

STEPHANIE

A SEXY MYSTERY

BOND

Body  
Movers

3  
MEN  
AND A BODY



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**STEPHANIE BOND**

***BODY MOVERS:  
3 MEN AND A BODY***



*Also by Stephanie Bond*

BODY MOVERS: 2 BODIES FOR THE PRICE OF 1  
BODY MOVERS

Body Movers series

BODY MOVERS: 4 BODIES AND A FUNERAL

BODY MOVERS: 5 BODIES TO DIE FOR

BODY MOVERS: 6 KILLER BODIES

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Carlotta Wren bumped her cast against the door frame leading from the kitchen to the living room. “Son of a...” She bit back tears as pain lit up her entire left arm. Although she was lucky the fall from the balcony of the Fox Theater hadn’t resulted in more serious physical injuries, the prospect of another four weeks in this clumsy cast left her frustrated and antsy.

It wasn’t enough that she couldn’t do her job at Neiman Marcus at a time when she desperately needed the money (short-term disability paid only partial wages). But yesterday when Peter Ashford had brought her home from the hospital, he’d shown her a ring he’d had made for her—her Cartier engagement ring, which he’d recovered from the shop where she’d pawned it, with two more large diamonds mounted, on either side of the original stone. *The past, the present and the future*. He would keep it for her, he’d said, until she was ready to make a decision.

And on top of everything else, her brother, Wesley, was missing.

Wesley was supposed to have picked her up at the hospital yesterday in a taxi, and when he hadn’t shown, his boss, Cooper Craft, had offered to go look for him. As of last night, Coop hadn’t found Wesley, but Carlotta was hopeful that her brother would turn up this morning. He’d come strolling into the house, whistling, with a mouse in a jar to feed his snake, Einstein, oblivious to the fact that Carlotta had barely slept last night, worrying about him....

Worrying about Wesley seemed to be her fate in life. She’d raised him since he was nine years old, when their parents had skipped town so their father could elude charges for investment fraud. Over the past decade, they’d heard from their parents only through a handful of postcards...until recently.

When a look-alike had stolen her identity and been murdered, Carlotta had agreed to fake her own death. The D.A. wanted to try to smoke out her parents and in exchange, they’d offered to suspend Wesley’s probation for hacking into the courthouse computer records. But Kelvin Lucas, the D.A. who’d been denied the chance to prosecute her father, Randolph Wren, had reneged on his deal when her parents hadn’t shown.

After Carlotta had alienated Wesley for going along with the plan.

After she’d put her friends and coworkers through the traumatic ordeal of thinking her dead.

And after she’d slept with Detective Jack Terry, her temporary live-in bodyguard.

What no one knew was that Carlotta’s father *had* shown up, in disguise, and he’d recognized her, even though she was also in disguise. She hadn’t known it was him until later, when she’d found the note he’d slipped into her pocket: “So proud of you both. See you soon. Dad”

The scrawled words left her conflicted. During her parents’ long absence, Carlotta

had worked up a powerful resentment. Sometimes, she even cheerfully hated them. Leaving without saying goodbye. Leaving her to finish raising Wesley when she was just a few months shy of graduating high school and barely equipped to take care of herself. Leaving no money, only a paid-for town house in a transitional section of Atlanta that was a far cry from the palatial home in Buckhead that they had lost.

College had no longer been an option. The only real expertise she'd had was... clothes. Her father had been a wealthy investment broker; Carlotta had worn nothing but the best since she could dress herself. Thankfully, she'd been able to turn that dubious skill into a career in retail. She'd been a top salesperson for most of her years at Neiman's...until lately, when her life had seemingly exploded with complications and new relationships.

And old ones.

"Did shithead make it home yet?"

Carlotta turned to see her friend Hannah Kizer standing there, hands on hips. Dressed in pink pj's with white bunny rabbits and without her severe goth makeup, Hannah looked almost human—pretty, even.

"Not yet."

"Have you heard from Coop?"

"Not yet."

"Don't worry. Wesley can take care of himself, whether you want to admit it or not."

"I wish you were right, but history has taught me otherwise."

"How's the arm?"

"Getting dressed is an aerobic workout. Thank heaven for front-closure bras."

"Yeah, I had a broken arm once. Men wanted to jump in bed with me. I guess it made me seem vulnerable or something."

"Or less likely to eat your prey?"

Hannah gave her the finger, then dropped onto the couch, picked up the remote control and turned on the small TV. When the picture came on, it was warped. "What happened to your big-screen TV?"

Carlotta sat next to her friend and pointed to the living room window, still covered with the boards the police had tacked in place. "Taken out during the drive-by shooting. I'm waiting for a new window to be delivered and installed, but we can't afford to replace the TV. Wesley shouldn't have bought it, anyway," she grumbled. "We could've used that money for other things."

Like paying toward what he owed his odious loan sharks, Father Thom and The Carver. Or paying down their credit card debt, which had ballooned in size since her identity had been stolen. Or catching up their loan payments, or any one of a hundred other bills they were late on.

Wesley said he'd sold his motorcycle to buy the TV, but she knew the television had cost more than his bike was worth. She figured he'd been gambling again, despite his claims to her that he'd stopped.

She turned her head to look at her friend. "Where could he be?"

"A thousand safe places," Hannah assured her.

"Or a thousand unsafe places. Those thugs for The Carver who tried to force me into their van the other day said that Wesley had pulled a stupid stunt and was in big

trouble. What if they kidnapped him?”

“Look on the bright side—his loan sharks probably won’t kill him because they want to collect their money.”

Carlotta glared at her.

Hannah’s smile fell. “Sorry. Just trying to lift the mood.” She flipped channels past the midmorning game shows, and stopped on a local talk show, *Atlanta & Company*, where local celebutee KiKi Deerling was being interviewed in all her silky blond, micro-mini glory, snuggling her pet pug on her lap. It was the guilty pleasure that Carlotta needed to take her mind off Wesley.

But a minute into the interview, Hannah scoffed, “Give me a break. This girl is only famous for being famous. She’s a total poser.”

Carlotta nodded, but nursed a little pang of envy toward the young woman who had inherited beauty, money and a last name that adorned a jewelry empire headquartered in Atlanta. “It would be fun to live her life for a day, though. No worries, just party after party.” She gave Hannah a pointed look. “For once, we wouldn’t have to crash.”

“That girl is a waste of human skin. You’d think with all that cash she’d buy some underwear. I’ve seen her twat more than my own.”

“Thanks for the wholesome image.”

“And you’d think she’d learn by now that if she’s going to have sex with someone, she should sweep the room first for hidden cameras. I always do.”

“Really?” Carlotta said. “What married man are you dating this week?”

“His name is Troy and he’s a college professor.”

“What does he teach?”

“Ethics.”

“Oh, well then, plus ten points.”

On television the starlet held up her pet pug, which she’d dressed in a T-shirt bearing the name of the camp she was promoting.

“Camp Kiki?” Hannah said. “Is that where kids go to breathe fresh air, learn to snort coke and become anorexic?”

“Cut her some slack,” Carlotta said with a little laugh. “I’ve heard of this camp. It looks like she’s at least trying to do something good for underprivileged kids.”

“Underprivileged to her probably means anyone who doesn’t have a driver.” Hannah gave Carlotta a sideways look. “Sorry. I forgot that you used to be rich.”

“Not that kind of rich.”

“Are there classifications for how rich you are?”

“Sure.” Carlotta used the fingers on her good hand to count them off. “There’s inherited wealth, the kind that’s so massive the heirs live off the interest. Then there’s inherited wealth that has to be maintained, like taking over the reins of a family business. There are ranks within inherited wealth, depending on how prestigious the business—jewelry is near the top of the list. Then there’s aristocratic wealth, meaning there’s no cash flow, everyone just kind of exists off their family name and estate. My parents were farther down in the pecking order—they were bourgeois rich. My dad worked for his money.”

Hannah lifted an eyebrow.

“Or stole it, depending on who you believe.”

“And who do you believe?”

The note her father had slipped to her scratched the skin of her chest where she was keeping it in her bra. She was afraid that Wesley might find it if she left it in her bedroom. And truthfully, she just wanted to keep it close. “I honestly don’t know. He was indicted for fraud, so the D.A. must have had a case, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe it was personal. What do you really know about the D.A.?”

“Just that he’s a lying asshole for renegeing on our deal.”

“Well, there you go. Maybe he had some other motivation for charging your dad.”

“So why didn’t Dad stay and fight it? Why skip town and abandon his own kids?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would *your* parents do something like that?”

Hannah shifted on the couch, and it occurred to Carlotta that she had never talked about her parents. And frankly, Carlotta couldn’t picture the people who had spawned her bizarre friend.

“Has your father called you again?” Hannah asked, neatly sidestepping Carlotta’s question.

“No.”

Not that it had been much of a conversation. He’d phoned her at work a few weeks ago and said, “It’s Daddy.” She’d been so startled, she’d dropped her cell phone—and the connection.

“And I broke my cell phone, so I couldn’t even call back.”

Hannah frowned and pointed to the end table. “Whose cell phone is that?”

“Mine, but...it’s a new one.”

“How did you afford a new phone?” Hannah asked suspiciously.

“Peter gave me an extra one that he had lying around.”

Hannah picked up the sleek, razor-thin phone. “Right. This state-of-the-art gadget was just lying around. Did it belong to his murdered wife?”

“No!” At least Carlotta didn’t think so.

“Is he paying for your service, too?”

“It didn’t cost anything to add me to his plan,” she said defensively.

“Yet. Don’t kid yourself—the man plans to collect.”

“Peter’s been very good to me,” Carlotta murmured.

“You mean the man who dumped you years ago when your parents left town? The man who’s suddenly all over you when his wife has only been dead for a few weeks? Yeah, he’s a real stand-up guy.”

“It’s complicated.” No one knew that her father had also called Peter, who now worked for Mashburn & Tully, the investment firm where her father had been accused of stealing from customers’ accounts. Randolph Wren had asked Peter for his help in finding an alleged file that could prove his innocence. It was a secret that bound her and Peter together.

Then there was the ring....

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway made Carlotta leap off the couch. “It’s Coop,” she said when she saw the white van. She watched until he got out of the van—alone. “But Wesley isn’t with him.”

She opened the front door and stepped out on the stoop in the early morning heat, eager for news. “Did you find him?”

Cooper Craft was tall and lean, with light brown hair and long, neat sideburns. He lifted his gaze to hers and shook his head. “No. You haven’t heard from him?”

“No,” Carlotta said, feeling the stirrings of true panic. “I’ve been calling his cell phone every hour. How far could he get on a bicycle?”

He gave her a little smile. “He’ll turn up.”

But she could tell by his haggard expression that Wesley’s body-moving boss was worried, too. It made her sick with fear. “Come in. I’ll make coffee.”

When Coop entered the house Carlotta noticed that he was wearing the same clothes he'd had on yesterday. His hair was disheveled; his sideburns merged with an unshaved jaw. Her heart tugged when she realized he hadn't been to bed. "Did you drive around all night?"

"I checked the hospital emergency rooms and a few places I thought he might be, but no one had seen him."

"Hi, Coop."

He looked up and did a double take at Carlotta's stripe-haired friend standing barefoot and fresh-faced in her unexpectedly cuddly pj's. "Hannah?"

She flapped her eyelashes. Hannah had a huge crush on Coop. "In the flesh. Um, this isn't what I normally sleep in, in case you're interested."

Carlotta rolled her eyes as Coop smothered a smile. "Okay. Did you keep Carlotta company last night?"

"Yep."

"Good." He glanced at Carlotta, his gaze softening. "I was worried about you. How's your arm?"

She squirmed. "It's fine, thanks. How about that coffee?"

"I'll make a pot," Hannah said with a frown. "Yours is sludge." When she disappeared into the kitchen, Carlotta motioned for Coop to sit down.

He lowered his long frame into a chair, then removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I'm going to throttle Wesley for making you worry so much."

Carlotta smiled to herself—for making *her* worry so much? Since Coop had hired Wesley to help him move bodies for the county morgue, he'd become a mentor to her brother. Whether Wes realized it or not, he looked up to his boss. And it appeared Coop was equally fond of him. Her heart swelled with gratitude. Wesley needed a positive male influence in his life.

Heaven knew their father had fallen down on the job.

The phone rang and Carlotta dived for it. "Hello?"

"Yeah...is Wesley there?"

Carlotta pursed her mouth, recognizing the guttural voice of a person who'd lost more than a few brain cells. "He's not here, Chance. Didn't you get any of the messages I left for you, asking if you'd seen him?"

"No."

She touched her forehead. "No, you didn't get the messages, or no, you haven't seen him?"

"I ain't seen him since the day before yesterday."

She exhaled. "Do you know where he could be?"

"Uh...no."

“With his girlfriend maybe?”

“Girlfriend?”

“Come on, Chance, he’s been coming home smelling like women’s perfume. Unless you’ve suddenly started wearing Chanel No. 5, he’s been spending time with someone else.”

“I would not know anything about that,” Chance said woodenly.

Carlotta wanted to scream. “Chance, this is serious. He could be in trouble.”

“Don’t worry, my boy can take care of himself.”

She gritted her teeth at the implication that Wesley was part of Chance’s “posse.” “If you see him, will you tell him to call me as soon as possible?”

“Sure thing,” Chance said, then disconnected the call.

Carlotta sighed. “His friend Chance Hollander hasn’t seen him.”

“What’s this about a girlfriend?” Coop asked.

“I thought you might know.”

“I know he’s got a thing for his probation officer.”

“But she has a boyfriend—remember, we met him at the Elton John concert.”

Coop gave her an amused smile. “Some women have more than one guy on the line.”

A flush climbed her face. Coop and Wesley had walked in on her and Jack Terry kissing, and there had been no mistletoe—or even December—in sight. She didn’t know if Wesley had told Coop that Jack had spent at least one night in her bedroom, but Coop probably suspected as much. Coop had also met Peter and was aware of their history. All of which would have to be sorted out at another time.... At the moment she couldn’t think past Wesley being gone.

Luckily, Hannah arrived with three cups of coffee, and a box of sweet rolls left over from one of her catering gigs the previous day. Carlotta took the food gratefully, her stomach rumbling from hunger.

“Wesley has to come back,” Hannah said dryly. “Or you’ll starve.”

Carlotta stuck out her tongue, but she appreciated her friend’s attempt at humor. And it was true. Wesley did all the cooking, and had done so for years. He was pretty good, too, darn his infuriating, scrawny little ass. Her eyes watered.

“Hey,” Coop said quietly, putting his large hand over hers. “Wesley is a smart kid. If he’s in trouble, he’ll figure out something.”

Carlotta nodded and inhaled a cleansing breath. If their parents’ leaving had taught her anything, it was that tears didn’t solve a thing. Action did.

“What now?” she asked Coop.

“I know he has an appointment to see his probation officer at eleven. I’d say if he doesn’t show, then you should call the police. Considering that thug’s comment to you about Wesley having done something stupid, this might have to do with the loan sharks he owes.”

Her heart squeezed, but she had to consider worst-case scenarios. “You’re right. He wouldn’t miss his appointment with Eldora. Not voluntarily.”

“Meanwhile,” Coop said, pushing himself to his feet, “try to think of somewhere he might’ve gone, or someone who might know where he is. I’ll keep making inquiries.”

“Okay,” she said, following him to the door. “And Coop...” She squared her

shoulders, but that only caused pain to shoot down her arm. “I hate to ask this, but have you checked the...morgue?”

His brown eyes filled with sympathy, and he nodded. “I did. He’s not there.”

Tears of relief filled her eyes. “Thank you for caring.”

He gave her a little smile. “I can’t seem to help myself.” Then he turned and walked to the bottom of the steps. “You have my cell phone number if you need me.”

“Yes,” she called after him, waving with her good hand until he drove away.

Carlotta looked to her left and saw their neighbor Mrs. Winningham working in her yard. They weren’t the best of friends, but the woman had called 911 a few days ago when two of The Carver’s thugs had tried to drag Carlotta into their van. So she went down the steps and crossed to the fence that separated the yards of their respective town houses. “Hi, Mrs. Winningham.”

“Hello,” the woman chirped. “And you’re welcome.”

“Pardon me?”

“I said you’re welcome for the get well card I sent to you through your brother. He said you managed to only break your arm.” The woman sniffed. “Although I must say you made a spectacle of yourself, dangling half-naked from the balcony of the Fox Theater.”

“Yes, I’m good at that,” Carlotta said cheerfully. “I’m sorry, but I haven’t seen Wesley yet to get your thoughtful card. May I ask when you gave it to him?”

The woman looked perturbed. “I gave it to him yesterday morning. He said he was going to meet you at the hospital and bring you home in a taxi. Then he rode off on his bike.”

“And did he seem okay to you?”

“‘Okay’ is a relative term where your family is concerned, but yes, reasonably so.”

“Thank you,” Carlotta said as pleasantly as she could manage. “I’ll let you know when I get your card, Mrs. Winningham.” Her stomach rolled as she went back to her house.

“What’s wrong?” Hannah asked.

Carlotta told her about her conversation with the neighbor. “So Wesley didn’t just get wrapped up in some marathon poker tournament and forget. He was planning to meet me at the hospital like he said. Something bad has happened, I know it now.”

“Shh, you don’t know that for sure,” Hannah said. “Wait to see if he shows up at his P.O.’s office. Do you have the phone number?”

“There’s a business card on the bulletin board in his room.”

“Want me to get it?”

“Would you?”

“Want me to feed Einstein while I’m in there?”

“Please,” she said. The last time the massive python had gone unfed for too long, it had found its way out of Wesley’s room and into Carlotta’s bed.

When she returned, Hannah tried to entertain Carlotta by coaxing her to the back deck to stick her feet in the kiddie pool Wesley had bought for her—to make up, he’d said, for the lavish life she’d given up with Peter in order to raise him. The cool water felt good between her toes, but it only made her miss Wesley more.

“I’m sorry I have to leave,” Hannah said later, standing with her hands on her hips, back in full goth garb and makeup, the barbell in her tongue clicking against her

teeth. “But I can’t get anyone to cover me on this corporate luncheon.”

“Go,” Carlotta urged, shin-deep in the pool and clutching the phone. “You’ve done enough hand-holding for a lifetime.”

“Call me to let me know what you find out. I should be finished in a couple of hours or so.”

Carlotta waved her off, and attempted to relax, trying to find some solace in the beautiful sunny day and the fact that the neighborhood that she’d hated living in was looking quite pretty today. When the trees were leafed out, they hid the shabbiness of most of the homes, their’s included. The gay couple that lived on the other side of them, whom they’d only seen and not met, had made upgrades to their house. Now that she thought about it, she decided her neighbors probably didn’t extend themselves because the Wren place was, as Mrs. Winningham had so often reminded her, “a blight on our good street.”

Ironically, Carlotta had vowed to update their place and make some badly needed repairs just before she’d broken her arm. For extra money, she had even contemplated joining forces with Hannah to go on some body-moving jobs for Coop—much to Hannah’s great delight. But that, too, would have to wait until after Carlotta’s arm healed.

“Come home safe, Wesley,” she whispered. “I have plans for us. You can’t leave me, too.”

In that moment, her hatred for her parents was a palpable black mass in the air around her. She shouldn’t have to deal with this alone. What if something happened to Wesley? Life without her brother was just too impossible to comprehend. She realized with a start how he must have felt when he thought she’d taken a dive off that bridge, before they had learned it was someone pretending to be her.

Their parents’ abandonment had forced them into a closeness that probably wasn’t healthy. She wondered if they would forever be emotionally dependent on each other, or if either would someday make room in their life for someone special. Wesley was particularly resistant to change—he still refused to allow her to take down the aluminum Christmas tree in the living room that their mother had put up mere days before she’d skipped town with their father. So it sat there in the corner, a sagging, tarnished emblem of their family, complete with little gifts underneath that had never been opened.

Except by Jack Terry, when he’d stayed at their house doing “surveillance” in case her parents showed up for the fake funeral. He’d thought he might find clues in them as to their parents’ whereabouts. He’d rewrapped the gifts, but Carlotta had been furious when she discovered what he’d done. Had been hurt. Confused. Torn.

With Jack, everything was muddy.

Meanwhile, the hands on the clock seemed to crawl. The phone didn’t ring. Wesley didn’t materialize. When she called the number on his probation officer’s business card at five minutes after eleven, she was nauseous.

“Eldora Jones speaking.”

“Eldora, this is Carlotta Wren, Wesley’s sister. We met a couple of nights ago at the Elton John concert.”

“How could I forget? Are you out of the hospital?”

“Yes, thanks, and feeling much better. I’m calling about Wesley. Did he make his

appointment today?”

“As a matter of fact, he didn’t.”

Carlotta’s heart sank to her ankles. “Did he call to say he wouldn’t be there?”

“No, he didn’t. May I ask what this is about?”

“I hope it’s nothing, but my brother seems to be missing.”

“Missing?”

“He hasn’t been home, no one’s heard from him since yesterday, and he isn’t answering his cell phone.”

The woman paused, then said thoughtfully, “I did receive a call from a Richard McCormick saying that Wesley had impressed him in his interview yesterday morning. He’s set to start his community service with the city computer-security department next Monday.”

“He was supposed to meet me at the hospital after the interview, but he didn’t show.”

“Have you called the police?” Eldora asked hesitantly. Carlotta thought she detected more than professional interest in her tone.

“That’s next on my list.”

“Will you have Wesley phone me as soon as you...see him? He’ll have to make up the missed meeting.”

Carlotta promised she would, then hung up and put her head between her knees to relieve the light-headedness that suddenly overcame her. *Please, God*. She reached for the phone again and dialed Detective Jack Terry’s number from memory.

Jack had arrested Wesley for hacking into the courthouse computer. He’d reopened their father’s case. He’d investigated a couple of little murders that Carlotta had gotten involved in accidentally. And in between, he’d given her one or three mind-boggling orgasms. Theirs was a lust-hate relationship. After the fiasco at the Fox Theatre, during which he’d broken her fall, she was hoping she wouldn’t have to call him anytime soon.

*Here we go again.*

“Jack Terry,” said the rough-hewn voice over the line.

It was so unexpectedly comforting, Carlotta’s throat choked with emotion.

“Hello?” he said. “Is anyone there?”

“Jack,” she cried.

“Carlotta? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Wesley,” she said, openly sobbing now.

“Are you at home?”

“Yes,” she blubbered.

“I’m on my way.”

Six minutes later, Detective Jack Terry walked through her door. Carlotta had pulled herself together and had promised herself she'd behave professionally with Jack, just like anyone else would report a potential crime to any police officer.

Instead, she went into his arms and pressed her wet face against his ugly tie. He just held her and rubbed circles on her back.

"You have to give me something to go on here," he finally said into her hair.

She sniffled and lifted her head. "Wesley's missing."

He fished a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her for an awkward one-hand nose blow. "Let's sit down and you can tell me what's going on."

They settled on the couch and she relayed what she knew, from how Wesley hadn't shown up at the hospital the previous day to the fact that he'd missed the meeting with his probation officer.

Jack's expression was serious, but not concerned. "So he's been missing for less than twenty-four hours."

"Yes, but something's wrong, I know it."

"Has he ever disappeared before?"

Carlotta hesitated. "This is different."

Jack's face relaxed. "Probably not. He could be with a buddy, hanging out, or maybe he found a card game."

"His friend Chance Hollander called here. He doesn't know where Wesley is."

"That's the guy who gave us the tip in the Angela Ashford murder, isn't it?"

She nodded. "I don't trust him. I think he's into something illegal."

"His friend could've been covering for him. Maybe Wesley was right in front of him, stoned, or sleeping off a hangover. Doesn't Wesley have more than one buddy?"

"Not really," she said, then frowned. "Not that I know of. But there's a woman."

"A woman?"

"I don't know who she is, but sometimes he comes home smelling of expensive perfume."

"I think I caught a whiff of that myself the night of the drive-by shooting," he said, nodding. "That could be where he is." He winked and thumbed away a tear from her cheek. "See, nothing to worry about."

"But remember what those guys you arrested here said about Wesley being in trouble with The Carver."

"I remember. I also remember telling you that if Wesley has gotten himself in deep with these guys, he's going to have to figure a way to get out of it."

"But what if they hurt him?"

His mouth twitched downward. "He's young. He'll heal. And maybe a beating is what he needs to convince him that these aren't people he wants to do business with."

She gasped. “But what if they kill him?”

“That’s not likely. An intelligent young guy like Wesley is more valuable to them alive.”

That made her smile slightly. “You think he’s intelligent?”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, he’s not very smart.”

“He’s only nineteen.”

“He’s not a kid, Carlotta. When I was nineteen, I’d traveled halfway around the world.”

“In the military?”

He nodded. “Don’t baby him. If you do, you’ll never have a life of your own.”

“So you’re telling me there’s nothing I can do?”

“Legally, not until he’s been missing for twenty-four hours. Off the record, though, I’ll do a little nosing around.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Jack.” She reached up to stroke the bruise around his eye. “I see your shiner is fading.”

“Yeah.” He caught her hand and folded it into his.

His eyes were the color of amber, bright and direct. Sexy.

“How’s your arm?” he murmured in a husky tone that implied he was asking how incapacitated she was.

“My arm...” She felt the pull of his body on hers, like a force field. But she remembered too well the negative fallout the last time she’d given in to that attraction. Besides, if the note from her fugitive father fell out of her bra, it would probably kill the mood. “My arm is itching, actually.” She made a face and wiggled her finger under the edge of the cast.

He smiled, and the surface tension dissipated. He pushed himself to his feet. “I should go. I’ll call you if I find anything. Meanwhile, if Wesley shows up, let me know.”

“Okay. I’m sorry for the drama,” she added sheepishly.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “Wesley’s lucky to have someone who cares about him. I’m not sure he deserves it.”

“Do any of you male types deserve it?” she asked lightly.

“Touché.” He left, grinning.

Carlotta stood at the edge of the window and watched him drive away, wishing she could put her finger on her feelings for the man. Then she shook her head at the futility of such an exercise. The next time she and Jack crossed paths, they could be at each other’s throats.

But he had made her feel better...and empowered to do something more than wait to get a call from Wesley—or the morgue.

She called Hannah, who answered after the third ring. “Any news?”

“No. But I was wondering if you’d like to take a little field trip when you got off work. I need your muscle.”

“You got it. Pick you up in an hour.”

She was waiting outside, holding a fire extinguisher, when Hannah pulled up in her refrigerated catering van.

“Are we going to a fire?” Hannah asked, looking like the Goth Chef in her white smock.

Carlotta tossed the extinguisher on the floorboard, then climbed in awkwardly. “No, but it was the closest thing I had to a weapon. Chance Hollander is into all kinds of shady stuff. I just want to be prepared in case we have to fight our way out of there.”

“Gee, if it’s a weapon you need, I have an arsenal.”

Carlotta squinted at her. “I don’t think I want to know that.”

“Knives, I mean. I’ve got a bagful in the back—from paring to cleavers, straight edge, chisel ground, hollow edge, serrated.” She bounced in her seat with excitement. “Who are we going to hurt?”

“No one, hopefully. But I want to question Chance Hollander to his smarmy face, and who knows what kind of people I might run into at his place.”

“So I should arm myself.”

“One knife, Hannah. Just one. And let me do the talking.”

They parked in the visitor lot for his building and climbed out. “We need to grab some empty food boxes so we look like we’re catering a party,” Carlotta said. Hannah stacked empty boxes on a handcart and wheeled them toward the entrance. Carlotta followed, carrying the fire extinguisher. The concierge buzzed them in.

“We’re catering a party for Chance Hollander,” Carlotta said, then smiled apologetically. “But I’ve forgotten his unit number.”

The concierge not only gave her the unit number, but held the elevator door for them. She tipped him five dollars.

“Nice work,” Hannah murmured.

“All the party-crashing subterfuge we’ve learned occasionally comes in handy.”

They got off on the top floor and Carlotta took in the upscale decor with a twinge of envy.

“Wow, Wesley’s friend must be wealthy,” Hannah remarked.

“Chance Hollander is a trust fund baby, with lots of idle time on his hands.” They found his door. Carlotta rang the doorbell and pushed Hannah in front of the peephole. “If something’s going on, he won’t open the door to me. Try to look friendly.”

Hannah’s attempt at a smile looked more like a grimace, but a few seconds later, Chance Hollander greeted them, dressed in a short Hefner-esque paisley robe. He was blond and tanned, with the chuffy body and casual posture of a person who enjoyed excess.

“Yeah?” As soon as he spotted Carlotta, he tried to shut the door, but he was no match for Hannah. She shoved him so hard he stumbled backward and landed on his ass on a zebra-striped rug shaped like an animal hide, in the middle of a room crammed with black leather furniture.

Carlotta rolled her eyes. Why was it that people with money usually had no taste?

They walked in and Carlotta closed the door behind them. “We just want to talk, Chance.”

“I don’t know where Wesley is,” he said.

Carlotta narrowed her eyes at him. “You know something, you little shit. And you’d better tell me.”

He got a surly look on his face as he reclined on his elbows. The robe had fallen away to reveal baggy briefs and a spare tire. “Or what?”

She handed the fire extinguisher to Hannah. “Would you pull the pin, please?”