

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

The Devil Makes the Rules

by

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Prologue

El Paso, Texas

A cold wind blew across the mountain and settled on the grounds of the old cemetery. Nightfall came quickly in late November to the desert southwest. The grounds were well-kept but sparse. There were prettier graveyards in the city, but none older with more history. Notorious gunfighters and Mexican generals were buried here, but it wasn't their resting place the man was interested in finding.

He remembered his mother as a woman who laughed easily and had a gentle touch and his father as strong and vibrant. He missed them and loved them still.

He found their two gravestones lying flat in the caliche. The stones were engraved with the simple statements of names and dates. It had been so long since they were buried here, his memories of them had begun to fade.

Above his parents' plots lay the small graves of their two stillborn sons.

He had never planned to come back. Not to this town and not to all the memories, and after he finished his business here, he doubted he would ever return again. He had a new life and a new family now. He wanted to have dreams and hopes for the future, but with each passing year it became more difficult.

He pulled the windbreaker up over his neck and was glad that he had thought to bring it when he left the warm, Florida climate. He knelt and touched each stone to say his farewell. As he stood and looked across the solemn, lonely scene, he thought he saw

a figure of a man standing in the shadows. The figure was too far away for him to be certain, but for an instant he thought it looked like....

A chill ran through him, and he realized it wasn't from the cold wind. It couldn't be. He didn't believe in ghosts from his past. He looked away, and when he glanced back, the figure was gone. He chided himself on his foolishness and turned toward the pathway to the parking lot.

These people he loved were in God's hands and had been for the last twenty years.

He pulled his car onto the gravel driveway leading toward the exit. If he had looked in his rearview mirror, he would have seen the same figure move out from the shadows, his long, curly, blond hair moving in the wind and a sardonic smile spreading across his weathered, handsome face.

Chapter 1

Key West, Florida

The tall, handsome man squinted into the early Florida sun and watched the lone figure walking down the dock. As the shape drew closer, he realized it was a woman dressed in a long, red sundress, the hem of her skirt swishing against her ankles. Her stride appeared purposeful and confident as she studied the boats tied up in her path.

He was surprised when she turned in the direction of his boat, the *Footloose*. So surprised in fact, that he sloshed the cup of coffee he'd been drinking all over the recently polished deck and burned his hand as the hot liquid flowed through his fingers. He wiped his hands on his clean, cargo pants and gave her his full attention.

The woman looked up and he caught his breath. He didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful woman in his life unless it was on the cover of one of the Hollywood gossip magazines that covered all the racks in the local grocery store.

She was tall for a woman, he guessed close to six feet and thin and willowy but with curves in all the right places. She had hair so black it looked dark blue in the bright

sunlight, and it flowed down to the middle of her back. She looked familiar, but he didn't think he'd ever met her before.

Smiling, he stood and walked out to the rail. "Can I help you, ma'am? You seem to be looking for something," he said.

"Oh," she said and laughed. "I don't think I'm lost, but the man at the bait shop must have given me the wrong information. I'm looking for the *Happy Traveler*. The man, Willie, I think that was his name, told me I'd find it at the end of the pier." She pointed at his boat. "Obviously this one isn't it, and I've come to the end."

"You are partially correct. He usually ties her up right here beside me. I'm afraid he left yesterday for a run to the Bahamas." He looked up at the woman's crestfallen face and said, "Anything I can do to help?"

"Will he be back soon?"

"Probably not until day after tomorrow. He is usually gone about a week. He has family there and always takes the opportunity to visit when he has a paid trip. Were you hoping to book a fishing trip?"

"Fishing?" she asked and frowned, "I..."

Embarrassed, he said, "Sorry. I'll bet the way you're dressed you probably aren't looking for that. So, I'm guessing you want to go to the Bahamas, too. Sorry you missed him. I'm pretty sure he would have made room for you." Realizing she might have taken his words as a sexist remark, he quickly said, "I mean... if his boat wasn't housing a private party, he probably could have taken one more person."

She laughed again and tucked the strands of hair that had blown across her face behind her ear as her lips opened in a wide smile. "You know, you're funny."

He coughed and climbed down to meet her on the dock. "I really wasn't trying to be. It's just that you're not typical of what I see out here on the docks."

"And what do you usually see out here on the docks?" she said coyly.

"Retired, gray-haired ladies with their portly spouses or ridiculously young, giggling teenage girls wearing short shorts and you know, those..." he moved his hands from his shoulder to his stomach.

"Crop tops?" she said finishing the sentence for him.

"Yeah, those things."

"I've been known to wear a crop top and shorts back in the day."

He swallowed hard and pictured her like that and grinned. "I'll bet you have. Back in the day." She was flirting with him, and he was flirting back. It had been ages since he'd felt the zing this woman was giving him. It felt damn good.

She wet her lips, and he could see the tip of her pink tongue peeking out and then she said, "Maybe you can help me?"

He drew his glance away from her lips to her teasing, emerald eyes and said, "With what?"

"I need to go to one of the small islands in the Bahamas, and I need a boat to take me there."

"Why not take a plane to the main airport and then catch a small, puddle jumper?"

"That won't work. I need to arrive at a private dock. It's a surprise for someone. He's not expecting me until next week."

He hoped the disappointment didn't show on his face. This gorgeous woman was apparently already taken, and all the light banter back and forth had just been innocent flirting. Nothing more.

His answer came out a little gruffer than he wanted as he said, "I'd love to help, but I'm afraid I don't have the permits and licenses to take you to the Bahamas. I'm strictly a fishing boat for hire. Granted, it's a nice fishing boat, but I'm not equipped for anything like that."

"I understand. Do you know of anyone who can help me? I'm not from Florida. I guess I could go back and ask Willie."

"Why don't you come aboard, and I'll see what I can find. I haven't been in the business all that long so my contacts are pretty limited. I do have some names in my address book down in the cabin." He reached out to help her on board and said, "I'm Brett Adams. Welcome to the *Footloose*."

She put her hand in his and gracefully stepped onto the deck. Smoothing her long dress, she bit her bottom lip and said, "Marie Trudeau. Thank you for being so kind, Mr. Adams."

"My pleasure. You're probably the best thing that will happen to me all day. I don't have a trip planned until tomorrow morning, so I've got time today before I go into town for supplies."

He led her down the stairs to a compact, but efficient living area. “Do you live here?” she asked.

“Most of the time. It has all the comforts of home. Kitchen, bed, and of course the head with it’s own shower.”

“Most of the time?”

“I have friends in town that I visit sometimes, but mostly I’m here. Would you like a cup of coffee while I look for the names?”

“Umm, I would love some. I got going so early this morning I didn’t have time to go to the restaurant, and I hate hotel room coffee.”

“You must be hungry, too. I’m afraid I don’t have much, but I can whip you up an omelet if you like.”

“That would be way too much trouble. I’ve already imposed too much.”

“Hey, I’d like to. It gets kinds of lonely here. Some days, I find myself talking to the sea gulls. It would be my pleasure to fix you breakfast.”

“All right then,” she said and took a seat behind the small, built-in, kitchen table. She picked up the coffee and moaned. “Very good coffee. You, my dear man, are a gourmet.”

“I guess you could call it a vice. I go to Whole Foods in Wellington and spend ridiculous amounts of money for coffee beans. It’s nice to share it with someone.”

He moved to the small galley and whipped eggs and milk into a bowl and poured the mixture into the hot frying pan, added cheese and a sprinkle of salt and pepper.

“Sorry, but I don’t have anything but cheese to put in it.”

“I am impressed you can cook. Most men, or at least most men I’m acquainted with, don’t know how to boil water. So, I guess since you live on your boat by yourself, you’re not married.”

He thought about Macy and what they’d had and smiled wistfully. “Was. Not anymore. You?”

“No, never have been. Too busy I guess. I work for a cosmetics company. I travel a lot, but this is my first time in The Keys. It’s really beautiful here.”

“So the someone you’re going to surprise is a boyfriend?”

For a moment she seemed confused and then said, “Oh, no, nothing like that,” but she didn’t elaborate so he let it drop.

“I gather from your accent and your last name that you’re from Louisiana?” he said as he placed the omelet in front of her.

“Now how did you ever guess that? Yes, I’m from New Orleans,” she said pronouncing it *New-Aww-Lens* like a true native. “My family’s lived there for generations.”

“I went to school in Houston with a lot of Cajuns. I can usually pick you guys out in a crowd,” he said. She smiled and again he was struck by how beautiful she was.

He found a couple of names of reputable captains and gave her the list. “I hope this will help you out. I haven’t heard any bad things about them, and they seem like they’re competent, but you probably need to check them out before you commit.”

Marie stood and held out her hand. “Thank you, Mr. Adams. I appreciate all of your help. You’ve been a real gentleman.”

He tried to think of something to say that would delay her departure, but in the end he escorted her up top, reached out lacing his fingers with hers, and helped her off the boat. “Drop by if you’re ever in town again, and please call me Brett.”

“I just might do that, Brett”

He stood and watched her as she walked back down the dock, her hair and skirt blowing in the breeze. He knew he would never see her again, and for some reason it made him surprisingly sad. She was pretty, kind, and easy to talk to. He sighed and returned to the cabin to get his list of things to do in town and tried to get the thoughts of the glamorous stranger out of his mind.

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Brett was jarred from a sound sleep when he heard his name called. The overhead light suddenly shone bright in his eyes. He sat up abruptly and squinted. He could see a figure sitting across from him in the shadows, but before he could utter a word, he saw the gun pointed directly at his heart. His eyes met the deadly gaze of the same beautiful woman he had been having erotic dreams about just moments before.

“What the hell?” he said. “Marie?”

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