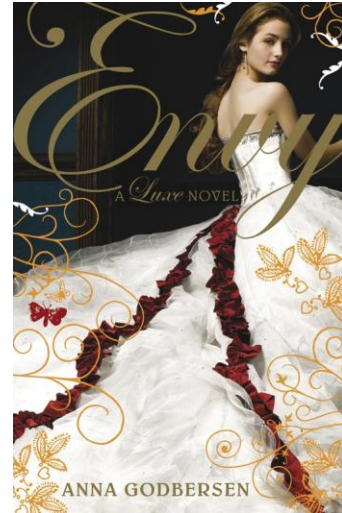


ENVY

EXTRACT 2



“Don’t you feel drunk enough already?” she admonished. Her smile never wavered, and she brought her upper lip back just enough to reveal the perfect whiteness of her teeth.

“I’ve had a lot,” he replied slowly, without particular venom, although the drink might possibly have been impairing his inflection. “But not enough to make me want to spend the evening with you, my dear.”

Penelope briefly shut the lids of her large eyes and stifled any feelings his comment might have aroused. Then she batted her mascara-darkened lashes and let her lake blue irises roll right and left. No one had heard, she determined with a small release of her shoulders, except perhaps the waiter, who wouldn’t have dreamed of looking her in the eye. When she spoke again, it was with effortless ease and a glass of champagne in her hand:

“When you put it that way, I suppose I should have one too.”

Thus fortified, the most envied couple in top-drawer Manhattan moved onward through the throng. The members of the Automobilist Club were making grand pronouncements about upcoming races, and the ladies who wanted to be near them were smiling patient smiles and assuming the poses of eager listeners.

“Ah, the Schoonmakers!”

Penelope twisted the length of her white neck so that the full blaze of her smile could be fully appreciated by her host. “Mr. Bouchard,” she purred, as he bent his long torso and placed his lips on her gray, full-length glove. The warmth in her voice was studied and convincing; it was a tone she reserved for men like Leland, who was heir to the Bouchard banking fortune and besides that universally liked. He was that rare high-born New Yorker who somehow or other had managed to make more friends than enemies, and was a particular friend of her brother, Grayson. As younger men they had lived in adjoining rooms at St. Paul’s. Penelope, ever watchful, noted Grayson’s presence by the window, where he was ensconced in conversation with her mother-in-law, the senior Mrs. Schoonmaker, whose dress of opalescent chiffon tiers did little to detract attention from her.

“I hope you’re both enjoying yourself,” Leland went on earnestly as he clasped Henry’s hand. His light blue eyes were open wide beneath his broad forehead, as though their enjoyment really was a crucial issue for him, and for all Penelope knew, it was. “Did you see the motorcar downstairs?”

“Could not have mishedut,” Henry answered enthusiastically, slurring the last two words.

Penelope elbowed him while maintaining her steady, bright gaze. “Such a beautiful object, Leland.”

“Thank you.” Leland’s eyes drifted and his chest rose, and for a moment he was

someplace else. “Speaking of beauties,” he went on, his attention returning to Penelope, and this time with an added touch of sympathy, “how is your dear friend Elizabeth? It was terrible what happened, and not seeing her out has made us all worry.”

Until that moment Penelope had maintained a strong, smiling posture, and had stayed uncowed by Henry’s misbehavior or any askance glances from whichever young ladies in the room flattered themselves by imagining that they were the rival of the former Miss Hayes. But now her mouth constricted and she heard herself swallow hard. Leland went on looking at her with that same concerned expression. Henry’s weight on her arm bobbed a moment and then grew heavier. She only hoped that her face did not betray the insecurity this inquiry brought on, for of course Elizabeth was her dear friend by reputation only. Penelope had barely seen her since her unexpected return from what was supposed to have been a long exile in a western state—for truly, what was there to say?

“She is very well.” Penelope began to regain her composure, and even as she spoke reminded herself that she really would have to make a show of seeing Elizabeth, one that the papers took note of, and soon. “But it is still early for her to be going out. After her trauma. You understand, of course.”

“Of course.” Leland bowed his head, appearing almost embarrassed for having asked after a girl who had gone unaccounted for for over two months, and who might indeed have suffered any number of grave injustices. But before he could further anyone’s discomfort, he succumbed to the calls of his fellow driving enthusiasts, and excused himself. “Please do enjoy,” he said as he slipped into the crowd.

Penelope did not look after her host as he left. She stared straight ahead and reminded herself what a lucky thing it was that he was not a gossip and that he wouldn’t be searching for signs that Mrs. Henry Schoonmaker’s marriage or friendships were not what they seemed. For a moment she reflected on how to avoid such a mistake again, and then she turned toward Henry.

His dark eyes were focused in the direction of the huge windows and the night scene they held, and they looked less glassy than before. There was something almost like clarity in his face when he turned toward his wife, and when he spoke, it was deliberately.

“Promise me,” he said, meeting her gaze, “that if someone brings up the Hollands again you’ll take me home.”