe was unearthed in one of the cellars and it was taken to the conservators intact. They sent for a specialist team who got it open within a couple of days, and once open, they discovered some documents in there, proving that the wall safe once

belonged to a firm of Solicitors named – wait for it – Josiah Hubert and Sons!”

Her deep brown eyes sparkled with exhilaration as she removed her fingers from her husband’s lips.

Carlton could see the look of expectancy on his wife’s face. He knew that it should have meant something to him, but the lift had stopped short of the top floor.

“And that means...what?”

“Josiah Hubert and Sons – Whitewall – durr!” said Naomi.

The penny dropped.

“What, *the* Josiah Hubert and Sons?” said Carlton, almost disbelieving his own ears.

“Yes! And if you thought that was good, listen to this. One of the documents in the safe was an unopened letter with ‘John and Matthew Chance – Cestui que Vie’ written on the rear *and...*” Naomi paused enjoying the sheer deliciousness of being able to tell her husband the electrifying details. “... it says ‘Matthew’s Copy’ on the front!”

She couldn’t help herself; she let out an involuntary shriek of delight and clapped her hands together.

As an ex-Army Officer and the current head of the Planning Department, Carlton was a dignified and controlled person, but even he could feel the excitement. He sat bolt upright and said, “Good grief, Mimi, that’s amazing!”

The memories flooded in. In May 2002, on behalf of the Historic Research Department, he had forced open an old travel case known as the Whitewall File and had discovered two items. One was a faded blue envelope addressed to ‘the incumbent Mayor and District Clerk’ dated from 1869, with the inscription ‘John & Matthew Chance – Cestui que Vie’ written on the rear, and the other was a leather document folder, containing lots of old notes and correspondence.

As per the instruction on the envelope, he’d handed the unopened documents to the incumbent town clerk Giles Eaton, and he had never seen them again.

Through a process of deduction, he and other members of the Chance family had concluded that the envelope had

contained a copy of the Deeds and a Tenancy Agreement relating to the old Whitewall Estate on nearby Wordale Moor, which indicated that the estate, now named Whitewall Farm, had once, and maybe still did, belong to them.

Had the case been proven in Court however, it could have had disastrous consequences for Walmsfield Borough Council, because it could have proved that their predecessors, the old Hundersfield District Council, had illegally purchased some of the Whitewall land for their own ends. And it would also have been possible that it could have been required to repay an inestimable amount of money to the Chance family, by way of recompense.

But events had conspired against them. Before anybody had been able to prove anything, the documents had disappeared and all of those who'd seen them had died in questionable circumstances including Giles Eaton, the man thought at the time to be the main instigator of the documents' destruction, and the mysterious deaths.

During that period, Eaton had become associated with Adrian Darke, a local multi-millionaire businessman whose forebear was also believed to have illegally purchased some of the Whitewall land. For a while, suspicion had fallen upon him too, but nothing had ever been proven, and all of the investigations into his involvement had been dropped following the death of Eaton.

Once it had been accepted that John Chance's copy of the documents had been destroyed, all had seemed lost, until a discovery had been made in America by another branch of the family.

An old chest, believed to have contained Matthew's copy of the documents, had been inherited by Alan Farlington, Matthew Chance's direct descendant. He'd invited Naomi and him to Florida to supervise opening it, but once again they'd been thwarted, because amongst the scraps of deteriorated parchment they'd found inside, only one had had the words 'eus immit' written upon it, and nobody had been able to fathom what that had meant.

He looked up and saw Naomi deep in thought.

“So,” he said shaking them both out of their reminiscences, “when you opened the old chest in Florida, the remnants that we saw must have been something else and not the remains of Matthew’s copy of the documents.”

“Well let’s not be too hasty in assuming that,” said Naomi. “We’ve been here before, and I’ve learned that when it comes to Whitewall nothing is ever straightforward, but I must admit that I always harboured doubts about the contents of that old chest.”

Carlton nodded and sat back in his chair. It had been on the trip to America in 2002 that he had fallen in love with Naomi. He looked at her pretty face and dark brown eyes and adored her more every day.

“So what now, beautiful?” he said.

A huge grin lit up Naomi’s face.

“What do you think?” she said. “It appears that a whole new chapter in the Chance family saga may be about to open up. I’m off to Newton this afternoon to get that envelope!”