

— Chapter One —

FRIDAY, 12<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 1906

The actors below stepped back from their final curtain call, and Aubrey slid his palm from Rupert's thigh, where it had lain for half the last act.

Rupert, whose warm hand had rested absently over his, pressed his fingers and let him go, then leaned forward, looking past him at Henrietta, the only other person in the box.

“Enjoyable, beloved?”

“Ridiculous.” She grinned. “I liked it.”

*Two Naughty Boys* had been amusing in parts, but mostly so absurd as to be dull: without his lovers' company, Aubrey'd have left after the first act. But now that it was over, so was their time together, and he wished he could turn back the hours, like the pages of a book, to the moment the heavy asbestos curtain rose on the opening scene. Instead, as the electric lights brightened, he stood and offered Henrietta his arm.

“It's the energy,” she explained, taking his sleeve to rise from her chair. “The liveliness.”

“The pranks even you wouldn't have dared as a child,” Aubrey suggested.

Her eyes gleamed. “That, too.”

Aubrey picked up his top hat and ebony cane and followed Rupert and Henrietta out of the box, through the private retiring room, and into the corridor beyond.

A party of young fellows tumbled out of a box ahead of them and hurtled towards the stairs, voices loud, footsteps muffled by the thick, moss-green carpet.

“Good evening, Henrietta.”

Aubrey startled at the grim voice behind him, and Henrietta’s back stiffened.

“Hernedale. Fanshawe,” Lowdon added.

Aubrey tipped his hat with the silver knob of his cane, since there was no escaping it.

“Evening, Lowdon.”

“Edgar.” Henrietta turned with a chilly smile for her older brother. “We didn’t expect to see you here.”

Rupert turned last, reluctance in every move. “Evening.” He glanced up the corridor beyond Lowdon. “Might we hope to see Mrs Lowdon?”

“Sadly, no. She intended to accompany me but was indisposed.”

“How... unfortunate.”

Aubrey heard what Rupert didn’t say: that Lowdon should’ve stayed at home to keep her company. He disagreed. Lowdon’s absence would be compensation enough for missing any play.

Lowdon kept pace with them down the staircase, towards a roar of voices.

Halfway down, Rupert paused. “My dear. Do you think...”

Aubrey looked past them, into the huge crush-room heaving with patrons—chatting, discreetly flirting, edging apologetically towards the doors.

“Better go back till it clears a bit,” Henrietta decided.

Aubrey’s spirits lifted at the prospect of a few more minutes together: he’d missed Rupert and Henrietta dreadfully over the week they’d been away from London.

Rupert sighed. “Care to join us, Edgar?”

“Delighted, Hersedale.” Thus Lowdon, as might have been expected, poisoned their companionable interlude before it began.

A mahogany table dominated the far end of the retiring room, and upright chairs, upholstered in cerulean blue silk, stood along the walls. An attendant, carrying the remains of refreshments they’d shared earlier, slid out, leaving behind only a neatly folded copy of *The Times*.

Henrietta stood at the entrance to the box, staring into the theatre, while Rupert laid his top hat on the table, then settled behind it and unfolded the newspaper.

Aubrey closed the door to the corridor. “Something happening?” he asked Henrietta.

“Not a blessed thing.”

Lowdon, seating himself beside Rupert—as though Rupert hadn’t made it perfectly plain he wanted to be left alone—harrumphed and glared at her, as though ‘blessed’ counted as swearing.

Rupert’s lips tightened, but Henrietta ignored her brother. “Just restless,” she told Aubrey.

In solidarity, he set two chairs beside her. He sat and had barely removed his hat when there was a quiet tap at the door. Henrietta strode towards it.

“Attendant,” Rupert said, without looking up from the paper. “He’ll open it himself.”

Henrietta opened the door anyway.

It wasn’t an attendant.

A well-made fellow in his mid to late twenties—clad in a black dinner jacket rather than proper evening dress—removed his top hat and bestowed an unnecessarily charming smile on Henrietta. “Sincere apologies for the interruption,” he said, “but I thought I saw something fall, and indeed...” He opened his hand. A small, golden mass lay on his gloved palm.

“Oh!” Henrietta glanced at her wrist. “The catch must be faulty. Thank you very much.”

The stranger poured the fine chain bracelet into her hand without touching her. “Be a shame to lose part of a matched set.” He must’ve noted her necklace. “Fabergé?”

“Well spotted.” Henrietta brightened, and they launched into a conversation Aubrey couldn’t follow, because his lack of knowledge of the subject was exceeded only by his lack of interest in it.

Having delivered the bracelet, the stranger really should have left, and taken his improbable charm and light golden tan with him. Instead, he lounged in the doorway of their retiring room, frankly flirting with Henrietta, regardless of the fact that he’d been neither introduced nor properly invited to join them.

But Aubrey couldn’t regret it. Henrietta was happy. And he, sitting unobserved on the other side of the room, was quietly indulging a warm, giddy hum of attraction.

The fellow’s unbuttoned jacket revealed a black waistcoat drawn smooth and tight across a muscular chest and drew the eye down the lean lines of his body. He stood a respectable distance from Henrietta, but his smile, the humour in his tone, the confidential angle of his body, suggested a friendly intimacy which didn’t exist between them.

“Dash it, Henedale!” Lowdon’s voice ripped Aubrey’s attention from muscular shoulders. “Look to your wife!”

Henrietta froze, transformed in a heartbeat from languid Aphrodite to outraged Artemis, and the stranger lost his smile.

Damnation! Why shouldn’t Henrietta flirt, if she chose to? But Aubrey had no right to defend her with her husband there. Would never, in any case, have the right to challenge her brother’s humiliating reprimands.

Rupert raised an admonitory finger. “One moment, Edgar.” He skimmed his page to the end, then sighed and looked up. “There. You’re quite comfortable, I believe, Hettie?”

“Perfectly, thank you.” Henrietta glared at her brother, who glared back, his moustache bristling like an irate blond hedgehog.

“As I thought.” Rupert folded the newspaper with care and exquisite regret. “I’m sure I’d have noticed, had you required assistance.”

“Of course you would.” Henrietta glided across the room and laid a delicate, gloved hand on his sleeve. “My dear...” She glanced at the stranger.

“I beg your pardon.” Rupert met the stranger’s gaze. “Do come in. Henedale. Pleased to meet you.”

Rupert wasn’t averse to turning the social screws when annoyed. Besides, it was the perfect response. Turning the fellow away would have licensed Lowdon’s assumption of authority over Henrietta and condoned his insolence towards Rupert.

“Lucien Saxby.” The stranger stepped in, offering Rupert a dazzling smile. “Delighted to meet you.” Tucked beneath Saxby’s arm, half-hidden by the hat in his hand, was a riding cane.

The fellow wasn’t dressed for riding. Why the devil must he carry a—

“By my word, Henedale!” Lowdon rose from his chair.

“Lady Henedale, may I present Lucien Saxby,” Rupert said, unperturbed. “Mr Saxby: Mr Lowdon, my wife’s brother. Rising in your honour, I believe.”

Flushing, Lowdon swelled to his full, majestic height. “I *beg* your pardon!”

Lowdon absolutely deserved the mockery. But it put Saxby in a damned awkward position, and while the fellow really ought to have kept to the strict bounds of propriety...

Saxby’s smile faltered, but he gamely nodded a greeting. “Pleased to—”

“I *find*—” Lowdon jammed his top hat onto his sleek, pomaded head. “I must take my leave.”

“Goodness!” Henrietta murmured. “So soon?”

Lowdon fixed her with an icy blue stare. “I regret, madam. Something in the air here... disagrees with me.”

“I expect you’ll feel much better outside,” Rupert agreed.

Lowdon strode towards the doorway.

“Please convey my regards to Mrs Lowdon,” Rupert added, “and wishes for her swift recovery.”

Lowdon cast him a glare of withering scorn, and stamped ineffectually into the corridor, his tread muffled by the carpet.

Saxby stared after him. “Perhaps I’d best—” He settled his hat on his head.

“Aubrey Fanshawe!” Desperate to retrieve the situation, Aubrey leapt to his feet. His chair teetered. He snatched at it and dropped his hat and cane.

When he turned back from putting everything to rights, Saxby was watching him.

“Er.” Aubrey clutched his cane in front of himself. “Delighted to meet you.”

Interest kindled in Saxby’s eyes and a slow smile dawned. “And I...” The riding cane drifted upward and nudged the brim of his hat. “...to meet...” He glanced down and back up Aubrey’s body. “...you.” He held his gaze, as warm and intimate as though they were the only two people in the room, and Aubrey the only focus he could ever want.

Aubrey’s throat closed. His face burned. A rapid throb in his neck warned him his pulse was hammering.

“Care to join us, Mr Saxby?” Rupert asked.

Aubrey wrenched his attention from Saxby’s smile.

“Very kind of you—” Saxby faced Rupert “—but I regret, I’m not at liberty to accept, this evening.”

Rupert’s gaze strayed to the newspaper. “Another time, perhaps.”

“I look forward to it. Good evening, Lady Hervedale. Lord Hervedale.” An enchanting smile for Aubrey. “Mr Fanshawe.”

Aubrey clutched the smooth, narrow length of his cane and watched Saxby stroll out.

“For heaven’s sake, Aubrey,” Henrietta murmured. “Go after him.”

After all, Rupert and Henrietta would leave soon, anyway.

Rupert’s attention refocussed. “Fellow said he was busy this evening.”

Aubrey stared between them, aware that his judgement was currently... somewhat compromised.

“He might change his mind,” Henrietta urged.

Aubrey looked at Rupert, who shrugged. “Worst he can do is say is no.”

“*Worst* he can do—” Damnation! Aubrey lowered his voice. “—is *blackmail* me! Or have me arrested for importuning, if I’ve misread him.”

“Aubrey,” Rupert said, “you definitely haven’t misread him.”

Henrietta shook her head. “Couldn’t have been clearer.”

Restless, Aubrey strode across the room and looked out. Saxby’s shapely, inappropriately clad form was disappearing down the stairs.

“Damnation!” He cast a desperate glance back at Rupert and Henrietta.

Rupert sighed. “Just go if you’re going.”

“Don’t forget dinner tomorrow!” Henrietta blew him a kiss.

He raised his cane in acknowledgement, then raced along the corridor and down the stairs, searching the crowd below for a black dinner jacket.

THE GAIETY’S VAST circular crush-room—panelled in hardwood and supported by bronze-capped marble columns—still heaved with theatre-patrons. Standing two steps up for a better

view, Aubrey stared towards the main doors, and to either side of them. Then hopelessly began a more systematic scan of the crowd.

“That was quick.”

The voice was quiet, but Aubrey almost swallowed his tongue. Saxby stood on the step beside him, hat tipped back at a jaunty angle, riding cane tucked under his arm. He was almost a full head shorter than Aubrey.

“I assume you have a suitable private place?” Saxby murmured.

A private place? *Private?*

“You—” Aubrey coughed and tried again. “You said you had another engagement tonight?”

“Naturally.” Saxby gazed into the crowd with placid interest, as though casually conversing with an acquaintance. “I was unable to accept Lord Henedale’s kind invitation, since I’d already accepted yours.”

Aubrey stared at him.

“Shall we?” Saxby tilted his head towards the main doors.

Should he? Oh, Lord.

He’d assumed the offer in Saxby’s eyes was for desire briskly sated in a quiet alley—a place men of his class wouldn’t stumble across them, unless they had business of their own to hide.

A suitable private place...

Now that Saxby’d asked, it seemed churlish to suggest anything less. Rooms could be hired for the purpose, but Aubrey wasn’t familiar with Uranian spaces: they’d always seemed to him more vulnerable to discovery by police than a random dark alley. And hotel staff were suspicious of pairs of men since the Wilde trials.



“Don’t feel obliged, if you’ve changed your mind.” The back of Saxby’s gloved hand brushed his. “It’s quite all right.”

Aubrey looked down into gentle hazel eyes. “Oh. No, it’s—” He should bow out. Instead, he was ashamed he’d ever distrusted the man with those eyes. Besides, while he *could* walk away, it’d be terribly rude, and—

Damn it all, he wanted Saxby more now than ever.

“It’s this way.”

Saxby searched his eyes. “You’re sure?”

Aubrey produced a confident smile. “Of course.”

He was sure this was the stupidest, most risky thing he’d ever done.

BY THE TIME they passed the doorman guarding the entrance to Albany’s Ropewalk, Aubrey was distinctly uncomfortable in the trouser area. Saxby had said not a single untoward word, and his deportment was everything that was proper, and yet the tone of his voice, the curve of his lips, the shadow of his eyelashes upon his cheek, all ached with dark promise.

The Albany rule that nobody speak in the walkway and hallways didn’t help. They paced the covered Ropewalk, past side paths to others’ buildings, in perfect, unplanned synchrony, bound by a conspiracy of enforced silence and mutual purpose.

Bringing men home was a risk Aubrey never took, and yet here he damned well was. It was too late to rescind the invitation, and a traitorous part of him delighted in that. This moment didn’t belong to the mind, but to the body, and to core-deep, unfettered impulse.

Anxiety pounced as he unlocked his front door. He turned on the electric light in his entrance hall and stood back to let Saxby in, glancing down the stairs to the basement, across to his neighbour’s door opposite, then up towards the upper chambers; reminding himself that

fellows did bring friends home from time to time, especially if it grew late and the friend lived outside the City. Locking the door firmly behind them brought a measure of calm.

“Please, avail yourself.” He indicated the coat-stand as he put his cane in the base, then shrugged off his overcoat.

“You’re Lord Letchworth’s son?” Saxby removed his hat to reveal light brown hair, pomaded and smoothed to perfection, hairline describing a tempting curve behind his ear and across the back of his neck.

Averting his eyes, Aubrey dropped his gloves on the shelf under the hall mirror and turned to the drawing room. “Younger son.”

At the sideboard, he picked up a decanter. “Brandy, Mr Saxby?”

“Thank you.” Saxby stepped into the drawing room, looking around. “Though you might drop the ‘mister’. Under the circumstances.”

“As... might you.”

“Your bedroom?” Saxby indicated the double doors opposite the fireplace.

“Indeed. We might—” His face warmed, and he turned back to the decanter “—adjourn there. Later.”

Silence.

Had he been too forward? He turned. And flinched. Saxby was close beside him.

“Apologies. Did I startle you?”

“Perhaps a little.” Heart hammering, he pressed a glass into Saxby’s muscular bare hand, then picked up his own.

“One learns to be discreet, in my line of work,” Saxby said.

“Of... work?”

Saxby raised an amused eyebrow. “Some of us must work for a living.”

Aubrey’s neck heated. He wasn’t a *complete* fool. “What *is* your line of work?”

Saxby sipped his brandy, holding Aubrey's gaze. Well-shaped lips tilted in a half-smile.

"I'm a journalist."

Aubrey froze.

"With the Daily Mail." Saxby cradled his glass in one hand.

A cool, crawling sensation under Aubrey's skin suggested blood was draining from his face. It wasn't clear quite where it was going, though, since his trousers now fitted perfectly.

"Politics?" Hoping he sounded nonchalant, he fumbled his glass onto the sideboard before it fell from numb fingers. "Sports?"

Saxby turned the glass in his hand, watching the amber liquid sway. "Society."

It all became plain. The charm. The approachability. The deceptive, gentle gaze which had seduced him into inviting the fellow home, and explicitly into his bed.

He clung to the sideboard as the room swayed and his world crumbled. "Do you mean to—to expose me?"

"Certainly." The gossip journalist looked up with a mischievous smile. "But not in the papers, and only if you wish it."

Dear God. Aubrey closed his eyes.

"Are you well?" Saxby's glass clicked down on the sideboard.

"Perfectly." His lips were numb.

"Do sit down."

The weight of Saxby's hand on his sleeve shot a shiver of desire through his abdomen: suggestible flesh defeating judgement.

"I shall do quite well here." Forcing his eyes open, Aubrey groped for his glass and drained it.

“I expect you needed that, but do sit, now. You’re dreadfully pale.” Saxby slid an arm around his back, and despite himself, Aubrey leaned into him. Really, it was very pleasant to be looked after, even by a Judas.

Saxby steered him to the sofa then disappeared behind him while Aubrey sat with his feet on the hearthrug and stared into the fire.

“There you go.” The damned fellow settled beside Aubrey like an old friend and folded his nerveless fingers around a brandy glass.

Aubrey’s attention wavered from the glass to Saxby.

“Journalists aren’t demons, you know. Not all of us, at any rate. And I’ll personally vouch for the quality of the brandy.”

This was a farce. An inappropriately dressed gossip journalist who’d entrapped him was recommending him his own brandy, trying to set him at his ease in his own home. But he couldn’t undo what was already done. So he closed his eyes, sipped his excellent brandy, and sank back into the sofa.

Warm fingers nudged his chin. His eyelids shot open. Saxby was tugging on his bow tie.

“What are you *doing*?”

“Loosening your collar.” Deft fingers plucked the stud from the front of his collar.

Saxby rubbed his knee as though it were an obedient dog, then walked away again. “Stud’s on the tray for now, all right? Beside the decanters. It’d just roll off the table.” He returned with his own glass of brandy, sat down, and bestowed a charming smile upon Aubrey.

“You’ll soon feel quite the thing.”

Aubrey stared back with a creeping awareness that he must look utterly debauched: lounging on the sofa, brandy glass in hand, bow tie hanging loose, and collar spread wide to bare his throat. Worse yet, that awareness, combined with Saxby’s smile, provoked a dismaying degree of interest within his own mind.

“Do relax.” Saxby rubbed Aubrey’s knee again. “I don’t write about Uranians at all. Only consider: quite aside from any natural scruples, I’d find myself rather short of willing companionship, don’t you think?”

“I—imagine so.”

“Quite. So you needn’t worry.”

He needn’t—! Aubrey stared at him. As though a spell in prison were nothing to worry about! Aside from the disgrace to himself and his family, hard labour might as well be a death sentence.

Saxby’s smile held firm.

Aubrey closed his eyes and let his head sag back. He might as well do as he pleased. The devil take good manners and poise alike: nothing could be retrieved from this situation.

Silence filled the room, but for the regular tick of the mahogany clock on the mantelpiece, and the sigh of fabric against fabric as Saxby drank, or crossed his legs, or whatever the devil he was doing. It was almost peaceful, the turmoil inside balanced by the undemanding quiet.

Fingers whispered across his temple. “Don’t worry, beautiful,” Saxby murmured, “I won’t betray you.”

And then he couldn’t open his eyes, because they’d let the tears out, and that was a humiliation too far. Instead, he swallowed hard: swallowed the tears and unmanly fear and locked them deep in his aching chest.

“It’s the loneliness, isn’t it?” Fingertips stroked his hair.

But he wasn’t lonely: he had Rupert and Henrietta, and he was sure to meet the right woman eventually.

“I feel it, too.” Saxby’s fingers brushed the tip of his ear. “At times I become—so very tired of being alone.”

An aching lump swelled in Aubrey's throat. His eyes and the bridge of his nose burned. Because there were times—there *were*—when he felt terribly, terribly alone.

“Hush. It's all right.” Saxby took the empty glass from Aubrey's hand and guided his head onto his jacket shoulder. “We're both here.” Warm breath in his hair. “For now, at least, we needn't be lonely.”

Aubrey left his head there, leaking slow tears into woollen cloth. Because it *was* enough, for now. Or at least, it was better than nothing, which was very nearly the same thing. And it was pathetic—despicable—that it was enough; that he wanted a man who might deliver him to the gossips and the law.

“I'm sorry I teased. Truly. Didn't mean to frighten you.”

Aubrey was supposed to say he wasn't frightened: it was what men did. But the words wouldn't come.

Saxby sighed. “I need to move, beautiful.” He lifted Aubrey's head and shoulders and leaned him back on the sofa. “Just a sec.”

Aubrey cracked damp eyelids as Saxby leaned forward and took off his boots, and then warm hands eased the pumps from his own feet.

Sitting back in the corner of the sofa, Saxby stretched out his legs and drew Aubrey closer, between his thighs. “That's better.” He urged Aubrey's head onto his chest and folded his arms around him. “Much more comfortable.”

Aubrey relaxed, breathing in thyme and wool and leather. His belly rested alongside a warm ridge—evidence of Saxby's arousal, of their likeness—but Saxby only held him. His own cock twitched and swelled, but he ignored it, drifting, instead, in a tranquil haze.

Sometime in the endless now, lips brushed Aubrey's temple, and he lifted his face to Saxby and parted his lips as naturally as a daisy opening to the sun. Saxby brought his warmth nearer, offering the strength of his arms and the heat of his dancing tongue. Gentle

fingers mapped the curves of his face and naked throat, sparking whole-body shudders. A muscular arm cradled him closer. A firm hand stroked downward and unbuttoned his trousers to release his throbbing cock.

And then... Saxby pressed his whole hand, palm to fingertip, along the length of Aubrey's cock, and held it, warm and safe, against his belly. And kissed him. And kissed him.

Until Aubrey rocked into his warmth, desperate for more.

Saxby's hand wrapped around him. Aubrey thrust into his strong, sure hold, fumbling over Saxby's trouser buttons, reaching into his drawers. His fingers discovered a broad cock, gnarled with need and weeping with want, and Saxby moaned into his open mouth.

He slid down, forgoing the delights of Saxby's mouth and hand for the grounding of his solid cock. Closing his lips over the crown, he nursed slow, salt tears from him, swallowing his loss, one hand coaxing more from Saxby's body, the other appeasing his own.

Restless hands cupped Aubrey's face, raked his hair, but never pressed him. A thumb stroked the junction of his mouth with Saxby's cock, and he moaned, working faster.

"Fanshawe!" Saxby gasped. "I'm going to—!"

Aubrey locked his lips around Saxby's crown, sucking and swallowing, tugging both their cocks with awkward, aching arms. Saxby's hips jerked forward and strong hands clamped Aubrey's shoulders, setting him awhirl in a haze of bliss. He moaned, and Saxby gasped and groaned, and the bitter salt of his release flooded Aubrey's mouth. Sobbing, half-drowning, but still latched on to Saxby's warm, pulsing cock, Aubrey thrust his way to giddy, muscle-knotting satisfaction in his own familiar hand.

When he came back to himself, he'd collapsed over Saxby, cheek against his damp, softening cock, and he was weeping. Again. Or perhaps, still.

"Fanshawe," Saxby whispered, stroking Aubrey's hair.

He sighed and squeezed Saxby's thigh, then wiped his sticky hands and face on his shirt-tail.

Saxby urged him upward and settled his head on his shoulder. Aubrey lay, quiet and still, staring into the burning heart of the fire.

"Let me know when you're ready to retire," Saxby murmured at last. "With or without me."

He pressed his face into Saxby's shoulder, inhaling warmed wool and the sharp ozone of their mutual release. "I assume—you need to go."

"If you want me to." Saxby cradled the back of Aubrey's head. "Or I'll stay if you want me to."

Aubrey shut his eyes. One wasn't supposed to want. Want was childish, demanding. Like tears.

Broad fingers moved lower, massaging his neck where it met his shoulder.

Aubrey tilted his head, unfolding beneath the cossetting. Muscles resigned their tension each by each, until he sagged over Saxby, draped along the solid contours of his body like a cloak of heavy silk, like a cape of airy feathers.

"Stay," he whispered.