

# THE DOUBLE VICE

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THE 1ST HIDDEN GOTHAM NOVEL

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**BOOKS  
LIKE US**

*He is not one of us.*

Dash Parker tried to shut out all the noise around him and pinpoint exactly what it was the man had said—on his birthday, of all days—to cause this hurried thought. Not an easy feat given both the house band and the tiny dance floor of his club, Pinstripes, were hitting on all sixes.

Still facing the dancing men, Dash tilted his head towards the outsider. “I’m sorry?”

The outsider stood just at the edge of his peripheral vision. A darkened shoulder. A faintly outlined jaw. And, of course, the voice.

“A pansy is here. And you will take me to *him*.”

Ah, it was the “him.”

Every female impersonator Dash knew referred to themselves and others as “she” and “her,” and required everyone else to do likewise. They were “Duchess,” “Doll,” and “Flossie,” not “James,” “Robert,” or “Allen.”

Then there was the belligerent tone, the brusque manner, the clipped accent, the demands—especially the demands. Wanting Dash to take him to a “pansy,” then

bristling when Dash had replied he was in the wrong place and ought to try Mother Childs near 59th Street where, at this hour, they'd be showing off their latest drag.

And now, the "him" drenched in contempt.

This was a man who disapproved of the recent changes in the world. A bluenose. Dash pitied those who couldn't keep up, though he had to admit the world was flying through this decade. Just as fast as the drummer's sticks across his snare and the dancers' feet across the floor. Why, here it was, the middle of August 1926, and already so much was different. Women were voting. Telephones were ringing. Radio waves and motor cars crisscrossed the country. The farms shrank, the cities grew. Jazz was quickly becoming America's music, and secret clubs popped up to celebrate the nature of Dash and many others.

And yet, so much had not changed. Hate, for one. Fear, for another.

This outsider represented both.

*How did he get in here?*

It was Sunday, August 15, approaching midnight, and they were standing in a room hidden behind a men's tailor shop called Hartford & Sons on West Fourth Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. A secret knock was needed to enter the shop itself. Then once inside, one had to find the secret door in the back wall of the curtained-off changing area. An elaborate system. Pinstripes, like many clubs of its kind, was designed to be the very height of discretion. It had to be to avoid the raids. Now how did this outsider figure it all out?

More importantly, *who* was this outsider? A cop? A federal agent? A newshawk for a low-rent tabloid writing an expose of the "invert underworld"?

Unnerved, Dash turned to face the man. "My good sir,

you are free to walk around to see if *she* is here. Many fine gentlemen such as yourself do the same when they come to a club.”

A scowl rippled across the outsider’s face as he straightened the lapels of his blue-gray suit. He did not want to venture any farther into this narrow, darkened room.

*He is not one of us.*

Dash brushed his misbehaving brown hair behind his ears while his hazel eyes measured this threat. They mirrored each other in some ways, he and the outsider. Their slim figures totaled up to the same height, roughly six feet, and they were about the same age; newly twenty-six on Dash’s part and the other appearing to be just past there. But whereas Dash’s features were warm and inviting, this outsider was all hard angles and warning signs. Clenched jaw and razor-blade cheekbones. Blazing blue eyes unwavering in their stare. Blond brow creased in anger.

Such incongruity, what with the joyous dancing on one side of them and the lively bar on the other.

“Very well,” Dash said to the lack of response, speaking in what his younger sister Sarah used to call his “Father Voice,” which was amusingly (at least to her) formal and old-fashioned. It often came out when a situation was going wrong . . . or about to. “May I ask who you are?”

“That is none of your concern.”

“Why are you here?”

“Also, not your concern.”

“Listen, my good man, if you’re here to start trouble, then I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“You don’t have the authority.”

“Oh, but I do,” Dash said. “I’m the owner, and I’d very much like it if you left the premises.”

The moment the words were out of Dash's mouth, he realized his mistake.

*You dope. He's not going to leave now until you tell him everything.*

The outsider gave him a curious look. "You own this place? I should've realized sooner. You don't look like the other men here."

Dash gestured to his own black tuxedo and white silk shirt. "Because of this?"

"Yes. You have money." A curt raise of his chin. "These men do not."

The outsider wasn't wrong. Most of the patrons here tonight couldn't afford the finery Dash wore, not having been born into the privileged upper class like he was. Instead, they gathered what mismatched glad rags they could find to celebrate his birthday. In the case of the bell bottom standing next to them, he still wore his navy whites, albeit freshly laundered. Dash's former uptown friends would've taken offense, but Dash was charmed by their efforts.

And now, now he must protect them.

"Be that as it may, my loyalty is to my patrons, something I should think a gentleman such as yourself would appreciate. And it is *you*, good sir, who clearly doesn't belong." Dash grabbed the man's elbow. "Off you go."

In response, the outsider quickly grasped Dash's hand, the grip hot steel. "I am not leaving until I find this . . . this *thing*."

The clipped accent became clearer and harsher, the consonants landing like bombs.

*German.*

Dash stifled a grimace. He didn't dare show the pain he

felt in his crushed hand. "I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

The outsider's eyes blazed blue like hot flames. His lips twisted into a cold smile. "You do not want to make an enemy of me."

Dash's jaw tightened, his pulse pounding. "You are outnumbered in here."

"I will find this pansy."

"No, you won't."

"Why is that?"

"Because there isn't one. Look around you!"

The outsider kept his eyes on Dash's face for a few more seconds before relaxing his stare as well as his grip on Dash's hand. The release in pressure sent a dizzying rush to Dash's head. He took a few deep breaths, hoping he wouldn't faint. He also hoped that what he said was true. He watched as the outsider took in the sights surrounding them.

At one end of the club was the band, a trio of drums, bass, and cornet played by two black men and one white. Scandalous and highly illegal. In the center was the busy dance floor, filled to the brim like a martini, men and their male partners threatening to slosh over the sides. Those men who weren't dancing with one another leaned against the surrounding blue-painted walls or sat at wobbly wooden tables, smoking, drinking, laughing.

On the other end of the club was the bar, jammed so full you couldn't even see the bartender. Dash watched as the outsider's eyes took in the hunched shoulders, bent heads, and shirt backs with damp circles just above the trousers. No matter where the outsider looked, it was a sea of suit jackets, waistcoats, and suspenders. Not a dress in sight.

The two eventually faced each other again.

"There," Dash said, his dry throat causing him to clear it. "She appears not to be here."

The bell bottom standing next to them put his arm around a young man on a barstool, who was dressed in a sharp green suit. Loudly bragged tales of sexual conquests followed, as his dimpled cheeks spread into a grin. His young quarry looked up at him with lips parted in breathless anticipation. Their colognes, citrus and sawdust, intertwined with one another like their bodies would soon be.

The outsider flashed them a look of disgust, then said, "*He is here.*"

"What makes you certain?"

"I followed a companion of his."

Cold sweat licked Dash's palms. Only law enforcement and private detectives followed people, didn't they? "Tail-ing," the pulps called it. Now who was this female impersonator? And why the urgency over her? If the cops or the Feds wanted to raid Dash's club, this outsider had all the evidence they needed to shut Pinstripes down: men drinking liquor, men dancing with men. Who would care about just one girl gallivanting around the Village in her latest drag?

Unless . . . unless she was rich, and her wealthy family was trying to stop a scandal.

*Just like mine did.*

Dash cleared his dry throat again. "Perhaps she gave you the slip. This city at night can trick many a man's eye. I'd look elsewhere, if I were you."

The outsider sighed, as if Dash were a misbehaving child. "You are being difficult."

Dash projected a cockiness he didn't feel. "'Stubborn' is the word most men use to describe me."

“Give me your name.”

Dash was about to reply *none of your concern* when his name was called by a familiar voice to his left.

The man arched his brow. “Dash?”

*Hell.*

First, he said he was the club’s owner, now someone else said his name. The only information left to volunteer was his home address!

He forced a smile. “Short for Dashiell. Excuse me.”

He turned and pushed his way to an open space at the crowded bar. Once he laid his hands on the polished wood surface, he called out, “Evening, Joe!”

His bartender, business partner, and roommate Joe O’Shaughnessy stood behind the wooden bar, grinning one of his mischievous smiles. “Happy birthday, me lad!”

Joe placed his hands on hips tightly clad in brown trousers. Broad, wide shoulders strained against the matching suspenders, and the wrinkled white shirt worn with no tie (no matter how much Dash begged him) featured rolled-up shirtsleeves exposing thick forearms covered in fiery hair.

He bent forward at the waist. “Or is it me lass?” he added with a wink.

Dash wanted to reply to Joe’s usual flirtation in his usual way, *you’ve seen my bed from time to time, you tell me*. Instead, he lit a cigarette and flicked a wary look to the outsider behind him.

“We have a problem.”

“Ya tellin’ me.” Joe reached down underneath the bar and brought up a bottle of clear liquid. He poured the elixir into a snifter glass and passed it to Dash. “Taste this.”

“Joe, I—”

“Taste it, lassie.”

Dash acquiesced. He didn't want to alert his patrons about a wolf in their midst—not yet, at least. Better to avoid a brawl and go along with Joe's banter. Which was disarmingly easy. Not only was Joe forceful, he was right irresistible. A big six of a man with eyes the most vivid green, made even more luminous by the flaming red of his hair and the paleness of his freckled skin. A woman on the street once described those eyes as emeralds on the neck of the Queen. Joe replied they were the only things royal about him. Everything else was purely second class.

*Well*, thought Dash, *not quite everything*.

He picked up the snifter. "Gin?"

Joe nodded.

Dash flipped the liquid back. It burned his throat like coal smoke.

"Dammit, Joe." He dropped the snifter onto the bar and brought up the cigarette to wash the taste out of his mouth. "The past two weeks, it's gotten worse and worse."

Joe nodded. "I know, I know. It's just that by the time the truck gets here—"

"—the good bottles are all taken."

"I've been mixing 'em with fruit juices and seltzer like usual. Only now I'm startin' to hear complaints."

Dash exhaled a thick cloud of blue-gray smoke. Not all of the changes in this decade had been good. Ever since the ridiculous Volstead Act, beer and wine had been replaced with "cocktails," concoctions to hide the vile taste of the bootlegged alcohol. Glasses were now loaded with lemon juice, honey, sugar, and mint leaves. Like drinking candy. Appropriate since the federal government and its nannies continued to treat its citizens like children. But if the childish disguises weren't working anymore, then how could they compete with the thousands of other speaks in town?

Joe put away the snifter and said, "All right, lassie. What about this problem?"

"Dash, is it?" the Problem said. "We have not finished our conversation."

Dash placed his cigarette on the lip of an ashtray, murmuring to Joe, "A bluenose snuck in."

Joe was confused. "What was that?" he said at the same time the outsider called out Dash's name.

*Hell*, Dash thought for the second time tonight and turned around.

The outsider had stepped closer to him. At that moment, the band ended their song with a squealing high note and a mighty cymbal crash. The crowd of men exploded into cheers and whistles, drowning out the outsider's words.

"I'm sorry?" Dash said once again, cupping his hand behind his ear while he thought to himself, *how do we get him out of here without causing a fight?*

The outsider's mouth moved, but still Dash heard no words over the din. A few of the men surrounding the dance floor started to mill about. In between the patterns of glad rags, Dash thought he saw the flash and sparkle of a blue and gold dress. Was he imagining it? He narrowed his eyes. There. At the back-right table nearest the band. A blue and gold dress. Now where did she come from? She was probably in the water closet when Dash and the outsider scanned the room the first time. Lucky for her. She sat with two darkened figures in tuxedos, the only other tuxes in the place besides Dash's.

The outsider's eyes sparked. He started to turn to see what was behind him.

Dash touched the man's shoulder to stop him. "I can't hear you!" he shouted.

The man's frowning lips moved in a frustrating pantomime.

The cheering and whistling eventually stopped and the band began a slow waltz. The men on the dance floor, breathing hard, wiped their faces with their handkerchiefs and grabbed their partners again to sway to the soft music. Heads rested on shoulders and hands pressed against backs, eyes half-closed in bliss. This gentle moment was considered "degeneracy" by those nanny lawmakers, and Dash marveled, not for the first time, at the cruelty of the language used to describe the tenderness on display.

"I said," the outsider continued, "I will pay you handsomely if you can find this . . . person. If that's what it'll take for a man like you."

Before Dash could reply, another voice cut through the noise. "Pardon me, boys, a lady is coming through!"

Like a miniature Moses, Finn Francis—Dash's other roommate and partner as well as the club's only waiter—parted the sea of men to get to the bar. He inadvertently separated the bell bottom from his green-suited prize, and their dimpled smiles were replaced with momentary frowns. They rejoined each other's limbs immediately after Finn passed.

Once in front of Joe, Finn said, "I need three gin martinis, extra dirty, no olives, and one beer from the secret stash. And I cannot emphasize the no olives part enough, Mr. O'Shaughnessy. I got a Your Highness who is just *insufferable*, and if this Queen Mary sees any trace of olives, she will raise all-holy hell."

He turned his mascara-lined blue eyes to Dash.

"I swear to Athena, she thinks this place is the Ritz-Carlton and the service should be the same. No offense, dearie."

Caught off guard, Dash replied, “None taken.”

“But this *is* a bar in the Village, and you get what you get. Why people act like they’re the Astors when their bank accounts look like the O’Shaughnessys—”

“Finney,” growled Joe.

“—I’ll never know.” He caught Dash’s expression. “What’s that look for?”

Dash stared into his friend’s wide blue eyes which sparkled with intelligence, the painted lashes magnetic in their effect. For the life of him, Dash couldn’t get the words out fast enough to warn this “wisp of a lad” with short black hair, a smooth oval face, an impish upturned nose, and a pointed dimpled chin that an outsider had broken into Pinstripes.

The outsider quickly set his sights on the small man. “You said ‘she.’ A queen, I believe?”

Dash tried to catch Finn’s attention with a quick and forceful shake of his head. Alas, the little man didn’t see it, or more likely, ignored it.

“I did,” Finn replied, turning towards the outsider, “and not that I’m a flat tire, but *she* can sometimes be *too* much. And dearies, I am quite at home with being too much.”

He gestured to his own outfit, a crisp white vest with no shirt underneath, showing off his sinewy arms and narrow, hairless chest. Despite the fact he wore no proper shirt, he still placed a matching white bow tie around his neck. A sparkling comb in bright red flashed from the corner of his dark-haired head. The cherry on top of a soufflé of a man.

The outsider was persistent. “And one of the men at this table, he ordered a beer?”

“That’s what I said. Little kraut.” Finn caught himself. “I don’t mean to offend. A German boy. Nice enough. A bit shy.”

“Where is this table?”

“Why, back there next to the—”

“FINN!”

All three men—his waiter, his bartender, and the outsider—were surprised at the sudden rise in Dash’s voice. Even the bell bottom and his green-suited companion paused their conversation.

Dash forced a polite smile and spoke softer. “I believe this man was just leaving. He was looking for someone, but she is not here.”

He glanced meaningfully at Joe and mouthed the word “bluenose.”

Joe finally got the hint. “Aye,” he said, aiming his green emeralds at the outsider’s blazing blues. “She’s probably elsewhere. Best be on yer way.”

The outsider replied, “I can see the men here lack the proper breeding.”

“What was that, bub?” the bell bottom said, tearing his gaze away from the boy in the green suit, his hackles rising.

The man ignored the sailor. “And the proper respect of those who have good breeding.”

The accent got thicker, the consonants harsher. Bigger bombs landed.

He looked at Finn. “Take me to the table. Now.”

Finn’s eyes flashed. He tried to redirect in his own way. “Why choose a Queen Mary when you can have almost every man in this room? A tall, strapping thing like yourself, you could have your pick of the litter.”

Finn quickly saw his error.

Dash did as well.

The outsider stepped towards the small man, his body tight with promised violence. “What did you say to me?”

“I-I just thought—”

“Do you honestly think I want to engage in this, this *filth*?”

Dash grabbed the man’s shoulder to pull him away from Finn. “Sir, I will *not* ask you again—”

The outsider gave no warning. He quickly whirled around to Dash with his right hand closed into a fist. By the time Dash registered the motion, it was too late.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chris Holcombe is an author of LGBTQ+ historical crime fiction. *The Double Vice* is the first novel in his *Hidden Gotham* series, which showcases New York's lively but criminally under-represented queer world of the 1920s. He is also an award-winning songwriter, winning "Best Folk Song" at the 2009 Hollywood Music in Media Awards, as well as an accomplished brand strategist in marketing and advertising. He lives with his husband in New York, where he is hard at work on the next *Hidden Gotham* novel *The Blind Tiger*.

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