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Opening Extract from...

The Silver Locket

Written by Margaret James

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Chapter One

The view from the breakfast room at Charton Minster was of the most beautiful garden in the whole of Dorset, but on this bright March morning Rose Courtenay hated it.

The sight of golden daffodils in full flower beneath the spreading trees merely reminded her she was trapped, perhaps for ever. She turned away and was about to go upstairs again when she heard her mother on the phone.

'Of course you must bring Alex,' Lady Courtenay was saying. 'Poor boy, it's not his fault Viola Denham was his mother. We should be glad she let him come to Henry. If she'd left him with that painter fellow, he'd probably have turned out very badly.'

Alexander Denham – that's all I need, thought Rose. She wondered if she'd dare to have a migraine which would get her out of going to her mother's evening party. She couldn't stand that silent, sullen boy who never seemed to do anything but scowl, but with whom she was expected to get on just because Henry Denham and her father were old friends.

Lady Courtenay's parties were tedious enough at any time, but if she had to talk to Alex Denham or – appalling prospect – dance with him, this one would be purgatorial.

'Well,' she said to Boris the black Labrador, who could smell the bacon in its silver dish and was looking at her hopefully, 'they can't *make* me dance.'

'What did you say, darling?' Frances Courtenay came into the room. Tiny, plump and blonde, beautifully dressed and always smelling like a lily, at fifty she was still a pretty woman, with eyes as blue as cornflowers that sparkled in a

face unlined and flawless as a peach. She'd kept the lissom curves of youth in places where most women of her age had flab and bulges. She always made her tall and slender daughter feel like a giraffe.

'Nothing, Mummy,' Rose replied, and sighed.

'What do you plan to do today?'

'Oh, I don't know – be bored?'

'Rose, don't be ridiculous.' Lady Courtenay nodded to the maid to pour her coffee. 'I know it's not the fashion these days, but I think girls of your age should be married. Then you'd have no time to brood and mope about the place, or read those frightful novels, which can't be good for you.'

'If I were allowed to do something useful with my life, I shouldn't mope!' retorted Rose. 'You know how much I want to go to Oxford. Somerville has offered me a place, so why do you and Daddy insist I stay in Dorset?'

'Darling, we merely want the best for you.' Frances Courtenay shrugged expressively. 'If you went to Oxford, and did all that silly studying, how would you find a husband?'

'I don't want a husband.'

'You don't know what you want. That's why you need a husband, someone who'll look after you and correct your taste.' Lady Courtenay waved the maid away. 'But the right sort of men hate clever women. So although you did quite well at lessons, I'd keep it to yourself if I were you.'

Then she noticed Boris, who was chewing at the fringes of a priceless Persian rug. 'Rose, I wish you wouldn't bring that horrid dog in here. Where are you going, darling?'

'Only to my room.'

'Well, don't get your head stuck in a book. I promised we'd look in on Mrs Sefton, we must collect your dress from

Dorchester, and there are a million other things to do today.'

Rose pulled a face behind her mother's back. She edged out of the breakfast room, swiping a rasher of bacon on the way.

'Here, good boy,' she whispered, winking conspiratorially at Boris, who lumbered after her with drooling jaws.

As Alex Denham washed and shaved that evening, he scowled at his reflection in the pitted, freckled glass. Why was he bothering, he wondered. Why was he going to so much trouble, when he knew what they all thought of him?

If he'd burst in wild and dishevelled, dressed in poacher's corduroys or the old tweed jacket he wore when he went hacking, they wouldn't be surprised. They'd merely nod their heads and whisper, 'Well, of course he's Viola's son. What can one expect?'

So he didn't want to go to Lady Courtenay's party. He'd always hated going to Charton Minster, the gracious honey-coloured mansion half a mile away, where the ghastly Courtenay family lived in regal splendour. He was going tonight to please his guardian, for Henry seemed determined that Alex should mix socially with the people who had snubbed his mother.

'Let bygones be bygones, turn the other cheek,' said Henry Denham. But Alex wasn't made like that, and he could not forgive.

He wiped the flecks of soap away and then reached for his shirt. He wondered if he'd see the heiress, if he'd have to watch as she was fawned over and courted by the flower of the county.

He'd rather liked her once – at least, as much as a boy of twelve could like a girl of ten. But since she'd left the

schoolroom she had put her hair up, laced herself into a set of stays, and learned to look down her well-bred nose at him.

Perhaps, he thought, he shouldn't be surprised. She'd probably heard a version of events that had shocked and horrified a sheltered girl like Rose, especially if she hadn't suspected anything before.

Alex, on the other hand, had been collecting shreds and patches of the local gossip for almost twenty years. He'd stitched them all together to make his mother's shroud.

'She was always flighty from a girl.'

'It was grooms and gardeners first of all.'

'Then she had that artist chap, who was the boy's real father.'

She'd been dead for eighteen months, but still the gossip flowed. In rural Dorset, friends and neighbours usually let the dead rest in their graves, but in Viola Denham's case they made a rare exception.

'Ready then, my boy?' Henry Denham's kind but foolish face appeared at the door of Alex's dressing room. 'Come along, old fellow. We're going with Lizzie Sefton and her daughters. It doesn't do to keep the ladies waiting.'

'I'm coming now, sir,' Alex said.

Although he liked Henry Denham very much, Alex was secretly quite glad the old man wasn't his father. As well as a crumbling manor house and a decrepit, rabbit-bitten estate, he might have inherited those embarrassing jug ears, and that great, bulbous nose.

It has been a tedious process, being dressed and crimped and titivated by her mother's maid. But when she looked in the glass that evening, Rose could see the hours of pain and

boredom had paid off.

The riot of unmanageable black curls had been subdued, cajoled then tamed with bandoline, and her unruly brows were plucked and arched. Two discreet spots of rouge were carefully smudged on her pale cheeks.

Now she was laced into a cruel whalebone corset, she had a woman's figure, not a gawky girl's, and her new gown became her very well. Simply cut and artfully draped in the elegant fashion of the spring of 1914, the dress was made of softest salmon-coloured taffeta. The style rounded out her slender figure, while the colour warmed her sallow skin. A scatter of tiny crystal beads was sewn across the bodice, catching the light and adding sparkle to her large grey eyes.

When she met her father on the landing, Sir Gerard stood back to look at her, then nodded his approval. 'You look enchanting, darling,' he began. 'That's an exquisite gown.'

'Thank you, Daddy.' Rose smiled back at him, reflecting that he hadn't yet seen the bill. But Sir Gerard might be worked on, she decided. She'd go to Oxford yet.

She walked down the great staircase, hung with portraits of the Courtenays going back to Elizabethan times. As she passed an earlier Rose Courtenay, dark-haired and grey-eyed just like herself, but formal and unsmiling in her starched white ruff and rich brocaded stomacher, she saw the Denham party coming in.

She knew she shouldn't be unkind, but she couldn't help noticing that poor Henry Denham looked his usual shuffling mess. Their neighbour Mrs Sefton's purple gown had obviously been made for someone half her ample size, and her two beaky daughters were trussed up like dowdy hens.

But Alex looked quite striking in the scarlet jacket and tight black trousers of the Royal Dorset Regiment.

Of course, it had had to be the Royal Dorsets, and even then they'd had to pull some strings to get him in. There wasn't the remotest chance they'd have him in the cavalry or the Guards, Rose had heard her mother whisper to Mrs Sefton, even if Henry had been rich enough – not with a family history like that.

She watched Alex moving through the crowd. He nodded to acquaintances, but hardly ever spoke and never smiled.

He'd grown up quite good looking, Rose decided. Those heavy eyebrows and that square, determined jaw, so unprepossessing in a child, were actually attractive in a man. As a boy, he'd scowled and frowned so much she had seldom felt the urge to go and talk to him. When she'd made the effort, he would grimace as she spoke, and rarely mutter more than a single syllable in reply. As Rose's nanny had often said, young Master Denham was neither use nor ornament.

But it seemed that these days he was not entirely without manners. As Rose joined her mother to welcome some new guests, he came up to speak to Lady Courtenay, who said she was delighted he had come.

Then Lady Courtenay drifted elegantly off to go and speak to someone else, leaving Rose and Alex to look at one another.

It soon became apparent to Rose that Alex wasn't going to speak, so she decided she must fill the silence. 'What a delightful day it's been,' she said, without expression. 'So warm and pleasant for the time of year.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Alex, who was fiddling with the braiding on his cuff.

'I dare say you've been riding, or walking on the headland?'

'No,' he muttered.

'Then perhaps you went to Dorchester?'

'I had some things to do at home.'

He didn't elaborate, and as Rose was thinking it would be much easier to swim through frozen treacle, the musicians hired for the night began to play. In a matter of minutes, almost everyone under thirty-five was up and dancing.

Alex had his back to them, and didn't seem to notice. He stared down at his highly-polished shoes and gnawed his lower lip. Finally, when even fat, absurd Georgina Sefton had been asked and led into the waltz, he found his voice. 'Miss Courtenay, if you mean to dance–'

He left the sentence hanging in the air.

Rose was mortified. If she said she did, she would look either forward or pathetic, and which was worse?

'No, Mr Denham,' she said, crisply. 'I'm afraid I have a headache. I shall not dance this evening.'

Alex seemed to think this meant he could make his escape. He bowed and walked away.

Glad to see the back of him, Rose became aware of the bustle and commotion of some late arrivals, but she was too annoyed to go and see who had turned up. She was sitting in the supper room, alone and irritably picking at a candied pear, when she heard a familiar, pleasant voice.

'Miss Courtenay?' Michael Easton smiled and bowed. 'I looked for you among the dancers, but then Mrs Sefton said she'd seen you come in here. I hope you're not unwell?'

'I had a headache earlier, but I'm much better now.' Rose looked at the vacant chair beside her, hoping Michael Easton might sit down.

He did, and then he glanced at Rose's plate. 'That pear looks rather good,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll have one, too.'

'I wouldn't bother if I were you.' Rose pushed her plate aside. 'They're much too sweet. In fact, they're quite disgusting.'

'Then I'll resist temptation.' Michael edged his chair a fraction closer. 'May I stay a while and talk to you?'

'Yes, of course,' smiled Rose. 'When did you get back from Cambridge?'

'Only yesterday, and on the train I happened to meet this most amazing fellow–'

Rose liked Michael Easton, an eldest son who had great expectations, if not much ready cash – his father's love of gambling saw to that – for Michael was always such good company.

He was handsome, too. Six feet tall, broad-shouldered and blue-eyed, he had a head of blond, leonine hair that made him look the image of a Viking warrior from a children's story book. Nowadays, to her embarrassment, Rose found she sometimes wondered what this modern Viking looked like without clothes. She realised she was wondering now, and blushed as pink as her new gown.

'Miss Courtenay, would you like to dance?' asked Michael.

Rose pulled herself out of her reverie. 'Yes, very much,' she said, 'but I can't this evening.'

'Why, because it's Lent and you're too holy?'

'I told Mr Denham I didn't intend to dance.'

'Mr Denham?' Michael frowned. 'Oh, you mean *Alex* Denham. Don't worry, he won't notice.'

'How do you know?'

'I saw him heading for the billiard room with Henry and my father. They'll be there all night. Come on, let's have some fun.'

So Rose danced with Michael, who told her all about what he'd been doing at Cambridge, and made her wish she had been born a boy.

'What's been happening here?' he asked.

'Nothing very interesting,' said Rose. 'Daddy sacked a gamekeeper for drinking and bawling *The Red Flag* under Mummy's window at four o'clock one morning. A maid has given notice, she's going to work in Dorchester, she means to learn stenography, and she–'

'My sister says you haven't been to see her for a month or more,' interrupted Michael suddenly.

'I haven't,' Rose agreed, but then decided he wouldn't want to hear about her progress in geometry, or her place at Oxford. 'I've been rather busy.'

'Well, you must come over soon.' He grinned. 'I promise you we'll make it worth your while.'

'How?' Rose smiled, intrigued.

'We've bought a gramophone.' Michael's blue eyes sparkled. 'It's tremendous fun! We've all the latest music – tango, ragtime. Of course, we have to keep the contraption in the butler's pantry. The parents don't approve.'

'Mummy wouldn't have one in the house.' Rose sighed wistfully. 'She hates that ragtime music. She says it's decadent.'

'Yes, it's frightful stuff.' Michael pulled her close, so she was crushed against his chest. 'It makes your heart beat like a drum, and your pulses pound.'

In Michael's warm embrace, inhaling the beguiling scents of shaving soap, cologne and clean, male perspiration, Rose felt fairly decadent already. The thought of being alone with Michael Easton, of dancing to that wonderful, intoxicating music, made the hot blood rush into her face.

The room grew warmer, noisier, and Rose was starting to enjoy herself, but as Michael whirled her round in yet another waltz, she suddenly had a feeling she was being watched. She turned to see Alex Denham standing by the open door.

His jacket was unbuttoned at the collar. A lock of jet black hair had fallen forward so it lay across his forehead. He'd obviously been drinking. An empty whisky glass hung in his hand, and he seemed to lean against the doorframe for support.

Then he began to make his way across the crowded floor, weaving unsteadily between the other dancing couples, avoiding some but ploughing into others, and making everybody stare at him.

The music stopped, and Alex stood in front of Rose and Michael. 'Your headache must have gone, Miss Courtenay,' he said pleasantly.

Rose was so surprised she couldn't speak.

Then Alex smiled at her, his dark eyes meeting hers, and to Rose's great embarrassment she couldn't look away. No, it was even worse than that – she didn't *want* to look away.

'When they begin to play again,' said Alex, 'will you dance with me?'

'Miss Courtenay is engaged for every dance,' said Michael, his blue eyes hard and cold.

'Every single one?' Alex frowned at Rose in disbelief. 'Miss Courtenay?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Denham,' Rose replied, more sharply than she'd meant, and horribly aware that she was blushing.

'I see.' Then Alex shrugged and smiled again. 'Well, never mind, Miss Courtenay,' he said softly, his dark brown gaze unfocused but intent. 'Maybe some other time?'

The music started, and somehow he managed to get himself across the ballroom floor.

'Denham can be very irritating,' muttered Michael, and Rose felt his hand become a fist, pressing hard between her shoulder blades. 'I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. We all know what he is and where he came from, after all. But maybe someone ought to teach the fellow courtesy.'

'It doesn't matter.' Rose became aware her feet were aching. The straps and laces of her undergarments were digging trenches in her flesh. The vile whalebone corset crushed her ribs.

She wanted to sit down. But Michael danced on, talked on, told her more amusing stories, and she felt obliged to smile, although she wasn't really listening to anything he said.

Michael finally noticed her abstraction. 'You must be getting tired,' he said, and before she could deny it he was leading her towards some chairs. 'You sit here, and I'll fetch you a cordial.'

As Michael walked away, Rose noticed several chaperones sitting together on a window seat, no doubt exchanging scandal. She didn't mean to eavesdrop, but the women were all deaf, their shrill, aristocratic voices carried, and she could hear very well what they were saying.

'Viola never had any shame,' rasped one. 'So we shouldn't be surprised if her son decides to make a foolish exhibition.'

'But he's such a very attractive boy.' A second woman sighed. 'So tall, so handsome. He has his mother's eyes, her charming smile, and there's a certain sort of girl who doesn't ask for more.'

'Well, Henry won't allow it, I shall see to that.' The first crone shook her head. 'One bastard at a time is quite enough

for any family. If Alex thinks he can play fast and loose with Charlotte Stokeley – that child is just fifteen.'

'Your cordial, Miss Courtenay.' Michael handed Rose a glass, then sat down beside her and started telling her another story.

But Rose didn't hear Michael, didn't see him. She didn't know why she felt like this, she didn't understand it – after all, she didn't even like the man.

All she could hear right now was Alex asking her to dance with him. She could still see his smile.