



ALASKAN COURAGE

• BOOK TWO •

SHATTERED

DANI PETTREY



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In loving memory of
my beautiful mother, Marlene (1939–2012)
and my dear grandmother Alice (1916–2012).
I miss you both so very much. Until eternity.
Psalm 27:13



To Kayla:
This one's for you, my precious girl.
Thanks for the inspiration!
I love you beyond measure.



Piper bolted upright, sweat dampening her pj's despite December's chill.

What was that?

Her bleary gaze flashed to the clock—1:30—then to Aurora standing like a sentinel at her bedroom door. The husky's white fur rippled down her back, her ears alert.

Piper shifted the tangle of snowflake flannel sheets binding her legs, listening.

There it was again. Creaks echoed along the floorboards below. Heavy steps. Not Kayden's.

Aurora lunged at the door, pawing the battered wood frame. A low growl rumbled through the dog's throat.

Piper got to her feet, ignoring the cold shock of the floor as she crossed the room.

She cracked her door ever so slightly and peered into the darkness.

Another creak echoed from the downstairs hall. The footsteps paused at the base of the stairs.

Aurora whimpered, nudging at the opening with her muzzle.

Piper reached down to grab Aurora's collar but wasn't quick enough. Aurora charged into the hallway.

Piper shot out after her, but her sister pulled her up short—with a rifle in her hand. Kayden released her grasp on Piper and raised her finger to her lips.

They moved down the hall as Aurora barreled down the stairs, growling.

A male grunt sounded below them. Something hit the ground hard.

Kayden aimed her rifle at the chaos below. “Get the lights,” she whispered.

Piper flipped the switch.

Aurora stood at attention a foot away from the man on the floor. He pulled his arm away from his face and looked up.

“Reef?” Piper gaped at her brother in horror. “Is that blood?”



Landon Grainger slammed back the shot of rum and let the warm fire crinkle through his chest.

“Looks like you’ve got some sorrows to drown, Officer.” Becky Malone shifted on her stool, leaning in until the spicy scent of her perfume tickled his nose.

He set the empty glass on the bar and signaled the bartender for another. “You have no idea.”

She trailed her finger along the rim of her glass. “Oh, I think you’d be surprised how much I know.”

Her confident tone startled him. Was he that transparent?

“Heartbreak is no stranger to me.”

Landon grimaced. Apparently he *was* that transparent.

“Another shot?” the bartender asked, the bottle poised over Landon’s empty glass.

He hesitated, wanting the oblivion, needing it. . . . But it was the needing it that had him wary enough to try to stop his slide. “Better make it a beer.” He needed to walk out. Needed to drive home. One beer and he’d call it a night. He shouldn’t have entered the bar in the first place, definitely shouldn’t linger.

“You know”—Becky scooted closer, her thigh nestling against his—“I find company is a surefire cure for heartbreak.”

He’d have asked why she was so certain it was heartache fueling his need to forget but knew the question would only expose him further. If Becky mentioned Piper’s name . . .

Piper. Landon gripped the neck of the beer bottle with two fingers and tilted it to his lips. Funny how quickly old habits returned. If he wasn't careful, he'd find himself at the bottom of the slippery slope he was skirting. He'd walked the straight and narrow for too long to let the pain knock him back that far.

"What do ya say?" Becky trailed her fingers down his chest, creating no less burning than the rum had. "I'm real good company."

"I'm sure you are, but . . ."

"Those butts . . ." She shook her head. "They're half your problem."

He took a quick draught of his beer, tossed a ten on the bar, and stood.

Becky cocked her head with a smile. "Is that an invitation?" She swiveled to face him. Her long legs were bare between the fringe of her black jean miniskirt and the tops of her red alligator boots.

"Aren't you a little underdressed for our Alaskan weather?" Thanksgiving was barely past and it was already ten below and snowing. She was a Yancey local. She should have known better.

"Oh, sugar." She got to her feet and smoothed her skirt. "I know how to keep warm."

Warmth sounded good. He'd been cold and alone for far too long, and it was painfully clear that nothing would ever happen with Piper—at least not as far as he was concerned. He bit back the memories of the night's events.

Becky's fingers intertwined with his. "Why don't we take this party somewhere more private?"

" . . . *it would seem like wisdom but for the warning of my heart.*"

Why had he read *The Lord of the Rings* so many times growing up? So many lines were ingrained in his mind.

"Just a few drinks between friends," she said, leading him toward the door.

"And then?" He knew exactly what she anticipated then.

"And then . . ." She grabbed her coat off the rack, pushed

open the door lined with tacky red tinsel, and led him into the parking lot.

Tariuk's frigid coastal air slapped the harsh sting of reality across his weathered cheeks.

Becky slipped her arms into her jacket and wrapped them around his waist. "And then . . . we'll see what feels right."

Nothing about this feels right. "I appreciate the offer—" "But?"

"But . . ." He sighed, glancing at the loosened strand of Christmas lights lifting in the wind, then lashing back against the battered gutter of Hawkings Pub. It wasn't one of Yancey's finer establishments, but on an island as small as Tariuk, it was about as out of the way as he could manage.

She smiled. "I told you those butts are only holding you back."

His cell rang and her eyes shifted to his pocket.

"I've got to take this."

She didn't bother loosening her hold.

"Grainger."

"It's Tom."

Becky nuzzled against him.

He tried to extricate himself from her hold. "This isn't a good time."

"You can say that again."

"What's going on?"

"There's been a murder."



Landon downed a couple Tylenol to ward off the headache he knew would be coming and drove with one hand on the wheel while he guzzled what remained of an energy drink. He'd attempted to erase, or at least drown out, the earlier evening's memories, but after a few drinks and a close call with Becky, they only gouged deeper. What had once been an effective form of escape now imprisoned him, cementing in his mind everything he was trying to forget.

He crushed the empty can in his fist.

What was it going to take to forget Piper? To stop the agonizing pain slowly eating away at his insides?

He tossed the crumbled can on the floorboard and accelerated.

The road was empty except for him—a long, dark abyss stretching ahead. He'd been teetering on the brink for a while, but tonight . . . He clamped the wheel, pain spreading through his limbs, his heart. Tonight had pushed him over the edge. Reality had struck like a bolt of lightning.

Watching Piper with Denny Foster at Cole and Bailey's engagement party had made it all so painfully clear. One day it would be Piper's engagement party, Piper's wedding, and he'd be standing on the sidelines forced to watch the woman he loved pledge her life to another.

Ahead, faint whispers of red danced in the overpowering glare of floodlights. Squinting against the assaulting brightness, Landon pulled to a stop beside the patrol car with its lights still swirling. Taking a steadying breath, he stepped from his truck, bracing himself for what lay ahead.

The frozen ground crunched beneath his boots as he made his way past the Midnight Sun Extreme Freeride Competition's temporary headquarters—a series of modular trailers and tents, and on to Trailside Lodge, where the athletes were housed. The normally quaint and sedate wooden-beam lodge was a flurry of activity, and the floodlights only seemed to be heightening the confusion and further fueling the frenzy. A crowd stood outside, gawking at the sheriff and his deputies as they cordoned off the front area with caution tape, effectively corralling the fifty-some guests, probably mostly event competitors—snowboarders and skiers—into a partition along the lodge's main stone entryway.

Deputy Tom Murphy spotted him through the crowd and advanced toward him.

“Whose bright idea was the floodlights?”

Tom cleared his throat and inclined his head toward Sheriff Slidell.

Landon sighed. *Of course.* An elected official with no previous

police training, Landon's boss waffled between near noninvolvement on one case to dramatic oversight on the next.

Despite his position, Bill Slidell didn't know the first thing about running a proper crime scene, and it showed, painfully.

"Let's see if we can't cut these lights once we are certain the area's been secured. No need to go scaring folks any more than they already are."

Tom tipped his hat. "You got it."

Landon entered the lobby, surprised at finding a fire still roaring in the large stone hearth and the still-lit Christmas tree. Easily twelve feet high, the giant spruce almost touched the vaulted wood ceiling. The flames reflecting off the decorative silver balls magnified the fire's glow amidst an otherwise empty lobby.

Andy Miner, the owner and manager of the nineteenth-century establishment, stepped from the back room. "Landon, I'm glad you're here. Slidell made all my guests get up and stand out in the cold. It's nearly two in the morning, for goodness' sake."

Landon glanced at Tom.

Tom shrugged. "Boss's orders."

He grimaced. "Let Slidell know once the perimeter's secure there's no harm in letting folks back inside. Tell him they'll be more cooperative and easier to question if they're not freezing to death." *Not to mention easier to keep track of.*

"You got it. Do you want to wait for me or head up on your own?"

"Where's she at?"

"Ladies' restroom, top floor."

"Who's stationed up there?"

Tom cleared his throat. "Slidell wanted us down here, searching."

"So you left the murder scene unmanned?"

"We taped the entrance, and with all the guests out here . . ."

Landon headed for the stairwell, taking the steps two at a time to the seventh floor. His heart pounded in rhythm with the pounding of his boots against the concrete stairs. He preferred to get his blood pumping, his adrenaline going, before entering

a crime scene, sort of revving the organ before experiencing the shock of what awaited. He figured that way it wasn't such a jolt to his system—at least not physically.

He exited the stairwell as Tom exited the elevator. "I thought you were going to talk to Slidell about killing the floodlights." Slidell would react far better to Tom's suggestion of bringing the guests inside than his. After the last murder case they'd worked, Landon thought he and his boss were finally finding common ground, but now, with Slidell's reelection campaign in full swing, his boss was becoming more a politician and less a cop with each passing day.

"I am, but there's something you need to know first."

"What's that?"

"I didn't want to say anything in front of Andy, though I'm sure he knows. By now everyone probably knows."

"Everyone knows what?"

Tom rubbed the back of his neck. "The witnesses . . . they say . . ."

"Witnesses?" Could they be that lucky? "They witnessed the murder?"

"Close enough. Walked in on the killer finishing up. Her blood all over him."

It wasn't often that a case caught such a big break. "Run me through what happened."

"One of the athletes said she left something up here earlier in the evening."

"You get her name?" *Please tell me you got her name.*

"Just a sec." Tom fished a small notepad out of his shirt pocket. He flipped it open and scanned the page. "Ashley Clark."

Landon made note of the name. "Go on."

"So she and her friend came back up to retrieve it."

"The friend's name?"

"Tug Williams, also a competitor."

"Okay." Landon jotted down the name.

"They get off the elevator, start down the hall. They hear some commotion coming from the ladies' changing room, so

Ashley pokes her head in. Sees the victim dead in the killer's arms, the murder weapon still in his hands."

"We have the killer in custody?" Why hadn't Tom said so?

"Afraid not. He argued with Tug before ramming past him and Ashley and fleeing the scene."

Argued? "The witnesses knew the suspect?"

"That's correct."

"So who is it?" Why was Tom hedging?

"You aren't going to like it . . ."

A sick feeling roiled through Landon's gut. "A woman's been murdered. I don't like any part of it."

"The killer's Reef McKenna."

Darkness flashed before Landon's eyes. "Reef?" It couldn't be.

"Both witnesses ID'd him."

This will kill Piper. "Has Slidell already put out an APB?"

"Nope. Just set us to work securing the guests and the perimeter."

He doubted Reef had remained on the premises. "Any sign of him?"

"Not a glimmer. You want us to send someone out to his family's place?"

"I'll go." If anyone was going to break it to them, it would be him.



2

Shock reverberated through Piper as she watched her brother scrub blood from his hands.

“I’m going to get Cole,” Kayden said, disappearing through the back door before Piper could argue.

“He won’t understand.” Reef shut off the water and turned to face Piper, blood still smeared across his shirt.

“Of course he will, when you explain.” Cole would understand, just as everyone else would. Reef had found the poor woman after she’d already been killed. “Let’s get you into a clean shirt. Cole and Gage are always leaving stuff here.” She rummaged through the hall cabinet and yanked out a sweat-shirt—Landon’s UAF sweatshirt that she’d borrowed months ago. Back when they were still . . .

She shut the closet door. She didn’t know what they had been then *or* what they were now. Everything seemed inside out between them.

“Here.” She tossed it to Reef, despite the strange longing to hold it tight.

“Thanks.” He pulled the bloody shirt over his head and tossed it on top of the washer.

Piper hopped up on the dryer, careful to keep her distance from the shirt. There was so much blood soaked into it. She winced at the loss of life, at the pain the poor woman must have suffered. “Tell me again why you didn’t call the police,” she said

as Reef washed the blood that stained his chest. Landon would harp on the fact that Reef hadn't called the police, she just knew it—surely as she knew Landon, or *had* known Landon. Things seemed so different now. *He* seemed so different now. Distant. Edgy. Withdrawn.

“Because I panicked.” Reef swiped his chest with a dry rag. “Tug and Ash thought I did it. They wouldn't listen.” He pulled on Landon's sweatshirt and stalked back to the kitchen.

Piper hopped down to follow him. “But didn't you explain?”

“I tried, but . . . Wait a minute . . .” His blue eyes narrowed. “You believe me, don't you?” He shook his head. “Of all people, I thought . . .”

Guilt seared her conscience. How could she even for a second believe her brother capable of murder? “Of course I believe you. I'm just trying to understand, so when Landon comes, I can explain it to him.” Landon would assume the worst, given the circumstances. If only her brother had called the police.



Verifying the crime scene was indeed secure and that the medical examiner, Booth Powell, was taking charge of the victim's body, Landon headed for the McKennas' property. He figured Reef would run to Piper. She was the one person in the world who'd believe him no matter what.

With a heavy heart, he climbed from his truck and walked the familiar path to her door. No festive occasion would greet him—not even a casual weekly meal. For the first time, he was approaching the McKennas as a law official, and it gave him pause.

Just as he lifted his hand to knock, the front door swung open, the evergreen wreath clanging against the glass.

“Thank goodness you're here.” Piper yanked him inside.

Not the welcome he'd been expecting.

She wore a bright-pink set of flannel pajamas with some sort of design he couldn't quite make out in the dim hall light. Her lush amber hair, still mussed from slumber, fell well past her shoulders.

“There’s been a terrible misunderstanding,” she said as they passed through the front room, where bunches of white and silver balloons still bobbed against the ceiling beside the swags of sparkling streamers. Four hours ago this home had been filled with laughter; now it’d been replaced by heartache.

“I need to speak with Reef.”

“He’s in the kitchen.” She stopped outside the swinging door. “The poor thing is so shaken.”

He’d just taken a woman’s life—he’d better be shaken up.

Piper laid her hand against his chest, her lithe fingers resting over his heart. *Fitting*, he thought dryly. *It belongs to her.*

“I’m so glad it’s you. That you are the one who came to talk to him.”

He wasn’t there to talk. He was there to arrest. He stepped past her into the kitchen, where the scent of her buttercream frosting still lingered in the air.

Reef sat at the kitchen table. His hands, clasped together on the table’s surface, were clean—as was the shirt he’d clearly just slipped on.

Landon looked back at Piper with disappointment. She’d actually helped him clean up evidence?

“What?” She frowned.

“Reef’s shirt.”

“It’s on the washer.” She pointed to the laundry room door.

“I need it.”

“Why? I told you it’s all a big misunderstanding.”

“It’s evidence, Piper.” He strode into the laundry room, exceedingly thankful to find Reef’s shirt balled on top of the washer rather than in it.

Snagging a plastic Ziploc bag from the cupboard overhead, he shoved the shirt inside and sealed it before further contamination could occur.

“You’re not listening to me, Landon.” Piper trailed him back to the kitchen, not an inch from his heels—just as she’d done as a kid. Back then he’d sworn she’d done it just to annoy him. Now she was dead set on getting his attention.

“Reef.” Landon stopped at the table’s edge. “We need to talk.”

Reef lifted his head, his dark-rimmed eyes bloodshot, his expression indicating shock.

Shock at what he’d done, or shock at getting caught?

This wasn’t Reef’s first run-in with the law, but Landon hoped it was his first taste of death, and hoped even harder that it tasted foul.

“I know that look. I know what you’re thinking.” Piper positioned herself between Landon and her brother.

He was thinking how badly he wished he could spare her from the pain Reef was going to bring on them all.

“You think Reef had something to do with tonight’s accident.”

“Accident? Is that what he told you? That there’s been an accident?”

“No. I mean the mix-up.”

“Mix-up? Piper, a woman’s been murdered.”

Reef’s head lowered, and a guttural moan rumbled in his throat.

Landon stepped around Piper. “Reef, I need you to come with me.”

“You’re taking him in?”

“Yes.”

“But he can explain.”

“Great. He can explain at the station.”

“Is that necessary?”

“He *fled* the scene of the crime.”

“Because—”

Landon held up his hand to silence her. “I need to hear it from Reef.”

She turned to her brother. “Tell him.”

Landon shook his head. “Hold it. Before you say anything, I need to advise you of your rights. Protocol has to be followed.”

Landon indicated for Reef to stand, and he did so, his movements tremulous. Landon pulled out the handcuffs. As upset as he was with Reef, the painful fact remained that he was arresting his best friend’s baby brother, and it stung.

Reef nodded and turned to accept them.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“What’s going on?” The lingering gravel of sleep clung to Cole’s voice. He stood in the doorway, his hair tousled, his gaze suddenly shocked wide awake. He stepped inside, and Kayden followed.

“I’ve got to take Reef in for questioning. He fled the scene of a crime.”

“Kayden said a woman’s been murdered?”

“That’s correct. One of the Freeride competitors. Karli Davis.”

“And, Reef”—Cole’s eyes darted to his brother—“what happened?”

“I didn’t do it,” Reef said.

Cole gaped at Landon, confusion marring his brow.

The despair radiating in his friend’s eyes cut straight through him. He hated being the one to compound the McKennas’ pain. They were family. Maybe not biologically, but they were his family all the same. “I’m taking him to the station. We need to talk.”

“Does he need a lawyer?”

“I’d highly recommend it.”



3

Landon placed the tape recorder on the interrogation room table and slid into the metal chair opposite Reef.

He cleared his throat, and Reef looked up, a pale shadow of the exuberant hothead he'd been at the engagement party mere hours ago. He sat hunched forward, much as he had at Piper's, his hands clasped on top of the Formica table, his thumbs twitching back and forth.

Slidell remained behind the two-way glass, no doubt keeping a critical eye over the proceedings.

"Let's get started." Landon pressed the Record button and slid the tape player forward. "You've been advised of your rights, Mr. McKenna?"

"Yes."

"And you're waiving your right to an attorney at this time?"

"I am. I didn't do this."

"Why don't you start by telling me what happened?"

"Karli texted and asked if I wanted to have some fun."

"What time was this?"

"Maybe an hour after I left the party."

"Cole and Bailey's engagement party?" It was important to be precise.

"Yeah."

"She texted your cell?"

"Yeah."

“And what was your response?”

“I said why not. Not much else to do around here.”

Landon ignored the hometown jab. “Go on.”

“I went to her room. We grabbed some beers and headed for the hot tub.”

“At the lodge?”

“Yeah. They’ve got one of those rooftop Jacuzzis. We drank some and hung out in the tub.”

“Anyone else up there?”

“Ash and Tug were in the tub when we got there, but then they headed in after maybe fifteen minutes.”

“About what time was this?”

“I don’t know. . . .”

Landon lifted his chin. “Take your best guess.”

“Eleven . . . ?”

“All right, and then what?”

Reef looked down, his hands shifting to his lap. “We decided to call it a night.”

“Why?”

Reef cleared his throat. “I was tired of playing her games, so I left.”

Games? He’d come back to that. “And went where?”

“Back to my room.”

“Can your roommate verify that?”

“Dillon? Nah, he was out for the night before I even got back from Cole’s.”

“So you go back to your room, and then what?”

“I turned on the TV.”

“But that wasn’t the end of your night?”

Reef shook his head. “No.” The word came out raw.

Landon reclined in his seat. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Reef stared at the door, then down at his feet. “I went back to see her.”

“Why?”

“I felt bad.”

Now they were getting somewhere. “About what?”

“Storming off.”

Landon straightened. “You stormed off? Had you two fought?”

“We had a disagreement.”

“Over what?”

“Her choices.”

“Choices that affected you?”

Reef shrugged.

Landon followed a hunch. “You and the lady have a prior relationship?”

“Wouldn’t call it a relationship. We hung out.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Off and on the past couple seasons.”

“So what ended it? Why the split?”

“No split. It wasn’t like that.”

Landon leaned forward, resting his arm on the table. “So what was it like?”

“I told you. We hung out.”

“Sexually?”

Reef nodded once.

Landon followed another hunch. “She hang out sexually with anyone else that you know of?”

Reef looked away, a quick burst of color flaring in his cheeks.

“I’ll take that as a yes. You know the names of these other guys?”

“Guy.” Reef bit out. “Far as I know.”

“And his name?”

“Rick Masterson.”

Landon kept his voice even, despite the shock reeling through him. “Rick Masterson, the Freeride circuit promoter?”

Reef sank back. “Yeah.”

“Isn’t he married? And about a dozen years older?”

“Last I heard.”

“So you and Karli fought about her relationship with Rick?”

“Again, *not* a relationship.”

“But you fought about him?”

“We didn’t fight. We disagreed.”

“About her affair with Rick?”

“About the fact that I wasn’t interested in being used.”

“What did she say to that?”

“I didn’t give her a chance to say anything, just left.”

“But you went back?”

“Yeah.”

“Because you felt bad?”

Reef exhaled, rubbing his hands along his thighs. “Karli never was one to show emotion, but she’d actually teared up. I felt I should go back and . . .”

“And?”

“Make sure she was okay.”

“What time was this?”

“I don’t know, maybe fifteen minutes later.”

“Walk me through what happened.”

“I stepped off the elevator and heard her scream.”

Landon cocked his head. “You heard Karli scream?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you know it was Karli?”

“Trust me. I’ve heard her yell enough in competition. Besides, she was the only one up there when I left.”

“What did you do?”

“I called her name.”

“She answer?”

“No, and I couldn’t tell where she was. I called her name again. She didn’t answer, but I heard something in the ladies’ changing room.”

“Define *something*. What specifically did you hear?”

“A thump and some—I don’t know—sounds of movement.”

Landon nodded, prompting him to continue.

“I announced I was coming in, just in case someone else was in there. . . .”

“And was there?”

“Not that I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“Karli.” Reef squeezed his eyes shut, his face contorting. “She

was lying on the floor, facedown. Blood was . . .” He swallowed. “I thought maybe she fell, slammed her head on something. I bent down and rolled her over, and that’s when I saw . . .”

“Saw what?”

Reef swallowed. “That she was dead.”

“How’d you know she was dead?”

“Her eyes were wide open. I could just tell. I saw the blood and tried wiping it up.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I was just trying to stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“The blood.”

“But you said you knew she was already dead?”

“Yeah.”

“So why worry about stopping the blood?”

“I don’t know, man. I just needed to stop it, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t help her. I slumped to the floor and pulled her in my arms, and that’s when . . .”

“When?” Landon prodded.

“Ash and Tug came in. Ash screamed, and Tug asked what I’d done. I told him. I tried explaining I’d found her like that, but he was freaking out.” Reef raked a shaky hand through his hair. “I know I shouldn’t have left, but Tug kept yelling ‘What’d you do?’ I panicked, pushed past him and ran.”

“To Piper’s?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you do when you got there?”

“I scrubbed Karli’s blood off my hands while I explained what happened to my sisters. And then you showed up.”

“I want to make sure I’ve got this perfectly clear. You’re claiming that you did not kill Karli Davis?”

“No. I told you I found her that way.”

“With blood on her chest?”

“Yes.”

“What about the weapon?”

Reef blinked, staring off somewhere in the distance. “Weapon?”

“The eyewitnesses said you had a weapon in your hand.”

His eyes darted back to Landon as if he'd been awakened from a dream. “The knife.”

“Yeah. What can you tell me about the knife?”

“I saw it lying there and I picked it up.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. It just seemed out of place. I saw it on the floor beside her body, and I picked it up. I dropped it when Ash screamed. Sounded just like Karli's had, all high-pitched and squeaky.”

“Before Ash and Tug showed up, did you see anyone else? Anywhere on the floor?”

“No.”

“So you heard Karli scream, you heard scuffling, but when you entered the changing rooms you saw no one but Karli?”

“Right.”

“You saw no one enter or leave through the changing room door other than you, and then Ash and Tug.”

“Right.”

Landon leaned forward. “Reef, it's vital to the investigation and best for you if you're completely honest with me.”

“I was. You can't honestly think I hurt Karli. Come on, Landon. You know me. You lived with us.”

A long time ago. “That may be, but evidence doesn't lie. You can make this a lot easier on yourself and your family if you tell the truth. Lies are only going to hurt those you love.” He knew that firsthand.

“I'm not lying. I didn't hurt Karli.”

“Karli wasn't hurt, Reef. She was *killed*.”

“I didn't do it. I didn't kill Karli.”

Landon glanced back at the two-way glass behind him. He knew what had to be done. Time to rake Reef over the coals, even if he was his best friend's little brother, even if it was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Reef, two witnesses place you at the scene of the crime,

holding the murder weapon, with the victim's blood all over you. Once confronted, you ran and tried to cover up evidence."

"I didn't try to cover up anything."

"You washed critical evidence off your hands."

Reef looked at his hands, fingers splayed. "I was just trying to get her blood off. My friend's blood."

"Your friend? A minute ago you said you were sick of playing her games. That doesn't sound much like a friend."

"We were going through a rough spot, but I cared for her."

"You cared about a girl that was two-timing you with a married man?"

"I told you our relationship wasn't like that."

"I thought you said it wasn't a relationship. That the two of you were just hanging out."

"You know what I mean."

"No, Reef, I don't. Did you and Karli have a relationship or not?"

"I guess, if you want to get technical, yes. We were friends."

"Friends that were sexually involved?"

"Yes."

"So your friend, sleeping with another guy while she's bedding you, didn't bother you?"

"I didn't say that."

"So it did bother you?"

"I wasn't happy about it."

"I imagine not. Did you tell her you weren't happy about it? Was that what caused the breakup?"

"I told you. We didn't *break up*."

"Okay, is that why you hadn't *hung out* for a while?"

"Yes."

"When she texted you tonight, did you think she wanted to start hanging out again?"

"Maybe." Reef scuffed the toe of his boot against the tile floor.

"But Karli wasn't serious about it, at least not serious enough to end her liaison with Rick Masterson. That's what you fought over—right?"

Reef remained silent.

Landon stood, striding as he spoke. “You probably said some things you regretted, you went back to talk with her, it didn’t go well, you argued, one thing led to another, and . . .”

Reef slammed his palms on the table. “I didn’t kill her!”