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“Every man has some reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone, but only to his friends. He has others which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. But finally there are still others which a man is even afraid to tell himself, and every decent man has a considerable number of such things stored away. ... Man is bound to lie about himself.”
(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*)

Voices of Honor House

“I should have fucking stopped him when I had the chance.” (Nick Delamore)

“Why did I join Omega? What was I looking for?” (Alex Merten)

“If I hadn’t been trying to make Nick jealous, I never would have gone to that party with Van Pelt.” (Allyson Chambers)

“Told her to stay away from those pretty college boys.” (Clarice Johnson’s boyfriend)

“They should burn every last one of those damn frat houses to the ground.” (Megan Bradley)

“Bitch, bitch, bitch. All I know is I had a great time as an Omega. Cut loose the wagons, boys!” (Bru Van Pelt)

“We are bound by faith to be men of courage and honor serving in the light of truth. This is our inspiration and our creed.” (Founding motto of Omega Epsilon Tau)

Prologue

Almost midnight in McAllen, Texas, and a weary priest clutches the remote with a trembling hand. He winces as CNN's Wolf Blitzer drones on in that odd staccato tone. Former Congressman Bruce Van Pelt is projected to win the May 2012 Ohio Republican gubernatorial primary, defeating state attorney general Richard Reasoner. He will face Democrat Kwame Imani in the fall election. When live coverage shifts to Van Pelt and hundreds of enthusiastic supporters, Father Alex Merten closes his eyes in silent prayer.

Moments later, the beaming candidate waves to the crowd in the Cincinnati Convention Hall. Van Pelt hugs his comely, stylish wife and three adoring daughters, while two tow-headed grandchildren cling to the towering man's trousers. Now he addresses those in the hall and countless TV and Web viewers.

Mirage. Charade. Phony. Merten knows Van Pelt's seductive powers. He will use his good looks and charming Kentucky accent. Soothing voice, strident words. Analysts will later say the charismatic Tea Party candidate was openly confrontational to his Democratic opponent and to those who reject his rigid worldview.

"It is time to reclaim what is right and good in this Christian nation of ours. I stand unwavering by my traditional conservative values. I'm proud to represent this great state of Ohio and eager to contribute to the dialogue about the future of our country and the American way of life."

Merten watches the newscast a thousand miles away from his hometown Cincinnati on an old back-heavy Zenith TV. Here in McAllen, parishioners would find it strange their priest was interested in Ohio's next governor. For he has been part of this poor Texas border community for some 30 years. *Yo soy Padre Alejandro.* His life

revolves around this church of St. Philip or San Filippo, as most of his congregants call it. They would ask him: Why do you care about this tall Anglo with the loud “redneck” voice so far away?

Merten clicks off the TV, rubs his weary eyes and shuffles across the humble rectory apartment, old floor boards creaking under the threadbare pale blue carpeting. His gait slowed by bulging discs and arthritis, he exhales loudly as he eases down on the straight-back wooden chair. The modest kitchen table is where he composes his Sunday homilies and tries to balance the parish accounts, robbing Peter to pay Paul as his dear mother used to say when bill collectors clamored for payment.

On this warm spring night, no urgent church business awaits. In a few days, the town will celebrate Cinco de Mayo, and St. Philip’s will again be the center of joyous ceremonies. But on this night, Merten is mired in sadness as the image returns of an obese naked woman unconscious in a shower stall. His heart races as old panic returns. Static grows louder. He again closes his eyes and prays: *Clear my mind, Lord, and help me find peace. Bless her departed soul. And forgive me for having failed so long ago.*

In Carlson, Indiana, about 100 miles from where the raucous celebration for candidate Van Pelt is underway, another on the cusp of 60 has also viewed news of the Ohio primary. But this man, a reporter for the local *Times-Union* newspaper, is more animated than Merten, who watched in grim silence. Nick Delamore seems bemused by the election update.

“Un-fucking believable,” he shouts at the screen, nursing his third tumbler of Dewar’s on the rocks. Spittle sprays from his lips as he switches his remote to HBO and scans the lineup. His mood warms when he sees *Trading Places* in progress. He knows the scene is coming where the voluptuous Jamie Lee Curtis disrobes before bedding

with Dan Akroyd. He has been aroused on countless nights by the lingering topless scene. *No harm. No foul. Nothing better to do.* Nick unbuckles his belt and fidgets in his leather recliner, careful not to spill his precious scotch.

Tonight, in Lakewood, Ohio, a popular suburb just west of Cleveland, Megan Bradley is watching CNN's election returns when her phone rings. She sighs before answering when she sees the call is coming from "A Safe Place," the women's shelter. One of the young late-night crisis line workers asks timidly: "Megan?"

Bradley shakes her head. *You know this is Megan. Why do you have to ask?* But she doesn't chide the nervous staffer. She knows how intimidating it can be talking to the shelter director, especially when calling her at home so late.

"What's going on, Sheryl?"

"I'm sorry to call, Megan. But everyone else is either with other clients or out sick tonight. I didn't know what else to do, or who to call. I'm sorry."

"It's OK. Don't apologize. What do you need?"

Bradley learns that the sexual assault nurse examiner at University Hospital has called the shelter. Patient name and room number given. Request for victim advocate. She tells Sheryl she will be there in 20 to 30 minutes. Within the next hour, Bradley will urge the victim to complete her rape kit, debrief with her two weeping roommates and argue with a new Cleveland cop who comes on way too strong in questioning the victim—a still drunk Case Western freshman, who was allegedly assaulted at an all-day frat party. She had passed out while draped on the steps of St. Rocco's Church after wandering disoriented and disheveled in the Little Italy neighborhood of Murray Hill. When Bradley finally returns home at 3:30 a.m., she has

almost forgotten how angry she was hours earlier when she heard that Bruce Van Pelt had won the Ohio Republican gubernatorial primary.

Conservative media applaud Rep. Van Pelt's candidacy, but liberal pundits claim his rise has been a well-orchestrated sham, given the wealthy Republican's minimal legislative credentials during several congressional terms. Even critics, however, acknowledge his impressive political machine. Among his inner circle is former Wall Street wunderkind, younger brother, Jerry.

Merten and Delamore knew the Van Pelts from their fraternity days at Merriman University. Bruce (Bru) was older by two years. He was the alpha male, boisterous and charismatic, while the nebbish Jerry was nicknamed "Casper the Friendly Ghost." But you underestimated the younger Van Pelt at your own risk.

Now some 40 years later, Merten struggles to understand how Bru Van Pelt basks in glory while justice is denied. *Some wounds weren't meant to heal*, Merten says to himself. With pen in hand, he wonders about Nick Delamore.

Has he really moved on, learned to live with it? Just another in a long list of regrets? Though they have been estranged for years, Merten is well acquainted with his friend's rationalizations.

Tonight, Merten searches for words that might persuade or provoke Delamore. *Fallacy*. Can anyone can stop Van Pelt's rise to power? *Fantasy*. Why do I ask Nick to confront a man he once called his big brother? *Futility*.

Delamore and Van Pelt had been football teammates, and Van Pelt recruited Nick into the Omega Epsilon Tau fraternity. They were kindred spirits—fun-loving pranksters and tough-minded brawlers who drew plenty of female attention. Nick naively saw Bru

as Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac's "holy goof," sex-addict pal. Nick enjoyed Bru's escapades until lines were crossed and tragedy struck.

Crumpled pages now burn in an old blue Maxwell House coffee can in Merten's stained kitchen sink. He tries, but he can't summon the words he seeks. He repeats the ritual for two nights. Then, on a beautiful Friday evening, May 4, the Good Lord delivers inspired prose, and his writing flows, paused by tearful recollections. He concludes with a prayer for Nick. *May you find redemption, my dear friend.*

He signs the letter ("With love and devotion to Christ"), adding a postscript: "God will strengthen and protect you." Merten leaves the rectory and hurries to the dented blue USPS mailbox outside Francesco Marin-Carle's Tex-Mex restaurant. Francesco and his wife, Maria, are heading to their new car, a silver Escalade, when they spot him and vigorously wave.

"Hola, Padre Alejandro! Buenas noches!"

He returns the greeting with an upraised hand and tired smile: "Buenas noches."

Sidewalks are more crowded than usual even for a Friday night as young people gather to celebrate the eve of Cinco de Mayo.

"Come join us, Padre," a young man standing a half block away shouts. The amiable fellow is tall and lean with bronzed skin, shoulder-length black hair and a toothy smile. "Come have a drink with us," he says as the crowd cheers, raising beer bottles. A symphony of car horns resonates, and the shouting continues.

"Gracias," Merten replies good-naturedly. "But it's past my bedtime."

"Adios and buena suerte, Padre Alejandro," the young man says, bidding his weary-looking pastor farewell.

“Buena suerte, mis amigos.” Again a wave of thanks and back to the rectory for Merten. The evening’s celebration has sparked memories of another some 40 years earlier in Sussex, Ohio. But this is a barbed recollection.

On the eve of the annual Hawaiian Luau party, a stocky, darkly handsome Alex Merten stands with a group of men drinking Mogen-David 20-20 (“Mad Dog”) from leather wineskins. They watch Mitchell Crouse and Bru Van Pelt rotate the carcass of a large pig, the fire spiking and crackling with greasy drippings. The Omegas surround the ceremonial roasting as frat president Van Pelt proclaims: “Wait till my little Pi Phi is sizzling on my spit.”

The amiable Merten is tired of Van Pelt’s crude boastings and his lewd remarks. He won’t challenge him, though he longs to yell: *Just shut the fuck up!* Instead, Merten howls along with the other lackeys on this mild southern Ohio night. He tells himself that if he had more guts, he would confront the sonufabitch. But here he stands with a shit-eating grin. *Just go with the flow.* His reticence prelude to the sins of that fateful weekend.

A year later, Merten would forgo plans to pursue law school and, instead, surprise family and friends by entering the seminary. He will serve as a devoted priest through five decades. But for all the good he has accomplished in this sacred calling, he remains haunted by his failures. Now it is too late. Van Pelt has grown too powerful. But with God’s grace, Nick Delamore will rise up and challenge the man who has hurt so many people. A reckoning. That is Merten’s final plea.

Tonight, the aging priest again leaves the rectory, still wearing his trademark black pants, short-sleeve back shirt and white cleric’s collar. This time he heads to the river as the fragrant, balmy evening air envelops him. He moves steadfastly toward his

destination—the banks of the Rio Grande, where a beautiful sunset has settled hours earlier. Now a full moon cascades swaths of silver light on the rushing waters.

The warmth of the early spring day still lingers, rising from the cracked sidewalks of the poor Mexican-American neighborhood. The noise from revved up muscle cars and the clamor of distant voices comforts Merten even now. These are his parishioners, and how grateful he has been for the love bestowed upon him through the years.

He arrived here wanting to build a new life, and he found a place where people needed and trusted him. If only he felt worthy of their affection. As hard as he has tried to accept their embrace, a part of him was always enjoined to another place, a former life.

He pauses to study the strong current of this masculine river. The sound of the rushing water is soothing. He recites the rosary, holding it gingerly in his calloused, tremorous right hand. Once he had been a champion swimmer, earning a college scholarship. Few who saw him now as a lumbering padre would ever believe he had been a competitive athlete. His jet-black hair has long since turned to pewter gray. He had shaved his once-trademark thick moustache decades earlier upon entering the seminary.

Ironically, it was that moustache and dark looks that led many at Merriman to believe Merten was Hispanic. The Omegas used to call him “Garcia.” In the late 1950s, when many in the fraternity were just boys, a TV show named “Zorro,” was popular. The hero was a dashing masked outlaw in California during the days of Spanish rule. Sergeant Garcia was a hapless, chubby, mustachioed Spanish soldier, who struggled in vain to capture Zorro. Merten’s frat brothers said he was a spitting image of Sergeant

Garcia. Few knew he was mostly of German descent, not a trace of Latino in his ancestry.

Now overlooking the rushing sparkling river, Merten recalls his long friendship with Nick. How surprised his parishioners would be to learn of his secular past. Father Alex was in a fraternity? How was that possible? He is a priest, a celibate man of God. Fraternity men are drunkards and fornicators. How could he have lived that kind of life? What made him want to become a priest? As much as Merten loved his congregants, he could no more tell them the truth than he could his own family.

He finishes his rosary with an Act of Contrition, praying he will ultimately be forgiven. He rises slowly from his knees, groaning loudly. He glances about to ensure he is alone at this tranquil site along the riverbank. Legions of stars shine above. Nearby, dogs bark. Soon the Cinco de Mayo celebrations will erupt in this humble neighborhood. There will be cheering, some fireworks, perhaps gunshots into the air. Parishioners will stop by the rectory to invite their beloved Padre Alejandro to their homes.

Carefully he removes his worn thick-soled black shoes and places them on the dirt path leading to the river's edge. In one shoe, his wristwatch and wallet, in the other—his faded black-beaded rosary and white cleric's collar. He shakes his head to quell the static and banish the image of that poor unconscious woman in the shower stall. Time to erase all bad memories and seek eternal rest. *Selfish? Sinful? Perhaps.* But even in those final moments, Father Alex Merten prays for his family, for Nick and for others on the road to perdition. *May almighty God forgive and bless all of us.*

Chapter 1

Those who knew and loved the brash, bold Nick Delamore could issue a warning decades later: Prepare to be disappointed. He was hardly hero material. For those expecting a flawed man but with a strong moral center, keep searching. Nick was that kind of guy once upon a time, but it had been quite a slide.

When he learned of Alex's death ("by apparent suicide"), he said all the right things to Merten's older brother, Jim. But Nick was angry at his old friend for taking the easy way out. Earlier on that May evening before Jim's call, Nick had read Alex's letter, which arrived as a thick envelope.

He was genuinely curious when he saw the return address from St. Philip's Church in McAllen, Texas. He thought maybe Alex had found some memorabilia from their college days or an old news story Nick had written back in his prime. Then again, Nick thought, maybe this was just another appeal for donations.

Once Nick read the first few lines, he realized the letter was escorted by problems that couldn't be alleviated with a \$50 check. Alex's prose could have been less melodramatic, but, given the circumstances and his likely mental state at the time, it was coherent, albeit foreboding: "Dear Nick, As I watched the news coverage of Van

Pelt's primary victory, I could no longer remain silent about what transpired in the fraternity all those years ago. I know you have long wished I could just forget the past and move on. But I have never forgotten and have never stopped asking for forgiveness from my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If I were a more courageous man, I would now do whatever was necessary to bring the truth to light. But I am weak. ..."

Nick could anticipate what was coming. Alex would ask him to "take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them." How many times had he spoken of *Hamlet* as his favorite work of Shakespeare? And how often had he begged Nick to let him go to the police to explain their role?

"Don't be stupid," Nick had chided his guilt-ridden friend in the panic-stricken days that followed Clarice Johnson's death. "We moved the body. That makes us complicit. Do you understand?"

As Nick read the letter, he again saw Alex and him struggling to carry the heavy unconscious woman out of the frat house in a makeshift shroud of sheets and blankets.

Alex described events from that desperate evening in meticulous detail, as if transcribing a deposition. Nick thought he had written the letter less like a priest and more like an overeager law student, which was what he had once aspired to be. He said he appreciated Nick's efforts to protect him and his family, but he reiterated that the two of them should have done more. And he asked Nick to examine his conscience and the course of his own life. "How many of your personal and professional failures are due to the regret you've carried as I have done?"

No offense, pal, but I don't need you playing pop psychologist, Nick thought when he first read the letter. *What in the hell was Alex expecting from him after all this*

time? To accuse the next governor of Ohio of rape and manslaughter? Really, Alex? No wonder you jumped in that friggin' river. You were out of your mind.

Nick reread his late friend's letter twice, word for word. *How did he remember all this? And why? Just because Van Pelt was another ambitious, duplicitous politician was no reason for such recollections. What was to be gained?*

Alex was asking Nick to seek justice, but for whom? Johnson was dead, and Van Pelt was virtually untouchable. Even if evidence could be discovered, no criminal charges could be filed. The statute of limitations in Ohio was 20 years. Legal options aside, Van Pelt's election was all but guaranteed by political observers. How could Nick alter anyone's fate?

Once, he relished challenging those in power. At the height of his career with the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* newspaper, he had been a Pulitzer Prize-finalist, based on his impressive investigative reporting on the Teamsters Union and its corrupt president Jackie Presser. There was a book deal, an HBO movie and national exposure. Back then, Nick was a journalistic force, capable of raising serious questions about Van Pelt's character. But his glory days had long since passed.

He had gone from a celebrated reporter to a casualty of ego and reckless behavior. His "issues" had ended his second marriage after 14 years and jeopardized his career. He could no longer be trusted with prime assignments, and his anger and vindictiveness alienated editors and once loyal friends and newsroom colleagues. After the *Plain Dealer*, he had an assortment of jobs each one progressively worse. Nick didn't see it that way until it was too late. He told people "he'd be back on top of his game in no time."

His downward spiral continued until January 2011, when he found himself working at a 25,000-circulation Gannett-owned paper in central Indiana. The one-time “boy wonder” of the newsroom was now a grumbling general assignment reporter going through the motions of his job. He wrote stories on mundane topics such as the deteriorating infrastructure in Carlson, Ind. Hundreds of words on potholes. During the holidays, his first year in town, he covered Santa’s arrival at the local strip mall on the back of a city garbage truck.

Nick was hanging on precariously in an age when veteran news people were being fired by the tens of thousands nationwide. He was a dinosaur. He wasn’t cut out to shoot his own photos much less video. He had no interest in creating dandy Web pages for his regularly updated stories. The youngsters in the *Times-Union* newsroom viewed him with curiosity or disdain. They knew little of his once distinguished past as a top investigative reporter long before the term multi-media was uttered at any damn paper. Nick’s current thirty-something editor-in-chief was riding him to become a “convergence journalist,” to be read as much online as in print. But the “old guy” was a lost cause, and his obstinate attitude was hastening his demise.

At 59, the onetime college linebacker now listed noticeably when he walked, like a fishing trawler on stormy seas. His chronic bad back was the result of old football injuries and 10,000 days and nights hunched over typewriters and keyboards. A paunchy 6-foot, 200-plus pounds, Nick couldn’t recall the last time he had played racquetball, pickup basketball, even a friendly game of touch football. In later years, he had endured kidney stones, a nagging prostrate and colitis. He popped tiny green Imodium A-D pills as if they were Tic Tacs.

He was grateful for his almost full head of tan hair flecked with gray. The once-tight curls had become an odd mix of soft waves and brittle patches. In his younger days, people said he resembled leading man James Caan. Now Nick looked more like the comedic actor Albert Brooks. His fleshy lined face dominated by thick-lensed wire-rim glasses.

Still, he rationalized he had preserved enough of his good looks and shadow of his athletic physique to attract pretty pre-menopausal women. Make no mistake: The twice-divorced Delamore wanted no long-term commitments or even short-lived companionship beyond the bedroom. Most nights he'd fall asleep in his worn brown leather recliner, holding a glass of Dewar's on the rocks as the TV droned on. This grumpy almost-old man seemed unlikely for anything remotely redemptive much less heroic. And that was just fine by him.

While rereading Alex's letter, he poured himself another scotch and then popped a Lean Cuisine dinner of chicken, rice and green beans in his microwave. "A fabulous meal for the world-famous reporter," he boasted. But he never got a chance to eat the plate of processed food because the phone rang twice on that May night. The first call was from Jim Merten, and the other was from Nick's ex-wife Megan Bradley, who wanted to talk about more than Alex's death.

Nick wondered how Jim had tracked him down in Indiana. It wasn't as if he were on Facebook, Linked-in or Twitter. He refused to engage in social media, considering it a waste of time and self-indulgent preening. Since he had left the *Plain Dealer*, Delamore wasn't exactly a well-known journalist. His fame had been short-lived. So how did Jim find him?

"Called Megan," he said. "Nice you two have stayed in touch since"

“Since we split up twenty-some years ago,” Nick grouched. “You probably think that’s crazy, right?”

Then he apologized for his surly tone. How could he be angry with Jim, who was grieving his brother’s death?

“Alex always said Megan was the best thing that ever happened to me,” Nick added. “And he kept reminding me long after the divorce.”

The two men chuckled briefly. Then Jim said: “Nick, we’re bringing Alex’s body back to Cincinnati. The funeral is Saturday, and the family would enjoy seeing you again after all these years. Hope you can be there.”

“Absolutely, you got it,” Nick said. “And, listen, I’m really sorry for your loss.”

“And for yours,” Jim said. “Alex always considered you like another brother.”

“Thanks. Appreciate that. Almost forgot. Where’s the funeral?”

“We wanted it to be in the cathedral downtown where Alex was ordained. But because of the manner of his death, the diocese won’t allow it in a Catholic church. So, it’ll be at noon at Armbruster’s Funeral Home on Colerain Avenue near the Gateway Mall.”

When the call ended, Nick sipped his now lukewarm scotch and reflected on the early days of his friendship with Alex. Back then, Merten was his husky pal who wore a ready smile, especially when his love affair with hometown honey, Donna Carvel, was in full bloom. How he would drone on in his Cincinnati “twang” about his gorgeous girlfriend and how lucky he was to be with her. Nick either pretended to listen to Alex’s romantic ramblings or ignored him out right. In return, Merten called Delamore a “jaded Casanova who never knew what true love was all about.”

But Nick was there when Alex's relationship came crashing down. He confided in Nick how Donna got pregnant the first time they made love and how he had borrowed money from Van Pelt (who gave him a check and a pat on the back) to help pay for the "sad, awful" trip to New York City for an abortion over Christmas break. A month later, just before Valentine's Day, 1973, the two former high school sweethearts broke up.

Nick would find him moping in their small corner room on the second floor, listening to the same Cat Stevens albums day after day. Donna wouldn't answer Alex's letters or phone calls. No way to make things right. Those were dark days, but the worst were yet to come.

After that terrible spring of 1973, Merten spiraled into depression and dropped out of Merriman the summer before his senior year. He returned to Cincinnati, eschewing contact with the outside world, reading the Bible and sleeping in his boyhood twin bed. Nick said Alex was living like Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk.

Over the years, Nick joked that Alex became a priest so he could wear those colorful Sunday vestments, give speeches to a captive audience and drink gallons of free church wine. But he was proud that Merten was one of those Berrigan-brother priests, the kind who protested for social justice, did good works and "walked the walk."

Nick thought Alex was happy in his humble Tex-Mex parish. But now, in the wake of his death, he wondered why all that sacrifice and service wasn't enough to sustain his friend, enough to erase any past sins.

Just a couple freaked-out guys trying to do the best we could, Nick thought, reciting old words as he stood in the dimly lit kitchen of his starkly furnished apartment. But in his mind, he was pushing open the squeaky wooden door of that second-floor frat

house bathroom, feeling the rush of warm steamy air from the running showers and smelling the stench of spilled liquor, secretion and excrement.

While Nick repeatedly recast the narrative of that night as the actions of two frantic 20-year-olds, Alex Merten never could. He carried regret throughout his life, choosing to end it some 40 years later. That made no sense to Nick.

Why Alex? Why now? We were the good guys. We tried to do the right thing. Right?

“Who the hell knows?” Nick said, gulping down another belt of scotch as his cell phone rang again.

“I was so sorry to hear the news about Alex.” Megan Bradley’s distinctive rapid-fire Dorchester, Mass., accent had never changed, even though she had spent more than half her life in the Midwest. She talked, walked and thought faster than most people. In their younger romantic days, her energy and antics attracted Nick. Over time these same traits grew to aggravate him.

“Jim called you,” Nick said, slurring his words, “and you gave him my number?”

“You didn’t want to hear about Alex’s death?”

“His suicide. Suicide.”

“I know. That’s what Jim said. Just so sad.”

“Happens to the best of us, even a priest.”

“So damn sad. I mean I hadn’t seen Alex in ... forever. But he was such a good guy.”

“Amen to that, sister.”

“Why did I know you’d make a joke about all this?” Megan asked and then answered herself. “Of course, that’s how you always deal with emotional things.”

“Of course,” Nick replied, his gruff voice becoming more animated. “You know me like a friggin’ book.” Although he had also lived in the Midwest for most of his adult life, tonight Nick sounded like he was back in his gritty hometown of Barrington, N.Y.

“OK. I didn’t call to fight with you,” Megan said. “Just wanted to say I was sorry about Alex and to let you know I’ll be at the funeral. You’re going, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Geez, you’re something else. Hitting the scotch pretty good tonight?”

“Bingo. Megan scores again. Look, gotta go. *Deer Hunter*’s on Showtime.”

“Don’t you ever get enough of that Vietnam stuff?”

“It’s Bobby DeNiro. You serious?”

“OK, I’ll leave you to your bro-mance. But we need to talk after the funeral.”

“About what?”

“For starters, what we can do to stop Van Pelt.”

“What we can do? Who’s we?” Nick asked, his tone souring. “You mean you and Kwame?”

“Cut the crap. I’m helping with his campaign, and we could use your help.”

“You forget I’m a journalist? Can’t get involved in political campaigns. A little thing called conflict of interest.”

“Yeah, right, like when George Will wrote speeches for Reagan.”

“I think it was the first Bush, actually.”

“Whatever,” Megan said, her words rushing by Nick, who was already starting to tune her out. “I’m not talking about you doing anything official. It would be more behind the scenes.”

“Cool, I could be Deep Throat,” Nick said sarcastically. “Sorry not interested.”

“Don’t you even care that a guy like him could be the next governor? You know him as well as anybody, Nick. You of all people should care.”

“Knew him a long time ago. Maybe he’s got his act together.”

“Seriously? You’re not defending that S.O.B. are you?” Megan’s voice grew shrill. “After all this time, you still think he was just some happy-go-lucky frat guy who got carried away with some drunken sorority girls? Really, is that what you think? Because if you do”

“All I’m saying is”

“What? What the hell are you saying?”

“What I’m saying, if you’d let me finish, is that there are false accusations. You know, like a few years ago with the Duke rugby team.”

Nick thought he heard Megan grind her teeth.

“Jeezus,” she exhaled. “It was the lacrosse team in 2006, and that was about lack of evidence not false accusations.”

“I stand corrected.”

“Ninety-five percent of sexual assault victims are telling the truth,” Megan said. “You should know that.”

“Maybe. But I was reading this article by what’s her name? You know, the bigtime feminist? Oh yeah, Camille Paglia. About today’s hookup culture. How these young women exploit their sexuality. A girl comes on to a guy. She sends provocative texts. Then starts sexting. Maybe they both do. Anyway, they screw. But then she changes her mind, claiming she regrets what she’s done. Maybe because she’s afraid her parents will find out she’s been sleeping around. So now she says he sexually assaulted her, and the

guy is forever labeled a predator, a sex offender. What I'm saying is the falsely accused angle is more interesting. Challenges conventional wisdom."

"Paglia's a raving lunatic. And what you describe happens so rarely that, when it does, it gets blown out of proportion. Most victims suffer in silence. Again, you should know that. Maybe if you looked into what's happening on the Hempstead campus, in your own backyard, you'd get off your ass and write about the truth. Instead of trying to challenge fucking conventional wisdom."

"How'd we get off on this tangent? Thought you were talking about Van Pelt."

"I was until you started ranting about going after some falsely accused guy, sexual assault story. But there's no point talking anymore tonight. You're just"

"Hey, if Van Pelt wins this election, he wins. Nothing I can do about it."

"Great attitude, Delamore. For someone who used to care about some pretty important things, you sure have flamed out."

"And you always remember to tell me how disappointed you are."

"We're done here," Megan said, followed by a long sigh. "Can't believe I even tried to talk to you tonight. Say hi to Bobby for me."

"Bobby? Bobby who?"

"DeNiro," Megan said flatly before clicking off.

Nick had to hand it to his ex. She could still get him riled up. They hadn't talked in over a year. Their last call was when Nick phoned to congratulate her for being invited to the White House by Michelle Obama, who had organized a national panel on domestic violence. Megan was chosen for her exemplary work as founding director of Cleveland's "A Safe Place," the largest women's shelter in Ohio. She had started in the

field back in the 1970s as a feisty grad student in the Campus Counseling Center at Merriman University, where she and Nick had met.

Their relationship had been as passionate and problematic as could be expected from the union of two strong-willed East Coasters. After they divorced, Megan's career continued to flourish, while Nick's declined precipitously. He joked that she had propped him up during his successful years, and once she dumped him, he lost his bearings and was set adrift.

When Nick clicked the TV back on to watch *The Deer Hunter*, he forgot he had been watching the election coverage on CNN. He couldn't believe his timing. A commercial was now playing for Van Pelt's Christian charity, "Gather My Sheep." There was Bru and his wife, Susie, in some godforsaken African village surrounded by several laughing brown-skinned children. Bru had two of them in his arms, and he was smiling along with them. It was a well-produced, convincing commercial that made him look downright saintly.

Nick stared intently at the image of his former friend and fraternity brother on the TV. "Who the hell knows?" he muttered. "Who the hell really knows?"

Chapter 2

Alex Merten's service was attended by more than 200 people, who gathered on a sunny late spring day in a suburban Cincinnati funeral home. Standing room only with rows of folding chairs clear to the rear of the parlor. On portable bulletin boards in the lobby were photos from his past lives—as young Alex, as “Garcia” in college and as Father Alex (“Padre Alejandro”).

Nick had glanced at the pictures as an anthropologist might study artifacts from a lost civilization. He and Alex together smiling, arms around each other back in their college days. More smiles with Nick and Megan at their 1976 wedding. Most of the photos were with happy souls from Alex's many years in St. Philip's parish in McAllen, Texas.

After Nick hugged Jim, Alex's white-haired polar bear big brother, and expressed his condolences to his frail 87-year-old widowed mother, Mary, and grieving brothers and sisters, he turned to take his seat in the back. En route he saw Megan motion to the empty chair next to her. He nodded and moved slowly toward his ex-wife's location in the main parlor. Her short dark hair was streaked with gray, but she was still an attractive woman in her early sixties with a trim figure and a relatively unlined face, dominated by sparkling blue eyes and a cute upturned nose.

“Still look like a leprechaun,” Nick joked under his breath after giving Megan a perfunctory hug.

“And you've put on a few pounds, Delamore,” Megan countered.

“Can't argue with that,” Nick said with a smile. “But I carry it well, right?”

Once seated he asked Megan about her longtime boyfriend.

“Where’s Roger?”

“Cleveland State’s graduation. As dean, he had to attend.”

“Course he did,” Nick replied, staring at the closed casket topped by the framed picture of me in my vestments surrounded by beaming brown faces. Nick certainly didn’t want to chat further about Megan’s relationship. And she knew better than to ask Nick if he was seeing anyone.

“Who’s the tall guy?” he asked. “Looks a little like Clint Eastwood.”

“An old Jesuit friend of Alex’s from seminary. Father Gary Scott,” Megan said. “He can’t officiate as a priest, but Jim said he’ll lead the service. Can you believe they wouldn’t allow the funeral in the cathedral? Alex gave all those years to the church, and they refuse a Catholic service.”

“Tough union. Those padres don’t like suicide. Not good PR for the priesthood.”

“Well I think it sucks,” Megan said, as the ceremony began with the lanky off-duty Jesuit in dark jeans, blue running shoes and a green, yellow and red Hawaiian-print shirt, acknowledging my mother and siblings. Nick was impressed that Alex had survived eight years in the seminary not to mention decades in the priesthood. Being celibate was tough enough, but how did he deal with all that bureaucracy? As a liberal-minded college student, Alex had quietly rebelled against institutional hierarchies, claiming they crushed people’s spirits. Yet he had been a card-carrying member and cog in the machine of the 1.5 billion-member Holy Roman Catholic Church. The tradeoff was Alex’s joy in serving the poor, where he found his true calling, said Fr. Gary Scott at the funeral service.

“I wish each of you could have seen the joy on those children’s faces in that humble community in McAllen,” he said. Scott’s sonorous voice was DJ quality. “They loved Padre Alejandro. Their Father Alex. And how he loved them.”

As Father Scott spoke, Nick understood how Alex had reinvented himself as a priest. What he couldn’t grasp was why after all these years and all these good works he would take his life. *Surely, God had forgiven this humble, loving man for any of his sins*, Nick thought sitting in that funeral home.

The service concluded with remarks from Jim Merten and Gerri, one of Alex’s sisters. There were touching memories shared along with humorous anecdotes. Nick watched several people dabbing tears from their eyes. Megan cried along with many others that day. Nick was stoic, preferring to remember the good times he and Alex had shared first as fraternity roommates and then as long-distance friends.

Just before Father Scott stood once more to thank everyone for coming and to announce the gathering later at Jim’s house, Nick hurried to the rest room. These days, he could barely go 30 minutes without having to hit the nearest john. As he was rinsing off his hands, a compact balding man entered the lavatory. He and Nick made brief eye contact, but there was no immediate recognition. Yet Nick had a premonition, as if he knew this short, stocky guy with the pale complexion. Nick paused to play with some lingering curls in his thinning hair, waiting until the guy turned from the urinal and approached the sink.

“Gunner, that you?”

The man smiled shyly and waited until he washed and dried his hands with a couple paper towels before responding.

“Long time, Dago.”

“Damn straight. How the hell are you?”

The two men shook hands and gave each other a brief hug. Glen “Gunner” Gunderson was an Omega with Nick and Alex. The three had roomed together sophomore year. Gunner was one of the few Democrats in the frat. He, Nick and Alex were the only Omegas who voted for McGovern in 1972; whereas, more than 50 enthusiastically pulled the lever for Nixon.

“You still live in Cinci?” Nick asked, his mood brightened by this chance meeting.

“Moved back a few years ago to take care of my mom. Was living in Boston for a long time. What about you?”

“Carlson, Indiana. Can you believe it? I’m living in the boonies,” Nick said, smiling.

“Had a cousin who went to Hempstead. Not a bad college town,” Gunner said, gazing in the mirror at the faint scar that ran down his forehead to his right eyebrow.

“Says you,” Nick said, glancing at Gunner’s reflection.

Just then, frosty-haired Jim opened the door, looking anxious. “Nick, we could use you as a pallbearer. OK?”

“Sure, be right there.” Gunner was leaving when Nick slapped him on the back. “Man, it was good to see you. We should get together sometime.”

The two men exchanged business cards and shook hands. As Gunner was walking into the crowded parlor, Nick abruptly asked: “You voting for Van Pelt?” And then he chuckled.

Gunner turned and stared curiously at him as if he was caught off guard by Nick’s question. Gunner lowered his head briefly. When he looked up, he was tightlipped with watery eyes.

“Take care, Nick,” he said softly before disappearing into the mass of people exiting the funeral home.

As Nick made his way to the front of the room, where the walnut casket awaited him and the other pallbearers, he saw Megan consoling Alex’s fragile mother, who sobbed quietly into a blue and white flowered handkerchief. Megan glanced at Nick and mouthed the words, “We need to talk.” He nodded and took his position with the other pallbearers.

Alex Merten was buried on that sun-soaked afternoon on a hillside overlooking his hometown. Father Scott said that Alex’s corporeal existence had ended, but his loving spirit was now free to roam. Then he joked: “Just no haunting allowed. Omniscient observation was OK but no earthly interference.”

After the service, Nick joined family and friends at Jim’s Tudor-style house, a few miles away. He ate a ham sandwich and some German potato salad off a paper plate and sipped a can of Diet Coke. Megan drank black coffee from a Styrofoam cup and cornered Nick by the staircase.

“Who were you talking to when you came out of the bathroom?”

“Why? You trailing me?”

“Did he go to Merriman?”

“Gunner, I mean, Glen Gunderson. He, Alex and I roomed together sophomore year. Good guy. Haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“Nice of him to come. Alex touched a lot of lives.”

“Absolutely. He sure did.”

“There’s something you should know about Alex,” she continued.

“Something? Like what?” Nick replied tentatively, placing the paper plate on a sandy-colored carpeted step behind him. He intended to finish his sandwich after hearing out Megan. But he lost his appetite when she spoke of a phone call a year earlier between Van Pelt and Alex.

She explained how Alex had also mailed her a letter on the last day of his life. In that letter, he apologized for burdening her. But he asked her to speak to Nick about Van Pelt. As Nick listened to Megan, he wondered how far had Alex gone? Had he broken their vow of silence?

“I’m not following,” Nick said abruptly, studying Megan’s expression. It reminded him of the startled look on Gunner’s face less than two hours earlier.

“He called Alex last summer to tell him he was running for governor,” Megan said. “He asked for his support. Told him he was calling old Omegas. Tried to charm him, offered to contribute to his parish. But when Alex told him he could never endorse him, the conversation changed. He threatened to tell Alex’s bishop about him being in the fraternity, about him borrowing money to pay for an abortion and other ‘embarrassing behavior.’ ‘We’re Omegas—‘til death do us part,’ Van Pelt said. Then he laughed hysterically before hanging up.”

Nick bit his lower lip and glanced across the living room where dark-suited men and women in muted-colored dresses ate and drank and commiserated.

“He wrote you about all this but said nothing to me?” Nick said. “Doesn’t make any sense. Why would Van Pelt think Alex could do anything to help or hurt his campaign?”

Megan cleared her throat. “I don’t know. You tell me. Maybe he thought you and Alex were still in regular contact. Maybe he wanted to make sure *you* didn’t do anything to screw things up. Maybe he was using Alex to get to you.”

“Come on,” Nick said, feeling his bad left knee throb as he stood on the staircase and leaned on the black metal railing for support. “Stop with all the conspiracy stuff. If Van Pelt was so concerned, he could have just called me instead of contacting Alex.”

“He obviously didn’t want you involved. You’re a reporter.”

“Involved? What the hell can I do about an Ohio election? I’m at a podunk paper in Indiana.”

“You still know a lot of people.”

“Maybe. But like I told you before, I can’t get involved.”

Megan’s blue eyes narrowed, and her mouth clamped shut. Color rose in her pretty face as she faced Nick.

“Damn it, you’re already involved, and you have been all these years whether you admit or not. You keep trying to forget about people like Alex or Allyson. Or have you erased her memory too? Alex was right. You’re probably the only one who can stop Van Pelt from being elected. But you still think of him as your old frat buddy, your big brother. What I can’t understand is how he still has so damn much power over you.”

“Calm down,” Nick said. “I don’t know what you’re getting so upset about?” He resisted a grin. Megan could curse with the best of ’em. When you’re raised in Dorchester, you’re no shrinking violet. Nick drew closer to her. Close enough to kiss her. Instead he reprimanded her. “Hey, lower your voice. How about some respect for Alex?”

“How dare you!” she said pushing him against the metal railing. “Don’t talk to me about respect for Alex. His death wasn’t enough to understand what he wanted from

you? Are you kidding me?” Megan turned and stormed away, rushing past mourners crowded into the living room. Nick turned with a crooked smile, trying to allay the concerns of nearby mourners. He left a few minutes later after again paying his respects to Alex’s family.

Later, Nick was stuck in a meandering line of traffic, slowed by orange barrel construction delays on I-75 South. Up ahead, he saw the sign for I-275 and one for Louisville. He was headed back to Carlson, to his crummy little one-bedroom apartment and to his dead-end job at the *Times-Union* paper.

But on this day of grieving and retrospection, he was detoured in memory to an old destination. He was heading to verdant Kentucky on spring break, 1972. Now separated from his young wife, Linda, and baby son, Joey, Nick was free to do as he pleased. They had left Ohio months earlier and returned to New York. Nick was eager to forget about his mistakes and spend time with Bru Van Pelt, who had told him to bring swim trunks, his golf clubs and something decent to wear to the country club for dinner. All Nick had was his worn beige corduroy sport coat. It would have to do—until Bru took him shopping unexpectedly for a new navy blazer at a classy downtown men’s store. “Consider it an early Easter present from your Omega big brother,” he said.

Those days Nick saw Van Pelt at his best. He had his good friend from high school, Jonah “Moby Dick” Moore, shoot hoops with Nick and him at his backyard b-ball court that also doubled as a tennis court. Moore was a black inner-city kid who had earned a scholarship to attend Bru’s preppy high school. The two towering players dominated their suburban basketball league. On this spring break, the three men enjoyed playing b-ball and lounging around the pool afterward, sipping cold Coors beer

that Bru's father, Brian, had flown in special from Denver as he did each month on his company's private jet.

On Sunday, after lunch at the Louisville Country Club, the Van Pelts hosted a niece's 12th birthday party at their house. Nick watched in bemusement as Van Pelt gave a gaggle of kids endless rides in a family golf cart. Grinning, shouting boys and girls were hanging on to Uncle Bru as he drove like "Bobby Unser at the Indy 500" around and around the spacious grounds of the Van Pelt homestead. Years later, Nick would see a photo of JFK driving a bunch of Kennedy kids at Hyannis Port that was eerily similar to the family scene he observed in Kentucky that enjoyable weekend.

And now, decades later, after what Megan had told him, he was supposed to forget such scenes ever existed. He should think of Van Pelt only as a sinister force and a foe. That's what Megan wanted. Alex must have also decided Van Pelt had no redeeming values. Had he forgotten the \$500 Bru loaned him for his trip to New York with Donna, never asking for an IOU? What about that St. Patrick's Day party when Van Pelt saved Alex from getting his face kicked in by those townie goons?

A long time ago during a very rough patch, Bru had stepped up to help Nick. He knew Van Pelt wasn't a saint, but neither was Richie Zambrelli, Nick's old gang leader from his teenage brawling days back in New York. Richie had meant something to Nick, too. Like Bru, he had looked out for Nick, protected him and showed him good times. Both guys acted like they cared, instead of ignoring him, mocking him or ragging on him constantly like his real big brother, Matt, had done throughout childhood. That's why it had always been hard to explain to Megan and even to Alex about the bond he had once felt with Bru back when they had each other's back.

“Sounds like you two had some kind of love affair,” Megan sniped when she and Nick first started dating in college. She distrusted frat guys and knew about Van Pelt’s reputation with women at Merriman University. She was standoffish toward Nick for the longest time until he had shown her that he was worthy of her trust. He assured her he would leave the fraternity after his junior year. But Megan still questioned how he could ever have been in the frat and friends with Van Pelt.

By the middle of his junior year, Nick and Bru’s relationship had changed. They circled each other cautiously and hardly spoke. Something had come between them. Some Omegas suspected it had to do with Allyson Chambers, the cute freshman who went to the Viking Party with Van Pelt instead of Delamore. But no girl had ever come between the two guys before.

When Alex had asked Nick about the rift, he just shrugged him off. Alex didn’t pursue the reasons for their falling out. He was too caught up in his own melodrama with on-again, off-again girlfriend, Donna.

Now, all these years later, Megan wanted Nick to help her challenge Van Pelt’s candidacy. She was supporting Cleveland Mayor Kwame Imani in the governor’s race. Was there more to Nick’s reluctance to get involved in the political campaign than journalistic ethics?

The reason for Nick’s intransigence had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with enduring jealousy. As Nick’s salty-tongued, WWII vet dad used to quip: “Watch out when sex rears its ugly head.” Kwame Imani (aka Kevin Williams in his early undergrad days at Merriman) was Nick’s romantic rival during and after college for Megan Bradley’s affections. The ebony-ivory soap opera had reappeared through the years. For all Nick knew, maybe Megan and Kwame had resumed their old

romantic ways. If that were the case, why in hell would he do anything to help the guy, regardless of how Nick felt toward Van Pelt as a Republican gubernatorial candidate?

Nick rationalized it would be wasted effort to help Imani, who had no chance of winning this election. Van Pelt's campaign was backed by national Tea Party leadership, wealthy contributors like the Koch brothers, and prominent advisors, strategists and management experts. He was surrounded by longtime loyalists, many of whom were Omega frat brothers. These men were respected business and civic leaders throughout Ohio and the Midwest. About all they might say to a reporter in reference to Van Pelt's collegiate past was that he was quite the ladies' man.

Was that a crime? Hardly. As Nick knew, most guys had walked around those days with permanent hard-ons. When they had argued at Alex's wake, Megan accused him of defending Bru. But it was easy for her to be judge and jury. She knew Van Pelt only as an archetype, a fraternity stud who believed he was entitled to his conquests, which he and his cronies enjoyed recounting at drunken reunions.

How often through the years had Nick tried to prove to Megan that he never justified Van Pelt's behavior? He tried to convince her that he had no enduring ties to him or to any former frat brothers, except for Alex. He reminded her how the last time he and Van Pelt met, they had a vicious fight, and Nick broke Bru's nose. That was June 1973, and they hadn't spoken since.

Hours after Alex's funeral, Nick finally arrived back in Indiana, while thunderstorms rumbled across the state. As was his custom whenever there was bad weather, he knocked on the door of his elderly neighbor, Gloria Perdue.

"Gloria, it's Nick," he said. "You OK?"

He waited a short while to see if she would wobble to greet him. Maybe she had already turned in for the night. Nick was reaching for his keys when Gloria's door opened.

She was a solidly built woman but with two bad knees that prevented her from getting out on her own much. A longtime widow, she had no family nearby. Once a week, Nick picked up her grocery list and returned to help stock her shelves and fill her refrigerator. She insisted on giving him cash, which he always returned unspent when he dropped off her food and prescriptions.

"I'm fine. Bless your heart for checking on me," Gloria said cheerfully, leaning on her metal tripod cane. Her once clear blue eyes now fogged by glaucoma and cataracts.

"Just checking," Nick said, leaning over to give her a brief hug. "How's the garbage situation? Let me take it down for you."

"Oh, that's OK," she said. "Don't want to bother you. It's late."

"No problem," Nick said, stepping past her and into her narrow kitchen, where a small plastic grocery bag was tied to a knob on the sink cabinet. "Was getting pretty full. Good thing I checked."

"Thank you for looking out for me," she said, giving Nick's arm a little squeeze. "You're in my prayers every day."

"I need all I can get. You're saving my soul, Gloria."

"They were just talking about that on the 700 Club," she said, smiling at Nick, who headed downstairs with the bag of garbage.

Back in his apartment, Nick sat in his recliner, drinking a tall glass of Dewar's and watching ESPN's *SportsCenter*. The scotch coated his throat, but it failed to calm his mind as the day's reflections rushed by: Gunner's pained expression when Nick

mentioned Van Pelt. Mrs. Merten dabbing her eyes with a flowered handkerchief. Megan turning angrily from him on the stairs. *“There’s something you should know about Alex.”*

Come on, man,” Nick thought. *Why didn’t you call me when Bru called you? We should have talked. Why did he get to you like that? And why the hell did you jump in that damn river?*

Nick reached in his shirt pocket and retrieved the business card Gunner had given him at the funeral home. Beneath the Gunderson Financial Investments heading were office, fax and cell phone numbers. It was almost 10 p.m. Nick decided to call anyway. *If he doesn’t want to talk, he can let it go to voicemail.*

As the phone rang, Nick remembered how Gunner got his nickname. He loved chucking the basketball from long range in their intermural b-ball games. Hence the name Gunner.

Nick wondered what was behind that queer look Gunner flashed when he joked about the campaign. Nick knew Gunner never liked Van Pelt, the boisterous braggart who was always carrying on, always goofing on the shy, reserved Gunderson. But why the odd reaction today? Hadn’t Bru found Gunner after those townies jumped him? Didn’t he bring him to the emergency room for stitches? Gunner may not have been buddy-buddy with Van Pelt, but he couldn’t deny he had helped him that night. Could he?

After three rings, Nick was ready to leave a message. Then a fatigued voice answered.

“Gunner, it’s me, Dago.”

“Who?”

“Nick. Nick Delamore.”

“Oh, Nick. Hey, it’s pretty late, you know. Got an early day tomorrow.”

“This won’t take long,” Nick said. “But there’s something that’s been bugging me for a long time. Why did you leave Merriman?”

Gunner sighed. He started to respond, but his words were inaudible mumbles. When he spoke, it was more of a plea than a reply.

“Come on, Nick. It’s late. I just decided to transfer to UC. It was closer to home.”

“But you loved Merriman. Must have been tough getting beat up. But was that really why you left school?”

Again he sighed. “It’s a long story. And I really don’t want to go into it, OK?”

“Understand, but I think we both owe it to Alex to clear some things up.”

“Clear what things up? What are you talking about?” Gunner’s voice was stronger and testier. “Look, Alex was a good guy back in college. But I hadn’t been in touch with him for years, and now he’s dead. What exactly do I owe him?”

“I guess I really don’t know,” Nick said fumbling his response. “But it was good you came to the funeral.”

“We all deserve respect,” Gunner said. “You show up and try do the right thing. That’s why you were there, right, Nick?”

“Sure. Absolutely,” Nick said, wondering how far he should go in probing Gunner’s feelings toward Van Pelt. “Can I ask you something?”

“Come on, man. Can’t this wait until some other time?”

“Won’t be long. Promise. It’s just you acted strange today when I brought up Bru’s campaign.”

“When it comes to Van Pelt, I don’t have much to say.”

“Understand. I mean he was always busting your balls about something or other. But he did help you out the night those townies jumped you.”

“Helped me out? Nick, there weren’t any townies. It was him.”

For several minutes, Nick took notes on a legal pad as Gunner recounted his intimidation at the hands of Van Pelt in the spring of Gunner’s junior year. Bru often called out certain Omega frat brothers as “faggots.” It was usually good for a laugh, and then the insult was forgotten.

But in Gunner’s case, Bru seemed relentless in questioning his sexuality. Gunner tried to laugh off the accusations. But once Jerry Van Pelt joined the frat, Bru became increasingly paranoid as if he believed Gunner and Jerry were attracted to each other. Whenever they were together, even if he was in a group of other Omegas, Bru would stare Gunner down or do something to get him to leave.

“He never said anything to me about you and Jerry,” Nick said. “I mean there wasn’t anything between you two, right? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Gunner chuckled nervously. “Don’t mind me asking? Jeezus, Nick, why don’t you come out and say what you’re thinking. Was I gay? Was ‘Fairy Jerry’? And did Bru find out?”

On that mild mid-April night in 1973, Gunner had gone uptown for a few beers and some pinball with a couple friends from his econ class. He returned around midnight to the room he shared with sophomore gymnast Adam Henninger, who was sleeping down the hall. Omegas were either in the rack room, downstairs in the tube room watching Johnny Carson, or trying to get laid somewhere on campus. Bru was waiting in Gunner’s darkened room.

When he flipped the light switch, Bru was sitting bare-chested and barefoot in gray gym shorts on the arm of the cheap black vinyl couch. He was sipping from a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He offered Gunner a drink, but he declined.

"Come on, be a man, ya fuckin' queer." He grabbed Gunner by the neck and pushed the mouth of the bottle violently against his lips. A warm stream of bourbon, blood and saliva coursed down his face and chin. As Van Pelt began laughing at the pathetic sight, Gunner jerked backward and knocked Bru's arm away, the bottle crashing to the floor.

"You faggot sonufabitch," Bru said, grasping for Gunner who was almost to the door. Van Pelt dove at him as if trying to make a shoestring tackle. Gunner lost his balance and rammed into the doorjamb, splitting his forehead. He blacked out. When he came to, Bru was standing over him with a clenched fist.

"Swear to God, you better not be messing around with my kid brother," he slurred.

Although he was woozy and could feel blood flowing from his mouth and the gash on his face, Gunner attempted to get up. Bru knelt on his chest.

"You're not going anywhere until you swear you'll leave Jerry alone."

"You're crazy," Gunner wheezed. "Get off me."

"Swear to God, I'll beat the living shit out of you if you're messing with him."

"OK, I swear. I'm not, OK? I swear. Now get off."

"You're bleeding like a stuck pig," Bru said, now on his knees, inspecting Gunner's wounds. "Come on, I'll take you to the ER."

Gunner refused but Bru insisted. He helped him up and told him to sit on the couch while he found a small towel to stem the bleeding. Bru rushed to his room and

returned with a roll of athletic tape, which he used for an impromptu bandage. When he was done, the woozy Gunner looked as if he were wearing a candy cane-colored turban. Bru held him upright as they walked to his bright red Mustang.

“Now hold that towel tight,” Van Pelt ordered. “Don’t want you bleeding all over my new car.”

The next day, he concocted the story of how townies jumped Gunner outside one of the uptown bars. Somehow Gunner made it back to the Omega house “bloody as hell,” and Bru rushed him to the hospital. A week later, Gunner made plans to transfer to UC for his senior year. No Omegas ever knew the truth.

“Damn, I had no idea,” Nick said.

“Nobody did. Van Pelt may have been psycho, but nobody ever said he was stupid.”

“Why didn’t you tell anybody?”

“My word against his? He was like a god in that fraternity. And did you forget how his millionaire alumni parents endowed the new business school? Like anyone was really challenging him at Merriman. Nick, you were the only one who could stand up to Van Pelt. But back then you weren’t really around that much.”

Nick recalled in late spring of his junior year he and Megan had begun their rollercoaster love affair.

“Not trying to lay a guilt trip on you, Nick.”

“I’m just sorry, Gunner.”

“Not your fault. Took a while, but things turned out OK.”

“You married? Kids?”

Gunner chuckled, his laugh warm and genuine.

“Dago, for a wise guy New Yorker, you always were a little slow on the uptake. I’m gay. Have been my whole life. Like I said, Van Pelt was bad news, but he did have me pegged correctly.”

“Man. Could have fooled me. You always had dates at the parties. Good looking ones, too. And you played a mean game of b-ball.”

“I can still knock down three-pointers like Jimmy what’s his name on ‘Hoosiers’.”

“Chitwood. Jimmy Chitwood.” Now Nick laughed. He ended the call by thanking Gunner and telling him they would get together soon.

“I’d like that, Nick. Take care and don’t blame yourself for what happened. That was a long time ago.”

How could Nick have known that Bru’s story about the townies jumping Gunner was bogus? He was so matter of fact about the whole incident that Nick just believed him. And Gunner had supported his story when guys asked for details.

Nick ended the call without asking Gunner if he and Jerry Van Pelt were “involved” during their frat house days. What was the point? What would have been scandalous back then, now would scarcely register. A certain percentage of homosexual encounters in a fraternity, dormitory or barracks were expected. But in the early seventies on a conservative campus like Merriman, such behavior would have been devastating for a prominent family like the Van Pelts, where deviant sexual attitudes were verboten.

Bru had told Nick that when they were teenagers, if he tried to defend his effeminate brother from his father’s taunts, he would be taught a “proper lesson” in the family basement. Brian Van Pelt may have been a brilliant businessman, but he was a harsh, rigid father. He had been a decorated Marine in WWII, who saw horrific combat

in the South Pacific. When he returned home after the war, he was determined to be successful and to always be respected—by his wife, children, employees ... everyone. Or there would be hell to pay.

Nick learned early in his friendship with Bru that the source of his explosive anger lay in that expansive Louisville home. His father had been a heavyweight boxing champ in the service, and he had a makeshift ring built in the basement. That's where Bru learned to fight and where he was disciplined as an adolescent for his mischief, misdemeanors or just mouthing off. In the ring, Brian would lecture and hector his hardheaded oldest son while throwing sharp punches at the boy.

“Either you're a leader or a follower. A lion or a sheep. Which are you, Bruce?” If Bru answered in anything less than an appropriate answer forcefully voiced, Brian would cuff him on the side of the head or throw a sharp jab at his exposed ribs. If he dared to complain or showed an unacceptable level of engagement, the punishment would be a flurry of harder punches. When Bru grew older and stronger, he tried to retaliate.

“A couple times I tagged the old man, and that was all she wrote,” Bru recalled, telling Nick how Brian knew just where to deliver a knockout blow—on the left or right temple or with an uppercut to the jaw. “Lights out,” Brian would yell or “Timber” as Bru would crash to the canvas, only to be awakened seconds later with a face full of ice-cold water.

And where was Bru's mother, Valerie, when all this was going on? Likely passed out. She tried to keep up the appearance of being a “good” wife and mother in the early years of their marriage and her children's “tender years.” She would somehow get the

boys off to school and then either meet girlfriends for a drinking lunch or just open a bottle at home.

She would usually be “napping” when the boys came home. But she would manage to rally and awaken in time to serve a tolerable dinner and even make small talk with Brian and the boys at the table while finishing her wine and after-dinner liqueur. She would tell her sons to do their homework and then she would typically fall asleep on the living room couch or maybe she would be sprawled across her king-size bed. Most nights she slept alone in that stylish bedroom.

Brian Van Pelt’s regular relations with his wife had ended after second son, Jerry, was born. Though “Val” had remained attractive through her late thirties and forties, Brian preferred the company of call girls, and he had a book full of contacts in the major cities where he did business. When Bru was just 14, and his pecker deemed man-sized by Brian’s calculations, he lost his virginity “the Van Pelt way” with a guaranteed “great lay” prostitute in one of Cincinnati’s finest downtown hotels. Brian wanted to ensure his oldest son got a taste of quality poontang early enough so that he could never fall prey to some homosexual predisposition, as it appeared dainty number two son, Jerry, was destined.

Val knew about Brian’s indiscretions. They had reached an agreement early in their marriage that if their extra-marital affairs were handled judiciously, they would be tolerated. As long as the boys didn’t find out the truth about their parents’ counterfeit relationship, Brian and Val were free to pursue lovers. Unfortunately, one of Val’s trysts occurred too close to home. An encounter with her “Latin lover boy” art instructor was discovered by Bru, who had cut classes one afternoon his sophomore year in high

school. He came home unexpectedly, finding his mother and Mr. Romero swimming au naturel in the backyard pool.

“Nice image of dear old Mom, huh?” he had recounted with Nick.

“Skinny dipping, really?”

“Saw her big white ass floating in the shallow end.”

“Man, that’s rough.”

“No big deal,” Van Pelt said. “And that was how Romero’s shriveled pecker looked—no big deal. Saw him when he got out to towel off. Mine was twice as big as his.”

Nick cracked up, listening to Bru’s description of the pool scene. “Maybe the water was cold.”

“Good one, Dago,” Bru said, joining him in laughter. “Must have been freezing out there.”

Nick tried to reconcile his memories of Van Pelt with those shared this evening by Gunner. He knew what damage Bru had been capable of. But that didn’t mean he could just erase any and all recollections. Megan said Nick was still trying to defend the guy after all this time. Wasn’t it obvious that he had used Nick, manipulated him like he had done to so many others? Megan insisted Van Pelt was a pathological liar, and that Nick had been duped all along.

What’s holding you back now? he asked himself. Haven’t you figured things out yet?

Nick poured another tall scotch on the rocks and lumbered toward his recliner. He reached for the remote control but never turned on the large Panasonic plasma TV. He just stared at the wide black screen as old images kept reappearing.

Chapter 3

Sullivan “Sully” Kirby was Bruce Van Pelt’s father-in-law, chief benefactor and political godfather. On New Year’s Day, 2012, Kirby, 70, had announced he would leave the U.S. Senate when his term expired in 2013. He would not seek re-election. The longtime Republican senator from rural southwestern Ohio had a colorful political career spanning five decades. He enjoyed telling his constituents that he was first elected to Congress in 1976, the bi-centennial year. And he had hoped to serve until the tri-centennial year, but “the Good Lord has other plans.”

In appearance and manner, Kirby reminded folks of the late Sen. Sam Ervin, who chaired the Watergate committee in the early 1970s, leading to the resignation of former President Richard Nixon. They were both amiable small-town fellows who had risen to political fame. Of course, Ervin was a god-forsaken Democrat, and Kirby was a die-hard conservative Republican. Kirby was heavy-set with a ruddy complexion, a shock of white hair and twinkly brown eyes behind vintage tortoise-shell glasses. In his later years, he grew a salt and pepper beard that endeared him to his constituents and media watchers. The Santa comparisons were all too obvious. And Kirby played up the part, effecting a deep-bellied laugh and droll smile for the cameras. He spoke in homespun ways that the liberal pundits on MSNBC teased as “equal parts Jed Clampett and Gomer Pyle.”

Sully Kirby’s amiable public persona masked a Machiavellian mindset. He knew what political deals to make and which to avoid. He had served on choice Senate subcommittees for years. He wasn’t opposed to reaching across the aisle if co-sponsoring a bill with a Democratic colleague could benefit his constituents and burnish his reputation.

Few knew that as lieutenant governor to Ohio Governor Jim Rhodes in May 1970, Kirby had recommended National Guard troops be sent to Kent State University armed with live ammo. After the killings of four students, Rhodes struck a defiant pose, defending the show of force against anti-war protesters on that bloodstained campus. Kirby told friends privately that he regretted the troops hadn't shot more of "those dirty longhairs."

Decades later, the onetime poor farm boy from West Milton, Ohio, had become quite wealthy, serving on the board of directors of several corporations. He and his wife, Norma, had a large family, most of whom shunned the limelight. But his middle daughter, Susie, had long been drawn to politics. In college, she had worked as an intern in the Treasury Department. She promised her father that one day she would run for office. She likely would have, if not for Bruce Van Pelt. When Susie met Bruce during the Reagan years, he was working as a lobbyist for his father's international textile business.

In the 1970s and '80s, the general public was largely unaware of how many lines of designer jeans were manufactured in sweatshops in Thailand, India and Mexico. The low labor costs enjoyed by Brian Van Pelt's clothing company were offset partially by tariffs on imported goods. But thanks to the legislative influence of Brian's old friend Sen. Sully Kirby, those taxes on the manufactured imports were modest due to waivers granted to Van Pelt's firm because the jeans were packaged and sold in the U.S., providing American jobs and revenues "here at home." The Van Pelt product line would subsequently expand to include other foreign-made, private-labeled items, such as running shoes, sold in Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Sears and J.C. Penney stores nationwide.

His business was a global success, but Brian took nothing for granted. He regularly dispatched his oldest son, Bruce, to meet with trade officials, international

business groups and other entities, ensuring the continued profitability of the company's overseas investments. Bruce was a natural lobbyist, with his quick smile, towering presence and gracious style. He attracted powerful allies and a host of beautiful women.

Susie Kirby wasn't the prettiest of Bruce's D.C. conquests, but she was certainly the best-connected, thanks to her powerful father. Bru would confide to his fraternity brothers years later that, "She may not have been the best lay, but she was definitely the most valuable." The line always garnered plenty of guffaws from his pals. That was Van Pelt, crude to a fault and brutally frank.

Once married, Bruce and Susie became a Washington, D.C., power couple. They were the darlings of the conservative movement, befriending notable figures like Newt Gingrich and Ralph Reed among others. Though neither Bruce nor Susie had been serious about religion during their early adult lives, they learned that in politics religious affiliation could be critical to success. Each had been raised mainstream Protestants, but evangelical Christian leaders like Reed embraced them.

Susie founded a charity for orphans in third-world nations, several where Van Pelt factories were located. Bruce served as CEO of "Gather My Sheep," which featured extensive public service advertising and generated millions of dollars in fundraising, while providing invaluable name recognition. The telegenic Van Pelts were frequent guests on the Sunday morning talk-show circuit.

Upon the advice of his father-in-law, in the late 1990s, Bruce established residency in southwestern Ohio in a sprawling house minutes from Merriman University, his alma mater. In his subsequent Congressional campaigns, Kentucky native Van Pelt stressed his wife's family's deep Buckeye roots and his Ohio college

years. He became a popular if not a productive legislator, serving multiple terms in the House, buoyed by the support of FOX News and other right-wing media outlets.

Van Pelt left Congress in 2010, ostensibly to focus on his family's philanthropic efforts. Meanwhile, his operatives were securing endorsements and strategic alliances across Ohio. Conservative columnist George Will dared to define Van Pelt's political future as "Kennedy-esque," which loyal Democrats termed blasphemous.

Once the state's primaries were completed in May 2012, Ohio Republicans coalesced around their charismatic candidate, who seemed assured of the November election. The campaign, driven by advanced polling, social media outreach, metrics and analytics, would still reflect Sully Kirby's homegrown influence. He knew Ohioans, particularly residents in small towns and "white bread" suburbs, from Columbus southward. The campaign would concede Northeast Ohio to Van Pelt's Democratic challenger, Cleveland Mayor Kwame Imani.

"All we have to do is win a simple majority," Susie said. "Even less if there's a Libertarian candidate."

Sully flicked his hand in mild disgust. "No Ralph Nader in this race. All we have to do is beat Kwazi's ass, and he doesn't stand a chance anywhere but in Cleveland and Akron."

"Kwame," Bru corrected his father-in-law. "It's Kwame. We were at Merriman together. You knew that, right, Sully?"

"Kwazi, Kwame, whatever his jungle bunny name is, I don't care. Let's send Kwame and his big brother Obama both back to Africa in 2012." And with that Sully guffawed.

Bru shook his head, frustrated at his father-in-law's racist antics, but he didn't challenge his outburst. Van Pelt would never be termed enlightened on social issues. But he didn't harbor fear or hatred of blacks, as did so many of his cronies and colleagues. He often cited his high school friendship with Louisville basketball star Jonah Moore as being "pivotal" to his surprisingly moderate views on race. Yet Bru had learned long ago that Sully could care less about being "politically correct" around his family and close friends. And he sure as hell didn't like being reprimanded by his son-in-law or anyone else.

Sully Kirby's announced retirement, scheduled for December 2013 from the U.S. Senate, provided Bru with an "insurance" strategy. If, in the unlikely scenario, he lost the Ohio governor's race in November 2012, then he would declare himself a candidate for his father-in-law's Senate seat the following year. The long-term political landscape looked promising indeed.

Nick had watched skeptically whenever one of the Van Pelts' "Gather My Sheep" TV commercials aired, with the sincere-looking couple, Bruce and Susie, imploring viewers to donate with "their hearts and their dollars." The man Nick knew in college was as far from a devout Christian as one could get. Had he really changed? Had Van Pelt experienced an epiphany on his road to Damascus? *Possible but doubtful*. He may have graduated to the halls of power in Washington, gained a savvy, prominent wife, acquired great wealth and fame, but Nick believed Bru was still driven by his passions and demons.

The gubernatorial contest in Ohio would be a microcosm of the 2012 presidential election: an urbane African-American former community organizer running against a God-fearing Republican who had amassed a fortune as a businessman. Nick had no

links to Obama or Romney, but he shared a history with Kwame Imani as well as Van Pelt.

He had met Imani through Megan when they were all students at Merriman University in the early 1970s. Imani had adopted his Muslim name at a time when black militancy was the Zeitgeist, even on conservative campuses like Merriman. And an articulate, energetic guy like Imani easily stood out among a few hundred students of color at a school with an enrollment of some 8,000 white students.

He cut a dashing figure in the days of campus protest. With his goatee, he resembled a cross between Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver. Bespectacled, short and slightly built, he possessed a resonant voice and a clipped conversational style. When contemplating a response to a question, he would lock eyes with the person. Intense and serious almost to a fault, Imani would let his guard down only among trusted friends and confidantes. In those comfortable venues, his distinctive cackling laughter would resonate. He was also a talented impressionist who could mimic a host of entertainers, notably black comedians like Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor.

In college he and Nick circled each other cautiously, partly because of their differences. But the main reason was they were rivals for the attention and affection of the petite Irish spitfire and campus feminist Megan Bradley. None of them could have imagined back then how 40 years later their fates would intertwine.

Though his arrogance still angered Nick, he had to acknowledge Imani's impressive rise from social worker to city councilman and now mayor of Cleveland. In 2012, he was attempting to become Ohio's first African-American governor. But why would Nick want to help him? They had never been friends. How could they? Did Megan think Nick had forgotten her love affair with Kwame when their marriage broke up? She

was free to sleep with whomever she wanted to when they divorced, but did it have to be with her old college boyfriend? The guy before and after him?

Nick may have wanted to sit life out in Indiana, slumped in that faded brown leather recliner, sipping his Dewar's and hoping the past would stay buried. But the walls were closing in. Too many people still hounded and haunted him. Now Allyson had joined the fray.

He hadn't thought about Allyson for years until Megan threw her name in his face at Alex's funeral. It wasn't as if he had forgotten her. She was just another on a list of people whom he had somehow failed, slighted or otherwise dismissed.

Nick remembered her as fresh-faced with a kid-sister smile, a gift begging to be unwrapped. She had grown up in the small farming community of Garden City, due west of Medina in Northeast Ohio. Her older brother had been an all-state running back, and Allyson loved football. When she went to Merriman in fall 1971, she naively believed that being a college cheerleader would be as fun as it had been in high school. The former beauty queen also thought she could keep away from the "bad boys" as she had dodged them in Garden City.

She was a devout Catholic, determined to save her virginity until the wedding night. That's how she envisioned true love and life happily ever after. She dated cautiously during her freshman year. Though after one heated make-out session, she let her "boyfriend" slide his hand underneath her triple-latch bra. But when his greedy fingers probed further, she yelled like a woman possessed. He bolted from her dorm room as if chased by the devil himself.

She didn't care if her ("Easy DZ") Delta Zeta sorority sisters called her a prude or guys labeled her a tease, she wasn't going "all the way" until she was sure she had found

the right man to be her husband. But it was exhausting fending off the groping hands and heated breath of a line of suitors. Remarkably, her virginity vow remained intact until the fall of her sophomore year when she met Nick at an Omega—DZ beer blast in mid-October 1972. He was at the keg, doling out foamy cups while Chicago's "Make Me Smile" blared from basement speakers.

"Aren't you drinking?" Allyson asked Nick, approaching cautiously after studying him from a safe distance.

"Don't worry. I'll catch up."

She quickly catalogued his assets: strong athletic build, butterscotch brown eyes, gorgeous curly hair and a sexy moustache above full "oh-so-kissable" lips. She was impressed that after a few minutes of conversation, he wasn't trying to squire her away to some make-out room in the frat house. Despite the noise and hustle that encircled the attractive couple, they kept talking and laughing, while she sipped her beer and he gulped his. She remembered him from the football team and asked if he would play again after his knee injury.

"Spent all off-season trying to rehab it," he said, eying his left leg. He patted his knee. "But once you tear an ACL, you're out of luck if you're a linebacker."

"That's too bad. You were really good."

As Allyson spoke, Nick's gaze drifted from the commotion to remembrance of crushing tackles on the gridiron. He missed the primal rush of adrenaline after dominating another man. Never again would he experience such pure instinctive pain and pleasure. When he glanced back at Allyson, his eyes had lost their luster. She smiled up at him, hoping he would ask her to dance as Sly and the Family Stone now ignited the party, exciting dozens of sweaty white faces. He thought briefly of stealing a quick kiss

but then pulled back as he saw Jerry Van Pelt scurrying about the basement rec room like a mischievous child.

“Is he an albino?” Allyson asked.

“No, but he’s a strange little guy.”

“His hair looks white, and he’s so pale.”

“Hard to believe he’s his brother,” Nick said, pointing to Bru, dancing across the way with a zaftig DZ and her flailing black hair.

“That’s unbelievable. They’re so different. Was one of them adopted?”

Nick smiled and shook his head as he followed Jerry’s path. The little creep was sneaking toward to the bar where several red plastic cups of beer were aligned. He glanced over at Doug Martin, Mitchell Crouse and Keegan Allen, who were standing next to a few sorority girls.

Crouse nodded at Jerry, who giggled as he pulled something out of his jeans’ pocket. Nick watched as he dropped a pill in each of the three glasses and then vanished into the crowd. A few moments later, the Omegas handed the red cups to their unsuspecting dates. Nick turned to Allyson.

“Don’t ever set your drink down at one of these beer blasts,” he said. “Always keep it with you.”

“OK?” she said, staring curiously at Nick. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Just some advice. That’s all,” he said. “Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it,” she said, patting him on his thick sloping shoulders. “Thanks.”

Nick knew that Jerry had gotten the soapers from “Mighty Max” Klein, whose motto was: “Prime the pump and get a hump.” Jerry was like some demented Willy Wonka eagerly dispensing the muscle relaxants at the beer blast.

Allyson tugged on Nick's forearm, shaking him from his daydream.

"Come on; let's dance."

But they never did because just then Bru swooped down on Allyson.

"Come on, gorgeous, you're dancing with me," Van Pelt yelled with a metal beer stein in his left hand, his paw of a right hand grasping Allyson's trim waist. "Dago Delamore is off limits, honey. Didn't he tell you? Married and has a kid! Too bad, so sad."

When Van Pelt was sober, he was an intimidating presence. When he was drunk, he became dangerous. Nick could predict when his dark side would emerge. And then he was the only Omega who could confront him, especially when Bru was at his most reckless.

They had first competed on the football field when Van Pelt was a sophomore tight end and Nick a hard-nosed freshman linebacker. They went at each other viciously in drills and scrimmages. Nick's initial impression of Van Pelt was that he acted and sounded like some kind of Wild West cowboy, though hailing from Louisville. He was loud. He swaggered. Nick didn't like him and knew they would soon come to blows.

Not that Van Pelt had tried to antagonize him. When they met in the locker room before the first football practice, he introduced himself as "Bru," called Nick "buddy boy" and marveled at his tight brown curls. "Now that is one fine head of hair." Then he reached over and tried to mess with it, but Nick deflected the attempt with a right forearm block. "Look like you boxed some with a move like that," Van Pelt continued, drawing a small audience.

“Boys, this here Nick *Del-a-more* is a bad-ass, originally from New York, says Coach Putnam. Delamore, that’s got to be E-talian, right? From now on, I’ll call you Dago. OK by you?”

“Whatever you say, Hopalong,” Nick replied, pulling a name from one of his childhood TV cowboy shows.

Van Pelt studied Nick for a few seconds processing his quick comeback line.

“Hopalong Cassidy. Jeezus, I loved watching that guy as a kid. OK, you Dago, me Hopalong. Yee-haw!” His booming voice easily drowned out any number of minor locker room conversations.

At the Omega-DZ beer blast, Van Pelt pulled Allyson in his wake, gyrating his hips and slurping his beer while acknowledging cheers from adoring fraternity brothers and stares from awe-struck sorority girls. At six-foot-four with broad shoulders, a narrow waist and a large equine head, Van Pelt seemed more like some mythological god come to life. He had a dominant brow and high cheekbones, wide nose and perfect teeth. Close-cropped blonde hair accentuated his oversized slab of a face.

He gazed at Allyson, his hazel eyes riveted on her porcelain face. “You are just too damn beautiful,” he exclaimed, kissing her harshly. He forced his thick tongue between her resisting lips. And when she tried to pull away from him, he grabbed her ass and pressed her to his crotch. Allyson squealed, but she couldn’t be heard amid the din of noise in the frat house. She had felt other guys bulge with desire when they slow danced with her. But she and her girlfriends laughed off those “boys and their boners.” Van Pelt’s erection was different. It frightened Allyson, and now she used her two hands to escape his clutches. When he tried to recapture her, Nick blocked his path.

“Take it easy, Hopalong,” Nick said, locking eyes with Van Pelt. “You’re scaring this nice girl.”

“What’s it to you? Oh, I get it. You want to tap this young thing? Where’s your wife and baby boy? They go back to Dago-town, New Yawk?”

Nick pushed him aside and turned toward Allyson, who was pale, wide-eyed and recoiling toward the bar area. As Nick pivoted away from Van Pelt, he felt a cold stream of beer douse him from behind, followed by a piercing metal spike as Bru’s beer mug clanked off his head. Although music was still blaring, the room grew still as the two big men squared off.

“Come on, Dago. Don’t pussy out on me. Let’s go a few rounds.”

Nick nodded at Allyson as if to reassure her. She stared blankly, too stunned to speak. He stepped toward Van Pelt, whose hands were raised. Nick assumed his familiar boxer’s crouch. Left fist cocked by his chin, right fist balled by his right ear. He moved closer, easily ducking Van Pelt’s drunken roundhouses. He skillfully dodged or deflected several blows, as coached years ago by Mr. Arturo at the White Plains YMCA.

“Come on,” Van Pelt shouted. “Throw a damn punch.”

Just then, he caught Nick with a glancing jab to his face. But he made the mistake of celebrating, raising his arms in triumph as if expecting him to fall. Nick grinned and calmly threw just one punch, a pure right hand to Bru’s solar plexus. The punch felled the giant as if hit by an ax. First came a loud groan, followed by his 200-plus pound frame collapsing in a heap on the slippery linoleum floor. Nick rubbed his left cheek, instinctively looking for any sign of blood. He ran his tongue along his top row of teeth.

All good.

As some in the crowd hollered, others rushed to help Van Pelt to his feet. Nick pushed through the bodies searching for Allyson. He rushed upstairs and found her about to leave by the side door.

“Hey, where you going?”

“I don’t like fighting. It scares me,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“We were just goofing around. Look, I’ll walk you home. OK?”

“No, that’s OK.”

“Come on. It’ll be all right. Promise.”

When Nick and Allyson got to her dorm, he stepped back. But she surprised him by leaning in and kissing him fully on the mouth.

“Is it true what he said about you being married and having a son?” she asked, her arms still around Nick’s neck.

“Yeah, but things aren’t good. We got married too young, and I haven’t been a very good husband.”

“You seem like a good guy to me.”

“Thanks, but we just met.”

“Come on,” Allyson said. “It’s cold out here; we can go to my room. My roommate’s gone for the weekend.”

Like most of her sorority sisters, Allyson lived in the same upper-class dorm, where the DZ suite was located. There were no sorority houses at Merriman. Campus administrators mistakenly believed that by limiting sororities to multi-room suites, women were less likely to engage in reckless social behavior.

Nick had seen enough women’s dorm rooms at Merriman to know the layout: two-beds, two-desks, double-dresser and sliding closet doors with full-length mirrors.

The first thing that caught his eye in Allyson's room was a large color poster of James Taylor above her tidily made single bed with a black and white checkerboard comforter. Then Nick looked closer and saw a menagerie of stuffed penguins on the bed, the windowsill and on her round nightstand table next to a 5x7 family photo and black clock radio.

"So you like penguins and JT," Nick said as she clung to him.

"I love penguins and JT," she said cheerfully. "I keep playing 'Fire and Rain' over and over. It's so sad, but it's so romantic."

"Good album," Nick said. He hesitated before sitting on the edge of the bed, his tan work boots planted on the floor. Unlike many in the frat who owned extensive wardrobes, Nick favored jeans, white crew neck T-shirts, gray sweatshirts and ankle high boots or low-cut sneakers.

"Come on, silly," Allyson said. "They're not real penguins." She pushed the plush animals off the comforter and jumped on Nick's lap.

Allyson had drunk several beers, and Nick knew she was more than ready to make out. She was nuzzling against his neck. But he didn't know how far to take things. After all, he had just met this girl, and she seemed very naïve. Nick played it cool, choosing to talk first. He asked about her major and what she wanted to do after college.

"I'm in special ed," she said, "like I told you at the beer blast. But you got distracted by that big jerk."

"Van Pelt," Nick said, reliving his perfect punch from earlier. "What grade level?"

"Elementary," Allyson said. "I love kids."

"That's good," Nick said, trying to restrain himself from the lovely Allyson, who was now running her fingers through his hair while kissing him softly from jaw to ear.

“You’re turning me on, you know?” Nick’s hands were clasped in his lap while Allyson fawned over him.

“Am I?”

“Look, I don’t know how far you want to go.”

“Why can’t we just kiss?” she asked, searching Nick’s eyes. Her voice was soothing, but her words were firm. “I don’t know why that’s never enough.”

“Sometimes it is,” Nick said. “OK, just kissing. With or without clothes?” he asked, testing her sense of humor.

Her body stiffened, and she slid off his lap. She started pacing on the round pink shag rug by her bed. She looked adorable as she walked in serious circles. But she had tears in her eyes. “I was afraid you would say something like that,” she said, her voice wavering. “But I really can’t. I’m sorry. You think I’m a big prude don’t you?”

“Allyson, I think you’re fine,” Nick said. “You’re a beautiful girl, and it’s your call. We just met, you know.”

She smiled and rushed at him. Now she was kneeling on his sturdy barrel chest.

“I was hoping you’d understand,” she said. “Thank you. Thank you.”

They French kissed, and Nick drifted in the simple pleasure of making out. After a few minutes, he glanced at the clock.

“Should I stay or go? It’s getting late.”

“You can stay, but it’s a small bed.”

“OK if I take off my boots and dungarees? I promise that’s it.”

“Dungarees? Don’t you mean jeans?” Allyson asked. Then she looked at Nick and her voice dropped. “Can I trust you?”

“Can you?”

“I think so,” she said. “I want to put on my pajamas, but I’m keeping my underwear on.”

“Put your bathrobe on, too, if it makes you feel better,” Nick said, smirking at Allyson’s funny pout.

He had no idea the night would end this way. He lay with Allyson, making out with her on that narrow, lumpy dormitory bed. Even though she wore navy blue flannel pajamas over her bra and panties, Nick could still feel her voluptuous body. He was as aroused as if she were naked. Her warm kisses and darting tongue had him going crazy. God, how he wanted to make love to this sweet young thing, who smelled of citrus shampoo and baby powder. But he had promised her. He exhaled loudly, coming up for air.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in the perfumed darkness.

“Taking a break.”

She giggled. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t go all the way. I want to be a virgin when I get married. I’m Catholic.”

“Me too.”

“Were you a virgin when you got married?”

“Not a virgin, but I had only been with Linda.”

Allyson stroked Nick’s cheek and pulled him toward her. As they kissed, he lowered himself onto her, his lower torso between her legs. With her thick flannel pajamas and industrial-strength panties, she might as well have been wearing a chastity belt. But the rhythmic rocking of their two bodies soon produced the intended effect. Allyson started softly cooing, her warm breath filling Nick’s ear. That was more than enough to send him over the edge.

“Did you?”

“Ah-huh,” he said, feeling pleasure still rushing through his loins. He was light-headed and content. “What goes up must come down.”

“You’re funny and so gosh darn cute.”

“That’s what they all say,” he replied cheerfully, giving Allyson a final kiss. They fell into a deep, peaceful sleep. Early the next morning, Nick sneaked out of the dorm before anyone discovered him. Allyson watched from her window as he jogged back toward fraternity row, a big curly haired teddy bear. She knew then she was meant to be with him forever.