

Chapter One

December, Northeast England

I concluded, towards midnight in the Powerhouse, it isn't breaking up that kills you. It's the aftermath. This revelation, coming hard on the heels of six or seven shots of JD, seemed momentous. I wanted to communicate it to someone. But that's the problem with the Powerhouse—and the Barking Dog and the rest of the handful of gay dives struggling to hold on through the regeneration of Newcastle upon Tyne's west end—you don't communicate, at least not verbally. A track whose sole lyrics were *riverside, motherfucker* repeated at intervals across its trippy, bone-shaking bass had been circling round the club for the past ten minutes. If I wanted to talk, I'd have to get up close and personal. Right up against someone's ear.

Maybe I could try it with him. The stereotype there at the bar. While I was at it, I could tell him the rules—because there *are* rules down here, even for the heaving sea of flesh and muscle fighting it out on the dance floor, assuming their positions and their partners for the night. You don't come here alone four weekend nights in a row, sit there looking the way he did and not expect to be picked up. Not that he seemed offended by the regular attempts. Whatever his method for repelling boarders, it was quiet. Good-natured, even: most of the rejects had come away smiling.

All right. My turn. If he was the archetype of lonely dignity—dark, impassive, bloody beautiful in the industrial

style, all lean muscle under his tight black vest, leather jacket slung across the bar beside him—I was my own kind of caricature, perhaps a match for his. Friends, mirrors and an undamaged ego had once told me I was lovely too. Postgrad-student, promising-young-doctor lovely. Wheat-sheaf fair to his dark. I always got my man. The song said, *riverside, motherfucker*, and it felt like the word of God.

I got to my feet. He was watching me, as expressionlessly as he watched everything and everyone else around here, but I did have his attention. The wheat sheaf got displayed to best advantage if I gave it a casual push back with one hand. I went for the manoeuvre, caught the tinsel banner some festive-minded fuckwit had thought apt to string around the walls of the city's most hard-core pickup joint and brought the whole lot down.

I slumped back into my seat. I didn't have left inside me whatever it took to be mortified, or even amused. I just didn't fucking care. The trip-hammer rhythm went on. *Riverside, motherfucker*. At the bar, the stereotype had turned so his fine-sculpted profile was all I could see. It was perfectly still. If he was laughing his arse off inside, it was down very deep. Wow. Kind as well as gorgeous. He was definitely breaking every damn rule around here.

I didn't have long to think about it. The bar and the strobing lights were suddenly eclipsed by the substantial form of Lou McNally, my ex-flatmate and self-appointed guardian of my virtue on nights like this. He wasn't very good at it. I'd lost count of my casual scores since Joe had walked out, but I was definitely past single figures. Actually, given the six months and counting that I had been alone, I kind of hoped it wasn't worse than that.

"Matthew!" Lou's voice carried clearly through the bass. Unlike me, he hadn't lost the student trick of nightclub conversation. He carefully set the jug of mojitos I'd demanded as a nightcap down on the table. "Howeh,

sunbeam. I know this is going to be a difficult time of year for you, but..." Reaching past me, he rescued the tinsel strands from the beer pools and worse that carpeted the House by the time the dance floors filled on a Saturday night. "No need to spoil it for everyone else." He crashed down beside me and slung an arm round my shoulders. Anyone else I'd have shoved away, or possibly stabbed, but Lou had been almost as constant a presence in my life as Joe. From the same shitty council estate, he'd scrambled along with us into higher education, electing to study medicine more out of habit and a sense of solidarity than any particular desire to benefit humankind. "Come on, Matt," he said, giving me a squeeze, splashing the mojito messily into our shot glasses. "Let's drink up and go home."

I considered it. Lou had been making the same suggestion after every round since about half past nine. If I'd listened the first time, or even the fifth, I might have got out with my dignity. I wanted to explain to him that it wasn't my bloody fault I was here in the first place. Last year at this time—and indeed for the six years before then—I had been home with Joe. Studying, cooking dinner. Maybe even wrapping the odd present. Rolling about on the fireside rug. Christ, we'd even had a dog, now housed with my parents, who clearly saw her as a poor substitute for the grandchildren a healthier boy would have dumped on them. Joe and me were meant to be forever.

Forever, if only he'd seen it that way and not discreetly conducted a two-year affair of such perfect thoroughness that, when he finally broke it to me, his new life was a done deal. *Fait accompli*, inarguable. He loved me, always would. But he couldn't live forever in the subculture. He wanted kids. He wanted someone to take home who wouldn't make his mother cry and his dad's face turn apoplectic purple. Basically, he wanted a girl, and over the past two years he

had found, wooed and won one. Joe had walked out to get married.

Yes. Not the breaking up that kills you—the bloody aftermath. Not my fault I was back in the Powerhouse, the Dog, the Blue friggin’ Banana cruising a singles scene I’d never had to bother with when everyone else my age was pairing off, because I already had my boy, my other, and Joe and I would come here to dance and flirt and maybe even take some lucky third party home with us for fun, so utterly secure were we of each other’s unswerving devotion.

But Lou already knew all this. He’d heard it ten times before—more, probably; I was sometimes an amnesiac as well as a maudlin drunk. Further, he’d had a ringside seat for the whole catastrophe. Just as much a friend to Joe as to me, he’d watched it from both sides. Not his place to tell me what was going on, of course, and he’d held his tongue for his own good reasons. But Lou had known. And for all his friendship and support of me in my new single state, that was hard to forgive.

Abruptly I couldn’t forgive anyone. Not Joe, not Lou, not the crowd of boys on the dance floor and lounging around the tables. Because they *were* boys: on this circuit, you started looking sheepish if you were still hanging around after the age of twenty-one. Me, Joe and the caricature at the bar were about six years out of the scene’s demographic. Worst of all, I couldn’t forgive myself for needing to be here. For feeling so desolate, without a skinful, without some stranger’s cock up my arse, that I couldn’t even stand a weekend night at home by myself...

I lurched out from under Lou’s arm. Getting to my feet, I felt him follow, closing a steadying grasp on my elbow that I pretended not to need. “Oh good!” he shouted over the continuing “Riverside” beat. “Going home?”

I shook my head. There was no point in trying to talk, but Lou knew me well enough to translate my sign. I jerked

my thumb over my shoulder in the rough direction of the bar and its steadfast, handsome occupant. *Going to get him.*

“What? Oh, don’t waste your time. I asked Barman Bob all about him. His name’s Aaron. He’s an oil rigger. Comes here on his off shifts to drink and watch the boys, and he doesn’t want company—not even you, bonny lad, so why don’t you forget all about it and come home with Lou while you can still walk?”

An oil rigger? He would be. I found, to my surprise, I could still laugh. Somewhere a Village was missing one of its People. As for *not even you*, that was just a red rag to my drunken bull, the worst thing Lou could have said. He should have known better.

Of course, when I got up close, he wasn’t a caricature at all. More of a refinement, I thought, shouldering my way through the scrum at the bar. As if the stereotype had grown up, escaped into serene reality, watching my approach without signs of pleasure or irritation. His eyes were so green I thought he must have been wearing contacts, before deciding he didn’t look at all the type. One rose tattoo, which I wished I could see more clearly in the club’s fractured light, climbing up over his shoulder. No other decoration about him, not even a ring on the powerful, fine-made hands loosely clasped on the bar. Now I was very close, about to make my move onto the vacant bar stool beside him. Many men had straddled that arduous peak on this night—straddled it and failed. Well, I wasn’t dismounting without him... A gap opened up in the crowd, and I slithered through.

I had no chat-up lines. You don’t need them when you’ve practically married your childhood sweetheart, and since the divorce, I’d relied on my looks and my obvious hunger to do the talking for me. He was drinking beer. I pointed to his pint, pointed to Barman Bob and mouthed, *Another?* From here I could see his jet-black hair was

sprinkled through with silver, though I didn't think he could be more than a couple of years older than me. The contrasts were, for some reason, a devastating effect. A marring of his perfection, a sign he was prey to age and fate just like the rest of us...

He put out a hand to me. His grip was warm and dry. He closed it on my wrist as if he'd known me for years, as if he could have known I liked to be held that way. When he spoke, he carried easy through the beat, though his voice was low and soft. Accent local but not Geordie—no, a cultivated landsman's voice, west Cumbrian, maybe. Slowly I tuned in from the feel and the sound of him to what he was actually saying. And then I, like my many predecessors, got off my bar stool and walked away.

Straight, more or less, into the arms of Nicky Harris. For once I didn't mind. You wouldn't catch Nicky, small-time dealer and club rat, laying a hand on your arm and telling you, so gently your heart nearly fell out of your chest into the bartop icebox, you were way too good for this place. *"You're getting wasted. This won't take the pain away."* Christ Almighty. I'd told Bob, Lou, everyone else who knew me and frequented this dive to shut the fuck up about Joe and me. I didn't need the teasing or the pity. Certainly not to have tears cracked up out of my deep-frozen heart by the touch and the words of a stranger. I surveyed Nicky through a haze of them. He didn't look as rough as usual. Anyway, he would do. Inevitably, he was digging in his pockets for something to sell me, and this time when he produced a strip of E, I took one. Dry-swallowed it, grinning at him. When he made a gesture for payment, I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him off through the crowd.

Riverside, motherfucker. The track, obviously a record-length extended mix, thudded on. This close to the speakers, the bass was enough to staple-gun you to the wall. I let it—allowed a momentary fantasy that each beat was a nail,

punching through flesh and bone. Ground my spine against the wall, tipping my head back. Nicky was on his knees in front of me. His prickly, hard-gelled crop was nothing like Joe's and nothing like the way I imagined that silver-starred blackness would feel. So much the better. Maybe I should have been down giving him head to pay for the drugs, but I'd known he'd grab the chance to suck me off. He was a lifer in here, as well. He'd hit on me even when Joe was around. Yes, this way would work fine for both of us. No trouble. He'd gone down like a lamb the moment we fell against the first wall, and I'd given him a push to show him how the deal was going to work.

I opened my eyes and saw where Nicky and I had come to rest. Oh God. This was bad. I'd been heading, I supposed, for the House's notorious back room but hadn't made it. We were barely off the dance floor. I'd done some ill-advised screwing in some stupid places over the last few months, but this was spectacular. Already heads were turning in the crowd, the first few hoots going up. Best of all, we were in good line of sight to the bar...

And he was watching. The caricature. Aaron. For a moment I considered shoving Nicky off my cock and ending the floor show. But why the hell should I? I felt the drug hit the booze in my system and groaned, watching the lights blur, the half circle of faces gathering round become grinning masks. Those incredible eyes were green even from this distance. Well, the supercilious prick wasn't too proud, too bloody dignified, to watch me getting off, was he? Nicky, who'd plainly sucked a lot of cock in his time, was surprisingly good. I thrust into his mouth for a few seconds longer, noting with vague, bitter satisfaction that hands were going to zips in the watching crowd. Yeah, show them all what they were missing. Show *him* in particular. Not too late for the wheat sheaf; I ran a hand through my hair. Grabbed Nicky's shoulders and eased him back to

display myself, pulling out almost to the tip. I had a nice big cock, or so I'd been told regularly enough over the past few months: a lifetime of monogamy hadn't offered much chance of comparison.

God, *was* he watching me? His gaze was at once intent and as distant as if he were gazing at ships on the horizon. I didn't know. The beat hammered into me. Nicky, getting impatient, grabbed at my arse to drag me in, tonguing the length of me, letting me feel a graze of teeth. And now I had the problem of finishing what I'd started out here. The one thing more humiliating than my performance so far would be a failure to finish it; to go soft with the JD and the E swilling round in my system, to drown in the misery trying to whelm up from out of my gut. Oh Christ. Hallucinating Joe into the place of whoever was sucking or fucking would usually get me off, at high emotional cost. All right. My own beautiful Joe, who would never be caught dead doing something like this, writhing in front of me, deep-throating my cock. Instead of Nicky's stiff-gelled crown, Joe's hair, warm silk, sliding between my fingers, releasing its clean, familiar smell, the scent of love and home...

Riverside, motherfucker. I sobbed in one breath and released it in a wail no one would hear, not even Nicky. Not even me. Beyond the ring of wankers and spectators, I caught a glimpse of Lou shouldering into his jacket, heading for the door. Great. One more person I'd managed to alienate out of the increasingly tiny handful of souls who gave a shit about me. Joe wasn't going to help me. I felt like I was falling off a cliff. I wasn't gonna come. Gonna lose it, wake up cold and sober, my dick pulling slack out of Nicky's sneering mouth.

The man at the bar shifted. What had Lou said his name was? Aaron? "Aaron," I whispered under the percussion. Why, I don't know. He'd turned me down flat. Tried to send me home like an overwrought kid. Oh, he was looking at me

now. Gaze drawn right in from the horizon to the flotsam thrashing around on the beach. *Got you, you bastard. I always get my man. Jerking off under the bar, I bet, on your little moral high ground. How would your shapely gob look wrapped around my cock? How would you feel underneath my hands—broad shoulders, hair like night sky filled with stars?*

Nicky choked. I didn't hear it, just registered the jerking of his head in my grasp. For a second, I was coming so damn hard I didn't care, spending down his throat with a violence that undid my knees and sent me slithering down the wall, shaft tugging out from between his lips before I was done. I hit my hands and knees, still spilling. Down onto the sticky tiles, into the effluence of Saturday night, booze and dirt and my own semen. Instinctively I balled up, throwing one hand over the back of my head. I was just aware of Nicky, whom I'd nearly suffocated, scrambling to his feet, swearing at me and wiping his mouth. Then the biggest bouncer I'd ever seen was surging through the laughing, yelling crowd, and I was leaving earth, shirt collar and waistband of jeans each in one of his kebab-meat fists... The crowd blurred out. There were doors swinging wide and some steps and a rush of night air. I hit concrete. I heard one last time, *riverside, motherfucker*. And the music stopped.