opening extract from

Rumours: A Luxe Novel

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I have just been invited to a most secretive, but assuredly most elaborate, celebration in Tuxedo Park sponsored by one of Manhattan's finest families. I have been sworn to secrecy for the time being, but I promise my loyal readers that I will report all when the week is over and the general word is out . . .

— FROM THE 'GAMESOME GALLANT' COLUMN IN THE *NEW YORK IMPERIAL*, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1899

IT HAS BECOME ALMOST REGULAR FOR THE LOWER classes of New York to catch glimpses of our native aristocracy in her city streets, tripping in for breakfast at Sherry's after one of their epic parties, or perhaps racing sleighs in the Central Park, that great democratic meeting place. But here in the country it is different. Here the rich do not have to suffer the indignity of being spied upon by a thousand eyes. Here in the snowy hills forty miles north-west of Manhattan, whatever business deal, whatever hustle, whatever random act of violence is being done back in the city, cannot touch them. For they and they alone are allowed in.

In those final, frigid days of the year 1899, the beau monde had escaped the city quietly, in small groups, according to the instructions of their hosts. By the eve of the New Year the last of them had arrived by special train to Tuxedo Park, disembarking at the private club's private station. There had been special trains all afternoon: one bearing orchids, another caviar and game, another cases of Ruinart champagne. And

now came Schermerhorns and Schuylers, Vanderbilts and Joneses. They were greeted by coaches newly painted in the Tuxedo colours of green and gold and decorated with commemorative silver bells from Tiffany & Co., and whisked across the freshly fallen snow to the ballroom where the wedding would take place.

Those who had their own self-consciously rustic residences there – one of those shingled cottages, say, with touches of moss and lichen – went off to freshen up. The ladies had brought their historic jewels, diamond-tipped aigrettes for their hair, silk gloves. They had packed their newest and best dresses, although there were several despairing of being seen in gowns they had already been described as wearing over the course of what had been a rather unhappy season. The city's most charmed socialite, Miss Elizabeth Holland, had met with a watery end right in the middle of it, and nobody had felt comfortable acting joyful since. The best people had been sitting around waiting for January, when they might finally escape for cruises in the Mediterranean and other points east. Now, so near New Year's, with a blessed but unexpected fête on the horizon, the mood seemed likely to pick up again. One or two of the women mentioned, in low tones, as they dabbed perfume behind their ears, that the bride was reported to be wearing her mother's dress in the ceremony, which would add a touch of humility to the proceedings. But then that was a

sweet tradition and did not excuse any lack of modishness on the part of the guests.

Already they were being ushered, by liveried footmen, to the ballroom at the club's main building. They were being served hot spiced punch in little cut-crystal cups, and remarking how transformed the ballroom of Tuxedo was.

Down the middle of its famed parquet dance floor was an aisle, delineated with white rose petals, several inches deep. Bridal arches wrapped in chrysanthemums and lilies of the valley dominated the centre of the room. As the guests began to file in, they whispered of the exquisiteness of the display and the high calibre of guests who had made sure of attending, even at such short notice, for the invitations had arrived only a few days before by hand delivery. There was Mrs Astor, behind her dark veil, present despite the ill health that had kept her in for much of the season and prompted rumours that she was ready to abdicate her throne as queen of New York society. She rested on the arm of Harry Lehr, that winning bachelor, so often spoken of for his flare in leading cotillions and issuing bons mots.

There were the William Schoonmakers making their way to the front row, young Mrs Schoonmaker – she was the second lady to wear that honorific – blowing kisses and adjusting her blonde curls and ruby tiara all the way. There were the Frank Cuttings, whose only son, Edward 'Teddy'

Cutting, was known to be such good friends with William's son, Henry Schoonmaker, although since mid-December the two had been seen out together only a few times. There were Cornelius 'Neily' Vanderbilt III and his wife, née Grace Wilson, who as a debutante was considered too 'fast' and had nearly caused her husband to be disinherited. She looked regal now, in lace-trimmed velvet panne, her auburn hair done up in elaborate curls, as much a Vanderbilt as anyone. But for all the well-born people taking their seats there were several who were notably absent. For among those hundred or so guests – a far more selective list than the four hundred allowed into old Mrs Astor's ballroom – there was one great family unrepresented.

This omission was to many strange and, beneath the gentle string music that announced how very soon the ceremony would begin, one or two of the guests whispered about the absence. Meanwhile, the wind whistled around the building. The icicles hanging from the eaves glittered. The last guests to arrive were urged to take their seats, and then a set of groomsmen in black tails – not the shorn dinner jackets that were the namesake of the resort – moved purposefully to their places.

The last of them, Teddy Cutting, cast a glance back to be sure his friend was ready. As the music rose, the crowd nodded approvingly at the sight of Henry Schoonmaker, his dark hair

slicked to the side and his handsome face imbued with a new maturity, taking his place at the altar. Was that a touch of nervousness in his famously rakish features? Was it excitement or was it trepidation? Then he, and indeed every set of eyes in the room, looked down the aisle, where the loveliest debutantes of New York, dressed in glacier blue chiffon, began to emerge. They moved in a slow march, one by one, across the little mountain of rose petals towards the front of the ballroom, trying as best they could to put away their girlish smiles.

When the opening strains of Wagner's processional played, the sylphlike bride appeared in the frame of the first flower-laden arch. The beauty of that girl was remarkable even to her family and friends murmuring in their seats. She was dressed in her mother's bridal lace, and a massive bouquet of frothy whites tumbled from her clasped hands. Her emotions were obscured by her ornate veil, but she moved forward to the altar with a steady purpose.

It was just as she took her place across from Henry that the door swung open and a young member of the staff appeared, breathless, and whispered into the ear of the woman stationed at the entrance. A cold rush of air was followed by a quiet gasp and then an almost inaudible murmur. The intermittent whispers that had begun before the ceremony doubled, then tripled, and now created a low hum in the room even as the reverend cleared his throat and began the ceremony. The

groom's dark eyes roamed across the room. Even the bride stiffened.

The reverend's voice droned insistently on, but the faces of the assembled no longer seemed quite so placid or joyous. A growing discomfort had reached the privileged class even here, where it was warmly ensconced in its winter palace, even on the titillating verge of celebrating the union of two of its brightest members. The eyebrows of the guests were raised; their mouths were open. It was as though, suddenly, the wilds of that city that they'd left behind were not so very far away, after all. Something had happened, and it would forever alter how they remembered the last days of 1899.

It has been a dreary few months in New York, given the death of Miss Elizabeth Holland – who was one of society's favourites – and the blizzard that arrived in late November and left the city blanketed for days. But elegant New York has not given up hope for a fine winter season of evenings at the opera and gay cotillions. And our eye has more than once been caught by the newly ladylike comportment of Miss Penelope Hayes, who was the best friend of Miss Holland during her short life. Could Miss Hayes inherit her mantle of impeccable decorum and congeniality?

– FROM *CITÉ CHATTER*, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1899

'EXCUSE ME, MISS, BUT IS IT REALLY YOU?'

The day was clear and bracingly cold, and as Penelope Hayes turned slowly to her left, where the crowd had massed along the narrow cobblestone street, she exhaled a visible cloud of warm breath. She focused her large lake-blue eyes on the eager face of a girl who could not have been much older than fourteen. She must have emerged from one of those tenement buildings, which rose shoulder to shoulder, at imprecise angles, behind the masses of people. A jungle of black wires was strung from their rooftops, cutting ribbons out of the sky. The girl wore a black coat that had turned almost grey with wear, and her already pinkish complexion had gone patchy red in the cold. Penelope met her eyes and spread her plush lips into their warmest smile.

'Why, yes.' She drew herself up, willing the full effect of her slim frame, her elegantly ovular face, her incandescent skin. There had been a time when she was known as the pretty daughter of a nouveau riche, but she had recently taken to

wearing the pastels and whites preferred by the demurest girls her age, mindful of their conjugal connotations – although today, given the state of the streets she was traversing, she had chosen a darker hue. She extended her gloved hand and said, 'I am Miss Hayes.'

'I work at Weingarten the furriers',' the girl went on shyly. 'I've seen you once or twice from the back room.'

'Oh, then I must thank you for your service,' Penelope replied graciously. She inclined her body forward in a gesture that might almost be called a bow, although the stiff Medici collar of her navy cloth coat with gold piping made it difficult to move her head in a truly humble manner. When she met the girl's eyes again, she quickly added, 'Would you like a turkey?'

Already the procession was moving along ahead of her. The marching band playing noels had crossed onto the next block, and she could hear the voice of Mr William Schoonmaker through the megaphone moving along just behind the band. He was wishing the crowds who thronged the sidewalks a joyous season, and reminding them in as subtle a manner as he was able who had paid for their holiday parade. For the parade had been his idea, and he had financed the band and the travelling nativity scene and the holiday fowl, and he had arranged for various society matrons and debutantes of his acquaintance to pass them out to the poor. They were the real attraction, Penelope couldn't stop herself from thinking,

as she turned to her loyal friend Isaac Phillips Buck and reached into the large burlap sack he was carrying.

Even through her dogskin gloves and a layer of newspaper wrapping, she could feel the cold squishiness of the bird. It was heavy and awkward in her hands, and she tried not to show any signs of revulsion as she moved forward with the promised Christmas turkey. The girl looked at the package in a blank way and her smile faded.

'Here,' Penelope said, trying not to rush her words. She suddenly, desperately needed the girl to take the turkey from her. 'For you, for your family. For Christmas. From the Schoonmakers . . . and from *me*.'

The moment lengthened in front of her, and then abruptly the girl's smile returned. Her whole mouth hung open with joy. 'Oh, Miss Hayes, thank you! From me . . . and . . . and . . . from my family!' Then she took the weighty bird from Penelope and turned back to her friends in the crowd. 'Look!' she carolled. 'This turkey was given to me especially by Miss Penelope Hayes!'

Her friends gasped at the prized bird and shot shy looks at the girl in the fitted coat. Already they felt they knew her from seeing her fantastical name so often in the society pages. She stood before them as the rightful heir to the place in the public's heart once held by her best friend, Elizabeth Holland, before Elizabeth's tragic drowning a few months before. Of

course, Elizabeth had not drowned, and was in fact very much alive – a fact Penelope knew quite well, since she had helped the 'virginal' Miss Holland disappear so that she might more easily be with that member of her family's staff she'd apparently been enamoured with. And so that, more importantly, Penelope could reclaim what was rightfully hers: the fiancé Elizabeth had left behind. Her ascension was so nearly complete that already society's most exalted matrons, as well as its newspaper chroniclers, were whispering how very much more Elizabeth-like she seemed now.

This was not something Penelope would have previously found flattering – goodness being rather overrated, in her private opinion – but she had begun to see that it had its advantages.

Penelope repaid the warm embrace of the girl's adulation by lingering a moment longer, her eyes beaming and her smile as broad as it had ever been. Then she turned to Buck, who was highly visible in his grey check suit and amber-coloured dress shirt and a coat of beaver fur that covered the length of his generous body.

'You've just got to get me out of here,' she whispered. 'I haven't seen Henry all day, and I'm cold, and if I have to touch another –'

Buck stopped her with a knowing look. 'I will take care of everything.'

His features were soft, muted by the fleshiness of his face, and his fair eyebrows were sculpted in a way that lent him the appearance of canniness. A few more ladies, in their wide hats and elaborately lapelled coats, passed by, followed by a marching band. Penelope looked back up the street in the direction of the elder Schoonmaker's voice and knew that his son, Henry, with his dark eyes and his troublemaker's lilt, must be crossing into new streets along with him. Her heart sank a little. Then she turned back to Buck, who had already formulated a plan.

Buck was over six feet tall and his body expanded outward imposingly, and he moved now, as he so often had before, to shield the girl who most benefited from his loyalty. He had not been born rich – though he claimed to be a relation of the famous Buck clan who these days mostly resided in grand old mouldering mansions in the Hudson Valley – but was invaluable when it came time to host a party, and as such was often given fine things for free. Penelope pulled the veil of her hat down over her face and followed him into the crowd. Once they had made their way safely through the throng, Buck dropped his cumbersome bag of turkeys and helped Penelope into a waiting brougham.

While Buck said a few words to her driver, she settled into the plush black velvet seat and exhaled. Inside everything one might lean against had the softness of down, and everything

one might touch was made of gold. Penelope felt a softening at her temples; the world was right again. She removed her gloves in one deft motion and then tossed them through the open carriage door. Buck glanced at the slushy puddle into which they fell, and then took a step up and into the seat beside Penelope. As the wheels began to crunch across the rough road, he leaned forward and pulled a polished wooden box from underneath the seat.

'Kidskin gloves?' he said. 'Or would you prefer silk?'

Penelope examined the slender white fingers of her hands as she rubbed them against each other. Most girls like her, whose fathers were industrialists or bank presidents or heads of their own insurance empires, changed their gloves three or four times a day as they moved from teas to dinner parties to intimate little musicales. But Penelope thought her hands were superior, and so preferred to change gloves ten or eleven times. She never wore the same pair twice, though her recently discovered virtue had inspired her to donate them occasionally. 'Kid. It isn't warm outside, and you never know who you'll meet on a drive.'

'Indeed,' Buck replied as he removed a hand-sewn pair for her. 'Especially when *I* am giving the coachman his instructions.'

'Thank you.' Penelope drew the gloves over her wrists and felt like herself again, which was for her always a good thing.

'They adored you today,' Buck went on contemplatively.

'If only it weren't all so unbearable.' Penelope let her exquisite head rest against the velvet. 'I mean really, how many poor people can New York possibly hold? And don't they ever get sick of turkey?' She brought her kid-covered fingertips up to her high, fine cheekbones. 'My face hurts from all the smiling.'

'It is dull, always keeping up the pretence of being good.' Buck paused. 'But you were never one to lose sight of a goal,' he went on delicately.

'No,' Penelope agreed. 'And I haven't.'

Just then, the carriage came to a stop, and Buck put his hand on the little gold crank to lower the window. Penelope leaned over him and saw that they had come around to the front of the parade and now stood in the intersection looking down at the head of the procession. There was William Schoonmaker, both tall and broad in his black cloth suit. Beside him was the second Mrs Schoonmaker, née Isabelle De Ford, who was still young, and who was currently a vision in furs and lace. They were framed in the canyon of tenement buildings, and they paused at the sight of the carriage in their path. In a moment Henry came up to their side.

Penelope's breath caught at the sight of him. There had been a time when she saw Henry Schoonmaker almost every day, when they had been intimate with each other and with

every secret corner of their families' mansions that permitted behaviour not suitable to the maiden daughters of high society. They had done the kinds of things girls like Elizabeth Holland had been famous for not doing – until one day Henry announced that he was engaged to Miss Holland. At a dinner party that Penelope had attended. It was enough to make one vomit, which was in fact what Penelope had done next.

Of course, her violent reaction to that despicable news had since been tempered with understanding. Buck had helped her with that. He had pointed out that old Schoonmaker was a businessman of no small ambition – mayoral ambition – and that he doubtless liked the idea of his son's bride being so pristine and well liked. Penelope felt fairly certain that if Elizabeth were capable of something, then she was too, and she'd set about making herself into just such a potential daughter-in-law.

She had rarely been near Henry since then, and the sight of him now was like a concentrated dose. He was a slim figure in black, and under the long shadow of his top hat she could see the handsome line of an aristocratic jaw. He still wore a mourning band on his left arm, which Penelope noticed even as she willed Henry to meet her eyes. She knew he would. And, in a few moments, he did. Penelope held his gaze with as much modesty as she could muster, smiled an oblique little smile, and then pulled the veil back down over her face.

'It was a lovely parade, Mr Schoonmaker!' she called out of the window, resting her hand on the half-raised glass.

As she settled back into the velvet carriage seat, she heard Buck tell the driver to move on. But she wasn't thinking about where she was going. She was thinking about Henry and how very soon he would be done mourning Elizabeth. He was standing back there now, she just knew, remembering what kind of girl she was under the virtuous veneer, and all that had passed between them. And, this time, it wouldn't be just stolen kisses in back hallways. There would be no secrecy and no humiliation. This time it would be for real.