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The Golden Chain

Written by Margaret James

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The Golden Chain

Margaret James



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Prologue

March 1926

It wasn't so much a nightmare as a mystifying dream.

Whenever Daisy Denham had the dream, she woke up tangled in her bedclothes and soaked with perspiration. Of course, this wasn't unusual in India, especially when the summer was coming, the temperature on the plains was rising, and it was time to go up to the hills.

'What's the matter, sweetheart?' asked her mother, after Daisy had woken up at three o'clock one morning, shouting to somebody in her dream to stop, to wait, to come back – please! The ayah had gone running in a panic to rouse Mrs Major Denham.

'I had that dream again.' Daisy sipped slowly from a glass of juice. 'I saw the lady, the one I always see.'

'You saw her face?

'No, Mum, it was blurred. It's always blurred. I know she's young, and has black hair like you. But she isn't you. I'm sure I've met her once in real life. But I don't know where.'

'What did she say to you?'

'Nothing, she never speaks. She just stands there, looking at me. Then she goes away. Mum, she worries me.'

'She's just a dream.' Rose stroked Daisy's long, fair hair back from her sticky forehead. 'I dream about all sorts of things,' she added. 'I see people I know I've never met and go to places I know I've never been.'

She picked up Daisy's empty glass and smoothed the linen sheets. 'Try to go back to sleep now, dear,' she said. 'You're

going to have a busy day tomorrow. Or I should say today.'

'Did you finish my dress?'

'Yes, and it looks perfect. The style and colour are just right for you. Dad's bearer has polished up your shoes, and I've had all your ribbons starched and ironed. You're going to be the star of Mrs Colonel Norton's little show.'

'What about my dad, do you think he'll come?'

'He says he hopes to get away. But he's got a lot to do right now, as well as getting all the transport organised for when the mothers and children go up to the hills.'

'I wish he could come with us.'

'I do, too. But when he has some leave, I'm sure he'll join us for a couple of weeks. Come along, my darling, settle down. Ayah, stay with missy baba until she goes to sleep.'

So the ayah squatted by the bed, crooning softly in soothing Hindustani. The lady with black hair had vanished. As her ayah sang a lullaby, Daisy felt herself falling asleep.

Rose went back to her bedroom, where she found her husband was awake.

'So Daisy had that dream again,' said Alex.

'Yes, she did.'

'We ought to tell her, don't you think?'

'What would be the point? Alex, she's only ten years old. She's such a happy child. She has a good life here with us. Why should we rake up all that stuff again?'

Chapter One

March 1931

The show had clearly been a huge success, for now the village audience rose as one. They clapped and whistled and stamped their feet. As Daisy took her final bow with all the other performers, she scanned the rows of faces. But she couldn't find the person she had hoped would come.

The clapping finally died away. The other singers and dancers skipped and scurried off the stage. Daisy followed them to the dressing rooms, where the happy buzz of conversation raised her spirits, just a little.

She came out of the makeshift green room to find Alex Denham waiting with her hat and coat and gloves. 'You were excellent, darling,' said her father. 'Your song and dance act was the best thing in the show.'

'Do you think so, Dad?' said Daisy, looking all around for someone else.

They pushed their way into the crowded lobby of Charton village hall, where Alex nodded to acquaintances and was told by everyone his daughter was a star. But Daisy couldn't see the person whose opinion mattered most. 'Where's Mum?' she asked.

'She couldn't make it, sweetheart.' Alex shrugged apologetically. 'She had one of her headaches, and had to go and lie down.'

Daisy's shoulders slumped. Why was her mother being like this? Why had she changed? When the Denham family had left India the previous year and come to live near Charton, a honey-coloured, stone-built village on the Dorset

coast, the previously sociable, gregarious Rose Denham had made no effort to fit in.

A few months after they'd arrived, Daisy had been asked if she would like to be in a concert which the schoolmistress Miss Sefton was organising at the village hall. Rose had not forbidden it, but she hadn't shown any interest, either.

Since the family had come back to England, Rose had turned into a different person. While the Denhams lived in India, she had been involved in everything. The social life of the cantonment had revolved round Mrs Major Denham. She had organised all kinds of shows and fêtes and parties. She'd encouraged Daisy to join in amateur dramatics, let her perform in all the variety shows in the cantonment theatre, sent her to have dancing lessons, singing lessons, made her costumes. But not any more.

'Where are the brats?' asked Daisy.

'In the car,' said Alex. 'They enjoyed themselves. They were telling everybody you're their grown-up sister, and they clapped and cheered like anything. Do you want to stay for a while and chat, or have a glass of cordial and a bun?'

'No, Dad, let's go home.'

So Daisy and Alex said goodnight to a red-faced and happy Laura Sefton, who had masterminded the event, and looked relieved that it had gone so well. Now the cottage hospital would be that much closer to getting its new ward.

Alex and Daisy walked across the cinder patch to where he had parked the battered Riley he'd been left in Henry Denham's will. The brats were in the back, kicking and punching one other, but broke off when their father and sister got into the car.

'Look, it's Greta Garbo,' sniggered Stephen, grinning like a monkey.

‘You were so embarrassing, Daze.’ Robert, the bigger and stronger twin, grabbed her round the neck and made her choke. ‘When you croaked that song about picking lilac, I was nearly sick.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ said Stephen, Robert’s faithful echo. ‘When you sat on that tree stump and sang about the moon in June, you looked like you were going to lay an egg.’

‘Your eyes were bulging, like someone on the lav. A lady said you needed Beecham’s Pills.’

‘Hark the herald angels sing, Beecham’s Pills are just the thing!’ sang Stephen, in a high falsetto.

‘You danced like Mr Hobson’s donkey, and – ’

‘Daisy, take no notice,’ interrupted Alex, turning round to glare at the two boys. ‘Belt up, you little blighters, or I’ll thrash the pair of you.’

Although their father had never laid a violent hand upon them, the twins heard the authority in his voice. They belted up at once.

‘I know it’s difficult, but we must give it time,’ said Alex, as he drove home to Melbury House. They’d come back to England the previous October, after Alex had been injured in an anti-British riot, and obliged to leave the army. ‘Dorset’s so very different from Delhi, after all.’

‘Damn right it is – no money, freezing cold, no servants, living in a ruin,’ whispered Robert, confident he was on his father’s deaf side, so Alex wouldn’t hear him, even if Daisy did.

‘We’ll be fine, you’ll see,’ continued Alex. ‘I know this winter’s been a challenge. We’ve all had coughs and colds. But the spring and summer are wonderful in England. You chaps can learn to swim. We’ll go for picnics on the beach.

I'll find some ponies for you, and then you can go riding.'

'It sounds lovely, Dad,' said Daisy loyally, even though she didn't much like riding, and though she hated England and everything about it.

The damp and dismal countryside was ugly and depressing. The glass-green sea looked freezing. She didn't want to dip a toe in it, much less learn to swim. The beach was covered with sharp shingle or big pebbles, not with golden sand. The constant cold poked freezing fingers through her clothes into her very bones, and she'd given up all hope of being warm again.

Every time she walked into the village on an errand for her mother, the locals said hello. But then they gawped and goggled so much you would have thought she had three eyes. Whenever she went into the village shop, the woman behind the counter was very friendly and polite. But the other customers stared and muttered. Then they grinned like idiots if she turned round suddenly and caught them gawking, like a lot of fools.

They parked in front of Melbury House, which Alex had inherited from his guardian Henry Denham along with the old Riley. In its dilapidated state, the house was probably worth about as much as the rusty motor. Or maybe even less.

'You two can get the coal in,' Alex told the twins, as he parked the Riley. 'Make the fire up in your mother's bedroom, wash your hands, then go and fetch the supper trays Mrs Hobson will have left for us, and bring them to the drawing room. There'll be a good blaze there. Off you go, then – at the double.'

'God, we're nothing but child slaves,' groaned Stephen, but he went with his brother to the stables where the coal

was kept, leaving Alex and Daisy on the steps of the old house.

'You were very good, you know,' said Alex.

'You're just saying that.'

'I mean it.' Alex smiled encouragingly. 'You're very talented. Your mother and I have always thought so. You mustn't take any notice of the brats. They're only ten years old. They say the sort of beastly things that boys of their age do. I should know. I used to be like them, many years ago.'

'I can't believe you were as foul as those two,' muttered Daisy.

'Oh, I was much fouler!' Alex grinned and shook his head. 'I was a sullen, sulking horror. If you don't believe me, ask your mother.'

'Why didn't she come?' asked Daisy.

'I told you, love, she had a headache.'

'Yes, but Dad – '

'Come on, let's go in and see if she feels better.'

They found Rose lying on the threadbare sofa in the shabby drawing room. The fire had burned itself almost to ashes, and shadows from the oil lamps danced and flickered around the walls and ceiling, so all the cracks and stains weren't quite as noticeable as they were in daytime.

Alex drew the rotting velvet curtains, sending them rattling along the tarnished metal poles.

'Alex?' Rose opened her eyes 'Daisy, you're back already? How did it go?'

'She was wonderful. They clapped and cheered like maniacs. You would have been so proud.' Alex sat down on the sofa and took Rose's hands. 'Goodness, Rose, you're freezing! Why didn't you pull those blankets over you?'

'I fell asleep.' Rose smiled at Daisy. 'Sit down, my darling,

tell me all about it, and don't miss out a thing.'

As she sat next to her mother, inhaling her familiar scent of jasmine, orange blossom and whatever Rose put on her hair, Daisy began to feel a little better.

She was at home and, even if today home was a crumbling ruin, not a British army major's splendid married quarters, she was with her parents, the people who loved her best.

Maybe her dad was right. Maybe they should give it time. Maybe England wouldn't be so horrible, after all.

If it didn't improve, however, maybe they would let her go back to India on her own? Maybe she could go and stay with Mrs Colonel Norton and her daughter Celia?

She could travel by herself, or with a chaperone. After all, in autumn she would be sixteen – grown up, if not in law, then certainly in every way that mattered.

She was getting taller and she looked more like a woman every day.

As he slouched against the wall of Mrs Fraser's little dressing room, his hands pushed deep into his trouser pockets – a stance he knew his mother hated – Ewan Fraser scowled.

'Why do *I* have to come to Dorset?' he demanded, his green eyes mutinous slits, his usually generous mouth a stubborn line.

'I can't leave you in Scotland on your own all spring and summer,' replied his mother, tartly.

'I shan't be on my own,' retorted Ewan. 'Mr Morrison and his wife are here. I could live in their cottage, and they'd keep an eye on me.'

'Darling, that would not be suitable.'

'Why not?' asked Ewan. 'I stayed there all that time you were away with Dad, when he was in hospital and you lived

in Edinburgh so you could visit him, and when you had to go to see the lawyers. You don't need to worry about me.'

'Sir Michael has invited you.' Agnes Fraser looked beseechingly at her tall, broad-shouldered handsome son. 'Ewan, the Eastons are your father's cousins. They're rich, they're influential. You know you have no one else to help you make your way. Oxford will be so expensive. After you leave Oxford, you'll need contacts, friends – supporters who will get you started on a career in law, or something in the professions. Sir Michael has an awful lot of very important friends.'

'I'm going to be an actor,' muttered Ewan. 'So I don't need the help of cousins from Dorset. Anyway, you don't like Lady Easton. You've always said she's common. When my father was alive, you'd never have even talked to anybody who had been divorced, let alone gone to stay with Lady Easton, and have the woman tell you what to do.'

'Well, it's different now,' said Agnes. 'Your father didn't leave us enough money. What happened on Wall Street a year or two ago made things even worse. This place costs a fortune to maintain, and we have to live.'

'I still don't see why we should have to go and grovel to the likes of them,' objected Ewan. 'Why do you want me to go to Oxford, anyway? Why can't I leave school and get a job?'

'A minute ago, you told me you were going to be an actor.'

'Yes, I did, and acting is a job.'

'Oh, Ewan!' Agnes got up and put her arms round Ewan's waist. She hugged him tightly, laying her neat, dark head against his chest. 'You're so young and inexperienced. You don't know this wicked, wicked world.'

Ewan knew that in a moment she would start to cry. Then

he would have no option but to agree to go to Dorset. So he might as well give in right now.

'I don't have to spend the whole time fishing, do I?' he demanded, determined to salvage something.

'I'm sure Sir Michael would be very pleased if you would go with him and help him cast. When people don't have children of their own, they like to have the young around the place, and he's so fond of you.'

Agnes looked up at Ewan, brown eyes bright with unshed tears. He hoped she wouldn't actually turn the taps on, because when that happened he never knew what to do. 'I knew you'd see the sense of going,' she said.

Ewan shrugged out of her embrace and slouched out of the room.

A few days later, after Agnes Fraser had agreed with Ewan's school he could be absent for the summer because of urgent family business down in Dorset, he and his mother left Glen Grant for the long journey south.

There'd been some talk about him going back for a week in June to take examinations. All his masters had set him so much work his luggage weighed a ton. But, thought Ewan, since I don't intend to go to Oxford …

Agnes had arranged to let their house until September, bringing in some welcome cash, but making Ewan feel even more gloomy. Now he would be stuck in rural Dorset, sponging off his father's relatives and missing the place he loved, until the best of the year was past.

They travelled down first class, which in Ewan's opinion was a waste of the money his mother said they didn't have. They had a compartment to themselves. While Mrs Fraser stared out of the window, occasionally getting out

her powder compact and touching up her paintwork, Ewan lolled across three seats and read his pocket Shakespeare, a tiny copy printed on the thinnest India paper. It had been his father's, had gone with him to the trenches, and it still smelled of dirt and smoke and blood.

As Ewan read accounts of battles and tales of love, he wondered if he was ever going to live up to his father, a highly-decorated hero who had died of war wounds, even though he'd taken years to do so.

It didn't look as if another war was in the offing, or at least not yet. So he wasn't going to be able to cover himself with glory on some distant battlefield. He wondered what it would be like to fall in love.

'Ewan, what are you doing?' demanded Agnes, suddenly. 'You've got that strange look in your eyes again.'

'I'm just reading,' Ewan said, hoping she didn't want to talk to him, or rather lecture him.

'You always have your nose stuck in a book. You're always dreaming. There's life out there, child – real life!'

Yes, shooting and fishing in Dorset, and they won't compare with anything in Scotland, Ewan thought, but didn't say. He didn't want to provoke his mother into delivering yet another sermon.

Agnes rearranged her furs, peering at him over the turned-up collar of her coat, like a petulant marmoset in lipstick.

'It's freezing in this carriage,' she complained. 'I wonder where the guard can be? Maybe there isn't one on this awful train. Ewan, I don't feel well. I'm sure I'm feverish. I think I must be going to start a cold.'

Daisy had yet another cold. Since they'd come back to England, she almost always had a cold. This was not

surprising, for she was always freezing, even if she wrapped herself in layers and layers of woollens, wore scratchy home-made cardigans and thick, hand-knitted socks. The spring her dad had promised them was taking its time to come.

Getting up late one morning, she found her mother in the kitchen, discussing the week's meals with Mrs Hobson, the woman from the village who helped Rose with the household chores.

Daisy liked Mrs Hobson, who had obviously decided the Denham family needed lots of jumpers, socks and cardigans, and also feeding up. She cooked them wholesome stews with plenty of suet dumplings, carrots and potatoes, and always welcomed Daisy to the kitchen with biscuits and a glass of milk.

Mrs Hobson came to Melbury House each weekday morning, and she and Rose did everything between them – dusting, cleaning, scrubbing, laundry, peeling endless piles of vegetables, and laying all the fires.

Daisy came home from school most afternoons to find her mother resting with her feet up on the sofa, pale with fatigue and looking drained.

'I thought I heard some footsteps,' Mrs Hobson said, beaming as Daisy snaked a hand across the kitchen table to grab a fresh-baked scone. 'You're not at school today, then?'

'She was up coughing half the night, so I thought I'd keep her off this morning. This old place is so damp. I'm surprised we haven't all had pneumonia this winter.' Rose brushed Daisy's fringe out of her eyes and felt her forehead. 'You're not so feverish now. If you're feeling better, you could go to school this afternoon.'

'Maybe not, it's double Latin.' Daisy grinned. 'I'll go for a walk along the beach, or into Charton and blow my germs

away. Unless I can do anything for you, Mum?'

'Thank you, darling, but I think we've finished,' Rose replied, although she must have known she'd never finish, that she would never manage to run Melbury House as it was intended to be run, with a live-in staff of five or more, and extra help besides.

'If you go to the village, you must always use the road from Melbury,' she reminded Daisy. 'I know the other way is shorter, but that gated road is private. It's on someone else's land.'

'Where's my dad?' asked Daisy, pretending not to hear what Rose had said about the road.

'He and Mr Hobson are marking out a vegetable garden. Alex has lots of plans for it this year.' Rose smiled ruefully. 'I think he means to keep you children busy.'

'I'll go and see what they're doing.'

Daisy went to fetch her coat, but as she walked along the service passage the women's voices floated after her, and she couldn't help hear what they were saying.

'She's grown up very pretty,' said Mrs Hobson. 'I always knew she would.'

'She's lovely,' Rose agreed. Then Daisy heard her mother sigh. 'Of course, it's rather difficult for me, coming back here and having to see the people I used to know. I expect there's lots of gossip in the village?'

'Well, there's still a bit,' admitted Mrs Hobson. 'But not as much as when you first came home. You and Mr Denham and the children are living here so happy and respectable that I'm sure there's nothing much to say.'

'I hope you're right,' said Rose.

'Mrs Denham, I dare say it's not my business, but does Daisy know what happened all those years ago?' asked

Mrs Hobson.

'She – Mrs Hobson, look at the time, we must get all that ironing done,' said Rose.