

You Can Go Home Again

By

Jodi Bella

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Chapter One

Becky Atlee juggled the two grocery bags that grew heavier with every step. Thank goodness she was almost home.

She popped the earpiece from her cell phone out of her ear and frowned, thinking over the last voicemail message as she walked the remaining steps up to her brownstone. Why did Amy sound so upset?

Her gaze, downcast on the evening sidewalk in front of her feet, caught on the toe of a weathered, yet familiar, cowboy boot as she pivoted to start up the steps to her brownstone, and her heart froze. Her gaze dragged up the lean muscular legs, the tapered waist and broad shoulders, and stopped on the handsome, beloved face, as she gasped in surprise, both bags slipping from her hands to land at her feet with an audible CRASH!

Well, now she knew why Amy had been trying to get a hold of her all day long—she'd been trying to warn Becky that Tucker was going to be in town.

“Well, Red, it's about damn time you showed your pretty little face,” Tucker Rhodes admonished in his lazy redneck drawl as he unfolded himself from her front steps and wrangled her disheveled shopping items back into the grocery bags. She stood frozen stock still, unable to do anything but stare at him as he stood erect again and hitched both bags easily into one burly arm. Her gaze again slid involuntarily over his hard, working man's muscles, up the long frame of his tall body, and finally came to rest on his easy going, masculine face. He didn't look a bit different than he had fourteen months ago, when she'd last seen him. Yet somehow the flyaway wisps of his long, dirty blond hair tugged at her heart. The cleft in his chin begged for her lips to press against it. The hollow of his stubbled neck promised the smell that was uniquely his and that came to her sometimes in her dreams.

And his clear, spring green eyes met hers with an intensity that made her stomach twist.

Her traitorous heart was knocking hard enough against her ribcage that she half expected to look down and see it burst from her chest.

Becky feigned a heavy sigh that was meant to convey her supposed displeasure at Tucker's unexpected appearance on her front steps, but was really just an attempt to try to calm her suddenly racing pulse, then looked up into his beloved face, and said, “What are you doing here, Tucker?”

He indicated the brownstone with a motion of his head. “Let's talk inside. I've been sitting out here over an hour and my ass feels damn near froze solid.”

Reluctantly, Becky followed Tucker up the brownstone steps, her gaze naturally drawn to the tight, jeans-encased area of his body that he had just referred to.

“You seem to have a good building here, at least,” he was saying as she punched in her code to access the inside of the brownstone. “Lots of security. No one would even give me the time of day, let alone let me inside. Course, that just goes to show you how dangerous it really must be in this area, if the security has to be so tight at your apartment building.”

Becky stifled another sigh, this one purely born of frustration. She wasn't surprised to hear Tucker start in on New York; from the time she'd first mentioned that she was moving here she'd heard nothing but horror stories about it from him. A country man born, bred, and always, Tucker could never fathom her current choice in residence no matter how many times she tried to explain it to him.

Inside the brownstone, Tucker stood to the side while Becky did a quick mail check, then trudged up the next flight of steps with him following along behind her. She unlocked the door to her small apartment and preceded him inside, turning around to watch as he entered and took in the little piece of New York that was her own.

Kicking the door shut behind him, Tucker immediately locked it with his free hand and then went straight to the counter in her kitchen where he deposited her bags. She waited for the negative comments to come, watching him closely. *This is it?* he'd say... or *This is why you want to stay in this God-forsaken city?*

But he didn't say any of it. Instead, he started taking things from her grocery bags and putting them away in her cabinets—and in all the *right* cabinets at that, just like he lived here for crying out loud, which really grated on her nerves!

"Tucker," Becky said in a voice carefully controlled, but tight with impatience. "What the hell is going on? Why are you here in New York?"

He paused in his work and met her gaze. "I've come to take you home, Beck. Mark has finally gone and done it. He died of a drug overdose last night."

Her immediate internal response to that was: *Oh, Mama...* But she carefully hid any feelings about his statement and within barely a blink of time responded with, "Well, what the hell took the bastard so long, anyhow?"

Tucker looked her up and down, not judgmentally, but searchingly, like he was trying to find any missing emotions she might be hiding from him. She wanted to shout at him to stop looking at her that way, because of *all* people, he should have known that she wouldn't have any emotions except for relief where this news was concerned. Pity for her mother was a side effect, yes, but there was little to be done about that.

Carefully, like he was talking to a time bomb that could detonate at any of the wrong words that might accidentally fall from his lips, Tucker said, "He was your brother, Beck..."

"No," she interrupted adamantly, holding up a protesting hand. "There's two things wrong with that statement. I haven't had a *real* brother in fifteen years—and even if he was my brother by my own bad luck and genetics, it doesn't mean that I have to care that he's gone now, because I sure as hell don't."

"Look, I know you've never been his biggest fan..." Tucker began in a slightly cajoling voice.

Becky snorted. "Can you blame me? He's done nothing his entire life but hurt my mother and father, leach everything he could get off of them, and then turn around and verbally and physically abuse them at every chance he got!"

Tucker nodded. "I know, Becky. I'm not asking you to come home to see him put to rest. I'm asking you to come home and be there for your mom. She needs you right now."

Becky found herself suddenly blinking back against hot, pressing tears. She took a few cleansing breaths before trusting herself to speak clearly. "You know that's not true. You know as well as I do that we haven't talked to each other in over fourteen months."

"That was your choice," Tucker reminded her softly, "not hers." He stopped the process of unpacking her groceries and met her gaze directly. "You need to go to her now. It's time to mend the wounds between you two."

She folded her arms across her chest in a defensive stance. "I... She... she won't want me there..."

"Yes, she will."

"Did she ask you to come and get me?" she pressed him.

Tucker lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “She didn’t have to. I know she wants you there. And besides that, Red, you’re all the family that she has left now.”

Becky stared at him. “She has you... you’ve always been as good as a son to her—*better* even than the son that she had by blood.”

Tucker shook his head. “I’m not *you*,” he said. “It’s not the same thing.”

“I can’t just go off, just like that, you know,” Becky said defensively as she watched him put the last of the groceries away and then fold up the two paper bags. He wedged them between the side of her little refrigerator and the wall, where she had a small collection of paper bags already started. “I have a job. I-I—”

“That’s been taken care of already,” he interrupted her. “I called your boss this morning and explained the situation to her. She was very sympathetic and told me you had plenty of personal time accrued and that you should use as much or all of it, even, as you might need.”

For the second time in twenty minutes time, Becky found herself staring, speechless, at the man before her.

“You called my *boss*?” she thundered, incredulous.

“Yup.”

His agreement was completely unabashed, almost proud. She wanted to slug him.

“I wasn’t about to come all this way, you see, and then let you wiggle out of this by giving me some horseshit excuse about your job.” His gaze narrowed on her. “You forget how well I know you, Red. You never use personal or sick time unless someone *makes* you do it. You’re a workaholic.”

“Yeah, and you’re a meddling asshole!” she shot back, so frustrated she couldn’t think of anything more insulting or profound to slay him with.

“Tsk tsk. Don’t resort to name calling, sugar.”

To her dismay, Becky felt her cheeks warm at the mild rebuke, and the memories of what similar displays of language had resulted in for her over the years. Annoyed with her reaction almost as much as she was by Tucker’s characteristic high-handedness, Becky made a low, growling sound in her throat and stamped her foot. “Look here, Tucker, I am *not* going home with you! I am *not* going to the funeral. I am *not* going *anywhere*...”

“Apparently I wasn’t clear enough earlier when I said that I was ‘asking’ you to come home—I’m not really asking, you see. Because *asking* implies that you have a choice here, and really there is none. You *will* come with me, Red. Make no mistake about it. How you come is up to you, but I am not returning to Pennsylvania without you in tow.”

Becky glared at him. “You can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do. You... we... you’re not my fiancé anymore, in case you haven’t noticed! You don’t have any say in what I do or where I go...”

The grin he sent her way had a dark, dangerous glint to it. “You were the one who ended the engagement,” Tucker reminded her. “I never wanted that. *I* still want *you*. And so you see how I *can* think that I still do have something of a say in what you do and where you go, at least in this one instance.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “Now, we have exactly four hours before our plane leaves. Considering drive time and check in time at the airport, that leaves you exactly twenty minutes to get your little behind back into your bedroom to pack for your trip.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Becky insisted stubbornly, arms folded decisively over her chest.

Now Tucker’s grin widened. “All right, now, so we’re going to play this game, are we?” Out of the corner of her eye, Becky saw him unbutton one sleeve of his flannel shirt. He flipped it

up, inside out, and began to fold it up several more times till it rested just beneath the level of his elbow. "I'm going to count to three, Red. And if you haven't hightailed it out of this room by then, by God, your butt is mine."

"What a surprise," she scoffed. She glanced at the kitchen clock. "And imagine it only took you twenty-five minutes before throwing a spanking threat my way."

His eyes glimmered. "I wouldn't have to resort to it at all if you'd just act like an adult every once in a while and be reasonable." He watched her as she glowered back at him, standing her ground. "So what's it going to be, sugar? You going to come along nicely with me to Pennsylvania or do I blister your backside first and let you squirm on it the whole ride home?"

In a tone meant to grate on his control, she carefully enunciated her response through gritted teeth, as though speaking to someone either very dense or of another country who spoke only a little English. "I'm-not-go-ing-any-where-with-you!"

A deep, masculine chuckle shook through Tucker's chest and despite herself, Becky felt her toes curl in response to that sound. She remembered times when they had made love, tousling and playfully wrestling in the sheets, when that laugh of his had started in his belly but felt like it ended inside of her, because their lips had been locked at the time. She felt color rise to her cheeks at the memory.

"All right then, miss, if that's how you want it," Tucker was saying, oblivious to her thoughts. "Don't say I didn't warn you." With one hand, he reached into the drawer to his right and immediately extracted the largest wooden spoon that Becky owned. How he knew where to find it was a mystery she never would understand and she mentally laughed, thinking he must have some kind of spanker's radar. Holding the painful-looking utensil up for her to see, in case she'd somehow missed it, he sang out, "One."

Later, Becky would wonder why she didn't just run for it then. She could have taken off for her bedroom, locked the door and gone out the window, down the fire escape. But she didn't. She stood her ground shakily, staring wide-eyed from that spoon to Tucker's face.

Of course, subconsciously, she knew how fast Tucker was. And how much more angry he would have gotten had there been a chase. He probably would have spanked her every hour on the hour along the way back home had she made a run for it when she had the chance.

"Two..."

"This is absolutely ridiculous!" Becky protested, still somehow holding her ground. "I am a grown woman for God's sake and I can make my own decis..."

"Three!"

"Oh, shit!"

The time for action had come and Becky took off down the hall as fast as she could. But, as always, Tucker was still faster. He snatched her clear off her feet and had her twisted around his hip, her bottom propped in the air on his raised knee in seconds. To her mortification, she felt his hand as he fisted her sweatpants at the waist and a second later shucked them down over her hips to puddle on the floor. Her plain cotton panties immediately followed.

And barely a breath later, before she could even gather enough air to voice any kind of protest, before she could figure out the best way to wiggle out of his grasp, the first fiery splat of that wooden spoon made its mark on her naked backside.

It had been over a year since Becky had endured a spanking at this man's hands. And good God, how it did hurt to have her memory refreshed of the sport!

Tucker was merciless with the wide wooden spoon, dealing out smart, stinging raps all over her backside, deaf to her howls and pleas. Her skin reddened quickly under the deluge of

smacks and her bottom literally bounced with the impact of his blows. Becky called him every dirty name she could think of only to have him repay her in a faster, more furious barrage of spanks. Her body bucked in time to the tempo of the spanking stick he yielded, a dance of punishment that was a fight for dominance and concession of her will to his desire.

The sounds of the spanking seemed deafening in her tiny apartment and Becky was sure that her neighbors could hear everything through her paper-thin walls. Mr. Thompson, across the hall from her, who always pounded on the wall for her to ‘turn down that blasted music’ would probably run over any minute now and beg to lend a hand with her comeuppance. She’d been determined at first not to add any sounds of her own distress to the loud slaps and smacks echoing in the apartment, but with each new stinging bite of wood on flesh, her resolve not to cry was rapidly dwindling.

“Anytime you want me to stop, you just say you’ll come back home with me, and that’ll be it,” Tucker graciously offered her.

“You can go to hell, you bastard,” she hissed at him over one shoulder instead.

The spank that followed that response resulted in the handle of the wooden spoon cracking in half.

With a disgruntled noise at the interruption, Tucker threw the ruined implement aside, shifted Becky slightly to allow for a better target, and began anew with the wide, hard surface of his hand.

“I can do this all night, Red,” he told her now. “I’m sure you remember that from experience. But if you make us miss the plane because of this, I promise you, you will have a freshly battered behind each and every day that you are home.”

Becky gritted her teeth and hung onto her precarious position half over his hip, half over his raised knee. She blinked back the first tears from the spanking and allowed herself the smallest of yelps and groans. The position he had her in was too tenuous to attempt to struggle too much; she’d either wind up landing face first on the floor, or Tucker would simply carry her a few feet over to the kitchen table, take a seat in one of her chairs and start anew, reenergized and renewed with a much more comfortable position to work in. She was totally at his mercy.

Yet, despite the pain and her odd position, the contact of his hand on her bottom, even in this harsh manner, did strange, familiar things to Becky. Even though it hurt, and badly, she found herself aching between her legs, and almost lifting herself up for his assault. Her sex clenched as if reaching for him, and she felt her nipples grow taut, awaiting a gentle hand upon them. And these traitorous reactions, more than anything he had said, more than the pain of the spanking, or the guilt of knowing she should do the right thing and be there for her mother at this hard time, made her shout for him to stop, that she’d go with him after all.

* * *

Tucker wasn’t smug or self-satisfied as he helped her to regain her feet. He knew that she had conceded the fight to him reluctantly and he also knew that the fight was not really over. It would continue and grow harder to endure as they continued to be around one another from here on out.

He watched her pull up her underwear and sweatpants, watched her face as she winced when even that soft fabric brushed closely over her abraded skin.

“I’ll go pack a bag,” she snapped, and flounced away from him, her backside all but radiating red heat to match the long tresses of hair that bounced with her every step.

It was only after she had disappeared around the corner, and out of sight, that Tucker allowed himself to shake out the pain from his smarting spanking hand.

Jesus, it had been a long time since he'd warmed up her behind. He had to admit he'd missed it.

Hell, he'd missed her.

With a frustrated hand, he raked his fingers through his hair. Just how the hell had things gotten so messed up between them? And how was he going to get through the next week or so with her around all the time again?

Better yet, how was he going to bring about a reconciliation between Becky and her mother instead of watching them drift further apart? Her mother didn't even know that he'd come up to get Becky and bring her home for the funeral. And despite the confidence he'd spoken of earlier, he wasn't exactly all that sure that she'd want to see her daughter.

But damn it, he didn't care. Things had been messed up in Becky's family far too long. She was right in her description of her brother -- he was a true bastard through and through and had done nothing but repeatedly hurt her family since he'd been a teenager. A drug addict and problem drinker, Mark never could hold a job longer than a month and constantly borrowed money from his parents with a half-hearted promise that he was getting sober, only to blow their trust and the cash on more drugs. And despite many attempts on her parents' part at tough love, they always inevitably let him back into their lives and their house and their pocketbook because he was their son and they wanted to believe that he might one day get it right and walk the straight and narrow path.

He never had been able to do that. And the money he'd mooched and wasted from his parents was only the beginning of the pain he'd brought to them. Over the years he had gotten violent with his father, resulting in a couple fist fights which Mom ended by calling the police after Dad was able to close Mark off in a room on his own. He'd also physically threatened his mother on a few occasions, though he'd never actually carried out any of those threats. One time when Becky was a kid, a phone call came in that was for her brother and when she woke him up to answer the phone, he came up ready to take a swing at whoever it was that had shook him awake; it was only when he had her pinned to the wall with his arm drawn back at the ready to punch her that he realized who she was and released her.

Though this type of violence was common, verbal abuse to everyone in the family was his most favorite pastime when drunk or high. He had also stolen cars, forged his parents name on school documents and checks, and been arrested more times than could be counted.

He always announced that he was getting sober when he got into big trouble and faithfully, though cautiously, his parents took him back in and supported him, hoping that this time would be the magic cure. For a few weeks, he usually would go through the motions, or at least make it look that way, and this was the cruelest of all things that he did because it made them believe in him every time. He would be a different person when he was clean, the son they missed, and though he was still surly and moody, he was a much-improved person from when he was high.

Inevitably, every time he turned away from his parents' love and help and returned to the world where he was most comfortable, that of booze and drugs.

Becky had severed all ties with him once she'd been able to get out of her parents' home, and had really stopped speaking to him since she'd been ten or so. Growing up her best friend, and later her boyfriend, Tucker knew how much she hated her brother, and not just in the common way many siblings fight. She'd seen at a young age how badly Mark hurt her parents, and she vowed early on to do everything in life the opposite of how he would. She'd never once touched drugs or even alcohol. She got good grades in school and earned scholarships to college. She'd worked

nearly full time while in college so she could get her own place and out from under her parents' roof. Never once had she asked them for money once she was out on her own.

And as soon as she could after school, she'd found a job in another state, and moved away from all the pain and chaos her brother caused.

She'd told Tucker at the time that she couldn't stand by and watch her mother (for by then her father had passed away and it was just her mother left to handle Mark) struggling with her son anymore. She worried about her constantly and was frustrated beyond words with her because no matter what she said to try to persuade her to get Mark out of the house, she never listened. Not even after he had been repeatedly threatening to her one time and she'd had to call, for the first time alone, to have him arrested. Mom insisted that though he threatened her physically he would never carry out his threats. Becky thought otherwise.

She'd tried telling her mom that if she didn't stand up to Mark and kick him out of the house, then she wouldn't talk to her anymore and she would move away. Mom didn't believe her and, besides, Mark was on a new 'I'm getting clean' rampage.

Becky was just sick of it all. So she did exactly what she'd said she would and moved to New York, cutting off all ties with what was left of her family.

That was when she broke up with Tucker. She insisted that all along in their relationship she'd been trying to think of him as a lover when really she couldn't get past their first relationship of friends. She'd told him to find someone who could love him the way she couldn't and asked to remain friends, and most especially asked him to keep an eye on her mother in her stead. She called him regularly for updates on Mom and for very short, 'friendly' chats that were as uncomfortable and impersonal as you could get.

Tucker hadn't known what to think. While he wasn't a cocky guy, he didn't think he had imagined the way she looked at him over the three-year period of time after they had realized they were more than just friends. She loved him, he was sure of it. He wasn't sure why she'd broken up with him when she left for New York, though he did have a hunch. And one of these days he was going to find out if he was right—and if he was, her butt was going to be sore for a month of Sundays when he was through wearing her out.

In the meantime, he was going to do whatever he had to in order to get things fixed between Becky and her mom.

And if he was really lucky, Becky might just decide to come home for good then...