

Chapter 1

On the Tuesday in August that changed everything, Derek Walsh woke up with a dry mouth and a headache. He tried to remember how much scotch they'd had after dinner, whether they'd smoked one joint or two as they listened to his vinyl, but it was more of a blur than he wanted to admit. Whatever it had been, it had been too much. He moved his leg over onto Karina's side of the bed but it was cold. He glanced over at the clock. 8:45. He hadn't heard his wife get up, hadn't heard her leave. He was getting too old for this.

He sat up and swung his legs to the floor with a groan. He felt terrible. He wasn't hung over often, but his capacity for drink and drugs was fading as fast as his morning erections. He thought about Julie. How she told him she'd been drunk or hung over most of the decade they were together. He hadn't realized she had a problem until she told him she was going to treatment. How had he not seen all that? How had she kept it all hidden if she felt like he did now?

He knew he needed to get moving. A run would make him feel better and the heat of high summer would hit full force in another hour. He pulled on his shorts and tank top and went downstairs.

The kitchen was a mess, dishes piled in the sink, unwiped counter tops. He groaned again. Since Karina was teaching summer classes and he wasn't, the mess was his to deal with. He'd do it later. He found a clean glass, filled it from the tap, and drank it down.

He started off strong as he always did, a surge of energy and adrenalin up the hill towards the hospital, but he slowed after a few blocks and ten minutes later, he turned around. Between the hangover and the poor sleep of middle age, there was no way he was going to go five miles.

As he turned onto his street, he saw the taillights of the mail carrier rounding the corner. He pulled the mail out of the box and went into the kitchen where he poured a tall glass of orange juice and drank it down. Then he took the mail into the dining room and sorted it on the table. A couple of bills, ads from the market up on Rivermont, a letter from the university about the fall faculty workshop, and then a slim envelope in a familiar handwriting. Something from Pete Chandling.

He frowned when he saw the Priority Mail sticker. He and Pete still wrote to each other, both preferring letters to email, but nothing was ever a rush. He opened the envelope. Instead of a letter from Pete, there was a typed letter signed by a name he didn't recognize and a sticky note: "Did you get this too?"

Derek frowned again, then sat down at the table and read.

Dear Peter Chandling,

My name is Jason Kirchner and I am searching for my birth father. My birth mother, Rhonda Ordway, got pregnant while she was a student at Western Willamette College in Salem, Oregon, in 1972, and gave me up for adoption. In tracking her down, I discovered that you and five of your fraternity brothers got my mother drunk and had sex with her in somebody's apartment. One of you is my father.

I have six names. You're the only one who is local so I'm starting with you. I hope you are man enough to meet with me.

Jason Kirchner

Derek put the letter down slowly. Then he got up, walked into the kitchen, and vomited into the sink.

Chapter 2

“This is Pete. Leave a message.”

“It’s Derek. I got the letter. Call me.”

It had taken Derek nearly 10 minutes to stop retching into the sink. He was glad for the spasms, the choking, the sour taste in his mouth as the orange juice came back up and burned his throat. It helped him not have to think. But eventually he was as empty as he could be and he straightened up, rinsed his mouth, and went back to the table.

He remembered. Of course, he remembered. Not her name. Even seeing it on the page conjured nothing. He couldn’t visualize her either. Not whether she was blonde or dark, short or tall. Not even what her breasts were like. But the event of it, the doing of it, that he remembered.

He remembered Fred Landon leaning in the passenger window of Pete’s old Volvo. Pete was driving and he was riding shotgun. He always rode shotgun. In the back were Jim and Lonnie. And Fred leaning in the window with the invitation.

“We’re all set.” Fred’s eyes had glowed with excitement, and he winked and smirked in that annoying way that the frat brothers made great fun of. “I’m going first, of course, then Murcheson, since it’s his apartment, and then you guys figure out who’s next. I’d say wait out here 10 minutes and then come on in. It’s around the back and up the stairs.” He pointed down the street to a small set of concrete stairs. “We’ll leave the door unlocked.” He slapped the window sill and stuck his hand out for Derek to shake. Then he hustled over to his car and helped the girl out and they disappeared around the building. She was small and slim. He could see that in his mind.

Someone had asked, “She wants to do this, right?” Jim? No, not Jim. Not Pete either. Must have been Lonnie. But he didn’t remember anyone responding.

What he remembered next was rummaging through Pete’s glove compartment for paper. Pete had a little notebook he used for mileage and gas records. Already the accountant. Derek saw himself ripping out a clean sheet from the back and tearing the sheet into four pieces of different lengths. Then he mixed them up, placed them in his hand so no one could see the length of the paper, and offered them around. “Shortest goes last,” he said.

Jim had said something smart like “We don’t need to draw for that” or “You go last, Pete. That’s a given.” Everyone had laughed.

Derek could feel the energy that had hung in the car all these years later—excitement, trepidation. He could see the white paper in his hand. He’d drawn the second to shortest. Pete would go third after Murcheson, then Jim, then him. Lonnie would be last.

He got up from the dining table. He felt queasy and his head pounded. The run, the vomited orange juice, the hangover that he’d done nothing to medicate. He looked at the clock. 10:17. He got a beer out of the fridge and drank it down. The cold carbonation was soothing. He rummaged through the fridge. Found tuna, lettuce, and bread. Made a sandwich. He took it out to the patio with another beer. He thought about calling Pete again but he didn’t want to seem freaked out.

He sat down and looked out into the gulch of old trees that separated his property from the houses on the next street over. He watched the leaves shimmer in the small breeze. He saw the flash of red as a cardinal flew from branch to branch, heard the chittering of a smaller bird.

He remembered that the four of them had stood on the sidewalk outside the building for a while. There had been beer in the trunk, and he and Pete shared one. It was warm out. Fall maybe? Late spring? Maybe Jim had passed a joint. He always had one on him.

It was a surprisingly big place, that apartment. Big open rooms compared to the frat house. But it was still full of the crap furniture they all had in those days. Murcheson was watching TV. Johnny Carson talking to Rob Reiner. Funny how that detail was so clear. They'd all stood there watching. They must have been really stoned. Finally, the other guys sat down on the sofa, but he remembered not wanting to crowd in with them so he'd pulled a straight chair from the dining table and sat next to Murcheson and a little behind him. It had felt awkward to sit there. He didn't like not being part of the inner circle. That part of the memory was also clear.

Were there muffled noises from the bedroom? He couldn't be sure. Maybe Fred's voice, the girl's voice. Mostly it was the audience laughing at Carson and Reiner although he didn't remember any of them laughing. Or talking for that matter. At some point, Fred must have come out of the bedroom, for in his mind's eye, Derek could see Murcheson heave himself up out of the chair and go into the bedroom and close the door. And then more memories came back. Fred going out the front door, Murcheson coming out of the bedroom, lighting a cigarette. He went into the kitchen, got a beer and a slice of cold pizza, and took his chair again in front of the TV.

It was Pete's turn then but he hadn't stood right up and gone in. That Derek remembered too. Instead Pete had glanced his way with a strange look. Derek couldn't see the look in his memory, only felt his own curiosity about whether Pete had been clowning around or was stoned silly. Now he wondered if Pete had been afraid.

Jim had spoken then. "Pete" was all he said, and Pete went to the bedroom door. He'd hesitated again and looked back at Derek for just a second and then he'd gone in and shut the door.

When Pete came out, the Carson show was over and an old Glenn Ford western was on. Pete hadn't looked at them, just turned and went down the hall to the bathroom. Jim didn't hesitate. He stood up from the couch, grinned at the three of them, and went into the bedroom. Derek went to the bathroom when Pete came out. He found some mouthwash in the cabinet over the sink and took a swig. What a funny small thing to think of.

Pete took Jim's place on the sofa. He didn't look at Derek.

When Jim came out, he grinned at them again. "You're up, Walsh," he'd said, clasping Derek's shoulder with his hand in passing. Derek could still feel that hand on his shoulder. Then his memory went blank until he stepped into the bedroom.

He heard the screen door slide open. It was Karina. "Hey, weren't you going to lunch with Todd?"

"Shit," he said. "What time is it?"

"Ten to one."

"Shit, shit, shit." He handed his wife the phone. "Will you call him and tell I'm on my way? Fifteen minutes at the latest."

She laughed, shook her head. "What have you been doing all morning?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said over his shoulder.

It was dark in the house after the bright sun of the terrace. He started up the stairs and then remembered the letter, went back down and carried it up with him, placing it way in the back of a drawer of his desk. Then he changed his clothes and left.

Chapter 3

Peter Chandling sat sweating in his green Miata just outside the entrance to Crema, a coffeehouse in SE Portland. He'd been there 15 minutes watching people go in. Young men to be exact. He assumed that Jason Kirchner would look familiar. But he hadn't seen anyone he recognized.

He wished he had a drink. The nervousness was miserable. He checked his pager. No response from Harv. His AA sponsor worked as a shop supervisor for a manufacturing plant and was seldom available during the day. He only worked with men who'd been sober a good while, men who could manage their own lives. And that hadn't been a problem for Pete until now. For the last eight years, he'd stayed out of drama and chaos. But this—he couldn't have foreseen this. He knew he should have gone to the Monday night men's group and talked to someone afterwards, but he just couldn't talk about it with anyone but Harv. Harv already knew about that night in the apartment. Pete had told him during his 5th Step confession.

He looked at his watch. It was 4:35 and he needed to go in. He needed to face this and make whatever amends he could.

The big room in the coffee shop was mostly empty. He took off his sunglasses and looked around. Two women in the corner. Three slackers at different tables on their computers. An older couple with two little kids, one in a stroller. He went up to the counter and ordered a chamomile tea. Maybe it would settle his stomach. As he handed the counter clerk his debit card, he heard his name.

He turned and looked at the young man behind him. Jason Kirchner was tall. His light brown hair was long and just this side of shaggy, his brown eyes deep set. He had pleasant features but they bordered on the nondescript. A forgettable face that Pete would remember forever.

"Jason," Pete said.

"Yes."

Pete turned back to the clerk, signed the receipt, and picked up his tea.

"I'm over here," said the kid, and he led the way to a back corner table for two. He waited for Pete to take the booth seat against the wall and then sat down across from him. An untouched iced coffee sat in the middle of the table.

"I wasn't sure if you'd show up." The kid's face was closed, not quite blank but hard to read.

"It was the least I could do. How can I be of help?"

"A DNA sample would be a good start."

"I'm happy to give you one," Pete said, "but I'm not your father."

The kid tensed his jaw and shook his head. "How do you know? Because you're too short?"

Pete could feel himself blush. The kid was at least 6 feet and he wasn't. "Well, there's that," he said, "but mostly because I didn't have sex with your mother that night."

Jason sat back. He looked out the window and then looked back at Pete. "Are you bullshitting me?"

"No."

"You were there, right?"

Pete screwed up his courage and looked Jason in the eye. "Yes, I'm very sorry to say that I was."

"And you went into the bedroom while the others watched TV, right?"

Pete hesitated and then nodded. He wanted to ask how Kirchner knew all this but he didn't have control of the conversation.

Jason leaned forward on his elbows. Not exactly menacing but Pete felt pinned into the corner. "Why did you go in the bedroom if you weren't going to have sex with her?"

The shame choked Pete's throat and he took a sip of the tea.

"Well?"

"I...I did plan to have sex with her. But once I got in there, I...I couldn't do it."

"You mean you changed your mind?"

"No, I couldn't...you know...get it up." He kept his eyes on the tea cup.

"That's not what my mother said."

Pete looked up at him. "Your mother told you about that night?"

"No." Something else passed across the young man's face. Anger? Sorrow? Then it closed and he said, "She told her husband and he told me."

"Well, I don't know what she said—or he said—but I didn't have sex with her. I..." He put up his hands as if to ward off something. "I got on the bed with her and we fooled around some but I couldn't...nothing happened. So I lay there with her for a while and then I got dressed and left. That's it." He looked out the window and then very slowly looked at the young man across from him. He saw the kid's jaw tighten again and his lips purse. A small shiver of fear ran through Pete. "I'm so sorry. I know an apology is not enough. I don't know what else to say."

"Did my mother want to have sex with you? Did she know you? Did she like you?"

"I don't...I didn't really know her. I met her that evening or maybe I'd met her before that. I don't remember. We all hung out at this tavern, and she was there that night."

"Was it your idea? Gang-banging my mother?"

Pete winced at the ugly words. "No," he said as quickly as he could. "No, it wasn't my idea."

"Whose idea was it?"

"I don't know. We were all out there at the tavern, we were drinking and playing pool, and somebody suggested we go back to this guy's apartment and party there."

Kirchner hesitated and then said slowly, "So if it was a party..."

Pete could see him trying to figure this all out.

"If it was a party, why was my mom the only girl there?"

With every passing moment, Pete felt more guilt, more shame. "Okay," he said. "It wasn't a party exactly. It was, I don't know, just an idea, an impulse. Somebody said let's go to the apartment and take her with us and see what happens."

Jason sat back in his chair. He shook his head again. Then he said, "Did you drive my mom there?"

"No, I didn't."

"You didn't have a car?"

"No, I had a car but I drove the other guys."

"Who drove my mother?"

Pete didn't know what to do. He didn't want to implicate Fred. It wasn't his place to do that. "I can't tell you that."

"Why? Some fraternity oath bullshit?"

"No," Pete said, although that was true. They'd taken strong oaths of loyalty in the fraternity. Not about this specifically. He'd never talked to any of them afterwards about this. It was as if it hadn't happened. But they'd made sacred vows to protect each other. Even the

members they didn't like much, like Fred. "No," he said again. "To tell you the truth, I don't know how she got home."

Kirchner didn't say anything and then he looked at Pete and said, "You're scum. You know that, right?"

Pete looked at the kid and then looked away. The shame boiled up in him and he felt light-headed, almost dizzy.

Kirchner pulled a backpack off the bench next to Pete and opened a zip compartment, took out a DNA swab tube, and handed it to Pete. "Just run it around in your mouth."

"You don't believe me," said Pete.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't see why I should."

Pete took the tube, opened the little kit, and did as the kid asked. He handed the two parts to Kirchner, who closed it up and put it in his backpack. "How long does it take?" he said.

"What do you care? You said it can't be you."

"It can't."

"Well, then." Kirchner stood up. "I'll be in touch."

"About what?" said Pete. He was struggling to figure out what else could happen.

"About all this. It's not over. Not by a long shot." He turned his back on Pete and moved to the door and went through it. A minute or so later, Kirchner walked down the street past the window where Pete sat. Pete looked up as he passed and the kid shot him a look of hatred and pain so intense that Pete had to close his eyes against it.

He'd told himself all these years that he hadn't had sex with the girl and therefore he'd done nothing wrong, but he knew he was guilty just the same. And he saw that he'd known it all along.

