

# HOME AT LAST CHANCE

## EXCERPT

### CHAPTER ONE

Tulane Rhodes leaned forward in his seat and scowled at Sarah Murray out of a pair of greeny-gray eyes. “You painted my car sissy pink and put a bunny on its hood. How do you expect me to feel?” he snarled.

Sarah breathed in the scent of leather upholstery and corporate money. The National Brands Learjet had been placed at her disposal. She had about an hour—the time it took to fly from Martinsville, Virginia, to Columbia, South Carolina—in which to take charge of this angry man. She wasn’t sure she could do it even if she had a hundred years, but she was going to give it her best shot. Her career depended upon it.

She squared her shoulders inside her black power suit. “Pink is the official color of the Cottontail Disposable Diaper brand,” Sarah said. Her mother would be proud of her calm, controlled tone. Mother always said a proper Boston lady didn’t raise her voice, but used quiet logic instead. Sarah really didn’t want to be her mother, but right now, it was the best strategy she could muster.

Sarah continued ticking off points on her fingers. “Also, the car in question doesn’t *belong* to you. It belongs to Jim Ferguson Racing. And I’m sure I don’t have to point out that Mr.

Ferguson is not happy with you right now. National Brands paid Mr. Ferguson millions of dollars for the privilege of painting that car pink. As part of the sponsorship deal you—as Mr. Ferguson’s driver—have a responsibility to show up at personal appearances. If you had shown up at your appearances last week, National Brands wouldn’t have felt the need to send me here to do your advance work.”

“To bully me, you mean,” Tulane said, as he settled back into his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. His biceps twitched. He was angry.

And huge. Tulane Rhodes filled the reclining seat with six feet and two hundred pounds of South Carolina good ol’ boy. He possessed all the classic markers of his kind—a broad drawl and buzz-cut hair that framed an angular face with too many sun-induced laugh lines and crow’s-feet. A well-worn Alabama T-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. And a battered Atlanta Braves baseball cap topped off the ensemble. Maybe if Tulane had worn a blue blazer or a Nike golf shirt with khakis, he might have overcome the stereotype. But he hadn’t, and he didn’t.

Sarah was in trouble. This man was dangerous, and angry, and likely to run her over at two hundred miles an hour if he ever found out that she was the reason he was driving a pink stock car. He was also wickedly handsome, had a reputation for being a bad boy, and those green eyes of his had the unsettling effect of making her feel as if her panties were on fire.

She needed to concentrate on the task at hand but she had no idea where to begin. So she borrowed a page from Grandmother Howland’s handbook. She gave Tulane Rhodes *the Look*.

When given with the proper stare and just the right lift of an eyebrow, the Look could turn someone to stone in about one second flat. Grandmother Howland, who had been a devoted librarian and churchwoman, could lift her eyebrow perfectly and command silence, just like that.

“I am *not* a bully, Mr. Rhodes. I expect you to be an adult about this,” Sarah said in a soft voice that she tried to invest with all of the proper venom of her grandmother.

Tulane cracked the smallest of smiles. Lines bunched up around his eyes while his lower lip stretched into a sexy curve that displayed a couple of dimples. The mental image of Grandmother faded.

“Ma’am, pardon my asking, but you got something stuck up that butt of yours?”

“I beg your pardon?” The Look vanished.

“Well, you were grimacing, you know? You looked like you had gas pains or something. I guess it was just a passing thing, huh?” His smile broadened.

The man was onto her. Her black suit hadn’t hidden her good-girl nature apparently. Sarah had no other weapons at her beck and call so she forged ahead, just like Grandmother would have done.

“I would appreciate it if you would refrain from using such vulgar language. I must remind you that you will be the spokesperson for Cottontail Disposable Diapers, a family product with a wholesome image,” Sarah said.

“Well, I’m not the wholesome family man you’re looking for.” Tulane broke eye contact and ducked down to stare out of the window to his left. The jet had just taxied to the end of the runway, and the engines revved in anticipation of takeoff. The glare from the window highlighted the pulsing tendons in his jaw.

He shifted his gaze. “I know diddly about diapers. On the other hand, I did read something about National Brands making some real fine rubbers. You want to paint my car with a logo for condoms, I’m right there with you. I’m willing to talk about safe sex any day of the

week. In fact, I try to practice safe sex *every* day of the week. But diapers? Uh-uh. Way I figure it, a diaper bunny is about the shittiest thing you could put on Jim Ferguson's Cup car."

Sarah could feel her cheeks coloring at Tulane's use of profanity. When was she going to get over this? She was twenty-five years old, a graduate of Harvard University, and she wanted to be like Deidre Montgomery, National Brands' vice president of marketing—a woman totally fluent in business profanity. How could Sarah ever achieve success in business if she couldn't get over of her strict upbringing?

"Don't sputter, now," Tulane said as if he could read her most intimate thoughts. "I hate it when a woman starts sputtering in outrage. It always reminds me of Miz Lillian Bray, the chairwoman of the Christ Church Ladies Auxiliary, back home in Last Chance, South Carolina. You cuss in front of her and you're liable to end up serving endless hours as an altar boy." He looked out the window again. The Learjet was rolling, and the engines pressed Sarah back into her seat. With a roar, the little jet sped down the runway, rotated nose up, and surged into the sky. The ground dropped beneath them, providing a view of the spring-green vistas of the Virginia countryside.

Sarah studied the man for a long moment, trying to imagine him as an altar boy. She failed. Her experiences with altar boys had been far-reaching and entirely unsatisfying.

"Mr. Rhodes, I think it would be helpful if you considered me to be just like Miss Lillian. Just remember that my reports back to headquarters will make or break your career." Oh boy, she was so lame—like she really had that kind of authority or power. Tulane was in trouble, but not that much trouble.

He gave her a smarmy look that started at her chest, came up to her face, and went back down, as if he realized she had overreached. She should have resented that gaze, but it made her

feel oddly titillated and strangely alive. She didn't think any man had ever looked at her quite like that, as if she were a fat slice of Boston cream pie.

"If you don't mind my saying so," Tulane said, "you are a whole lot younger than Lillian Bray. And, for the record, you sure don't have her skill when it comes to the Look either."

Sarah opened her mouth and shut it again. How on earth did he know about the Look?

"You were about to say something?"

Just how had this conversation taken this strange turn? "Mr. Rhodes, I need you to remember you are now a spokesperson for Cottontail Disposable Diapers. You have to be a role model. Why don't we spend our time more profitably, by going through our schedule for the next couple of days?"

He settled back into the brown leather seat and tipped his baseball hat down over his eyes. "Honey, you can yammer all you want, but I was up late last night going over car setups with my crew chief, and I thought I'd get a little shut-eye before you have me officiating at diaper-changing contests."

"Mr. Rhodes, those events are designed to build traffic at the store."

Tulane opened one eye and angled his head. "Oh, really? I thought it was just for the fun of it."

"Sorry."

"Uh-huh. Look, lady, I don't want to be here. I don't want to go to Value Mart and put on a pink shirt with a bunny logo and sign autographs for people who are laughing at me. I'm only here because ya'll bullied Jim Ferguson and he told me to be here or else. So you could do me a huge favor and just hush up." His head slapped back on the seat, and his eye shut.

That was it—Sarah's career was officially over.

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Tulane tried not to concentrate too hard on the high-pitched white noise of the jet engines. Their revs were not quite matched, and that sent a little harmonic buzz through the cabin that made his skin crawl.

He hated flying. He could never admit this or the entire world would laugh at him. A man who drove cars two hundred miles an hour should not be afraid of flying. He took a deep breath, trying to counter his fear.

Maybe he should worry about losing his ride. That was a real and tangible fear. He was deep in Jim Ferguson's doghouse, and if he didn't straighten up and fly right, he might be out of a job.

The plane hit a serious bump in the sky, and every nerve ending in his body fried. He concentrated on relaxing the tense muscles in his jaw and thought about the little-bitty woman National Brands had sent down to take charge of him. Sarah Murray was a bona fide nice girl. All by its lonesome, this made her immediately irresistible.

And she was easy on the eye. Some pretty impressive curves lurked under that black suit. She had killer eyes, too, of a shade not quite brown and not quite green. Her eyes kind of scrunched up when she smiled, and her freckled face was adorable when she blushed. Someone up in New York either had a sense of humor or knew exactly the kind of nursemaid to send in his direction. He really couldn't be nasty to a nice girl like that.

The plane buffeted sideways. Tulane opened his eyes. Sarah was studying him with a calculating look on her face. He needed to act fast, before she figured out he was a sissy when it came to planes. That would be too much to bear. He usually bloodied the noses of the bullies who crossed his path, but he was going to have to charm this woman.

He hauled in a big breath. "I reckon I owe you an apology."

He didn't sound real sincere, but she smiled up at him with a toothy grin that hit him like the g-forces on turn two at Bristol Speedway. The plane skipped around the sky.

"So I couldn't help but notice that you come from up north." Oh brother. How the heck was he supposed to get around this little-bitty obstacle with a line like that? His body flushed hot.

"I've lived in Boston most of my life. I moved to New York right after graduation from Harvard to take the job with National Brands."

"So did your folks come over on the *Mayflower* or something?" he asked.

Sarah's eyes flashed with annoyance. "Everyone asks that question. As a matter of fact, my mother's family *did* come over on the *Mayflower*."

"And your daddy's family, too?" With his luck, her daddy was a governor or something. That would make her not only a cute bully, but a well-connected one.

"Dad's from Wyoming."

"Really?"

She nodded. The plane bumped. Tulane clutched the armrests. She noticed, but said nothing. Good.

"And what about you, Mr. Rhodes?"

He relaxed his death grip and reached for his southern charm. "Well, I reckon you know all about me, ma'am."

"I know you grew up in a small town in South Carolina with a peculiar name. Your mother is a hairdresser and your father is a mechanic?"

He tried not to cringe. He wasn't about to make his daddy a national laughingstock by telling the truth about him. He'd been protecting Daddy's honor all his life, so he'd lied through his teeth in that bogus bio. He needed to change the subject. Now.

"So tell me," Tulane said, "how'd a nice girl like you get into the business of advancing celebrity athletes like me?"

"Mr. Rhodes, I hardly think—"

"Better fasten up back there," came the disembodied voice of the pilot. "We're going to have to weave our way through a few thunderstorms."

Just then, the plane took another hit from turbulent air. The clouds outside the window were turning an unsettling shade of gray. Tulane battled his fear by tightening his seatbelt.

He turned back toward Sarah. She didn't seem to be all that worried about falling out of the sky or being struck by lightning.

She leaned forward, as if nothing untoward was happening. "What I was about to say is that I hardly think driving a stock car makes you an athlete. An entertainer perhaps. Certainly a daredevil, but not an athlete."

"Trust me, it's a sport," he said through his locked teeth.

"It's entertainment. And besides, you just go around in circles for five hundred miles, so it's not very entertaining entertainment. That probably explains why it's the fastest-growing phenomenon in the entertainment industry."

"Look here, you name me one other sport where a man goes out and risks his life every time he performs." *And every time he has to fly to another city.*

She smirked. "Bull riding."

"What?"

“Bull riding. Not only do bull riders have to hang on to a raging bull, but they take their lives in their hands every time they enter the ring.”

“Yeah, well, I reckon you’d never catch a bull rider in pink.”

Her eyes widened, like she knew some great big secret. “You might be surprised what bull riders wear.”

“And just exactly what do *you* know about bull riding?”

“My father rode bulls for a living. He was pretty good at it, too. I saw some pictures of him all dressed up in fringe and sequins—purple ones.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Why would I kid you about that?”

A flash came from outside the fuselage, followed by a crack of thunder, and it felt as if God were trying to strike one of them dead. “Shit,” Tulane said aloud.

The red crawled up Sarah’s neck, but otherwise she seemed unperturbed by the thunderstorm.

“How did a bull rider produce such a prissy little daughter?” Tulane asked.

“You think I’m prissy?” Sarah sat even straighter in her chair and looked down her nose. She resembled a twelve-year-old trying to be outraged.

“Yes, ma’am,” he drawled, forgetting about the black cloud beyond the window.

Her eyes sparkled with ire. “I am a lady, Mr. Rhodes, not a priss. I realize this distinction is probably lost on a person such as yourself.”

“You don’t like being prissy, do you?”

“I’m not prissy. I’m a businesswoman. I have a job to do, and I’d appreciate it if you would—”

“Like hell,” he said.

The blush staining her neck started to crawl up her cheeks.

“See? I say the word ‘hell’ and you light up like a neon Budweiser sign. Honey, *hell* isn’t even a really bad cuss word. NASCAR wouldn’t even dock me points or fine me if I said that word in a TV interview.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary for us to have a full discourse on profanity, Mr. Rhodes.”

“If you want to learn how to cuss, I can sure teach you how. Believe it or not, I have been fully briefed on the Federal Communications Commission’s list of seven dirty words that are never to be said over the airwaves. Would you like me to help you learn them? We could start with the filthiest one on the list. By the way, it’s f—”

“Don’t say it, please.” Sarah closed her eyes, but her face glowed. She didn’t appear to be angry. She looked turned on and hot. Tulane suddenly knew exactly how to handle this particular nice girl that the folks in New York had sent to keep him in line.

“Okay, I won’t say that word, although it almost escaped my lips a while ago when that lightning hit.”

“I’m not surprised.” She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. Yep, she was like every nice girl he’d ever met. A naughty spirit lurked deep inside her, yearning to be free. And wasn’t it fun to play dirty with a nice girl?

“Okay, forget the FCC,” Tulane said with a smirk. “Let’s start with something easier, like taking the name of the Lord in vain. People these days hardly think that’s cussing.”

“I’m surprised you would want to chance such a thing, given the way you’ve been clutching the arms of your seat.”

Uh-oh. He didn't like that. If she ever told anyone that he was afraid of heights, he'd be laughed at from one end of America to the other. What in the world was he going to do about that?

One answer came immediately to mind as he studied her nice girl pearls and pumps. It would be easy to compromise her integrity.

He launched his attack. "I have no idea what you're talking about. But why don't we just move to the really easy cuss words, like 'hell'? No one considers that a cuss word anymore. C'mon, girl, just say it once for me."

Sarah angled her chin up and something naughty ignited in her eyes. Tulane breathed a little easier. This might be fun.

"The hell I will," she said, and then her face turned beet red.

And just at that moment, a ray of sunshine came cascading through the window, lighting up her hair with fire and making her look like a demonic angel. Tulane's pulse rate climbed, but for the moment it had nothing to do with his fear of flying.