

Excerpt from 7 BRIDES FOR 7 BODIES
by Stephanie Bond
Coming soon!

Chapter One

“ARE YOU READY FOR THIS?” Wesley asked, his brow furrowed.

Carlotta Wren hooked her purse on her injured shoulder, wincing slightly when the weight of it landed on the padded dressing underneath her black wrap dress. She’d labored ridiculously over what to wear to visit their long-lost fugitive father in the Atlanta City Detention Center, where he was being held after Detective Jack Terry, her sometimes-lover, had arrested him yesterday at the townhome where she and Wesley lived. But Diane von Furstenberg was always appropriate.

“No,” she admitted as she made her way down the steps of the front stoop. “Are you?”

“Sure I am.” But her younger brother stabbed at his glasses—a telltale sign he wasn’t sure at all.

At the end of their driveway sat a dark blue Atlanta Police cruiser, angled to block the entrance.

“It’s been there all night,” Wes offered.

“To scare off reporters, no doubt.” Jack’s doing, she was sure. She sent him a mental thank you—the last thing they needed at the moment was a media circus. The driver side window of the cruiser buzzed down and the uniformed officer asked if they were leaving. She confirmed they were and thanked the bleary-eyed man who waved, then started his engine and pulled away.

Carlotta’s feet moved toward the garage, but her stomach churned like a washing machine, and she felt strangely detached from the moment. Part of her numbness she could blame on the painkillers she was taking for the slicing wound The Charmed Killer had inflicted on her before her father, Randolph Wren, had materialized to save her. The prescription drugs had sent her on a fantastic trip across time the previous night in her dreams, the remnants of which still plucked at her. *What if’s* and *should’ve been’s* had plagued her most of her adult life. She desperately hoped their father’s reappearance would help to put some of those doubts and anxieties to rest.

As the garage door raised, Carlotta glanced around to take in their unkempt yard and the shabby neighborhood, alert for interlopers now that their guard had left. But at nine o'clock on a muggy Wednesday morning in Lindbergh, an older section of Atlanta that squatted between the bling of Buckhead and the zing of Midtown, everyone was going about their business, seemingly oblivious that the world of the Wren children had just been turned upside down.

Again.

On the other hand, considering what she and Wesley had been through over the past ten years on their own, maybe their neighbors had gotten used to the commotion and were no longer paying attention.

And she was relieved that Peter Ashford, the closest thing she had to a boyfriend, and Hannah Kizer, her dearest gal pal, and Cooper Craft, Wesley's endearing body-moving boss, had respected her request for space to allow her and Wesley to acclimate to a new normal.

Their father was back.

The realization still took her breath away.

But Randolph's sudden appearance to save her had unleashed a whole new set of questions—how had he known Carlotta's life was in danger? Where had he been for the past ten years? And where was their mother Valerie?

"Want me to drive?" Wes asked, nodding to the two-door rental she'd been driving since her blue Monte Carlo muscle car had been blown sky high by The Charmed Killer.

"You don't have a driver's license," she reminded him.

"You should rest your shoulder while you can."

He was right. And considering the momentous errand ahead of them, what was a piddling misdemeanor if they were stopped between here and the city lockup?

She handed him the keys. "No speeding."

He nodded solemnly. With a start she realized her lovable slacker brother seemed more grown up this morning, his normal smart-ass attitude shelved for the time being. He looked more mature, too, having traded his standard holey tee for a button up shirt and jacket usually reserved for his body moving jobs. But of course he wanted to look grown up for Randolph, who hadn't seen Wesley—as far as they knew—since he was a scrawny nine-year-old.

Wes unlocked the trunk and stowed his bicycle. Carlotta bit down on her tongue until her eyes watered. After the family reunion, her little brother would be off to do any number of things that were decidedly un-family-friendly, such as meet with his probation officer, go to his part-time computer-security job that was part of his community service for a hacking crime, or to his side job of working undercover in a loan shark organization.

Oh, and there was the body-moving gig.

Damn Randolph for abandoning her, but double-damn him for abandoning Wesley. He had suffered from their parents' absence more than she had. She prayed their father would say the

right things today, that he had some plausible explanation for skipping out on their lives. Granted, though, gentle-hearted Wesley, who believed their father was innocent of the white collar crimes he'd been accused of, would not require much in terms of contrition. He would take whatever Randolph said at face value.

Notwithstanding the fact that Randolph had saved her from a madman, she herself wasn't inclined to be so forgiving.

Next to the rental car sat her beloved white Miata, incapacitated. Remembering the drug-induced "trip" she'd taken in the car the night before, Carlotta eyed the convertible warily as she opened the passenger door of the rental to swing inside.

Wes was already buckled in, seat and mirrors adjusted. He cranked the ignition. "Tell me again how Dad looks."

She gave him a little smile. "The same, only older. You'll see soon enough."

"What if he doesn't recognize me?"

"How could he not? You look just like him."

It was true—Wesley's light brown hair and fine-boned features were Randolph's, and model-worthy, although her brother didn't seem to be aware that his good looks turned heads.

Carlotta frowned when she thought of one head in particular. Liz Fischer, Randolph's attorney and former lover, had recently transferred her inappropriate attention onto Wesley. Carlotta wanted to throttle the woman, but Wes was an adult...as Jack had reminded her several times.

She frowned harder—Jack and Liz had history of their own.

"Is your shoulder hurting?"

"Hm?"

Wes backed the car out the garage. "You look like you're in pain."

"I'm fine," she murmured, giving herself a mental shake. She had too much on her mind to worry about where Jack Terry had left his DNA.

Wes maneuvered the car down the driveway, started to back out onto the street, then slammed on the brakes as a massive SUV blasted its horn and blew by close enough to shake their vehicle. Carlotta dug her nails into the armrest. Wes exhaled and pulled a hand down his face. "Sorry."

"Maybe I should drive."

"No, I got it," he said, then eased out onto the street.

"Do you know the way?"

Wes arched an eyebrow and Carlotta sighed. They both knew the way to the city jail by heart. And she couldn't blame her brother entirely—she'd seen the wrong side of cell bars herself. It was only for a few hours when she'd taken a tire iron to one of Wesley's loan sharks—totally justified. And there was the time she'd been arrested for murder—a big, fat

mistake. But still, if one were keeping score in the spectator sport that was her life, she was minus ten points.

She settled back and tried to empty her mind of troubling thoughts—past, present...and future. Randolph's timely appearance had also interrupted her and Peter's impending trip to Las Vegas. It was supposed to have been an impromptu vacation, but she'd found a ring box in Peter's packed suitcase. She could only assume that between Cirque du Soleil and Celine Dion, he'd been planning to propose.

And wasn't a tiny part of her glad she had a reason to postpone that particular conversation?

The announcer on the radio delivered the traffic report—the rush hour in Atlanta usually averaged four hours—then heralded the day's headlines.

“In local news, police are reporting the capture of fugitive Randolph Wren, who famously skipped bail over ten years ago for investment fraud in a case where investors lost millions and nearly bankrupted the Buckhead firm where Wren was a partner. In a strange twist, Wren was apprehended during the arrest of a man accused of being The Charmed Killer. The GBI reports that Wren's name did emerge as a suspect in that case because of an alleged romantic relationship with one of the victims. It's not known what connection Wren has to the man in custody for a crime spree that resulted in the deaths of several Atlanta women. Stay tuned for more details on this developing story.”

So much for trying to keep the sordid details from neighbors and coworkers.

Wesley leaned forward and swiped at the OFF button. “Assholes.”

“They're just reporting what they were told,” Carlotta murmured. “They have a job to do.”

Her mind clicked to the voice message she'd received from Rainie Stephens, a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. She and Rainie had worked together on a couple of cases and had fostered a mutual, if wary, respect. The short message had been personal and supportive in light of the news of Randolph's arrest...but Carlotta knew the underlying motive was to nab an exclusive from a victim of The Charmed Killer case who also happened to be the daughter of a federal fugitive. It was the kind of story that could catapult a local reporter to national exposure.

She checked her phone log to find several missed calls from Peter and Hannah, one from Coop, and a few calls from numbers she didn't recognize, although how strangers would've gotten her cell number, she didn't know. Her voice mail message light blinked frantically. And there were a string of unanswered texts from Peter. *Are you ok?...Just ping me to let me know you're ok...Good night...Good morning...I miss you...Remember I love you.*

She tucked away the phone, her mind swirling with the names of the people she needed to contact later—including her boss Lindy at Neiman Marcus (who would've heard all the Wren-related news) to once again assure the woman that despite appearances to the contrary, she could still do her job.

As they neared the detention center, she and Wes maintained a tense silence, steeped in their own thoughts. Traffic eased and every red light turned green, as if the universe was hurrying her toward her father. After a decade of waiting and wondering and weeping, this was happening so fast...too fast. When she saw their destination looming ahead, she swallowed past a dry throat, wishing she'd brought a bottle of water.

And what if she burst into tears? She hadn't thought to bring a tissue. Or wear waterproof mascara. She gripped her purse harder—retro Gucci...timeless, but not roomy. It wasn't big enough, for example, to hold photographs of all the things Randolph had missed over the years, assuming he'd even want to see them.

“How long do you think we'll get to talk to Dad?” Wes asked.

“Jack told me we'd have twenty minutes.”

Wes's mouth tightened. “Jerk.”

“It's not his rule, Wes.”

“Still...I bet he's gloating like hell to have brought down a big-name fugitive. He and the D.A. are probably still out celebrating.”

“That's not really Jack's style.”

“He has a style?”

She decided to let that one pass as Wes slowed the car to turn into the crowded visitor parking lot. The Atlanta City Detention Center was a popular place.

“What are you going to ask Dad first?” Wes's voice vibrated with nervous excitement.

She wet her lips. “I thought I would let him do the talking. Don't you think he owes us that much?”

Wes frowned as he maneuvered into a parking space on the back row. “Don't mess this up.”

She frowned back. “What do you mean?”

“You sound angry.”

Her chin went up. “I have a right to be angry.”

His jaw clenched, then he shoved the gear shift into park and killed the ignition. “Dad has a lot to deal with right now. He needs our support.”

Carlotta gaped. “Support? Wes, he's the criminal here. We're the victims.”

“He got caught saving your life,” Wes said evenly. “He's in jail because of you. You should be grateful.”

Fury rose in her chest like a tide. “Grateful? I should be grateful because Randolph walked out and left me with—” She broke off before she said something she couldn't take back.

“With me?” Wes's face was a mask of hurt.

“With his mess to clean up,” she corrected. But the damage was done.

“Why didn't you turn me over to foster care?” Wes spat out. “I probably would've been better off.”

Okay, that stung...and was quite probably true. She blinked back hot tears as he opened the door and flung himself out. The car shook when he slammed the door. He popped the trunk lid and hauled out his bike none too gently, then walked it to a nearby bike rack, as if to punctuate that he would be getting away from her as quickly as possible when they left.

She took a few calming breaths and reminded herself they were both emotionally raw at the moment, but they had been through worse.

Hopefully.

Carlotta opened the door and climbed out, relieved to see that Wes was waiting for her at the entrance to the slightly formidable building. She never thought she would long for the relative coziness of the Midtown police precinct where Jack Terry worked and everyone knew her name.

As she approached, Wes held himself rigid and wouldn't look at her. The one moment when they should've been standing in solidarity, and she felt utterly alone. Despair welled in her chest as he swung open the heavy glass door.

7 BRIDES FOR 7 BODIES coming soon! Check www.stephaniebond.com for updates, and sign up for the newsletter to be notified as soon as the book is available! The release has been pushed by a few days because of an impending announcement about the BODY MOVERS series—Stephanie thanks you SO much for your patience and your support!