



## The Winter Bride

*Anne Gracie*

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**The Winter Bride** Anne Gracie

**Award-winning author Anne Gracie delivers the second in her enticing new series about four young women facing a life of destitution—until a daring act changes their fortune and turns them each into a beautiful bride...**

Damaris Chance's unhappy past has turned her off the idea of marriage forever. But her guardian, Lady Beatrice Davenham, convinces her to make her coming out anyway—and have a season of carefree, uncomplicated fun.

When Damaris finds herself trapped in a compromising situation with the handsome rake Freddy Monkton-Coombes, she has no choice but to agree to wed him—as long as it's in name only. Her new husband seems to accept her terms, but Freddy has a plan of his own: to seduce his reluctant winter bride.

Will Damaris's secrets destroy her chance at true happiness? Or can Freddy help her cast off the shackles of the past, and yield to delicious temptation?

## The Winter Bride Details

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Author : Anne Gracie

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## From Reader Review The Winter Bride for online ebook

### Keri says

Fabulous addition to the series and Freddy was the bomb!!!

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### Sophia says

What sheer delight this was to read! I had not read this author's books before and I certainly missed out when I started with the second book of the series (though, I had no trouble reading it out of actual order). Sometimes one is just precisely in the mood for something light, good-humored, and just enough heartwarming romance and twisting to the plot to give it balance. Even better if it totally takes one by surprise.

I'm not exactly sure what I was expecting, but an eccentric old lady who does as she pleases, four unique women who are sisters of the heart if not real sisters, a man styling himself as a rake merely to keep from those feelings that hurt and the chance of yet someone else leaving him, oh and lets not forget the watchful eyes of society, deep dark secrets from the past, and a love affair that takes everyone by surprise including the people who find themselves in love.

The story opens with Freddie Monkton-Coombes giving his word, reluctantly, to his best friend that he will watch over Max's new sisters in law and his aunt while Max is away on his honeymoon. Freddie has no desire to be anywhere near respectable young women who are making their debut for the Season because they will be swarming with men who he will have to watchsafe and worse, they will be attending affairs where marriage-minded girls and their vigilant mamas will be looking to snag him.

But his promise is his word of honor so he manfully sets out to do his duty. His duty soon leads him into the oddest situations because these women all seem to have an eccentric bend particularly the oldest of the sisters, Damaris. Freddie catches Damaris sneaking out, but instead of the trouble he expects her to be in, she is doing something crazy- and perfectly above board. He chooses to keep her secret and in turn, later finds himself needed to make an interesting proposition to Damaris. He needs a fake fiancee and Damaris needs the money he would pay her. Freddie gets a whole lot more than he bargained for from his growing feelings for the enigmatic Damaris to the truth about her past.

Damaris Chance reluctantly agrees to a Season. She has no desire to marry in fact she can't or the truth would disgrace her and all that are associated with her. Her pretend sisters only know the part of her past that begins when she was sold to the brothel where they were all brought and escaped, but Damaris' history is so much worse and darker than they can imagine. As a result of her choice, she knows that she must have an income and no one can know that she is working. She barely gets started on her nest egg when the disturbing Freddie Monkton-Coombes discovers what she is doing. While he isn't the fribble and flirt he pretends to be, she still doesn't expect the fastidious man to not only keep her secret, but act as her escort. His outrageous plan to use her to help him get past his mother's plot to set him up is absurd, but what he dangles as an incentive sure is not. Damaris finds that faking an engagement is harder than she imagined and mostly because she starts to wish that it is real.

Alright, so I was very excited about this one. I was hooked from the beginning when I chuckled aloud over

Max's aunt's scheming and her way of looking at matters.

*The old lady flapped a dismissive hand. "Pish-tush, what nonsense! Now come along, gels, Mr. Monkton-Coombes will have finished his muffins, and while all men should be kept waiting a little- it keeps them nicely on edge, I find- it does not do to keep them dangling too long. And when one finally joins them, they must be made to feel that the waiting was worthwhile..."* p. 15 Lady Beatrice from The Winter Bride

There are aspects of this one that I found interesting. First, there is Freddie, Max, and Flynn's involvement in trade and enterprise. I enjoyed that they were active, intelligent men and this occupied some scenes so that the focus was more wide-spread than the romance. I also found the unusual background of the circle of ladies a refreshing nuance to keep this one from being a traditional style historical romance.

And speaking of an aspect that went beyond the romance, emotional abuse of children is another theme that runs through this one. Freddie was an emotionally abused child because he was the ignored and then later, unwanted second son. Damaris also had it hard with her missionary father, from the time she could remember and worse when her mother died, who treated her more like a burden and later the hired help than his child. The man was a bitter, narrow-minded sort that didn't reflect well on his choice to be a missionary. And worse, he perpetrated a form of emotional abuse to Damaris that made my blood boil. She had a very rough life, but added to this was all the wrong thinking this evil man instilled in her. She was repressed and ignorant as a result of his words to her as a child and young teenage girl. She was made to feel guilty over something that was natural and right like physical love and attraction. She thought some other things too that she got from this guy, but I don't want to do spoilers so lets just say that his actions were villainous even if later it all made sense.

And nestled in the middle of all this was their romance. In a nutshell, it was a fake mates type plot. Freddie needed Damaris to act as his betrothed to keep his parents off his back. Damaris and Freddie both swear off marriage for two different reasons. Freddie wants nothing to do with the intimacy, responsibility, and closeness of such a union and Damaris, influenced by her father and her past, thinks she can't have marriage with a decent man and what's more doesn't ever want intimacy with a man. Naturally, this was a slow developing romance, but once it got there, it heated up fast. Freddie was careful with Damaris and he accepted her and her past without a qualm just as Damaris was perfect for him because she dug to the heart of his issues and made him face them. They were a fun, beautiful couple and I loved reading their romantic story.

*"Well I'm shocked," said Freddie in as shocked a manner as he could conjure up. "Deeply shocked," he repeated. "May I serve you some of this apple tart? It looks and smells delicious, doesn't it?"*

*"Apple tart?" she repeated blankly. "Did you hear a word I said?"*

*"What you said?" he cut a generous slice of tart. "You mean about you not being Miss Chance?" He slid it onto a plate and passed it to her. "And not being related to your sisters and your aunt and having no fortune-yes, and I told you that I was shocked. Deeply. Will you have cream with that?" Without waiting for her answer, he lavished her apple tart with clotted cream.*

*She frowned and gave him an accusing look. "You knew. All the time I worried about telling you, and you knew!"*

*"You're not eating. It's delicious. Of course I knew."*

*"Then why did you say you were shocked? Deeply shocked?"*

*"You seemed to expect it and I didn't want to disappoint you." He gave her a wicked grin. "I don't like to disappoint ladies, you see."* P. 135 Freddie and Damaris from The Winter Bride

In summation, this was one of the best historical romances that I've read all year and heartily recommend it to other historical romance fans.

My thanks to Penguin Group for the opportunity to read this book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Lady Wesley says**

3.5 stars. Quite enjoyable, with some surprising plot twists. Freddy is an adorable hero.

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### **Mei says**

If I appreciated Lady Beatrice in the previous book of the series, here I'm adding another character: Freddy!

His fear of *muffins* and marriage is hilarious! He would do anything to avoid them! But fate has other plans for him... \*wink\*

Damaris, one of the Chance sisters is an orphan who has some very traumatic events in her young life. She's always calm and in control, but behind this appearance a fear of rejection and abandonment is lurking.

Both Damaris and Freddy are plagued by guilt, but they cover them differently. Freddy posing as an empty headed dandy, Damaris as a perfect young lady.

Fate, or better Max, force them in close contact, and both cannot escape the attraction that slowly builds between them.

Here too the romance is slow building, but very sweet.

Damaris fights it because she's afraid of the repercussions her past (all very real and tragic) will have if it comes in the open.

Freddy fights it because he feels that he doesn't deserve happiness.

Still it is Freddy that capitulates first and the way he woos Damaris is fantastic! His playfulness while fighting her fears is just what Damaris needs. I laughed at the twist he gave to some Biblical stories and the convoluted route he took to bring Damaris to surrender. It was really, really excellent!

It is also important to remark that both of them are very strong characters. Freddy, when freed of his guilt is ready to do anything to make Damaris love him; Damaris', when confronted with Freddy's parents disdain, impassioned defence of Freddy's character! What a wonderful scene! I wanted to applaud her!

Also, like a cherry on top, Lady Beatrice is present here too and it was wonderful finding her in such a great shape!

I'm looking forward to reading the next books in this series and I hope both Lady Beatrice and Freddy will be present in them! I also hope for more characters like them to enliven them. I think Patrick Flynn, the "Pirate" with his gold earring! ;)

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## Mary - Buried Under Romance says

*The Winter Bride* is a laughter-filled journey into the world of experimental Chinese swimming pigs, enchanting the hearts of readers and making them yearn to read the story over and over again. Intrigued? I hope so.

Confirmed bachelor Freddy Monkton-Coombes has a deep aversion to marriage, responsibilities, and muffins – the eligible misses of marriageable age who seek to entrap him in marriage. His best friend, Max, had married one of the Chance Sisters in *The Autumn Bride*, and asked Freddy to look after them along with his elderly Aunt Beatrice while he's on his honeymoon. Appalled, Freddy reluctantly agrees, and that's where his troubles began. He has no problem dealing with the charming Jane and Daisy Chance, but Damaris Chance is a different matter.

Damaris Tait became Damaris Chance in a chain of events detailed in *The Autumn Bride*. She had grown up in China with her missionary father, and escaped to England upon the death of her father and the burning of their mission. What she endured during her travels is her deepest secret, and also the one which convinced her to never marry, despite her deep yearning for security and a husband to care for her. When Freddy is driven to near insanity by the ploys of his mother to marry, he concocts a crazy scheme of a fake betrothal with the only girl who doesn't want to marry – Damaris. Yet, as their fake betrothal continues, why does Freddy suddenly want to make it real? And more importantly, can he convince Damaris to tell him the shadows of her past?

This is an amazing piece of work that animates not only Freddy and Damaris, but every secondary character, making them lovable and realistic. But really, Freddy and Damaris take the cake here. Damaris is a quiet, pleasant girl of hidden talents (she is a skilled painter of china) and hidden dreams. Being a foreigner, her life in China was harsh and even more that her father condemned her for being of bad blood, giving no love to her. She is caring, considerate, and even more astounding, she has mettle. For her escape to England, she walked hundreds of miles in China, and after all she's endured, no one is more deserving of happiness than her.

Freddy, whether he knew it at first, is exactly the type of person Damaris needed in her life. His infectious humor both charms and unsettle her, just as she unsettles him with her knowing eyes that peer deep into his soul. He is a chameleon and does the practiced rake very well, pretending that his brother's death doesn't affect him still, pretending that his parents' insults don't harm him, and pretending that he is a complete wastrel when he's a successful businessman. There is so much hidden depth in Freddy, and it takes Damaris but a few days to realize, while his own epiphany comes years after. But it was well worth it.

Freddy and Damaris lived their lives in parallels, neither belonging, hurt by their family, and both seeking a truer love. Most of all, they truly understand each other.

**“You know your fear is both false and illogical, but you fear it anyways.”**

**She stopped dead and looked at him, her eyes wide with surprise. “You do understand,” she breathed, so softly it was almost lost in the fog. (Pg 50)**

There is so much to commend this book and Anne Gracie's writing. Some parts made me shed tears; others had me laughing until my sides hurt. Anne Gracie is a superb writer who takes you on a beautiful journey of two amazing character's path to love, filled with joy and laughter, and an unquenchable happiness when the “dragons” are defeated.

I highly recommend this book, but advise readers to read *The Autumn Bride* first. If the tagline in *The Autumn Bride* was *muffins*, then the tagline in this is the *experimental Chinese swimming pigs*. I cannot wait for Jane and Daisy's books, for they will undoubtedly wow me as well. Fans of Jane Austen will no doubt enjoy a selected quote at the beginning of each chapter, providing relevant wit to this amazingly charming story. Read to find out about the pigs! :)

\*My hearty thanks to the publisher for this review copy; yes, this is an honest review.

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There is SO much more I want to comment on this book, but I'll just let you read it and discover for yourselves. ^\_^

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### **Kathleen says**

**4.5 solid-gold stars for this one, the second book in the Chance Sisters series.** Maybe I was in the right mood, but I was captivated by the characters. A hero to dream on. A likable, strong heroine. (Loved that scene at the Breckenridge breakfast table.) A plot -- a fairly credible plot. Some sparkling, clever dialogue -- often mildly funny. Engrossing, poignant -- even slightly profound. Plus, several sizzling pages between the sheets.

My only quibbles are minor: It was winter, so the storm would have been freezing, hypothermic conditions (and how would parsley be growing?). Plus, a little too pat towards the end, on two counts: (view spoiler) Also, I could do without the profanity, but at least it wasn't a frequent occurrence.

In my view, this book is stronger than book 1. More deeply felt. But it would be best to start with book 1. And I'm eager to read the fantastical Flynn's story. A self-made nabob of lowly Irish birth and a tendency towards bling. Will he star in book 3? Maybe Flynn -- who plans to marry an aristocrat -- will hook up with Daisy, the gimp-footed gutter girl with fashion design flare -- whom I adore??

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### **OLT says**

I was predisposed to dislike this after all the disappointing (to me) Bride books Gracie has been churning out since 2008 but I borrowed it from the library on another reviewer's recommendation. Turns out I really like it, proving once again that it's not a good idea to have preconceived biases about anything.

The plot itself isn't what makes this such a good read. It's the two main characters. They're great, especially hero Freddy. Heroine Damaris is admirable also. I do so enjoy a woman who's determined to make it on her own and not for stupid reasons. She has a dark secret in her past (yes, yes, that is so cliche but I didn't care) that makes her behavior very reasonable, and she is also a very likeable female.

But the absolute delight of the book is hero Freddy. He also has a dark issue in his past (yes, yes, again cliche but let's move on) that makes him seem emotionally aloof and somewhat superficial, but as the story progresses Damaris and Freddy reveal themselves to each other and begin the healing process.

This isn't a dark, angsty book although it does have those dark secrets. Gracie keeps the serious issues

serious without making this a bummer of a book. For the most part, it's actually a fun read. I do so love the "God's Plan" theory as explained by Freddy to Damaris. the Venice (no, NOT Italy) moments, and, of course, the experimental Chinese swimming pigs are not to be missed.

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### **Daniella says**

I have mixed feelings about *The Winter Bride*. Don't get me wrong, I liked it enough--the 3 stars are a testament to that--but the story just had too many flaws to ignore.

**For one, its characterisation was problematic and one-dimensional.** It's problematic in the sense that I found Damaris' character to be inconsistent at times. At the start of the book, she's very serious and solemn, and then all of a sudden, halfway through it, she's all laughter and smiles. I also found that the other characters, including Freddy, the hero, to be rather bland and lacking in depth. To give them credit, Freddy, Max, and the Chance sisters were likeable. It's just that, well, they don't have enough character depth to feel real. The same holds true with Freddy's parents. The way they were painted in the story, especially their irrational hatred against Freddy, seemed too contrived to be normal. This issue stopped me from making any connection to the characters. I didn't feel invested.

Another issue I have with the book is **the irregularity in the tone**. It can be funny at one instance, and then serious the next. The mercurial quality to the tone just made me confused as to how I should feel at the scenes.

The whole reading experience entertained me, but it was a shallow kind of entertainment. The plot was very simplistic and not at all compelling. I liked it, but that's just it.

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### **Jen says**

This is the second book in the Chance Sisters series, and I must say this one was loads better than the first!!! Freddy and Damaris first struck me as two people who were wrong for each other.... I was proven wrong!!! These two were such a match made in heaven! I loved them and I loved the way they fell in love!

This instalment had a little bit of sex, but this series seems to focus more on the romance, the friendships, and the family! I adore the journey we are taken on by Anne Gracie! I love her writing, it pulls me into the stories that she creates, and makes me feel so much emotion for her characters!

This author's books are a must read if you enjoy a heat warming historical romance! She hasn't let me down so far!!!

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### **Jacob Proffitt says**

Well that was unexpected (and in the best possible way). I was going to have a quiet night with a little Fallout 4 and in bed at a reasonable hour. This book upset those plans. Sorry. Too mild. This book took those

plans, tossed them into a cement mixer and poured them into a tornado that reached escape velocity on a trajectory with the sun.

Ahem. So this is a series and I would recommend starting with the first. Which is a good book, so you're lucky there. But I'd encourage reading this one even if the first was awful because Damaris and Freddy are just too awesome to miss.

And now the struggle not to burble. I'll try to keep it short. Damaris is just lovely. We know from the first book that there's some serious damage in her past. This book takes its time revealing details but that's mainly so we can experience them with Freddy and that's a powerful scene that benefited greatly from the added emotional impact. What's most awesome about Damaris, though, is how fearless she is in standing up for those in need of defense despite her own hurts and insecurities. It was very surprising to find Freddy in the category of those needing defense and beyond awesome when she steps up in glorious virtue to rain fire on evildoers. And yeah, that's vague to avoid spoilers, but it was awe inspiring. Gracie has a way with those charged, righteous diatribes and the brief glimpse of it in the first book is carried even further in this one. That it doesn't wander into self-righteousness or, worse, didacticism is a miracle and mark of her talent as an author.

And don't think that Freddy isn't worthy of Damaris just because he finds himself in a place where Damaris can stand up for him. He's every bit her match when his interest is engaged and his strength is a perfect complement to hers. I suspected he had hidden depth in the first book and that hint is delivered with power here. I loved his quiet competence and that he didn't need to make a big deal out of himself all the time. He's worth reading the book all by himself and being matched with Damaris is wonderful icing on the cake.

It was a delight to spend time with these two as they helped heal each others' wounds and come together in a way that made them stronger than they could ever be separately. After about the halfway mark I knew I was lost and that I'd be staying up to finish the book. I'm so glad I did even though I'll pay the price in the morning.

**A note about Steamy:** On the low end, but powerful for all that. There's a single explicit sex scene but it was perfect in timing, length, and emotional impact. Given Damaris' past, it was incredibly important for Gracie to get this one right and I thought she did an incredible job.

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### **Hristina Tserovska says**

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### **Angie Elle says**

There was so much to love about **The Winter Bride** that I don't even know where to start. While a large portion of the first book in this series focused on establishing the Chance sister's circumstances and budding relationship with Lady Beatrice, it's clear this installment belonged to Freddy and Damaris. Their road to love was filled with hilarity and heartbreak, often times within seconds of each other, and it was enough to keep a reader on her toes. But that's what happens when you have a hero and heroine who each have an

aversion to marriage.

I just love the way Freddy and Damaris fell in love – how Damaris was scared to death of it and shying away, but Freddy so rational about the entire situation and determined to win her over. The way he reflected on their first kiss and how it was the best kiss he'd ever participated in had me in stitches.

Freddy and Damaris had both had their share of heartbreak, and that strengthened their connection. But Damaris had quiet strength, honesty, and fairness, all qualities I find admirable in a heroine. She was convinced she was never going to get married or be a mother, and every time children were mentioned, her longing was so tangible my heart broke for her. As for Freddy, I found him to be, surprisingly, effervescent and happy go lucky, and I loved him for it. That's not to say Freddy didn't have a more serious side; he did, and I think that's why I loved his carefree side so much. Freddy needed that to deal with his past. While Freddy's mother frustrated me, I loved her persistence about her son getting married, as it led him to Damaris. I'm glad that Damaris wouldn't be cowed by his parents, and that she was so angry on Freddy's behalf for the way they treated him. And I love, love, love that it was seeing her go toe to toe with his parents that finally opened Freddy's eyes to how special Damaris was. There was a bit of a wait for the sexy times in this one, but the payoff was worth it. Freddy was so kind and gentle with Damaris, everything she needed. I'm not sure I could love him any more than I do. Also, why is revenge so damn sexy in historical romance? I found Freddy wanting to dish out retribution on behalf of Damaris so hot. And yeah, sweet, too. But mostly hot.

As for how this series is progressing, I continue to love the family these young women have made with each other, and I adored Patrick Flynn and his introduction. I am so excited to read his and Daisy's book!

This book is more unique than the blurb suggests. It's not your typical 'ruined' story. In fact, Damaris' ruin doesn't come along until well into the second half of the book, giving her and Freddy plenty of time to get to know each other and for their feelings to develop. I loved **The Winter Bride**, and I'm so glad I already have the next book in the series fired up and ready to go!

*Audio Review:* I adore the narrator for this series. I think she is able to portray the characters true to who they are. Max and Freddy were very different heroes, and her tone reflected that. While she may have narrated both stories, she acclimated her tone to that of each book. And oddly enough, the entire time I was listening to the first book, I knew the narrator reminded me of someone, but I couldn't put my finger on who. It came to me with this installment – she sounds like a young Angela Lansbury. If you're a fan of audio, I think the audio version of this is wonderful and am glad this was my first experience with the story.

This review was originally posted on Books & Beauty Are My Bag.

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**Ally says**

**OMG these two. Adorbs**

**Read for the HR Series Challenge. Read out of order, because it's me and I tend to do that kinda thing**

**Series:** Obvs

**Sexy times:** I believe there are two acts of love

**Plan on reading more by the author:** Yes!

**Synopsis:** Demaris has a big secret she's been carrying with her since she hit England's rocky shores that prevents her from marrying. Evah! (don't all the Chance sisters have something they are hiding, hmm?). And Freddy, well, he's simply not the marrying kind. He's got bad family blood and he's not about to tie himself to anyone or tie anyone to his fam.

Cue the storm that rages and the river that overflows its banks. Literally. Suddenly the two are in a precariously inconvenient situation that brings on the love!

**Heroine:** Demaris. Oh, she's a likable one alright. Possibly my favorite of all the Chance sisters. Woman knows how to save her own a\$\$ and sure as hell ain't afraid to ask for what she wants.

**Hero:** Freddy. I get it. I get why he acts the fool. He's covering up for some really serious family stuff. Breaks my heart. His family?

**Why it did or didn't work for me:** You know it just came down to this being an excellent story that kept my attention all the way through. Nothing terribly earth shattering but it was all of the little things that kept me riveted: Demaris' take down on Freddy's parents, Demaris' telling Freddy her secrets. Demaris' making dumplings. Freddy realizing what she was to him. Freddy chopping wood. Lot's of wood. It was just damned good.

Signed,

*I'll keep on keeping on with this author. She's a sure bet for me.*

Toodles

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### **Jane Stewart says**

4 ½ stars. I enjoy the author's choices and dialogue.

Like the first book in the series, this is not great writing, but I felt good while reading it. The happiness flowed into my other life. And that makes it 5 stars for me.

I wish more regency romances were like this. Too many authors use inaccurate assumptions and secrets for excessive drama and suspense. Gracie does not. I'm not talking about Damaris keeping a secret about her past. That was reasonable. Here's an example of something I liked. After sex, Damaris makes an assumption that is wrong. Another author would have Damaris leave the guy and not say why. But Gracie has the guy sense something wrong, ask her about it, and not give up until she tells him. So she tells him, and then he explains why the assumption is wrong. I was pleased because I am used to other authors who would draw that out for extended conflict. Sometimes I don't mind drawing it out, but many times I do.

I loved the character Freddy. He was entertaining. He fears and avoids muffins (irritating females chasing him for marriage). Aunt Bea mistakenly thinks he likes to eat baked muffins. He does not correct her. So she frequently serves him muffins, and then he has to think of ways to avoid eating them, like throwing one in the fire, but then he worries there might be a smell.

#### HEROINE WAS RAPED IN THE PAST.

Some readers might want to know this. The rapes were not shown in detail, but they were mentioned. The f-word was used regarding this.

#### AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR:

I really enjoyed the narrator Alison Larkin. I frequently complain when a female narrator uses a weird voice for the hero, and Larkin used a weird voice for Freddy. He did not sound sexy at all. He almost sounded comical. But this narrator is so wonderful with emotional interpretations - I loved it, weird Freddy and all. I loved the way she interpreted Mrs. Jenkins (a very minor character) who was Damaris' boss at the pottery shop. I plan to look for more books that she narrates. However, one of my friends was disappointed with the narrator, so it's a personal preference.

#### DATA:

Narrative mode: 3rd person. Unabridged audiobook length: 12 hrs and 31 mins. Swearing language: mild.

Sexual language: none, other than the f-word mentioned above. Number of hero/heroine sex scenes: two.

Setting: 1816 mostly England. Book copyright: 2014. Genre: regency romance.

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### Wendy says

Wonderful Anne Gracie. I adored your amusing, witty dialogue, and engaging cast of loveable characters. Freddy and Damaris, secondary characters from **The Autumn Bride**, are the star players, well supported by the rest of this delightful mishmash of a 'family', especially the outspoken and outrageous Aunt Bea. Lady Beatrice can turn any situation to her own advantage or to the advantage of her beloved adopted 'nieces'. Nothing will stand in the way of their happiness as far as she is concerned; no bending of the truth is unacceptable.

She has decided that Freddy Monkton-Coombes, her nephew Max's oldest friend, will meet her girls and she orchestrates this meeting shamelessly. Freddy is a confirmed bachelor and avoids what he refers to as, 'muffins' - young women intent on trapping a chap into marriage – like the plague. He has skilfully sidestepped this terrible fate for many years but, from the moment he comes face to face with the quietly serene and beautiful Damaris, he is hooked even though he doesn't realise it at the time.

Whilst he is away on his honeymoon with Abby, Aunt Bea's eldest 'niece', Max, whose story was told in **The Autumn Bride**, has coerced Freddy into acting as guardian/chaperon to the girls and his aunt. Although initially extremely reluctant, Freddy eventually agrees and takes his promise very seriously. Naturally, it throws him into regular contact with Damaris, and the die is cast as he begins to enjoy her company and she his. At this point, I must add that whilst **The Winter Bride** can be read and enjoyed as a standalone, I recommend reading **The Autumn Bride** first as there is quite a complicated back story and the relationship between Aunt Beatrice and her 'nieces' is explained in detail.

Freddy's parents have decided that it is high time he settles down and produces an heir, and have therefore arranged a house party where hordes of these 'muffins' will be waiting to pounce. Damaris is just as set

against marriage as Freddy and so he comes up with an idea which will keep them both free of a leg shackle. When he eventually persuades Damaris to his way of thinking, the two enter into a mutually agreeable pact. They will announce a fake betrothal which will serve the dual purpose of placating both his parents and Aunt Bea. While Aunt Bea is intent on arranging a season for her, Damaris' only ambition is to live quietly in the country in a little cottage with a few chickens and a vegetable garden. Here she hopes to have the peace and quiet to forget the past tragedies and horrific memories which plague her. On the face of it, this arrangement suits both Freddy and Damaris and, in return for her wholehearted compliance, Freddy sets about the task of arranging the purchase of a country cottage for Damaris.

Damaris's peace is to be shattered, however, by the elegantly beautiful Freddy as he unwittingly worms his way into her life. He has worked very hard to present a rakish, devil-may-care appearance to the ton but behind this façade is a man with a keen business brain who is also kind, thoughtful and, most importantly, honourable with oodles of integrity. As the story unfolds, it emerges that he suffered a boyhood tragedy which has left him deeply traumatised and apparently, as a result of this tragedy, unloved by his parents. His outward devil-may-care persona is a carefully manufactured one, behind which he hides in their presence, and his self-deprecating manner and refusal to explain or defend himself to his cold and unloving parents only seems to perpetuate their annoyance and disregard for him even more. Observing all this on a visit to his family, Damaris intuitively sees how very unhappy he is whilst in their company. She is appalled by their treatment of their only son and sets out to get to the bottom of the rift between them and, in the process, show them how very wrong they are about him. There are a few amusing but bitter-sweet moments where she takes Freddy's autocratic parents to task, and he is both touched and amazed by her courage, having only previously seen the quiet, gentle side of her nature. This is where we see the real Freddy Monkton-Coombes, as Damaris determinedly begins to strip away the layers of his past and hidden turmoil.... sniff!

Freddy begins to see that Damaris is no 'muffin' and comes to the astounding realisation that he is not against marriage at all with the right girl, and that girl is Damaris. But how to persuade her? To this end, he sets out to make their betrothal fact rather than fiction. Freddy is such a darling man, that even his seduction and compromising of Damaris is somehow honourably achieved, especially as it's done after she has confessed her distressing secret. And what a touchingly tender but sensual scene it is, and throughout Ms. Gracie maintains her legendary wit and humour, without undermining the love, affection and sheer sexiness which has grown between them. It's one of those very memorable scenes that leaves the reader with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

Anne Gracie's references to Jane Austen's works add yet more humour and wit, especially in the scene where Freddy, initially horrified at being obliged to attend Aunt Bea's literary society – deviously organised by her to introduce her 'nieces' to the young men of society – quotes the opening lines from **Pride and Prejudice**:

*'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife.'* ..he shudders.... "What about the poor fellow's wants, eh? Do they matter? No. Every female in the blasted story was plotting to hook some man for herself or her daughter or niece. If you don't call that horror, I don't know what is".

The serious underlying issues for both protagonists, which each eventually helps the other to overcome, make this so much more than just a fluffy romance and it is definitely my favourite of the *Chance Sisters* series, although I love them all. Both characters are utterly loveable and I have never forgotten Freddy's character even though I initially read the book on its publication three years ago – a fair indication of how much of an impression this book and his lovely character made on me.

As previously mentioned, I read and loved this book when it was originally published and when I spotted that the audio version was at last available in the UK, I jumped at it, and immediately downloaded the whole series, especially when I realised that it had been recorded by the acclaimed actress and comedienne, Alison Larkin. Ms. Larkin is a special favourite of mine and her name on an audio book is always guaranteed to attract my attention. When I saw that she was in collaboration with Anne Gracie, there was never any doubt in my mind that this would be a wonderfully satisfying listen. In my opinion, Ms. Larkin is the perfect choice to perform this witty and charming series with its Austen quotes. I always think (and say it whenever I review one of her audio books) that she has a ‘smile’ in her voice, which, in this case, perfectly captures the humour always present in Anne Gracie’s novels.

In addition, her considerable acting skills are evident when dealing with the deeper, more serious issues. This is especially true when Damaris reveals her heart-breaking secret and Freddy’s childhood trauma emerges, and then the more serious side to his nature. Alison Larkin handles these revelations with supreme sensitivity.

As I have already mentioned, Freddy initially gives the impression of superficiality, seeming to prefer avoiding not only confrontation but responsibility too. But this impression is dispelled as we learn more about him and Alison Larkin sheds his light-hearted persona and exaggerated, slightly foppish accent as she subtly builds up the tension, especially during the scene towards the end of the book where Freddy, by this time devoid of all levity, is moved to violence. Between them, the author and narrator show his hidden mettle as he squares up to his opponent in defence of his love.

Alison Larkin’s rendition of Aunt Bea is also particularly clever as this manipulative but kindly, elderly lady, who is guilty of telling the biggest whoppers, is a tremendous character and a difficult one to capture with credibility I would imagine. However, Ms. Larkin gives a faultless performance, worthy of any West End stage, as she portrays this indomitable lady with her decidedly imperious upper crust accent, using just the right amount of intonation and nuance to indicate her age and air of entitlement.

I can’t praise Alison Larkin’s performance highly enough as she brings Anne Gracie’s lovely, tear-jerking, feel-good story to sparkling life with her accomplished interpretation of it. I would **LOVE** to hear Ms. Larkin perform **The Perfect Rake** by Anne Gracie (another of my favourite books) which I believe has yet to be recorded.... hint to the audio company and publisher!

I highly recommend **THE WINTER BRIDE** for both content and narration and, as I have all four books in my audio library, I look forward to many more hours of listening pleasure.

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