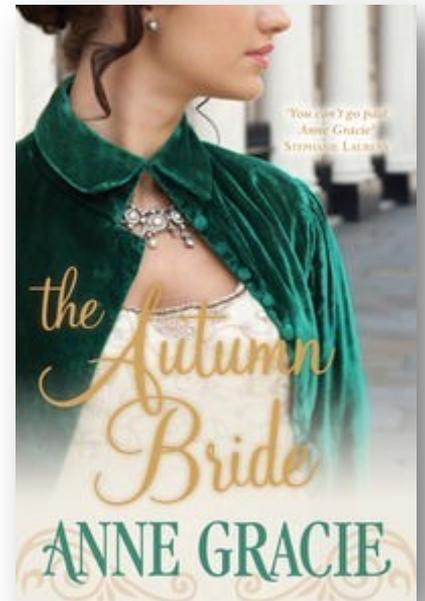


# The Autumn Bride

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## Extract

### Prologue

*'And what am I to do on the occasion? It seems an hopeless business.'*

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

*London, 1805*

'I'm sorry, my lord, but there's nothing left.'

*My lord.* Max Davenham still couldn't get used to being called that. Lord Davenham was his big, hearty, larger-than-life uncle. But his uncle was dead and Max, the heir, was now Lord Davenham.

Then the import of what Harcourt and Denton, his uncle's lawyer and man of affairs, were telling him filtered through. 'What do you mean, nothing?' His uncle was a rich man; everybody knew that.

Harcourt spread his hands in a rueful gesture. '*Nothing.*'

'Less than nothing,' Denton clarified. 'Your uncle sold off everything that could be sold off, mortgaged the rest and borrowed as heavily as he could.'

Max struggled to take it all in. His uncle had died just over a week before, of an accident in the hunting field, but no one seeing him in action could possibly have suspected there was any shortage of money. At the time of his death he'd been hosting a large, lavish house party.

'He died in debt?' It wasn't really a question. Since the news of the death, Max, who'd been finishing his final year at school, had been approached by an endless stream of tradesmen demanding payment, dunning him for what his uncle had owed. Some of the sums were enormous.

'A great deal of debt,' the lawyer agreed heavily.

Max speared his fingers through his hair. 'What a damned, bloody mess!' Nobody reprimanded him for the bad language. He was a schoolboy no longer. He was Lord Davenham, and he was entitled to swear, to take his seat in the House of Lords — and to bear the responsibility for the huge financial mess his uncle had left behind.

'Thank God for my aunt's jointure. At least she won't be caught up in this mess.' His aunt was the only daughter of the Earl of Fenton. The late earl hadn't much liked her marrying a mere baron and on her marriage had set up a generous trust to provide for her in widowhood.

There was a short silence. Harcourt gazed fixedly at his fingers. Denton fiddled with the documents that lay before him. Neither one met Max's eye.

'That's gone too?' Max said incredulously. He didn't understand much about trusts, but he'd always believed – in fact, he'd overheard his uncle say once – that it was damned well unbreakable. Obviously he'd found a way.

He looked at the two men in front of him. 'So what must I do?'

'Everything that remains must be sold off.'

'Everything?'

Both men nodded. 'Everything,' Denton confirmed. 'Davenham Hall –'

'The home estate?'

'Everything,' Denton repeated. He consulted the list in front of him. 'Davenham Hall, the Cornish mines, the hunting box in Leicestershire, the Sussex properties, the manor in Norfolk, the London house –'

'The London house? But that's my aunt's *home*.' Aunt Bea hated the country. The loss of the country houses wouldn't bother her in the least, but . . .

Max's brain was spinning. How had nobody seen this coming? Taken steps to prevent it?

He shook his head. 'I don't mind selling off the other properties, though I'd rather we tried to keep the home estate if we possibly can, but I won't allow the London house to be sold.'

'I'm afraid you have no choice, my lord.'

Max frowned. 'But where would my aunt live?'

Harcourt said apologetically, 'Perhaps with relatives?'

Max was appalled. Aunt Bea? His magnificent, outrageous aunt, a leader of the *ton*, living on her relatives' charity as a poor relation? He couldn't imagine it. It would kill her.

'Impossible. There are only a few distant cousins left,' he heard himself saying.

Denton leaned forward and said firmly, in a voice not untinged with sympathy, 'You haven't understood, my lord – *everything* must be sold, and even then there will be debts – big ones.'

Max slumped back in his chair. 'You mean I'm ruined?'

'Utterly.'

There was a short silence.

'Did my uncle not realize?' From all Max could see, his uncle had been spending money like water up to and including the day he died. No, not spending money – running up debts.

The silence thickened and became awkward.

Denton broke it. 'He knew he was ruined, all right. He'd known for years – we tried again and again to make him understand, but . . .' He shook his head.

Harcourt, the lawyer, hesitated, then said delicately, 'Your uncle did, however, ensure he had paid all his gambling debts before he . . . died. He died a gentleman.'

Max stared at him, realizing what the man was telling him, what nobody had told him before now – the reason for the wild, lavish house party, the last drunken, reckless out-of-season hunt, where his uncle, always a noted horseman, had taken greater and greater risks, putting his horse at any barrier, heedless of any danger until he'd come off at the last fence, slamming headfirst into a stone wall and breaking his neck.

The bastard had *known*. He'd gone out on a drunken spree, escaping the mess he'd made. Paying only his gambling debts – his so-called debts of honor – *honor!* Max snorted. Leaving the mess to his wife and his eighteen-year-old heir.

He forced his fists to unclench. 'Does my aunt know?'

Harcourt shook his head. 'She knows nothing of this.'

'Her jewels might secure a –'

'Paste, my lord,' Denton said sorrowfully.

'Paste?' She'd brought a fortune in jewels to the marriage.

'Lord Davenham had them copied, all but a couple of her rings – the ones she never takes off.'

'Does she know her jewels are paste?'

'I doubt it.'

'So we're ruined, indeed.' There was a long silence. Max's brain was reeling. Only a few weeks before, his biggest problem was whether he'd pass the Latin exam and whether his cricket team would win the cup. Now . . .

He rose and paced about the room, trying to make up his mind what to do. He didn't seem to have much choice. But he wasn't going to take the advice of Harcourt and Denton – not completely.

He squared his shoulders and resumed his seat. 'Very well, sell off everything except the home estate and my aunt's house in London.'

'But –'

He held up his hand. 'I won't allow my aunt to be rendered homeless and dependent on the charity of relatives. Retaining her London home and securing her an income is my first priority.'

'But –'

'And if I can possibly hang on to Davenham Hall, I will. If you can, rent it out to someone; if not, close up the house and rent out the land to local farmers.'

'But, my lord —'

'I do understand the gravity of the situation,' he assured them. 'But the home estate in Devon has been the heart of my family for generations and I'm going to do my damndest to hold on to it. Sell off everything else; make sure you get the best price you can. Be discreet; once the vultures scent blood they'll peck the carcass to bits. And part-pay the noisiest of the creditors first; it might give us some breathing time.'

The two elderly men exchanged glances and seemed to come to some unspoken understanding. 'Very well, my lord, but the sale of the properties won't begin to cover all of the debts. How will you —'

'I'll borrow.'

Denton said in an exasperated voice, 'My lord, the banks won't lend you a penny. Don't you understand? You're *ruined*.'

Max clenched his fist. 'I am *not* ruined yet! And if the banks won't lend me the money I need to secure my aunt's future, I'll find it elsewhere.'

In an urgent voice Denton said, 'Don't do it, my lord. You don't know what you're getting yourself in for. You spoke of vultures, but private moneylenders are worse than vultures.'

Harcourt added, 'He's right. Remember your Shakespeare — they might lend you the money, but they'll demand their pound of flesh.'

Max stood. 'Then if that's what it takes, so be it.'