

## Chapter 1

Amber Knox invited me to dinner one hundred and twenty hours before Brody would fly to New York, and he and I would meet for the first time that mid-evening in December. I'd been walking the downtown streets the night before, slipping into smaller, less noisy bars and sitting quietly among the paired-up talkers along the counters, giving in around 5 a.m. when the last dives closed and crawling home with no foreign body to show for it, just the night alone and the walking, and I'd slept hard until lunchtime. Later in the early Saturday evening Amber called, and after hanging up in came a slight guilt, as I'd missed her graduate school commencement that afternoon, so I withdrew my commitment to the couch in my small living room and readied to leave the house without a shower, in destroyed jeans and a radio t-shirt from Boston, given me by a girl I no longer knew and hardly remembered. Just the shirt, and the recollection of picking her up from an airport with the too-small white-and-red garment draped over her forearm outside the terminal gate. Only when wearing it could I see her face, beaming, as we locked arms down the escalator, heading off to who-recalls. But when smiles begin to fade in the present, as had happened between us, the entire person seems to disappear, too. Amber, however, was a different animal.

I scanned a small bookshelf near the door on the way out and found a book I'd borrowed from Amber, a year prior, and decided to re-gift it to her as a peace offering for my absence, hoping the joke would also earn her reprieve. The verdict would come soon, in back of a small Italian eatery on east Airport Boulevard, the part of the boulevard where it becomes a two lane shortly before it dies its brave death as it melts into Government, a boulevard also, where an old war cannon heavily rests at the junction. The restaurant was a quick few miles from my house off Azalea Street in Midtown, and though I was late, likely taking my time in rebellion to going at all, the large group she'd assembled in celebration, consisting of family and friends who were all unknown to me, was a warm collection of people well-versed in laughter. They consumed a fair third of the place, and it was easy to find them. Amber leaned over the table for a hug as I passed her the book, a childlike look of regret on my face in addition to a half-smile, and she laughed, I sighed, she explained it to her mother, the gift that kept on giving, and her mother extended a hand, smiling, saying *Pete, we've heard so much about you.*

Just as I seated myself at the end of one long table, my view a clean shot of the broad window overlooking the boulevard, and before I could choose a wine, I was interrupted on my work phone by a call from a friend who bartended downtown, informing that a mutual acquaintance had been stabbed in the neck the night before. It sounded drastic and incomprehensible, and I stood to step outside for the details until he said our friend was at work that very night. A flesh wound, he said, and then went on to mention the junkie who'd stabbed him was in jail for attempted murder. I sat back down and was coerced into relaying the story across the table, with chagrin, indicating to strangers that yes, this is my life, yes, I carouse with stabbing victims. Brody, sitting two seats down, and before I knew him as Brody, leaned across the young woman between us and said, *Everything's insane.*

Brody and I would quite soon end up sitting beside one another, as the girl dividing us, a librarian-looking sort, and rightly named, Penny Frick, took to glowing over photographs of her young daughter with a pair of Amber's friends at the other end,

newlyweds who were expecting, a couple emitting a series of oohs and ahhs at the pictures that disrupted my focus on feeling out of place. He and I sat close for a good while, with him doing most of the talking at me, around me, with others, his leg bouncing up and down steadily next to mine below the low-hanging table linen. Amber, highly distracted by the attention, indulging in it, too, played kind host and threw a bright smile or raised her eyebrows at me across from the other side of the room.

“You two need to get together,” she said loudly, pointing back and forth at Brody and me, completing the declaration with such an apathetic wave of her hand I wanted to pick her brain about it, as I wasn’t there to meet anyone. Envisioning an eventual return to my couch, being there was all I’d the energy for.

There was some odd chatter about fish sauce coming from an un-introduced family member of Amber’s, someone swore by it, someone said *you just don’t know what you’re missing*, and Brody and I parked elbows on the flat of the table to listen closer as the man, an Asian-looking fellow, told how it was made in so-and-so’s garage.

“Homemade fish sauce, huh.”

“Sounds wild,” Brody said.

“You guys,” Amber called across the room. “I’m telling you.” She shook her head at us.

“What’s she...do you have any idea what she’s talking about?” I asked him.

“One sec, babe. He’s talking about homemade beer.”

We studied ourselves being studied by the women at the table, which ignited a mutual recognition of our presence together.

“Have you ever kissed a *Frick*?” He asked.

“A Yes would be a lie, man.”

Brody flirted a bit with her as I thought about kissing a Frick and was glad to be momentarily overlooked, my knee jutting from the gape in the jeans, my shirt likely unwashed, two-day shadow across my chin.

Our server was extremely kind and she told us, almost individually, that we were all pleasant when the bill was paid by Amber’s gracious parents. But she likely ate her words as everyone seemed to then take up the small walk-through space inside the building to take various group photos. An elderly couple nervously excused themselves in a hurried shuffle as they passed through the Red Sea of family, friends, and me and Brody tucking in our shoulders and nodding out of the film’s way. In the fray I was somehow assigned the holding of Amber’s aunt’s purse. It was the right choice to have come, even if to purse-carry. My stomach was at more ease than earlier, sitting around at home self-debating and deliberating with cashews and worrying I’d get nothing accomplished in the pending hours beyond sitting alone in lamentation of bruising myself so thoroughly the night before.

We all exchanged goodbyes in a casual exodus toward the door, warm hands shaking before becoming cold, jackets being slipped into, a few hugs. As we lined up down the ramp of the patio, Amber cupped her hands and announced a get-together later in the evening, to which I falsely agreed attending, knowing it would be late getting started and I already had neglected work deadlines back home in need of attention, deadlines I’d surely neglect, but at least I’d be nearby when responsibility began to rear its head. It was Brody who brought me out of that particular thinking.

“Hey Pete.”

“What’s up?”

Brody crossed to my side of the car and leaned against the trunk, running his right hand down the back windshield as if appeasing a hissing cat.

“So I’ve got a girl in crisis. At that huge bookstore next to the Irish pub. Down that way.” He thumbed over his shoulder. “About a mile west, three tops.”

“What about her?”

“Not sure. Come get some coffee. We’ll scope her out, see if danger lurks. On me man.”

My suspicion was that Brody was a person one could ignore and it would still carry little weight, a self-talker, elated to have bystanders hear and join in. I was curious about the danger and figured I’d be better off staying awake through the stomach rumblings that night and possibly adhere to new experience instead of moping on home and ignoring the phone. I agreed with a doubtful nod, which he ignored. *Nice*, he said, patted my car and then trotted two parking spaces over to a beat up version of mine, and he disappeared before my car could get remotely warmed in the slim frost. Down Airport I wondered what I was doing and what to expect and thought a bit about whether the strength would reverse roles and find me to make an appearance at the party later. I considered the imminent struggle for conversation amongst the unfamiliar drunks, which seemed unappealing enough to where I’d determined a very resounding No before cutting the engine in front of the bookstore. I could see Brody through the glass as I walked toward the building, being handed a coffee by a male employee with shoulder length blond hair and a thin goatee. Brody waved a pair of fingers overhead as I entered to join him.

“I knew Knox from workshops on campus,” Brody continued once I’d returned from the counter with a coffee. “We get together a good bit now that I’m done. She’s talked you up before. I think that’s what she meant at dinner. That we should get together.”

“Why was that again?”

He was looking over my shoulder periodically at his female friend. We’d not discussed her yet and I was nicely surprised at the mission I’d become a part of. Whatever crisis it was I guess Brody had on his watchdog eyes, had it under control. “You guys ever see each other?”

“Knox and I? Not quite,” I said, laughing. “You?”

“We never committed to any authentic interest in it. So you’re a serious writer? She called you a writer. She said you’re serious.”

“Oh, right...that’s what she was doing.”

“So you do? You write?”

I sighed.

“Yeah, I guess...”

“That’s good. *Good*.” He breathed into his coffee. “I’m going to New York Thursday, go catch up with an old friend who’s got a textbook coming out.”

“You write?” I asked.

“Yeah, Pete.” He exhaled, set down his coffee, stretched his arms to the ceiling and reclaimed it in his cold hands. “As much as I can. *As often*, that is. This sounds secretive, right?”

“How so?”

“These short answers. Like speaking in code. You published?”

“In a couple locals. I think...I *hope* I’ve got a novel working. Some other projects going. Little things. Not really yet.”

“Right on. I’m bringing a novel up with me. See if it’s got legs. I guess it’s done. For now, at least. But that’s still great. Hey, *motion*.” Brody kept nodding and I was wondering and not nodding. I was wondering about the girl.

“You know anything about what’s going on with her and that guy?”

“Nah. It seems unnerving though. She seems unnerved. But then she always does. She’s a sweet, sad situation. That’s why I thought we should be here.” The top of Brody’s left knee bounced around the edge of our table. It was dark outside and not necessarily cold, not a Midwestern cold, not ever in Mobile, where natives dared to call 55 degrees freezing. I’d seen a Canadian winter once, a real winter, a year earlier while visiting my brother-in-law’s ex in Toronto.

“We?”

He looked at me curiously.

“Yep,” he said, nodding.

“What’s wrong with just you?”

“Hmm? Nada.”

His leg still bounced, palms still glued to the outer edge of the plastic cup.

“You gonna talk to her?”

“Hell no. She’s good.”

“Did you even say hi to her?”

“Nah.” He shook his head and looked over my shoulder. I almost laughed. I was tired but had it in me to laugh. “You have an agent, or editor?”

“Not hardly.” I smiled at my coffee in mild disbelief.

A woman squeezed by our table and bumped into his leg. He didn’t notice. “Then I’ll read some of your stuff this week, right? Maybe bring something of yours up and show my friend Mitch.”

“I don’t know.”

“It could be a good thing, man.”

“Are you published?”

“Getting there. A short novel with a small press in Massachusetts. Nothing full-length like this one. I’m looking for good things in the year.”

“What’s your last name?”

“You haven’t heard of it. Like a hundred copies of it, just in the northeast.”

“No, man,” I said, finally laughing. “I don’t know your last name.”

“LaCoste.”

“LaCoste,” I repeated.

“Pete what?”

“Rattigan.”

“I could just call you Rattigan. You know, we should start something,” Brody said, pointing at me and exhaling.

“Like what?”

“I dunno. We’ll see.”

“I’m not too confident about the politics of publishing these days. Almost feel like hanging it up.”

“No way, babe. Not at all. If Knox says you’re serious, no doubt you’re strong. Give me a peek at it and I’ll take it with me. Yeah?”

“How many options do I have?”

He winked at me and looked again over my shoulder. I felt a four year-old’s timidity when sitting across from me was a guy who didn’t seem to care if his work to date were received as genius or toilet paper. Bright white teeth, dimpled cheeks, around six-two with blondish-brown mid-length hair strapped back by a navy-colored hair band, blue eyes, tan complexion, seemingly indifferent but friendly, I thought his looks could easily preclude a lack of confidence. He thought a moment and then shrugged.

“None, man. Just think, life can be almost miserable unless you teach yourself to maintain the highs the universe deals out. I mean, yeah, you learn from the lows. You *have* to. But it’s empowering to understand it’s possible to rocket back up from a really low low, man.”

“I guess so.”

“No, you *know* so.”

“But what are you talking about?”

“That whole ‘how many options do I have’ thing. I’m talking about *trying*. Why not take a jump, right? It’s not gonna do you any harm to experience the gloomy side of effort, right? There’s a kind of success in failing, too. They cancel each other out that way.” He suddenly sat up straight. “Here she comes.”

I was still stuck on what Brody was saying as stranger danger approached, while the fellow she’d been sitting with had his eyes down and peeled little papers at their table by the entrance’s large window. I knew where the talk could be going, and I knew why Amber had grinned at us, at me, why it was a sly grin. I thought I’d already begun doubting myself less, a thought I’d had when alone and still nearing the cusp of doubt. I was ready to dissect things further, but we both yielded to start playing concerned friend to a woman in some untold need. *Take a jump*, I thought, and stood to shake the girl’s hand before sitting down after Brody’s introduction.

They knew each other through Amber as well, and I realized that after graduating two years back, I didn’t know anyone anymore, just fragments of them when I saw something, like the shirt I wore, that reminded me of what was but no longer is. The girl was a beginning poet also trying to figure why her fiction kept falling apart. She was considering switching to Islam but, the crisis finally unfolding, she decided against it because her Saudi Arabian boyfriend confessed at the last minute to being married and that he was returning home to get his wife and children before settling into a job in London now that his schooling was over in the States. Her name was Margaret MacDonald and she was not pleased, not at all, to be sitting with her boyfriend’s best friend who’d come to give her the information about the incisive breakup. I sipped my coffee and made a pledge with myself to say not a damned thing. Instead I studied the young man against the glass up front, still digging through the scrap paper and mumbling to himself perhaps about what next to say when Margaret returned. I felt silly and confused on his behalf. It’s always the messenger. And we *were* talking about it, the situation, and *him*, just a handful of feet away.

Margaret didn’t initially seem too overwhelmed by the burden of a personality, as she spoke with relative slowness and mentioned something about having lived in east or west Memphis, which I regrettably yet immediately held against her as the Grand

Explanation for her seemingly lack of a legitimate take on the world. She'd an orange-red hair color, more toward orange, and her voice was thick with a self-challenging defiance against the truth behind her emotions. I sat back into my chair and coffee and hoped not a single person would walk by and nudge me like Brody, because the moment had become suddenly new and interesting, and I'd surely flinch, maybe miss one of them exercising their strange reasons. My knuckles got parched-throat dry as she sat and my voice went bare and white.

"It isn't that I feel it's that big of a cultural difference between us. I mean, don't you think if he really cares about me, something as unimportant as religion wouldn't be getting in the way?" She asked, standing close to our table, hunched forward, expressionless face.

Brody was index-finger-massaging his chin. My lips puckered over my thin straw I'd fidgeted into my cooling drink and I imagine I looked a lot like a curious child, bored stiff from adult conversation.

"Sweet baby," he said, like a weathered trumpeter, tested by years of dark stages, might say before telling glossy-eyed drunks in the front row to clear a path as he shuffled through to the bar. "It does matter, see? We've got power and the will and the right and literal freedom to step back from uniformity and be, well, *happy*. And happy's hard work to some, right? But we can make more choices. That's our birthright. Not just here in this building, but on this very soil, man, I mean, *Nabokov* knew..."

I kid-sipped my tepid coffee and savored each minute of guessing Margaret's musical choices, IQ, favorite soda.

"But religion matters to some people more than most other things. No doubt," he said, nodding. "You said you two had a breakthrough because he stroked your hair while driving to dinner the other night, and he held your hand? But if nothing had happened between you two up until that point, and now he's saying he's *married* or Mohammed's saying it *for him*—which is indisputably shitty, but still, justly informative—you think maybe it, well, and I mean this kindly, *you* were his one final experiment with American tactility?"

"Whoa. Yeah. I guess so."

"But see, it can't *all* be religion. Generally...and I know it's unsafe to generalize, *usually*... but nothing should be all about one thing. And I'm not defending either...you get what I'm saying, right? But also, who's to say he loves you the way you want him to, or if it's the same way you're trying to love him? It's all at least *some* form of love, right? Rattigan here's *all* love."

He smacked me lightly on the arm and I turned my curious eyes upward to hers, with my lips still tight around the straw as I responded.

"I have no idea what's happening right now."

"See?" Brody said.

"But *Mohammed*..." Margaret whispered as she glanced past her shoulder at him. Poor man, still shredding paper, still looking down. "Now *he's* offering marriage."

"To *whom*?" Brody asked.

*Me*, I thought. Mohammed wants me.

"To *me*."

Are we really doing this right now, literally *next* to him? I thought.

“I agreed to go get something to eat with him after this. I just... I don’t know what to do about any of this. I don’t want to paint Sam as a jerk...”

“He kinda is,” Brody said.

“...or Mohammed, because when they’re both out of this situation they’re both wonderful guys. I was so ready to say Yes to Sam when *this* came along,” she said, thrusting her thumb toward Mohammed. “And I know it’s obviously had to have been here all along, but I can’t say Yes to Mohammed and guarantee him the same trust as I did Sam. You know?”

Brody leaned back in his chair and smiled at me because, I suspected, he was rewarding himself for keeping what was then happening a secret from me. He ran his hands through his hair, reset the band across the top of his forehead, giggled, and then took my straw from my cup sitting near his long right forearm and stuck it in his mouth and began chewing. Through the chewing he looked at me again.

“What do you make of all this, Rattigan?”

“Make sure it’s an expensive restaurant,” I said softly.

Margaret eyed me like I’d vomited myself. Brody laughed aloud, a quick blurt which seemed to even surprise him, and clapped his hands once. Margaret looked at us both, one at a time, as if we had never even had minds. And then Brody, fortunately, rang in with a salesman’s closure.

“Come on, sweet baby. He’s just saying this is *your* jam. If you don’t, if we don’t, *anybody* doesn’t, assess troubling situations with clarity and courage it’ll be a hard road forward. Things don’t get easier if someone sits around expecting them to. Rattigan’s just saying to be assertive is all. Make way in your life for more serious aggressions that might arise. Don’t let your personal identity come to question in your mind just because someone in your life is flagrant with their *own*.”

Margaret looked at me, cocked her head and sighed, got this curious look on her face, looked at me again and I got nervous. I tried to take back the straw but Brody leaned away in his chair and patted his chest and kept smiling.

“Why does he call you by your last name?”

“Yeah, LaCoste,” I said. “Why so informal?”

Brody sat forward, amused.