opening extract from

I'm the King of the Castle

written by

Susan Hill

published by

Penguin Books Ltd

Please print off and read at your

Chapter One

Three months ago, his grandmother died, and then they had moved to this house.

'I will not live there again, until it belongs to me,' his father had said. Though the old man lay upstairs, after a second stroke, and lingered, giving no trouble.

The boy was taken up to see him.

'You must not be afraid,' his father said, nervously, 'he is a very old man, now, very ill.'

'I am never afraid.' And that was no more than the truth, though his father would not have believed it.

It will be very moving, Joseph Hooper had decided, with the three generations together and one upon his death bed, the eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son. For, in middle age, he was acquiring a dynastic sense.

But it had not been moving. The old man had breathed noisily, and dribbled a little, and never woken. The sick room smelled sour.

'Ah, well,' Mr Hooper had said, and coughed, 'he is very ill, you know. But I am glad you have seen him.'

'Why?'

'Well – because you are his only grandson. His heir, I suppose. Yes. It is only as it should be.'

The boy looked towards the bed. His skin is already dead, he thought, it is old and dry. But he saw that the bones of the eye-sockets, and the nose and jaw, showed through it, and gleamed. Everything about him, from the stubble of hair down to the folded line of sheet, was bleached and grey-ish white.

'All he looks like,' Edmund Hooper said, 'is one of his dead old moths.'

'That is not the way to speak! You must show respect.'

His father had led him out. Though *I* am only able to show respect now, he thought, to behave towards my father as I should, because he is dying, he is almost gone away from me.

Edmund Hooper, walking down the great staircase into the wood-panelled hall, thought nothing of his grandfather. But later, he remembered the moth-like whiteness of the very old skin.

Now, they had moved, Joseph Hooper was master in his own house.

He said, 'I shall be away in London a good deal. I cannot live here the whole time, even in your holidays.'

'That won't be anything new, will it?'

He looked away from his son's gaze, irritated. I do my best, he thought, it is not the easiest of tasks, without a woman beside me.

'Ah, but we shall be looking into things,' he said, 'I shall see about getting you a friend, as well as someone to look after us in this house. Something is soon to be done.'

Edmund Hooper thought, I don't want anything to be done about it, *nobody* must come here, as he walked between the yew trees at the bottom of the garden.

'You had better not go into the Red Room without asking me. I shall keep the key in here.'

'I wouldn't do any harm there, why can't I go?'

'Well – there are a good many valuable things. That is all. Really.' Joseph Hooper sighed, sitting at his desk, in the room facing the long lawn. 'And – I cannot think that it will be a room to interest you much.'

For the time being, the house was to be kept as it was, until he could decide which of the furniture to be rid of, which of their own to bring.

He moved his hands uneasily about over the papers on his desk, oppressed by them, uncertain where he should begin. Though he was accustomed to paperwork. But his father's affairs had been left in disarray, he was ashamed of the paraphernalia of death.

'Can I have the key now, then?'

'*May*...'

'O.K.'

'The key for the Red Room?'

'Yes.'

'Well...'

Mr Joseph Hooper moved his hand towards the small, left-side drawer in the desk, underneath the drawer where sealing wax had always been kept. But then, said, 'No. No, you had really much better be playing cricket in the sun, Edmund, something of that sort. You have been shown everything there is in the Red Room.'

'There's nobody to play cricket with.'

'Ah, well now, I shall soon be doing something about that, you shall have your friend.'

'Anyway, I don't like cricket.'

'Edmund, you will not be difficult, please, I have a good deal to do, I cannot waste time in foolish arguments.'

Hooper went out, wishing he had said nothing. He wanted nothing to be done, nobody should come here.

But he knew where to find the key.

He is like his mother, thought Mr Joseph Hooper. He has the same way of not bothering to explain, and of making secrets, the same hardness and cool way of looking. It was six years since the death of Ellen Hooper. The marriage had not been happy. When his son, who so resembled her, was away at school, there were long spells when it was hard for him to remember what she had looked like.

Joseph Hooper turned back to answering the letter which had come in reply to his advertisement.

The house, which was called Warings, had been built by the boy's great-grandfather, and so it was not very old. In those days, there had been a large village, and the first Joseph Hooper had owned a good deal of land. Now, the village had shrunk, people had left for the towns and there had been few newcomers, few new buildings. Derne became like an old busy port which has been deserted by the sea. All the Hooper land had been sold off, piece by piece. But there was still Warings, built on a

slope leading out of the village, some distance from any other house.

The first Joseph Hooper had been a banker, and rising in the world, when, at the age of thirty, he had built the house. 'I am not ashamed of it,' he had told his friends in the City. And indeed, he had spent more on it than he could well afford. He hoped to grow into it, as a child grows into over-large shoes. He was an ambitious man. He had brought the younger daughter of a minor baronet here, as his bride, and set about founding his family, consolidating a position, so that he could afford the house he had built. He had succeeded with no margin, so that, bit by bit, the surrounding land which belonged to him had been sold.

'That is the history of Warings,' the present Joseph Hooper had told his son, Edmund, taking him solemnly around. 'You should be very proud.'

He did not see why. It was an ordinary house, he thought, an ugly house, nothing to boast of. But the idea that it was *his*, the idea of a family history, pleased him.

His father said, 'You will come to understand what it means to be a Hooper, as you get older.'

Though he thought, what does it mean, it means little, to himself. And he shrank from the expression in the boy's eyes, from his knowingness. He was his mother's son.

Warings was ugly. It was entirely graceless, rather tall and badly angled, built of dark red brick. At the front, and on both sides, there was the lawn, sloping downwards to a gravelled drive, and then into the lane, and without any tree or flower-bed to relieve the bald greenness. Up the drive, and at the back of the house, bunched between the yew trees, were the great bushes of rhododendron.

The yew trees had stood here before the house, Warings, had been built around them, for the first Joseph Hooper had admired their solidity and denseness, the fact that they grew so slowly and were the longest lived of all trees. He had planted the rhododendrons, too, not at all for their brief, dramatic show of colour in May and June, but for their dark green, leathery leaves and toughness of stem, their substantial look. He liked their gathered shapes, seen from the end of the drive.

Inside the house, everything was predictable, the high-ceilinged rooms, with heavy, sashed windows, the oak wall panelling and the oak doors, and the oak staircase, the massive furniture. Little had been changed since the beginning.

Joseph Hooper had spent that part of his childhood before school, and between terms, in this house, and he did not like it, he had unhappy memories of Warings. Yet now, at the age of fifty-one, he admitted that he was a Hooper, his father's son, and so he had come to admire the solidity and the gloom. He thought, it is a prepossessing house.

For he knew himself to be an ineffectual man, without any strength or imposing qualities, a man who was liked and humoured but little regarded, a man who had failed – but not dramatically, as one falling from a great height, who attracts attention. He was a dull man, a man who got by. He thought, I know myself and am depressed by what I know. But now, with his father gone, he could stand before this house, and have it lend him both importance and support, he could speak of 'Warings – my place in the country', it would make up for a good deal.

A narrow path led down between the yew trees into a small copse. That, and a field beyond it, were all that was now left of the Hooper land.

The boy's room, high up at the back of the house, overlooked the copse. He had chosen it.

His father had said, 'But look at all the others, so much larger and brighter. You had much better take the old playroom and have that to yourself.' But he had wanted this, a narrow room with a tall window. Above him, there were only the attics.

When he woke, now, there was an enormous moon, so that at first, he thought it was already dawn, and that he had missed his chance. He got out of bed. There was a slight, persistent movement of wind through the yew tree branches, and the elms and oaks of the copse, and a rustling of the high grasses in the field. The moonlight, penetrating a thin space between two trees, caught the stream that ran through its centre, so that, now and then, as the branches stirred, there was a gleam of water. Edmund Hooper looked down. The night was very warm.

Outside, on his landing, there was no moonlight, and he felt his way in the dark, first on the carpeted upper staircase, and then, for the last two flights, on the bare, polished oak. He went forward quite deliberately, being sure of his way, and unafraid. There was no sound from the room where his father slept. Mrs Boland only came here during the day. Mrs Boland did not like Warings. It is too dark, she said, it smells un-lived in, of old things, like a museum. And she had gone about trying to let in light and fresh air, where she could. But Derne was low-lying, and the air that summer was close and still.

Hooper crossed the wide hall, and here too, because it was the front of the house, no moonlight came. Behind him, the wood of the staircase settled back upon itself, after he had trodden it.

At first, he could not decide which key it might be. There were three together in the left-hand drawer. But one was longer, with a smudge of red paint across the rim. Red paint for the Red Room.

It was at the back of the house, facing the copse, so that when he pushed open the door, he saw it in full moonlight, almost as bright as day, when the lights always had to go on, because of the yew branches, overhanging the windows.

Hooper stepped inside.

It had been designed, by the first Joseph Hooper, as a library, and there were still the glass cases, reaching from floor to ceiling, all around the room, filled with books. But nobody ever read, here. The first Joseph Hooper had not even done so.

Edmund Hooper examined the titles of some of the books the day he was brought here to see his dying grandfather, and they were of no interest. There were bound volumes of the *Banker's Journal* and the *Stockbroker's Gazette,* and complete sets of the Victorian novelists, never opened.

It was his grandfather, recently dead, who had started to make use of the Red Room. He had been a lepidopterist; he had filled it with glass showcases of moths and butterflies. It was like the room of a museum, for here was no carpet on the polished oak boards, and the display cases stood in two long rows, from one end to the other. There were trays of insects, too, which you could pull out from recesses in the walls.

'Your grandfather was one of the most important collectors of his day,' Joseph Hooper had said, showing the boy round. 'He was known and respected the world over. This collection is worth a great deal of money.'

Though what use is it, he thought, what use, why should I not sell it? He hated it violently. He had been brought in here, afternoon upon afternoon, during the summers of his boyhood, led all about the room from cabinet to cabinet, he was lectured and instructed, he had been forced to watch as the insects were removed from their poison-fume bottles with tweezers, spread out and then pinned down through their horny bodies on to the card.

'This will all belong to you,' his father had said, 'you must learn the value of what you are to inherit.'

He had not dared to rebel, he had gone back into the Red Room every holiday, feigning interest, acquiring knowledge, disguising his fear. Until, at last, he had grown older and found excuses for spending all of his holidays away from the house.

'It is easy for you to despise and shrug your shoulders,' his father had said, seeing how it was. 'You pay no attention to what a man has done. I am an international authority, but you think nothing of that. Well, let me see you make a name for yourself, in some way or other.'

Joseph Hooper had known that he would never do so.

He tried to salvage a little conscience by teaching his own boy. 'It is a splendid thing for a man to become world famous in that way,' he said. 'Throughout his life, your grandfather devoted all of his free time – for it was not his profession, you understand, it was only his hobby, he had a job of work to do. Every ounce of his energy apart from that went into building up this collection.'

For ought not a boy to feel some pride in his family's importance?

Edmund Hooper had gone about the Red Room, looking closely, saying nothing.

'I have seen you catching butterflies in jam jars and so on,' Joseph Hooper said, 'I daresay that is a sign of interest, I daresay that you will follow in his footsteps more than I ever did.'

'The butterflies were just a craze last term. We caught larvae and watched them hatch. Nobody's interested now.'

He walked to the window and looked out onto the copse, swept by the first heavy rain of summer. He did not say whether the stiff moths, inside their glass cases, interested him or not.

'Why didn't you bring me here before?'

'You came – you were brought here as a baby.'

'That's years ago.'

'Well – yes.'

'I suppose you quarrelled with grandfather then.'

Jospeh Hooper sighed. 'That is not the sort of thing to say, it is not something we need be concerned with now.'

But he understood, looking at the boy, a little of how it had been with his own father, he felt the need to make some kind of reparation. I am not a hard man, he thought, I have more to regret about my own son than he had about me. For he knew that he had failed, from the very beginning, to ingratiate himself with Edmund.

The small key that fitted all the glass cases was kept inside a Bible on one of the lower shelves.

At first, Hooper walked up and down the room softly, looking at all the moths, laid out on white card, and at the labels beneath them. The names pleased him – Hawk Moths, Footmen Moths, Lutestring Moths. He read some of them out to himself, in a low voice. Moonlight came through the window, coldly, on to the glass.

Above the wooden panelling of the Red Room were the animals, the stag's head with antlers branching out over the doorway, and the cases of grey fish, against their painted backgrounds of weed and water, the stuffed bodies of weasel, stoat, and fox, glass-eyed and posed in stilted attitudes. Because of the old man's long last illness, and the neglect of the housekeeper, it was some time since they had been cleaned. Mr Joseph Hooper had said that the animals should be sold, they were not a matter of family pride, they had only been bought in a lot by the first Joseph Hooper, who wanted to equip his library in the manner of a sporting person.

Hooper stopped in front of a case at the far end of the room, beside the uncurtained window. He looked down at the flat, fragile shapes. He was fascinated by them, excited. He inserted the small key and lifted up the glass lid. It was very heavy and stiff from disuse. A puff of old, stale-smelling air came into his face.

The largest moth of all was in the centre of the case – '*Acheroptia atropos*' – though he could only just make out the writing on the card, the ink had faded to a dark yellow in the sun. 'Death's Head Hawk Moth.'

He stretched out his hand, put his finger under the head of the pin and slid it up, out of the thick, striped body. At once, the whole moth, already years dead, disintegrated, collapsing into a soft, formless heap of dark dust.

Chapter Two

'Some people are coming here today,' said Joseph Hooper, 'now you will have a companion.'

For he had been much impressed by the graceful letters of Mrs Helena Kingshaw, by their honesty and lightness of tone, and by her voice over the telephone, later. She was widowed, she was thirty-seven, and she was to become what he had termed an informal housekeeper. There would be Mrs Boland for the cleaning and some cooking.

'Perhaps you might agree to come for the summer, just at first,' he had written, 'to see how you and your boy settle, and how we all of us rub along.'

'Warings,' Mrs Helena Kingshaw had replied, 'sounds so much like the home we have been looking for.'

Joseph Hooper had been greatly touched. That night, he examined his own, thin figure in the cheval mirror. 'I am a lonely man,' he had said, and was not ashamed, afterwards, of having admitted it.

'His name is Charles Kingshaw, and he is just your age, he is almost eleven. You must make a good effort to welcome him and be friendly.'

Edmund Hooper went slowly up the four flights of stairs to his own bedroom. It was raining hard again, and great, bruise-coloured clouds hung low over the copse. He had thought of going in there today, but the grass would be too wet.

And another boy was coming, after all, with his mother, so that there would always be someone about the house to notice him. She would start making them play games and go on expeditions, that was how the mothers of some boys at school were. Once, recently, he had wondered if he ought to feel his own mother's absence, to want things that only she might provide.