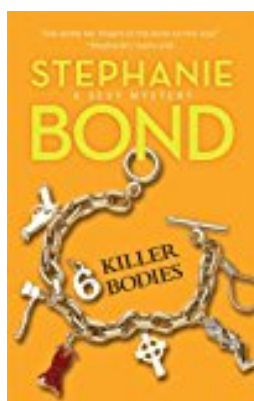


[PDF] 6 Killer Bodies (Body Movers, Book 6)

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Description:

About the Author See Stephanie's Amazon Author Page: amazon.com/author/stephaniebond

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. "Carlotta, this isn't your fault."

Carlotta Wren turned her head to look at Detective Jack Terry, who was dividing his attention between her and Atlanta's evening rush-hour traffic. They were heading north to Buckhead so Jack could drop her off at Peter Ashford's home. She was still reeling from watching her good friend Cooper Craft be arrested as The Charmed Killer, a monster who had murdered nine women, leaving

a charm in the mouths of his victims as his signature. There was only one problem: Coop wasn't a serial killer.

"I know it isn't my fault." Carlotta dabbed at her wet eyes with the handkerchief Jack had given her. "Because it's *your* fault, Jack."

He frowned. "Mine? How do you figure that?"

"You tipped off the GBI that Coop was coming to see me at Neiman's." Carlotta worked at the store as a sales associate, although lately not up to her potential, considering all *the* diversions of her life. Missing fugitive parents. A delinquent brother dodging loan sharks. Serving as an on-again, off-again body mover for the county morgue. "Insinuating" herself into police investigations (according to Jack's partner, Detective Maria Marquez).

Jack's mouth tightened. "It was better for Coop to be taken into custody sooner rather than later, and in a public place. At least no one was hurt."

"Jack, you can't possibly believe that Coop committed those horrific crimes."

He slammed on the brake to keep from rear-ending the car in front of him. "Damn traffic. Where the hell are all these people going?"

The way Jack deflected her question made her wonder if he thought the GBI had arrested the wrong man. "Jack, answer me."

His jaw hardened. "It doesn't matter what I believe. I'm not on the case, remember? But trust me, the GBI wouldn't have made an arrest without evidence."

"What kind of evidence?"

"I don't have specifics."

"DNA?" she prodded. "The Chief Medical Examiner told me that the state crime lab was supposed to return DNA evidence any day."

Jack frowned. "Why would Bruce Abrams be talking to you about the case?"

"Because he knows Michael and I are connected." Michael Lane, her former coworker, was on the run after committing some pretty heinous acts himself, including trying to kill Carlotta and, after escaping from a hospital mental ward, stalking her. Until Coop's arrest, Michael had been the primary suspect for The Charmed Killer.

And Michael was still out there somewhere.

"Plus," she continued, "I played the sympathy card by telling Bruce my father's name had popped up on a list of potential suspects, thanks to your crackerjack profiler, Detective Marquez." She gave Jack a wry smile. "I'm sure she's behind Coop being fingered as The Charmed Killer."

"Regardless of the outcome, Maria is just doing her job."

"Do you know, she actually warned me about the men I let into my life? I thought she was talking about you."

He gave a rueful laugh. "Not bad advice, considering who you're living with."

"You were happy when I took Peter up on his offer to stay with him until things settle down."

"I wouldn't use the word 'happy.' I thought you'd be safe with him. But that was before Ashford bought you that stupid tricycle."

"It was a scooter, Jack. And it was a thoughtful gesture considering I didn't have transportation. Now I'm back in the same spot. I don't suppose you've found the person who planted the explosive under my Monte Carlo?"

He frowned. "No."

"Do you still think it was Michael?"

"Maybe."

"Who else could it have been?"

Jack shifted in his seat. "Coop."

Carlotta's eyes went wide. "Coop? Jack, that's crazy. Coop would never do something like that. Why would he want to hurt *me*?"

"When your car blew up in the mall parking lot, you told me the only places it had been parked earlier that day was in your garage at the townhouse and at Coop's place when you allegedly paid him a—" Jack took his hands off the wheel to draw quotation marks in the air—"visit. I can't ignore the fact that Coop had a window of opportunity to plant the device."

"When I allegedly paid Coop a *visit*?" Carlotta shook her head. "Jack, if you want to know if I slept with Coop, or with Peter for that matter, why don't you just ask me?"

"Because, as you so often remind me, it's none of my business." Then he nodded to her lap. "What's that you're holding?"

She glanced down at the mangled piece of paper, feeling sick all over again. Just before his arrest, Coop had brought her the results of the drug test she'd asked him to conduct on a sample of Wesley's hair. The report stated that her brother tested positive for opiate/Oxycodone, confirming her worst fears. When she'd confronted Wesley about stolen refills of a painkiller and a single tablet of generic OxyContin she'd found on his bathroom floor, he'd told her he'd only taken the drugs temporarily to alleviate the pain he'd experienced from when one of his loan sharks, The Carver, had cut part of his name into Wes's arm.

But the drug test indicated a more pervasive problem—didn't it? Coop had said over the phone that he wanted to explain the test results to her in person. But before he'd gotten the chance, the GBI had descended and arrested him.

"It's nothing," she murmured, pushing the paper into her purse. If Wesley was caught taking drugs, his probation would be revoked. All this time, she'd been worried about keeping her brother out of jail, and now, inconceivably, Coop was in lockup. "What's going to happen to Coop?"

Jack sighed. "He'll be arraigned within a few days."

"Do you think he'll get bail?"

"That depends on how good his attorney is, the mood of the judge, and the D.A."

"Kelvin Lucas?"

"Right. Since this is the biggest case Fulton County has seen in a while and since one of Lucas's A.DA.'s was murdered, I'm sure he'll handle this case himself."

She touched her throbbing forehead. "I can't believe this is happening. The idea of Coop being The Charmed Killer is ludicrous."

Jack clenched his jaw. "Right now, jail is the best place for him to get sobered up and dried out."

The vision of Coop in a cold, empty cell made her lungs squeeze. He must be feeling dazed and utterly confused. And so alone.

Jack leaned on the car horn, which was ridiculous considering traffic was at a standstill. "This is bullshit." He reached under the seat and pulled out a siren to set on the dashboard, then switched on the blue light. Begrudgingly, the cars ahead of him eased over to the shoulder to allow him to pass.

"Are you taking advantage of your position as a law enforcement officer to get around traffic?"

"You bet your sweet ass I am."

He pulled ahead, slowed at a red light, then proceeded through when the coast was clear.

"You're only making it worse for everyone else."

"Yeah, well, I'm not feeling too generous today."

Carlotta observed Jack under her lashes. His rugged features and big body were rarely at ease, but a muscle worked in his jaw, and his grip on the steering wheel was more fierce than necessary. Despite the fact that he'd given Coop up to the GBI, Jack, too, was disturbed about the arrest. But was he disturbed because he'd been duped by someone he considered a friend of sorts, or because he believed Coop was innocent?

But if Jack thought Coop was innocent, why would he give him up? Because he couldn't resist being part of an investigation he'd been dismissed from?

She knew the detective well enough to know that he wouldn't tell her what was going on in that thick head of his, not if he thought she might go off on her own tangent. She'd have to finesse information out of him.

"Coop's fall from grace a few years ago is going to hurt him, isn't it?"

Jack nodded. "He was drunk when he stopped at the scene of an accident and declared a woman dead when she wasn't. Frankly, Coop was lucky he was only stripped of his title as Coroner and had his license to practice medicine suspended. The woman barely survived. If she'd died because of Coop's negligence, he would've been looking at serious time. It doesn't take a psychiatrist to see how something like that could mess with a person's head."

"But he seemed to be dealing with everything okay," Carlotta said. "I didn't know him when it happened, but Coop seemed at peace with working for his uncle at the funeral home, and moving bodies for the morgue."

Jack shrugged. "Things change."

"Not without a reason," she insisted.

"Everyone has a breaking point," Jack said. "It doesn't have to be a major incident."

She was tempted to let Jack in on what her brother, Wesley, had told her about following Coop to a neurologist's office, and their concern that Coop was sick. But their suspicions were mere conjecture, and Jack had already betrayed her confidence by informing the GBI when she'd called to let him know that Coop, who had been missing for a day, was on his way to see her at Neiman's. She wouldn't be so forthcoming with information the next time.

Jack took a call on his phone and from the one-sided conversation, she gathered he was talking to his partner, Maria, who needed a ride somewhere.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," he said, and Carlotta thought she detected a note of intimacy in his voice.

The GBI had kept Maria on The Charmed Killer case, but had removed Jack, partly because of his association with Carlotta, who had been indirectly connected to some of the victims—either as a body mover on the crime scene, or a passing acquaintance. And the last body had been a speed bump for her scooter. She hated that Jack had to maintain his distance from the investigation just because she'd been implicated in the crimes. Now that an arrest in the case had been made, she assumed Jack and his gorgeous partner would be reunited.

Not that she cared if Jack and Marvelous Maria were sleeping together. Okay, maybe she cared a *little*. Carlotta and Jack had rolled around a few times, but Jack was his own man. And she was supposed to be giving her relationship with Peter a fair chance. She and Jack had agreed to stop falling into bed with each other, yet their lives still intersected enough to keep the tempta...

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