

Enjoy a look at the first chapter
of the second book
in the Chance O'Brien
Mystery Trilogy.

STUDENT BODY

by

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aka Tess Thompson

Jake Windham woke up to the sound of the roaring crowd. He reached up and tipped the ball into his hands and gracefully ran across the goal line. He looked up for his dad in the stands and was rewarded with a thumbs up and a grin, but then the image faded, and he could no longer see the faces above him.

He opened his eyes and frowned when he saw the beige headliner of his Ford pickup and realized the roaring crowd was the noise of traffic coming through the partially open window. He wasn't on the football field, and his glory days were far behind him.

He groaned, put his hand to his face and winced. When he pulled his hand away, he saw the dark stain on his fingers. He sat up, and a wave of dizziness forced him to bite back the bile that crept into his throat. Staring back at him in the dashboard mirror was the swollen face of a man he hardly recognized. "What the hell happened to me?" he whispered. He closed his eyes and slowly sat back.

He remembered drinking a beer when he'd stopped at the usual place with his friends after the game for happy hour. There was a girl, blonde, really cute. When he tried to reach farther into his memory, he came up blank. Wow, he must have really tied one on. Even in college when he'd been at the lowest point in his life, he had never gotten that drunk. A shiver ran down his spine, but it wasn't from the cold. What was going on? Had he broken one of his steadfast rules not to drink and drive?

He reached for the ignition and realized that his keys were not in the switch. He searched around on the seat, felt in his left pocket, and then found them in his right. Perplexed, he frowned a little, dug them out and started the truck. He drove slowly across the parking lot while trying to get his bearings. He saw an HEB Grocery Store, a Chinese restaurant and a couple more businesses he didn't recognize. He realized that he was probably only about seven or eight miles from home when he pulled up to the stop light at the intersection with Woodson Parkway. Shaking his head and mumbling to himself, he pulled out into the Saturday morning traffic.

When he got home, he didn't know what he expected to find. Maybe the police? It was obvious he had been in a fight last night, but surprisingly his knuckles weren't sore or bloody. He wondered what the other guy looked like and what would have made him that angry. As a general rule, he didn't have a bad temper. He considered himself a pretty mellow guy.

Jake stumbled through the front door, hit the bathroom, and ran cold water on his face. He winced again when he felt the sting from the lacerations. He looked in the mirror at his bloodshot eyes and put some antibiotic cream on his face. He thought about calling the friends he had been with the night before to ask what happened, but his cell was on the hall table by the front door. He only managed to make it as far as the sofa before he collapsed with the thought in mind to just grab a quick nap.

When he opened his eyes, the house was completely dark. He looked across the room at the digital clock on his VCR and frowned. It was two o'clock in the morning. He had slept for over twelve hours. Hypnotized by the glow of the street light across from his house, he watched the insects flit back and forth.

He reached up and turned the switch on the lamp sitting on the end table. He squinted at the light and rubbed his eyes. This wasn't the first time he had drunk too much, but he didn't think he had ever felt this bad in his life. He clicked the remote control for the TV and channel surfed for about five minutes, and then gave up and touched the power button and threw the device onto the seat beside him. "Get yourself together, J," he said gritting his teeth as he walked back into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and let the hot water pour over his head until the water ran cold and he began to shake. He quickly dried off, threw on a pair of shorts and quietly waited for it to be morning when hopefully someone would tell him what was going on.

It was a few minutes past nine when Jake pulled into the Urgent Care Clinic where his friend Rene Campos worked as a nurse practitioner. They had gone to the University of Texas together and reconnected when Rene moved to Houston for a job after finishing the additional training needed for his degree. Rene was a student trainer when Jake was on the football team, and Jake considered him a good friend. When Jake called him early Sunday morning and told him what he remembered, Rene expressed concern and told him to come to the clinic as soon as it opened. He wanted to run some tests.

Not knowing really what to expect, Jake was a little apprehensive as he walked into the building, but he could feel his mood lightening when he looked past the receptionist and saw Rene with a concerned smile on his face. Jake filled out the necessary paperwork and was shown into a small, sterile room.

"You really don't look good, bro," Rene said and patted Jake on the shoulder. Jake shrugged and sat on the examining table. "Like I said on the

phone, it sounds like you may have been drugged. Sounds like somebody slipped you a Roofie. That's my unofficial diagnosis. I'll draw some blood and have you pee in the cup. We'll send it in and see what the lab has to say. Usually all traces of Rohypnol disappear after twenty-four hours, but we may get lucky."

"But, why? I still have my wallet and credit cards. The cash is still there minus I guess what I used on drinks. So it wasn't robbery."

"Beats me. Doesn't make any sense to me either. When I left, you were at the bar with some blonde chick hanging on you. Maybe somebody was trying to 'roofiemy' her and got you instead."

"You're kidding me, right? Did you meet her? Ever see her before?"

"Not that I can recall. You don't remember her?"

"No. The only thing I remember is getting there and going up to the bar for a beer. I remember a blonde, but I couldn't tell you what she looked like. Can you?"

"Not really. Only saw her from across the room. I guess you would say she was pretty. Short and kinda curvy."

"Did I hit on her?"

Rene paused for a minute and then said, "Come to think of it. She came from a table in the back and walked up to you when you were ordering your beer. Almost like she'd been waiting for you."

"That's just creepy, man," Jake said and ran his hand through the sun-bleached shock of blond hair falling into his eyes.

"Appears she did a number on you," Rene said, touching Jake's face. "Looks like claw marks. I've seen enough cat scratches to know."

"She scratched me? Hell, I thought I'd gotten in a fight with some guy?"

"If you did he was Wolfman."

“I need to clean your face. It’s too late for stitches. You should have called me yesterday when you woke up.”

“Sorry, I was a little busy feeling like crap.”

“Just make sure you keep these wounds clean. If it gets worse you come back immediately, you hear. You don’t want your face to rot off.”

Jake laughed and stuck out his arm for the blood test and realized he didn’t have any more answers now than he did when he walked in the door.

“We didn’t get to talk on Friday. I needed to tell you something, but obviously you were busy with a psycho woman. You really should call the police.”

“And tell them what? We don’t even know if I was drugged much less what the motive was.”

Rene sighed and said, “I ran into Caren a couple of weeks ago?” When Jake didn’t respond, Rene continued. “Don’t tell me you don’t care?”

“So, all right; I’ll bite. Where’d you see her?”

“At a restaurant. She’s living in Houston now and working for some big criminal law firm. And yes, she looks good and no she’s not married.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Maybe not, but you were thinking it. And yes, she asked about you.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That you were fat and bald and ugly as sin. What do you think I told her? I told her you were fine and working at one of the high schools as a football coach and no you weren’t married. If you ask me, she’s still interested.”

“I didn’t ask you. Things were over between us a long time ago.”

Rene shook his head and said, “Yep, that’s what I expected you to say, but if it were me, I’d want to know.

On the way back to his house, Jake's mood was anything but joyful. He'd been drugged and maybe assaulted by an obviously crazy woman. He would have to go to work tomorrow looking like he'd been in a brawl, and Caren Kent, the woman he would love forever, was back in town.

What a frigging mess.

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Most Mondays were slow days on campus. Many students and teachers alike spent too much time partying over the weekend and most were reluctant to get back into the business of academics.

King Oak High School housed about fifteen hundred students, and discipline problems arose daily. The principal relied on Officer Mario Rodriguez to keep a lid on things, and he rarely asked for any help from others, including the Houston Police Department.

Normally, his steady, calm demeanor made him an especially valuable campus police officer. Today, the look on his face alarmed his boss. "What is it, Mario?" Principal Melissa Young motioned to a wingback chair near her shiny mahogany desk. "Have a seat and tell me."

He shook his head, gulped some air and caught his breath before speaking. "We've got a big problem outside in the parking lot."

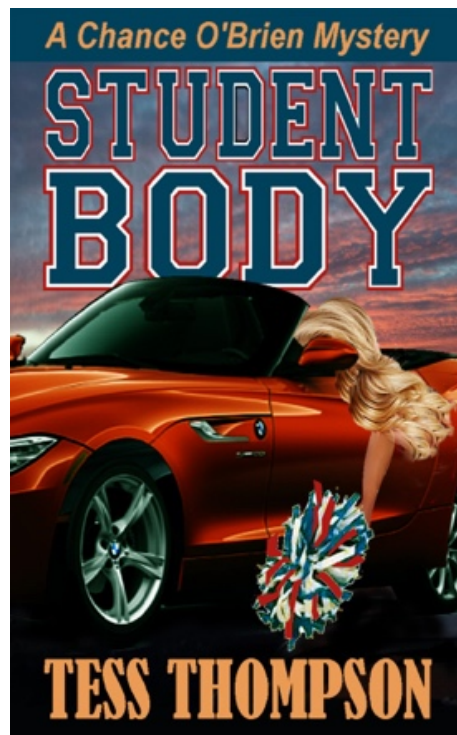
Ms. Young stood up abruptly, took his arm, and propelled him out of her office. "Let's get out there. You can tell me on the way."

“I already called it in to HPD. I don’t think the two of us can do this alone.”

Now, a worried look appeared on the principal’s face. She took out her two-way radio/cell phone and flipped it on while they walked. “What are you talking about?”

“There’s a body out there and it smells to high heaven.”

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