

An excerpt from *Burn It Up*, Desert Dogs book three, ©2015 Cara McKenna

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The temperature had dropped, way down to freezing to judge by how their breath fogged the night air.

Having already survived one trip on the bike, Abilene clambered aboard behind Casey with passable confidence. She was pooped, looking forward to bed, and hoping the baby was having what Christine called a “merciful night.” But the moment the engine started up between her legs, all that fatigue rattled away in the brisk February breeze. She squeezed Casey tight and had to remind herself not to confuse vibration with arousal.

It didn’t help. The noise and the wind swallowed her, left her feeling alive and awake in a way unique to being on a motorcycle. Suddenly it made sense, why people would want to live their waking lives on these things. So much freedom, without any windows standing between you and the world. All those stars overhead, no roof to hide a single one.

And a warm, strong man in your arms, she thought, hugging Casey’s middle. Did he get pleasure from feeling her at his back, as anything more than a reprieve from the winter air? She hoped so. She was a mom now, and his employee—thoroughly unsexy roles, but she hoped some shadow of his old crush had lingered.

Yeah, right. Not after he’d seen her give birth, seen her grouchy and frustrated at two a.m. She knew, from hearing Miah and Christine talk about him, Casey wasn’t

historically a guy who stuck around and did the right thing. He was kind of like Abilene in that way—always adrift—except it sounded like he'd been in control of where he wound up. In addition to his record, he'd been a card counter in Las Vegas for a while, which struck her as the shadiest thing you could probably do for a living without actually breaking the law.

The wind found her hands through her knitted mittens, and she inched them into the pockets of his hoodie. He felt good against her. Warm, strong, and big. Big enough to make a girl feel feminine and protected, but not so big that it was intimidating.

As she held on to him, she wondered how it'd feel, being in his lap. Her thighs around his hips, his excitement right there, against hers. His hands on her waist. Just to feel a man like that again, right there against her . . .

Not just any man. Your boss.

What had James said to her, back when they'd been together? *If you'd ever gone to college, you'd have lost a good professor his tenure.* He'd been teasing, and at the time she'd laughed. She knew she had a type—you could only make the same mistake so many times before you had to admit it was more than a coincidence. But it wasn't funny anymore. Not now that she had Mercy to think about.

The scattered lights of Fortuity fell away behind them, the bike's headlamp the only glow to be seen until the lit gate of Three C appeared as the highway curved. This was her last night like this—closing up late, riding home out in the open, be it in a car or on this motorcycle. Tomorrow, she had to start watching her back. She tried to soak up every second that was left, but in a blink, Casey was parking by the fence.

He helped her down after he cut the engine. "Not so bad, right?"

“It was fun. Worth the frostbite.” The automatic porch light came on when they neared. Abilene dug her keys out of her purse as they mounted the steps and let them both inside.

“Man, we missed some good dinner,” Casey said, shutting the door behind them. “What do you think? Meat loaf? Pot roast?” The house was warm and smelled impossibly good, like gravy and rosemary. Someday Abilene would have a little home that offered Mercy this experience—comfort and hot meals and nice smells. A fireplace, holiday traditions.

“Bet you there’s leftovers,” she said, hanging up her coat.

“Bet you they’ll taste real good around four o’clock, when your daughter decides to wake us up.”

They walked to the den, where Casey would be making his bed once more. It was a comfy enough couch—a big old tan leather behemoth, probably as old as Abilene—but he had to be missing his apartment. And his freedom. And his privacy.

“I better head up and check on Mercy,” she said.

He nodded as he sat and unlaced his boots. “See you in the morning, hopefully. Though if you need any help, you know how to wake me.”

She smiled. “One good poke to the forehead. Night.”

“Night, Abilene.”

“Thanks again for the ride,” she said, and her smile felt shy when she offered it. She headed for the steps.

The door to her room was open, and she found Mercy sleeping peacefully in the crib. She switched off the baby monitor, officially relieving Christine of her duties. She

changed into her pajamas and scrubbed her face in the guest bathroom, shut the door, climbed into bed.

Sleep while you can, she ordered herself. The peace could be over at any moment, shattered by that noise that filled her so wholly with both dread and maternal urgency—the first tentative coo that inevitably snowballed into a squall.

But sleep wasn't coming. She lay in the darkness, trying to deep breathe, trying to think relaxing thoughts. But with the chaos of the bar gone and the distraction of the ride over, all that passed through her head were the what-ifs that surrounded tomorrow.

Today, she corrected. James would be released around ten in the morning.

The prison was ninety miles away. He could be in Fortuity by noon if he wanted to be. If he had his truck waiting for him and enough money for gas. How long would he need to find her? How long would it take to run into somebody who said, yeah, they'd seen a young brunette around, didn't she just have a baby? Heard she was staying up at the ranch out east, they might say, and just like that . . .

Poof. Poof went her security. Poof went her secrets, if James saw fit to tell Vince or the Churches or Casey or anybody else about the way they'd met. Poof went custody of her child, maybe.

Maybe. Only maybe. She wasn't that girl James had first met. She was good now. Wasn't she? Better, at least. She was *trying* to be good. She worked hard, hadn't had so much as a sip of beer since the moment she'd found out she was pregnant. It was almost impossible for a mother to lose custody to a father.

He couldn't get her child taken away.

Could he?

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With sleep eluding her and lying in the dark producing nothing but waking nightmares, after twenty minutes, Abilene abandoned the covers and poked her head out the door.

A lamp was on in the den, and she crept onto the landing. Casey was lounging on the couch, tapping on his lit-up phone. He never failed to make her feel competent and secure when she needed those sensations most, and right now she craved reassurance like a fish craved water. She went back into her room and put on a bra and socks, left the door open in case Mercy woke, and padded to the steps.

Casey sat up as she reached his periphery. He glanced at his phone, then switched it off, screen going dark. “Thought you’d be out like a light in five minutes flat.”

He spoke softly, as all the Churches were sleeping. She loved when he did that. Normally he was a loud, brash man, not strong on the volume control, but she adored how his voice sounded in late-night moments like these. So close to a whisper. Soft in every way.

She shook her head. “Can’t sleep. Too much on my mind. Were you about to turn in?”

“Don’t have to. Hey, how about I start a fire? It’s kinda chilly down here.”

A fire did sound nice. She got settled on one end of the couch and pulled an afghan over her lap, watching Casey assembling wood and balled-up newspaper pages in the big stone hearth. His back flexed where his sweater pulled tight across his shoulders, leaving her warmer by a degree.

His lighter snicked, and as yellow flames licked at the wood, he joined her, peeling off his sweater and tossing it over the couch arm.

“How you feeling about tomorrow?” He kept the lighter in hand, running his thumb along its smooth silver corners, worrying the lid. He toyed with the thing on boring nights at the bar, too, and when he was trapped with the sleeping baby on his lap.

“A little scared,” she said. “To be honest, I’m trying not to think about it.”

Studying this man’s handsome face was certainly a welcome diversion. It was more than mere gratitude drawing her to him, she realized. There was a very real chance that once James was out, her past would follow suit. Everyone believed they were protecting her welfare—and they were. But James could hurt her worse by talking than by hitting her, and she bet he knew it.

Depending on how pissed James was, in a week or a month or who knew how long, Casey might know the truth about Abilene, and that would just about destroy her.

She knew she couldn’t ever be with this man. But she still felt for him—worse than ever, in fact. Going forward, she’d make better choices. Find herself a man as sweet as this one, minus the criminal record and all the secrets. But she couldn’t deny she still wanted him.

She eyed his mouth. *And I don’t want much. Just a taste.* Just a kiss. A farewell kiss, to say good-bye to her old habits, once and for all.

He smirked, seeming to realize she was staring. “What?”

“Nothing. Just in my head.”

“If we weren’t on baby patrol, I’d take you out back and make you smoke a joint.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m not much for drugs.”

“Pot doesn’t count.”

“Pot also never solved anybody’s problems.”

“Nah, but it’ll shut your brain up real good.” He pocketed his lighter. “Damn, that sounds perfect, actually. Smoke a bowl, stare at the fireplace . . . Hardly anything better in the world than that. Not with your clothes on, anyhow.”

She laughed. “Sounds fun, I’ll admit.” The exact kind of fun she’d missed out on in her teenage years.

“Being a grown-up is such a drag sometimes,” Casey sighed.

“Tell me about it.” Again, she couldn’t help but imagine some different world, one in which she and Casey were the same age and had met in high school. Some world in which he’d maybe taken her virginity, been her date to prom, horrified her parents in ways that looked downright innocent, compared to reality . . .

Would he stop me, if I tried? Tried to kiss him? Tried to touch him? This felt like her last chance. Her last reckless mistake . . . Did that old crush still live inside him someplace, strong enough for him to maybe forget the baby and the danger and the fact that she was his employee, just for a little while? Make her feel like a sexual person again, remind her how good wanting someone could feel, and being wanted right back?

Heart pounding, she turned, bending her legs so her knees rested atop his thigh. She lay her arm along the couch, and her cheek on her shoulder, leaning a bit closer.

Casey seemed to take the move for exhaustion or vulnerability, and wrapped his own arm around her shoulders, giving her a little squeeze. It had been a long time since he’d touched her with this kind of casual ease. It reminded her of her final weeks of pregnancy, the nights they’d closed the bar together and he’d sometimes rub her aching back when there was a lull in orders. Not sexual, but friendly and familiar. Comforting.

Though tonight she wanted something more than comfort.

“Everything’s going to turn out okay,” he told her in that soft, fascinating, un-Casey-like voice. “Right now, this will probably be the worst of it. The waiting.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about tomorrow.”

“No?”

“I was thinking about how much things have changed, since last summer. Since I first met you.”

“No fucking kidding, huh?”

“You used to flirt with me,” she said, making sure he’d hear the smile in her tone, and know it wasn’t a complaint. “Shamelessly.”

“And you must have turned me down, like, eighty times.”

“I miss those days, sometimes.”

He sat up straighter, took his arm back, and met her eyes. “I still think you’re real pretty, you know. If things weren’t so different, I’d still be hitting on you, every chance I got. Wait—did *that* count as hitting on you? Don’t sue me for sexual harassment.”

She poked him in the side and let her hand linger there. A tiny but bold move, and something spiked in her blood, something hot and nearly forgotten. Nostalgic, a touch dark. Innately natural.

Do what you always did best, a mischievous voice whispered. *And to heck with tomorrow.*

Casey swallowed and glanced at the fire, trying to blame it for how hot the room seemed to have grown. It couldn’t be the contact, right? This was just friendly, innocent touching. Like friends might do, if they got along real good.

Like, real good, he thought, feeling the heat of Abilene's palm through his tee, warming his ribs. He couldn't seem to make sense of that hand.

"What do you want most, Casey?" She asked it quietly, but there was a strength in those words—a fierce and curious charge.

"What do I want?" He used to know the answer to that. He could've replied with a single word, without thought. *Money.* But things had changed since he'd moved back to Fortuity, and now the answer wasn't so obvious. He'd come home after that long, frivolous absence to find his mother a decade deeper into her mental illness, a childhood friend dead, and his hometown in the grips of scandal and tragedy. He'd agreed to stay as a promise to his brother, but more was holding him here now—he could feel it. Something stronger than his word, stronger than guilt. Duty. Pride, even. Foreign sensations, both. "I want . . . I want the bar to succeed, first and foremost. And for you to find your way through this messy situation with your ex."

"No, I mean, what do you want most in life? Like, some people want a family. Some people want to be successful. Some people want . . . I dunno, they want to be singers or actors, or to travel the world."

I want to be somebody, to the people I care about. That was what came echoing back from his subconscious, though he couldn't say if that was exactly true. He wanted to *want* that. He wanted to be capable of it. But he also felt lost half the time, and his future was foggy in ways he couldn't begin to explain to her, and all of that made the wanting a dangerous luxury. The girl had enough worries. No need to burden her with the news that he was due to lose his marbles in five or ten years, like his mother.

"I guess I'm not sure anymore," he said. "What about you? What do you want?"

Aside from a white house with a white fence, red shutters, and a red mailbox?”

A long pause. “I think what I used to want was security. I was on my own, from the time I was pretty young, and that was what I wanted. What I missed. But that’s more a need than a want. I think what I want most in the world now is to be a good mother.”

“You’re already that.”

“I dunno. I mess stuff up every single day.”

“So do all parents. You should meet mine.”

“Maybe . . . But whether I’m there or not, that’s what I want now. I want to be a good mama, and to make a safe, stable home for Mercy.”

“Did you have that yourself, when you were a kid?”

“I thought I did,” she said, sounding far away. “But it wasn’t quite what it seemed.”

“Sounds like life.”

“I guess. But anyhow, I want better for her. I want to *be* a better person, for her. Make better choices.”

And Casey wanted the same, he realized. To be better than he had been. He couldn’t say he had what Abilene did, though—a singular, solid reason to get there. He had Duncan and the bar to consider now, and his brother and mom. But nothing so real and monumental as a child. He only knew it felt good. Knew he’d begun feeling like a grown man for the first time, these past few months.

Freedom felt good, too, but in a fleeting, empty sort of way. Freedom felt like the rush and the relief of playing hooky to avoid a test you hadn’t studied for. But doing the work, making the grade . . . that felt way better, deep down, and it stuck with you way longer. Pride versus the brief, false pleasure of avoidance.

“I want to work hard,” Abilene went on, “and find us the nicest home I can. I want to save up my money and get some kind of education.”

“Oh yeah?”

She nodded. “I don’t even have a GED.”

“What do you want to study?”

“Nothing glamorous. Just a skill, so I can get a steady job. I mean, bartending is great. It’s perfect, right now, more than I could ask for.”

“But it’s not a career.”

“Career isn’t even the word. It’s just . . . I don’t want to be doing that in ten years. I want something flexible, like being a hairstylist, maybe. Something I could do out of my home, make my own hours. I can’t assume I’ll ever have any help in raising Mercy. You know, from a guy. A boyfriend or a husband. But something like that would be nice. Just something I control, that pays the bills, and that I enjoy.”

“Sure.” He wondered how much it would cost—beauty school or whatever modern term there probably was for it, and the cost to get some little storefront set up . . . *Probably less than I’d make if I went in on one last job with Emily.*

Abilene spoke quietly, the words sweet and sad, detached from the current thread. “I hope somebody’ll look at me again someday, the way you used to.”

He frowned, sad himself. “Course they will. Plenty of guys will. And still do.” Nightly, at the bar. In fact, Casey had fantasized about punching any number of those guys in the face.

“I’m just a mom now.”

“For one, you’re more than that. And guys’ll come into Benji’s, once you’re back to

work—guys with no idea you have a kid—and you’ll see. Some guy might just fall for you, find out you’ve got a baby, and not even give a crap. Happens all the fucking time.”

“You think?”

“Well, bear in mind they’ll need to come in on nights when I’m not around; otherwise I’ll run them out on a rail.”

A pause. “Why would you?”

“Kinda hard to be charged with being somebody’s bodyguard and not getting a little protective,” he fudged.

“Am I like your little sister now or something?”

He shook his head. *Far from it. I wish I could be so saintly.* “Nah. You’re my friend, and my coworker and employee. You’re a lot of things, but sister’s not one of them. Then again, I’ve never had a sister, so what do I really . . .”

He trailed off, distracted by her hand. Her fingers were opening and closing, bunching the cotton of his shirt loosely, letting it go, again and again. It seemed wise to write it off as an absent, thoughtless sort of touch, but he couldn’t. Not quite. There was something else in the contact. Something mischievous, or curious. Something that got his blood moving quicker, pulsing lower. Heading in dangerous directions. He swallowed, and felt her attention on his mouth or his beard or his neck. *Am I dreaming this?* No, he couldn’t be. Everything was too real—the smell and the dry heat of the fire, the scent of her shampoo or lotion or whatever that was.

And in a breath, it became very real. Very bold.

Her restless hand slid lower, fingertips finding his belt. He sucked a breath. “What’re you doing, honey?”

“Something I want to.” Her fingers slipped under his shirt’s bottom hem, tracing his buckle.

His brain screamed, *Stop her*, but his cock screamed, *Let her. Kiss her. Pull her onto your lap and show her what she does to you*. The rest of him was paralyzed, trapped between the two instincts. All it seemed he could do was watch. Watch as her hand freed his buckle with an easy, knowing motion.

Fuck, I’m hard. Whatever words his brain managed to bully his mouth into speaking were going to look monumentally out of line with his body’s obvious vote.

He grunted as she slid his zipper down, then covered her hand. He’d meant to pull it away, but his fingers weren’t complying.

At a loss for anything else, he said, “I’m your boss.”

She seemed to sense how thoroughly toothless that argument was, and squeezed softly.

Tell her this is wrong. That you don’t want it. Lie, quick. But the only sound his mouth offered was a ragged exhalation, a noiseless moan.

“I never stopped having a crush on you,” she whispered. “But I don’t expect this to turn into anything, I swear. I just like you. And I want you.”

“This doesn’t feel right,” he said, but the lie came out breathy and weak, the limpest protest. Nothing felt as right as this. She had to know what he really wanted, as she stroked her palm up the ridge of his erection through his shorts and fly.

“Fuck.” His eyes shut, and his hand grew limp atop hers. “It’s late.”

“I don’t care.”

And shit, he didn’t either. “The baby might wake up.”

“And she might not.”

Become that better man you've been telling yourself you are right fucking now, asshole, and move her motherfucking hand away.

But that voice was so small, and her touch felt so goddamn good . . .

His own hand slipped to her hip, up her side, but she caught it before he could cup her breast.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “I’m not ready for that yet. I just want to touch you. Make you feel good.” With that, she let his hand go, only to head for his waist once more. This time, at least, he halted it in a firm grip at his belly.

“Jesus, honey, slow down.” He laughed, feeling drunk, and did his fly and buckle back up. “Can’t we kiss, instead?” Do things in the right order, at least. He’d wanted this girl for too long to rush now.

“Yeah,” she whispered, “we can do that.”

His hands were on her again in a breath, but more innocent this time—that soft cheek against his palm, silky hair in his fingers. Every nerve was screaming for him to dive right in, but he slowed himself down before their lips touched. He’d savor this moment, even as everything about it screamed high school grope-fest, right down to it happening on a friend’s parents’ couch.

He held her gaze for breaths on end. Her eyes were bright in the sunshine, as blue as sapphires or robins’ eggs or any other insanely blue thing. But here in the den, lit by only the fire and a reading lamp, they were dark and deep, full of secrets, it felt like. Her lips looked just as they did in every fantasy he’d ever had about her—her mouth small but her lips full, seeming as innocent as the rest of her. Deceptively so.

Did those lips come up to meet his? He couldn't say how it happened, but they were kissing, light and distracted, voices hushed, hers faint and sweet, his deeper and rough now. He heard her name on his breath, the sound coming from no conscious corner of his head. As the final syllable settled between them, he took it further.

She tasted minty. *Just like she ought to*, he thought, the notion nonsense. Like he really knew her at all, had any clue what to expect from her. Not anymore, not now that he'd felt her hand between his legs, more brazen than he'd ever have expected. She was everything, here on this couch, in this moment. Sweet and wicked, a seductress and an innocent. A temptation and a terrible idea, and a foregone conclusion.

Emphasis on the terrible idea, his higher brain interjected.

Fuck off.

Her hand was drifting once more, seeking him between their bodies, cupping his aching flesh through his jeans, then rubbing.

"Oh God." *Tell her to stop, for fuck's sake.* "Jesus, honey, don't stop."

Wow, well done.

Her mouth was at his throat, her hair a soft, heavenly weight draped over his wrist and knuckles. And her hand . . . Christ, her hand was everything. He hadn't been touched like this in six months or more. He'd almost forgotten how essential it was. His head dropped back, inviting her kisses.

For half a minute he let her spoil him, until he was hurting and crazed and needing to kiss her back. Needing to give back, instead of taking. He held her head, fingers in her long hair, and drew her face back so he could meet her eyes. He let her see the desire surely burning in his, and then he kissed her exactly as he'd always fantasized he might.

He cupped her jaw in both hands and brought his mouth down. She roused hunger in him—always had—and he let her feel that with every deep sweep of his tongue, every soft grunt from his throat, every needy flex of his hips, pressing his erection to her palm—

The worst sound in the world. The rattle of his phone buzzing on the coffee table.

He wrenched his face from hers. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

Abilene went still. “It’s late. It might be important—Vince or somebody.”

Doubtful. But he knew exactly who’d just be sitting down to start on her evening’s business. With Abilene’s hand still on him, he leaned forward and snatched the phone, accepted the private call. “I told you no, now fuck off.” Hit END, tossed the thing aside.

“Not Vince, I take it?”

“No, it was nothing.”

“Didn’t sound like nothing.”

The intrusion had sobered him. It offered a chance to end this, do the smart and honorable thing—*the thing a better man would do*—and land himself with the blue balls he deserved for having succumbed in the first place. He put his hand over hers once more, coaxing it to the safety of his thigh. “We should stop.”

Her lips pursed, expression changing in an instant. “That wasn’t, like, your girlfriend or something, was it?”

“No, just an old colleague. I mean, hey, I’m not a great guy, but I’m not a *complete* shit.”

She looked deflated for a breath, then smiled. “You don’t think you’re a great guy?”

“Oh, hell no.”

“How come?”

“You don’t want to know, trust me.” She was a good, Christian girl. He hadn’t heard her so much as swear in the past four months—not since the pregnancy mood swings and the throes of labor had passed. She didn’t need to know about his old life. Best-case scenario, it’d disappoint her. Worst case, those pesky morals would have her phoning the fucking feds on him. The latter felt unlikely, but in any case, the truth of his past was a burden this girl needed like a hole in the head. *My past and my future both*. Man, was he ever a fucking catch.

“You’ve been good to me,” she said. “And to Mercy.”

“That’s different.” And it was new. He was a good boss, he supposed, and tried to be a good friend. But he’d not always been the best son or brother, and while Casey had never intentionally hurt anybody, he was far from an upstanding citizen.

As his body cooled, his thoughts turned to that little fantasy house of Abilene’s.

There were lots of places around Fortuity that fit the bill—modest little ranches that you could buy for pretty cheap. For now. When the new casino was up and running, who knew what might happen to the property values, but until and if that all went through, you could get a decent place for as little as fifty grand.

Casey thought about that job Emily had called with. His own savings was all tied up in the bar, but right there was an easy twenty grand. A fat down payment, and with a couple more gigs like that, he could buy a place outright for Abilene and her daughter. She couldn’t afford it herself, not on a part-time bartender’s wages, but it sure would do her good, that kind of stability. Before she’d come to Three C she’d been living in a rented room in a cranky old lady’s basement—not exactly home sweet home.

Maybe three final jobs, and I could be her goddamn hero.

Except she'd want to know how on earth he was able to afford it, and telling her wasn't an option.

Fucking shame, too. The thought of it excited him. For plenty of good reasons, he couldn't ever be her man. Chiefly because of his mental health, but he couldn't tell her about that. Or rather, he *wouldn't*. He was only now beginning to face it himself—not only the shame and embarrassment of feeling faulty and doomed and helpless, but the guilt over how he'd handled his mother's decline. The dread of wondering sometimes if maybe he'd earned this fate, maybe he deserved it, for failing her, for running away as he had. So no, he couldn't tell Abilene why, and no, he couldn't be her man. But being a benefactor wasn't a bad consolation prize.

They'd gone quiet, and Casey's heart felt all warm and mixed-up. The kiss needed acknowledging, that much was clear. Hot as it had been, right as it had felt, they needed to agree it could never be repeated. Last thing this girl needed in her life was another complication.

"What just happened," he said, trailing off. "That kiss, I mean. That was unexpected. Real nice, but . . ." *Tell her it can't ever happen again, dumb-ass.* "Unexpected," he repeated.

"I know. I wasn't thinking straight, exactly."

"Me neither." He rarely was, not when this woman's body was within ten feet of his.

"I don't regret it," she added.

"No, I don't either. But given everything you're dealing with right now, I think we ought to agree not to do that again." He laid his arm along the back of the couch. "Not to

pretend it never happened, but just . . .”

“Yeah . . . But it was real nice, just like you said. Nicest thing I’ve felt in ages.”

He smiled, and in a breath he felt sad. He wished this was last summer. Wished this was the ignorant and blissful world he’d lived in when he first met her, back when he’d had no clue she was pregnant, no clue about her ex, no ties to her aside from his attraction. No ties to Fortuity, so when he inevitably fucked it all up, he could just roll back out of town with his sights glued firmly on whatever came next.

Oops. Should’ve thought of that before you bought a bar and started bonding with her goddamn baby. Shit. He’d gone from a completely free agent to a business owner, boss, babysitter, and bodyguard in what felt like a breath.

Guess when I step up, I step all the fucking way up.

“Tell me about the house,” he said, wanting a distraction, and something familiar and innocent, to settle his racing mind. “Where’d we leave off? Two bedrooms now. Washer and dryer.”

“Tell me about your tattoo,” Abilene countered, her voice spacey and quiet, barely louder than the crackle of the fire.

He glanced at his outstretched arm, his sleeve pushed up to expose the ink on his shoulder. “What about it?”

“Why a horseshoe, but then a thirteen in the middle of it? Doesn’t that kind of cancel out any good luck you’re gunning for?” She traced the simple black design—dark gray, really. He’d gotten it in Vegas during his gambling days, probably seven years ago, now. He shivered at the touch, chest and neck warming in its wake.

“Horseshoe’s only lucky if its ends are pointing up,” he told her. “Like above the

entrance to the stables, out back. Like a cup, to catch the luck or something like that.” His was the inverse.

“Oh. Then why on earth would you get an *unlucky* horseshoe?”

“Because fuck luck.” He smiled at her. “Luck is for idiots. If you’re smart enough, you operate above that bull.”

She looked thoughtful a moment. “You used to count cards, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “It’s legal, even if it doesn’t make you too popular with the pit bosses.”

“Was it just you, on your own?”

“No. I worked with a team of about twelve to fifteen, and we moved around constantly, trying to stay forgettable. You never do, though. But anyhow, fuck luck. Only suckers gamble for real.”

“Huh.”

“What?” he asked. He eyed her hair, curling his fingers into a fist behind her to keep from touching it.

“I dunno. I believe in luck. I mean, it feels like the only thing propelling people through life, some days. I wouldn’t be sitting in this beautiful old house now if it wasn’t for having the good luck of meeting all of you. I wouldn’t have a job, either. Though I wouldn’t have wound up here to begin with if it hadn’t been for a bunch of bad luck. And some good stuff mixed in too, I guess.”

“That’s bullshit,” Casey said. “Bad luck is just what people who make shitty choices blame their problems on.”

She sat up, frowning, looking hurt by that.

“I don’t mean you, honey. Abilene,” he corrected quickly. *Can’t go calling the girl*

“honey,” now, can I? *Fucking dangerous territory to go wandering into.* Though which of them he was worried about getting attached, he couldn’t say.

“Sometimes our circumstances are out of our control,” he said. “And that’s not bad luck, either—there’s no such thing. That’s just life.”

“I guess,” she said slowly, still frowning, but looking more curious than offended now. “I never thought about it like that. About choices. I always thought I was just getting shuttled around by these things that would happen to me, like a leaf in the wind. I’d end up someplace bad, or maybe someplace good, and I was either scared or thankful about it. I guess I never gave much thought to it being all my doing.”

“Well, not everything is within a person’s control. But it’s not luck—that’s for fucking sure. At the end of the day, there’s always someone to blame. And in my experience, it’s almost always your own self.”

“Huh.”

“Luck’s just an excuse that dumb-asses use so they never have to smarten up.”

She cracked a smile at that. “I’m probably at a point in my life where I’d better learn to quit being such a dumb-ass.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think you are one, but yeah, now’s probably the time to steal a little control back from the world. Luck’s for people who don’t want to make choices. But there’s always a choice, no matter how trapped you feel.”

“Do you ever feel trapped?”

He had to think about that. What he felt now—tied to this town by the business and his commitment to Duncan, tied to his uncomfortable home life by his promise to Vince . . . *Trapped* wasn’t quite it. Tethered, maybe, but he’d secured every single one of

those knots himself.

“I don’t think I’ve felt trapped since I was about twenty,” he decided aloud. “Since I started looking around Fortuity and realized I was on a track to wind up a nobody, in a no-place town, for the rest of my life. ’Til someday I woke up with a bad back from four decades’ working in the quarry, forced to retire and spend my days bitching with the other old-timers by the Benji’s jukebox. Sounds fucking cocky, but ever since I was a kid I thought I was too big for this place. Had more exciting shit due to me. I feel like an asshole saying it now.”

“You’re not a nobody here, anyhow. You’re a business owner. You’re going to preserve an important part of Fortuity’s past for when the casino changes everything.”

“Yeah, I hope so. But I also know my fifteen-year-old self would’ve been fucking horrified to hear I never made it out of here.”

“But you did. And like you said, it was your choices that brought you back.”

“Yeah.” And now, at thirty-three, a little older and more sentimental, a little more vulnerable to guilt and regrets, Casey could admit that if he *was* doomed to lose his marbles in the next ten years, that time was better spent doing right by his mom and building some kind of professional legacy that didn’t have him flirting with a place on the ATF’s dance card.

The fire was mellowing; crackling yellow flames turned quiet and orange, lapping lazily at the pink logs. Beside him, Abilene yawned, and in its wake her gaze went to his tattoo again.

“For what it’s worth, I feel real lucky to have met your brother, and you and Raina and Duncan.”

Again, that was choice, not chance—she'd gone to Vince for help. But it was a nice sentiment, so he didn't contradict her. "And I feel lucky that I'm in a position to be of use to you."

"That's real sweet."

He squeezed her around the shoulders, just for a second. "I know. Don't tell anybody I said it."

She laughed.

"You should get back to bed," Casey said. "You'll need whatever sleep you can get tonight."

And as if on cue, the dreaded noise drifted down from above—a soft, single coo, promising full-blown wailing to follow inside a minute.

"Spoke too soon," he said, just as Abilene stood.

She paused to look back at him as she slipped her feet into blue flip-flops, smiling shyly. "Thanks for the distraction."

"Don't know if I should say you're welcome, or apologize for letting it get as far as it did."

"Don't apologize."

He nodded.

She pursed her lips, then bent down and kissed his cheek. "Night."

"Sleep well."

She smiled a final time, then headed for the stairs, holding up the legs of her pajama bottoms like a kid, to keep the hems off the floor.

Like a kid. So *unlike* the woman who'd just turned him inside out—and without ever

crossing third base. He shoved the thought aside.

Get your head on straight. Tonight was a one-off. A slip of her good sense, probably a need to escape from whatever thoughts she had coursing through her mind regarding what might come once her ex was out.

A dangerous ex, Casey thought, and that child's father. Sometimes he caught himself nearly getting attached to that baby, and had to pull himself up short. *Just because I can change diapers now, and heat formula, and have puke stains on the shoulders of half my shirts, doesn't make me anything more than a babysitter to that kid.*

The only thing he'd earned for sure was James Ware's anger, should the man find out how close Casey had gotten with his ex and his daughter. He swallowed, collar feeling tight.

Just keep it to yourself. Hope maybe you get nicknamed Uncle Casey, but beyond that, leave it the fuck alone. Quit feeling shit you have no right to feel.

No right, because he was his mother's son, with a sad fate likely awaiting him. And because he was his father's son to boot. He wanted to think he'd never turn his back on a commitment as huge as a child, but then again, if he'd been a big enough shit to skip town when his mom had started getting bad . . .

And because sure, he'd done better in the past few months, but that didn't change one important fact—at the end of the day, Casey was every bit the criminal Abilene's arms-smuggler ex was.

The only difference is, I've been smart enough not to get caught.

And he'd better hope to hell that good, God-fearing girl never found out the truth about him.