

CROSTOWN PARK©

CHAPTER 1

Only two things scared Alexandra Stockton: turbulence and falling in love.

Last to board, she heaved her bag into the first empty overhead bin. Then she eyed a middle row seat towards the front of the plane. An elderly man in the window seat looked up at her through thick, magnified lenses. "May I offer you the window seat?"

"Sure,"

*How did he know I prefer the window?*

Alex thanked the gentleman, took her seat, and stared outside.

Suddenly, a white bird flew into her view and flapped its wings as if to motion to her. She felt an odd sensation as she stared, transfixed. A wave of goose bumps made the hair on her forearms stand up. And then, the beautiful bird was gone.

She looked to her left at the man, who now dozed.

He opened his eyes.

"Did you see the bird at the window?" she asked with an attempt to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Don't believe I did," he replied with a distinctive Southern drawl, the voice of a man comfortable in his own skin.

"I can't explain it, but I think the bird was giving me a message." She felt drawn to him and held out her hand. "I'm Alexandra Stockton. I am on my way back to Houston from a trial seminar in Dallas. What about you?"

"Reverend C.O. Bryant. I'm coming home from a pastor's conference in Dallas. "You a lawyer?"

She nodded.

"Well, well. 'A lawyer," he said with a wide grin on his face. "I haven't had call to need a lawyer 'til now and here one sits right next to me."

"Why do you need a lawyer?" she asked.

While she inhaled the scent of his Old Spice cologne, Alex listened to Reverend Bryant's story. She learned that less than

a year ago, he and members of his congregation bought up some abandoned crack houses in Houston's impoverished Fifth Ward, renovated them and opened Shepherd's Cottages, a foster home for neglected, abused and abandoned children.

A children's advocate, Alex was captivated by the Reverend's insight into problems she grappled with daily at the courthouse. The Reverend explained how, Jose Gonzales, one of his house parents responsible for caring for the children, had been accused of sexually molesting a teenage boy in his care. The Reverend was convinced the charges were false.

"His uncle, Voodoo, got him to tell those lies on Jose about what happened in Crosstown Park," he said, then grew quiet.

Something about the Reverend told Alex his story was true.

"Don't worry, Reverend Bryant. I'll represent Jose and we will get to the bottom of it. Shepherd's Cottages will be all right."

The words flew out of Alex's mouth as quickly as the white bird had flown up to the window and flapped its wings.

With a common interest in helping neglected and abused children, they forged an instant bond and talked the rest of the trip.

When the airplane experienced turbulence going down through

the clouds at the Houston airport, Alex clasped her sweaty hand over the Reverend's on the armrest between them and gave him a look of abject fear.

"White knuckle flyer," she said through clenched teeth.

"I'm glad something scares you because you seem like a pretty tough lady."

Now, two days later, sitting in the crowded criminal courtroom at Jose's arraignment, Alex wondered about her impulsive decision to take the case.

"The charge is serious. Aggravated sexual assault." Judge Dyan Morse's voice boomed. "Bail denied. Trial is set for December 18, 10:00 a.m."

Alex Stockton didn't flinch.

Marilyn Rivera, the young number two Assistant District Attorney, gave a smug smile.

The arraignment was over. Round one for the prosecution.

Alex stuffed her file into her briefcase and stood to leave. The ruling was a setback, but it bolstered her determination to vindicate her new client, Jose Gonzales. She had six weeks to discover the truth about what happened in Crosstown Park between Jose and his accuser, Chris Jackson.

*I need a witness, she thought. And fast.*

As the clerk called the next case, the bailiff led Jose, handcuffed and shackled, from the courtroom.

"I'll be over to the jail in a little while," she called to him.

The forlorn glance he shot Alex tugged at the trial lawyer's heart. Today, in the dimly lit courtroom, she questioned her acceptance, no questions asked, of the Reverend's compelling story. She realized how little she knew about him and her new client. Swallowing self-doubt like castor oil, Alex passed a group of lawyers on her way out of the courtroom.

"Dang, Alex, you keep gettin' prettier while I'm losing all my hair," one called.

"Hey, sweet Alex. What brings you over here to this side of the street?" attorney Bill Haley asked.

"I'm defending good against evil, what else?" she said with a grin.

Her colleague's comment reminded Alex of her three year absence from the criminal courthouse. She missed the camaraderie between lawyers and court staff. Although close in proximity, the civil and criminal courthouses were light years apart. And, few lawyers successfully worked both sides of the street.

"I hear you're going for a judgeship," another said. "I'm

all for it. Just don't wait until December 31<sup>st</sup> to file your petition," he warned.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she said as she headed for the door. Alex turned back and gave them a friendly smile. "And, I'm not on the bench yet either guys so no need to brownnose me now."

Their comments made her think. After a two year clerkship with a federal judge, Alex had gone into practice on her own. Her long term goal was the judiciary, but in the meantime she busied herself with an active case docket, pro bono work, bar association activities, and work for the reigning political party. Now, after ten years, she had her sights set on a newly-created juvenile court judgeship. Her goal was to get the Governor to appoint her before the election.

Heading toward the elevator, she caught the scorching stare of a handsome black man standing nearby.

The look in his eyes caught Alex off guard. They were filled with hate.

*He was at Jose's arraignment. I wonder why...*

Alex drove to her office, a small building nearby across from Memorial Park, Houston's favorite jogging trail. She took the elevator to the top floor and stepped in the modern reception area. Alex had spent time and money creating an

office she enjoyed because, like most lawyers, she worked long hours.

Her long-time assistant, Ruth Stiles, greeted her with a wry smile and a quizzical look. "Where were you this morning? Your calendar was clear..."

"Arraignment on a new case," Alex answered without making eye contact, nonchalantly thumbing through a stack of mail. "Picked it up this weekend."

"Criminal case?"

Alex nodded. "Aggravated sexual abuse," she said, heading quickly down the hall toward the kitchen.

"Now wait a minute," Ruth said sternly, following right on her heels. "You need to tell me all about it."

In the cozy kitchen, decorated in pink and orange hues, Alex took a Dr. Pepper and some saltines from the fridge. She sat down at the small table and told Ruth about the case.

"The accuser is Chris Jackson, a teenage foster child. He said my client molested him in the park across the street from his foster home, Shepherd's Cottages. But the Reverend doesn't believe him. He thinks it is a set up."

Ruth shook her head. "Something's not right. Why would a kid lie?"

"I'm not sure yet," Alex said with a shrug. "The Reverend

thinks the kid's drug dealer uncle, Voodoo, is mad because he lost his crack houses when the Reverend turned them into the foster home. 'Says Voodoo is so mad he won't give up until Shepherd's Cottages is closed."

'Sounds like a ghetto turf war. But, Alex, you're out of criminal law. Why help this preacher? You haven't been to church in years."

"I went Sunday," Alex said with a devilish grin.

Ruth grabbed the cabinet as if to steady herself.

"I know," Alex sighed, staring at the tall pine trees beyond the window. "Saturday's flight was strange. Just as the plane pulled back from the gate, a white bird fluttered outside my window and something weird came over me. Then I struck up a conversation with the Reverend. Before I knew it, I offered to take Jose's case."

"What did you charge?"

Alex didn't answer.

Ruth's eyes widened. "Not *pro bono*! We just finished that snarly guardianship for Judge Ross. I want to close out this year with creamy, cash cows, like the Crane case."

Alex recalled the Reverend's startled look when she had told him not to worry about money. "I'm not sure why, but my gut tells me to help him," she stated.



"What about the judicial appointment? Juvenile judges work with CPS to *protect* kids. Defending a perpetrator might not go over well for you. Have you thought about that?"

"It crossed my mind," Alex admitted, tucking a strand of long, straight hair behind her ear.

Truth is, at the courthouse after the hearing, the realization that she may be in over her head with Jose's case had seized her entire body. Now, her stomach felt like a toxic chemical plant going haywire. She hoped the soda and crackers would help.

The phone rang. Ruth answered in the kitchen and put the caller on hold.

"Mike Delany," she said.

Alex caught her breath and headed down the hall to her office.

Mike Delany was the Governor's Chief of Staff. They were old friends since he was an Austin lobbyist and she served on a young lawyer board. Mike insisted Alex was a natural politician. He spent his life with elected officials and had a trained eye. After he helped the Governor win, he became his Chief of Staff. Now, the Governor made most decisions with Mike's approval and everyone in political circles knew it.

She picked up the phone. "Hi, Mike. What's up?"

"Congratulations! You made the Governor's short list for the appointment to the new juvenile bench."

Her heart leapt. Mission accomplished! She was one of two, maybe three candidates in the running. Now she just had to ensure she made it to the top of the list. If the Governor appointed her to the bench in January, she'd have nearly a year under her belt before next November's election. That would make her an incumbents. Incumbents were hard to beat.

"When will he decide?"

"Before Christmas."

Alex swallowed hard.

*Right about the time Jose's case goes to trial.*

"When can I talk to him?"

"Tonight. There is a fund-raiser at the River Oaks Country Club. Be there at 7."

Alex was so excited she could barely put the phone back into the cradle. Her years of hard work had finally provided the opportunity of a lifetime.

Alex thought about Jose's case. Maybe the D.A. would offer him a good plea bargain, like deferred adjudication. If he successfully lived out probation, he'd have no conviction. In aggravated sexual abuse cases, such a generous gesture was wishful thinking. Anyway, if Jose was really innocent, she

couldn't play the "Bleed-m-and Plead-m" game for her own selfish reasons. Court-appointed lawyers were notorious about getting a good deal from the DA on the first setting and copping a plea as a way to move the court's docket. And keep the judge happy. For some reason, today, the thought of a young court-appointed criminal lawyer counseling Jose through the bars of the crowded holdover cell didn't sit well with her. She didn't know the defendant enough to care that much yet, but something about the Reverend had instilled in her a belief that justice was at stake here.

Alex had to wonder if Reverend Bryant was just too trusting. Her deeper senses said no. As far as she could tell, there was no graceful way out of Jose's case.

Leaning back in her chair, she propped her feet on her desk and visualized family, friends, and scores of colleagues watching her being sworn in as presiding judge of the new juvenile court.

Later that afternoon Alex walked into the new state-of-the-art county jail. The sight of criminals eating and sleeping better than millions of needy children struck a deep chord. She told herself that politicians should allocate more tax dollars on education and family planning than they do on jails.

After an extensive security check, she sat in a sparkly chrome attorney-client cubicle, staring through a mesh grill. Like the new jail, memories of her days as a court-appointed criminal lawyer were stark. Massaging a knot in her neck with her hand, she pondered how best to approach her new client.

Suddenly, a guard appeared and shoved Jose inside. "Ten minutes 'til dinner," he growled, then slammed the door behind him.

Alex glanced at her watch, leaned forward, and looked intently at Jose. In his orange jumpsuit, he didn't look like a sexual offender. Small, well-built, with smooth olive skin, his jet black hair and faint mustache offset intense dark eyes. She pictured Jose on the stand and wondered whether jurors would like him.

"Sorry we weren't able to talk before the hearing," she began.

Shrugging, he gave a half-hearted smile. "The Reverend trusts you. Do I have to stay in here until trial?"

"I'm afraid so," she answered. "But, we have a quick trial setting."

Alex understood her words didn't console her client. Six weeks was a long time to spend behind bars. "The police report is sketchy. Tell me about Cottage Five."

Jose swallowed hard. "It's where the older boys live. Chris Jackson rooms with Jaime Soliz. They are troublemakers."

"What do you mean?"

"They won't follow rules. They smoke; skip school; ignore curfew. They used to sneak out at night until we put bars on their windows."

"Tell me what happened?"

"Chris came home late from school and wanted to go trick-or-treating with the other kids, but he was grounded. When I told him to do his homework, he ran out of the house. I followed him into the park across the street."

"Crosstown Park?"

Jose nodded. "The park is off limits to our kids."

"Why?"

"Reverend's rules. There's crime, drugs, hookers..."

"Where was Chris headed?"

Jose shrugged. "Maybe to the corner where his uncle's thugs sell drugs."

"What happened when you caught up with him?"

"I came up from behind and grabbed his jacket collar. He whipped around and pulled a knife on me." Jose took a deep breath. "When I saw his face, I knew he was high. I can't forget his eyes. Snake eyes."

Alex noticed bright blue veins on Jose's tightly clenched hands.

"Drugs are all over the Fifth Ward," Jose continued.

Questions flooded Alex's mind and there was little time left. "Tell me about Chris's knife wound."

"He cut himself on the neck, just deep enough to get blood on both of us. I let go. He ran off, cussing and yelling."

"Did anyone see?"

Jose was silent.

"It's important," Alex urged. "Were there witnesses?"

"There are eyes all over the park, but no one tells." Jose wrung his hands. "And CPS, well, they don't want to know the truth."

Alex knew he was right, but proving it would be next to impossible. "What happened then?"

"I ran back home. Then, a cop car pulled up. The CPS social worker was right behind it."

"Camilla Roe?"

Jose nodded.

Alex frowned. This morning, on the police report, she'd seen the name of one of the most difficult CPS social workers. A woman with an attitude. And an agenda.

"Chris was in the back seat of the police car. He pointed

at me," Jose continued. "Miss Roe put him in her car and they drove off. I got handcuffed and came here."

"Tell me about Chris' uncle, Voodoo."

"The boy worships him. He'll do anything he asks."

Alex put the top back on her pen and slid her legal pad into her briefcase. "I believe you, Jose. But, I have to be honest. The maximum sentence is life in prison. Chris says you forced him, at knife point, to have oral sex in the park. He says you threatened to kill him. When he tried to escape, you stabbed him."

"It's not true. I swear it," Jose said. His eyes watered.

When the guard entered, Jose rose and scuttled toward the door.

Alex stood. "One more question. Have you ever been in trouble with the law?"

When Jose turned back, his eyes met hers. Before the heavy steel door closed behind him, he answered, 'Statutory rape. Two years ago.'

## CHAPTER 2

Driving home, Alex gripped the steering wheel. Statutory rape? Did the Reverend forget to mention it, or did he know? Regulations governing foster homes required Shepherd's Cottages to run background checks on all potential employees. Surely the Reverend followed the law. If he didn't, her decision would be made. With good reason, she would withdraw from Jose's case. She had to get to the bottom of it and quick. The Reverend said the next Board Meeting was Wednesday evening. She would show up and find out what she needed to know. It was important now to focus on tonight and her meeting with the Governor.

She entered her three story townhome from the garage and was greeted by Siva, her trusty Labrador Retriever. She went to



the kitchen and poured a goblet of Chardonnay before going upstairs to her sanctuary. In the large master bath, she turned on the water, doused it with foaming essential oils, then lit the scented candles on the marble ledge. Tossing her watch and jewelry into a crystal bowl, she peeled off her black gabardine pantsuit, then stepped into her oversized Jacuzzi tub. She sank back into the tub and took a deep breath.

To clear her mind, she picked up a white crystal and a pink quartz from the tub's ledge and held one in each hand. Her best friend, Candy, owned a metaphysical shop, and told her rocks vibrated positive energy. The white crystal would balance her masculine and feminine sides; the pink quartz would calm her nerves. Instead of celebrating today's exciting political news, she agonized over her new case.

Then Alex slipped into a black crepe cocktail dress, pulled her hair up and fastened it with a barrette, and donned her favorite diamond earrings. A glance at her watch told her to leave now, or be late for the reception.

On the way, she picked up her on again-off again boyfriend, Assistant District Attorney, Bryce Armstrong. He was handsome and ambitious, a dynamic combination. Half an hour later, Alex entered the elegant ballroom of the River Oaks Country Club. Bryce immediately spotted an old college buddy, now a City

Councilman, and the two men walked ahead of her, deep in conversation.

As she approached the receiving line, Alex smiled. Bryce was the perfect political function escort. They arrived together, pursued individual business and political interests, then enjoyed each other afterwards. She was relieved he was already busy because she came to the function with an agenda.

At the ballroom entrance, honored guests formed a receiving line. Alex entered the grand room, filled with smartly dressed city dignitaries, judges, and lawyers, all gathered to raise money for Governor Paul Hasting's second term bid. Amid imposing columns, ornate crystal chandeliers, and lush draperies, lines were drawn and deals were cut. Fragrant rose centerpieces adorned round tables, but didn't overpower the distinct aroma of old money.

As Alex headed toward the bar, a short, balding man with a dark mustache and oversized glasses sidled up to her.

"Mike!" Alex planted a big kiss on his cheek. She noted his crooked tie and unpressed suit. Even now as the Governor's Chief of Staff, Mike Delany would never change.

"Alex! You look great! Excited?"

"You know I am. I want that appointment. Bad."

"That's my girl. No guts, no glory." Tipping his glass of

scotch her way, he said, "Here comes your chance to tell the old man himself."

Alex turned and saw Governor Paul Hastings approach. Tan and fit, with penetrating hazel eyes, he exuded power; an appealing aphrodisiac.

"Governor, you remember Alexandra Stockton," Mike said.

"Why sure. I couldn't forget your favorite rising star," he said. His eyes devoured her. "You look ravishing. Are you on the dinner menu?"

Alex grew flushed in his presence. She gave a demure smile.

"Looks like you need a drink, Alex. And, you need a fresh one, Gov.," Mike said. "I'll be right back."

With his gaze fastened on her cleavage, the Governor took Alex's elbow and led her to a nearby secluded table. "Mike said you wanted to talk."

Once seated, Alex looked at the powerful man beside her. "I'm your choice for the new juvenile court bench," she stated.

"I like your confidence. For a young lawyer, you've already accomplished a lot. Mike sings your praises and I trust his judgment. Unfortunately, I have other political interests to consider."

Alex lowered her eyes. "If there's anything I can do to

make your decision easier..." she began.

"Don't say that," he said with chuckle. "You never know what an old man like me might want."

"I'm speaking politically, Governor." Alex knew his reputation as a ladies man and in this room, right now she didn't care whether her legal abilities or his predilection toward tall, shapely blondes persuaded him to choose her. "I hear next term you plan to overhaul Children's Protective Services."

His expression grew serious. "Nothing short of an atom bomb will change any dammed bureaucracy, especially one entrenched in its own power like CPS. But, I think the public shares my view that, in some areas, the agency has gone too far. Parents should have the right to discipline their children. Taxpayers are tired of paying millions of dollars for inefficient programs."

"I worry about all the unadoptable children stuck in the system" Alex said. "I shudder to think of how they will parent." She mentally pushed away memories of her childhood and stopped wringing her hands.

"The agency needs to re-focus on education and family reunification," he said with a gentle elbow in her side.

"You're right. The system needs change. I want to help."

Alex said with her thoughts on the children at Shepherd's Cottages.

The Governor had a twinkle in his eye when he took her hand and squeezed it. "Don't worry, Alex, you are on my short list."

When Mike appeared and handed them both a fresh scotch, several people crowded around the Governor, vying for his attention. As quickly as he appeared, he was gone.

"Did he tell you?" Mike asked with a quizzical grin.

"Yes!" Alex answered. Her excitement was irrepressible. She grabbed Delany and gave him a big hug.

"I told you the time was right," Mike said. "'Glad you listened?"

Alex nodded. "You won't regret helping me."

"Good," he said, glancing over his shoulder at his surrounded charge. "I better keep tabs on the old man. I'll get the three of us together again soon."

Watching him leave, Alex was grateful for his friendship.

She surveyed the room for Bryce and spied him carrying three drinks, making a beeline toward two attractive females, one a federal judge. Watching him, Alex wasn't jealous. She appreciated the fact that Bryce had everything most girls wanted: a brilliant career, wealthy family, good looks... None of that mattered since she'd vowed to herself no man would take her off her career path.

Keeping her conversation with the Governor to herself, Alex mingled with lawyers and judges for over an hour before she caught Bryce's eye. She tilted her head and an eyebrow toward the entrance, then she ducked into the ladies lounge.

While Alex stood at the sink and washed her hands, she thought about how quickly her life had changed. Once everyone knew who was on the Governor's "short list" and until the appointment was announced, her life would be a fish bowl. Her choice of cases and clients would have to be carefully analyzed. She thought of Jose. On the plane Saturday, the possibility she might soon fulfill a lifelong dream hadn't crossed her mind.

As part of his second term election strategy, Alex knew the Governor planned to propose sweeping foster care reforms. His agenda needed popular support and his judicial appointee should promote his interests. If the Reverend was right and during Jose's trial, she exposed flaws in the current system, a solid victory would increase her chances. Win-win deals were her

specialty; somehow she'd turn the situation to her advantage.

While she applied lipstick, a friendly judge entered. "Any truth to the rumor you're running for the new juvenile bench?" Hal Winslow is already campaigning hard.

Before she could reply, a woman already in a stall jumped into the conversation. "I heard the Governor will appoint him."

The two women must have seen her with the Governor. She knew better than to take their bait. Politics was a nasty business; not for the weak, or fainthearted. "I trust the Governor's good taste. He'll appoint the best man, or woman, for the job. Ladies, in the meantime, I have a handsome date to attend to," she said as she ducked out the door.

Alex found Bryce in the foyer.

"Let's go," he said.

She took his arm and they walked toward the exit.

"Productive evening?"

He grinned. "You bet. 'Lined up a golf game Sunday with a couple of the Governor's biggest contributors. I'll persuade them to share their generosity with me next election." Like his father before him, he planned to become Harris County District Attorney.

Alex looked appreciatively at him. Bryce's race was more than two years off, but he'd already begun laying the groundwork for his campaign. Smart move. She met him a little over a year

ago at a University of Texas alumni party. Before the night ended, they'd generated enough electricity to light up downtown Houston. Despite common interests in law and politics, both agreed building their careers took priority over a full-time relationship.

The valet pulled up with her Mercedes and Alex let Bryce take the wheel.

"Did the neckline on your little black dress give the old geezers a heart attack?" he asked.

"I hope so," she murmured. "You look handsome in Armani, darlin'. 'Til now, I didn't realize how much I missed you this evening."

His right hand stroked her hair and neck. At the first red light, he gave her a passionate kiss. "I've waited for that all night," he said, then pulled her closer.

Gently, she pulled away. "We're almost there. I know it'll be hard, but..."

"You're right about that," he interrupted. "I can't wait to get you home."

The rest of the way, Bryce discussed his most recent capital punishment verdict and plotted his political future aloud. "This death sentence will seal my status as top prosecutor in the office," he said with a proud grin. "Capital cases are great campaign copy."



"As usual, you're right on target," Alex said. She didn't tell Bryce about making the Governor's short list for the judicial appointment. She felt a silent rivalry between them and Alex knew Bryce would be envious if she beat him to political office.

When they passed the security gate and entered her complex, Alex placed a hand on his arm. "I need to check my mail. Drop me off and I'll meet you at the house in a minute."

"I'll open the Dom Perignon."

The taillights quickly disappeared toward the back of the property and Alex opened her box. Each week she received a letter from Lila Henderson, her maternal grandmother. Born to a teenage mother with no means of support, Alex had quickly been adopted. Soon thereafter, her adoptive parents divorced and when they couldn't take care of her, she went into foster care at age five. At twenty-five, Alex traced her roots and found Lila, her only lifeline to family. There were still siblings she couldn't find. Startlingly similar in appearance and personality, she and Lila felt like they had known each other all their lives. They vowed to make up for lost time. Now in her seventies, the woman's heart was weakening and Alex was anxious to learn results of her recent medical tests.

She thumbed through a stack of mail and found the letter. Opening and scanning it long enough to be assured of Lila's good

health, Alex headed home with a mischievous grin on her face. Tonight was her celebration. Champagne, along with fresh berries and whipped cream, would make it an especially erotic evening.

When she turned onto the path to her townhome, headlights of a dark car blinded her. With a loud screech of tires, it turned the corner toward the exit. She quickened her pace.

Close to home, Alex heard Siva barking in the outside patio, where she stayed when Alex was gone. Entering the front door, she walked through the living room to the back sliding glass door. She saw Siva jumped wildly against the door to the garage. Alex's heart rate quickened and an eerie foreboding swept over her. Bryce should be inside the house, sipping champagne by now.

She crossed the patio and entered the garage. The overhead light was on and her car, engine running, was halfway inside. Bryce was nowhere in sight. Then she heard a loud moan. She ran around the car to look and a blood-curdling scream erupted from her lips.

On the cold concrete, Bryce lay crumpled in a ball, blood pooling beside his head.

Alex's heart raced. "Bryce! What happened?" she asked as she knelt, grabbed his arm and turned him toward her. His face was covered in blood, his lips and eye lids were already puffy

and he was unconscious.

Alex reached into her car, grabbed her cell phone, then dialed 911. Luckily, the fire station was right around the corner. Alex knew it wouldn't be long until they arrived, but the few minutes she waited felt like hours.

She looked around the garage. It was quiet. She didn't sense danger nearby; she sensed an evil storm had just passed, leaving behind destruction.

She held Bryce, but was helpless to alleviate his pain. It was frightening to see such a strong man so vulnerable. He might be in a coma, or have a closed head injury. Watching his blood pool, she hoped he'd make it to the hospital in time.

She wished she could talk to him, find out what happened, but would have to wait. Then she remembered the dark car that, minutes before, sped around the corner. Whoever attacked Bryce must have been inside.

The cops arrived first. When questioned for a preliminary report, she had little information to give.

Paramedics were close behind. They checked Bryce's vital signs, placed him on a stretcher, then motioned Alex to follow.

Distraught, Alex drove to the hospital. The incident sobered her up and any trace of alcohol from the party was gone. She wondered how Bryce's attackers got by the usually tight security. She didn't see how, unless they followed another car

in while the night guard was on rounds.

She quickly ruled out a random burglary-in-progress. The perpetrators hadn't entered her townhome. She had to consider the possibility it was intentional. Bryce was a formidable prosecutor and known to be ruthless toward defendants. He surely had enemies, but in his case, they usually ended up on death row. Besides, why attack him at her home rather than *his*?

At Methodist Hospital, she stood outside the glass window of the treatment room quietly watching busy ER doctors work on Bryce.

After a few minutes, the doctor stepped out. "His nose is broken; the cut on his cheek needs stitches; he could have internal bleeding, skull or rib fractures," he told Alex. "We'll keep him here a couple of days just to make sure. You can see him now."

Alex stepped inside and went to a now semi-conscious Bryce.

"They were looking for you," he sputtered through swollen, bloody lips.

Alex's eyes widened. "Who?"

"They said to tell you to mind your own business," he said.

When it dawned on her she, not Bryce, was the intended victim, a cold chill went up her spine.

Bryce coughed painfully. "This is about your new case, isn't it?"

"New case?"

"Come on, Alex. Your first criminal case in five years and you think I wouldn't know?"

Alex sighed. It was painful to watch him talk.

"What kind of mess have you gotten into?" he growled.

Alex knew this was no time to explain. "You need to rest."

"Call my father," he ordered.

A pretty, doe-eyed nurse entered the room. "I have to take him to radiology," she announced.

As she wheeled him out of the room, Bryce commanded, "Get off the case."

Nerves rattled, Alex ducked into the nearby restroom where the strong smell of cleaning fluid made her retch. Courthouse gossip spreads like wildfire. The minute she left Judge Morse's courtroom this morning, Bryce must have gotten word. Wiping her brow with a paper towel, she assessed herself in the mirror: what had been an artful makeup job was now raccoon eyes, her couture cocktail dress looked like a wrinkled hand-me-down, and her black hose had a fresh runner down one leg.

She walked back into the waiting room where no one seemed to notice and poured a cup of stale coffee, then called Bryce's father on her cell phone.

While she waited, Alex watched worried mothers hold sick babies, fathers console tired children and a lost-looking

elderly man seated in one corner. One after another, ambulances arrived with car accident injuries; stab wounds from barroom brawls. Alex tried to focus on her surroundings, but couldn't keep her mind off the vicious attack on Bryce and the connection to her new case. And, the stunning fact it was meant for her.

Her thoughts turned to Jose's arraignment hearing earlier and she relived every moment. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She remembered the scorching stare of the well-dressed black man by the elevator. In the sterile hospital, it occurred to her he might have something to do with Jose's case. He could be Bryce's attacker.

Alex thought about Bryce. He had a right to be angry; he was hurt. She wondered how unforgiving he could be, especially if the deep gash on his cheek left a scar. He and his father were notorious for their tempers. If she didn't succumb to his demand to withdraw from Jose Gonzales' case, it wasn't farfetched to think he might ask his father to make phone calls to the right people and hurt her politically.

"Alex, what happened?" Ronald Armstrong's gruff voice broke into her thoughts. The ex-DA, in slacks and polo shirt, stood before her and ran a hand through his uncombed, steel-gray hair. His penetrating eyes riveted Alex to her seat. She gave him the facts. Bryce could tell him the rest.

"Who did this?" he demanded.

She shook her head.

He gave her a look of disgust, then strode to the main reception desk and demanded the best private room for his son.

Alex had been dismissed.

Incensed by both Bryce and his father's unreasonable demand and determined to keep her cool, Alex left the hospital.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became.

Since taking Jose's case, she'd been tempted to drop it in favor of securing the judgeship. She knew winning the case was a long shot and that her spotless trial record was at stake. Tonight, a new element presented itself: her personal safety.

Withdrawing from the case would guarantee her safety, or would it? From what she'd learned, Voodoo was capable of anything. Her pride wouldn't allow him to run her off that easily and to let Bryce, or his father, do it was out of the question. She wasn't married to Bryce. He didn't pay her bills and had no right to tell her what to do. Bailing out on the Reverend and Shepherd's Cottages went against the grain of everything she worked so hard in her life to rise above. Her independence as a woman was on the line.

Alex focused on her promise to the Reverend. A stubborn streak, inherited from her grandmother, inclined her to keep her word no matter what the cost. Her deeper instincts told her Shepherd's Cottages was worth it. Though she'd met him only

once, she liked Jose and, so far, believed him. While the depth of her commitment to the Reverend and Shepherd's Cottages perplexed her, she was still motivated to fight for the children. Shepherd's Cottages gave the children what they needed and wouldn't let the home go down without a fight.

It was late and her mind was a maze of competing thoughts and emotions. She needed to discuss Bryce's attack with the Reverend and decided to call him first thing in the morning. He'd surely make sense of things.

The closer she was to home, the more nervous she became. The thought of driving alone into her garage was terrifying. Having failed in his earlier attempt, Voodoo could try again. By the time she turned onto Memorial Drive near her townhouse, anger had taken the place of fear. She pulled into the garage and only after the garage door was down and she was safe inside, did she unlock her car door. When she opened her back patio door, she was comforted by her dog, man's best friend.



### CHAPTER 3

Wednesday evening came quickly. After a long day in the office, Alex headed for Shepherd's Cottages to confront the Reverend and his Board about Jose's prior conviction.

It was almost dark at half past five and the overcast sky threatened rain. She navigated rush hour traffic to the Fifth Ward, birthplace of many county jail inhabitants, turned off the main road, and drove toward the Shepherd's Cottages compound. The streets had no sidewalks; only dirty ditches filled with branches and leaves. Every few feet, she dodged large potholes. She slowed before a barbed-wire topped fence and open security gate, then entered a narrow driveway. Floodlights lit the perimeters of the property, consisting of six small cottages, an activity center and playground with a blacktop basketball court.

Alex parked and was immediately surrounded by a group of pre-adolescent boys who gawked at her new car. Several little girls peered shyly around the corner of a building.

She stepped from the car and looked for someone to direct her to the Board meeting. Moments later, a teenaged girl with shiny black hair and brown skin emerged from a cottage. "Hello Rosemary," she called to the girl she met at the Reverend's church Sunday. "Where's the meeting?"

When the girl motioned toward a small house with "Administration Building" in bold letters over the front door, Alex fell into step beside her.

Even with a row of small children clamoring behind her, Rosemary was poised and graceful. "Go on over to supper now," she told them gently.

Inside the main cottage, Alex saw a computer atop an old secretary desk. A worn black sweater hung on the back of a rickety wooden chair behind it.

"That's where I do my homework," Rosemary said

"Good," Alex said. "Keep up your grades."

"I'd like to be a lawyer." Rosemary lifted her chin proudly.

"Great! Let me know if I can help." Alex wondered how often the girl had been told she'd never amount to anything.

Sensing a presence behind her, Alex turned.

"This is Miss May," Rosemary said politely.

Hands on hips, feet shoulder-width apart, the African American administrator looked formidable. The hem of her royal blue polyester dress didn't quite cover knee-highs. Her intense stare was meant to intimidate, but unperturbed, Alex just met her gaze.

"So, you're Lawyer Stockton," she said.

Detecting a hint of disapproval in her voice, Alex nodded. "I need your help with Jose's case."

"I do whatever the Reverend tells me," she answered. "Come into the boardroom. We're waiting on the Reverend and Mr. Wright."

Alex followed Miss May down the short hall. She glanced inside a half-open door marked Administrator where mounds of paper covered the desk and boxes lined the walls. Children's toys covered an old lime green vinyl couch and a TV with aluminum-tipped rabbit ears sat on a metal stand.

When Alex entered the boardroom, the flurry of activity came to a halt. Six adults, munching finger sandwiches and snacks, sat at a scuffed and scarred conference table. All eyes riveted on her. Alex straightened her jacket, squared her shoulders, and gave them her trial smile.

*The best defense is a good offense.*

She plopped her leather briefcase on the table. "I'm Alex

Stockton," she began. "I represent Jose Gonzales. Trial is December 18. I have only a few weeks to prepare and will need your cooperation."

Miss May walked in, carrying an overloaded plate full of food. She settled in her big chair at the head of the table.

One by one, the board members introduced themselves. There was Mrs. King, whose husband was a deacon in the church. Mr. Samples, a deacon and recent widower, worked as handyman and looked the part in overalls and red plaid shirt. Dr. Hope, a retired psychologist in tight red sweater and skirt, wore her hair in a French twist just shy of a bee hive.

Next was Virginia Murphy, a retired schoolteacher. "I'm the Secretary," she announced.

Mr. Washington proudly proclaimed his boss at Computer City recently donated a printer to Shepherd's Cottages. Bertha Jackson sat next to Miss May. Equal in size, Alex guessed they were sisters. Bertha cooked at the nearby high school and prepared the board's snacks. It was obvious she enjoyed the fruits of her culinary skills.

Intrigued by their stories and colorful personalities, Alex looked into their eyes and gave each a firm handshake. In last week's trial seminar in Dallas, she'd learned to take time to make a personal connection. The technique worked. She felt them warm to her.

Moments later, dressed in a windbreaker, khaki's and a jaunty beret, the Reverend entered. A tall, lanky man followed and immediately went for the sandwich tray. "Aw, Bertha, my favorite," he said, reaching for one and stuffing it into his mouth. When his sea blue eyes met Alex's dark gaze, his expression changed. He looked like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Excuse me," he said, swallowing hard and wiping his mouth with a napkin. "I'm Nic Wright, the token white guy on this Board."

The others giggled and grinned. The blue-eyed man's charisma filled the room.

"Nic, meet Alex Stockton," the Reverend said. "Jose's lawyer."

The others grew quiet.

Alex gave him a nod, then wasted no time getting into the meeting. "The Reverend believes Jose is innocent and I believe him," Alex said, then looked directly at the Reverend. "Monday, when I met with Jose at the jail, he told me about his prior sexual offense. Statutory rape. I assume you knew there was a law against hiring sex offenders as house parents in certified foster homes?"

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

The Reverend began slowly, measuring his words. "I should

have told you about that. Jose told us what happened with his high school sweetheart and her father. The day I went to the police station to do Jose's background check, Nic was still on the force and he helped me. When we looked, the incident didn't appear on the report. I can assure you we were aware of the hiring procedures. We thought we followed them."

Alex shot Nic a fierce look. "Not disclosing Jose's prior sexual offense is 'proper procedure'? You should know better."

"We followed CPS rules," Nic responded in an even tone. "When Jose was hired, his case was on appeal. That's why it didn't show up. We thought he might win his appeal. Since it wasn't on his report, we didn't mention it."

Alex turned to Miss May. "I need a copy of Jose's file, please."

Miss May looked at the Reverend.

He nodded.

The woman got up and left the room. Moments later she returned and handed over a slim file. She scanned it quickly. Sure enough, the background check showed no prior convictions.

"This report may clear Shepherd's Cottages from civil negligence claims," she said with an arched eyebrow toward the Reverend. "But, if Jose takes the stand, the D.A. can impeach him about his prior offense."

"Jose deserved a second chance," Nic said. "Until this

whole mess with Chris, everything was fine." Leaning back in his chair, he crossed one leg over the other, then folded his hands behind his head.

Alex recognized Nic's aggressive body language. Loaded with testosterone, she realized he could be dangerous. She scanned his lightly starched cotton shirt, and Wrangler jeans and noted the bulge in his brown Roper boots.

*He probably carries a pistol, she thought. Texas cowboys.*

Alex wasn't happy, but what she heard at least made her less angry.

"Jose thinks Chris lied for his uncle, Voodoo. Tell me about him."

The Reverend shook his head. "Voodoo is an angry man. 'Been knowin' his family clear back to his great grandfather. His mother died when he was two. His grandmother raised him. Until she died, he came to church. That same year, when he was twelve, his father died of a stab wound. 'Barroom brawl. Although I'd hoped he'd take a different path, he hardened his heart against God, and me. It seems he wants the same for Chris."

Alex repeated Jose's version of what happened in the park that evening. "Does anyone have anything to add?" she asked.

Miss May spoke up. "Jose's right. I was the only one here that evening."

"What about CPS's investigation?" Alex asked.

Tension in the room rose a notch. The board members shifted in their seats. Alex's gaze locked with the Reverend's. "Is there something I should know?"

"We've had some problems with CPS," he answered. "Camilla Roe, our case worker, doesn't like me. She'd like to see the home close."

"She'd like to burn our church down, too," Dr. Hope muttered angrily.

"Now, Evelyn, let's not scare Alex off with all this," the Reverend said in a calm tone. "By the time we get the children, they've already been through a lot. We're patient with them. We know we don't have much time to make a difference in their lives. The State can send them home any time." He paused, carefully choosing each word. "The problems between Miss Roe and me began with a Cottage Five discipline problem. Chris, and his roommate Jaime refused to follow rules. Jose and I had concerns about how their behavior affected the other children. So, we set stricter rules. 'Told them they'd get a paddling if they broke the house rules. The next day, Jose caught Jaime smoking and, as promised, he got a spanking. He called CPS and now they're investigating me for it."

Alex shot Nic a fierce glance. "If you are a cop, you know corporeal punishment in foster homes is strictly forbidden!"



Overwhelmed by the enormity of the Board's blunders, Alex pushed back her chair and stood. "Sorry Reverend," she said. "In light of this new information, I have to think about handling Jose's case." Turning abruptly, she left the boardroom.

Alex was livid as she headed for cool night air beyond the exit.

She reached for the front door when Nic came up behind her and grabbed her arm. "Alex," he said. "Please, listen. I'm no longer on the force, but this whole thing is my fault. I advised the Reverend to hire Jose when I saw Jose's case was on appeal. I banked on his conviction being reversed. Jose needs a good lawyer and we can't afford anyone else. If you walk out now, we're sunk."

"I said I need to think," Alex answered.

Nic abruptly released his grip and gazed deep into her eyes. "Please let me help you investigate the case."

"I don't need your help," she said as she stepped outside.

The breeze cooled Alex's cheeks. Nic's touch had sent a charge through her body, but she had no intention of mixing business with pleasure.

Children's laughter rang through the night air, still heavy with impending rain. As she walked toward the lights of the activity center, a tension headache formed at the base of her

neck. Heading toward the activity center, her thoughts went back to last Sunday and her first visit to the Reverend's church.

As she entered the Fifth Ward she'd seen dirty, neglected children playing in the streets. Scraggly dogs picked through trash on the street. Men and women sat listlessly on sagging front porches.

*The Fifth Ward is more like a Third World country than the U.S.*

She parked amidst several old, dented cars in the parking lot and walked toward the church. Just then, a black Lincoln with darkened windows slowed as it passed her.

Something about the car and the unknown occupants gave her the creeps. She quickly entered the clean, modest church and was greeted by a lovely Hispanic girl who introduced herself as Rosemary. When she'd signed the guest register, Rosemary pinned a red visitor ribbon on her lapel, then led her to a second row seat in a well-worn pew.

The first row was filled with happy children in their Sunday best. The choir, in red-trimmed white robes, sang a gospel hymn which ended when a side door opened and the Reverend appeared. The room grew quiet. Excitement, like a powerful electrical charge, was in the air. After climbing the few

stairs to the podium, Reverend Bryant began in a low, soft voice...

"Good Morning. Today we'll talk about how God allows us to go through tough times for our own good. Think about Peter, the impetuous, overly self-confident Apostle. He had to fail in his area of greatest confidence in order to see his weaknesses and then change, for the better."

Alex had never heard someone preach with such passion. He told the story as if he were there. Alex looked around and saw love and admiration in the beaming faces of his congregation.

The Reverend's voice grew stronger with each word. "Let's remember the day Peter told Jesus he would go with him...even to death. Jesus predicted, 'When the cock crows three times, you will have denied me three times.' Peter didn't believe it then, but picture him later on that day when Jesus' words came true."

The congregation heated up. Women cooled themselves with paper fan "Amen", and "Praise God" when the urge came over them.

In rhythmic cadence, the Reverend's voice rose and fell. He grew more animated and his right hand clutched the Bible. "And...in that very moment, Jesus walked through the garden courtyard and looked directly into Peter's eyes." With a handkerchief, the Reverend wiped sweat from his brow. "We know Peter wept bitterly, but we can only imagine his inner torment. It took an instant for Peter to see himself for who he really

was."

Alex never thought church could be interesting, but something about the Reverend's delivery fascinated her.

"After God sifts us, He *always* restores us. God ended up using Peter in a powerful and mighty way. He was the rock the church was built on; people were healed by his shadow; he preached a sermon one day and three thousand people were saved."

Like the day she met him, Alex was enthralled by the Reverend.

Alex snapped out of her reverie and bolted the last fifty feet to the Activity Center. She entered and saw thirty-five children between the ages of three and sixteen eating dinner in a crowded dining hall. The room was plain except for paneled walls covered with children's drawings on colored construction paper. Tables and chairs were government issue. Served on paper plates, Sloppy Joes with Fritos barely passed for a healthy meal.

Several little children screamed and pointed in her direction, "That's Jose's lawyer." They ran over and hugged her knees. Obviously less trusting of a stranger, the older children were more subdued.

Alex picked up a little girl and held her in her arms. The precious thing, in a pink jogging suit over a white T shirt, was

hungry for love and affection. "Honey, what's your name?" she asked.

"Nikita." She pointed to a boy sitting alone in the back of the room. "That's my brother."

With Nikita still in her arms Alex walked over and sat down next to him. "Hi. What's your name?"

"How old are you?"

He held up a hand, extending his fingers broadly. "Five."

His too long jeans were cuffed at the bottom, and a faded red windbreaker almost hid the yellow cotton shirt beneath.

An awkward adolescent girl tugged on Alex's blazer. "Miss Lawyer, will you get Jose back for us?" As the others watched anxiously, Alex answered.

She was at a loss for words, too confused about the case to give them an answer. The children needed honesty. Knowing they had often been lied to, Alex searched for the right response.

"I hope so."

"Chris and Jaime is liars," a young girl blurted out angrily.

The rest of the children nodded agreement

"That's Christina," Rosemary said.

Alex looked at her, who with three children in her lap, looked more like a woman than the frightened young girl she was.

"Christina, I promise I'll do my best."

Looking pleased, Christina nodded.

The others clamored for Alex's attention.

"Miss Stockton has to go," Rosemary interrupted. "It's bedtime. Don't worry about Jose. Just remember to include him in your prayers tonight."

"Yes, Ma'am," they chimed in unison.

As she headed for her car, Alex thought of how the old computer monitors on the floor and the half-assembled bookshelves in the main room echoed the children's incomplete existence. Alex wanted to see order restored in their lives.

Once Alex entered her car and locked her doors, the skies opened up and it started raining hard.

As she left the complex, Alex decided to drive past the Reverend's church. Turning the corner she saw the steeple, a beacon in a dark world. Soft light inside the church outlined the image of a white bird in the round stained-glass sanctuary window. Remembering the white bird outside her plane window the day she met the Reverend, a strange wave of warmth washed over her.

Saturday morning, after three hours of fitful sleep, Alex woke up and called the Reverend.

"Hello, Alex," he greeted. "I'm going fishin'. 'Want to come along?"

"Sure," she answered. They needed to talk.

"Meet me in an hour at Denny's on the Gulf Freeway at Nasa One. It's just a short piece to where I fish."

"Can I bring my dog?"

"Sure."

Alex paused. "Rev, I don't do worms."

"No problem." he said with a chuckle. "See you there."

Alex washed her face, pulled her hair into a pony tail, then threw on jeans and a sweater. The thought of going fishing with the Reverend made her smile. Normally about this time she'd be making love to Bryce, but instead, she thought with a pang of guilt, he was still recovering from a brutal attack.

It was an overcast, chilly November day. After a quick stop at Starbuck's for a cafe latte, she was on her way. Twenty minutes later, Alex pulled into Denny's parking lot. Her heart skipped a beat. She saw the Reverend and Nic, busy organizing their fishing gear. The Reverend hadn't mentioned Nic would be there. A quick glance in her visor mirror drew a sigh. She hadn't worn makeup, but it was too late.

She looked at Nic. He was dressed in jeans, a UT sweatshirt, and baseball cap turned backwards. He looked like an overgrown kid, but a handsome one.

When he saw her, Nic's face lit up. He approached and said hello, then greeted Siva like an old friend. The dog responded

by offering her right paw. "She smells my dog," he said.

"What's her name?"

"Siva."

"Meaning?"

"Blessed one. What about him?" she asked, pointing at his Golden Retriever.

"Just Sam. He's my best friend."

Alex looked at Siva, who was sniffing around Sam like there was no tomorrow. "She's mine too. Where are we going?"

"The Rev likes a little place on the bay a few miles down the road. Let's hop in the truck. Siva can ride in the back with Sam."

Alex's gave him a concerned look.

"You ride up front with the Rev," he offered. "I'll stay back here with the dogs."

Once in the truck, she marveled at the Reverend's outfit. He looked like a career fisherman in his rubber boots, thick green pants, fisherman's vest with dangling lures and a funky old cap covered with tournament pins. He started the truck, looked back at Nic's thumbs up sign, then backed out of the parking lot and pulled onto the feeder road.

"I almost didn't recognize you," Alex said. "Pretty serious hobby, huh?"

The Reverend nodded. "I love to fish."



"You need a T-shirt that says, "Fishing is my life'," Alex offered.

They turned off of the main thoroughfare and took a gravel road toward the bay.

Seagulls hovered near the water and the moist air smelled salty. Alex was relaxed and hesitated to spoil the moment by talking about Voodoo, but she had no choice. She wasn't at the Board meeting long enough to tell the Reverend about the attack on Bryce. "Reverend, I've been thinking about what happened to my friend Monday night. Could Voodoo be behind it?"

"It is possible," the Reverend said sadly. "I'm afraid it's my fault for getting you into this."

"No, I volunteered," Alex assured him. "One of my problems is that both Bryce and his father, our former DA, ordered me off the case."

"They may be right. Your safety is the most important thing."

"I'm no quitter, but I'm not sure what to do next." Alex wanted to tell him more. He knew nothing of her bid for the judgeship and the legal problems with the case.

"Let's fish," the Reverend suggested. "Maybe you'll get some direction." He turned into a small graveled area on the bay.

While Nic and the Rev assembled the fishing gear, Alex took

Siva off her leash to investigate the area. She observed the comfortable silence between the Reverend and Nic. What an odd pair they were: a tall, handsome white man and a short, elderly black man. Their warm camaraderie made her feel safe and secure.

When she approached, she heard the Reverend telling Nic about the attack on Bryce.

"I'm glad you weren't there," Nic told her.

"I guess I'm lucky I checked my mail," she said. "Bryce's father is Ronald Armstrong."

"The DA?"

"Ex-DA. They both ordered me to withdraw from Jose's case. I think they are chauvinists."

"They may be, but they're probably worried about you, too," Nic said gently.

The Reverend held up a thermos. "Hot coffee anyone?"

Both Alex and Nic accepted and the Reverend poured them a cup. A cold wind blew in from the bay and they warmed hands on their mugs.

Being so close to Nic did strange things to Alex's emotions. Her voice sounded a couple of octaves higher; her blood flowed quicker through her veins.

Nic set up three chairs, placing poles and a bucket of lures between them.

"Someone needs to show me how to do this," Alex said, then sat in the middle chair.

"Are you teachable?" Nic asked.

"I don't know," she answered.

"You seem pretty hardheaded to me," Nic teased.

"I am. So watch it."

Nic approached and helped her cast the rod. She was aware of how the touch of his arms and chest made her heart race.

"Now, just wait," he said. "That's what fishin's all about-waiting. When you get a tug, I'll help you. Just don't try to reel him in too fast. You'll lose him that way." He gave her a slow grin.

"I'll remember that," she laughed.

The men cast their lines and waited patiently.

They sat quiet for what, to Alex, seemed an eternity. Solitude wasn't her strong point. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she broke the silence. "Rev, Jesus was a fisherman, wasn't he?"

He nodded. "He was a fisher of men. By trade, some of his disciples were fishermen."

"Tell me about them."

"Here's a good one. One day Jesus's apostles had been fishing all day and hadn't caught a thing. When they came in, Jesus told Peter to go back and put out into deep water for a

big catch. Peter complained, but did what he was told. After a short time in deep water, they caught so many fish their nets broke and the boat began to sink."

"What made the difference?" Alex asked.

"The first time, they fished in shallow water," the Reverend announced with obvious delight. "When they went into deep water, they caught a haul."

"I don't get it," Alex said.

"They didn't get what they wanted because they were in the wrong place. Maybe, in order for us to find answers, God means for us to go deeper spiritually."

"I need an answer," Alex said. "I need to make Bryce understand why I can't just drop Jose's case."

"Can you change your boyfriend's mind?" Nic asked.

Alex bristled at the word *boyfriend*, but didn't correct him. "He was hurt and angry. Surely he doesn't think he can dictate my life. Last time I checked, I was a grown woman."

Alex saw a smile form at the corners of the Reverend's lips as she talked to Nic. Moments later, when his line began to pull, the Reverend jumped up to reel it in. From the way he acted, you would think he had a killer whale on his line.

Then, Alex and Nic's lines started to pull. All three were preoccupied with activity at the end of their wires.

"Steady," Nic shouted.

When both men's lines came up empty, they looked at Alex.

To their obvious surprise, Alex reeled hers in after a brief, but fierce struggle.

"A twelve pound redfish!" Nic exclaimed. "I'll be darned."  
"You know the old saying," the Reverend said with a twinkle in his eye. "Lucy got the fish."

Alex returned home in late afternoon with a new surge of confidence and some fresh fish filets. She jumped into the shower to wash away the fish smell. The fishing trip had energized and enthused her.

When she caught the big Redfish, she took it as a sign she could reason with Bryce. Common sense told her he would listen and, after hearing the whole story, would understand the importance of her commitment to Jose and Shepherd's Cottages. A silent alarm went off inside when she realized she didn't know anything about Bryce's deeper values. Something deep down in her gut told her it was time to find out whether there was more to their relationship than great sex.

Alex jumped into her car and headed the short distance to Bryce's condo. Just before turning onto his street, she called him from her cell phone.

"Hello," he said in a gruff voice.

"I'm around the corner," she said.

"Did you withdraw from the case?" he asked.

When she said no and started to explain, the phone went dead.

Alex dismissed his attitude. He was still mad. Once he saw her, she'd get him to listen.

She parked behind his Porsche and walked up the drive. His front door was ajar. She entered, walked into his spacious den, and found him propped up on the couch in front of the big screen TV. A noisy, college football game dominated the room.

Bryce took a swig of beer and stared at her through lifeless eyes. His face was puffy, bruised, and the gash across his cheek still had stitches. His mood was as sour as his looks and Alex wondered if, for the first time, she saw the real Bryce.

"I told you not to contact me until you withdrew," he said, not hiding his anger.

"But..." Like a sand castle hit by a sudden wave, her rehearsed speech vanished. Eyes lowered, she searched for the right words.

Before she found them, Bryce slammed the remote control down on the ottoman. "That's great, Alex. Because of you, I'm attacked by a couple of thugs and you don't think it's important. Your priorities are screwed up!"

His harsh words deflated her resolve to explain. She lost

the desire and momentum to work things out with him. He'd seized the offensive edge and she knew he wouldn't quit until he bullied her into submission. "You won't give me a chance to..." she began.

"There's nothing to explain!" he interrupted. "Why defend some sleazy Mexican who molested a foster child?"

Alex kicked the ottoman so hard the remote control and big bowl of chips and salsa hit the floor, splattering all over Bryce's bare leg. "Don't you dare call my client names!" she screamed, and then stormed toward the door. "My client is innocent. I'll prove it!"

"You'll regret it," he warned.

"Don't threaten me, Bryce," she warned. Alex opened the door, stepped outside, then slammed it behind her with as much force as she could muster.

On her way down the drive, blinded by tears of frustration and disappointment, Alex nearly bumped into a girl she recognized as the pretty nurse from the hospital last week.

Noting the pharmacy sack in her one hand and a six pack of beer in the other, Alex said, "He's all yours, honey. All yours!"

Backing out of the driveway, she headed for home. She was angry, not at Bryce, but at herself. Bryce wasn't capable of understanding, or supporting her decision on Jose's case. A few

minutes earlier, in his condo, she realized how shallow their relationship was. They didn't really know each other. With startling clarity, she realized how much alike she and Bryce were: emotionally unavailable career slaves. Like an icy gale on a hot summer day, it hit her that, like predators, she and Bryce had feasted off each other with reckless abandon.

This morning at the bay, she wasted time and emotional energy trying to figure things out. Now, she felt foolish for thinking of him in such intimate terms. What upset her was not ending it with Bryce, but her own lack of character. For the first time, she saw something inside herself she didn't like, or understand. Her outer shell, the fortress she'd built around her heart, was breached.

At the first red light, she flipped down the visor mirror and took a long, hard look at herself. There was renewed strength in her eyes. She thought about Jose's case. It was time to get down to business and find out the truth about what happened in Crosstown Park. Then, a smile formed on her lips. Surely Nic's offer to help her on the case was still open.