

Wild Ones Tip #3: You can't tame a Wild One.
You just have to go wild.

GOING WILD

The Wild Ones

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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Going Wild
The Wild Ones #2

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Disclaimer: The people and town of Tomahawk are not technically real.

WARNING: If you're a very serious person who is looking for a very serious book...you might want to stop reading now. It only gets crazier from this point.

This is for the readers, who, like me, needed a break from the serious stuff. #EmbraceTheCrazy

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Prologue

Wild Ones Tip #422

*Our crazy is an acquired taste but an addictive brand. Ye've
been warned.*

LIAM

People often ask me what in the hell convinced me to move to Tomahawk, Washington, where the four corners of crazy are known as the Wild Ones. They want to know what possessed me to live next door to the Vincents—the same ones who think it's acceptable to fish with dynamite if the fish aren't biting the hooks they so generously attempt to use.

They want to know why I ever thought I'd make it in the woods with bugs, bears, and other things that want to take a bite out of me.

I tell them all the same thing...

It's a long, crazy story.

And of course, I blame one girl.

Chapter 1

Wild Ones Tip #293

Watch for Wild Ones. Shit usually blows up in our wake.

KYLIE

“You crazy sons of bitches!” I yell as the smoke slightly clears from where Hale Vincent has just *accidentally* blown up our dock.

His eyes are wide as he heaves himself out of the lake, his terribly long beard dripping with water as he gets back into his boat with his brother.

“That was an accident!” he calls out. “I was aiming for the stump and tripped!”

Killian, his brother, points to the said stump that is lifting out of the water as if to prove its existence.

“It messed up our prop the other day!” Killian tries to explain.

A grin spreads over my face when I hear the stampede of feet rushing this way.

“Better run, Vincents,” I say with a wicked grin.

Killian curses, trying to crank the boat, but he’s too late.

Paintballs start flying, pelting the boys as they yelp and try to duck. The *tink tink tink* is a beautiful sound as the paintballs rapidly crash against the boat, while the army of Malones face off against two-thirds of the Vincent triplets.

“We’ll fix it!” Hale yells as Killian gasses the boat and drives them away from the dock...or what’s left of it, rather.

“Damn right they’ll fucking fix it,” my dad grumbles, walking over as part of the dock breaks off and falls into the water, punctuating the destructive wake of the Vincents.

He groans.

“Damn Vincents. If I hadn’t loved their momma and daddy so much, I’d kick their asses all day every day for the rest of my life.”

I grin, knowing he’s full of shit. He has a soft spot for the orphaned triplets. Just like the whole town does.

“It’s not like we’re much better,” Eric points out helpfully.

“Besides, this means we can pay them back,” Jason, another cousin of mine, says, grinning.

Dad points his finger in Jason’s face. “Do *not* blow up their dock. Bill will never let me hear the end of it. Besides, Vick said he was going to put a ban on explosives if we all kept using them so much.”

Tomahawk problems. Gotta love them.

“You sure you want to go off to LA and miss all this?” Dad asks, his beard moving up, signaling the fact he’s smiling.

Or so I assume.

Tomahawk—land of the bushy beards. Don’t ask. Long story.

Those beards are the reason I love traveling. I don’t even know what the men from this town look like, so if I want my vagina to ever get any exercise...I travel.

For good reason.

Besides, most of the guys here are too afraid to hook up with the only Malone girl.

Pansies.

“It’s just for a couple of months,” I remind him.

He smiles broader, because that beard lifts higher.

“My fancy artist daughter.”

I roll my eyes, and my cousins start heckling me. When Heath’s muddy foot brushes my boot, my body turns to stone, and I slowly look down.

A hushed silence falls over the yard.

No one moves. Even the creatures of the forest seem to freeze in place, terrified of what I may or may not do.

My red. Beautiful. Shiny. Awesome Boots.

Mud.

Dirty. Mucky. Mud.

“Oh shit,” Heath says on a hiss.

Slowly, my eyes come back up, leveling him with a cold glare. His eyes widen in fear seconds before he takes off running.

I snatch up the paintball gun, and I take aim before firing rapidly, hitting him at least ten times before he collapses and curls into the fetal position.

“You better be glad mud will wash off these!” I yell. Then peg his ass five more times with paintballs as he howls in pain.

My dad is shaking with silent laughter when I glare over at him.

“Just mud. You don’t kill over mud if it’s not the suede.” He raises his hands innocently, and I roll my eyes.

“I’m going to go see Lilah before I leave. So I guess I need a ride there.”

“I’m not going around the Vincents,” he growls. “Not after they just blew up my dock.”

I bat an unconcerned hand. “They’ll fix it. They always do. It’s only Lilah’s shit they never fully repair.”

“Take the boat. I’ll send Heath after it.”

I give him a quick kiss on his hairy cheek, and then he kisses my forehead.

“Be careful in LA. Don’t get arrested. They’re not as lenient as we are around here.”

I flash a grin. “No worries. I won’t be firing paintballs at unsuspecting citizens or accidentally blowing up someone’s

personal property.”

“I mean it, Kylie. Don’t do anything crazy like crashing your car into a pool again. You’ll have to pretend to be normal for a couple of months and forget your raising. We won’t be there to back you up,” he goes on.

“I won’t be as psychotic as you raised me to be anywhere but Tomahawk,” I tell him, crossing my heart with my index finger.

“Promise?” he asks.

“Promise.”

Chapter 2

Wild Ones Tip #74

Wild Ones are always wild, so lock your doors and sleep in body armor.

KYLIE

“Hey, everyone, this is Kylie Malone, and she’s filling in for Jake’s pussy ass tomorrow so we have that fifth,” Rudy says as we drop to a booth inside a bar.

It’s a laidback bar just on the outskirts of LA, not far from where the gallery was.

I flash a smile at all the guys around the table, my gaze lingering on one seriously sexy face for a moment longer than the rest, before giving a little wave.

The sexy guy arches an unimpressed eyebrow at me as he lowers his beer bottle.

He’s blond with the perfect splash of tan, and has a strong jaw with no hint of stubble. I’ve been stuck in beard central for the vast majority of my adult life, so I’m still adjusting to the smooth faces.

And his is my favorite so far.

“You’re going skydiving with us?” Sexy Guy asks skeptically, and I restrain a smile.

“Yeah. Problem with that?”

He shakes his head slowly, his smirk lazily etching up. I can tell he’s going to be a dick.

“That’s Liam,” Rudy says, gesturing to the dick.

He goes around the table, introducing the other three guys, and I pretend I don’t feel the disbelieving gaze of Liam as he studies me without subtlety.

As I'm about to tell one of them where I'm from, Liam talks over us.

"This is expert level skydiving. No instructors are going to be strapped to you."

Guys like this? Never get challenged. I've learned that about LA in the past three weeks. I'm only here for four more, which will be the end of my showcase tour.

So far, I've learned it's nothing like what I'm used to.

But I'm also nothing like they're used to.

It's like stepping into the Twilight Zone, and I've enjoyed the vacation.

"Really? I had no idea." I mock a gasp. "Rudy, why didn't you tell me?"

Really, though, my acting skills are so over-the-top that you can hear the sarcasm coating each word. Rudy starts laughing, and Liam's cocky smirk flattens to a thin, disapproving line. I wink at him before ordering a shot of tequila.

"Shots? Before skydiving?" Liam asks.

"You always mother the ones around you?" I ask absently, not looking directly at him.

Really is a shame such a sexy face belongs to such a prick.

Five minutes into speaking to him, I know three things:

He's entitled.

He's rich.

He's a prick.

All I need to know.

Besides, he's way too pretty for me. Guys like him drool over girls like Lilah or Nila.

My shot arrives, and I grin up at the waitress, thanking her before handing her my money. Then I toss it back and order another.

She keeps them coming, and before I know it, the conversation has veered to the more pornographic pieces that were in the gallery today. I laugh under my breath, trying not to notice how Liam is still studying me.

“You always have such curly hair?” he asks as I stack up my fifth empty shot glass.

“You always stare at curly hair? Or am I just special?” I ask, tugging a light brown curl of mine that springs back into place when I let go.

I smirk at him this time. It seems to bother him when I don't let him bother me.

He spins the coaster on the table, not looking at me anymore, and I go back to pretending to listen to the conversation.

I mean, Rudy offered me a free spot on their dive, and usually, a dive like this would run close to seven hundred dollars, possibly more. I couldn't pass it up, so I can pretend to like them for a night.

Even Liam.

The prick.

The guy who is staring at me again.

I have those ringlet curls that turn to straight fuzz if I don't use a thousand hair products.

There's something you should know about where I come from...

The women may dress like something out of a fashion horror magazine, but we damn well take care of our hair.

Long story for another time.

I stand and move toward the jukebox when the weight of his very scrutinizing gaze continues to follow me. I pick a song I love, mostly to remind me of who I am, and walk back when it starts playing.

Liam's eyes slowly scan down the front of my little white sundress and drop to my boots—okay, this is where I tell you I

have a small issue. Well, it's a big issue. An obsession, really.

Cowboy boots.

My small apartment back home has two walls full of boots.

No lie.

It's where most of my money goes.

Don't judge me. It's an addiction. It's also the one thing in life that brings me unadulterated joy.

"Nice boots," he says, his lips twitching as I sit down. "Straight off the ranch?"

This freakishly gorgeous guy is really close to getting his ass kicked by these boots.

"I'm a wild one," catches my attention as someone from the bar sings along.

My grin spreads, and I turn back to face the prick. "These boots are made for walking," I joke as I stand again. Okay, so it's a totally cheesy joke that no one even laughs at.

I move to the dance floor and dance with the first guy who has the balls to join me.

I have no idea what his name is, but he's a sweetheart, and a damn good dancer.

I'm laughing and enjoying myself, when I turn and see Liam watching me, like he's trying to figure me out. I go back to ignoring him as someone else starts playing the song over.

It makes me a little homesick, but it gives me a piece of home at the same time.

I keep taking shots. And I keep dancing, enjoying myself.

Several other songs play, and before I know it, the once-empty dance floor is now packed full of people. I dance until I'm suddenly plowing against a firm body, and I move a curl out of my face to look up at...Liam.

He smirks down at me.

“How is it you’ve now had ten shots, yet you still seem mostly sober?” he asks, handing me yet another shot of tequila.

“I’m very sober. Are you counting my shots?” I ask, shooting the drink without thinking about the fact he might have done something to it.

I’m not used to having to be wary.

If I feel funny in a second, I’m going to karate chop his dick so hard that he’ll have to fuck a girl around a corner to deal with the new angle it’ll have.

A sardonic smile ghosts his lips before he mouths, “*Eleven.*”

And then he winks at me.

Even though I hate him a little, and wonder if he’s poisoned or drugged me, for some reason I still smile. His eyes dart down to my lips, and then they flick back up to meet my eyes. He seems amused more than anything.

“Are you going to answer my question?” he asks.

I roll my eyes, still dancing. “Two reasons. One, my family are big drinkers. You grow a tolerance, because no one wants to be the first one who’s drunk at a family event. Two, the shot glasses are half the size of normal shot glasses. And they only fill them half way up. So I’ve maybe had three shots in reality.”

He cocks his head like he’s studying me.

“Your math is terrible,” he says seriously.

“Thank you,” I deadpan, causing his eyebrow to arch in confusion.

“If you’re not drunk, then why have you spent an hour dancing?”

My eyebrows go up. “I *like* dancing. Besides, if I had stayed over there, something terrible would have happened.”

He waits expectantly, and I grin at him.

“What?” he finally asks, taking the bait.

“You would have just kept smirking at me and delivering veiled insults.”

His smile spreads for the first time. A real, genuine smile.

I’m human, and I’m capable and crass enough to admit to myself that smile of his is like a live wire straight to my clit. Not that I’d ever tell him that.

“That would be terrible, I suppose,” he says, stepping closer.

“Very,” I agree, wondering if I’m crossing into flirty territory when he tucks another curl behind my ear.

I might even shiver a little when his fingers brush my cheek during the motion. This guy smells as good as he looks. And it’s been...six months? At least six months since the last time I found someone to scratch an itch with.

“You really sure you can skydive? Because tomorrow is no joke,” he says seriously.

My lips twitch.

“You skydive often?” I ask, vaguely aware we’re just standing in the middle of a bunch of people dancing.

“Not too often anymore, but still on occasion. I like the rush it gives me.”

“I’m well-acquainted with adrenaline rushes,” I say with a shrug.

He gives me a dubious look that tells me he doesn’t believe me, but I hold my secretive smile in place, not elaborating.

“You’re a confusing little specimen, Kylie Malone,” he says. I’m not sure why my name sounds so good coming off his lips.

I blame it on all the beards I’ve endured for too long. Our town stopped fornicating when the beards got long enough to hide baby birds in them. The whole nest and momma bird too, in some cases.

“I’m actually simple. We all are.” I smile again.

“Simple? We? Who’s we?” he muses.

“My family. Friends. Everyone back home.”

“On the ranch?” he asks, but this time his tone is light and teasing instead of insulting.

“Back at the lake. No ranching.” I decide not to tell him my father does own a small farm. It’d make him laugh, and I don’t want to hear him laugh when my vagina likes his smile so much already.

“They wear cowboy boots on the lake?”

“You really fixate on the oddest things,” I point out.

He tugs one of my curls, and I allow him to keep invading my personal space. His foot is touching mine, but it’s not offending my boot yet. If he scuffs a boot, his very pretty ass will be going to buy me new ones.

“What were you showcasing at the gallery?” he asks, not bothered by the bodies bumping into us as they dance around our unmoving ones.

“Several pieces, actually. Why? Did you come peruse?” I drawl, only partially interested in his answer.

He cocks his head, his own secretive smile etching up. “I own the gallery.”

Ah, that explains the extra dose of cockiness.

My eyebrows go up, and he smiles cockier. Not very humble, is he?

I grab the sides of his face, and his smile dies as I tug his head down. He acts like he’s about to struggle when I narrow my eyes and make a show of looking him over.

“Funny. I was thinking you to be more of the model type. Perfect symmetry.”

His eyebrows go up again, and he stares at me like he thinks I’m crazy, while I keep his face smashed between my

hands, giving his lips a bit of a fish-pucker effect. He's still too pretty even like that.

"You truly are a beautiful man," I say on a long sigh as I release the sides of his face.

"Beautiful?" he asks, laughing lightly.

"Yes. A beautiful...prick."

I pat the side of his cheek, and all the humor in his expression disappears.

"See you tomorrow, Pretty Prick," I say over my shoulder as I sashay away in my *awesome* boots. "See you guys bright and early," I say cheerily to the table of artists.

"You okay to walk back to your place alone?" Rudy asks so helpfully.

I wink at him. "Don't worry. Most people here seem really terrified of people who talk to themselves. People seem to give me a wide berth the louder I talk to myself."

I'm met with a lot of blinks as I grab my purse, but Liam is suddenly back at the table.

"Someone should walk you back to your hotel," Liam says firmly.

My smile creeps up, and I peer over at him. "I'm not at a hotel. I'm staying with a family friend. And don't worry," I tell him as I walk away. Without turning around, I loudly add, "I'm a Wild One."

Chapter 3

Wild One Tip #222

Don't fight us when we're saving your damn life. Otherwise, we might decide to just let you die.

LIAM

I'm not sure what it is about her that I find fascinating.

She's cute, but it's LA; cute girls are a dime a dozen. And in her case, she's sort of sweetly cute with a *homegrown* air about her, which is not my normal interest.

I'm not sure if it's the way she doesn't seem to swoon around me, or if it's that challenging glint she gets in her eyes when I try to bring her down a notch. Usually, people stumble over themselves to let me talk down to them. Especially new artists.

But not Kylie Malone.

Who the fuck is Kylie Malone?

She's dressed in her gear, listening attentively to the guide. I'm worried for some reason that she's full of shit and in over her head. She does *not* look like someone who has done enough jumps to be on this trip.

She could get killed, for fuck's sake.

She's like a honey-haired, grownup version of Shirley Temple, and obviously that doesn't scream *thrill seeker!*

She's wearing some really ugly tennis shoes today, instead of the cowboy boots she was donning so proudly last night. I'm not sure why that is getting my attention. I'm not sure why *she's* getting so much of my attention.

"You guys ready?" the guide calls out, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I watch as he splits up our jumps, timing each one, and Kylie gestures for me to go in front of her.

“After you, Shirley Temple,” I yell with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes, and she steps to the edge. My breath catches in my throat when she turns to face me. At first I think she’s going to panic, but then a daring little grin spreads over her face, and she winks at me before flipping—fucking flipping—backwards out of the plane.

That’s not allowed, damn it.

I rush to the doorway, watching as she kicks through the air, spinning around and creating aerial movements like a pro.

Well, I’ll be damned.

I leap out on command, and I try to glide toward her, keeping a safe distance as I watch her spin her circles and flip well below me. I don’t want to be in her chute radius.

Perfectly timed, her chute bursts open, and I keep falling, having some ground to make up. She’s way out ahead of me, but when my time comes to deploy my chute, panic sinks in.

It’s hung.

Trying not to freak the hell out, I jerk and jerk on the cord, but it doesn’t budge.

I look down, seeing the clouds break apart as the ground approaches too quickly.

Every muscle is flexed as I try to jerk open the damn chute, but it’s jammed, refusing to budge, even the backup chute seems to be locked up.

I know I checked it a thousand times. I know it was working, damn it!

I never fuck this up. Thoughts racing a thousand miles a minute, panic continues to build, alone with the growing stone in the pit of my stomach, and the uncontainable pressure building in my chest.

The wind actually hurts when it pummels me, sounding in my ears like I’m stuck in a vacuum tunnel. My stomach

sinks, and I barely glimpse the lake ahead of us. I begin pulling again, hoping for a miracle.

I finally feel something give, and the backup chute flies open, but I'm still descending too fast, not having enough time to slow like I need to. My stomach feels like it's climbing out of my throat as the panic I've been avoiding claws its way to the surface.

I barely manage to guide myself over the water when I crash to it, feeling sharp, excruciating pain shoot up my leg as I land awkwardly on it. The water almost feels like a wall on impact, and my chute drops down around me, clinging like wet clothing, as I gasp for air and sink, fighting with one good leg to keep my head above water.

I grab a knife from my hip, jerk it up, ignoring the searing pain in my leg as I cut through the chute, feeling fresh air waft over me.

It hurts too bad to try and kick with my right leg, and I'm struggling with the wet parachute and the water as I try to get my pack off before it drags me down.

My eyes glance up just in time to see Kylie disconnect, her discarded chute flying into the air as she crosses her arms over her chest, crosses her feet at the ankles, and drops at least thirty feet into the water.

"Don't," I shout, gurgling on water as my head dips below the surface.

I fight, struggling, and force my way back up until my head breaks the surface again. It's short-lived, because I'm dragged under again by the relentless extra weight, gaining no purchase with the use of one leg.

But there are suddenly hands on my middle, touching me, freeing me. The pack comes off, and it feels like I lose thirty pounds.

My head springs up above water with more ease, and I gasp several bursts of air as my body starts moving backwards.

"Stay flat!" someone yells, but I'm loopy, confused. Almost incoherent.

It's not until I'm being dragged onto the shore, coughing incessantly to free my lungs of all the water that crept in, that I turn to see the girl who is kneeling beside me, saying something I can't hear as she pulls my helmet off.

Her hair is drenched, her helmet is already gone, and she's hovering over me, her lips moving to silent words too far away for my ears.

The pain...is too intense. It feels like my leg is on fire and being hammered at the same time. Each breath I take feels like liquid frost and knives.

All I can hear is my rapidly firing heartbeat drumming in my ears as my vision dims.

My last thought is that Shirley Fucking Temple just saved my life.

Chapter 4

Wild Ones Tip #68

We're the nicest fuckers you're ever gonna know. (Kidding. If that's true, you've lived a sad life.)

LIAM

Two days ago I had surgery, and today I finally got to come home with my leg—from thigh to heel—in a cast.

Yeah. Shattered that motherfucker real good.

Happens when you hit the water so hard that it reacts like a solid mass. I'm lucky the malfunctioning chute slowed my speed enough to let me survive.

I groan, shifting up on the bed, wondering if that pain medication is just a placebo, because I'm still hurting like a little bitch boy with no pain tolerance.

My door buzzes over and over, and I wince as I grab the remote by the bed. Finally, someone has come to check on me.

"Hello?" I ask into the remote, but then the image pops up on the screen, and a curly-haired girl is looking back at me. Well, she's looking at the camera.

"Just came by to make sure you're alive," she says. "And to drop off a piece of art you obviously bought."

She holds up the sculpture I purchased the second I saw it. Before she saved my life. Before I even knew she existed. I never bothered to meet the artist, never do.

It's a sculpture that in no way looks like it was made by Shirley Temple.

I push the button to unlock the door. "Come in. I'm in the last room on the right."

She pushes through the door, and I wheeze on a breath, feeling the crack in my ribs wreaking havoc, just like the doctor said it would.

She walks in, looking perky and refreshing.

“Hey, Shirley,” I say with a grin, surprisingly happy to see her.

Well, to see anyone. I’m dying of thirst. And pain.

“It’s Kylie,” she corrects, narrowing her eyes at me.

“I know. Thanks for bringing that sculpture by.”

She shrugs, coming over to check me out.

I couldn’t stand being at the hospital, but now I wish I hadn’t left, because...no one is returning my calls, and I can’t walk around alone. Everyone keeps saying they’ll swing by later, but then they dodge my calls when I try to make them hold true to their word.

I was lucky to get my sister to drive me here and help me to the room, before she abandoned me to hurry off to the country club for a date.

“Loki. Funny choice in a sculpture from a girl who looks sweet like you. And an interestingly dark take on it too.”

She tilts her head. “I’m not sweet. Like, not even a little bit,” she says with a sweet smile.

Sure she’s not.

“You were sweet enough to drop thirty or forty feet into the water and drag my ass out of the lake before I drowned, *and* call an ambulance. Thanks for that, by the way. I’d have thanked you sooner if I had your number.”

She smiles at me like she wasn’t expecting me to show gratitude for the fact she *literally* saved my life.

“I only have a phone on occasion. They’re too expensive for not much purpose, and I prefer to spend my money elsewhere. And Rudy called for the ambulance.”

My smile grows even more. Who the hell doesn't have a phone? My nephew is four and has a phone.

"You're kidding."

She shakes her head, and she hops up on the bed, careful not to jostle me as she points down at her boots. "My only big expense."

My eyes run down her legs instead, noting the soft, barely-there tan coating them. Her little white shorts do a number on me too. However, an erection hurts. Hurts damn bad. Because it makes my leg tense. And my leg is pitiful at the moment.

"You okay?" she asks when I grimace.

"I think they're tricking me with water pills instead of pain pills, because I hurt all over."

Obviously I don't explain the erection issue.

She leans over, and her strawberry scent makes me harder, putting me in more pain as she pulls back my pill bottle.

"You must be hurting if you're taking these and yet you're still in pain." She looks over at me, frowning. "When was your last one?"

"Six, maybe seven hours ago."

Her eyes widen. "It clearly states you need to take one every four hours. That's why you're hurting."

She looks around like she's noticing we're all alone.

"No one is here to help?" she asks, looking back over at me.

I laugh humorlessly, then wince again when it jostles me.

"Everyone had something more important to do. Apparently."

Not even going to lie; it's embarrassing to say that. I realized I wasn't loaded down with *real* friends, but no one? Not even my family?

I pay for my family's lavish lifestyles, and no one can spare a few hours to help me out?

"You won't be able to use those crutches for at least a couple of weeks. Rudy said you cracked a few ribs, and that's a bitch with crutches."

She says this as though she's experienced it before, and then she glances down at my leg.

"No one is coming?" she asks, no expression on her face.

I shake my head, looking away from her eyes.

"Guess not."

"I'll get you some water, and unless you have a problem with some strange girl roaming around in your house, I'll help you out until you can use them." She gestures toward the crutches. "Or until someone comes to take my place."

I grimace for another reason this time. Now I feel... pathetic.

"You don't have to. You don't even know me, and let's face it, I was a bit of a dick."

She grins widely. "I'm fully capable of handling any personality. And," she says, looking around, taking in my room, "these are way better than the digs I'm staying in. You'd be doing me a favor, because I'm sick of smelling my cousin's ex-college-roommate's dirty socks."

She returns her gaze to me, still smiling. She's trying to make it sound like it's a give and take situation, when really she's the only one giving, and trying not to make me feel as pathetic as we both know I am.

"You can spare that kind of time?" I ask, my pride falling apart as we speak.

She grins. "Showcases are only on Fridays. I'm on a tour that my dad set up with some connections of his."

"You're one of Shasta's girls?" I ask, confused.

She beams at me. "Yeah. Shasta owes my dad for something, so she came to look at my work. She fell in love

with it, and the next thing I knew, she was setting me up with this gallery tour special she was doing. It was a huge break.”

I reach over and tug one of those curls before I can stop myself, and she continues to hold a grin, amused...not slapping my hand away. That’s got to be a good sign.

But then she turns and slides off the bed, and I listen as she moves through the house, opening the fridge that echoes through the large and otherwise empty home.

“This place is massive. And it’s just you who lives here?” she calls out.

“Yeah. I like...space.”

“You mean you like showing off,” she says like a true smartass.

I grin. “Maybe a little. Believe it or not, I worked hard to earn my money. Galleries are just a hobby for me. I own at least fifteen of the best in the world. But my money started from building a chip that changed the way cell phones work.”

“Huh. So *that’s* why they’re so expensive,” she deadpans, which is...not what I was expecting.

She’s a hard one to impress.

Then again, I do look like death worked me into an early grave, and she’s here because no one else sees the need to bother with me. That’s not very impressive.

Just as she comes back into the room, holding a bottle of water and wearing a teasing smile, I ask, “Why are you doing this?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Because I didn’t get a nose full of water so I could drag you out of that lake, just to watch you suffer alone. Besides, I really do hate gym socks. They disgust me. My boots have been scared. I’ll have Harry drop my things off, if you’ll let me borrow your phone.”

I try not to smile, because I don’t want her to see just how relieved I am. That way she won’t feel guilty if she decides

this isn't a job she has to take.

"I'll pay you, obviously."

She swats her hand like she's batting away the offer. "If I wanted money, I would have already made demands. You can pay me back by giving me a space to do some art. I get stir crazy if I don't have room to spread out, and Harry's place has been making me stir crazy. Terrible things happen when I get stir crazy."

My smile grows.

"What terrible things?" I ask with as much seriousness as I can muster.

She gives me a stern look.

"I tug at my hair. It gets frizzy. You don't want to see me when that happens."

I laugh, then groan when it hurts. As the pain subsides, I gesture behind me.

"You can take the room next to this one for art. The one down the hall is the biggest guest room if you want to sleep in there."

She spreads out on my bed, lifting the remote to find a channel. "I'm good sleeping here. Trust me, you're going to need my help if you have to pee in the middle of the night."

I study her profile, wondering why in the hell she even gives a damn.

It takes no time at all to realize that Kylie Malone just does whatever in the hell she wants. And it's usually the nice thing.

Even if it is for a dick like me.

Chapter 5

Wild Ones Tip #894

Fire extinguishers are a necessary evil in our presence.

Make sure all flammable rooms are stocked with at least three of them.

KYLIE

On day seven, he's staying awake more than he's sleeping, which is progress. I'm sort of glad he can't go upstairs. Then I'd have to explain why there's duct-tape covering the window.

Well, the hole in the window, rather.

It's not like I meant for the hairdryer to go through it. It's not like I intentionally spilled an entire bottle of baby oil that resulted in me falling while that hairdryer flew out said window.

Don't worry. I'll nail it shut with some ply wood I found out back once he's dead to the world again and can't hear me hammering away.

No harm. No foul. At least not until he's healed enough to go up there and see the damage. I'll be long gone by then.

Until then, I'll continue putting images of him mostly naked into my mind while I give him sponge baths. Too many times I've run my fingers over those lines of muscles, wondering what'd it'd be like to trace them with my tongue.

He could bathe himself, in all honesty. But that's part of my reward for being so selfless. Clearly, he must know this, because he continues to let me sponge him off once a day.

The fire alarm wailing suddenly snaps me out of my trance, and I curse as I use a set of tongs to grab the flaming rag of doom off the stove and toss it into the sink. I'm still

calling it a string of names as I drown out the fire. When the smoke rages on, I grab a broom to start fanning the smoke away from the fire alarm.

After that doesn't work, I run to open two windows, then I grab a chair so I can get higher up to wave the smoke away. Short people problems.

Just as I'm starting to make progress, I hear a *whoosh*, and I look over my shoulder in horror as the pan I have on the stove—that is cooking lunch—suddenly spurts up a massive flame.

How is this even happening to me right now?!

“Everything okay in there?” Liam calls, sounding a little concerned.

“Fine!” I yell, panicking as I search for something to put the fire out.

“There's a fire extinguisher under the sink,” he tells me, his voice carrying over the mayhem and stupid freaking fire alarm.

“Ha! No fire in here! Just got a little smoky!” I yell as I dive to the sink and grab the fire extinguisher.

In Liam's house, it's like a canyon in the sense that when you yell, “*Hellloooo*,” you're going to hear it echo thirty times. So I shouldn't be surprised that the fire extinguisher makes one hell of a monstrous telling noise as I spray down all the flames.

One tiny little spark of fire reignites, and I spray the shit out of it again, panting as I finally lower the fire extinguisher and stare at the charred mess with extinguisher goo all over it.

This day...sucks chipmunk balls.

Annoyed, I climb back up on that chair, rip the fire alarm off the wall, and...realize it's not just *that* alarm going wild, it's also the fancy, state-of-the-art alarm *system* he has.

The land line—yes, I call it a land line—rings, and I run to answer it, hearing the security company asking me questions about said fire mayhem. I explain to them that I just

can't cook, but that we're not actually burning to death or anything.

"I'm afraid I'm going to need to speak to Mr. Harper," the woman tells me.

"Liam, the phone's for you," I call out, grimacing.

"Got it in here." I wait a beat. "Anything still on fire?" he asks, sounding amused more than anything.

"No."

I turn around, cursing this day from hell, and go to clean the mess up a little before making him a sandwich. Personally, I've lost my appetite.

When I walk into his room, he's grinning from ear to ear, and I hand him the sandwich I slaved over.

"All that for a sandwich?" he muses.

I ignore him as I climb up on the bed, and he laughs under his breath as he eats his sandwich.

"I have tons of takeout menus," he finally tells me in between bites.

"I know. I was just trying to do something nice," I grumble as he finishes the last bite—since he can inhale food—and puts the plate on the bedside table.

He tugs one of my curls, which is something he seems to love to do, as I shift into his side, getting comfortable on the bed while finding something to watch.

He doesn't take it seriously, but me being cooped up is a bad thing. Dangerous thing. Things like the hairdryer happen after a while. Along with the wild fire.

There will be more accidents, no doubt. Unless I start painting a hell of a lot more.

But he can't go out, and I don't want him feeling guilty for me getting crazy from being stuck inside. Well, he could go out, but it hurts him to move around a whole lot, so it'd be pointless and selfish for me to expect that. And the wheelchair

really hurts him because of his ribs. He can't roll himself, and he can't sit—reclining is necessary. Or lying flat.

“Got a boyfriend back home?” he asks randomly, his hand sliding across my stomach with a little too much familiarity.

“Nope. Beards aren't my thing.”

I feel his confusion like it's a real, tangible thing.

“*Okay*...got a girlfriend back home?”

I realize how that must have sounded when he follows up with that question, and I laugh, shaking my head. “No. I'm into guys.”

His hand slides lower, touching just the top of my pajama shorts.

“So no one is going to get upset if I touch you?” he asks, dipping his head next to my ear.

I make a sound of surprise when he kisses me just under my ear, and my body tenses.

“What're you doing?” I ask, feeling his hand slowly start to move under my shorts.

“You've slept beside me every night. Laid against my side daily. My dick is hard as stone every time you're around. I just thought I'd return the favor, since you seem to be immune to me.”

My breath hisses through my lips when his hand dips into my panties, and he kisses my neck as his finger slips against the wet proof that I'm certainly *not* immune. He groans in the back of his throat, and I shudder against him.

I'm obviously not going to stop him from touching me if that's what he's waiting on.

“Kylie,” he groans again, and then two of his fingers dip inside me, thrusting hard.

My eyes roll back in my head as I spread my legs wider, giving him access, and he sucks a spot on my neck that drives me insane. I start writhing against his hand, and then turn,

seeking his lips, desperately hoping this isn't a dream that I'm going to wake up from before the finish line is crossed.

All it takes is one touch of his lips against mine, and I'm lost. Because he kisses like he invented the word *kiss*.

It's commanding, powerful, demanding...it's a whole bunch of other words too, but my brain is struggling not to short circuit.

I moan into his mouth when he cups me, putting pressure on my clit while still pumping two fingers inside me. My hand comes up, cupping the side of his face, as his tongue mimics what his fingers are doing.

I'd really love to have that tongue somewhere else.

Just the thought has me grinding harder, and then it all erupts at once, the orgasm washing over me as I clamp down on his fingers.

"Fuck," he whispers against my mouth as I break the kiss to suck in air, shuddering against him.

I pull back as he watches me with lust-filled eyes, and he brings his fingers up, sucking them into his mouth while winking at me.

That's what snaps the last of my restraint. He started this, so that means the line has been crossed and I don't have to hold back anymore. Liam just doesn't realize he released the kraken or whatever. At least not yet.

That crazy guy still thinks I'm sweet just because I'm short and have curly hair. It's sort of cute how difficult he finds it that I'm anything else.

I shove my shorts and panties down in unison. His eyes zero in on the newly exposed skin, and he smirks as he watches me.

"As much as I'd love to fuck you, there's no way—even if you were on top—that I'd be able to. My leg isn't ready for that much movement."

"I'm not fucking you with that," I say with a smile. "But my mouth can fuck you without jostling you too much."

Heat fills his eyes, and I gently tug his shorts down just enough to let his very hard, very ready erection pop free. Damn. I really want to fuck that.

Staring wistfully, I throw my leg over his body, and his hands immediately go for my hips, dragging me down for his mouth to connect with that sweet bundle of torture.

I have to focus really hard to remember I'm supposed to be giving too, and I lower my head, taking him in little by little, swirling my tongue over the tip each time I come up.

“Don't thrust. It'll hurt you,” I tell him, grinning when he groans.

I stop grinning when he sucks my clit into his talented mouth and then smooths his tongue over it at the same time.

That's when I go in for the kill, sucking him down as deep as I possibly can and we both work hard to bring the other to climax first. I'm the first to go, which makes it really damn hard not to grit my teeth.

Since he's still in my mouth, *that* would be bad. I suck harder, even as my body shudders against his relentless mouth that is trying to kill me.

Then it happens. Without warning. He makes a surprised sound before semi-salty warmth is shooting into my mouth. I take it like a champ, though. I'm almost positive he had no idea that was coming—*ha ha ha!*—either.

His fingers dig into my ass as his head drops away from me, and he grips me even tighter as I finish sucking him down completely. When I'm sure he's done, I let go, bringing my head back, smiling as I toss my leg back over him and move to his side.

He's studying me like I'm a two-headed lizard.

“How does a girl, who looks as fucking sweet as you, give head like that?”

I roll my eyes, curling up against him. “For the last time, I'm not sweet.”

His arms go around me, even as his back stays flat on the mattress. His gaze rakes over my face several times as he touches my spiral curls like he can't help himself.

"You have a rose tattoo in a very odd place," he murmurs with a wicked grin.

"The crack of one's ass is an odd place for a rose tattoo? Huh. First I heard of it."

He laughs lightly, and I fidget nervously.

"So...that happened," I say awkwardly.

A slow smile forms over his lips as his eyes meet mine. "About damn time it did."

"It's only been a week," I point out.

"A week of pure torture," he amends.

I grin like an idiot, trying not to let myself fall. I don't have long left before it's time to leave. I'm happy to be here and help him out, and having some fun wouldn't be such a bad thing.

As long as I remember it's *just* fun and can never be more.

"Every time I think you can't possibly surprise me again, that's when you blow my mind," he tells me.

I laugh as I stand up, hearing the buzz of the door. Liam gets a ton of packages, since he's an online shopping whore.

I tug on my shorts before walking toward the door the old-fashioned way, instead of using his fancy remote thingy.

"That wasn't your mind I just blew," I call out over my shoulder, hearing him chuckle behind me.

Chapter 6

Wild One Tip #104

Being with a Wild One is like being in a rodeo.

You keep waiting to see someone get trampled by a bull, and you giggle at the clowns.

KYLIE

For two weeks, I've been in Liam's bed. Or on his floor while I painted. I set up in that other room, then kept finding myself gravitating toward him again.

I've sat on his face a lot lately. It's my new favorite thing in the world, and he seems to enjoy it as much as I do. Sixty-nine is the only number he seems to remember these days.

"I like this color on you," he says as he slides his finger over my nose, touching the green paint there.

I grin and roll my eyes, as his eyes spark with humor, while I finish putting the rest of his clothes into the laundry hamper and set it aside to do later.

"I guess I missed a spot," I tell him, wiping my nose with the towel that is holding my wet hair.

He lies back on the bed—where the poor guy has to spend most of his time.

"You seem to know your way around broken bones. Everything you've warned me that I would experience, I've experienced," he says, looking over at me as I settle into the covers.

I realized belatedly that 'normal' people wouldn't be so comfortable sleeping with a complete stranger. But, Liam has been cool about it, especially after I started giving him orgasms in the middle of the night.

I move in closer to him, and he slides his arm around my shoulders as I close my eyes and breathe him in like a total creeper. It's a daily struggle to remind myself that I can't keep him, even though I really want to.

"I've had tons of broken bones. I didn't figure out gravity until I was almost thirteen. I stopped breaking them after that. Tuck and roll, baby. Tuck. And. Roll." I pat his chest.

He laughs lightly, not groaning in pain for a change.

He's healing nicely, though he still has a long way to go.

"You didn't panic at all when I went down," he says, looking down at me.

His eyes are blue. Like really blue. And his hair is blond.

He's like my own sexed-up version of an anatomically correct Ken doll.

With a strong jaw and a constant mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Barbie would be so jealous...

When I smile, he smiles back, unaware of what's going on in my head right now.

"It's not the first time I've seen chaos unfold. It's actually second nature."

I love it when he studies me like I'm an enigma he can't figure out. It's one of the main reasons I'm always so vague. It keeps him looking at me the way he's looking at me now.

He looks like a model, he's smart, and he's hella rich. I'm a semi-cute starving artist who is known back home for being a *little* crazy. I need the advantage, so I take it.

His nose brushes mine, and he leans over as he arches an eyebrow.

"That's all you're going to tell me?"

I lean back, grinning. "You know the routine. You ask. I evade. Then you tell me something about yourself instead."

“I feel like I’m losing all my mysterious points, while you continue to gain more and more.”

He cuts his eyes toward me in mock accusation, and I laugh as I lie back on the pillow. His arms stays around me, and he brings me closer. I always sleep on the side where his good leg is.

I let my leg ride up on his naked hip, wondering if he’d be ready for another round yet. It’s been at least an hour or two.

We didn’t even bother putting clothes back on after I finished showering and giving him a wonderful little sponge bath.

I’d really freaking love it if we could have sex, though. Because...well, I don’t think I have to explain that one.

“I can put some of your work in my other galleries. I’d like it to be there, actually,” he states randomly.

“That’s sweet, but not necessary. I actually have a few gigs lined up after this tour.”

It’s a lie, but I’d never let him put my work in his galleries as a show of gratitude or as a sex-buddy favor. Well, an oral-sex-buddy favor, rather. I want to earn my spot on someone’s floor.

Besides, my pieces are getting attention online now. I used his computer today to get a look at it, and I emailed Lilah Vincent to help run that website, since I don’t know how, and she knows all things web-related.

“You’re maybe 5’2—”

“5’3,” I quickly point out. “5’6 with the right boots on.”

He chuckles lightly as I settle my head onto his chest.

“Weigh possibly a hundred and—”

“Do you want a boot in your ass?” I ask him seriously. “Never guess a woman’s weight. It’s like number one on the list of things to *never* do.”

He laughs harder this time, his lips brushing my forehead as he shifts, pulling me even closer until my entire body is pressed up along his side.

“My point is that you’re tiny. Yet you dragged me out of that lake with no problem. So I’m guessing...army brat?”

I snort, then outright laugh. He studies me, waiting expectantly.

“No. I think my dad was worried he wouldn’t pass the psychological evaluation required for enlisting,” I say by way of explanation.

It’s adorable that he doesn’t take me seriously.

“Then law enforcement brat?”

I laugh again. “No. And I’m not sure that’s a thing.”

He taps his chin thoughtfully with one hand, while his other snakes down to my waist, resting there. It’s like a full beacon presence. I can feel that one touch all over my body.

“Mob boss’s daughter?”

I arch an eyebrow, and he snaps his head toward me.

“You laugh at army brat and law enforcement brat, but you merely quirk an eyebrow at mob boss’s daughter?” he asks, his look incredulous.

My smile grows. “No. Not a mob boss’s daughter. But kudos for thinking outside the box.”

I reach up and touch his face before I can stop myself, and he smiles as I trace my finger down the side of his jaw. I touch his face all the time. Normally, guys as hot as him are not guys I get to touch.

Guys like him have girls lined around the corner. Guys like him break the hearts of crazy girls like me.

But Liam? I can’t stop touching him. Maybe it’s because we’ve been in our own little bubble for two solid weeks.

Maybe it’s because I’m the only one around, and he has no choice but to settle for me. I mean, I’m feeding him,

bathing him, taking care of his house—when I’m not equally destroying it—doing his laundry, making sure he takes his medication at appropriate times...

The point is, I’m convenient, and I don’t really mind that. I keep reminding myself of this when he’s looking at me the way he’s looking at me right now. Like I’m not just a convenience, but the exact thing he wants.

His eyes meet mine, and our gazes hold for a long, palpable moment. He always looks at me like he wants sex. That’s not new. But this look? This is something different, something reverent. Like he’s trying to commit every detail to memory.

“Even downed to a bed, you still keep it so smooth,” I say quietly, still running my knuckle along his cheek as he leans into the touch.

He gives me a shaky smile, his hand tightening on my waist.

“I can’t grow a beard. It looks like shit when I try, so I have to keep it smooth.”

It’s possibly the only thing he could have said to break the spell of this unexpectedly intense moment. I lose it, laughing so hard it hurts, and I bury my face in his chest as he warily wraps his other arm around me.

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” he grumbles, sounding a little defensive.

“Sorry,” I say through the laughter. “It’s just...*beard*. You’d have to know where I come from. And you’d never fit in with Tomahawk.”

I raise my head back up to see the curious look on his face.

“Because I can’t grow a beard?”

“Because you can’t grow a beard,” I agree.

He shakes his head. “See? More mystery. I think you do this on purpose.”

I yawn as I settle down a little better. If his leg wouldn't hurt like a hot fire-poker was being jabbed in it, I'd totally slide down on that erection and ride him all night, push him past all his limits.

It's not like he could run away...

"What're you thinking?" he asks, moving some of my hair away from my face as I grin with my eyes closed.

"That'd you'd suck at escaping right now."

"Escaping what?" he asks.

"The beaver corner of crazy," I say.

"Makes no sense, and yet adds even more mystery," I hear him sigh.

To be honest, we could probably have really slow sex that could last for hours, but that would be a lot like making love. And that would be a really slippery slope for me, since he's already more important to me than he should be.

Relationships aren't my thing, and I think this may be the longest amount of time I've ever spent alone with someone I'm attracted to on physical and emotional levels.

He tugs my hair, and my eyes reopen, seeing the need in his gaze that mirrors my own. Our lips collide in a searching, hungry kiss, and I slip my leg over him, straddling his waist.

I rub against him, feeling my nipples harden and drag against his chest. He grips my ass, tugging me up, and I moan into his mouth when his hand slides around and his fingers press inside me. No, not inside my ass.

I grind my clit against the hard cock between us, and he holds still under me, knowing if he moves, it'll hurt.

I remember his ribs and lift off him a little, and he continues kissing me like he can't get enough, while his fingers continue to drive me wild.

But his fingers withdraw before I'm finished, and my breath hitches when I feel the tip of his cock pressing in.

“Condom,” he groans, pressing in a little deeper, stretching me as my breath come out shakily.

My half-lidded eyes find his, and suddenly he thrusts up, going half way inside me.

He makes a pained sound, and I curse, remembering the main reason why we’re not fucking. See? I can’t think around him when he’s naked.

I pull off him quickly, as he once again says, “Condom.”

“Too risky. It’ll hurt you.”

I spin around, and my mouth goes down on him before he can protest. He grabs my hips, jerking me to his face, and devouring me in a way that has my eyes crossing.

It’s like we can’t get enough of each other, and I don’t want it to stop, just as much as I need it to stop.

This can only end bad.

Chapter 7

Wild Ones Tip #49

Don't bust our give-a-damn switch. We don't get things fixed too often.

LIAM

“You love this song, don't you?” I ask as *Real Wild Child* plays from my iPod dock.

“Reminds me of home.”

“They play this a lot?” I ask.

She turns and grins at me, that secretive grin she uses so often. “The town pretends they don't love us until we've been too quiet. They play this to call us out.”

Makes no fucking sense whatsoever, and she damn well knows it.

“I take it you're some sort of entertainer outside of painting?” I pry, trying to get at least one of her mysteries solved.

She snorts. “If you only knew.”

“I'd love to know, but you won't tell me about your home, other than it's really named Tomahawk, you have a dad you adore, and you live on a lake.”

She continues to keep her smile in place, looking up from the canvas she's painting in my room.

It's been just over three weeks since she blew in and started helping me out. I still can't use the crutches, because—do you know how many ab muscles that takes? And my abs contracting means pressure on my still-healing ribs.

So Kylie is still pretty much wheeling me around in the wheelchair for short distances and helping me move from one

spot to another.

But I am getting better. And within a few more days, I may can handle those damn crutches.

I draw the line at the bathroom and grit through the pain when I need to use it, without letting her help me. Even I have too much pride left for that.

And she's slept in my bed. Every night.

I started out thinking she was *cute*.

Now, the very thought of her or scent of her has me painfully hard. All the time. She's the *only* thing I seem to find sexy anymore. I'll never view sexy the same way for as long as I live.

Because Kylie is nothing at all like anyone I've ever known. She can drive you crazy in four ways at once. She can make you positive you're losing your mind.

She'll threaten my life one minute, and suck my dick in the next, assuring me I'd die a happy man if she killed me directly after.

You know those little Sour Patch Kids that slap you and hug you in the next breath? That's Kylie.

And it's one of the many reasons for my increasing addiction.

"Outsiders don't get to know about Tomahawk. Not the fun stuff. It's for residents only. So until you become a full time local, then no; I can't tell you anything," she explains.

She smirks at me and resumes painting the canvas. It looks like a grunge take on the city's skyline. Not my favorite work of hers, but still intriguing.

She just paints for fun usually. She only puts a lot of thought into her sculptures for the galleries, and those are unique, incredible and completely captivating.

"What about your family?"

She shrugs, still painting. We've mostly talked about me, and my family—that is going to be royally pissed when I cut

them off. And my shitty friends, who haven't bothered to call or make good on the '*if you need something, just let us know,*' promises. And my obsession with buying art, even though I have zero artistic talents.

I like wood work, and I do some work in my shop, but it's limited to functional pieces. Nothing creative.

Getting Kylie to talk about anything is like pulling teeth from a piranha.

"My mom took off when I was five," she says, shocking me. I've asked about her family daily, and it's the first time she's answered.

"Why?" is the stupid fucking question I ask, as though there could be a good reason for abandoning your child.

She snorts. "We were too *much* for her to deal with. My dad got saddled with my cousins most of the time, because my aunt and uncle split time between Tomahawk and Florida, where he had another set of children with his ex. Complicated family, they have. My mom finally left, and my dad raised me, while also dealing with my heathen cousins a good chunk of the time."

I try to sit up so I can see her better. Her expression is one of focus, because she's talking absently while channeling all her energy into her painting.

"Your cousins still live there?"

A huge smile breaks across her face. "Yeah. They have their own places on our side of the lake, but our family sees each other almost daily—when I'm not doing a rare trip like this. My aunt and uncle moved to Florida permanently after the last one turned eighteen two years ago. I have a place in town I stay at when I get tired of them messing up my concentration. It's a small, cramped apartment, but I can breathe easier there. I still go back and stay with Dad though, because he'd kill me if I didn't."

Smiling to myself and wondering what she'd be like in her own element, I try to picture her home. A ranch keeps

popping into my mind, even though she swears there's no ranch.

“Any friends?”

“Several. Sometimes we have to sneak around to see each other though. If we're seeing more than one *family* at a time, that is.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

She blinks like she realizes she said something she shouldn't have, then a daring little grin curves her lips. “Local knowledge only. Sorry, Anatomically Correct Ken.” She turns and blows me a kiss before returning to her work.

That's my least favorite thing she calls me.

“What got you into painting?” I ask her.

She laughs, moving on to a new canvas as she sets that one aside to dry.

“I need stimulation of some sort all the time. Sometimes multiple sources. I'm not an easy person to be around, in case you haven't noticed. Hence the reason I'm single. If I don't have a constant outlet, then something terrible happens.”

I love it when she says that.

“What happens?” I ask, taking the bait, as always.

She turns and gives me a serious look, which is debunked, due to the red paint on the tip of her nose that gives her a clownish vibe.

“I get bored.”

My smile only grows. “It's a terrible thing for you to get bored?” I ask, smiling bigger.

She nods slowly. “You have no idea. It's a terrible thing for any Malone to get bored.”

“Why is that?” I ask as she wipes the red paint off her nose.

She holds up her hand.

“Let me guess; I’d only be privy to that information if I was a Tomahawk local,” I say, grinning over at her.

She winks at me and taps her nose, letting me know I’ve guessed it *on-the-nose*.

“So when my leg heals up, are you going to let me take you out to dinner?”

“To tell me thank you?” she asks, apparently oblivious.

“Well, yeah. And to let me in your pants. Like with my dick instead of my tongue or fingers for a change.” It’s supposed to sound crudely charming, but instead it sounds totally...lewd, crass, and shitty.

And I want to take it back.

She snorts, then laughs, which has me relaxing about my mostly failed attempt to be funny.

“I’d normally say yes, but your leg won’t be healed before it’s time for me to go.”

That has my body tensing again.

“Time for you to go?”

She peers over at me, arching an eyebrow. “I have to be home in one week. The showcases end, and I miss my town. My family. My friends. Not to mention my apartment is possibly destroyed since my cousins were going to check in on it for me while I’ve been gone. I’ll have to deal with that.”

Okay, that...sucks.

Maybe because after three weeks of nonstop time together—other than her leaving for her showcases on Fridays—we’ve hung out like real friends. We’ve also crossed the line of friends numerous times as well.

I don’t...I can’t even imagine what it’ll be like without her here. And I really don’t want to.

“What about me?”

She smiles over at me again. “I’ll leave you with all my paintings that have kept me sane.”

Yeah...that sucks.

Then again, it's not like I've done anything to make her give a damn about me. She saved my life, and she's been taking care of me.

I'm just the invalid who has leaned on her and given her nothing in return, besides endless, whiny stories about my absent friends and family. And a few orgasms along the way. But she gives me almost just as many.

I suddenly realize just how shitty I've been.

I've been soaking up every ounce of refreshing air she's been giving me, never once considering it had an expiration date. I've gotten so arrogant that I just assumed she'd stay and give up her life until we saw where this was going.

"Maybe I can see you on my next trip to LA, and you can make good on that other promise though," she adds, not looking at me.

I see the blush on her cheeks, and my smile slowly starts to grow. It's a start. I want to see more of her. I need more than another week with her. She's the first *real* person I've ever had in my life.

Hell, if she's this good to a complete stranger, I can only imagine how good she'd be to someone she really cares about. And I want to be one of those people. I'm actually greedy enough to want to be her favorite fucking person.

I never knew how fake the people I surrounded myself with were until Kylie came into my world. I'm not ready to lose her.

I haven't even fucked her, and I'm beyond obsessed. I can only imagine how bad I'll be if I ever get her under me.

"There's no way you can stay longer?" I'm not ashamed to admit that I sound a little desperate.

She gives me the *look*.

"Something terrible would happen?" I guess.

"My family would come after me."

“And that’s terrible?”

“LA would never be the same,” she says on a shudder, then laughs under her breath.

If I’m going to impress her and try to get her to stick around and see what could be between us, I have exactly seven days to make it happen. Which means I need to hurry the hell up.

“Let me do something for you tonight. I may not can go anywhere, but I know a chef who owes me a favor. He can—”

My door buzzes, and she hops up from her painting, coming to get the remote.

“Hello?” she asks.

I figure it’s just another delivery person, when I hear the voice that has me internally panicking.

“Hello? Who is this?” Felicia asks.

“This is Shirley Temple,” Kylie says, mocking the name I’ve called her for three weeks.

“Funny. Where’s Liam?”

“In bed,” Kylie deadpans, causing me to smile tightly, dreading the inevitable.

“Who’s she?” Kylie asks, handing me the remote.

Telling her she’s the girlfriend I forgot I had would *not* be a good idea. To be fair, Felicia has been out of the country for eight weeks, and we’re in an open relationship.

But...Kylie is sweet, despite her objections. Sweet girls wouldn’t understand that.

You can’t cheat on someone who has given you a permanent hall pass. Besides, it was never a real relationship—which I realize now. However, I don’t exactly have time to prepare Kylie, explain the situation, or even try to dig out of this hole.

The door opens when Felicia decides to use her “emergency” key instead of waiting to be buzzed in, and Kylie

walks around to my side of the bed, just as Felicia breezes in.

Her hair is flawlessly straight. Her lips are lined in red. And she walks in wearing a power suit. Usually it does something for me.

Not today.

Like I said, I only have one idea of sexy now, and it's the curly-haired, messy girl at my side.

I'd rather look at her bouncy, spiral curls, and her paint-covered fingernails, along with all her clothes that have paint on them. You won't find one drop of paint on her boots. She takes her boots seriously.

"Oh, hi. You really do look like a grown up version of Shirley Temple," Felicia says, her eyes on Kylie.

It doesn't sound nearly as endearing as it does when I say it.

Kylie fidgets awkwardly, and Felicia grins over at me. "She's adorable. Pick her up at one of your galleries?"

"What are you doing here? I thought you weren't coming back for another few weeks," I groan.

She sighs harshly, flicking her gaze at Kylie again like she's sizing her up, then she takes in the numerous painted canvases that litter the room.

"Deal went south at the last minute, and—" She freezes, her words dying. "What happened to your leg?" she asks, her eyes widening when she finally notices.

No, I haven't told her. Like I said, I sort of forgot she existed. Don't judge. In case you haven't noticed, my life has been pretty damn superficial up until this point.

I never noticed it.

Never cared.

Almost dying makes you see things a little differently.

My eyes flick to Kylie as she moves to a canvas, busying herself with it.

Almost dying makes you want really different things too.

“I almost died. Kylie saved my life, and she’s been here ever since, considering I had no one else who gave a damn to help me out,” I say, looking back at Felicia, whose eyes have widened even more.

“Holy shit, Liam! Why didn’t you call me? Usually the first thing a man does when he almost dies is call his damn girlfriend!”

I see it when it happens. I see it the moment I lose her. I see it in the way her shoulders go tight, her head rears back, and her back stiffens.

“Kylie, this isn’t—”

“We’re in an open relationship, and he’s allowed to fuck whoever he wants, Kylie,” Felicia says softly to Kylie when she notices her discomfort. “Please don’t feel awkward.”

That doesn’t help, even though I wish like fuck it did.

Kylie spins, looking wide-eyed and out of place as she bends to start packing up her painting materials.

“Actually, we’re not...um...never mind,” Kylie tells her, her eyes staying on the ground. “We’re just friends. He needed help, and I didn’t want dirty gym socks *icking* up my pretty boots.”

Felicia is only momentarily distracted before she looks back at me.

“So why didn’t you call?”

I’m busy watching as Kylie hurries up and finishes putting away the paint.

“I forgot,” I finally admit.

Kylie tenses, but then stands and excuses herself, walking out the door.

I hear her in the next room where she’s been keeping her stuff, and my eyes shift back to Felicia.

But Felicia snaps a picture of my leg, before typing something on her phone. Probably posting on her social media about how her poor boyfriend is laid up and hurt.

“Well, what can I do?” she asks, still typing on her phone.

Until this moment, it hasn’t dawned on me that I’ve barely even glanced at my phone while Kylie has been here. She doesn’t have one, so I haven’t used mine. Unless it was to call in food.

“Did you call me?” I ask Felicia.

“No. The service over there was spotty at best. You get annoyed too easily, so I didn’t bother with it.”

She’s still typing, then she grins up at me. “Stacy just commented on my post saying she hopes you get better, and to let her know if she can do anything.”

Empty words.

I’ve learned that.

People say that all the time, and happily accept your help—which I’ve given through financial means or contacts—but they never give a true shit if you need help in return. To be honest, until Kylie, there was not a single person in my life I’d play doctor for either, so I can’t blame them.

Felicia keeps talking, and I keep trying to listen for Kylie.

Fuck this.

I stumble out of the bed, and Felicia moves out of my way as I grab my crutches, wincing through the pain as I force myself to the next room. It takes longer than I care to admit to make that trip, and I’m out of breath when I finally do.

“Jada says she hopes you get better too,” Felicia calls out as I push open the door to see Kylie zipping up her bag.

“Don’t go,” I say immediately, watching as her head snaps in my direction.

She gives me a tight smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “You have someone to help you now. It’d just be weird to stay.

Besides, I wasn't going to say anything, but they canceled the showcase on Friday. I can go home early."

My chest sinks, and I lean against the door, blowing out a breath.

"Don't go," I say again.

She hesitates for a second, giving me false hope, before she tosses her bag over her shoulder.

She lifts my phone up. "Hope you don't mind; I borrowed it to call a cab. I'd call my dad, but...no phone for him. I called a friend instead to see if he'd go let my dad know that I'm coming home early."

"He? Boyfriend?"

Yeah, I realize the second the words leave my mouth that I have zero right to act like a jealous prick. It's not like I can chase the words down and swallow them before she hears them, though.

She puts the phone down, and shakes her head. "I didn't forget to mention a boyfriend," she says a little passive aggressively. "In fact, I told you I didn't have one."

"I forgot about her. She's been gone a while and—"

"It's not a big deal, Liam," she says, her smile brittle and forced as she interrupts me. "You're the guy who lives in a crazy fancy house in LA. You're the guy who owns every new piece of technology that comes out. And you're the guy who forgets he has a girlfriend when he almost dies until she returns home to call the girl you've been going down on *adorable*."

She tucks her hair behind her ear. Then she lifts her other bag and tosses it over her shoulder as well.

"I'm way out of my depth here. I'm the girl who lives in the backwoods of nowhere. Wifi is spotty on a good day on my side of the lake. Our fanciest attribute in the home I grew up in is indoor plumbing. And for fun, we entertain ourselves in some rather disconcerting ways."

"Kylie, I—"

“I’m always going to live in Tomahawk,” she says, interrupting me again. “I may travel on occasion, but at the end of the day, I’m always going to go back. Because my family is everything to me. My mother walked out. She left it all. Thought she was better than the place I call my home.” She gives me a dry look. “Then she forgot we even existed.”

I wince, knowing that was a jab. She doesn’t understand though.

“I’ll never do that to the ones who love me. And you and I are on completely different paths,” she adds.

She starts to move toward the door, but I’m blocking her exit. So she stops, staring down at the ground.

“What’s the worst that could happen if you stay one more week?” I ask her.

She looks up, and a grim smile tugs at her lips.

“Something terrible,” she says quietly.

I smile, cupping her chin, bending so that my lips are brushing hers. She goes stiff against me, so I don’t press her for more contact.

“What’s that?” I ask on a whisper.

She sighs heavily. “I could end up forgetting how easily you forget you have a girlfriend. And I’m not the kind of girl who shares or likes to be forgotten.”

My smile evaporates as my hand falls away, and she gets up on her tiptoes and kisses the side of my cheek, lingering for no longer than a second. I close my eyes, trying to tell myself I’ve only known her for three weeks.

Doesn’t change the fact this girl, who had no reason to give a damn, was simply the only person who did care when it mattered most. The only person who looked me in the eye when she spoke, instead of distracted by someone else. The only person who smiled like the world makes her happy.

The only person I’ve ever known like her.

“Take care, Liam. No more skydiving until you know how to work a chute.”

With that, she leaves, the sound of a car’s horn reminding me that I’ll likely never see her again.

I don’t turn around until I hear her rush to say, “By the way, I broke a bathroom window upstairs. I nailed it up with some wood, but you’ll need to get it fixed. At least now I don’t feel guilty about it anymore.”

Before I can get my head snapped around, she’s slamming the door, punctuating her departure, and I hobble back over to my room, where Felicia is lying on the bed, smiling at the screen of her phone.

“I just fixed your itinerary for next week so you can work or network from home, and made sure that party at the vineyard you had on your calendar was handicap accessible. You’re welcome,” Felicia says, acting as though this is just any other day.

I haven’t looked at my calendar in weeks, since I don’t actually *work* for a living. I just do a lot of networking and let people kiss my ass while I look down on them and judge them and sometimes give them money if I think they can make me more money.

Obviously that hasn’t been my life goal these past few weeks.

Gee, I wonder why I didn’t attract anyone real.

I’ve been just as fucking fake.

Felicia tells me about my Monday and what’s set up. She moves on to Tuesday, and lets me know I may can pencil in a movie night with her. She tells me about Wednesday, and asks me how good my French is.

I can’t speak French.

She moves on to asking me if I’ll be able to get out by Thursday because of a polo match, but I’ve started tuning her out, as I drop to the chair in the corner of my room.

This doesn’t even feel like my life anymore.

It feels like my life shattered on the surface of that lake with my leg, and something new happened. Everything else sank to the bottom of that lake that day.

“Jason and Jenny are in town next weekend. They want to know if you can get them back into Pierre’s restaurant. They loved the mousse,” Felicia states, cutting through my thoughts as she grins at her phone.

Bye, Felicia, pops into my head. But no, that’s not exactly how I break up with her. I promise.

Really.

Okay, maybe it is.

Kylie’s gone for a second, and already I’m an incurable dick again.

Chapter 8

Wild Ones Tip #659

Grizzlies will rip your face off, even though they look cute and cuddly.

Wild Ones are the same way.

LIAM

One year later...

So now you know how I ended up in Tomahawk, surrounded by crazy on a level I didn't know existed. Every time Cooter—a fucking coonhound with a hard-on for my five-hundred dollar pillows—runs into my house the second I open the door, I try not to kill the damn beast.

Because he belongs to the Vincents. Who are one corner of crazy.

Oh, and I've been here for less than two months.

On day one, a nice lady named Penny tried to set me up with her niece, Lilah Vincent, who happens to be a Wild One—because that's a real fucking thing. I only went in hopes of running into Kylie.

Lilah, fortunately, wasn't any more interested in me than I was in her, and we actually became friends...of sorts.

In this short time, I've seen an entire town of men shave, or mostly shave, their beards after a nine-year beard challenge ended with Lilah cutting her brothers' beards. Their punishment was swimming naked across the lake. And the single men in Tomahawk started getting laid again.

To be clear, the beards apparently never hindered the married men from getting laid. This was told to me numerous

times by numerous married men, who for some reason felt I needed to know.

I've had random girls running their hands on my "beardless" face while I tried to get away, because this town has zero respect for personal boundaries.

I've witnessed fireworks shooting at people because a dog chased a squirrel—longer story than I care to tell.

I recently signed up to be on the challenge committee that instated this nine-year-long beard challenge—because that's also a real thing. How could I resist?

I've seen the Wild Ones in action.

Know they're real.

And I've only been in one corner for the action.

I've seen fish float to the surface of the water after pipe bombs went off in a war with the guy across the lake. The guy who owns a water cannon. The guy who fought off two Vincent boys to make it to the girl he loved—Lilah.

It was all rather dramatic and exceptionally entertaining.

They did a fish fry that night.

That was about two weeks ago.

One week ago? Benson was made an honorary Vincent with the promise he'd be an actual Vincent when he eventually married Lilah. Or so I've heard. I somehow managed to miss that show.

Confused?

So am I, most days.

I've learned to roll with it, because really, how can you not get sucked into the crazy? You'd rather be a part of it than watch it. Sometimes. I'd rather watch when explosives are involved, if I'm being completely honest.

I've integrated myself into this corner of crazy, and settled in better than I thought I would. Already, I've met more

genuine people in my short stint here than I've met in my entire life.

And here I am, still waiting to see Kylie.

I've seen just how crazy the Vincent triplets are. They're part of the Wild Ones.

And since I've moved here, I've learned something very important.

Kylie is on a different corner of crazy because she's also a Wild One.

She wasn't just saying that.

I knew she was perfect.

But, unfortunately, she's likely told her entire family why she left LA. Which means I may or may not have been making allies with some other Wild Ones while I wait to randomly bump into her and tell her I bought a home in Tomahawk for her.

So I could see her.

So I could be with her.

Because that's not insane or creepy at all.

I'm a whole other level of crazy, and not the kind she takes in stride.

So yeah. I'm stalling. Fuck off.

It's not easy to walk up to a girl who left you, didn't try to contact you ever again, and say, *"Hey, after knowing you for three weeks, I'm a total stalker. I even bought a house in your home town so I could stalk you better, since you don't have social media for me to do it virtually. But don't worry, I'm not watching you through your windows. Yet."*

"So the Malones are around the bend, right? Do they ever come out here for your aunt's parties?" I ask, serving the two bottomless pits—also known as the Vincent brothers—some steak.

They dig in, and I lean back.

“Yeah. But only if it’s a big party. They don’t come to the small ones,” Hale says, gnawing the steak instead of cutting it. “And only if another family of Wild Ones aren’t in attendance. Obviously. No more than two families at a time allowed.”

Don’t even get me started on this town’s weird rules.

“What’s a big party?” I ask him.

“Why do you always ask about the Wild Ones?” Killian asks me, raising a suspicious eyebrow and not answering my question.

“Our agreement is that I grill steaks, and you tell me things.”

“Yeah, but not things that might hurt some of the other Wild Ones. George Malone is a cranky old fuck, but he’s still a decent guy.”

I roll my eyes. “Do I look like I want to hurt George?”

He lets his gaze rake over me warily before meeting my eyes again. “I dunno.”

I groan. “I don’t want to hurt George. I’m actually more curious about Kylie.”

“Kylie?” they both ask in unison, sitting up straighter as their bodies go rigid.

“I met her in LA. Nothing bad,” I tell them dismissively.

They relax immediately.

“We’re fucking with you. We knew you were into one of our girls, but we didn’t know which one,” Hale says through a laugh, and I glare at him.

“Though we did suspect Kylie, given all the Malone questions,” Killian adds.

See? The thing with the Vincents is that they want you to think they’re stupid. When really, they’re fucking brilliant. It’s all part of their camouflage.

“Now we know,” Killian adds with a smirk. “You move out here for Kylie?”

Again, see?

“How good are you at keeping secrets?” I ask them.

“Depends on how good you are at letting us help with the Malones when the time comes. And it will come. If you let us help you fend them off, then we’ll keep our mouths shut until you have the balls to go find Kylie.”

My lips curl in a grin. “You say you like the Malones, but you want to fight?”

“Not fight. Fuck with. There’s a difference. Well, fighting would be cool too. Been a long damn time since we had a good brawl,” Hale interjects, an excited look crossing his eyes.

“I sure as hell want a rematch now that we have Benson,” Killian says with a dark grin. “The odds will be better for us.”

Hale grins, then faces me again. “Anyway, we feel like bullies when we fuck with someone who doesn’t have the balls to fuck with us right back. Why do you think we let Benson be with our sister? He never cowed.”

“So you’re saying I should never *cow* to her family?”

They look me over. “Never. But you need backup. Kylie is the *one* female Malone. It’s obvious they’ll be protective,” Killian says.

Hale claps my shoulder. “But you have to do one thing for us.”

“Buy you a water cannon?” I ask, my lips twitching.

He punches my shoulder. “See? You’re already learning how this works.”

“Kylie doesn’t trust outsiders, so that’s going to be your biggest obstacle,” Killian offers.

I don’t tell him *why* she doesn’t really trust me.

“Why’s that?” I ask him instead.

“Her momma wasn’t from here. And her momma ran off and left them when she was young. Her momma’s brother wasn’t from here, and he was gone half the time—”

“Because he had other kids in Florida,” I say, trying to help out with that.

“Still gone half the time,” Killian says, arching an eyebrow. “And never came back after he and his not-Tomahawk wife left a few years ago. They only moved out here because Tom—”

“Thought it was Todd,” Hale interrupts, frowning at Killian.

“Who’s Tom or Todd?” I ask, confused now.

“The Malone boys’ daddy,” they both answer distractedly.

“I think it was Tom,” Killian states with a shrug. “Anyway, they moved out here because Tom’s sister—Kylie’s not-Tomahawk mother—was up here. Then when she left, they started staying in Florida more and more, leaving George to raise their four boys most of the time. When the boys became inducted into the Wild Ones, they had to change their last names to Malone.”

Hale nods like he’s agreeing with this.

“Kylie doesn’t trust any outsider to stick around. Not even Benson. And Benson has Tomahawk blood running through him now,” Hale adds.

“Kylie will always be firmly rooted here, even though she does travel some for her art,” Killian says.

“You guys know a lot about Kylie,” I murmur, narrowing my eyes as the two smirks.

“Our sister is friends with all the Wild One girls. We pretend not to listen when she talks, so she talks a lot more when she’s under the illusion we’re tuning her out. You learn things,” Hale explains with a straight face.

And yeah...this is my Tuesday.

People in Tomahawk don’t always knock, I’ve learned. Some do. Lilah always knocks. Benson too. But not Penny and not the brothers. Most of the time, not Bill.

Penny walks right into the dining room where we're eating, and she pulls out a chair like she was invited. I just stand and grab her a plate, knife, and fork. She doesn't waste time picking out a steak.

I've learned to cook extra.

"Glad I caught you at home," she says, already cutting into the steak. "Lilah's wedding is tomorrow. It's last minute, but can you come?"

I choke on my steak. "What? I just talked to her yesterday and she didn't mention a wedding."

"She doesn't know she's getting married yet," Hale says.

"But I talked to Benson too," I argue.

"He doesn't know he's getting married yet," Killian explains.

"So will you come? We're going to do it over at our place. It has the space," Penny goes on, as though this is a perfectly normal discussion.

"Sure," I say on an amused breath. "Why not? I've never been to a wedding where the bride and groom didn't know they were getting married."

Killian slides his chair back, and walks out without a word. It's the usual, so I don't even question it.

"The troopers will be here soon, so we need to get the wedding over before they come and we have to start focusing on them," Penny goes on.

"Troopers?" I ask, my lips curving in a wry smile.

She nods. "Did you not hear the double loop sirens last week? That was a call to the Wild Ones. The state troopers come once a year to investigate this place. The town went in for a meeting about it and to make Benson a Vincent."

"So all the Wild Ones were there? Next time, I want to be in on that," I tell her.

She starts to speak, when Killian walks back into my house, carrying a large duffel bag.

“Oh! You got it?” Penny asks excitedly.

Killian doesn't get to answer before someone is knocking at the door.

I quickly go to answer, swinging open the door to...I don't know her name.

“I brought you my mom's famous peach cobbler,” she tells me.

At least twice a day, someone brings me something to eat. Yep.

Welcome to Tomahawk.

“Thanks,” I say, but her eyes widen over my shoulder when a Vincent likely comes up behind me.

“Hey, Becky. Want to come in? We're just about to break out some new toys,” Killian says.

“N-no. Bye!”

She darts away, and I laugh while closing the door. The Vincent brothers come in handy on occasion.

“Now, here's my problem. Our beards aren't gnarly anymore, and these girls are bringing eligible, mostly beardless bachelors everywhere something good to eat. But not us,” Hale gripes, as Killian takes the cobbler out of my hands and goes to dump half of it on his plate before running a hand over his newly growing beard stubble.

Penny snorts.

“What?” Hale asks, glaring at her. “We're just as damn good looking as he is.”

This is where I get pointed at.

“True,” Penny says, grabbing some of the cobbler for herself. “You boys are handsome.”

“Then what's the problem?” Hale asks.

Penny looks at him like he's stupid. “No Wild Ones are getting baked goods. You think any local girl around here wants to bed a Wild One?”

We all blink at her, and she taps her chin.

“That didn’t come out right,” she says, shrugging. “But you know what I mean. The local girls know that if you get tangled up with a Wild One, then you suddenly end up in the middle of all your chaos.”

“Mom married Dad,” Killian says, shoveling more cobbler into his mouth.

“Your mother was as bat-shit crazy as your father. I was always worried about what she was going to get me into. Then she met him, and I finally got a reprieve from life-threatening situations,” Penny grumbles.

Hale grins. “So you’re saying we just have to find a crazy chick. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

Hale unzips the duffel as I laugh under my breath, but my laughter dies when he pulls out something that looks like a damn machine gun.

“The hell?”

“Airsoft guns,” Killian pipes up. “Not as painful as a fucking paintball, but more ammo for a quicker attack.”

“For what?” I ask as he tosses one to me.

I catch it, hearing something rattle.

“For the wedding, of course,” Penny says. “Wild Ones always have the best weddings. I may not want crazy in my life daily, but on occasion, it hits the right spot.”

My smile slowly grows as I suddenly remember something.

The Wild Ones can’t all be in one place unless it’s a sanctioned gathering. Such as a Wild One’s wedding.

“Wear a chest plate under your clothes,” Hale adds.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Penny asks me.

Killian smirks. “Because he just realized what my sister’s wedding means.”

“What does it mean?” Penny asks, confused.

Killian shakes his head.

Hale distracts her, talking about their kidnapping plan for Benson and when she's bringing the tux.

I focus on what this wedding means to me. It means I finally get my face-to-face with Kylie Malone.

Ready or not.

Chapter 9

Wild Ones Tip #321

Sometimes kidnapping is acceptable behavior if you're friends with a Wild One.

KYLIE

“So what’s up?” Lilah asks as she meets me near the graveyard.

“Thought we’d go for a walk,” I tell her, grinning.

She shrugs as she joins me, but her eyes flit down to my dress.

“Fancy walking gear you have there.”

“Just left a friend’s house,” I lie, looping my arm through hers.

Two women approach us, take one long look at us, and turn to start racing in the other direction.

It happens when we’re together. No, I’m not offended.

I’d probably run too if I saw me and Lilah strolling up.

“Friend? As in a guy?”

I snort derisively. “You finally start getting laid, and now you assume everyone else is too.”

She waggles her eyebrows. “Beardless Tomahawk is a whole new world. Never know.”

A happy Lilah is a little more dangerous than a Lilah who isn’t getting laid. I’ve learned this recently...when she blew away half the Malones from the dock with one powerful water cannon she let her brothers use—her soon-to-be husband’s water cannon.

It really was hilarious, but that’s not the point.

Lilah and I are the only two female Wild Ones among the Malones and the Vincents. Our corners are the closest to each other. Obviously, I have to one up her.

I plan to get her back. Just as soon as I find something more awesome.

And yes, this is how we're best friends.

"I didn't get laid," I finally say when she keeps staring at me expectantly.

She lets her shoulders hunch as we continue on the small trail that leads into the woods.

"You've been missing a lot these past four months. I'm a little surprised you wanted to take a walk," she says hesitantly.

Yeah. Yeah.

I've been missing a lot in general. It's only recently that I've decided to completely dive into my art and hide from the entire world until I paint *him* out of my system.

Liam Freaking Harper.

The bane of my existence.

The guy I see every time I break out my vibrator. His silky smooth face, devastating grin, and panty-melting body. Not to mention his voice, his words, his easy, laid-back attitude. And the fact he was a huge piece of my life in just a short period of time.

Yep. It's bad.

"Been busy," I say instead of spilling all that drivel.

"You only paint like that when you're trying to escape something, so what gives?" Lilah asks, being more observant than usual.

"Nothing," I lie with a shrug. "I also went to Seattle last month for two weeks for a showing there, in case you've forgotten."

"That doesn't explain why you've been hiding."

"Sure it does," I say, smiling.

She gives me an I-don't-believe-you-one-bit look.

“Fine. Fine,” I groan. I’ve avoided this conversation for a year. I think it’s time to talk about it and just move on.

So, with a long sigh, I start explaining. “There was a guy back in LA last year, and for some reason, I can’t seem to stop thinking about him. I mean, it’s been an entire year. I’m fairly positive I only think about him more with each passing day.”

I mutter something about being stupid, and she grins. “What happened?”

“His girlfriend showed up.”

“Ouch,” she says, wincing.

“Oh, no worries. They had an *open* relationship, so she informed me it wasn’t awkward for me to be there while she was. And that it was okay if I fucked him. And then he told her he forgot about her.”

Lilah’s eyes are beguiled even as her mouth is twisted in shock. The more I say, the more stupid I feel about the entire situation.

Why was I so naïve?

To her stunned expression, I say, “Yeah. Tell me about it. I never had sex with him—at least not in the traditional sense. He and I were so different that it was laughable. I knew this. I left before I invested any more of myself in him. Yet he’s still in my head, because for three weeks, I got to have a guy no one else in the world ever saw. I was going to stay a fourth week just to be with him. Even lied and told him I had a showcase that I didn’t have—since it was canceled—knowing he’d never know the truth.”

“What if he’d gone to that showcase?” she points out.

“He couldn’t. He was bedded down with his entire leg in a cast. His ribs were jacked up, and it was hard for him to use the crutches. He was in a lot of pain those first few weeks. I always had to be the nine to his six because of that.”

“What? I’m usually hard to confuse, Kylie,” Lilah says incredulously.

“Maybe it’s the six to his nine now that I think about—”

“That’s not the confusing part,” she states dryly.

I laugh under my breath. “We went skydiving, and his chute malfunctioned. He’s lucky he got it deployed long enough to break his fall and land in water. But he still hit hard enough to break his leg in a several places and had to have emergency surgery, and he also messed up some ribs. I had to pull him out before he drowned, and when I realized no one else was helping him through it, I stayed at his house until... the girlfriend. Yeah.”

She stops walking, and I turn to see her gawking at me.

“I know, right? Crazy town stuff,” I grumble.

She shakes her head slowly as a bright, wondrous smile comes over her lips.

“Son of a bitch. I should have known,” she says randomly.

“Should have known what?” I ask, worried. Does she know why I’ve led her out here on this trail? We still have at least half a mile to go before the ambush.

Damn it!

I told them she’d never walk through the thick woods with me. Lilah Vincent is too suspicious.

She laughs. “I just realized something. Never mind.”

She loops her arm back through mine, smiling wickedly. That, admittedly, has me worried. My cousins would never hit her. So obviously she’d kick their asses if they can’t get the drop on her.

Unless she and I fought. We’ve fought before. It never works out so well for me.

In my defense, she’s always fighting with her hellion brothers. My cousins run from me, never letting me practice on them because they’re massive and worried I’ll hurt myself if I hit them too hard.

It's really not fair. My size leaves everyone underestimating me all the time.

"I should introduce you to my neighbor. He's been living here for over a month, but he's mostly stuck to our corner," she says with a secretive smile on her lips.

I wiggle my eyebrows. "The freakishly gorgeous neighbor?" I muse. "The one your aunt tried to set you up with, but you thought he was just too pretty?"

She nods, her smile growing ever so steadily.

"I heard he gets a lot of visitors to his cabin. Half the singles are taking him food daily. He's probably gained fifty pounds," I go on, laughing quietly to myself. "You can tell we don't get too many new ones out here."

"You've never heard his name?" she asks curiously.

I turn my head, looking at her with a raised brow. "Why would I care what his name is? If he was too pretty for you, then I doubt he'd be my type. I go for understated sexy, remember? Like me."

I tug one of my springy curls, letting it bounce into place, then shake my very small ladies. Yes, I know I'm not a vixen like Lilah. Still doesn't mean I don't know how to work what I have.

"Right," she drawls. "Guess it wouldn't matter anyway. He moved all the way out here for some girl he barely knew."

My eyebrows knit together.

"What?"

She toys with the ends of her hair, keeping her arm looped through mine.

"Says he sold his place in the city and moved out here because some girl got in his head. He came here to find her, even though he barely knew her or anything about her, as it turns out. He's waiting for the right moment to let her know he stalked her all the way to Tomahawk."

My lips purse. "I'm not sure if that's creepy or romantic."

“Can’t be one without running the risk of being the other,” she says matter-of-factly. “Perception is key.”

Before I can get more info, three bodies leap up from the bushes, throwing back their camouflage coverings, and they grapple Lilah even as she struggles and spews threats.

I might grin when Jason gets kicked really hard in the mouth by her combat boot.

“I’m so going to kick all your asses!” she shouts, then levels me with a glare. “Well played, Malone. Well played.”

I grin at her as they start tying her up, holding her down as they struggle with that task. Lilah is a hellcat when cornered, so she’s writhing and thrashing around, causing them to curse every time they almost get pegged with an elbow or foot.

“Oh, this isn’t my revenge, Lilah Vincent. This is my present,” I explain.

The confusion on her face is adorable, but it’s replaced with fury again when Jason starts manhandling her, tossing her over his shoulder and walking toward the lake.

“Someone let me on their back. These are my suedes, and I’m not stepping off the trail in them,” I call out.

Heath kneels, and I hop on his back. He carries me all the way to the boat, where Jason deposits Lilah carefully to the seat.

I turn the radio up to drown out her questions and threats as I drive us toward her aunt’s house. She finally gives up...

Until we dock and there’s no more music to tune her out with.

“What the hell are you doing?” Lilah demands as Jason lifts her out of the boat, her hands and feet tied together as we step onto Penny’s dock.

“I told you. This is my present.”

“Oh, Kylie Malone, don’t make me kick your petite little ass.”

I just grin.

“Your boots may suffer,” she adds viciously.

I turn a glare on her, and she smirks.

“Too far?” she asks, wiggling her eyebrows as she gives me a taunting grin.

Jason puts her in front of him like she’s a shield, but I finally smile, knowing Lilah would never be stupid enough to touch my boots. After all, these are a pair of tan suedes. The blue in the flowers matches my blue dress. And my suedes are always my precious.

“Why are there four flags flying?” Lilah asks suddenly, and I turn back to look at her as Jason starts carrying her toward the yard.

She pales as her eyes widen, and her head snaps to me. “She didn’t!”

“Oh, she did,” I say, smiling bigger.

She starts struggling again, but Jason is three times her size and carries her effortlessly toward the cabin, where Penny walks out, beaming.

“Let’s get our girl ready! People will be here at any moment!” Penny announces.

“Aunt Penny, you can’t be serious!” Lilah snaps.

“You can’t possibly be surprised,” I drawl, grinning when she cuts that death glare toward me.

“Really? You’re supposed to be *my* friend.”

“I *am* your friend. That’s why I stood in and let her alter the dress on me to make sure it fit you. After I tried on your clothes to see the exact difference. And got stabbed by a needle five different times when your brothers were out shooting and distracted her.”

Pausing my little monologue for dramatic effect, I pat my chest right over my heart.

“That’s love, Lilah Vincent. I *love* you.” I grin at her, even as she mutters a threat to pay me back.

“Let’s get that dress on her. And you,” Penny says, pointing at Lilah, “will behave. Otherwise, I’ll bring in the Wilders to help hold you down while I put your dress on you and fix your hair.”

Lilah pales. I’d be a little queasy too.

There are four families of Wild Ones. All of us have our own brand of crazy. But there’s only one wildcard. That’s the Wilders.

Ironically enough. Or is it coincidentally enough? Irony versus coincidence always gets me.

Lilah goes still, but I can see it in her eyes that she’s not done fighting it just yet. Why bother? She knows too many people will wrangle her down that aisle if she tries to escape.

“Grab the tux and take it to the boys,” Penny says to me.

Damn it. Vincent boys? Really?

Cursing internally, since I know better than to argue with Penny, I go grab the tux from inside, toss a rifle on my back, and then walk forever through the woods, adjusting the rifle on my shoulder as I go.

The door to their house is never locked—*because what suicidal dumbass would break in on them?*—and I walk in... then stumble to a halt.

“What the actual fuck?” Benson roars, a burlap sack on his head as he struggles against the ropes confining him to a chair.

I roll my eyes before looking over at Hale and Killian, who are both smirking at me.

“Hi, Kylie,” Hale says far too sweetly, a secretive grin on his lips.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Killian goes on, his lips also curving in a grin.

“You weirdos are acting weirder than usual.”

“Kylie! Damn it, get this fucking bag off my head and untie me,” Benson growls.

“Can’t do that until it’s closer to time,” I say, then decide I *can* tear the bag off his head.

Hale makes a sound of protest, but I whip the sack off before he can stop me, and Benson turns a cold, somewhat scary look toward his two brothers-to-be.

“This time, I won’t let Lilah stop me from killing both of you,” he bites out.

They just grin at him.

I hold the tux up. “You have to get this on him,” I say, wiggling the bag.

“We can manage that,” Hale says.

Benson looks at me, confused, then to the bag, and back at them. Slowly, his lips tilt up in a smile.

“I’m getting married, aren’t I?” he asks.

I cock my head, grinning. “Yep. Lilah is being wrangled into her dress as we speak.”

All of the sudden, his arms come around the front of his body, his ropes falling off his hands.

“What the hell?” Killian barks, looking at Benson as he bends and starts untying his feet.

“You really think Lilah hasn’t tied me up and tried to leave me on the bed all day a few times now? I learned a long time ago how to get free from ropes, even before I started dating her, because I knew one day I would be dating her.”

Hale turns a little green.

“That just made the list of things you should never tell us again.” Killian shudders.

Benson grins as he straightens and comes to take the tux from me. “Go. They’ll need help with Lilah. Just get her ready. I’ll handle the rest.”

“Well, that was easier than expected,” I say to the two sulking boys as Benson disappears into a room.

“Really wanted to beat him into submission,” Killian sighs.

Killian and Hale’s eyes shift to the door, and they both grin at the same time. I start to turn around, when I hear a voice that has me freezing to my spot.

“Did I miss the kidnapping?”

Slowly, painfully slowly, I turn around, knowing I have to be delusional.

My eyes collide with a set of too-familiar blues, and my heart tries to kick out of my chest when I see a ghost. Well, not a real ghost. Just someone who has to be an apparition or hallucination because there’s no possible way he’s in Tomahawk.

He looks surprised for a second, but then his lips leisurely curve in that unforgettable, panty-melting smile.

“This is the last place I ever thought I’d run into you. Not exactly how I imagined it,” he says, taking a step toward me.

Liam. Liam freaking Harper. It’s Liam. Hey, did I mention I see Liam?

Crazy town train, stop one complete.

I stumble backwards, and he stops his advance, arching an eyebrow at me as he smirks. I’m still too stunned and worry about what happens if I talk back to my hallucinations. I think those books said to never do that.

He’s just as devilishly gorgeous as I remember, if not sexier. Because he’s not in a pair of jogging shorts. He’s not wearing a T-shirt.

No, he’s in a suit. A perfectly fitted suit that screams for attention, because he looks like sex and sin wrapped up in a designer package.

Lilah’s words slowly sink in. Her neighbor who’s been here for over a month because of a girl he barely knew...

I think back to hearing whispers of the sexy man living next to the Vincents.

The man who just walked into this cabin like he's *friends* with the two craziest fools on this corner of the lake.

The man I never saw fitting into my world at all.

"I joined the challenge committee," he says seriously, as though he's somehow explaining why he's here, and I cover my mouth, trying not to laugh.

"Smooth. Real smooth," Hale says from somewhere behind me, letting me know this is really happening and it's not a hallucination.

Liam shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as his eyes screw shut.

"This really isn't how I wanted to see you for the first time. Give me a minute."

My smile falls away as reality comes back into play.

"Why *are you* in Tomahawk?" I ask.

He looks at me as if I'm the one who is insane. Usually, that's a fair assessment, but under the circumstances...

"Why else would I be in Tomahawk?" he asks incredulously. "I'm here because of you."

Yeah, I'm in one of the four corners of crazy for a reason. I totally find it romantic. And if I hadn't had an eye-opening glimpse into his life, I'd already be on him and riding him right in front of the Vincent boys.

But I'm not stupid. Liam may be in Tomahawk now, but it's sure as hell not a long-term fix. He loved the city. He loved his life. When he wasn't hurt, he loved being showy and flashy and surrounding himself with people who take note of how prestigious he is.

He had pictures all over his house of himself shaking hands with famous, rich, and important people.

This is always going to be my home.

And none of that flashy jazz comes with the territory.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I tell him shakily.

He frowns. “Well, that’s not the answer I was hoping for, especially since I’ve already done it. I’ve been here for over a month. Closer to two.”

I roll my eyes, keeping some very precious distance between us so that I don’t tackle him to the ground and say to hell with it.

“Liam,” I groan, “you’re the kind of guy who forgets he has a girlfriend. And I’m the kind of girl who will get your name tattooed on my right boob within a matter of weeks.”

His smile spreads. “Why the right one specifically?”

And there’s that charm I love so much. He’s always just rolled with my crazy like he couldn’t get enough of it.

“Because it’s a little bigger than my left one, so it’s my favorite.”

He smiles even broader.

“Prove it,” Hale says from behind me, and I flip him off as Liam casts a glare in his direction.

“Can you two give us a minute?” Liam asks them.

“You’re in our cabin,” Killian points out, grinning outright at us.

“Benson has been quiet for an awfully long time,” I remind them.

Both their eyes widen in panic, when suddenly there’s an answer to that. “I’m just hiding back here and listening. Don’t mind me,” Benson pipes in.

The Vincent boys relax, and I walk over, grabbing Liam’s hand, trying to ignore how that one innocent touch sends a pang of longing throughout my entire body.

I drag him outside, which isn’t hard, since he comes willingly. As soon as we’re near the lake, I spin around to talk to him and get to the bottom of this.

And...

He kisses me.

His lips are on mine, his hands are dragging me in, and he's kissing me stupid. I open my mouth to gasp, and his tongue sweeps in, reminding me how damn talented he is with that thing.

My hands go up, fingers tangling in his hair, and his hands slide down to my waist, tugging me up against him.

I moan instead of pushing him away, and he takes that as an invitation to push me back against a tree. He lifts my leg to his hip, and my dress hikes up as he grinds against me.

He was a man with limited mobility and strength the last time I was with him. Now he's a strong man with no restrictions, and my mind is in a fog as he tries to take what he wants.

Which is apparently me.

The kiss is a mix of desperate and angry, and I grind against him again as our lips break apart, both of us panting as he starts kissing his way down my neck. My eyes roll shut, as I grip onto his shoulders.

"I've wanted you for so fucking long," he says against my neck.

My eyes pop open, and I shove at his chest. He's half dazed when I jerk my leg down, trying to remember where we are and who we are.

"Can't fish on Sunday," I groan.

"What?" he asks, confused.

I narrow my eyes and point my finger. "You can't just kiss me until I'm too stupid to realize why this can't work. It's like fishing on Sunday. You always want to fish on Sunday, but you're not supposed to."

"Why can't it work?" he asks, that lazy smile of his doing incredible things to my angry vagina, as he completely bypasses the *fish on Sunday* remark.

My vagina is angry because I'm denying it right now, by the way.

And...fish and my vagina shall *never* again be in the same sentence.

"Because you live in—"

"Tomahawk," he interrupts, smirking as his eyes sparkle with humor. "Sold my place in LA. The only home I own is back that way," he says, gesturing behind me with his head.

"But you're going to—"

"Stay in Tomahawk, land of the mostly beardless ex beards and Wild Ones," he says, interrupting me *again*.

I'm flushed and flustered and...what's another f-word? No, not that f-word.

Because I'm *not* that. Well, I guess I could be that, in a different sense than the fun version.

"You're telling me you came all the way to Tomahawk because I sucked your dick? It couldn't have been that good," I say, trying to come up with anything to lighten this moment.

His grin spreads. "Yeah. I left my life in LA, bought a home in the craziest town in the U.S., just because you give excellent head."

A loud yelp pierces the air, and we both whirl around as Hale Vincent lifts off the ground, hovering on his hands and knees as a pained sound escapes him.

"I'm good," he says through strain.

Our gazes bounce up to the roof where Benson and Killian give us an awkward wave.

"Fucking really?" I groan.

Benson shoves at Killian, who laughs as he hops off the roof, landing in a crouch beside Hale. Benson lands beside him, and they both help Hale to his feet as they walk off.

My gaze returns to Liam, who is grinning at me.

“Why?” I ask, mostly because I can’t help myself. “You don’t even know me.”

He steps closer, tipping my head back by my chin. “I tried to live my life for eight months after you left. I didn’t want to go out with my fake friends. I didn’t want to talk to my shitty family. I didn’t want to date girls who weren’t you. For eight solid months, I moped around aimlessly. The only people who bothered to call or stop by were just doing so to borrow something or ask for a favor. On the ninth month, I called a realtor to sell my house. On the tenth month, I started looking at other homes to buy. Nothing felt right until I looked at Tomahawk.”

He blows out a breath, and my eyes flutter shut when he brushes his lips over mine. He pulls back just barely before whispering to me.

“I’m going to know you better than anyone ever has. I never forgot you, Kylie Malone. I tried so fucking hard, but I couldn’t get you out of my head. And now I’m done trying.”

He backs away, and my breath comes out shakily as I watch him smirk at me.

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into,” I tell him on a sigh.

“I do, actually. I’m going to prove to you that I’m not going anywhere, and I’m going to tame a Wild One,” he adds, the last part said jokingly, even if it is totally cheesy.

“You don’t tame a Wild One,” Hale says loudly, then grunts like he just got hit.

Both of us look over to where the bushes are shaking. I roll my eyes.

Hale stands, and Killian shakes his head. “You can’t tame a Wild One,” Hale says again to Liam, grinning. “You just go wild.”

To this, Liam waggles his eyebrows at me.

I walk away, gun still on my shoulder by some miracle, and move alongside the lake.

How the hell am I going to keep my family from killing Liam when they find out the beardless city boy getting all the single lady attention is here for me?

Speaking of single lady attention...

That will stop.

Tonight.

I will so cut someone.

Just then, I hear *Real Wild Child* blasting from Penny's cabin, and a small smile curves my lips as howls fill the air, Killian and Hale included.

I howl too, watching as Liam's eyebrows quirk in my direction.

The howls from above draw his attention as a helicopter soars over us, and people start jumping out, wings—yes, they have synthetic wings—spread as they glide down over the boat that is zipping down the lake.

The fliers coast into the boat like they've done it a thousand times, and the boat cuts a sharp one-eighty, racing back to catch the next group.

Liam's eyes widen, watching it all as several surfboards zip by with motors driving them forward.

More howls erupt, and Killian and Hale grow more enthusiastic with their own responding howls.

Benson just laughs and watches the show.

Hale runs to me, and I jump up, grabbing the tree branch, until I can toss my legs up and sit on top of his shoulders, carefully keeping my dress from dropping over his face, because the perv will mock my really old Garfield undies.

Really glad I stopped things before Liam saw my unfortunately embarrassing, but super comfy and broken-in underwear.

I howl louder, and the Malones respond as they zip by on their jet skis. The ones being pulled on the water-skis start

spinning and flipping, using the wakes as their own little waves. A lot of wetsuits are out there right now.

A hover boat blasts by, spinning a one-eighty and driving back toward us.

Hale drops me to the ground, and I shove the gun to his chest before I race to the end of the dock, jumping into the hover boat as my dad laughs as gasses us away. Two seconds later, I turn around to see Eric hit his donut just right, slinging up water all over Hale and Killian, who only howl louder.

Liam is watching me with a small smile as I turn my attention back to the front. All the while, the Wild Ones' theme song blasts on, always putting us in the best possible mood. It's like our high school fight song, without the high school or the sports and stuff.

I probably shouldn't ever say that reasoning aloud.

Dad cuts the boat again, and we dodge a set of Wilders who are on the motorized surfboards. I slap hands with Kai when he gets close enough, and he shoots back across the water, turning back again.

I stand up, gripping onto the back of Dad's seat as we head into the thick of it. The chopper hovers overhead again, and two girls drop down on tactical lines—one of which is barely thirteen.

We drive under Krysta Nickel, since I don't trust the younger Nickel girl, and I reach up, grabbing for her arm as she flips upside down, reaching for me.

"These are my suedes!" I yell as my feet leave the ground.

"I won't drop you!" she says through a smile, clutching my wrist with both of her hands as I hold onto her wrist.

The boat keeps going, moving out from under me, and I howl as I dangle over the water, letting them carry me to the bank. As soon as I'm hovering over dry land, Krysta releases me, and I land, bending my knees just a little, as Krysta flips back upright and zips the rest of the way down her line to join me.

The air is full of howls, laughter, and...the call of the wild.

It's a day we can't help but pull out all the stops.

One of our own is getting married.

And it's been a long damn time since a wedding.

Chapter 10

Wild Ones Tip #252

Life only makes sense when you're boring.

We're the definition of Murphy's Law for the human species.

LIAM

My eyes are glued to Kylie as she stands at the end of the aisle, holding a bouquet of flowers. Her knee-length, blue dress looks sweet, but those mischievous eyes trained on me try to tell me she's not sweet.

Like she always tried to warn me.

She just doesn't realize she's sweet.

Well, when she's not jumping on boats and getting carried across the lake by a helicopter and a girl holding her up by her hand.

Have to admit, I want to try that.

"Oh! I'm going to kick your ass if you manhandle me one more time, Jason Malone!" Lilah's growl has everyone turning around as a beast of a guy drops her to her feet at the end of the outdoor aisle lined with roses.

I halfway notice how her white dress comes up in the front, showing off her black combat boots with pink shoelaces, because I'm too busy noticing the hulking man who hauled her in.

That's a Malone?

I look him over, nervously tugging at my collar. I can practically feel Kylie smirking at me, knowing exactly what I'm thinking as I take in the guy who is about my height, but about double me in muscle mass.

This guy must bench press cars when he's bored. Or maybe wrestles alligators just for fun. Do alligators live here? I hope that's just a southern thing.

He crosses his arms over his chest, and Lilah rears back like she's about to kick him in the shin, when Bill grapples her, dragging her toward the altar, where Benson is laughing and waiting.

"I'm not popping out multiples, you interfering, meddling sons of bitches!" Lilah threatens, still struggling even as the Wedding March plays. "I mean it, Aunt Penny! I'll go get all my baby-making parts cut out of me before I give birth to a litter! Benson, this is just the start of it! You have to fight with me. Next they'll force us to have babies!"

I can't help but find this all weirdly fascinating. And somewhat hilarious. I've never seen a bride being dragged down the aisle before, as she swears she's not delivering a litter. She's a triplet. Her mother was a twin. Benson is a twin...

She's worried they'll start demanding babies, and she's horrified at facing a possible army coming out of her, given their odds.

"It'll ruin my vagina! Don't let them do this!" Lilah shouts. "You love my vagina, Benson!"

Definitely a first.

Benson grins bigger, running his hand along the side of his trimmed beard before walking toward the struggling woman who Bill is starting to lose the tug-of-war battle with.

Benson grabs her, and before she can fight with him, he kisses her. Hard. For a really, uncomfortably long time.

Howls break out, and I startle, forgetting these people really love a good howl.

Lilah stops fighting, and she melts against Benson, softening more and more until she's practically butter in his hands.

He walks backwards, taking her with him, as Bill wipes sweat off his brow, panting as he trails them.

“Who gives this woman, Lilah Vincent, away?” the officiate asks as he holds a bible in his hands.

I’ve never heard it worded that way, but sure. Why not?

“Her aunt and I give her away. For fuck’s sake, just hurry before she snaps out of the trance and starts fighting again,” Bill says, still panting as he drops to a chair beside Penny, exhausted.

Penny pats his arm as she grins so hugely and dabs tears out of her eyes with the handkerchief in her other hand.

Kylie is grinning, and her eyes find mine again. I can barely hear anything else.

I finally force my eyes away as I hear the officiate asking Lilah the million dollar question.

Benson says something in Lilah’s ear, and in a trance-like state, she says, “I do.”

He leans back, and her eyes widen like she realizes what just happened.

“I do too,” Benson quickly says as the man asks him the same question.

“You tricked me!” Lilah accuses, and Benson laughs as he kisses his bride without permission, subduing her once again.

“You may kiss the bride,” the man sighs. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. And blah blah blah. Damn Wild One weddings,” he adds, grumbling as he walks away.

It’s almost a roar of howls that break free around me, and I laugh, clapping as I watch Kylie howl with the rest of them. Hell, even I’m tempted to howl.

But before I can decide on that, everyone is suddenly moving chairs. It turns into a frenzy as tables come out of nowhere, getting setup around the edges.

I'm still sitting in the middle, me and my lone chair, completely dumbfounded by how fast they're changing the whole setup.

Idly, I spot Kylie as she's pulling her boots off, carefully placing them in a box like they're fragile, then places the box in a wooden chest, before shutting the lid and latching it.

My lips tug up in a confused grin, because as always, she's an enigma.

I slowly stand, lift my chair, and move it to a table as the altar area turns into a small platform stage. They pull sheets off of it, revealing amps, and microphone stands come next.

They pull back the small curtain that is hung on two poles to reveal a piano, drums, and a couple of guitars.

My eyebrows go up, but I'm distracted when Becky is suddenly beside me, handing me a beer.

"Did you like the cobbler?" she asks as I take the beer, admittedly checking the cap for puncture marks before I twist it off.

"Killian loved it," I tell her tightly, looking around for Kylie.

This won't look good, and I definitely need to look good on day one of our reunion. In the back of my mind, there was always this really stupid hope that she wouldn't care about Felicia or the fact I was an absolute fucking dick to have forgotten her.

"Oh," Becky grumbles, then brightens immediately. "I'll just bring you another one. They won't be at your house later, will they? Because—"

"Walk away, Becky," Kylie's voice interrupts as she comes up on my other side, smirking at Becky.

Becky looks between us as Kylie steps against my side, and of course I drop my arm around her shoulders. Because, Kylie is jealous. And there's no reason to be.

I didn't fucking move here for Becky.

Becky swallows hard before backing away carefully, as though she's watching for Kylie to attack and trying not to make any sudden movements.

I can't help but grin.

"How many girls from Tomahawk have you fucked already?" Kylie asks me.

And my smile dies.

"None. Though one did fuck me with her mouth. I ended up chasing her to this...place."

I gesture around me as the madness ensues, and two girls get on stage in front of us with two guys.

"You mean the girl you forgot to tell you were in a relationship?" she asks dryly.

I knew that was coming.

"I really did forget about Felicia—"

"Not helping your case," she butts in.

Deep breath, Liam. "I haven't been with anyone since you left that day."

That has her beer pausing at her lips, and she looks up at me.

"What about all the girls who've been bringing this sexy, beardless, new guy daily gifts of food?"

I smile slowly, reaching over to twirl one of her curls around my finger.

"None. Kept wondering if you were ever going to get in on that action. I really did expect to open my door one day and find you there, burned homemade cupcakes in hand."

She snorts and looks away as people start dancing.

Lilah shouts something to one of the girls singing, and she nods, grinning as Lilah and Benson take over the middle of the dance floor.

Half the people are dancing. Half are eating.

Kylie and I are just standing in the middle of it all, almost like that first night when people danced around us and I tried to pry into her head. I was worried she was a liability in over her abilities on that dive.

Then I was just fascinated with the way she handled me, instead of blushing and stuttering like her *look* made me think she would. I was fascinated by how different she was from what I kept expecting.

Then fucking addicted.

“I don’t take men perfectly edible food just to get laid,” she says, and I tense.

“Have you been with anyone since you left?”

She smirks before drinking her beer, not answering that. Just as I start to grow agitated, she turns to face me.

“I haven’t wanted to be with anyone. But that doesn’t mean—”

I cut her off, pulling her to me so I can kiss her again. Because I can’t help myself. It’s been a long damn year.

She melts against me just like she did earlier as catcalls emerge. She’s the one to break the kiss again, even as I try to resume it.

She takes a look around at several people who are watching us, and my arms stay fastened around her, keeping her from getting too far away.

“Well, at least you won’t have to worry about anyone bringing you any more food,” she says, patting my chest before smirking up at me. “You just made yourself unavailable by kissing me. Only the brave will venture near you now, Liam Harper. Or the unknowing.”

My eyes flick back down to her lips. “I’m not sure how many more ways I can prove that I’m here for you. I mean, I’ve already gone to extreme, possibly insane measures that would terrify most people.”

Her gaze flicks over my shoulder, and I turn my head to follow the path.

Five massive men are staring at me, all of them glaring with their arms crossed over their chests. Ah fuck.

Normally I wouldn't back down from any sort of confrontation, but five-to-one are never good odds.

Kylie pats my chest once more. "This night just got interesting," she chirps, then sashays away, leaving me to dread my impending death on my own.

But weirdly, I recognize the older of the five, and his eyes narrow on me like he recognizes me too. In fact, I've seen him twice. And twice, he told me to keep my mouth shut.

I did, since I had no reason to risk my life for some gossip.

I'm only distracted by a woman in a classy pant suit as she walks by in full-on hind-catcher gear. What the hell?

This is my Wednesday.

Chapter 11

Wild Ones Tip #52

When our song plays, shit's about to go down. Rawr.

KYLIE

The Wild Ones have made it to the dance floor now, and people are getting launched into the air, making it more of a circus act than actual dance.

“Who’s that?” Jason asks, glaring over at Liam as Liam watches me without subtlety, staring over the rim of his beer as he drinks it.

“That is a guy who wants to date me,” I say, grinning darkly as I wait for him to go back to my father, who will then implode and scare Liam off.

Which is what needs to happen.

I can go back to trying to forget about him before he decides—on a whim—to suddenly move somewhere else, and breaks my heart in the process. We only knew each other for three weeks. I’m crazy, so I understand it taking me much too long to move on. But what’s his excuse?

Jason, as expected, stalks off to go to my father and report back to him like a good little predictable giant.

I watch, drinking my beer, and notice how Liam seems unconcerned with the whole scene as he joins Killian and Hale...who are doing a keg stand. On two separate kegs.

Hey, where did the kegs come from? No one told me there was keg beer.

Quickly, I look around, noticing I’ve lost sight of the Wilders. Never, *ever* lose sight of the Wilder brothers. Their sister is a little more on my crazy level. But the guys? Remember that whole wildcard thing?

My eyes dart back to my father, noticing he's drinking a beer with Bill, both of them looking at Liam, probably plotting his demise.

Liam steps up and...does a keg stand. In his Armani suit.

And it's really freaking sexy.

My eyes drift over to where a woman is walking in...is that a hind-catcher's mask? It looks like she's about to cop a squat behind a batter to catch the strikes. Even I find it weird.

"Who's that?" I ask while pointing obviously, not even looking to see who's beside me.

"That's Benson's mother," Penny says, and I turn to face her, my eyebrow arching. "Lilah may have forever scarred her, so she's...prepared now. Benson warned her there'd be paintballs."

That's when I hear Krysta as she steps up to the microphone and says, "*I'm a real wild child.*"

The music starts playing, and we all howl in unison.

Barefoot, I spin around, diving under the table nearest to me as the first shot gets fired.

No, not a gunshot. We're not *that* kind of crazy. Well, not in this situation, anyhow.

I grab the paintball gun strapped to the bottom of the table, and I roll back out, laughing uncontrollably as I start firing rapidly at anything that moves.

"Stop!" Lilah shouts, and everyone stops immediately, fingers poised on triggers. Even the band stops playing. "This was my mother's dress!" she loudly adds.

Krysta grins as she speaks into the microphone. "Lilah's in her mother's dress. Don't you fuckers dare get it dirty."

Everyone nods like that's a perfectly understandable request, and the war resumes as the music starts again.

Lilah walks through the chaos, and everyone shoots around her. I giggle like an idiot when my paintball blasts Hale right in the chest. That never gets old.

My eyes widen when he turns his rapid-fire airsoft gun at me.

I tuck and roll, diving out of the way, hoping everyone isn't getting a shot of my fugly undies. Yeah, they're not the Garfield ones I thought they were.

Tate Nickel pointed out they have some other really scary cat on the crotch of them after I sailed over his head on the way to Penny's. I'm not sure how I grabbed the wrong panties.

Totally not the point right now.

I take cover beside my dad as he fires at the Wilders who are...zip-lining toward us.

When the hell did they get zip-lines installed?! *This* is why you aren't ever supposed to lose sight of them!

They're shooting some ridiculous PVC thing, and fish are flying from it. Smelly, dirty, disgusting fish. Everything from minnow-wads to bream are flying through the air.

Another Wilder comes sailing through on a rope swing, yelling like Tarzan as he rapidly fires more of the fish.

Lilah takes a seat with a piece of cake, not even concerned with the madness as she eats it, ducking for a stray fish to fly over her head without ever looking up.

I slide across the ground, firing at the next Wilder who comes down the zip-line. I hit Kai in the chest, and he turns that fishy shooter right at me.

My eyes widen, but before I can scream, a fish comes flying at my face, slapping me right in the mouth.

I gag. A little. Because it smells like they let the fish get real raunchy for a few days before deciding to use them for ammo. It tastes like warm garbage.

I dive again, deciding I'd rather tangle with an airsoft gun than rancid fish. Nickels are using airsoft guns too, so I pop a few of them with my paintballs, snatching a refill canister from Jason's hip as he runs by.

Krysta continues to sing, dodging the occasional stray fish, and I tuck and roll right in front of the stage, popping a few of her brothers, before rolling again.

I spot Liam firing an airsoft gun next to Hale, their backs together. He's laughing too hard to really aim, and I can't help but grin like an idiot.

I never thought he'd fit in, yet he's hanging with the Vincent brothers—of all people—like he's their missing sidekick.

Smirking, I crouch, making sure my dress isn't showing anything it shouldn't be, as I shoot him five times in the side before he can swing toward me.

His eyes flare with excitement, and suddenly he's shooting that damn thing rapidly at me. Those fuckers hurt too.

I laugh, running back toward the Malone corner...but scramble to a halt when I see Jason holding up a grenade. My mouth opens in a silent scream, and he sees me too late, already throwing it.

I try to jump out of the way, but I feel the wet blast of it against my legs, arms, and face as I fall to the ground, curling into the fetal position, and making myself as small as possible, while they launch five or six more.

It's like one wet blast after another, my body right in the kill zone.

Paint is all over me now.

Those dicks better be glad I put my precious suedes up nice and safe.

I'd kill them. For real.

Two arms grab me, and I look up as Liam hoists me up, dragging me quickly back to where he and Hale are firing toward my family.

Normally I wouldn't shoot at my own, but those fuckers just launched a grenade arsenal *while* I was in the line of fire.

I prop up beside him, and I start ticking them off, hitting them hard in the chests. That'll leave some pretty bruises because they didn't wear the thick chest plates.

My dad yelps when I catch him right smack dab in his arm pit, and he narrows his eyes at me. I shoot him again right on his thigh, smirking when he drops to the ground. Then I hit Jason right in the balls.

Goliath collapses with a pale face. I actually hope I didn't hurt him too bad, because I didn't aim for that.

Hale and Liam both groan with sympathy, but I don't stop firing until the song ends.

All the while, Lilah has finished up her cake, and now she's dabbing the corners of her lips like a dainty little princess. Not one drop of dirt or paint is on her beautifully white dress.

I'm panting heavily as I drop the gun.

"That's all?" Liam asks, sounding oddly disappointed when he notices everyone putting away their weapons.

"End of the song. Don't worry, sharp shooter; they'll sing it again," Hale tells him, laughing as Liam frowns, reluctantly relinquishing his weapon.

"Come on. We'll get a drink," I say on a sigh.

Liam smiles down at me, one of his hands going for my curls again. I let him. Somehow the paint avoided my hair. At least I think so. It better have, or so many Malones are going to pay.

"Kylie Malone never lets anyone touch her curls, so I have to be nosy," Nila Wilder says as she joins us, reaching past us to use the keg.

I roll my eyes as Liam's hand falls away from my hair.

"I stalked her here all the way from LA, so I guess she takes pity on me, since I love those curls."

Nila's eyes finally turn to take him in, and they widen as she says, "Hibbida Hibbida."

Don't know what that means? No one does. She tends to mumble gibberish when she finds someone attractive and tries to speak to them.

"What?" Liam asks with a grin.

Her eyes widen more as she blushes and darts a panicked gaze at me. Since she came over here to mock me, I just grin, enjoying the moment. It's always fun to remember Nila is just as human as the rest of us, since *nothing* else seems to faze her.

Penny joins us, smiling wildly as she saves Nila. "All the hearts of the non-Wild Ones just broke," Penny says on a long, mock sigh, gesturing back at a few women who are watching us with annoyed eyes.

I shake my head, not correcting her, because I want the she-wolves at bay. Only the Wild Ones should howl. Yeah. I know that sounds lame, but I'm in a mood. Lame is all I have right now.

"Non-Wild Ones?" Liam asks, frowning as he looks back at me.

"Oh, don't worry. I wasn't saying Kylie doesn't still want you," Penny laughs.

When I give her *the* eye, she stops laughing immediately, catching on.

"Anyway," she goes on, looking back over at him. "I meant the non-Wild Ones would never be brave enough to go after a man in challenge. But a Wild One...wouldn't back down if they wanted something, right, Nila?"

She elbows Nila, who clears her throat and nods, turning five more shades of red. She has no clue what she's even agreeing with. She's just ready to get the hell out of here.

Penny flashes a grin at me again, and I try not to smile back. Wouldn't want Liam's head swelling.

"Good thing you're all friends, though. Otherwise, life would be complicated," Penny goes on.

Nila squeaks a sound, then curses under her breath, giving up the hope of speaking as Penny leaves.

Nila finishes filling up her cup, and Liam looks adorably confused.

The young Wilder bumps her hip with mine, glaring at me like she's mad I didn't warn her. I hold a very straight face, even as she silently tells me all the things she knows her mouth won't.

Then she's gone, and I silently laugh to myself.

"She's a Wild One?" Liam asks, confused.

Nila, for all intents and purposes, looks anything but wild. Her hair is blonde and beautifully straight. It hangs down to her waist. And her dress is actually a really nice one, for a change.

She looks completely polished and put together, despite the fact we just went to war. She's the kind of pretty that makes you instantly hate a girl, but then she's also really awkward and adorable, so you hate her more for making you adore her. And at the same time, you sort of freaking love her too.

She's complicated like that.

Usually, she goes for the whole Jane of the Jungle look just to scare the hell out of people—make them worry about just how *wild* the Wilders have gone. Then she'll have spells where she gets tired of that and dresses normal.

"Yep," I say with a frown, noticing how he's staring after her. "And her brothers would kill you dead for looking at her like that."

His lips turn back up in a grin that is taunting as he faces me again.

"I'm just confused by the gibberish she spoke. I'm only into girls with Shirley Temple curls, who stay covered in paint."

I grimace, remembering that I am, in fact, covered in paint. How did I forget that?

My legs are dripping with green, yellow and red. For some reason, my dad never buys blue. My dress is basically ruined, but it's not like I expected any less. I'm going to shoot Nila a few times and paint her up a little when that damn song comes back on.

That's what she gets for being so annoyingly pretty and awkwardly sweet.

A warm hand cups my cheek, and my face is tilted back up so that I can stare into Liam's eyes that are twinkling with humor. His thumb strokes across my bottom lip, and he studies me like he always did, constantly trying to unravel every twisted thread that is knotted up to form me.

"I've really missed you, Shirley," he finally says.

And I decide I'm going to need something stronger than beer to numb all the reactions I have to him. Because I almost, *almost* drag the tall bastard down so I can kiss him again, ready to throw my heart into the grinder.

With Liam? I learned I can't just have fun. I let him slip inside uncharted territory, occupying more of my heart than I realized...until I had to spend the last year trying to get over a guy who consumed me in less than a month.

Then broke me.

Now he's here.

Ready to break me again.

The two choices I have are to be stubborn or be stupid.

Stubborn if I pretend not to notice how committed he seems to be, despite the unlikeliness of it. Stupid if I trust him then he hurts me, even though I knew it was probably going to happen.

I grab a bottle of vodka, knowing it's my weakness, and turn and walk away.

No one said I had to choose today. A girl can take some time to think about this sort of thing. I hear it's what adults do.

Chapter 12

Wild Ones Tip #8

Never get drunk first. You could end up hanging from a tree with honey all over your body, while the woodland creatures lick you clean. Or eat you alive.

KYLIE

Cold.

Wet.

Cold.

Wet.

I shiver, my eyes blinking open, and then shutting again. Then my eyes dart open as I jackknife up to the seated position, and...curse my freaking father and cousins!

The air mattress I'm floating on is taking on water, and I scramble to grab the...oar? No, this is not an oar. Not unless I was a freaking gnome!

That's another not-so-subtle short joke from the five giant spawns of evil.

Water laps at my legs, chilling them even as it tries removing some of the dried paint still all over me.

The tiny little decorative oar looks like a kid's toy in my hand, but I desperately start paddling toward the closest dock. Because I'm in the lake. The sun is out, and I'm floating in the middle of the lake.

Because I got drunk.

And then...fucking cousins and father.

I'm going to kill them all.

The oar is pointless, so I toss it aside, panicking when more and more water starts coming onto the mattress. The water isn't as cold on the surface as it is about a foot down, but it's still really cold.

Even in summer.

My eyes dart to the dock that is closest, and then...I meet a set of blue eyes as Liam walks out onto the dock, grinning as he carries a bundle of rope. Why is he shirtless?

Why is his body so perfect?

"Need help?" he chirps.

I look around, noting that I am definitely on the Vincent side of the lake. Still.

"No. I love being on a mattress that is slowly sinking in the middle of a lake that never warms up enough for swimming," I tell him.

He laughs before winding up then tosses the rope to me.

It misses, landing wide, and he quickly tugs it back in, hand-over-hand, until the rope returns to his grip. Then he tosses it once more...and misses wider.

"Do *you* need help?" I ask, smirking as he mutters something.

"It's not like I grew up on a ranch," he quips, winking at me as he gets the rope in again.

This time, when he tosses it, it lands on the mattress, and I grab it before it can fall off.

"Pull gently and slowly, or the mattress will dip. Then I'll have to kill you when I get thawed," I instruct.

He grins like I didn't just make an actual threat, and he starts slowly tugging me to shore.

"How are all those people good at waterskiing and stuff? I didn't think this lake was for watersports."

"Only the Wild Ones are *good* at it," I say absently, wincing when I shiver against the breeze. My dress is soaked,

damn it. “Falling in is great incentive to learn to stay upright when skiing and such. Negative reinforcement and all. You get really good, or you don’t do it much at all.”

He smiles broader, still slowly tugging me in, as I lean back, trying to put most of my weight on the rear to prevent the deflating mattress from capsizing. Those muscles of his are very distracting.

He winks when he catches me gawking.

“Terrible shame the way you’ve let yourself go,” I state wryly.

He doesn’t even try to hide his cocky grin, and he tightens those ab muscles just to toy with me, most likely.

“Did you see them do this?” I ask, seeing the dock grow closer and closer and tracking each inch of progress with relief.

“No. I stalked you until you disappeared about fifteen til’ two this morning. I figured you went home.”

My lips twitch.

“Are you telling me you knew where I was all night long?” I ask, trying to sound amused instead of acknowledging the butterflies in my stomach.

He arches an eyebrow.

“Now that I’ve finally run into you, my stalking game is about to get strong. I’ve been holding back.”

I can’t help it. I smile. “You realize stalking is not bragging rights.”

The mattress bumps the dock, and he reaches out a hand for me. I clasp his wrist, and he clasps mine, then actually lifts my entire body up until my knees are on the dock. His hands go to my waist, lifting me the rest of the way.

I shiver harder, partially from the chill of my wet clothes. Partially because he’s not wearing a shirt and all that firm, tempting skin is under my cold fingertips as my hands rest on his chest.

He grins down at me.

“So far I’ve noticed my stalking doesn’t bother you. It’s you thinking I might leave that seems to be the hang up.”

I start to push him away, but he tugs me closer, tipping my head back with a finger under my chin.

“I have no problem stalking you wherever you go. The only thing I can’t do is go another year without doing all I can to have you. All of you, this time. I’m tired of being fake. Tired of feeling fake. Tired of fake people. Tired of everything superficial. I want my life to be real, and that means I have to be just as real.”

My breath comes out shaky, and my gaze flicks to his lips before I shiver even more.

“Shit,” he says, dropping my chin. “Let’s get inside. You can use the shower to warm up and I’ll get you some dry clothes.”

“I need my boots,” I say as he lifts me, causing my breath to catch in my throat. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying you to the house. Got some grass that likes to cut up feet. Killian and Hale are going to help me get rid of it, but for now, you’re barefoot and the grass is still there.”

How is it that this tech-geek has somehow seamlessly fit himself in on the Vincent corner of crazy, and he doesn’t even bat an eye? It’s all I’ve ever known, but during my travels, I’ve realized most people...would call the law. Hence the reason we have to deal with the troopers every summer when some vacationers stumble upon something...crazy.

He carries me effortlessly, and I lean against his warmth.

“My boots,” I say again. “I have to—”

“I’ll go get them as soon as I get you inside.”

I smile for no real reason. “They’re in—”

“They’re in a box inside a chest that is latched and resting in Penny’s yard. I know. I told you I stalked you all day and night.”

He looks down as I try really hard not to kiss him, and he grins at me. “Stalker game is about to get strong.”

For no reason at all, I giggle.

I freaking giggle.

God help me.

Chapter 13

Wild Ones Tip #4

A Wild Woman always takes her hair seriously, but only the girls know why.

LIAM

I have an ace in the hole, but I'm saving it, hoping it doesn't come down to me winning her over with something superficial to keep her.

She walks out wearing my boxers—that are rolled at the waist several times most likely, hence the reason they're so short—and a T-shirt that hides them from sight. Her hair is wet, and it makes her look entirely different, because it's more wavy than curly.

“It dries frizzy if I don't have my hair stuff for the ringlets to form,” she sighs.

I already know this, of course, because I spent every waking moment with her for three mind-fucking weeks. Even though I was in excruciating pain, those were the best three weeks of my life.

Which tells you just how stale my life had gotten.

“I have all the hair stuff you need in the bathroom down the hall. I remembered all your girly shit from when you were at my house.”

Her eyebrows knit together.

“You bought my hair supplies?”

I shrug. “You were vicious when it came to your hair.” I mock a shudder, and she laughs. “Since I wanted to have you over here as often as possible, I stocked up on supplies.”

Her hesitant smile forms, and I lean back, studying her. As always. I hate trying to figure her out, because she always throws me a curve ball right when I think I'm having a break through.

She glances at my laptop near the table.

"How's the wifi?" she asks with a small grin.

I battle my own smile.

"Slow as fuck, but serves its purpose. I only need it on occasion."

She darts a glance to the Loki sculpture that's proudly sitting on a stand, but then her eyes take in all the art on the walls, and a small breath passes through her lips. It's all the things she painted while she was at my house.

Which is a lot. Kylie paints fast. And she paints more when she's trapped inside.

She clears her throat, bringing her eyes back to mine. "Still have an Audi?" she asks, surprising me with the random shift in conversation.

My lips twist in wry amusement as I shake my head. "No. Realized early on four-wheel drive was a necessity, since, when it rains, the dirt sections of the road get really muddy and impossible to drive through. Killian and Hale went with me to trade it in on a Jeep."

She perks right up. "You have a Jeep?"

I nod slowly.

"Then I guess I need to show you how to drive it."

My eyebrows go up as she stands.

"I know how to drive it," I tell her as she heads to the bathroom.

"Highly unlikely," she says, a hint of laughter in her tone.

I sit and wait, thinking of how I never expected to go out on the dock like I do every morning and find her sleeping on a mattress that was floating—or trying to float—on the lake.

I laughed, walked back in, grabbed some rope I fortunately had on hand for tying off boats, and walked back out. Then watched her until she woke up in a panic.

If I'd known she was out there last night, I wouldn't have hesitated to swim that fucking cold water and bring her in with me.

Her father stayed away from me all night, but he cast several looks in my direction. No doubt it's because I now know *why* he told me to keep my mouth shut about where I saw him. Or who I saw him with, rather.

Now he has two reasons to want me dead.

Great.

Thirty-seven minutes later, she walks out with dry hair in ringlets, and she comes to grab her boots from the table, pulling them on.

"These are some of my suedes, so we can't get into too much mud. Just in case."

"Why?" I ask, unable to help myself.

"Because something terrible would happen," she says, looking up at me with all seriousness.

I only grin. I've really missed that. "And what's that?"

She stands, looking like my favorite version of sexy—my T-shirt still hitting her thighs, showing only a peek of the boxers underneath, while her tan, suede cowboy boots with little blue, decorative flower patterns come up to her calf.

"Someone would have to die."

I burst out laughing, but she keeps a serious face.

"You're not kidding."

She slowly shakes her head. "Mud doesn't come out of suede too easily, if at all."

"So this will be the most dangerous ride of my life?" I ask, grinning.

"Very possibly," she tells me with a firm nod.

I open my mouth to speak, but someone knocks on the door. I get up to go answer it, but Kylie beats me to it. She swings it open, and I see a girl—can't remember her name—holding a covered dish.

She takes one look at Kylie, darts a glance over her shoulder at me—*I'm still shirtless, because Kylie won't stop looking*—and then back to Kylie before paling.

She slowly steps back, just as Becky did last night, and I grin as she suddenly turns and sprints back to her Explorer, the dish crashing to the ground as she races away like death is on her heels.

Kylie shuts the door, not even blinking an eye, while I try not to laugh.

“So you move here to stalk me,” she says as she turns around to face me, “but you get a house on the Vincent corner of crazy?”

Apparently we're not going to discuss the fact she didn't have to speak to utterly terrify a girl.

“I had no idea there were factions of crazy levels. Only locals are privy to that knowledge, apparently, so I was in the dark until it was too late,” I tell her, smirking.

“Touché,” she says, her smile slowly returning.

“Maybe you should leave the boots here,” I tell her as she grabs my keys.

“Why?” she asks, looking over her shoulder, as the sound of dirt flying up outside reminds me a girl is speeding away from here like she just saw the apocalypse coming.

“Because I'd hate to die before I finally got you under me.”

Blush hits her cheeks, and she clears her throat.

Wordlessly, she takes off her boots, neatly placing them against the wall, and I grin as she turns and faces me.

“Come on. I'll teach you how to drive in Tomahawk.” She glances at my chest. “And put on a shirt. I don't need any

distractions or you might die anyway.”

Chapter 14

Wild Ones Tip #18

*Wild Ones won't intentionally kill you. But shit happens.
Buckle up.*

Wear a helmet. Sign a waiver. You know, the usual.

KYLIE

Liam is clutching the oh-shit handle like his life depends on it as I spin another donut, laughing when he hisses out a breath. Mud slings up, and I cut the wheel, blasting music.

I howl into the air as I gas it, then take the next turn, using the perfect momentum to keep us from flipping. Because, I don't really want to die, obviously.

He finally loosens up and laughs a little, and I drive fast across the muddy field, glad that I left my boots behind, because the mud is viciously slashing inside.

"Where the hell are we?" he asks, as I spin out of another tight circle.

"A Wilder field. They own all the land on this side of the lake other than one little cabin an old lady owns."

"Old lady?" he asks, having to yell to speak over the music and roar of the engine. "No name? You're slacking. I thought you knew every local here to share or withhold secrets from."

I smile as I take another cut.

"She's not a local. She's a seasonal. Or used to be. She stopped coming two years ago. She's a horror writer, and she came out here in the summers for peace and quiet to write gruesome death scenes. No doubt she was killing the Wilders in the books, because they obviously disrupted the peace and quiet she came here for."

He laughs again, as I cut the wheel once more.

“So the Wilders don’t mind you tearing up their field?”

“Nah. They’ll come out here and join us if they see us.”

Just as I sling out of another donut, a loud *shaboom* rattles the air, sounding like a cannon, some crispy fireworks, and a Titan’s whip-crack all at once.

My chest vibrates and my body tingles as a pulse washes over us, and mud bursts into the air about a hundred yards from us, shooting up in a spray.

Fuckity fuck.

I gas the Jeep, driving like hell back toward the road.

“What the hell was that?!” Liam demands, his relaxed posture gone now.

“Tannerite. Warning shot,” I tell him quickly, just as another blast sends a pulse toward us, and another spray of mud flies up.

“The fuck? I thought you said they’d just join us,” he says in a much higher voice than usual.

My ass is clenched as the next pulse hits again, driving me forward. *This* is why those fuckers are wildcards.

“They would...unless they feel like being dicks today, which they clearly do,” I say, mentally noting some serious payback. “And they might not know I’m driving this shiny new Jeep either.”

“Motherfucker!” he shouts as mud sprays us, and a painful pulse has me driving that much faster. “This is a time when a phone would be a good fucking idea!”

I laugh manically, unable to help myself, as the pulses get less and less intense, letting me know they’re simply fucking with us now. I blow out a breath, but Liam is still watching the mirror, worried they’ll come after us.

“The Wilders don’t even have the Internet, much less a phone. Their main source of income is growing all the weed that our one cop deals to locals and various other towns. That’s

how they make all their money. Only the Wild Ones are supposed to know that, so they keep everyone else off their land.”

He whips his head toward me.

“Then why did you just tell me?”

I go a little stiff. I honestly have no idea why I just told him that.

“Just felt like explaining what was going on,” I say uneasily.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice his lips twitching. He knows I just slipped up by forgetting he wasn’t...here permanently.

“Why worry? Pot is legal in this state.”

“Not in the quantities people buy it in, and it’s still illegal to grow it. Plus, you make more money when taxes and licenses aren’t involved. We don’t do things like normal people, remember?”

We race down the road, getting out of Wilder territory. I don’t slow down until I see the sickening sight of a Trooper passing us, his lights and siren coming on in unison as he whips around and comes after us.

“Shit,” I hiss.

“What? It’s just a speeding ticket. I’ll pay it,” he says from beside me.

“That would be great...if I had a license.”

He groans. “You don’t?”

“Well, I did. It was taken away two years ago...in another state. Sort of forgot I couldn’t be an idiot anywhere but Tomahawk. The troopers aren’t supposed to be here yet.”

“I’m sure they were on their way to the Wilders’ place with all that shit blowing up too. Is Tannerite illegal?”

Fuckity fuck fuck.

“I don’t think so, but it’s safe to assume all things are illegal when the troopers are here. Pretty sure you need a license for explosives, and the Wilders will have no such thing. And the last place that needs investigating is the Wilders’.”

He pulls out his phone as I pull over on the side of the road. The trooper’s car stops behind ours.

“Glad one of us has a phone,” he says with a smirk. Then the phone is at his ear. “Hey, Killian, it’s me. The troopers are here. You need to get over to the Wilders’ place and warn them, because there was some Tannerite issues.”

He pauses, smiling over at me.

“Yeah. I promise to tell you later,” he goes on. “Right now, I’m going to have to keep Kylie out of jail.”

He glances back over his shoulder, and then he tugs me so hard that I almost slap him. Until I realize he’s shifting over me, staying on his phone. I quickly, and awkwardly, scramble to the passenger seat, buckling up like I’ve been here all along.

I look back to see the trooper’s head is down, so I hope that means he didn’t notice the swap.

Liam relaxes behind the wheel, and he continues to talk.

“Only seen one so far. But hurry. I’m not sure how long I can stall, and he was on his way out there.”

He hangs up and flashes me a smile just as the trooper gets out and walks this way.

“I said I was going to let you go with a warning, and you’re telling me you want a ticket?” the trooper asks, understandably confused.

At least he has no clue that Liam wasn’t driving.

“I think I deserve one. The lone officer here is really strict on his residents. I never want to be disrespectful by ducking

out on a deserved ticket,” he says so innocently, knowing writing a ticket will take a lot longer than a warning.

At least I assume it will. Since I’ve never had either one, I’m curious. I just got arrested and had my license suspended for driving a car into a swimming pool.

Long story.

And, yes, I was sober when it happened.

And, no, no one was hurt. I really thought I could make the jump. Dukes of Hazard style.

Their ramps were small and they jumped long distances with very little effort or speed.

Clearly that doesn’t work for people like me. I’m not sure where I went wrong, but at least now I know I can’t jump the lake. It was a failed trial run, but a wonderful learning experience.

“You’re the first person to ever argue their way *into* a ticket,” the trooper grumbles, writing something down.

I watch as Killian drives by in his Jeep, smirking at us as he passes. I blow out a relieved breath. The Wilders will close the gates to their land, and the trooper can’t trespass. I’m sure they’ll also be roadside, a feasible explanation for the Tannerite ready.

“You’re the first state trooper I’ve seen since I moved to town several weeks ago,” Liam tells him, dangling some bait to catch info.

“We don’t pass through here too often. Real quiet town that I’m surprised isn’t too broke to even exist. Usually once a year when some complaints roll in from tourists claiming a lot of illegal activity is going on is when we cruise through. We never find anything. You seen anything?” he asks, looking at Liam and narrowing his eyes.

“Saw a particularly shady raccoon digging in my trashcan the other morning,” Liam deadpans.

I bite back a laugh and turn my head away to hide my smile.

“The town has been a little eerily quiet other than that,” Liam adds.

The trooper grunts, still scribbling.

“It doesn’t make sense why we get these calls every year, yet never find anything. I came early, hoping to surprise the locals. More are coming, but I’ve already heard something akin to an explosion down the road that I’m going to investigate.”

“Could be an ongoing prank—the calls, I mean.” Liam is sounding helpful to the trooper, but I’m a little concerned about how easily he lies, as though he does it all the time. “And the explosions could have been fireworks.”

“Could be,” the guy agrees. “Every year, the damn wild life wreaks havoc on us. Worst woods in the country, if you ask me. I’m the only repeat trooper coming this year. The rest are new guys.”

Liam quirks a questioning eyebrow at me, but I just look around, avoiding eye contact, and hiding my secretive grin.

It takes a long few minutes, but the trooper finally hands Liam his ticket. Liam accepts it with a smile and some spoken gratitude.

“You drunk?” the trooper asks, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I can take a breathalyzer if you want,” Liam suggests helpfully.

This takes longer, giving Killian and the Wilders more time to act.

I hide my relief with a tight smile as the trooper shakes his head, reading the sober results of the test.

“Weird fucking town,” he mutters under his breath before finally sending us on our way.

I snatch Liam’s phone, and he grins as I start dialing Vick—our one local cop.

“So *now* a phone is handy?”

I ignore him, and speak when Vick answers.

“Troopers are here. Shut the town down.”

I hang up, and Liam looks at me like he’s confused as he pulls away, driving us forward at a decent, legal speed.

“Shut down the entire town?”

“Every part of the town has something at least semi-illegal or unlawful going on. The local grocer rents floor space out to locals. Locals set up stands inside and sell moonshine made by unlicensed men. Also, the moonshine is past the legal limit. And then others set up, bypassing health codes and federal food regulations—we know how to keep food safe without doing all that other shit. Penny even sells her jam there.”

He nods like he’s taking all that in.

“The bar doesn’t have a liquor license. He uses his brother’s liquor license, and his brother runs the liquor store downtown. They fudge the books and stuff. Then Caroline runs a gambling ring under her dance studio.”

“A gambling ring? The old lady with the beehive bun?” he asks incredulously.

I nod.

“Then of course there are the pot runners. A lot of runs are made to distribute all the pot the Wilders grow. Vick handles selling it to the locals. But, yeah. Nothing stronger than pot is allowed. You will go to jail for that. And then Molly sells baked pot goods at the bakery—”

“That suddenly makes so much sense,” he says, still driving.

The Wilders own a lot of land, so it takes a while to get back to town.

“What does?”

“Molly’s daughter was one of my *admirers*—” I growl a little, and he grins. “—and she brought me some brownies from her *momma’s* bakery. I ate the entire pan. Normally I don’t eat sweets.” He pats his abs through his shirt, winking over at me. “But I couldn’t stop once I started. And I laughed

for no fucking reason until my ribs hurt. Felt high as a fucking kite for hours and hours. Then I raided my fridge for an hour. The next day I spent four hours doing sit-ups, worried I was going to be soft before I finally got to see you.”

I try not to laugh. I forgot how easy it was for him to do this to me.

The uncontrollable grins. The freaking stupid-girl giggles. The vagina butterflies.

How did I forget all this?

“Sugar is the main component of Killian’s and Hale’s diets, and they still maintain a six-pack with ease,” I decide to say with a mocking lilt.

He cuts his eyes toward me.

“I’m aware. Thanks for pointing that out.”

I laugh a little under my breath, trying and failing not to smile over at him. When he winks at me, I’m transported back to those three weirdly perfect weeks where he was mine.

“You’re really in Tomahawk for me?” I ask him, finally letting that sink in as stupid little butterflies restlessly rustle in my stomach.

“Why the hell else would I move here?” he volleys.

Slippery slope, here I come.

“My father won’t take it easy on you,” I say instead of rolling down said slope. “And he doesn’t even know you had a girlfriend while I was wearing out my jaw on you multiple times a day.”

He jerks the Jeep back on the road after he veers off course by accident, and he clears his throat.

“Damn deer,” he mutters.

There was no deer.

I don’t point that out to him as I grin.

“Stay with me tonight,” he says suddenly, keeping his eyes on the road.

I pretend to think about it. I'm not stupid enough to think I can keep living in denial. Liam is here. He bought a home in Tomahawk to be with me.

I'm fucked in every sense of the word, whether I want to admit it or not. But I don't trust all these confusing emotions going to war inside me. My mother *loved* my father and me. Yet she walked away like it was the easiest decision of her life.

And she never looked back.

She has a husband and three step kids in Seattle now. Found that out through my cousins, who still keep in touch with their shitty parents on occasion. My mother went to be a mother to someone else because she liked the scenery better than our small town had to offer. Obviously I have trust issues with outsiders.

Not to mention...remember Felicia? I certainly do. I distinctly remember him telling her I was his savior, and not much else about me. Then again, he did tell her he forgot she existed, so there's that. Still not making this an obvious decision for me.

"We need to swing by my house so I can grab some supplies," I tell him, not responding to his invite just yet.

"Your house in town?" he asks, proving he's done his homework and found out where I live, while his triumphant smile spreading.

He's a good stalker, that one.

"No," I say with a larger smile. "Not those kind of supplies." I turn to face him fully. "We need to stop by my dad's cabin."

This time, when he swerves, I don't restrain my laughter.

Chapter 15

Wild Ones Tip #119

Families are crazier when they're all in one place.

Wild Families are just psychotic. Wear a helmet.

LIAM

I'm not too prideful to admit this is my worst nightmare realized.

But I heed Killian and Hale's advice, and I don't cower. As far as Kylie believes, I'm completely impervious. The very definition of confident.

In other words, I have balls of steel, because I'm acting like I'm not one bit afraid of having five men shoot holes in me until I sink to the bottom of the lake with ease.

As soon as we walk into her father's house, five men look up from their recliners—yes, all five have recliners in this living room that has numerous animal heads mounted on the walls like a bad horror movie intro.

Only her father lives here, but they pretty much all stay here a lot, according to the info I've gathered from the Vincent brothers during steak nights.

Shotguns and rifles are also hanging on the walls, as though they want them there for quick access, or their interior decorator was a serial killer.

The one with a semi-grizzly beard—her father—narrows his eyes at the boxers and T-shirt Kylie is wearing.

This is where I start hoping for a quick and merciful death.

Why did I not think about her clothes?

Kylie grins like a devil over her shoulder at me, before returning her attention to her father.

“You guys remember Liam, right? You left me floating in the lake near his cabin last night.”

That humor in her eyes dies as she glares at all of them.

Her father cracks a grin, but the four monstrous cousins start looking around at anything but her.

“You know better than to get drunk first,” her dad says, still grinning.

“I’ll remember that. You’ll remember that too.”

His smile falls.

“You threatening me?”

“You scared?” she muses.

I’m almost positive he pales a little, which I, of course, find fascinating.

“Family rules,” he says carefully. “First one drunk pays the price.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her eyebrow quirking in challenge.

“Family rules, no one gets to hit a girl, even when she doles out revenge.”

He rolls his eyes.

Then she turns and gestures toward me. “I’m going with Liam. The troopers are here. I’m just grabbing some supplies. He wants me to sleep in his bed tonight, so I thought I’d tell you not to wait up on me.”

I’m going to kill her.

Just as soon as I get out of here alive.

She flashes me that conspiratorial wink, before looking back at her father, who is stroking his beard thoughtfully as he studies me.

“This is where you threaten him to get out of town before you rip off all his limbs and feed them to the bears,” Kylie states flatly, watching him as he studies me.

“I don’t know,” her father says, grinning a little. “Liam is on the official challenge committee. We voted him in this morning.”

That challenge committee is saving me? Thank fuck for Bill helping me sign on.

Kylie’s arms fall to her sides as confusion mars her face.

“I said I’m spending the night with him. In his bed. Where he’ll probably put his hands on me. Lips too. He also has some other body parts you should worry about.”

I cast a glare at her, but she’s too busy staring disbelievingly at her father.

He grins more. “Bill and I have been outnumbered by Chester Perkins and his crew for a long time. With Liam here, we’ll have better odds. The challenges have been weak lately, because those pussies are too afraid to handle the big ones.”

He smirks at me. “You a pussy, Liam?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “No, sir.”

He nods thoughtfully.

“Didn’t think so. Have you told Kylie we’ve met?”

I shake my head again.

“You’ve met?” Kylie asks, her face scrunched adorably in confusion.

Her father smiles, while I keep my mouth shut. Smart men live in silence. Talkers die mysteriously and their bodies never turn up. Now I’m wondering if they end up with the beards. I mean the...*bears*.

“I was on his land. Didn’t realize anyone had bought the Morris cabin until he showed up at that hunter’s shack in the woods to check out his new property. I was just keeping it up. Hated to see a building that nice run down with no care.”

It's a total lie he's telling, but obviously I don't point that out. He was sure as hell not just keeping the hunter shack up. In fact, I thought he was going to bring it down.

I just didn't know the identity of the woman he was with, or why he wanted it kept a secret.

Until the wedding.

Now I get it.

And my lips are forever sealed.

Kylie eyes her cousins. "Well? No threats from any of you lot either?" she demands.

They all shrug, unconcerned.

"I think you'd be less likely to try to beat on us if you were getting laid regularly," one of them says.

My confidence grows a little more when her father laughs at that instead of shooting me with one of those rifles near his head.

In fact, I'm feeling pretty damn good about this whole situation now. I'm not sure why Killian and Hale made it sound like this was going to be difficult. The Malones are far more agreeable than the Vincents were with Benson.

Kylie throws her hands up.

"Not even one threat? The Vincents did worse to Benson when he went for Lilah, and they *like* him."

Ha. Apparently she's thinking the same thing.

She flicks her gaze between all of them as they blink at her innocently.

"He did give up his home and city life to come out here and be with you. Heard all about that," her father says with a shrug. "Sounds like a good man to me."

I'm glad her father approves of my stalker tendencies.

Now I can appreciate their level of crazy a little more.

Fully relaxed with an extra dose of confidence, I take a seat on the last vacant recliner near the door. Kylie mutters

something about the men in her house being anticlimactic before disappearing into a back bedroom.

As soon as the door closes, all five men look at me, humor vanishing, and they lean forward, eyes narrowing.

All the light air is sucked out and replaced with thick, suffocating tension.

Okay, feeling less confident now.

“My girl went to LA last year, and came back distant, quiet, and then started hiding herself away,” George growls, and I swallow hard.

He gestures to the wall on the far side that is loaded down with canvases, then gestures to the hallway that has paintings lining every single inch of it.

“She only paints like that when she’s hurting. Blues don’t get used unless she’s miserable. I knew it was a boy. Bill said you came here from LA to chase a girl, then you kissed my girl. The way I see it, that boy must have been you.”

Thank fuck she didn’t tell him about Felicia.

“Yesterday, my girl was herself for the first time in a long time. Today, she comes traipsing in here without a speck of blue paint on her. You make sure she stays that way. I see one new painting with blue, and I’ll tear your limbs off one-by-one and feed them to the fucking bears, before I turn the rest of these goons loose on you.”

He gestures to the four cousins who are cracking their knuckles like a bad cliché, and rabidly eyeing me like they don’t want to be held back. Did the one on the left just growl at me?

“You tell her I threatened you, and I’ll break all the bones you need,” George Malone adds.

I nod in understanding, because I’m not really sure what else to say to that.

“I’ll know if you tell her. She gets all smug when we threaten people. I like to wind her up and make her feisty,

because my girl is happier when she's feisty," he adds with an oddly chipper tone.

I nod again. I'll agree to anything. Five-to-one odds are never good. Five-armed-to-one-unarmed odds are even worse.

"And one more thing," he says, eyeing the others in a silent-conversation kind of way.

They get up and walk out without having to be told. As soon as they walk out, shutting the door behind them, George Malone levels me with a cool, terrifying look. "One word to Kylie about who you saw me with, and I'll hang you up by your ankles and let the boys use you like a dart board until they get bored. You understand?"

"Never once considered saying a word," I tell him honestly.

He opens his mouth to speak again, possibly to threaten more body parts on me, when Kylie suddenly emerges with a bag over her shoulder, still wearing my clothes.

Her father suddenly starts laughing, shaking his head, his eyes on me.

"You don't say," he says, confusing the fuck out of me. "This one is a funny guy, Kylie. Keep him around."

I force a smile, trying to go along with his crazy charade, and Kylie rolls her eyes while scowling at him.

"You're a terrible excuse for an overprotective father," she grumbles.

He just grins and winks at her. "My girl can take care of herself," he says.

She turns toward me. Like a suicidal fool, when she smiles, I forget my life is at stake and smile back at her.

"You ready to turn into some troublesome woodland creatures?" she muses.

Now I'm just confused. Really.

"The first hit on the trooper is ours," Kylie calls over her shoulder, heading out the door.

“You kids have fun. Don’t get caught,” George says in a light tone, grinning at us.

Kylie walks out, and I turn around in time to see George’s fake smile vanish like it was an illusion all along. His eyes narrow and he mimes a throat-slicing gesture on his neck before pointing at me.

Right. Got it.

I just nod like a bobble-head doll—*because how the fuck else do you respond to that?*—and walk out, following Kylie, who hops in on the passenger side of my Jeep.

Then we go to be woodland nuisances.

Because every time I think I’ve reached the maximum capacity of weird, this town just gets weirder.

This is my Thursday.

Chapter 16

Wild Ones Tip #214

Don't ask questions. Just go with it.

Helmet may or may not be necessary.

KYLIE

“Hold this,” I tell Liam, handing him my bag before heading to the trooper car and popping the hood.

“What’re you doing?” He eyes my tool that is a handmade contraption with squirrel teeth.

The trooper is talking to some people near the docks at the bar. The bar that is boarded up like it’s been closed for several years, when only yesterday it was busy.

“Keep a lookout,” I tell him, gesturing to the side of the building that hides me from sight, but also causes me to lose sight of the trooper as I get to work on his car.

He goes to peer around the corner before looking back at me. “Seriously!” he whisper-yells. “What are you doing?”

“Have you ever watched Super Troopers?” I ask absently, running the tool over a battery cable. When it pops, I move onto another.

“Yeah,” he says, confused as he looks toward me.

“Forget everything you learned about troopers from that movie, because they’re actually—usually—pretty smart. Which means you can’t just cut the wires on a car. They’ll know a person did it. But, you make them think an animal did it, and they get really annoyed.”

I flash him a grin as I quietly shut the hood.

“Step one, pests gone wild on battery cords.”

He looks back around the corner, then hisses out a breath before darting toward me. I giggle while racing beside him through the short patch of woods to where his Jeep is parked.

“So that’s it?” he asks.

I shake my head as we both get in.

“Nope. Step two is make them think they’ve got a disease. That’ll come once the others arrive.”

“What kind of disease?” he muses.

I shrug as he cranks his Jeep and starts driving us away.

“Not shooting for anything in particular,” I tell him.

He just smiles contently as he continues to drive us toward his house, and I stare at him, wondering how in the world he’s taking everything so easily. I’m still trying to wrap my head around him being here.

I finally cut my gaze away when his grin grows, possibly noticing my less-than-subtle staring fit.

He turns onto his road, and I pick at my nails just to have something to do.

“I don’t have my painting supplies,” I finally say on an exhale, my nerves etching up the closer we get to his house. “I can’t be somewhere without my—”

“I have all the painting materials you could need. Also have a pottery wheel and plenty of supplies. Also have random shit everywhere in the garage-turned-shop that you could use for sculpture assembly. I’ve been collecting anything unique since you left, just in case you ever rolled back into my life and needed shit to do a sculpture with.”

The staring resumes as I study his grinning profile.

“Why?” is the only word that comes out of my mouth.

As he parks behind his cabin, he turns his eyes on me. “I told you already that I wanted you with me as often as possible. So I tried to get everything you could possibly want or need. I remember every detail of those three weeks like it

was yesterday. Every small fragment of information you shared was filed away and saved for later use.”

He suddenly turns and gets out of the Jeep, but I sit here an extra few seconds, breathing in and out, trying not to slide head first down that slippery slope.

He’s waiting patiently by the open back door when I finally get out and make my way to him.

It’s barely been a whole day since I found out he’s living in my town. I wasn’t supposed to have to figure out if I’m stubborn or stupid so soon.

“What about your family? Don’t they still live in LA?” I ask conversationally, trying to remind my heart that he has zero ties here and plenty of ties elsewhere as I walk inside his house.

That is full of my artwork.

In fact, only my artwork is hanging on the walls, which is weird, considering his extensive art collection he once had. I really wanted to say something earlier, but I was too caught off guard by it all to speak without being stupid.

Loki is proudly sitting in the main room as well, demanding attention from anyone who enters.

The door shuts, and I look over my shoulder to see him leaning against it, his eye serious as he stares at me.

“When I came up with that bit of technology I told you about, I suddenly had more money than I could ever spend. And it just kept coming in. Then I came up with more technology that changed the way phones are today. That meant even more money.”

The open-floor plan has the living room and kitchen open to each other, and I sit down at the bar on the living room side, watching him as he moves to the fridge on the kitchen side.

“You already told me you were rich. I was asking about ___”

“You were asking about my family because you think I’ll get homesick and return to them, and you don’t give a damn

about my money. I know,” he says quietly with his back still turned. “Hence the reason I’m in Tomahawk.”

He blows out a long breath as he pulls out two bottles of water, and he shuts the fridge door before moving to the other side of the bar across from me.

I take one of the bottles, opening it and taking a sip, as he continues.

“At first I was excited, and I wanted to give my family nice things. We’d never been close, but I thought this would bond us all. Stupid to look back and see how naïve I was.”

He laughs humorlessly as I grow confused.

“Anyway, I paid their bills. I gave them vehicles. I handed them credit cards. Eventually, it just became expected that I would finance their lives, but I never got anything in return. No family Christmases. No Thanksgiving dinners. Nothing. I’m almost thirty, so family seems to be more and more important the older I get, yet I couldn’t even have a Christmas dinner with mine. Then when I got hurt, I finally asked them for something. After years of paying for everything and giving them all they asked for, *I* asked *them* for something. You saw how that worked out. You were the only one there.”

Absently, I start peeling the label off the water bottle, unable to continue staring into his intense eyes, because I’m seconds away from believing he’s never leaving Tomahawk and launching myself at him like a crazy girl.

“I cut them off just before I moved out here. I’m sure they’re trying to call me or visit me now, but they don’t have my new number or know where I live anymore.”

My eyes shift up to see a sad smile on his lips.

“They’re adults. They can fend for themselves,” I assure him.

His grin grows. “I know. I’m not worried about them. They can start selling all the pointless things they’ve collected—with my money—over the years to sustain them for a while.”

“I doubt they’d believe you moved to Tomahawk,” I finally say just to cut the tension.

He laughs lightly, looking down, seeming almost boyish.

“When they realize how very serious this all is, they’ll try harder to track me down. I took precautions to cover up where I moved to, though. So that answers your question about my *family*. I want something real, Shirley. And you’re the only thing I’ve wanted for myself in too long to remember.”

Rabbit hole, here I come.

“I don’t do open relationships,” I decide to say. Might as well list all the things I won’t do. Far shorter list than the list of things I will do.

His grin grows. “I’m not in Tomahawk to be with anyone else. How many times do you need to hear that?”

“I’ll let you know when I come up with a ballpark figure,” I say with a straight face, causing his grin to continue to spread wider.

Someone knocks on his door, and I stand, mud flaking off me and tracking behind me as I walk, resuming the list. We both need showers.

“I’m a terrible cook,” I tell him as I open the door.

Josie Simon is there, and her eyes widen in her head as she holds a casserole dish in her hands. I love her momma’s chili casserole, so I grab the dish just before she squeaks a shrill sound and takes off running in the other direction.

Looking through the clear lid, a smile spreads over my lips. Definitely the chili casserole.

Shutting the door, I look to see Liam’s smile now taking up his entire face. “I’m an excellent cook,” he assures me, not commenting on Josie’s squeaky departure, as the sound of a car flying out of the driveway sets up some background noise.

He also pulls out a fire extinguisher and puts it on the counter, his lips twitching when I glare at it for a minute.

“I can’t be in the Vincent corner of crazy too many days in a row,” I go on, putting the dish on the bar. “Unless no one finds out.”

He leans forward as I lift the lid, and he hands me a fork that I happily accept.

Just as I put a forkful in my mouth, he says, “I recently bought some land on the Malone corner of crazy.”

I swallow painfully as he regards me with a smirk.

“My new cabin is being built as we speak. It’ll be about the same size, but it’ll be more personalized as far as tastes go,” he goes on.

I put down the fork, no longer hungry.

“You bought land on my side of the lake? And you’re building a cabin?”

He nods slowly. “Looks a lot like that one,” he says, gesturing with his head toward the picture on the wall that I painted of the cabin I’ve always dreamed of building. “Only bigger with extra room for painting. Or doing sculptures. I have a wood shop being put up. Things like that.”

He’s building a cabin. A cabin that I painted. On my corner of reckless.

Because Liam is here for me.

He might just be crazy enough to be serious about all this.

It’s like I keep hearing all the right words, and none of my arguments are saving me from making a huge mistake. I’ve never found a guy—outside of home—who was as crazy as I am.

And just like that, I’m an idiot.

Apparently *stupid* is the winner, and *stubborn* is decidedly the runner up.

I’m climbing over the bar in the next second, and he grabs me at the waist, jerking me to him as his lips crash against mine. His hands move to my hips, moving me to sit on

the edge so he can stand between my legs and devour me more thoroughly.

One of his hands slides into my hair, gripping a handful—something only he’s allowed to do. Not sure why I don’t mind him touching my hair.

I moan into his mouth as he lifts me off the bar, and my legs strap around his waist as he carries me through the house.

“You’re too good at saying the right things,” I murmur against his lips, expecting him to smile.

He drops me to a bed suddenly, coming down on top of me as the kiss breaks, and he stares directly into my eyes, nothing but seriousness on his face.

“Because I said a lot of the wrong things last time, and suddenly you were gone. You’re not too damn easy to get over.”

I end up being the one who grins as I pat his cheek. “I’ll show you some of my crazy later on. Not today, though.”

He looks so adorably confused, since that seems random. Just wait until he sees the artwork that shows the crazy I’m talking about; it won’t sound so random then.

Instead of questioning me, since that never gets him anywhere, he kisses me again, slowly this time, tasting every bit of me to see if I’m real or just a mirage. I kiss him the same way, wondering if I’ve jumped into a delusional fantasy of mine where Liam comes to Tomahawk to be with me.

Finally, I shove him off me, and he blinks like he’s trying to break out of a daze. Quickly, I pull his shirt off me, revealing the fact I never had a bra to put on.

His eyes immediately go to my chest, and I grin as I start shoving his boxers down my legs too.

“We can’t have sex with clothes on,” I point out.

He’s off the bed and tugging his shirt off in the next minute. I tell myself I’m only doing this because Liam just wants something he never had. Sex with me. Yep, it sounds ridiculous to me too, because what guy moves to *Tomahawk*,

of all places, just to have sex with some girl he hung out with for three weeks.

We're both crazy.

But I can't fall too soon, or my heart will be his to crush in less than an hour.

As soon as he's naked, I sort of gawk at him. He looks way better than I remember, and I didn't think that was possible. Pretty sure my memory was robbing me of how perfect his body is because it didn't want me running back to LA to see if he was healthy enough to satisfy my curiosity.

I crawl forward on the bed, and he watches me until I'm close enough for him to touch. The second I am, he has a hand in my hair again, and he's coming down on top of me as he pushes me back.

Our lips touch with more hunger this time, both of us wanting this a little more than what is probably healthy.

His hard body slides over mine, grinding against me, and my legs open wider in invitation, ready for both of us to get put out of our misery.

I'm not sure how long we lie like that, naked and just kissing, hands exploring each other like we've forgotten how right this all feels, not even minding all the dried mud. But when Liam breaks the kiss, his eyes search mine before his lips tug in a sideways grin.

"You have no idea how good it feels to finally have you back," he murmurs, causing my heart to stumble.

I'm almost too distracted and lost in this haze of ours when he starts pushing inside me, his lips back on mine and kissing me stupid.

"Condom," I finally manage to say, reality slapping back at me.

His head comes back, his body still partially intruding mine, and he cocks his head.

"You're off birth control?"

I slowly shake my head.

“But that doesn’t mean this should happen without a condom.”

Yeah, no. That’s a boundary. We cross that boundary, then that means we’re doing this for real. And if it’s real, then I’m going to be lost so damn fast...

Not that I tell him that.

He tries not to look disappointed, but clears his throat and pushes off me. He forces a smile, and says, “You’re right. That was stupid of me.”

I admit, I stare after him like a starved-for-sex woman as his gloriously naked body moves to the connected bathroom, and my gaze rakes over him all over again when he reemerges.

I don’t notice the condom box in his hand at first, because he’s sort of still, you know, really freaking hard. My eyes are otherwise occupied.

When I do look up, he’s smirking as he tears the condom wrapper open with his teeth. I’d be smirking too if I looked like that naked.

During his downed-to-a-bed time, he lost a lot of the definition he’s sporting now. I want to lick every inch of him and call him mine.

My eyes gravitate to where he’s rolling the condom on. Maybe there’s some lip-licking—from me.

He slowly lowers back down to me, and I grab him by the back of the neck, forcing him to kiss me again so I can forget how stupid crossing this threshold will be.

Sex is intimate when it’s with someone you care about. Look at Lilah. She had sex with her best friend, and now she’s married to him.

She may be in the midst of conceiving a litter right now because I wouldn’t put it past Penny to tamper with her birth control.

I forget about Lilah when Liam starts kissing a path down my throat, and my fingers dig into his shoulders, as my hips arch, desperate to feel him.

“We spent three weeks on foreplay, and almost a year fantasizing what this would be like. Please stop teasing me before I choose stubborn instead of stupid,” I murmur against his lips as they find mine again.

Without asking what that means, he reaches between us, and I feel him bumping against my entrance. That’s the only warning I get before he thrusts in deep, causing my breath to catch in my throat as my entire body tightens in anticipation.

Breaking the kiss, he lifts up just barely, and draws back before thrusting in again, going all the way in this time.

His forehead drops to mine as he releases a shaky breath, and my legs wrap around his waist as he visibly strains with effort. I feel stretched and surrounded, completely under his control as he curls around me, drawing back just a little and thrusting forward again.

He releases a tortured sound, and I grin as my nails rake across his back lightly.

Without useless words, he starts moving inside me, and my eyes roll back in my head as he kisses a trail from my neck to my lips before searing me with a mind-numbing kiss, all while his hips roll and put some really incredible pressure on my clit.

It’s not the frenzied, uncontrollable sex I expected. It’s slow, sensual, almost as though he’s worshiping my body with his. Each movement is calculated, drawing out maximum pleasure as he slowly sends me closer and closer to that edge.

My mind is mush. Absolute garbled mush.

One of his hands slides down my leg, lifting it higher around his waist as he starts fucking me from a new, even more mind-mushing angle.

He breaks the kiss, his head coming back as he stares directly into my eyes. It’s almost a tangible crackle of something between us in that moment. An artist would capture

the souls in our eyes at this exact second in time, paint two people far too different to be so lost to each other.

The hues and shadows would bring to life the romance, hiding our obsessive tendencies so it's even more romantic. There'd be a realness to it, while also an edge of fantasy.

His hand goes to my hair as his hips start thrusting more insistently, his rhythm growing speed and force. The added pressure along with him so deep inside me is all I can take.

I cry out, my eyes screwing shut as that heat and pressure coasts over me with tingles and sensation, my release so powerful it drains every ounce of energy I have. Everything on me wants to shudder, even as he starts fucking me harder, drawing it out as he chases his own.

My eyes lazily open, just in time to see his jaw clenched, his eyes full of fire, and his body strung as tight as possible before he suddenly stills, then thrusts in again.

Every muscle in his arms relaxes as he struggles to say upright, and his eyes roll back in his head before he drops exaggeratedly to my body, causing me to do that damn giggling thing again.

He starts kissing my cheek, slowly moving to my lips, and I run my hands through his hair, drawing him closer until our lips collide in a lazy kiss.

“So much better than I thought it could be,” he murmurs against my lips.

My heart is doing the fluttery thing it tends to do around him.

It's doing that thing where it's trying to latch on once more.

Then again, I'm not sure if it ever let him go. What now?

He pulls out of me, and I watch as he staggers to the bathroom. “Give me five minutes, and I'll be ready to go again,” he calls over his shoulder.

Then...I giggle again.

For fuck's sake.

“Then I need a shower so I can stop smearing dried mud all over your fancy bed,” I say with a respectable, non-giggly tone.

“I have more sheets,” he calls from the bathroom.

Just as I enter, he's about to walk out, and he grabs ahold of both sides of the doorframe, blocking me as he towers over me and smiles down at me like the wicked wolf.

I might as well get that boob tattoo. He's going to be the death of me.

Trying to seem impervious to the super strength sex appeal, I duck by him, head to the shower, and...squeal like an idiot when he's suddenly lifting me off the ground, his front pressed to my back. I start laughing when he carries me into the shower and turns on a spray of ice-cold water.

I'm still laughing lightly when it starts to warm up and his mouth comes down on mine, kissing me stupid even as we both smile like idiots.

It turns into a really dirty shower. Yeah, I'm still lame like that.

Chapter 17

Wild Ones Tip #491

Sometimes people think our crazy is contagious.

Just know the effects aren't usually permanent.

LIAM

My arm stretches out, reaching and reaching for Kylie...until I touch the edge of my massive bed and realize she's not anywhere on the cold side of the mattress.

Darting awake, I look around, seeing her boots gone.

Pushing the covers off, I start looking through the house, calling out her name. Of course she's gone.

Groaning, I run a hand through my hair.

I really thought after last night, she was mine. Which is stupid, because I knew it wouldn't possibly be that easy before I ever moved out here.

There's no note, and she doesn't have a number to call.

Frustrated, I pull on some clothes, grab my keys, and start to go search for her. However, when I open my door, Bill is standing there with none other than George Malone.

I've seen this movie.

This is the part where the obsessed city guy who stalked the girl gets killed and dumped in the lake.

"Good!" Bill says with a wide smile on his face. "You're up! Challenge committee is meeting in ten minutes. You can ride with us."

George has his eyes narrowed as he looks past me and into my house.

"Kylie here?" he finally asks, his eyes meeting mine.

Not awkward at all.

“Nope,” is the only response I give while walking out, moving between them as I head toward the dock. “So what happens at these meetings? And how much warning is there usually?”

“It’s always spontaneous and there’s a lot of arguing. This year, we finally get the best challenge passed, because we have you,” Bill says.

He claps my shoulder.

Benson drives by in the new ski boat he just bought, since Lilah’s boat finally crapped out and she took his boat as a wedding present to herself. Killian and Hale are with him, and I half want to slap them for not being the ones to come get me.

Killian and Hale turn to give me a telltale grin when they see the beastly Malone right on my heels. Dicks. This is because I canceled steak night to spend all night with Kylie.

Without thinking too much about it, I hop down onto George Malone’s hover boat, wondering if I should leave a note for someone to find in case I go missing.

Refusing to look at him again, I concentrate on Bill, hoping to get some insight into what kind of madness I’m about to walk into.

“It’s a very classy gathering,” is his only lie.

“For the last time, Hale, we are not going to wear loin cloths as a challenge! It’s not decent!” Vick—the only cop in this town—groans. “No one wants to see balls all the time.”

“My balls are beautiful,” Hale deadpans.

“You knew the ones with tiny dicks would never go for this,” Killian tells his brother dryly. Then reaches down and grabs his crotch. “They’d have to be put to shame by us, then

all those desserts and casseroles would start coming to the Wild Ones instead of the boring ones.”

Vick palms his face, as Joey starts arguing that his dick is the biggest dick he’s ever seen, even if he’s not a Wild One. Paul gets in on this argument, also raving about his ‘massive stallion’ that has his girlfriend ‘*wild*’ with glee.

I just slouch in my seat, trying not to draw attention to myself as I soak in all the crazy around me.

“This is why we banned Wild Ones from these meetings. Why did you let them back in?” another man asks. “There’s a reason they can’t all be in the same place at the same time for very long.”

A guy—a Wild One from the Nickel family, I think—makes a sound that eerily mimics a jaguar’s battle cry, and another guy falls out of his chair.

The jaguar impersonator snorts a laugh and bumps fists with the guy on his left, who is also laughing.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, someone get them out of here. This is getting ridiculous,” another man groans.

“I’m cool with the loin cloth challenge,” Kai Wilder states absently, a massive knife in his hand as he shaves the head of his brother in front of him.

Because publicly shaving your brother’s head with an apparently super sharp machete is a completely normal thing to do while having a town challenge committee meeting.

“Because you’re a Wild One,” Killian says with a shrug. “And they don’t have *the balls* to go through with it,” he goes on, gesturing around at a few red-faced, angry men.

“*This* is why they were banned,” a bearded man gripes as he gestures to Hale, who is pretending to hump the face of the man getting his head shaved by a machete, causing an eruption of laughter from everyone around.

Even I have to restrain a smile when the half bald guy reaches for Hale, and misses by inches, not giving a damn

there's a knife close to his head as he leaps to his feet and scrambles to grab the quick-footed Vincent.

Seeing a guy with half a head of hair and half a bald head curse as he chases Hale, slinging shaving cream everywhere in the process...well, it's not something you witness every day.

Hale laughs as the bigger guy chases him, and Kai Wilder wipes the machete blade off on his jeans to remove the shaving cream.

"What's the vote? Who wants to do the loin cloth challenge?" Vick says on an exasperated sigh.

Only the Wild Ones, excluding Benson, raise their hands.

"So that's a no. Onto the next challenge suggestion," Vick says as he reads a card. Then he groans as his eyes come up to meet Bill's. "Again, Bill? Seriously?"

Hale is still running circles, wearing down the half bald guy who is struggling for breath. Kai sticks his foot out, tripping Hale, and giving Half-Baldy a chance for a split second, until the nimble Vincent is back on his feet and out of reach again.

Bill rubs his hands together like a giddy teenage girl as he perks up beside me. "I say put it to a vote," Bill states confidently.

"With the Wild Ones, he'll get the votes he needs. Them and that new city boy that stalked Kylie," a man snaps as he jumps to his feet on the aisle across from us.

Ah, great. Everyone knows I'm a lunatic. Awesome.

Weirdly, no one even bothers looking over at me, as though it's a casual thing to stalk a girl these days.

Only in Tomahawk.

Half-Baldy finally gives up chasing the ever energetic Hale Vincent, and finally drops back down, smearing a wad of shaving cream on his head again as Kai whips his machete back out.

Since they're both in the section allocated for Wilders, I can only assume that's his brother.

I don't know that I'd trust anyone with a blade that size near my head, but certainly not my family.

"He's been trying to get this passed for three years! And it's ridiculous! People will laugh at us!" the man shouts.

"Sit down, Chester. Your weak challenges have tired us all. It's time for some more fun," Bill argues.

This...is why I signed up. I grin as I sit back and continue to take it all in. I'm more of an observer than a participator.

"His last challenge lasted nine damn years!" Chester roars.

"And it was the best challenge this committee ever had, because you started outnumbering us when you got the Wild Ones booted."

"George never left, so I didn't get rid of all the Wild Ones," Chester spits, glaring at George like he's somehow offended him by existing.

"George is part of the founding families. He can't be excluded," a man says dismissively from close by. No one seems bothered by the tension. It's...again...normal to them.

"George thinks it's time for a bigger, better challenge, and George believes Bill is right," George says, stating the words flatly before "scratching" his cheek with his bird finger that is aimed at Chester.

I grin broader.

It's so ridiculous you can't help but be entertained when it's real-life action rolling out in front of you.

"How is this even *manly*?" Chester screeches.

"How can you ask that in such a girly voice?" Hale volleys, causing Chester's blood pressure to become obvious when he turns a very alarming shade of red.

"It's romantic, and if Chester got laid by anything but his calloused hand, he'd understand how fucking manly you have

to be in order to be romantic,” Bill says with so much conviction and pride that I’m instantly intrigued.

He’s never once told me what I had to vote for. Just said whatever he or George put to a vote better get voted for by me. I didn’t bother asking about the consequences.

They’re like the quirky rat pack in this place.

“We’ll be laughable fools if we go through with this,” Chester goes on.

“It has to be put to a vote,” Bill says with his fist raised toward Chester.

Chester brings up both fists next to his short white beard. “The Wild Ones shouldn’t get a vote!” Chester shouts.

I expect violence, so I shift over in my seat a little. However, this standoff goes on for a few minutes, both of them arguing, and I notice some people even yawn.

“We like romance too!” Hale decides to argue...weirdly. “We even like poetry and shit.”

“Roses are red. Violets are blue. God made us pretty. What happened to you?” Killian drawls, swiveling his head toward Chester, who glares at him.

I’m actually lost now, since I don’t know how we went from talking about a *manly* challenge to talking about poetry and romance. I really hope it’s not beard related.

I legit can’t grow a beard.

“The Wild Ones did the beard challenge for nine long years. The Wild Ones ended the nightmarish challenge as well. So they deserve to be in the challenge committee until they accidentally blow something up or break it beyond repair,” Vick says on another long-suffering sigh, as though he’s explained this numerous times.

“Then let’s vote,” Bill states emphatically. “Stop wasting time.”

“Just explain to me why this is romantic and manly?! It’s feminine and degrading!” Chester argues.

“My Penny has wanted to live in a musical since she saw Funny Face, though it’s only for the dancing and not the singing—be glad for that. The least I can do is make her dream come true. All the women would love it.”

“Lilah won’t,” Benson grumbles from my other side. “I have to do this for nothing.”

Do what?

The suspense has me looking like a sucker on the edge of my seat, my eyes bouncing like a tennis ball as I wait to figure out just how crazy and insanely dangerous this challenge is going to be, while also wondering why Chester is horrified by it.

And what do musicals have to do with anything?

“The chicks will totally dig it,” says the balding Wilder, shrugging a shoulder, even as Kai Wilder continues to shave his head one long, deadly swipe at a time.

“I fail to see how this is a wise thing to—”

Those words are cut off by something that sounds too damn much like a real grizzly bear, as one of the other Nickel brothers opens his mouth like he’s roaring. Because he is roaring. That bear sound just came from him.

The guy talking ends his words on a squeal, and both Nickel brothers break into hysterics.

“Damn Wild Ones,” Vick grumbles too close to the microphone, pinching the bridge of his nose. Without looking, he adds, “Fine. Who here wants to river dance every weekend ___”

“And Holiday,” Bill interjects, holding up a finger as he interrupts Vick.

I’m sorry...river dance?! What the hell?

Vick takes a calming breath before gritting his teeth and continuing. “Every weekend and *holiday*, whenever they hear Lindsey Stirling playing over the town speakers, who wishes to vote that all men must river dance?”

“Why does it have to be a female violinist?” a peculiar looking short fellow asks from the front. “I play violin too.”

“She has more talent in her pinky nail than you do in your entire body,” Bill says dismissively. “Only the best for our women,” he adds.

“Agreed,” George Malone says from the other side of Benson.

“Just vote,” Vick grumbles.

Bill’s hand raises. Several other hands go in the air.

My hand lifts reluctantly, because I can’t fucking river dance. This is *not* why I signed on. Did someone miss the part where I’m just a nosy observer?

Bill starts counting hands anxiously, and Chester is counting as well, their voices and counting out of sync and tumbling over each other.

“It’s a tie, so it doesn’t count!” Chester shouts, at the same time Bill shouts, “We win by two! River Dance Challenge accepted!”

Then the two turn and glare at each other, both arguing the other one can’t count, and then take education-quality jobs.

I sometimes wonder what normal people are doing in their lives now that I’ve moved to Tomahawk, land of the crazy people who think *only* four families are crazy.

Vick mutters a curse and starts counting hands, and finally says, “Majority vote by *one*.”

Chester is an angry guy, I realize, when he turns his scowl on me.

“Consequences,” Bill happily states, causing a melody of groans to emerge. “If you’re in town when the music plays, and you don’t river dance, you have to swim across the lake in a tutu while singing *Girls Just Want To Have Fun*.”

“That’s to keep Chester from breaking it. He’d never sing or wear a tutu,” Benson tells me when I give him a quizzical look. “This one will last another decade.”

His words are followed by another groan as he shakes his head and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“That’s still breaking the consequence rule. He had the lake the last time,” Chester argues.

“I added a tutu and a song,” Bill defends.

“It’s different enough,” Vick states dismissively.

Chester’s angry glare returns to me.

“No matter. Eventually the city slicker will be done with the Malone girl the second one of those apes breaks his nose, and he’ll go back home where he belongs. Then we can veto his vote. That will end the challenge without consequence,” Chester states dismissively.

“You saying you want my girl’s heart broken?” George Malone snaps before I can point out that I’m not going anywhere.

“I’m saying he won’t stick around. Just like that fancy ex-wife of yours!”

With a Tarzan battle cry, George Malone—the hulking beast of a man—propels himself over a row of chairs, running right at the older guy. One of the younger guys jumps up, taking the brunt of his tackle.

I slip out when the entire room starts pulling them apart, only to notice Hale sucker punch Kai Wilder, who kicks a leg out so fast Hale can’t stop it. His foot nails Hale in the balls, and Hale drops to the ground, while Kai finishes up his brother’s newly bald head at last and calmly puts the machete away.

“Stop fighting, you morons! The damn troopers are here, and I will arrest you both again!” Vick threatens. “Don’t make me do it. I’m going to count to three!”

Chester stumbles backwards, wringing his hand out after hitting the solid mass that is George Malone.

“One!”

George shoves off one of Chester's twenty-year-old bodyguards.

“Two! Don't you make me keep counting! I'll do it!”

The other Malones wrangle George back, being the only ones capable of doing so, as they remind him he hates the town cell. Just one cell. The other person will have to be confined to the public restroom. I read this in the “newly revised” pamphlet they gave us at the beginning of the meeting.

“Damn it, three!”

Vick goes stalking toward them with handcuffs out, and a squirt-bottle of water, spritzing them both in the face as they cough and curse.

This is my Friday morning.

Chapter 18

Wild Ones Tip #270

If we won't call you a cunt, it's because you lack warmth and depth.

In other words, we like people in a weird way.

KYLIE

“So you just left him in bed?” Krysta asks as she shuts the hood of the trooper’s car.

I’m half-assing my lookout task, seeing the troopers cursing the ants that are all over them, running as they try to strip down to their...plaid boxers. I could have lived without ever seeing those hairy backs. But the one trooper has a rather nice, hairless, somewhat alluring back.

It’s not Liam’s back.

Damn Liam.

Damn perfect body.

Lilah’s right—he’s freakishly gorgeous, and I’m sure as hell not.

“What if I’m just a phase? It’s all because he thinks I’m *real*—whatever that means. I was just something different that landed inside his stagnant lifestyle. It’s like finding a new series to watch, but then getting bored when it starts getting a little too...out there for ya. You know? And this town will get more out there, eventually. And I’ll get more out there.”

“By ‘out there’ you mean *crazy*, right?” Nila Wilder asks from under the other car.

“Exactly.”

Krysta moves on to the tires, putting two nails in one, and four nails in another. “Daddy’s making me pay for these damn

tires, by the way,” Krysta grumbles under her breath. “He said it’s not PC to make them pay for it themselves.”

Lilah watches out for Nila’s side as she bats a hand in my direction.

“I don’t think that’s what PC means,” Nila says from somewhere.

“He’s crazy about you, Kylie. You should have seen the way he talked about you when he first spilled the beans about why he moved to Tomahawk. It isn’t just a passing phase,” Lilah argues. “If he’d told me your name then, I would have shoved you to him sooner.”

“But—”

“They’re coming back!” Lilah hisses, jogging in her combat boots, and jumping over Nila’s legs as she runs toward the back of the car.

Krysta and I both grab Nila’s feet by her hiking boots and drag her out from under the car, causing her to hiss—because the gravel and all.

She darts to her feet, and we all laugh as we reach the woods, moving through them and far away from the troopers who will be cursing their bad luck—*A.K.A. us*—shortly.

They need to go. There’s nothing to do in town when the damn troopers are here. The grocery store is even closed.

“They’re not staying in town this time, so the fake disease heist is off. Gotta be crafty this time,” Krysta says, then points a finger at me. “Back on topic: If a guy gave up his life, chased me here—of all places—and was totally cool with just how crazy my family and I are, I’d give him a ring.”

I snort, and Lilah outright laughs. She’s so full of shit.

“To be fair, your family would send almost any guy running away, so that means—”

“That means I don’t have to worry about someone ambushing me with a wedding and asking when my babies are going to be born,” she quips, causing Lilah to scowl, but the

scowl fades to a smile, which pisses her off, so she looks away to hide her very expressional face from us.

“I think Lilah Vincent is happily married,” Nila mocks.

“Speaking of your family,” Lilah says, ignoring Krysta’s juvenile kissing noises, “aren’t your brothers supposed to be helping you today?”

Krysta rolls her eyes. “Tate and Porter are at the challenge committee meeting. I told my other two siblings there was going to be a comet crash if they didn’t do the rain dance in reverse until the sun sets.”

Don’t ask. Krysta’s family would take too long to explain. There’s a reason their family flag has a squirrel on it...

“You’re letting her distract us from explaining why she stepped out on Liam before he woke up,” Nila, the dead girl walking, says with a coy little grin on her face.

“You should have heard the way Nila talked when she met Liam,” I decide to say, the little dig causing that angry wrinkle to form on her brow.

She flips me off without looking at me, and I laugh to myself.

“Gibberish? Was it gibberish? Why did I miss it?” Lilah groans as we step onto the road, beginning our half a mile walk to the section of lake where we tied our boats off. I rode with Lilah, and Krysta rode with Nila. Since only two of us are technically allowed to be together at the same time.

Town rules are a pain in the ass when you have besties from all four families of Wild Ones.

“We really are being distracted. What’s the deal, Kylie?” Krysta, dead girl number two says.

I open my mouth to speak, when we hear a car coming. Nila shoves Krysta at the same time I shove Lilah, both of us reacting before those two can do it to us. They land in a heap, rolling down the ditch bank, as the car passes.

I'm almost positive that mountain lion screech is not actually a mountain lion, but a very pissed off Krysta Nickel instead.

I give a little wave to Janice Holland, and she starts to slow down, no doubt wanting some juicy gossip since she heard Liam is here for me. I'm ready to tell her he's my stalker and he's crazy over me, so she'll report it to all the nosy assholes with pretty daughters who have way too much interest in Liam.

But...she gasses it when she notices Nila at my side.

"I don't think she likes you. No way would she pass up the chance to grill me about Liam if you weren't standing right here."

"She's terrified of me," Nila says with a proud grin.

"We're going to kill you," Lilah groans, and I turn to see her climbing out of the ditch as Krysta pulls twigs from her hair and glares at us.

"It was us or you. I'm sure you understand since you two sent us into the ditch the last time that happened," Nila says with a grin, not even bothering to look back as she struts down the road in her ripped up jeans, raccoon tank top, and mountain boots.

I'm in my "feed the beaver" shirt, because it's just that kind of day.

We make it to the boats without anyone else going ditch-diving, and Krysta and Nila get boarded on Nila's boat, while Lilah and I get on hers. As they pull away, Lilah takes the driver's seat and swivels to face me when I get us untied.

"Am I taking you home or to Liam's?" she asks, a challenging glint in her eyes. "He's too much man to fit in that tiny little apartment of yours."

What she's really asking is if I'm a coward or fearless.

Which is really unfair. She knows I hate being called a chicken. That's how I have that rose tattoo on the crack of my ass. It was really awkward for Jenny—the ex tattooist—and

myself when I got that done all because Krysta called me a chicken.

“Actually, I want to go somewhere else,” I tell her, digging out the piece of paper in my pocket that I swiped from Liam’s bedside table.

“What’s this?” Lilah asks as she reads the address.

“Just drive, Lilah.”

“To an address? I don’t even know my own address.”

I blink at her. “It’s about a mile away from my dad’s. Just drive.”

“So he’s building this?” Lilah asks as we both stare—gawk, really—at the cabin in the making.

There’s a lot more progress than Liam alluded to.

He must have paid a small fortune to get a cabin almost completely built—especially one this size—in such a small amount of time. He’d need half an army to do this, and tons of material. All the electrical even seems to be done.

The inside is still raw, which means it’ll still be a while before it’s done, and there aren’t any doors or windows, but... the outside is almost finished.

And I can’t even...

“And he’s modeled it off your painting?”

“Yeah.”

“And you still wonder if he’s in Tomahawk to stay?”

“This is pocket change to him. No monetary amount can be considered a commitment from him. You should have seen his home in LA. If he can leave that—”

“I get it, Kylie,” Lilah says, interrupting me quietly as we both walk into Liam’s cabin.

My hand goes over the polished cedar, smiling softly as I move inside.

“Your mom left. Your cousins’ parents both left. You have trust issues. Understandably so. But—”

“So help me, if you say I need to follow my heart, I will punch you in the tit,” I warn her.

“Which tit?” she asks seriously.

“The left one, of course. I know you favor the right.”

She nods like that’s acceptable.

“Anyway, I was going to say—”

“He’s moving fast, Lilah,” I state quietly, looking around at the large rooms as I take a deep breath.

“Which is perfect, because you move fast,” she reminds me. “You and I were best friends immediately. However, you struggle to even attempt to make friends outside of the Wild Ones. You keep your circle too tight because you don’t *want* to risk getting attached too fast. You won’t even get another pet since that hamster died.”

“Because I become painfully invested and attached,” I remind her.

“And Liam is the first guy to ever get too close, and he did it way quicker than you planned for,” she goes on. “Which should tell you something. Aunt Penny said she was stuck to Uncle Bill after meeting him once.”

I say nothing as I sit down in what I assume is going to be the living room, avoiding the lumber piles and haphazard tools lying around with no particular order.

Lilah sits down beside me, nudging my shoulder with hers, and I hold my silence.

“Give it a few weeks, Kylie. See if what’s between the two of you is what you’ve built it up to be in your heads. What can it really hurt?”

“It can hurt *everything*,” I point out dryly, trying not to show any emotion.

She lost her parents, and moved forward. My mother walked away, but she's still alive. Even if she did move on to another family and another life before writing us off like we didn't even exist.

Our losses have different consequences. And I'm starting to think Lilah is more badass than me. Not that I'd ever tell her that.

"He had a girlfriend he forgot about," I remind her softly.

"And he had a crazy girl with an unhealthy addiction to boots for less than a month, and hasn't been interested in another vagina since," she's quick to retort. "I've witnessed that first hand."

My smile spreads before I can stop it, because now that I think back to her questioning whether or not her neighbor was into guys and wondering if she could watch the show, and it of course makes me feel good to know he showed zero interest in anyone else.

"Everyone always called my parents reckless. I mean, they started an entirely new corner of crazy just to toss my dad in. Then my mom joined him, and it was...magically insane," Lilah states randomly.

I laugh, thinking back to how wild her parents were. And how they were always together.

"She always said he was the biggest risk she ever took, because he consumed her. Dad said the same thing about her," Lilah goes on, a sad smile on her lips as she leans back on her hands and stares out the hole where the window will be.

After a beat, she turns her head to face me again, eyes serious for a change.

"You can't be reckless in every aspect of your life because you enjoy the adrenaline and the rush life gives you, then be overly cautious in the one section of your life that could give you the biggest rush you've ever had. It's hypocritical, for one, and you hate hypocrisy. Trust me when I say it's more fun to have someone always in your corner and at your back. You're not a coward, Kylie Malone. Don't use

your mother as an excuse to wall yourself off. Otherwise, how are you any different from the people who always point out we're going to die young?"

I groan as I glare at her and hate her a little in this moment. She grins as she wiggles her eyebrows, knowing she's winning.

"You're really not the best person in the world to take advice from, considering you're a Vincent."

She shrugs.

"I'm married now, so my relationship advice is totally legit," she deadpans.

We both start laughing after a moment of silence, and I sigh as I push back up to my feet and offer her a hand up.

She takes it, and I of course drop her back to her ass, turning and walking out while she curses my back.

"Hey, does this boat seem slower to you since Benson gave it to me?" she asks as we reach her boat again.

I answer as we get boarded once more in less than a few seconds.

"Not one bit," I lie, knowing Benson did something to make it slower.

"It says sixty but it feels like it's going thirty at the most. And I could swear that it used to do ninety, if you had enough weight in here. But it tops out at sixty, which again, feels like thirty."

"It's because it's finally yours," I lie again, grinning without her seeing it. "Nothing is ever as good as it seems once you finally have it."

It's a loaded statement that has her rolling her eyes at me when I look over at her after untying the ropes.

"I can assure you, some things are even better when they're yours," she argues.

As she cranks the boat and gasses it, she curses, staring at the topped out speed of sixty, which really is thirty. Crafty

husband she has.

“Just not everything is better,” she grumbles, pouting as we coast down the lake.

I wonder which category Liam falls under.

“Give it a few weeks,” she calls out, her voice carrying over the steady roar of the loud motor. “Spend all the time with him you can until you two either fall hard or hate each other. Call it dating boot camp, that way you can’t have this same debate with yourself daily.”

She cuts the wheel, heading into town instead of driving me to Liam’s.

“After a few weeks, you can decide if his crazy matches your crazy,” she says as we dock.

“Okay. Why are we here?”

She holds up her index finger after she finishes tying off. “One, because you need to pack a bag. That shirt is mine, by the way. Don’t forget it.”

“It’s mine,” I dutifully point out. “You borrowed it like a year ago and didn’t return it.”

“After a year, I think that makes it mine. Anyway, you need clothes. And also, you need to see Vick.”

“Why?” I ask her.

She rolls her eyes. “Because you’re going to be in the Dead Chipmunk corner for a few weeks or more, until Liam’s fancy cabin gets built.”

Ah. Gotcha.

Tomahawk problems.

Chapter 19

Wild Ones Tip #109

We're the reason the gene pool needs a lifeguard.

KYLIE

A bag on my back and a lot of worry in my stomach, I walk briskly toward Liam's cabin. Figures I'd finally commit to jumping in head first on the deep end, only to have my destructive cousins show up and finally try to scare the sexy prick off.

What are they doing here?!

"Good luck," Lilah calls out, laughing as she drives away and leaves me to deal with this madness on my own.

Walking much faster than normal, I step inside, and see... all my cousins eating steaks with two Vincents and one half-drunk Liam as he sips a beer at his kitchen island.

It's a massive three-room, open-floor plan, so the dining room is open and visible next to the kitchen, where Liam is hanging by himself, just enough distance from them to prove he *needs* distance.

That's not a good sign.

The guys don't even look up from their food, as Liam pushes off from the island, leaving the beer behind. I hurry to meet him halfway so I can get him alone and away from them. He's about to let me know how pissed he is, and then my cousins are going to flip out.

He really needs to wait until we're alone before he bitches at me for—

He lifts me and presses his lips to mine before I can even process what's going on, and my arms go around his neck as I melt into him.

“Told you she’d be back. You owe me fifty,” Killian draws.

“You still owe me seventy-five from our last bet,” I hear Jason grumbling.

“And you owed me two hundred from the bet before that,” Killian reminds him dryly.

Since Liam’s tongue starts making me stupid as he presses me back against the wall and continues to kiss me, I can’t understand the rest of the words they’re saying.

It all melts to background noise as I smile against Liam’s lips. This is definitely not the silent treatment or angry outburst I was expecting, since I didn’t even bother to leave a note when I snuck out.

He lowers me to my feet, blowing out a breath of what I think is relief. Then...the background noise volume cranks up.

“Me? *Your* uncle is the one who blew up Chester’s tractor when he was twenty. Chester was like forty then, and he still hasn’t forgotten it. He’s the reason they couldn’t get challenges passed.”

“Do I want to know?” I muse, staring up at Liam as he drops his head back.

“I made the mistake of asking why Chester Perkins—*who could second as Santa*—hates George Malone. They’ve been arguing over it for *three hours* now.”

He says the *three hours* way louder than anything else.

I stifle a smile.

“Because it had nothing to do with the tractor. It was the barn getting knocked down by *your* daddy that one time some idiot gave him the keys to a backhoe. It was the same year, and Chester believed it was Uncle George again, and your daddy wouldn’t tell the truth, because he got in trouble for something else Uncle George had done. *That’s* why he hates Uncle George.”

“That was a terrible question,” I decide to point out.

“Bullshit!” Jason shouts at the table, not at us.

Liam arches an eyebrow. “You think? It led to them following me home, talking about all the ways multiple men somehow pissed off Chester, and had me cooking enough steaks to feed a small village. I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll just ask you from now on, even if you do struggle to provide knowledge to non-locals who really are local because they now own two properties in Tomahawk.”

He holds up two fingers and mouths the word, “*Two*,” again, before grinning.

“You’re okay with all the kissing?” I hear Hale Vincent asking.

I roll my eyes as Liam turns to face my heathen cousins, who are crowded around Liam’s massive table that now looks small amongst giants.

Jason shrugs. “Uncle George said we couldn’t break anything yet.”

“So Dad *did* make a threat?” I ask, a smug sense of satisfaction rising.

Eric shakes his head. “Nah. Just said we couldn’t do anything unless he fucks up hard. We just wanted to haze him into the family, but since he’s sort of scrawny, we’re worried we’ll break something, which will break the rules.”

My smugness flits away like ash.

Liam turns away, shaking his head. He’s not scrawny at all. Well, next to normal people.

Jared, who is usually my quietest and most unpredictable cousin, and who is marginally smaller than the rest of them as far as bulk goes, just toys with his trimmed beard, not speaking.

Liam breaks up the silence by saying, “I tried to get your father out of jail, by the way, but Vick said they weren’t under arrest, just in a ‘time out’ until they could both calm down. Chester also got arrested and was locked in a bathroom.”

When people say this stuff out loud, it makes it sound much crazier than it is when you're living in the moment.

Liam's lips are curved in amusement, taking all this in a weirdly comfortable stride.

My eyes drift around the room, moving toward the living room, and I notice my sculpture is no longer in view. Frowning, I start to ask, when Liam answers like he's inside my head.

"Jared almost broke it, so I moved it to the bedroom and locked it up."

My lips twitch.

"Who puts something right in the walk way?" Jared asks absently, turning his drink up.

"It was off to the side. You just forgot how to walk," Killian intervenes.

"Okay, that's it. All of you out," I say, pointing at the door.

"We swiped two pies from Aunt Penny," Hale says as though that's a suitable argument.

"I'm good with going. The pie comes with us, though," Killian says, already carrying a pie out the door. Hale follows him with the other pie in his hand, not even lingering around long enough to tell anyone *bye*.

My cousins just give me a blank stare.

"Out!" I say again, much louder this time.

They just grin, not feeling the least bit threatened by me since I don't have a gun on hand. A paintball gun, that is. Or Dad. It always helps to have Dad.

"Liam was just telling us how you two met earlier," Jared drawls.

Ah, hell.

"Says you two went skydiving and you saved his life and stuff," Jason adds.

“Does Uncle George know you went skydiving without us?” Heath asks, smirking at me.

“It was free! I couldn’t pass up *free*,” I state defensively, rolling my eyes.

“Yeah. Apparently it’s no big deal that my chute malfunctioned, or that I almost died, or that you saved my life and helped a complete stranger inside his home where you’d never been before. It only mattered that you broke some pact about never skydiving without them,” Liam states dryly, picking up his abandoned beer before dropping to sit in a chair near the back of the table.

“I repeat: It was *free*,” I remind them.

“Yet you’re still holding that rafting trip against us, constantly threatening to tell Uncle George about it” Eric goes on.

Oh, those assholes. “That was different. You guys planned that trip without us, and waited until we visited Shasta about my art until you—”

I stop halfway through my rant when I see Jared arch an eyebrow and smirk at me, and I swallow down the other half.

“Fine,” I bite out. “If it’ll get you out of here, I’ll consider us even. As long as you don’t tell Dad about skydiving, I won’t tell him about your planned-to-leave-us-out rafting trip, all because you guys didn’t want us there while you tried to pick up girls. It’s not our fault we happen to carry around embarrassing stories.”

I cross my arms over my chest as Jared stands.

“I think our work here is done,” he finally states, a triumphant gleam in his eyes.

He’s quiet unless he’s being a royal smartass.

My other cousins all stand as well, all of them moving toward the door. Liam just drinks his beer, a ghost of a smile flirting with his lips as he stares over the rim at me.

“By the way, it was Eric who broke the toilet and not me,” Jason stage whispers before running out.

Liam just continues to hold that hint of a smile, not commenting as they shut the door behind them.

“I’m sorry they invaded your day.”

“I’m sorry you’re going to have to see me try to river dance at some point,” he states flatly as he puts his beer down. “I can promise you that will be twice as painful to endure.”

My eyebrows rise, because that’s random even by my standards.

“What?” I ask, as he pushes a plate away from him.

My cousins didn’t even bother cleaning up after themselves.

“Am I going to wake up and find you missing again in the morning, or does the bag you brought carry better news?” he asks, instead of answering.

“I brought more clothes,” I tell him with a shrug as I kick at the bag I dropped earlier when he started kissing me and making me stupid.

He fights a smile as he continues to study me too intensely.

Then he suddenly reaches into his back pocket and retrieves a phone. I walk over and take the seat next to him.

“I’ll clean up all these dishes, by the way,” I state uncomfortably as he does whatever he’s doing on his phone.

He shakes his head. “I can get the dishes,” he says absently.

That’s the closest to a domestic couple conversation I’ve ever had in my life.

He looks up and pushes the phone in front of my face, and I frown as I take it, reading whatever gibberish is on the screen.

Monday—

Charity breakfast at the Four Seasons—tax write off.

Personal shopper will be dropping off new suits at 10:00 AM sharp.

Conference call—lunch—with Landon Jones about software innovation.

Motivational speaker speech rehearsal.

Dinner reservations with Jamie Klen and his wife for some sort of celebration—find out what it is we're celebrating, exactly.

Exhibit opening.

After dinner drinks with Calvin Lawson to discuss investing in his documentary on oil or some other environmental issue—tax write off.

The more I read, the more confused I get. There are times beside each individual line of randomness.

“I can't say I understand any of this, since I don't know any of these people or things you're talking about,” I tell him, feeling sort of stupid, since it's clear he must expect me to know.

I slide the phone back across to him, and he pockets it with a smirk on his perfect lips.

“Neither do I,” he says with a shrug. “And that was just my Monday. That's what it looked like every single day from the day I made my first big paycheck, until the day you crashed into my life.”

I frown. “I'm not sure if I'm supposed to apologize or accept gratitude right now.”

He laughs while looking down, seeming a little uncertain of himself for the first time since we *crashed* back into each other's lives.

“I chased a dream. I beat the odds and became successful. I made more money than I'll ever be able to spend, and all that money keeps making more money. And I filled my days with things to keep me from standing still and watching life pass me by.” His eyes come back up to meet mine. “Never occurred to me I wasn't happy.”

I sit back, and he continues.

“I might have moved to Tomahawk because of you, but I stayed because I like it here. I like the pace of life. I like never knowing what tomorrow is going to bring, though it would be an entertaining schedule to read if half of these things were planned.”

I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face because I totally get a visual of that sort of calendar.

“I'm not going anywhere, Kylie. Even if you decide you want to push me away and keep your distance, I'll still be right here. However, I'll never let you date anyone else, because... I'll be here.”

Just like that, I realize how right Lilah was. I was right to choose stupid instead of stubborn. I just should have stuck with it instead of second-guessing myself.

Without saying anything else, I bend over and pull my beaver flag out of my bag and slide it over to Liam.

“What's this?” he asks, then grins. “Why'd you bring your flag?”

“Because Vick said if I'm staying here for a while, you have to raise that flag every time I'm here. But he reminded me it was only temporary.”

“I'll install a flag pole first thing in the morning,” he says with that smile lingering, amusement sparking in his eyes.

“Then let's find out if our crazies match,” I tell him, quoting Lilah's married-life advice.

His grin takes up his whole face. “I have no idea what that means, but it sounds a little dirty.” His gaze dips to my shirt, and he quirks an eyebrow. “Feed the beaver?” he asks.

“Sure. Why not?” I ask, standing and pulling my shirt off over my head.

I start laughing when he playfully tackles me, and my grin spreads when his lips come down on mine. My arms go around his neck, and he carries me to the bedroom.

Between really awesome sex, a lot of laughter, and listening to his tales of Tomahawk since landing in the town of madness, it turns into what is probably the most perfect night.

I try to think of the last Friday that was this good.

None come to mind.

Something crashes in the living room, and Liam curses as he pushes off me and runs out of the bedroom, still naked. Is he going to club whatever intruder there is over the head with his penis?

Has he not ever watched a scary movie?

“Damn it, Cooter!” I hear him shout, seconds before the sound of dishes breaking and a barking bloodhound collides.

Laughing to myself, I listen and watch as a naked Liam streaks by, chasing the “*damn Vincents’ infuriating dog.*”

Yeah. Nothing tops this Friday.

Chapter 20

Wild Ones Tip #912

You can sit with us if you really wanna. Bring a helmet.

KYLIE

Dad is milking one of the cows when I step into the barn, my backpack on my shoulder after collecting a few things I need over at Liam's. I borrowed his boat while he was still sleeping, mostly so I could talk to Dad alone.

Dad looks up at me, cigar hanging from his mouth, and grins around it when he realizes it's me and no Liam.

"Well, how's things going on the Vincent side of the lake?" he asks a little haughtily.

Rolling my eyes, I drop my backpack to the floor, and scoot him off the stool so I can take over milking the cow.

He stands and stretches, and I blow out a breath, wondering how to broach the very important thing I need to ask. I don't want to just blurt it out. It'll make me sound immature and insecure.

But...why the fucking hell has no Malone threatened any bodily harm to Liam yet? It's not fair.

Hale and Killian were ready to murder Benson.

Not one Malone has even cracked his damn knuckles in Liam's direction.

"Kylie?" he asks, sounding more serious. "Where's that boy?"

The bite of anger in his tone has me grinning. "He's in bed. I snuck out to talk to you about Mom. Wondering if you think Liam might be anything like her..."

I'm so going to hell.

I may be the first girl ever to want her father to threaten the guy she's dating. Seriously, why hasn't he? Liam isn't *that* perfect. Maybe I should bring up the forgotten girlfriend thing...

No. Then dad would just literally kill him.

"Figured you might eventually come to me with that question," he says, walking over to take the bucket of milk out from under the cow. He pushes Betsy May—*I'm not the one who named the cow and turned her into a cliché*—toward the back, but I remain on the stool.

"You're worried about Liam running off the way your momma did, right?" he asks with his back still turned as he puts the cow back out to pasture.

Sighing dramatically, I nod, then realize he can't see me. But before I can answer aloud, he turns and starts speaking like he somehow saw my non-verbal answer.

"Kylie, if you go comparing every person not from Tomahawk to your mother, you'll end up bitter real fast. Chester Perkins, for example, has never trusted a woman outside of Tomahawk, and no woman from here would ever be stupid enough to date him."

My eyebrow arches and I huff a little indignantly. "Are you saying no one from here would ever—"

"I'm saying," he interrupts, a small, mocking grin on his face, "it's a rare thing to find someone from anywhere who can truly embrace a girl like you. Benson was a gem in a pile of rubble, and Lilah snatched him up for that reason. But Liam? Liam is the kind of guy who doesn't just embrace this life; he enjoys it."

He starts straightening up, but I remain on my stool, just staring idly at nothing.

How did this conversation get so sidetracked? And how do I make him start threatening Liam? Because Lilah's a little smug about the fact they've already accepted Liam as one of their own without a single noogie.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” is the answer I decide to go with to get us back on track.

A rumble of laughter shakes him as he looks at me like he’s amused.

“You want me to tell you that Liam is never going anywhere. You want me to tell you that, even though he’s not from Tomahawk, he’s always going to stick around. You want me to make promises that no one can make, because no one can see the future.”

No, I want you to threaten him just one little tiny time.

I heave out a breath and roll my eyes, and then have a flashback to being sixteen, so I sit a little straighter and show off my adult posture to compensate. This is not at all the correct conversation.

I’m past this. Lilah’s married advice has already pushed me beyond this hurdle, damn it. Why is Dad making this so complicated? Just one limb. He just has to threaten one limb—or organ—on Liam’s body.

“*But,*” he says dramatically, bringing my gaze back to meet his eyes that are dancing with mirth, “I’ve never seen someone fit so well so soon in this crazy town.”

He comes closer, towering over me as I remain seated on the small milking stool, hating the fact I’m stuck here for this weird speech he thinks is empowering.

His hands go to his sides, making him look like a superhero, sort of like he always looked when he was raising me and my unruly cousins on his own. But why is he *actually* posing right now?

“Your mother never tried to fit in, Kylie. Neither did the boys’ parents. They saw themselves somewhere else the entire time they were here. Liam loves this town. He may have moved here for you, but he’s stayed because he found his unusual tribe in the most unusual of places.”

His grin grows as I stare at him like he’s getting a little too theatrical.

“You’re starting make all this less of a father/daughter conversation and more of an after-school special,” I point out dryly. “My question is, are you cool with some unknown guy who stalked me here stripping me out of my clothes every night?” I ask, helping put him on the path to Threatsville.

I bet the Malones will be twice as brutal as the Vincents when they finally get unleashed.

Then I can rub it in Lilah’s face.

He continues on like he has all the answers to the universe, while I sit silently and regret coming here. He picks now to practice his Dad-of-the-Year-Award speech, it seems.

While doing the superhero pose again...

“Most people believe it’s a phase. I’ll be honest, I worried as much as well. Then I saw the way he held his own with the Vincents. They’re not easy to impress, and you know that.”

Kill. Me. Now.

He squats down in front of me and snatches my hand, pulling it into his as he pats the back of it. Doing that Brady Bunch, good-dad thing that is sort of freaking me out, because he’s usually all growly and yelling.

I prefer growly and yelling. It’s like chicken noodle soup.

This is just...terrifyingly anticlimactic.

“Is this reverse psychology?” I ask him. “You know, where you try to convince me Liam is perfect for me by overly selling him, so that I’ll be less Juliette and more Julie-hell-no?”

He blinks at me.

“I couldn’t come up with someone the opposite of Juliette, so just go with it,” I prompt.

He holds my gaze, his expression so...sweet. Are there cameras here? I dart a gaze around the corners of the barn, looking for the cameras I can’t find.

Is he doing this *just* to piss me off? Because it’s really freaking working.

“I can’t give you assurances you seek, my darling child. But I can remind you that you’re a Wild One. Chester Perkins will never take the risks my girl will, because he doesn’t have a reckless bone in his body.”

My darling child? Seriously?

There *are* cameras; I just don’t see them. I bet he signed up for some reality show and this is his audition tape or something.

He stands, and I groan when I finally let the rest of his speech play over in my head. “Did you really just give that entire speech so you could make a dig at Chester?”

Laughing, he winks at me. “Just proving a point. At the end of the day, there are only four families of Wild Ones for a reason. No one else has it in them to take the risks we take for fun. Don’t guard your heart too much, Kylie. If a Vincent can fall in love, then so can a Malone.”

“So all this to take a dig at Chester and put me in competition with Lilah?” I ask incredulously.

He gives me a proud look that only leaves me groaning, then he chuckles as he walks away.

“Thanks for absolutely nothing,” I call to his back, tempted to flip him off, but then worrying he might come back and ground me or something.

I stay on the stool for a minute, then finally stand and snatch my backpack from the ground. That was an hour of my life I’ll never get back.

When my eyes come up, I see Jared leaning against the barn entrance, a look on his face that makes me realize he’s been eavesdropping.

“What?” I ask a little too defensively.

Does he know I’m desperate for them to threaten Liam? Am I that transparent?

“My parents never liked Tomahawk,” he states simply. “Not even a little.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline.

“Okay...”

“They hated the bugs, the wild animals, the small town, the limited amount of things to do.” He shrugs as he pockets his hands. “It stopped hurting when they left us behind instead of taking us with them. We still haven’t met our other siblings. Don’t really care to. I’m sure they’ve heard the worst about us.”

My lips purse, and I prop up as well. “They popped out four of you here, and your dad contributed to three kids there. Rabbits come to mind. Maybe they have more in common with wild animals than they realize.”

He snorts and rolls his eyes.

“The point is,” he goes on, “we reached the point when we were happy they were gone. The day we took the Malone name was the last time we looked back. George may be our uncle, but in all reality, he’s the best father we’ve ever had.”

“What does that have to do with the current price of eggs?” I ask, trying not to make a big deal of his confession, because I don’t want to make it weird.

Especially since he’s being real right now, and I came here for completely different reasons.

“If George thinks Liam is worth a shot, then I trust him. And you should too.”

He turns to leave, and I jog out to catch him.

“I’m already giving him a shot,” I tell him.

“No. You’re not,” he argues. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here asking your father to tell you what to do. You just thought he’d give you a different answer.”

He keeps walking fast, and I have to keep jogging to keep up with his long strides.

“You’re wrong,” I tell him, which causes him to stop and give me an unconvinced look. I start to tell him the true—and somewhat petty—reason I’m here, then realize how stupid

he'll feel for being nice and stuff, and decide against it. "I... wanted to hear my father's opinion, because he's always looked out for all of our best interests."

He cants his head, studying me, and I bat my lashes.

"And?" he asks.

Grinning, I turn and head back toward the quad I borrowed from the house.

"And I hope you like Liam, because I'll be bringing him out soon to see the family business," I call behind me.

He groans, but when I turn to look back, he's restraining a smile.

Shaking his head, he turns and walks away.

Clearly this day has not gone as planned, but at least I don't have to worry about them killing him or anything. I guess that's the silver lining.

And I can take Liam away from the Vincents since the Malones are being unusually nice for a change.

Chapter 21

Wild Ones Tip #522

Hell is probably wallpapered with our selfies. Just sayin'.

LIAM

“I didn’t realize you had a job,” I tell her as we turn into her father’s driveway.

We spent the entire weekend in bed. For the most part. And not just for the fun stuff. I think we tried to cram all the information about each other we could in a tiny span of time, without ever going so deep that it dragged down the conversation.

Apparently I still don’t know all her secrets, since this is coming as a hell of a surprise. She said let’s take a ride, and I went along. She waited until now to explain she had work. Work with her father and cousins.

“Have you seen my boot collection? You think my art pays for all that plus living expenses?” she asks around a derisive snort.

“It should. I paid a nice bit for that Loki piece, and it was worth a lot more,” I state warily as we pass her father’s house and continue down the long driveway.

“Yeah, but that was a rarity. Most of my expensive pieces don’t sell because I’m an unknown artist. But I still have quite a few that have been moving since Shasta strung together that really fun tour. I’ve done some more galleries since then too. However, that’s just boot money.”

She could easily make good money if she had the right contacts. Contacts I’ve offered her countless times. She won’t even let me put her work in my galleries—any of them—even though I’ve made it clear I love her art.

She thinks I'm partial.

Stubborn woman.

She stops at the end of the driveway, and raises a green flag with a beaver on it until it's at the top with more of the same flags above it. Only one still dangles at the bottom.

"That's boot money?" I ask, finally processing that comment as she gets back in and starts driving.

"Well, yeah. I have bill money and boot money." She states these things as though it's supposed to be obvious all the time, and I always smile because...I have no idea. Hell, it doesn't take much to make me smile like a fucking schmuck.

She knows her power over me, but likes to pretend she doesn't. Or maybe she doesn't know, and I like to pretend she does.

We park at the end of the driveway, next to a lot of pasture land that doesn't have lakeside views.

Four men turn to look at me from the fence they're leaning against. Only Jared is missing from attendance. A little black sheep takes off running away from George's loosened grip like it just got the keys to kingdom.

"You really do live on a ranch," I state absently, frankly a little shocked.

"Farm. Not ranch," she argues.

"What's going on here?" George asks, his brow scrunched as he gestures toward me.

"Liam is hanging out today. I'm making him endure my presence as much as possible to test his tolerance level," she deadpans, causing more confusion to wander around inside me aimlessly.

George nods. "Good idea. You two can start on the asses."

"Asses?" I ask, then clear my throat since my voice cracks a little.

Just what the hell are they doing out here?

“The jackasses,” Kylie clarifies. Or tries too... “Dad has sheep, jackasses, four cows, and runs a bait shop too. We take turns working the bait shop. It opens just before dawn.” She gestures around. “Our sheep are the best quality you can find, but Malones are most known for their jackasses.”

She bursts out laughing, while all the other Malones groan in unison.

“It’s never going to be funny,” George tells her.

“It’s just too obvious,” Eric states on an exasperated sigh.

My lips twitch as Kylie’s chuckles die down, and she rolls her eyes.

“Anyway. I’ll show you all we do. Got a big auction coming up, so there’s plenty of work to do between now and then,” Kylie goes on.

I notice she’s wearing an old, beat up pair of cowboy boots. I guess that makes more sense now.

I glance down at my very expensive, leather shoes.

“Oh, shit. I should have told you so you could dress better,” Kylie says as her face falls.

She knows shoes.

Clearing my throat, I roll my eyes. “I can get new ones.”

The four Malones start laughing under their breath, and Kylie cuts her gaze to them.

“You can take him to change his shoes. We’ll save you some work,” Jason tells her, then gives me a bland look.

“The shoes are replaceable,” I quickly tell her before she argues and makes me look like more of a pansy.

They continue to laugh at me, so I point up at the flag you can see for miles away, since their pole is obnoxiously tall, and there are five of them lifted in the air—one for every Malone in attendance. I bet the bait shop has one in the air too.

“Just curious, why the beaver?” I ask, gesturing to the flags.

“Because we like beavers,” Jason quickly fires back, winking at me.

“Just wondering if it was someone’s way of labeling you all pussies and convincing you to wave the flag with pride.”

The second the words leave my mouth, all the lingering laughter dies. George Malone is the first to crack a smile before turning his head. Jason and Eric glare daggers through me. Heath is busy getting gum off the bottom of his shoe and completely oblivious to the new conversation.

Kylie bursts out laughing, doubling over, and I smirk as I wink at the two glaring Malones. They both mutter something I can’t hear, but I’m sure it’s a threat.

She grabs my hand, tugging me away, and I toss my arm around her shoulders.

Then...I spend several hours doing a lot of physical labor, watching her cousins get in no less than three fights, and her father kick the hell out of the barn door no less than fifteen times when it jams.

All the while, they rib each other and me. They laugh and joke. They eat lunch together and talk about their plans for the week. And they all weirdly include me.

My lips press to Kylie’s head during one of the shit-shoveling breaks, and she leans against me, tired as she kisses my neck.

“It’s not always like this. Most days are easy. It’s just Mondays that take the longest, because we do minimal of work on the weekends,” she assures me.

Before I can say anything, George Malone is coming around the corner with two bottles of water. He hands me one, and I drink it down as he talks to Kylie about the auction.

“Liam can join us,” he says, his eyes not bothering to meet mine.

Kylie just grins. “I’ll let him know,” she says seriously.

He scowls at her, then turns and faces me. “You can join us,” he tells me grudgingly.

“Thanks,” I say with a small grin. “I’d like that.”

He turns and walks away without another word, and I idly wonder what my life would have been like if I’d had a family like this. People who are just *there*. People who can fight one second, then talk to you like nothing is wrong in the next.

“Just another hour, and we can get out of here. I’ll take you to—”

I cut her off, kissing her as I pin her up against the tree, and she grins against my lips as she pulls me closer.

When we break the kiss, she gives me a curious look. “What was that for?” she asks.

“Monday,” is what I tell her before returning to the pile of shit I’ve almost gotten completely shoveled into the wagon. Because there’s a wagon being pulled by a jackass—a literal jackass.

This is my Monday.

By the time we’re finished, her dad has a tray of lemonade, and all the Malones, Jared included, are sitting down under a shade tree in a circle around a fire pit.

They’re laughing and talking, and two of the Malones are volleying insults at each other.

I take the last seat available, and tug Kylie onto my lap. No one bats an eye.

“So you’re officially a Tomahawk man now,” her dad tells me, lifting his glass as I chug down the lemonade, surprised by how good it is.

I nod, not bothering to open my mouth and say something that might get something thrown at my head. Never can tell with these people. It’s a family of sour patch kids.

“He’s not Tomahawk. He’s still city until he builds a house instead of buying someone else’s,” Jason says, smirking at me like he just delivered some mega insult I missed.

“Kylie has an apartment, so that makes zero sense,” I point out.

“You calling me stupid?” he asks, scowling.

“No. I just think you have bad luck when you try to speak and think at the same time.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Jared Malone gets strangled on his drink, his body laughing and coughing at once, as the rest of the Malones dissolve into laughter, Kylie included.

“If I wanted to hear from an asshole, I’d fart,” Jason grumbles, and I start laughing as well.

The conversation moves along, and I join in on occasion, taking a few verbal digs and delivering a few of my own.

As Kylie settles back on me, verbally sparring with Jared, I feel how relaxed and comfortable I am.

Some people go their whole lives without ever figuring out where they fit in.

Turns out, sometimes almost dying can save your life.

A trooper car suddenly soars by, two more close behind it, screams following their wake.

Everyone turns to watch as another trooper comes “speeding” by on a...pink bicycle? He’s looking over his shoulder, panicking as he pedals like his life depends on it.

That’s when we hear what sounds like an entire pride of lions or something roaring, screeching, and making other ferocious, feral cat sounds. I tense, ready to run Kylie inside, as the Malones all curse, including the girl in my lap.

“Looks like the Nickels won this year,” Kylie groans.

“We’ll never hear the end of it,” Jared grumbles as the bicycling trooper screams on a downhill slope and disappears from sight.

I relax in my seat again, shaking my head.

This isn’t just my Monday. This is my life.

My arms tighten around Kylie’s waist, and she leans back to kiss me on autopilot as conversation resumes, all of them

acting like none of that just happened.

It's a Monday I'll remember.

Chapter 22

Wild Ones Tip #587

It'd be easier to tell you to wear a helmet all the time instead of trying to guess when you might need one. Just don't make it weird.

LIAM

“Has she tried to contact you since leaving?” I ask Kylie as her lips brush against my chest.

“My mom?” she asks absently, her body relaxed against mine as I trace imaginary patterns on her bare skin. At my nod, she answers, “No. She knew there was no turning back when she walked away.”

I pull her closer, but she pats my chest like she's the one comforting me.

“My dad really loved her, you know,” she goes on, snuggling closer. “But he says it was easy to get over her when she left like she did. No one expected George Malone to be able to raise his daughter on his own.”

She grins like she's fondly remembering her upbringing, and I stay quiet.

“He did, though. He raised me on his own, and he mostly raised my cousins. Even when their parents were here, they still didn't do much parenting. My dad kept the guys active. They didn't have his blood, but they had his heart and his love for all things Tomahawk,” she goes on.

Her head lifts so she can look at my eyes directly.

“The happiest my cousins have ever been is when they were told they had to change their last name to Malone. The pride on their faces had my dad pretending he wasn't about to

cry. Total saps underneath all that muscle. Each time a new one was inducted into the Wild Ones, there was more pride.”

I brush a wet lock of hair out of her face, and she leans into my hand, so I just keep it there.

“We fit together,” she goes on, and I study her, wondering if she’s referring to us or her cousins.

Clearing her throat, she gets up without clarifying, and snags her towel from the ground. Her body is still damp from the shower I interrupted and stole her from.

“Careful, Liam Harper. Don’t forget I’m trying daily not to go get that permanent tattoo,” she calls out as she walks into the bathroom, presumably to finish up her hair.

I say nothing as I exhale and climb out of bed. Kylie says things that makes me feel like she’s mine for good. But she also fought me hard to remind me she couldn’t risk fully being mine.

A very complex enigma, that one.

Pulling on my clothes, I head to the kitchen to drink some coffee and wait on her to finish up. I’m not in any sort of hurry to rush things, so I’m patiently waiting on her to guide this.

I had my chance. It was me who messed it up last time. This time it’s her turn to take the reins.

Three weeks is a long time.

I know this, because three weeks changed my life one time.

I stalked the girl of my dreams. I moved into a very weird town that loves pot and explosives—a combination that would terrify most. I bought two properties because the first one I bought was in the wrong corner of crazy. And I joined a challenge committee that requires the men to river dance on the weekends if they’re in town when Lindsey Stirling starts playing over the speakers.

Three weeks is what led to this life.

Somehow, I've miraculously avoided having to river dance, since I've only been to town once on a weekend, and no violin music played.

The point I'm making is that I'm not surprised that after three weeks of having Kylie to myself almost every single day, that I'm falling faster than is probably healthy. In fact, I'm positive I'm drowning.

She's just wearing a towel when she walks out, her hair perfectly ringleted—my word—already. “Lilah is coming over to borrow a shirt that I'll never see again,” she tells me as she leans against the counter next to me.

Most of her clothes are here now, considering we kept going and getting more and more.

I cage her in, and she grins when I kiss her. I'm still kissing her when we hear an obnoxious throat clearing.

“I knocked like five times. You two could come up for air on occasion.” Lilah Vincent.

Always a Vincent.

Soon, it'll always be a Malone when we swap corners of the lake.

I'm not sure which is worse.

When I break the kiss, Kylie is immediately firing back, “Says the girl who just got in trouble having for sex with her husband in the back parking lot of the hardware store.”

Lilah bats a dismissive hand. “Benson's hot when he gets jealous, and he always gets jealous in the hardware store because of all the guys who aren't even really checking me out. All they have to do is sneeze in my direction and he's got his hands all over me. Besides, we're in the honeymoon phase.”

“Usually the honeymoon phase ends before the actual honeymoon,” I tell her.

Kylie is pouring some orange juice, still trapped in my cage.

“I need to finish my hair,” Kylie tells me, leaning up to kiss my cheek. “Just get whatever shirt you want, but return it,” she calls to Lilah before she heads into the bathroom.

I let her go, watching her until she’s out of sight, and I dart a look at Lilah. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure. What?” she asks.

I check to make sure Kylie can’t hear me, then I walk over, grab Lilah by the arm, and drag her quickly toward one of the back guest rooms.

“If this is a ploy to make *it* put the lotion on, you should know my husband is a total ninja—*holy crap*,” she says, her eyes widening when I jerk open the closet door that opens into a huge walk-in closet full of...boots. Lots of brand new boots.

“Cheese and rice on a bed of guacamole,” she says, not making a bit of sense as she looks over the obnoxious amount of boots I’m hiding.

“I bought all these for her during the year we were apart. I was going to give it to her as a grand gesture if she wouldn’t have anything to do with me once I found her. Now...I’m already building her dream cabin, with the intentions of giving it to her until she decides how serious she wants to be with me. I don’t want to throw these at her too. It’ll feel like I’m trying to buy her affections, and I’ve been down that road. It’d be stupid to repeat the same mistakes.”

Lilah turns to me, lips pursing. “You won’t ever be able to buy Kylie, Liam. She loves the cabin you’re building—that she thinks is for *you*, by the way—because of the thought that went behind it. She’d love the boots because of the thought that would have gone into selecting them. It has nothing to do with the price tag.”

I lean back, checking to make sure I can’t hear Kylie. “Just come by later and get them out of here. I’ll save them for a holiday or something. I just...just get them, okay?”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. You’re being ridiculous, but fine. Why are you acting so nervous?”

I smile tightly. “I’m just trying not to mess anything up. Last time around, we had three incredible weeks before I really fucking blew it.”

“And now it’s been three weeks again?” she guesses.

“You can see the reason for the slight panic attack.”

“As long as your girlfriend doesn’t show up from a business trip, you’ll be fine,” she assures me.

Of course she told Lilah.

“I can assure you I only have one girlfriend, and I’m not quite sure she realizes she’s my girlfriend.”

Lilah snorts. “Trust me, she knows. You’ll be fine, Liam. Stop worrying.”

“I never want to be the reason she has that look on her face again, Lilah. You didn’t see what it was like. Every bit of everything was sucked out of her that day. I’m still—”

“Trying to seek penance for something she’s clearly forgiven and moved on from? It took her less than two days to end up back in your evil clutches. Stop freaking out. You’re giving me anxiety, and I’m trying not to change anything about my body in case it somehow messes up the birth control I’m truly depending on right now.”

It takes me a second to follow all that.

“Just hide the boots. And I’ll get them when there’s a good time to give them to her without it looking like I’m showering her with gifts all the time.”

She just grins. “She really will like them, but why’d you have to buy so many?”

“She had all these catalogues,” I grumble. “She circled her favorites. I bought all the ones circled, since she left the catalogues behind.”

“That is so fucking sweet,” she says on an exaggerated sigh, and I narrow my eyes as I point at her in warning.

“Not a word about this.”

“Right. I won’t let her know how pathetic you really are. You can keep all your cool points, because I’m an excellent secret keeper,” she quips, not even looking back as she skips out the door.

Lilah just thinks she’s not as annoying as the other two Vincents. Most of the time, she’s worse.

I shut the closet door, and then walk out and shut the guest room door behind me. Just as I head back into the kitchen, Kylie is walking out of the bedroom, as Lilah goes on.

She turns to look at her in confusion. “You haven’t found a shirt yet?” Kylie calls.

“Liam pulled me aside to show me his dick. Benson’s is bigger,” Lilah is quick to say, and the color drains from my face.

Kylie bursts out laughing, and I immediately relax. Damn Vincent. Why did I ask *her* for help instead of Penny?

I’m way too on edge, feeling an expiration date that isn’t really here.

“You okay?” Kylie asks me when she sees my face.

Forcing myself to calm down, I give her what I hope is a genuine-looking smile and not one of manufactured tension.

“Yeah. You ready? I’m not sure how I feel about surprises, but...you can talk me into anything,” I tell her, aiming for charming and not stupid.

She grins. “Lock up, Lilah,” she calls behind her.

“I’ll do it as soon as I get finished with your vibrator,” Lilah deadpans.

Sometimes I can’t tell when she’s joking or when she’s serious. Does Kylie have a vibrator here? Pretty sure I cover all those needs.

Kylie just laughs and leads me out. I try to stop acting like a damn spaz before I ruin this thing with my fear of ruining things.

Damn frustrating woman.

What the actual hell is wrong with me?

Why am I panicking this much?

Her fingers twine with mine, and some of that panic dies down. Things are fine.

Just fine.

“What’s this?” I ask, confused as we tie off to a tree and start climbing up a hillside where a dilapidating old bridge is.

“The Nickels are just beyond this bend. Their daddy is full-blooded Cherokee, and he used to live on Reservation, but he moved out here years ago to be with their momma, who was born a Wild One,” she states randomly. “Even though she’s of Irish descent, she adopted his heritage to the extreme to show her support of Native American culture. She’s a little wacky, but she has a huge heart. They also bought all our moonshine distilleries a while back when we got tired of the operation, and that’s how they make the bulk of their money now.”

“Okay...” I’m not really sure what else to say to that.

“The Wilders are more complex. Their dad was wild in the wrong way, and got himself killed when they were little, while he was off on a bender somewhere in Arizona with some other woman,” she says with a sad smile. “Momma Wilder, as we all call her, never wavered. She held strong for her kids, and carried on the name like it was always hers and never his. You already know about all the pot they grow.”

I run my hand along my jaw, debating on whether or not I should tell her. Deciding I’d rather piss her father off than continue to lie to her about what I know, I come clean.

“Speaking of Greta Wilder,” I say on a sigh. “There’s something you should know about her and your dad. They—”

“They’re dating?” she asks, a small curve of her lips hinting at a mocking grin.

My brow furrows. “You know?”

“Of course I know. Most all the Wild Ones have figured it out, except maybe Nila. You should see the way they look at each other when they think no one is paying attention.”

Now I’m just confused.

“How do you know?” she asks me, tilting her head.

“I sort of walked up on them when they were rattling the hunting shack on my land. And—”

She bursts out laughing, much to my surprise. Since her father wanted her not to know, I assumed that meant he was worried about how she’d take the news of him moving on.

Kylie rolls her eyes. “They sneak around like teens, but we know. The rest of the town doesn’t know. It’s not local knowledge, since it’s against town rules for two Wild Ones—no matter their age—to date. Tomahawk problems.”

My grin steadily grows.

“So I’ve been carrying that around for nothing?”

“Pretty much,” she says with an impish grin. “But don’t let Dad know I know.”

“No worries,” I mutter under my breath.

“Anyway, no one gets the other information I gave you about the Wild Ones unless they’re inside the Wild One circle. Consider yourself unofficially inducted,” she states, not meeting my eyes.

“Is this you telling me you believe I’m really here and not going anywhere?”

She bristles. “It’s me extending a lot of trust,” she defends.

“And what does all that have to do with the bridge?” I ask, deciding not to push too far too quickly.

“Remember last week when you were talking about finding a way to prove to people Tomahawk is your home because you’re sick of Chester Perkins expecting you to leave? Which, by the way, what’s up with that?”

I shake my head. “I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

She shrugs. “Anyway, I was thinking about all that wood in your wood shop, and about the fact you’re actually good with your hands.” She gives me a wink and a dirty grin that has me moving closer, but she moves away from my hands, going to stand on the rickety bridge.

“Kylie,” I hiss, not daring to go after her because the weight of two might send this thing collapsing. “Get away from there!”

She just moves closer to the center while holding her arms out and grinning.

“This is the unusable yet most helpful road from the north end of Tomahawk to the south. Yet no one can use it, because the bridge will fall apart under a car. There’s also a waterfall type area when the beavers don’t have it dammed up, but the dam helps keep the lower areas from flooding or draining the upper level until it’s just dirt. So there’s no way to drive through here on a boat either, since you’d be dropping thirty feet.”

“Could you stop standing on the unstable bridge that might drop you those thirty feet so I can breathe, please?”

Her grin grows as she walks toward me, and I snatch her to me the second she’s in reach, holding her so close that she mocks a suffocating noise.

I barely loosen my hold, and she squirms away, laughing a little as she turns and leans her head against my chest.

“We don’t let the state do much for us, so we do most repairs on roads and such on our own.”

“That explains why the roads are so shitty around here,” I say before I can stop myself, not realizing how much of a douche I sound like until it’s too late.

She shrugs. “We’re not high maintenance. But this bridge needs more skill. It’s only a year old, and as you can tell, it looks a hundred.”

My eyebrows go up. Only a year?

“Two Nickels fixed it last time,” she says as though that explains everything. “Anyway, I thought maybe you could build the new bridge with all your fancy engineering information and wood skills.”

She turns and faces me, and I stare down at her like she’s a puzzle.

“Only those who really love Tomahawk take the time to help out with something that benefits everyone and not just themselves,” she goes on, shrugging one shoulder.

My fingers go to her hair, and I tilt her head back as I grin and kiss her lips. She’s trying to give me something. Something special. Something that money can’t buy.

She’s giving me the key to respect from a town that holds its outsiders at arm’s length.

The key to hopefully shutting Chester Perkins right the hell up.

And a chance to leave my mark on Tomahawk doing something I love to do.

She’s trusting me with something that clearly means a lot to her and this town.

“Don’t worry. People don’t sue if it doesn’t work. We just block the roads so no one can drive through if the bridge messes up. But it’s cool if you’re worried and don’t want to risk it.”

I’ve never built a bridge before, but this is a small section, and I can do the research. And I can also call a lawyer to draw up iron-clad waivers so that I don’t risk getting sued.

“I’ll do it,” I tell her, watching as that smile transforms her face.

My thumb brushes her cheek, and suddenly I realize why I've been freaking out. I guess it would have been obvious to anyone who knew the constant stirring of unexplainable and mostly conflicting emotions before. Someone who knew what it was like to feel excited and full of dread all at once.

I'm in love with Kylie Malone.

And she's just spending time with me to 'see how it goes.' No wonder I'm acting like a fucking lunatic.

I don't even realize she's taking her boots off until she pushes away so she can stack them off to the side.

"What're you—"

"Okay. Now we can jump," she says, confusing the hell out of me.

"What?" I ask, just as she takes off running, laughing manically as she leaps off the unstable bridge.

My heart thunders out of my chest as I stumble to a halt at the edge before I even realize I've chased her. I look down at the long drop where she's emerging, her head coming breaking the water's surface already.

"That shower did you a lot of good," I call down to her.

"Couldn't resist. Your face was priceless!" she calls out, her voice barely carrying up the steep area. The bridge literally hangs over the uneven ground. Maybe fifteen feet long.

One side has a drop of five feet. Kylie jumped off the side that might as well be a fucking cliff. I really shouldn't be surprised.

"You coming in? Hold your arms crossed over your chest or anchored at your sides. And close your legs!"

"That water is really cold," I remind her.

"Oh, it's fucking frigid as hell," she agrees, swimming backwards as she grins up at me.

"Hell isn't particularly known for its frigidness," I retort dryly, staring down and wondering if I'm really about to do this.

Shit.

Without thinking too much about it, I kick my shoes off and pull my shirt over my head, then toss my pants to the ground.

Then...I take the leap.

My stomach climbs up my throat as the sensation of falling has me flailing my arms. I swear the water slams into my arms hard enough to bruise them, hence the reason she told me to hold them to my sides. Thank fuck my legs stay closed.

And that water is as cold as I used to be.

But Kylie laughing as my teeth chatter and my balls try to burrow their way into my body makes it worth it. No. No, it really doesn't, but I won't tell her that.

We both swim to the bank, freezing for no good reason, as we hike up the hill full of twigs that have a mission to destroy our feet.

All the while, she laughs, and I curse, and then I laugh too.

Told you I'm a lunatic.

Chapter 23

Wild Ones Tip #32

The four-letter words are our favorites. Except hell. No one likes hell, though. Hell's too pretentious with its 'No Wild Ones Allowed' policy.

KYLIE

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The rain starts slowly, and suddenly it's pouring, but I'm already inside because I smelled the rain coming.

A premature grin is on my face before Liam even dives into the cabin, soaked after just a few minutes.

"Holy shit that's cold!" he snaps.

"Well, yeah. Summer is fading, and fall is starting. It's going to get wetter and colder as the days drag on," I helpfully point out, while propping up so I can enjoy everything that clingy, wet fabric of his shirt is showing off.

He shivers and curses, stripping out of his wet clothes by the door like he can't get out of them fast enough.

It's my favorite show to watch.

We just came back from his first auction with the Malone family.

He fit in so well that people wondered if he'd always been a part of us. My smile just continues to spread as I watch him without subtlety.

Even after having him back for almost four weeks, I'm still not tired of taking in all the beauty that is the freakishly gorgeous Liam.

The water drips down each crevice of his sculptured body that should come with warning labels. Everything about Liam should come with a warning.

Warning: Super hot guy with this easy-going, fun attitude and a crazy that almost matches mine with eerie perfection, and this incredible way of always making me smile.

I've been doomed from the beginning and was an idiot not to realize it sooner. If I had a phone, we'd be arguing about who had to hang up first before I came out of the bathroom and joined him in the bed.

He curses his jeans when they try to hang on, and I continue to soak in the sight, while he hops around, finally getting the last leg out of them off.

When he looks up to see me just smiling and shamelessly admiring him, he quirks a cocky eyebrow and smirks.

“Like what you see, Kylie Malone?”

Only he can flail around like an idiot for five solid minutes just to undress and still be smug when he catches me staring.

I pinch my fingers together to demonstrate a miniscule amount. “Just a little.”

He shoves his underwear down, and I deliberately lick my lips before he suddenly charges me. I'm laughing before he even picks me up, my feet dangling in front of his shins as I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

“You're wearing entirely too many clothes,” he murmurs against my lips.

“Because I didn't get wet,” I remind him.

“Pretty sure I always get you wet,” he deadpans, his smirk fixed on his face like he's waiting for me to pat him on the back for that quick wit.

He drops me and steps back before winking at me, and I look down at my soaked clothes.

“Told you,” he says, just as the front door flies open.

Liam snatches me and pulls me in front of him like a privacy screen when two annoying Vincents walk in, both of them dripping water everywhere.

“What the hell?” Liam groans.

“What’s wrong, lover boy? The little guy cold or is he always so small?” Hale Vincent asks with a grin.

“Why are you walking around naked in front of us?” Killian asks, as though he’s genuinely confused.

“Because it’s my house. Usually people knock before they decide to burst in unannounced,” Liam tells them dryly.

“We’re just here for sweet provisions before we start on the water cannon. You helping us?” Hale asks, going to the fridge like he has the right, as Liam keeps me plastered in front of him.

“I don’t have any sweets,” Liam tells them, exasperated as Hale rifles through the fridge. “And it’s raining.”

Killian disappears into a room, then emerges with a drill and a saw...

“Where are all the sweets from the girls who want in your pants?” Hale asks.

“I just told you there aren’t any. Haven’t been for weeks. In case you’ve forgotten, I have a girlfriend now, and she scares other girls away. And it’s still raining.”

I’m not sure why I get butterflies when he tells them I’m his girlfriend, but I do. I also mentally pick out pretty butterflies that would look good under his name for my boob tattoo.

I might need someone to slap me. Lilah would definitely oblige.

“We need to stage a breakup. That would definitely get the sweets back. Remember all those girls bringing Benson

sweets when they thought he and Lilah broke up?” Killian goes on.

“We’re not staging a breakup,” Liam says without hesitation.

“You two, out. Now. We’re about to have sex and stuff,” I announce, moving toward them like I’m going to shoo them off, but Liam snatches me at the waist and drags me back.

Oh, right. He’s still very naked, and I’m the only thing hiding all the stuff he doesn’t want dangling for the world to see.

“Guess he’s a grower instead of a shower,” Hale says as he looks over to Killian.

“Why are you two installing the water cannon in the rain?” Liam asks, trying to redirect their attention most likely.

“Because what else are we going to do when it’s raining?” Killian asks, eyebrow arched in question.

“Any time it rains we shut off all the electronics in case of electrocution. It happens more than you’d think,” Hale tells us.

These two...

Killian tries to cover a grin, and I realize they’re deliberately cock-blocking right now.

I reach over and grab an apple before launching it right at Killian Vincent’s head. He catches it without even looking, and his grin finally spreads as he laughs and heads out, eating the damn apple like I gifted it to him.

Hale flips us off with both hands while walking out, and Liam grins like he finds them amusing.

He stops laughing when I start stripping. It feels good when he watches me the way I watch him. As though he can’t get enough either.

It’s something I’ve only ever experienced with him.

I’m usually the perfect rebound girl. Seems my enthusiasm boosts egos, but they’d rather be with the super hot

chick all the other guys wanted but couldn't have.

His eyes bounce up, and slow smile curves his lips as he backs up and locks the living room door.

As I peel off my shorts and underwear, I back up and lock the door in the kitchen.

We meet in the middle, just the small build up causing us to pretty much crash into each other instead of doing anything graceful.

We're not going to survive our "honeymoon" phase if it continues to stay like this.

He lifts me, and my legs wind around his waist, causing my breath to hitch at the feel of so much skin touching.

He kisses me harder before putting me on the dining room table.

I fall back as his head immediately goes between my legs, and like the talented devil he is, he has me on the edge in no time at all. Liam would be even richer if he showed all men how to do this the right way.

My fingers twist in his hair as my back arches, and I... call him a string of really terrible names when he leaves me on the brink, raising up so fast I don't have time to shove him back where I want him.

But then his mouth is on mine, and my fingers tighten in his hair as he thrusts inside me, one of his hands finding my deserted clit, and pushing me over that edge with him inside me.

I almost bite his lip, but manage to break the kiss in time, as my body violently shudders. His hips move like he's on a mission, his breaths teasingly raking over my neck as his lips drag up the sensitive column of my throat.

The table is fortunately sturdy and good quality, since he's fucking me like his life depends on it.

Just as another surprise orgasm washes over me without any warning, Liam's rhythm staggers, and he stills inside me,

releasing a very sexy sound next to my throat as he pants for air.

“Fuck, I love you,” he on a breath.

We both go painfully still, and his body goes tight with tension so thick it feels tangible.

Did I hear that right? Was it my imagination? Did he blurt it out but didn't actually mean it, since it was sort of a heat of the moment thing?

He seems really tense, so maybe he farted and I just thought he said those words?

I'm not even sure what to say, because I'm not sure what just happened.

Liam clears his throat, kissing the side of my neck again as he pulls out, and he glances over at the window.

“The rain stopped. I think I'll go help Killian and Hale with their water cannon,” he tells me, not missing a beat. “Dinner later?” he goes on.

Okay...now I'm really confused.

“Um...yeah,” I state unsurely as he abandons me on the table and goes to pull on his clothes.

He dresses faster than I've ever seen him dress. I'm not even off the table yet by the time he's out the door.

What the actual hell just happened?

Chapter 24

Wild Ones Tip #847

*Life is like a box of rocks. Ever had a box of rocks?
It's really hard and is constantly spilling to make a mess.*

LIAM

I'm a motherfucking idiot.

I toss down the wrench, looking at the absurd amount of pieces the Vincents have laid out.

All I can think about is the fact I told Kylie I loved her *while* my dick was inside her, despite the fact she's still warming up to me after my last colossal fuck up, *and* she didn't say it back.

It's like my brain shut down today, and I got lost in the fucking moment. Now I've gone and made shit awkward and pushed her way too fast.

"What's your deal?" Killian asks as I toss aside a screwdriver.

"I made it weird."

Both his eyebrows lift. "Made what weird?"

"Nothing. Let's just get this put together. I'd like to *not* think for a little while."

Chapter 25

Wild Ones Tip #209

We weren't born with enough middle fingers to deal with people. Wear a helmet.

KYLIE

Wandering around aimlessly, I head into the hardware store to buy my supplies. Today is the first time in a while that I took a paint inventory, since I haven't done much painting at all with Liam's crash-landing back into my life.

Obviously I've been consumed.

How could I not be?

But now I need to think, because I'm still not really sure what happened this morning or why he ran off to hang with the Vincents right after. So, I buy some paint, since I think clearer or not at all when I paint.

Maybe he scared himself.

Maybe he regretted it.

Maybe it really was a fart.

Maybe it's all in my head.

I blame the back-to-back orgasms for the mind-fuckery I'm dealing with.

Frustrated, I dump my basket out on the counter.

Max starts ringing me up, his eyes flicking to the paint then up at me and back to the paint. "What's wrong, Max?" I ask, not really caring.

"Nothing. Are you sure you got all the right colors?" he asks with a hint of dread in his tone.

Frowning, I glance down at the counter, going over all the colors. Those are the colors I'm low on. Just to be sure, I check my list.

"Yeah," I say with a shrug.

He releases a shaky breath, his hand trembling a little as he rings me up.

"Is someone holding a gun on you right now?" I whisper.

Nervous laughter flies out of him. "No," he states with a trembling voice. "It's just...are you sure those are the right colors?"

"Positive. What's wrong with these colors?" I ask incredulously.

"Noth-nothing," he stammers, proceeding to ring me out.

"Oh, dear," Janice Holland—notorious Tomahawk busybody—says, coming up as her eyes flit over my purchases before Max can bag everything. "I knew you went from buying condoms twice a week to not buying them at all anymore, but I had no idea it'd gotten this bad," she says on a sad sigh.

What?! I knew she was intrusively nosy, but not to the point where she took notice of the fact I haven't bought condoms in a while.

"I stopped using condoms two weeks ago. Not that it's any of your business," I tell her with a dark smile.

She pats my shoulder.

Really?

Who touches me without permission? Why is she scared of Nila and not me?

"What's your defect?" I ask, shrugging her hand off me.

She gives me a pitiful little look as I toss my cash to the counter for Max to take.

"You can weather the storm, Kylie Malone. You're better than that rotten mother of yours," she assures me. "It's not

your fault you don't know how to be a normal woman for a man like that.”

Then she's gone, literally hustling away like she's in a rush to do something or whatever crazy, nosy women do when they're not keeping tabs on the condoms you've bought or not bought.

“Can you believe that?” I ask Max, who is notably a few shades paler than a few moments ago.

“Change is in the bags with the receipt,” Max states, shoving the bags at me like they're contagious.

“Everyone in this town is acting even weirder than usual,” I grumble as I take the bags.

When I reach the door, I see Max picking up the phone, his eyes darting to me very suspiciously. Great. Now I sound like Lilah. She's the one suspicious of everyone. Not me.

I walk to my apartment, since it's not far, and raise my flag before heading in. Shit. I forgot to lower my flag at Liam's house.

Maybe one of the Vincents will do it.

My screen door is broken, so I actually have to use my front door for a change, and that blocks out a ton of natural light.

This day sucks, in case it isn't clear enough yet.

Just as I get my paint put down, someone knocks at my door. Lilah walks in without waiting on me to call her in.

“Hey, I thought I saw you leaving the hardware store.”

“Were you banging your husband in the parking lot again?” I ask her, trying and failing to smile.

Her lips purse as she studies me. “Benson is helping my brothers with the water cannon.”

“Seems to be the thing to do today,” I say with a little more bite than I mean to.

“Okay, what's wrong?”

Huffing out a frustrated breath, I go to drop down on my couch. Lilah takes a seat near me, her eyebrows up.

“Fine. I’m only telling you this because I feel like an idiot.” Taking a deep breath, I say, “I think Liam told me he loved me.”

“You *think* he did?” she asks incredulously.

“There were two really intense orgasms,” I decide to point out. “Then a quick disappearing act like he’s never done before.”

“Are you sure he didn’t fart?” she asks seriously.

“See? You understand me,” I groan. “But the more I think about it, I’m pretty sure he did say it. And since he ran, it either freaked him out because he didn’t mean to say it, or he regretted it.”

“He didn’t regret it,” she says immediately, acting like she was there and knows this for a fact. That’s Lilah. “Did you say it back?” she adds.

“Of course not,” I tell her. Did she miss the part where I wasn’t sure if he said it or not?

She gives me a look.

A have-you-pieced-it-together-yet look.

“What?” I prompt on a groan.

“If he said it and you didn’t say it back, then...” She lets her words trail off, and I just stare at her, waiting for this big revelation she thinks she’s stumbled upon with all her married-life wisdom. A ring does not make you smarter at relationships, but she hasn’t figured that out.

She rolls her eyes.

“For fuck’s sake, Kylie, if you didn’t say it back, then *he* felt like an idiot.”

For a second, I’m confused. Then my eyes widen, my lips part to form an *o*, and I face palm myself.

“By George, I think she’s finally got it,” Lilah says sarcastically, while blowing a piece of hair out of her face. “Come on. Aunt Penny gives a great ‘love’ pep talk to help you sort out your feelings.”

“I don’t need help sorting out my feelings,” I tell her, not even bothering to ask what a ‘love pep talk’ is. I’m not sure I want to know.

I really am an idiot, and that’s my main point of focus right now.

Before she can say anything else, someone starts banging on my door. Really? I’m never this popular, and the first day I’ve been here for longer than it takes to pack a bag, I suddenly have visitors everywhere.

Nila stumbles in with Krysta, both of them slamming the door behind them and fighting to look out the peephole.

“What are you two doing?” Lilah asks, looking at them like they’re crazy people.

“Do you think they saw us come in here together?” Nila asks Krysta as she shoves her aside and takes another turn at the peephole.

“I have a window right there,” I say, pointing beside the door, but they both ignore me.

“So what if they did? This is important! They can fuck off today,” Krysta tells her. “We didn’t get to be there for Lilah because we heard the news late.”

“That’s because we went camping to get closer to nature—your suggestion,” Nila reminds her.

“What news?” Lilah asks, sounding just as confused as I feel.

Nila turns and exhales heavily, as Krysta turns and runs a hand through her hair. Both of them look at the bag I have on the floor, and Krysta goes to look inside it.

“It’s here. Just like Angela told Kerry,” she tells Nila.

“Angela? Which Angela? The one married to Hank or the one who sniffs her armpits in the park on Tuesdays?” I ask, but get ignored as Nila groans and looks at me.

“What happened with you and Liam?” Nila asks very seriously. “Does he deserve to die? Because that’s going to happen, you know.”

“What?” Lilah and I both ask at the same time.

Krysta rolls her eyes. “She doesn’t look upset,” Nila says flatly.

“Then we should probably stop the massacre,” Krysta says back.

“If you two don’t stop having a conversation with each other and ignoring us, I’m going to kick you in the asses. Literally. And it’ll hurt! I just got new boots.” Lilah points at her signature combat boots with pink shoelaces.

They might be new but they look exactly the same as every pair she’s ever owned. She’s not big on variety.

Nila gives me an exasperated look. She does realize she’s considered crazier than me, right? All the Wilders are. That makes *her* the exasperating one.

“We’ll explain after we get there. Maybe Liam won’t be dead by then,” Krysta says as she grabs my forearm and starts dragging me away.

“Who the hell wants Liam dead?” I snap.

“Apparently, you do,” Nila says from behind me.

I’m going to strangle them.

I turn just as Nila runs out my back door, and my head swivels as Krysta opens the front door. “Wait about five minutes or more, then follow us. We can’t all be seen together. We’ll meet you at Liam’s,” she says as she starts to step out.

“If Liam’s life is at stake, then why the hell are *you two* going first?” I hiss.

She blinks at me. “Because Nila and I like popcorn better.”

Lilah catches me when I lunge for Krysta, and the door slams as Krysta runs off, leaving me struggling in Lilah's arms.

My boot is going up an ass today.

Chapter 26

Wild Ones Tip #20

Karma takes too long, and we're impatient.

*We'd rather beat the shit out of you right now. WEAR A
HELMET!*

LIAM

“You’re a man genius when you’re sulking and pissed off,” Hale tells me as I finish piecing together the last of the water cannon.

“I can’t believe you bought them one of these,” Benson says as shakes his head and drops back, wiping some grease—*don’t call it mechanical lubricant, or the Vincents won’t stop laughing*—away from his face.

“It was a pointless purchase since the Malones never tried to kill me,” I say tightly, ready to get the hell out of here so I can face Kylie and hope she isn’t freaked out.

Maybe she’s had some time to let it soak in and doesn’t want to run.

Killian’s phone rings, and he opens it—*who has a flip phone these days?*—to answer.

“Yeah?” Killian says, looking over as he listens to someone. “That would actually make a lot of sense. I’ll find out,” he tells whoever it is before pocketing his phone.

Hale shrugs when I cast him a questioning look, so I redirect my attention to Killian.

“Something happen between you and Kylie?” Killian asks.

I blow out a long breath and sink back onto the ground.

“I’d take that as a yes,” Hale stage whispers. “He looks guilty as fuck.”

“Why am I getting a strange case of déjà vu?” Benson asks on a tired sigh.

“Because that was Aunt Penny,” Killian tells him absently, his eyes still trained on me. “What happened between you and Kylie? Can you fix it or was it bad?” Killian asks me, then holds his hands up. “I don’t want details.”

“Funny you want any info this time, when I remember a shovel and a bat coming to my house because of one of these calls,” Benson grumbles.

“That was our baby sister,” Hale is quick to point out. “Kylie isn’t.”

“Lilah is your older sister,” Benson drawls.

“Can you fix this with you and Kylie, or are you a major dick?” Killian asks, ignoring Benson and pinning me with an expectant stare.

“First of all, it’s nothing like that. I just might have moved a little too fast, and now I feel like an idiot. Who did she tell?”

“I have no idea if Kylie has talked to anyone,” Killian says with a shrug. “Just making sure it wasn’t anything bad before this party got started.”

He flashes a grin at Hale, whose eyes widen.

“We get to pay for the water cannon?” Hale asks excitedly.

“Fucking finally, yeah,” Killian answers, as Hale fist pumps the air and...starts stretching. “And now we have Black Belt Benson.”

“No,” Benson says, holding a finger up.

“What’s going on?” I ask, but I get ignored as they focus on Benson.

I feel like I’ve missed a very important conversation that the three of them have only shared with their minds.

“They’ve outnumbered us for years,” Hale reminds him.

“They still outnumber *you*. I’m not doing it,” Benson tells them adamantly.

“You gonna tell Lilah that you let us fight the Malones without your help? Even though you’re a Vincent now?” Hale prods.

Benson curses under his breath, and exhales a sound that suspiciously sounds like hesitant resignation.

Why are they fighting the Malones? No one bothers to mention that. Of course. Not sure why I’m surprised.

“What would Lilah *Vincent* do?” Killian asks Benson with a smirk.

“Fuck,” Benson groans as he starts stretching as well.

Apparently Lilah Vincent would stretch at a moment like this. I only thought I was starting to understand their weird language.

“What the hell is going on right now?” I ask again.

“Remember how you liked the town for its *quirk* and *charm*?” Benson asks me, an annoyed expression on his face as he cracks his neck.

“I’m not sure what that has to do with anything at the moment,” I reasonably point out.

“It means, hello and welcome to Tomahawk, land of the nosiest people you’re ever going to meet, and the rumor mill that changes the first story twenty times until you look like a total dick,” Benson says on a long, frustrated breath.

“You lost me at *hello*,” I deadpan.

“Give him Heath,” Hale says, pointing at me. “Heath is the slowest.”

“Yeah, but he also hits the hardest if he does manage to land a punch,” Benson argues.

I genuinely thought he was the sane one of this bunch. And all those rumors that their particular brand of mind

functioning was contagious sounded preposterous before, but now...

“Give him Eric,” Benson adds.

“Why do I want either of them?” I ask flatly.

Still not getting answered.

“Eric will charge him like a bull, and he’ll be too stunned to react fast enough. Hell no,” Killian argues. “George needs to be the one he’s on. He’s older, slower, and half the time he swings a little too far to the right.”

“You really want him pitted against George Malone right now? The father who has raised his daughter on his own for years, only to see this guy break her heart?”

“Stop!” I shout, grabbing Hale by the shirt and causing his eyes to widen as I jerk him to me. “What the fuck are you talking about? How did I break her heart?”

Hale smiles, which causes me to give him a little shake, and Benson smiles to the right of me. As one, all three say, “Give him Jason.”

I’ve never been a violent person, considering I like to believe I’ve evolved beyond that barbaric sort of instinct. But at this particular moment, my fist comes up before I can stop it, and two hands grapple me back before I can hit Hale for no other reason than that they’re actually driving me mad right now.

“*And breathe,*” Killian says in a cooing voice that is only used to mock me.

I shrug Killian off me, and they all laugh like this is exactly what they wanted.

“Definitely Jason,” they all say again in creepy unison.

“He’s ready now. We don’t have to babysit,” Killian says as he bumps fists with Hale.

Before I can repeat the cycle of asking a question and getting ignored while growing increasingly furious, I notice a very familiar hover boat driving at hellacious speeds this way,

manned by two familiar oversized men. Behind them are three very distinct jet skis that would be considered Harley's on the water because of their size.

Yeah...they look pissed; the men, not the jet skis.

This escalated much too fast, and apparently you need to know a secret handshake to find out what exactly is going on around here.

"If it's already spreading around town, why isn't he getting the baked goods like Benson was?" Hale asks, acting as though it's no big deal the Malones are docking and glaring daggers at us.

"Kylie's flag is still up in his yard, so people think she's there," Killian tells him conversationally, while the Malones start climbing onto the dock and stalking toward us.

"Ahhh," Hale says as though that makes perfect sense, finally paying attention to the Malones. "We should lower it until at least a few trays of brownies or cobbler have been delivered."

The dock creaks under their weight, and Killian yells, "If you break Lilah's dock, we'll blow yours up again."

"And this time we won't fix it!" Hale adds, a wicked smile on his lips.

"You already broke her dock, jock itch," Jared Malone says as he flips Killian off.

Killian grins and wiggles his eyebrows as George Malone stands about twenty feet from me, next to all his hulking nephews.

My anger flees when I realize it looks like he wants to murder me, and in place of it, exasperation fills the void. Apparently he's finally pissed at me for keeping his daughter trapped inside my home.

George points his finger at me. "I warned you," he growls.

That...confuses me. I thought he'd just flipped his lid. "Warned me about what?" I ask him.

“I told you if I found I saw a speck of blue on her, I was going to tear off your limbs and feed them to the bears.”

I’ll take suggestions on what to say to something like that.

“I’m sorry, what?” is probably the worst response I could give, but it’s the one that pops out.

He continues to point a finger at me. I’m beyond grateful that it’s not armed.

“You hid her away over here in the Vincent corner, hoping I wouldn’t ever see it. But I’m smart, boy. I had Max call me if she came in to buy blue paint.”

“I’m sorry, what?” is again the worst response I could currently have.

“And now I’m going to rip your arms off and beat you with them,” he says on a frustrated breath, not really all that angry.

“That’s a very vivid imagery, but is there any way we could talk about this after I find Kylie and find out what the hell I’ve done?”

Benson snorts, and I quirk an eyebrow at him.

“There won’t be any talking to Kylie, because we will *literally* break your legs if you try that,” George barks.

Good to know all that limb-ripping stuff must have just been figurative chat before now.

When I open my mouth to speak, he looks away and talks to Killian before I can.

“Figures you brats would be on his side. You sure you want to do this?” George growls.

Killian grins, and Hale positively beams at him.

George snorts, vaguely resembling the sound of a bull.

“And you?” George asks Benson incredulously.

“He’s a Vincent now, remember?” Hale points out, as Benson pinches the bridge of his nose and mutters something

about loving this town in mantra, as though he's convincing himself of this.

Someone shoves Jared out toward Benson's side, and he curses while glaring at Benson.

"It's our time to shine, George," Killian says with a grin.

"You've been saying that for years," Jared states dismissively.

"Will someone, please, for fuck's sake, just tell me what the hell is going on?" I ask, exasperated.

A boat docks somewhere, but I'm busy staring at George instead of looking to see who it is.

"You're getting a beating for making Kylie buy blue paint," Eric tells me helpfully.

"Ah, makes perfect fucking sense," I tell him dryly.

"See? He gets it. Let's put the music on and do this," Heath says.

"Music?" I ask, confused—clearly. It's apparently the theme of the hour.

Jared curses when Benson smirks at him.

Usually Jared looks like he wants to hurt someone, but apparently Benson is the one guy no one particularly wants to fight.

Jared snatches Eric and pulls him closer. "Five on four means I get one to help me with the ninja," Jared explains.

"We're putting Jason on Liam," Hale states, acting like this is a business transaction of some sort. Or maybe a game of kickball where you try to pick teams.

"Jason?" George asks, stroking his beard thoughtfully as Jason practically foams at the mouth with menace in tangible form. "Interesting choice."

I'm not okay with this.

Not that anything I want matters.

George shoves Heath toward Killian. “I’m not tangling with that Vincent. I’ll take Hale.”

Hale bounces on his feet, taking a couple of test swings.

“Was it another girl?” George asks me, narrowing his eyes, and a stone drops in my gut.

“Look, I ended things with Felicia after just three weeks with Kylie,” I assure him. “And I would have ended it sooner —”

“What?” everyone asks at once, causing my eyes to widen into saucers when I see this is apparently brand new information.

I’m not sure what exactly the original question was that led me down that hellish path of confession, but I clearly misunderstood it completely.

“That was the first time!” I’m quick to defend. “Not this time. No. I’m one thousand percent Kylie’s boyfriend and no one else’s, and I haven’t been with anyone since her the first time.”

It feels a little warmer out here than it did a minute ago.

“And I would have broken up with Felicia sooner, but I sort of forgot about her,” I prattle on, getting nothing but silent stares in return.

“She was overseas. Out of sight, out of mind,” I add, laughing nervously because I just can’t seem to stop making it worse. It’s as though my mouth has conspired against me.

“Stop talking,” Hale says like he’s truly embarrassed for me.

Hale Vincent is embarrassed *for me*.

This morning started off so well...

They start arguing my past indiscretions, and I end up word-vomiting the entire fucking story that led to me moving to Tomahawk—a-fucking-gain. Only this time, I don’t omit Felicia.

George still wants me dead, and he instructs Jason to *have no mercy*.

All of this takes roughly ten minutes, because I leave out all the oral sex pieces out of the conversation I'm having about this *daughter*.

"I really think there's a less violent way to—"

Absolutely no one is listening to me anymore, so I just shut up and step back, eyeing Jason as he snaps his teeth at me. What the actual fuck?

Benson moves beside me and says, "This is where you decide how much you really want the girl. Unlike you, I had a lot of years to acclimate to this sort of thing. George may play like he's okay with his only daughter being in a relationship, but he really needs you to prove you're in it to stay," Benson tells me. "This madness? This is what's fun to them. And they're over-the-top crazy on a good day, and reckless on a bad one. You can walk away right now, and this doesn't have to be your life. So I repeat: How bad do you really want the girl?"

I stare at the behemoths who are all snarling at me.

Without another word, I tear my shirt off over my head. I may not particularly want to fight any of them over a blue paint purchase that has *nothing* to do with Felicia, but I sure as hell don't want to give up the girl.

I also don't want to give up the damn Vincents. Or even the Malones. And certainly not the refuge I've found in Tomahawk. Apparently, I can't have one foot in and one foot out—or, you know, be a sane and rational person.

They've made me crazy.

With a weary sigh, I toss my shirt to the side, and Benson grins broadly.

"Turn the music on!" Hale says as the Vincents start backing up, Benson included.

The Malones back up as well, while Eric grabs a speaker from the boat and sets it up.

“Is there a certain amount of paces we need between us?” I ask, calmer now that I realize there’s no real point to this. They’re just simply crazy.

Crazy I can handle.

Crazy I sort of like.

No one answers as we continue to put several extra feet between our two sides.

Music starts playing, and I realize instantly that it’s *Born to be Wild*.

“Is this the fight mood music?” I muse, causing Benson to snort and mask a laugh.

The Malones turn it up, and...then everyone just starts punching at the air like they’re warming up. Or maybe I’m getting lucky with a pretend fight. Jason does a Z slash with his hand, eyes trained on me with murderous intent like he’s inside my head and wants to cut out my hope.

Two women running in the distance distracts me for a moment. Are they carrying popcorn?

Shaking my head, I return my gaze to the Malones.

“So when does the fighting begin?” I ask curiously.

As if cued, the chorus screams, “*Born to be wild*,” starts playing, and several of the Malones start pounding their chests like gorillas. The Vincents howl loudly into the air. Then everyone but me charges into action.

I stand still while nodding to myself. “Of course we were waiting on the chorus,” I say under my breath, dodging the first weird snake-hand strike from Jason before slamming my fist into his side.

This is my Friday.

Chapter 27

Wild Ones Tip #257

We hit first and ask questions later.

But no nipple twisting allowed. Keep it classy.

KYLIE

Damn Benson for making Lilah's damn boat so freaking slow!

Just hearing the *fight* song blaring has my stomach twisting, but I stumble to a halt and hiss out a breath when I see my dad and cousins charging the Vincents and Liam. Why is Jason on him?! Liam is so not ready to fight Jason!

Jason misses, and Liam counters with a gut punch that sends Jason staggering.

Whew. Maybe he can handle him.

My breath comes out shakily as I stare around at the chaos.

“Get them, baby! Show them no double team is a match for your spinning kick thingy!” Lilah shouts from beside me as Benson does his spinning kick thingy, catching Jared in the face and sending him spiraling backwards.

He turns and repeats the action on Eric, and Eric dodges, but doesn't miss the very quick punch that Benson delivers right behind that.

Benson winks at Lilah, and she sways as she swoons. Gag.

Killian is obliterating Heath, one quick punch after another, while dodging all of Heath's slower ones, until one finally catches him in the side. Killian hits the ground, but rolls back up to his feet in a blink, ready for more.

Hale and my dad are circling each other a lot, until Hale finally flies at him like a spider monkey and lands on his back, putting him in a chokehold, while keeping his legs locked around Dad's waist.

Dad wobbles around, carrying Hale on his back and trying to shake him off.

Liam dives between Jason's legs, and kicks his foot out, catching him in the ass hard enough to send Jason toppling like a hacked-down beanstalk.

"I have no idea who to root for," I groan. "I can't go against the Malones for the Vincents."

"But the Vincents are backing your man! And we might finally win this time," Lilah points out, then pumps her fist in the air. "Go, baby! Kick his ass!"

"But why are they even fighting?!" I snap, getting a little queasy when Liam takes what looks to be a painful hit to the stomach.

He recovers quickly, knocking Jason backwards with a battle yell and a football tackle.

"Because you bought blue paint," comes Krysta's voice from above me.

Lilah and I both dart a glance above us to see Krysta hanging upside down in a tree from a limb above where Nila is sitting, putting their heads close together as they both eat popcorn.

"I only bought it because I was out!" I argue. "Not because I was miserable!"

"Tell that to them," Nila says with a grin as she gestures to the madness. Then she shouts, "Aim for his right, Killian! He's weakest there!"

Killian nails five hits on Heath's right so fast that Heath almost topples over, looking breathless and exhausted.

"He's just one guy! You two can take him!" Krysta shouts from her upside-down position toward Jared and Eric as they struggle to get close enough to Benson to even hit him.

“He’s one *awesome* guy,” Lilah counters with her eyes narrowed.

Krysta grins around another mouthful of popcorn, riling Lilah up.

“Uh-oh. They’ve got the song on repeat,” Nila says more seriously when the battle song starts back over.

Shit.

“*You know what that means,*” Krysta says in a singsong voice as she swings her body up then drops to the same thick branch where Nila is sitting and sits down beside her.

Her eyes are sparkling with amusement as Lilah and I both curse.

Krysta makes a clawed hand then does a very realistic cat-fight cry. Her family and their animal sounds are super creepy good.

Hale is getting slammed against a tree as he fights to stay on Dad’s back, unable to really bring him down or do anything else. Dad can’t get the leech off him.

Killian is wrenching Heath’s arm behind his back and demanding he say *uncle*. Benson finally takes a hit, and Lilah grimaces while looking away.

Liam is shoving Jason’s face in a patch of mud, bringing his head up long enough to let him breathe, then shoving it in again as he sits on his back. Jason finally manages to toss him off, and Liam darts to his feet, grinning as he charges the beast again.

“Fine. Let’s do this before they start enjoying themselves too much,” I groan as I pull my boots off and put them to the side.

Lilah smirks at me. “It’s been a while, Kylie Malone, and I’ve wanted to do this since you helped kidnap me for Aunt Penny’s evil plan.”

“You’re happily married,” I remind her warily.

“True. But that’s not the point,” she says, backing up as her eyes light up with mischief.

“If you pull my hair, I will pull yours back,” I warn her.

“Touch my nipples, and I’ll pull your eyebrows,” she threatens as she continues walking backwards, her eyes not leaving mine.

“And this is why most of us will die single,” I hear Nila sighing.

Lilah and I stare at each other for a minute, her smile growing like mine. Without waiting any longer, I charge her.

Krysta’s wildcat battle cry announces our arrival before I even crash into my best friend.

Chapter 28

Wild Ones Tip #345

We assume there's really more than one rule to Fight Club, but no one is ever allowed to talk about the rest. So we just simply made up our own rules from there.

LIAM

Jason and I are both fighting a laugh for no other reason than the fact this is weirdly fun. Their crazy really is contagious, and I've been infected.

I barely glimpse Kylie on the sidelines, but it distracts me enough for Jason to get a cheap shot in. I retaliate, taking him down once more, and we roll around like two idiots.

“Ever seen a cow eat grass?” Jason snaps as we do a shit job at wrestling.

“That really makes no—” My words end on an embarrassing yelp when the freak does something to my knee, squeezing it in a way that feels painful and ticklish and so wrong all at once.

My elbow catches him in the face, and he grunts before falling to the side. Leaping to my feet, I grab one of his feet and try to start dragging him. Making very little progress with the beast squirming, I start running in a circle in hopes of making him dizzy, using his leg like a handle on a merry-go-round.

“What the hell are you doing?” he snaps, as George and Hale waddle by us, Hale still strapped to his back like a relentless clinger.

Some weird cat cry echoes through the makeshift war-zone, and we all stop as if startled into stillness. My eyes widen, and I drop Jason's foot as Kylie crashes into Lilah, taking her down like a meek little football player.

Benson curses when he crashes to the ground at my feet, rubbing his jaw. I'm momentarily distracted when he kicks a foot up, catching Jared in the ribs and sending him toppling backwards as Kylie starts running through with bare feet and a shrill scream.

"Lilah Vincent, don't you dare!" she shouts, just before Lilah launches herself, taking Kylie back to the ground.

Our fight gets put on pause as we watch the...ridiculous girl fight.

"Cheater!" Kylie snaps, cupping each of her breasts as she stares at Lilah in horror.

Lilah just grins, wiping her long hair out of her face.

"Just for that, I hope that litter of kids does stretch your vagina so much that Benson has to spin circles just to feel you!" Kylie shouts, then grabs Lilah's...eyebrows?

Lilah screeches and bats her hands away.

I take a seat, because this is far more entertaining than fighting with Jason. Speaking of Jason, he returns with a beer and hands it to me, like he's been anticipating his show.

George is sprawled on the ground, eyes on the sky as he pants for air.

Hale is flopped down next to Killian, sharing beers with the other Malones, as Kylie and Lilah continue to grapple... weirdly. Kylie is latched onto Lilah's leg, as Lilah tickles Kylie's armpits.

"Take it back, Kylie Malone! You know how sacred my vagina is to me!" Lilah shouts seriously.

"They always ruin our fun," Jason states around a yawn. "Nice right jab, by the way."

"Nice left hook," I state on autopilot, as though this is as natural to me as it is to them.

"I had to start working with my left because Killian is so good on his right side. I was surprised they put you on me at first, since I usually tag Killian with Jared. Then they went and

got Black Belt Benson,” he says with a bitter snarl, even as he continues to watch Lilah and Kylie wrestle around on the ground.

Well, they’re just rolling around on the ground, really.

“Kick her ass, Lilah!” Hale shouts from the sidelines.

“Show that Vincent how a Malone really fights, Kylie!” Eric chimes in.

“Why are they fighting?” I ask, about the same time, Jason says, “Lilah looks some kind of hot when she’s getting pissed off about her vagina.”

Benson, not missing a beat, slaps Jason on the back of the head, as he answers me.

“To break up the fight between the guys. Might want to get her before this gets out of hand. They sure as shit never stop it. I’ll grab Lilah.”

I’m on my feet without hesitation, handing my beer off to Jason. Benson lunges, grabbing Lilah at the waist before she and Kylie can charge each other, and I grab Kylie at the same time.

“I win!” Kylie shouts.

“Like hell you do!” Lilah argues. “The fight was interrupted!”

“But you were pulled back first,” Kylie points out in a reasonable tone that doesn’t match the unreasonable circumstances.

I spin her in my arms, ignoring Lilah as she continues to argue while Benson tosses her over his shoulder.

“Why the hell did you buy blue paint?” I snap at Kylie, not realizing until this very moment that I’m actually angry about that now. After all, she only paints in blue when she’s depressed, according to her unstable family.

She gives me an incredulous look as I gently hold her by her shoulders.

“Seriously?” she asks me.

My jaw grinds as I glare at her, and she continues to stare up at me like I'm the one who needs my head examined instead of all the ones watching us. Someone has even turned off the music, likely to make it easier for everyone to listen in.

But my eyes are locked only on hers.

"I tell you I love you, and you go buy blue paint," I growl, not giving her time to respond or react before continuing. "What the hell, Kylie? Is it that fucking bad to hear that?" I ask quieter.

Wide-eyed and seeming surprised, she opens her mouth to speak, then closes it, then opens it again. When no words come out, I release her shoulders and take a step back.

"Got it," I tell her curtly before turning around and walking off, ignoring the fact everyone is currently staring at us.

Trying to get away from this so I can properly throw shit and try not to curse myself for moving way too fast, I head back toward my cabin.

"Damn it, stop walking away from me, Liam Harper!" Kylie gripes just before she darts in front of me.

It happens too fast for me to stop abruptly, and I crash into her, knocking her down as I go down with her.

My arms go around her as I spin us at the last minute during our fall, and it feels like she's turned into a dead-weight bowling ball when her knee collides with my stomach and knocks all the air out of me.

A grunt passes through my lips as she straddles me, apparently not concerned the fact I'm suffocating. I want to strangle her and kiss her at the same time.

Just as soon as I can breathe again.

Chapter 29

Wild Ones Tip # 442

We're easy like Sunday morning...as long as you wear a helmet.

KYLIE

His mouth opens and closes like he's trying to take a breath, but I know it's temporary. And while I have him restrained, I grab both sides of his face with my hands, forcing his eyes to meet mine.

I can't tell if he's angry, panicked, or pained. Possibly all three, given these insane circumstances.

"For fuck's sake, take a breath," Killian shouts.

As if prompted by his command, air finds Liam's lungs, and some half-donkey sound accompanies it as his color returns to normal. *Ohhh...* I didn't realize he couldn't breathe.

That makes way more sense.

A few chuckles follow that, because...my family and the Vincents are assholes, obviously.

"I can buy blue paint without being miserable," I bite out. "You're supposed to be saner than the rest of these idiots."

With one hand, I absently gesture toward the amused men watching us, but my eyes never leave his.

"I wasn't really sure what you said," I confess, swallowing a little insecurely as my other hand falls from his face and I just continue to awkwardly straddle him as he lies on the ground.

The look he gives me definitely doesn't make me feel like he believes me. "How could you have possibly have misunderstood that?" he asks dubiously.

This is the absolute least romantic place in the world for private confessions. We've had many far more romantic moments where this confession could have been made, and we wouldn't cringe when we looked back on it.

The weight of several nosy gazes on us doesn't seem to bother him though, and I don't have the option of taking it to a private location, because apparently I've already screwed up once today. I'd rather not delay.

"I thought there was no way I heard you right," I say barely above a whisper, causing his look to soften a little as confusion creases his features.

He opens his mouth to speak, when we hear Krysta yell, "We can't hear you! Speak up!"

Rolling my eyes and ignoring Liam's twitching lips, I go on, keeping my voice quiet just to spite them all.

"I blame the two orgasms," I explain very seriously, causing Liam's smile to spread.

"More than I needed to know," Jared groans from somewhere a little too close.

"Go. Away," Liam tells them, but his eyes never leave mine as his smile starts to slip.

"Now that you know I said it, does that mean more blue paint? Did I move too fast?" he asks just as quietly, meaning the assholes haven't left and we're awkwardly having this conversation in public. Not that I'm surprised.

"Can we talk about this in private?" I ask.

"No," comes a very unanimous reply from all the unimportant eavesdroppers.

Liam stands, holding me to him like it's no big deal, and starts carrying me toward Lilah's old cabin, even as everyone groans in protest.

My legs are wrapped around his waist, my arms are wrapped around his neck, and I'm looking over his shoulder as I flip off everyone who is watching us.

Which is *everyone*.

Dicks.

Krysta and Nila hop down from the tree, tossing down the empty plastic bowl that held their damn popcorn.

The second we're inside Lilah's empty cabin, Liam kicks the door shut and drops me to my feet so he can stare down at me with the most serious expression I've ever seen on his face.

"So, now that they've killed the most climactic part of a relationship, explain why you went and bought paint."

I cross my arms over my chest a little defensively. "Why'd you run off to the Vincents instead of sticking around?"

He rolls his eyes. "I didn't mean to blurt it out like that so soon," he says as he holds my gaze.

"So you didn't mean it?" I ask, swallowing a little harder than necessary.

"For fuck's sake, Kylie," he groans, exasperated. "You've dragged it out enough. Just tell me if it's too soon or not and if you're going to run."

"Why would *I* run?" I ask him.

He just stares at me, and a slow grin spreads over my lips when I see the hint of insecurity in his eyes.

"You really think I'll run scared because you love me? I've only avoided those three little words because *I* thought it was too soon," I tell him, watching as an array of emotions cross through his eyes, even as hesitance keeps him still. "I knew if I said them, something terrible would happen."

His grin forms before he can stop it.

"What's that?" he asks quietly, moving closer as his hand comes up to cup my chin, a gentle hold that keeps my face turned upward toward his.

"Well, for starters, a huge fight between the Vincents and the Malones," I state with a very serious tone.

His grin grows.

“That’s all?” he asks.

“That’s not enough?” I ask incredulously.

He shrugs one shoulder, that insecurity fleeing his features to make way for that heady confidence I love so much about him.

“I really expected more fireworks or something,” he tells me flatly.

Stepping into him, I crane my head back more to keep his gaze as our bodies press together. His hand falls away from my chin and slowly slithers into my hair, toying with the curls the way only he is allowed to do.

“I’ve loved you since the first time we locked ourselves in a house together,” I say on a shaky breath, watching as his eyes heat and his smile starts to slip. “I just didn’t realize it until you came back and I finally stopped hurting.”

His lips are suddenly crashing against mine, and my arms fly up to loop around his neck as he lifts me and presses me to a wall, kissing me stupid.

Someone starts clapping really slowly. Then someone joins them. And another.

“Are they seriously starting a slow-clap?” Liam asks against my lips, even though he’s grinning too big to continue kissing me.

The slow clap builds momentum until it’s finally a true applause, and we both look toward the windows to see Vincents and Malones pressed against the glass. Nila and Krysta are on a set of shoulders—Nila on Killian’s and Krysta on my father’s as they smirk and clap for us too.

“I’m going to ruin a set of boots kicking so many asses,” I say on a weary sigh.

But Liam starts kissing me again, drawing my attention back to the important part as he kisses me harder.

“I think I’ve seen enough. I don’t want to get sick,” I hear my dad grumble. “Beer at my place!” he adds jovially. “Tonight we celebrate with all the Wild Ones. To hell with the rules.”

Liam starts grinning against my lips again, and I pull back, my eyes locking on his.

“Are you sure you can handle being a Malone?” I muse, smirking a little.

His eyes narrow even as his grin stays in place. “I think you still underestimate me.”

His lips brush against mine, as he prompts me to wrap my legs around his waist and starts carrying me toward the door.

“Where are we going?” I ask against his neck as I start kissing on it.

His grip on my ass tightens as his footsteps hurry, carrying us away from Lilah’s cabin and everyone shouting at us to hurry up and meet them at my Dad’s.

“We’re going to celebrate on our own first before I spend a night with the Wild Ones and alcohol.”

“I can walk. It’ll be faster,” I murmur against his neck, dragging my lips up toward his ear.

He groans. “You’re barefoot,” he grumbles.

But we only make it as far as halfway before his lips are on mine and he’s shoving me against a tree, too impatient to make it all the way back.

Tree sex is totally hot with Liam Harper.

Epilogue

Three weeks later...

Wild Ones Tip #367

Custody disputes are as ugly as a shaved opossum.

LIAM

Wet.

Cold.

Wet.

Cold.

I jerk awake, and curse those stupid fucking Malones when I realize I'm floating on a damn air mattress in front of the town.

On a Saturday.

My head swivels when I hear the roar of a motor coming toward me, and a horn blares from the town hall, reminding me of the weird fog horn I heard in my shitty dream where I was stuck on a boat in a storm.

Kylie is on her father's hover boat and waving at me, even as I narrow my eyes at her.

"Really?" I snap at her, clinging to the mattress as their wake tries to tip me over.

George fights a grin, trying not to gloat, as Kylie doubles over from laughing so hard.

"Family rules, Liam. First one drunk pays the price!" she shouts.

"I'm not technically family yet!" I remind her, still struggling with the mattress that is now sinking because of all

the water they slung up.

George chuckles as he tosses me a rope with a lot more ease than the time I tried to reel in Kylie. I catch it and he starts dragging me in as Kylie ties them off.

Just as I near them, a lot of loud motors roar closer, and I turn in time to see a huge burst of water slinging up from Kai Wilder's motorized surfboard. The water crashes into me, and I struggle to keep my balance on the wobbling mattress, my feet moving like I'm dancing to keep steady.

George laughs harder, but I dive into his boat before I can fully fall into the water.

"Come on, city boy. We have a meeting today," he says as I try to catch my breath and glare at Kai Wilder, who doesn't even glance my way.

Kylie, the little traitor, comes giggling up to my side before pressing a kiss to my cheek.

I glare at her.

"Why do you look so giddy?" I ask her suspiciously.

"Because," she says around a grin, "today is a big day."

Before I can ask her what that means, George is shoving me toward the dock like he's too impatient to let me catch my breath or figure out what the hell is going on. I'm wet, I have morning breath, I'm really fucking hungover, and I spent the night on a mattress.

Now?

Now that damn violin has just started playing on the town speakers, and Kylie turns to me with wide, excited eyes.

"This day just got better," she says in a squeal, clapping her hands together.

This is the worst day ever.

I groan, even as George starts river dancing like a pro down the dock. In fact, all the Wild Ones are dancing like it's no big deal.

Wait...

Why are all the Wild Ones in town at the same time?

Killian looks like he grew up knowing this shit as he dances and owns it.

Kylie's laughter taunts me as I awkwardly fumble through the motions. Benson is apparently just as terrible as I am. But Bill—the reason we're even having to dance like this—looks like he was born to be Lord of the Dance.

Penny swoons as she watches him, her hands over her heart as she stares dreamily at her husband dancing on top of a picnic table.

Everyone out at this unholy hour is dancing like it's just a part of life, and most of them are actually good at it.

Fuckers.

When the song cuts off, I flip Kylie off over my shoulder as she continues to laugh at me and mock my terrible dancing. My arm drops around her shoulders when she steps into my side, still fucking laughing.

George looks like he's on cloud nine, and he winks at Greta Wilder as she casts him a secretive smile.

They're really not terribly discreet.

"What's going on?" I ask as Kylie guides me toward the town hall.

"Custody battle gets settled today," she says as though it should be obvious.

"Custody battle?" I ask, confused.

"Yes. Two custody battles, actually."

"Sure," I say with a shrug, trying not to humorlessly laugh at how my Saturday is starting off. "Sounds like fun."

She pats my chest, and I pull her closer.

"You owe me body heat. I need to warm up," I tell her as I lean down to her ear, nipping her earlobe.

She shudders a little, but presses closer.

“I’m all yours as soon as Vick gives us sole custody,” she says, kissing my jaw.

I’m so distracted by her lips that I don’t really *hear* her until someone is breaking us up and pushing us inside the hall.

“Wait. What?” I ask, but George is shoving me toward a seat, and Kylie takes a seat right in my lap, distracting me again.

My lips immediately go to her neck, and I’m thankful her father and cousins don’t have an issue with me touching her all the time. Or her touching me.

It’s not until a loud *banging* disrupts us that I look up, seeing the town hall is full, and Vick is the one making the banging noise as he slams a gavel down over and over.

“Let’s hurry this along. You know how I feel about all of you in one place,” he says loudly, then points a threatening gavel toward George. “And you broke the rules. Don’t think that went unnoticed. I know about your unsanctioned party three weeks ago that had all the Wild Ones in attendance.”

I don’t even remember the party.

Like at all.

I remember Kai Wilder getting there early, and saying, *drink this*, before handing me a mason jar with clear liquid. It was lights out for me after that, and I woke up floating in front of my house with Kylie on top of me.

She hit the mason jar too.

George holds his hands up innocently. “My daughter has only ever fallen in love once. Seemed sanctioned enough to me to have a party,” he says, not really using the word correctly.

Vick rolls his eyes.

“That’s all?” Chester Perkins demands from the back as he leaps to his feet. “That’s all you’re going to say to him about the one cardinal rule this town has?!”

“Chester, sit down,” Vick says on a groan. “We can’t delay. We need to move on to the two custody disputes at hand that involve Liam Harper.”

I sit up straighter, casting a questioning glance toward the Malones, who say nothing.

“First of all, his family’s lawyer has been sniffing around town. At George’s request, the town has been held in silence, but someone slipped and said Liam *was* here,” Vick goes on, casting a pointed look toward Chester.

“My family’s lawyer?” I hiss.

Kylie nods absently and pats my arm.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we have it under control,” George tells me absently.

“I just said I heard some city boy lives here. I wasn’t going to lie. Goes against my religion,” Chester says haughtily.

Vick rolls his eyes. “Anyway, we’re here to hear what Liam has to say on the matter concerning his family. Are you considering going back to the Harpers and your city life, or do you intend on letting the Wild Ones handle it?”

His eyes train on me expectantly, and a small grin curves my lips.

“The Wild Ones are welcome to handle it,” I say evenly.

Vick nods like he completely expected that answer. “Now onto the more complicated custody dispute. Hale Vincent, you have the floor.”

Hale stands up across the room, clears his throat dramatically as he unfolds a speech he seems to have prepared, and “scratches” his eyebrow with his middle finger that is turned toward the Malones and me.

“We took in Liam Harper, and he started out on our side of the lake,” Hale says, confusing me. “We groomed him, prepped him, helped him ease into his transition. We even

fought alongside him when the Malones came to attack him en masse. Bottom line, he's a Vincent."

"He's a Malone," Kylie states dryly, giving him an exasperated look. "He moved here for me, he's now on my side of the lake—living in a cabin he built for us—and something major, such as the fight, had to happen for him to be considered for induction."

"What's going on?" I whisper to George.

George just pats my shoulder before he stands.

But Hale keeps arguing first. "We have steak night. We also steal his desserts."

"He's not getting desserts anymore," George says dismissively. "He might have fought with the Vincents, but it's clear he's a Malone."

"They just want him because we finally beat them!" Hale shouts, pointing an accusatory finger at George.

George grins. "Our fight didn't finish."

"Want to finish it now?" Killian drawls.

Vick starts banging that gavel, and I stifle a laugh. It's the most ridiculous town meeting in the history of town meetings. And I sort of love it.

"Two Wild Ones cannot date if they're from different corners," Vick says dismissively. "Sorry, but it's the rules," he adds, not sounding sorry at all.

Hale groans as he drops to his seat, and Killian fights not to smile. He finds this entertaining, apparently.

"And since he's here for Kylie Malone, it's clear he'll take the Malone name when they marry—"

"Now, slow down a little, we're not that far along," Kylie is quick to point out.

"You'll marry," Vick says dismissively, causing me to hold back my laughter.

“Aunt Penny has volunteered to plan the wedding,” Lilah says as she stands, casting a devious look toward Kylie, who scowls in return. “We’ll get them down the aisle.”

Benson tugs her back down to her seat, and tosses an arm around her, as Kylie says something else about the *litter-producers* that earns her a scowl from Lilah.

Sometimes, if you didn’t know how much they all really cared about each other, you’d think they hated one another.

“So it’s settled then,” Vick says, looking around. “The Harper family will be dealt with if they come looking for their lost son, and Liam will be a Malone and the newest addition to the Beaver corner.”

A few snorts of laughter follow that, and the Malones all groan.

“A beaver is much more vicious than a dead chipmunk,” Jared drawls.

“Or a squirrel,” Eric says, looking pointedly at the Nickels.

One of the guys makes a squirrel sound, but it seems to have a rabid edge.

“The matter is settled,” Vick says loudly before anyone else can start volleying insults. “Everyone has two minutes to clear out.”

The gavel slams down, and everyone starts standing. My smile actually hurts as Kylie wraps herself around me and starts kissing her way down my throat again.

“No fucking in those two minutes!” Vick shouts, possibly at us.

Grinning, I stand with Kylie attached to me, and we follow out everyone else.

“Liam Harper is officially a Wild One,” Eric Malone says as he claps my shoulder.

Still holding Kylie against me, I stare out at the town who all pause as the violin music starts to play again. The river

dancing begins immediately, and I'm forced to put down Kylie so I can join in, though this time I do it a little more willingly.

The Vincents start having a dance-off with the Malones, and my smile spreads as I take the Malone side against them.

"I regret not giving him to the Vincents now," George says when he gawks at my...not so skillful moves.

Kylie stumbles into me, laughing so hard at the standoff that she can't keep her balance. I keep moving even as my lips find hers, kissing her so hard that she starts moaning into my mouth.

This is my life.

This is my home.

This is my family.

This is my Tomahawk.

Kylie draws back, mouthing three little words that have me ready to steal her father's boat so I can take her home.

"What's that look for?" she asks, peering up at me, still not realizing just how much she means to me.

"I have a present for you."

Her eyes brighten as she steps closer.

"What?"

My lips brush over hers. "A lot of boots," I tell her as the violin music stops.

"Boots?" she asks, clearing her throat like she didn't just swoon a little.

"So many boots you circled in those catalogues," I tell her, grinning.

"Where?" she asks, trying not to sound overly excited, even as I see the weakening resolve in her eyes. After all, boots are her biggest weakness.

"Lilah hid them," I tell her with a shrug.

“What?” she asks with a very serious, and not-so-happy expression.

I shrug, playing coy. “I didn’t want it to look like I was trying to buy you, so I sent Lilah to collect the boots until the perfect time to return them.”

“You let Lilah *Vincent* touch boots that you bought for me?” she asks like I’ve committed treason.

“Yes,” I say, my smile mocking her.

She whirls around, spotting Lilah dragging Benson toward the boats like she’s about to break town rules about sex-in-public.

“Lilah Vincent!” Kylie shouts.

Lilah spins around, cocking her head to the right in question.

“What did you do with my boots?”

Lilah’s grin slowly spreads, and she turns to start sprinting toward the docks.

Kylie takes off running after her, and Benson groans as his head falls back.

I just watch as Lilah dodges her, and they chase each other like children playing tag. George Malone nudges me as he comes to stand close.

“You’re already figuring out how the family works,” he says in approval as Lilah squeals and leaps over a log to start racing down the road.

“I hate running!” Lilah says after a string of curses from the distance.

“Then give me my boots!”

They disappear down the road, and I’m the only one watching like it’s anything out of the ordinary.

This...is my Saturday.

THE END.

Note from the author...

Thank you for reading *Going Wild!*

Liam and Kylie's book was something completely different to work on, because all the drama comes in at the front of the book, and you've already read *Becoming a Vincent*, which basically happens between Kylie and Liam's story.

It's the first time I've ever put the true climax so close to the beginning of a story. It makes it unique in that way, even if it steals some of the angst you might have been hoping for from a normal romance.

Beneath all the fun and silliness, Liam really did grow as a person after the accident that led to him getting close to Kylie. He was shallow, vain, arrogant, and completely self-absorbed.

Kylie grew a lot too. For such a risk taker, she never really took risks. After all, Liam was her first relationship, and it was an accident that she ever even got close enough to him to care about him. Her guard was down, and it was too late to stop it by the time she realized what had happened. She didn't even acknowledge how judgmental she was in the beginning, because she genuinely didn't see herself as the judgmental type.

It was what made her real to me. She noted her flaws on the outside, but never made much effort to point out her actual personality flaws. That's the way we are. We rarely notice our character flaws, but we stare in a mirror and point out every physical flaw we have.

Now I'm getting too deep, but you get the point. Kylie was just an average girl with a lot of hidden insecurities she masked with confidence and sarcasm, and Liam was a typical rich douche. Until they made each other better.

Yes, I know this series lacks a lot of that angst from all my other books that also have comedy. That was the purpose

of this series. Something lighter, something more fun, something...easy to read that just makes you laugh or feel good.

This series is to break up the ordinary, and it's meant to be silly (and sexy) fun.

For all your angsty needs, I've got plenty of other series that might interest you. ;)

In case you read the last note from *Becoming a Vincent*, I'll try not to repeat myself too much, but it might happen a little.

I draw from a lot of real life experience when I'm writing, but for this series, I'm drawing from my childhood mostly. Obviously things will be exaggerated from time to time, but the fight scene? Yeah...totally something the "men" in my family would have done.

I told you I would share the true stories that inspired certain scenes, so...

The men in my family weren't violent, but I reckon if you had dangly bits, you had to prove you were a man by wrestling or joining a "tough man" competition. If you don't know what a tough man competition is, well, it's a bunch of average Joes who think they can fight, and a bunch of MMA professionals who've been fighting competitions for years. Then a big ole slice of humble pie is served up by the end.

It's damn good entertainment, but it's been a while since I've seen one, so I'm assuming there was some concussion research done there. I'll get back to you on that.

Another way to prove you were a real man, sometimes you had to wrestle your daughter's boyfriends who were half your age. My first "real" boyfriend accepted the challenge and even taunted my father when they started the circling thingy people do before a fight. I believe the words "old man" and "slow as molasses" was used. (I didn't say he was original at insults.)

It took less than five minutes for my father to effectively pin him. Then my dad pulled the guy's pants down and

literally spanked his ass like he was an errant child from the eighties in front of all of us. Tonya knocked Danielle off the porch when she tried to cover her eyes, because we were ‘sheltered’ children like that, and there was a boy’s naked butt in plain view.

I can laugh about it now. No worries.

Anyway, that’s where the *fight* scene came from. Well, the attitude of it rather. Completely different, I know, but my father was humming *Eye of the Tiger* when he was spanking said guy’s ass in front of my sisters and I. Meanwhile, my stepmother was laughing so hard she couldn’t breathe.

I make us sound like terrible people, but you have to remember this was the nineties. Times were different and *The Three Stooges* were comedy gold even then. At least in our town.

This series is still my escape, and I really hope it remains an escape for everyone. Kai Wilder’s book is next, which will be the first male Wild One to have a book. Killian Vincent is after him. I think. Don’t quote me on that last one just yet, but as of now, that’s the plan.

Hope you’re as excited about Kai Wilder’s book as I am.

Don’t worry, the Nickels will be in a book soon, as long as the series continues to do well. I know it’s different, but that’s sort of the point. So thank you for giving it a chance, and thank you soooooooooo much for reviewing. I can’t even explain how important that is, and I can’t thank you enough for taking the time to do it.

As always, I love the hell out of you. <3

XOXO,

C.M.

Sneak Peek of Kai Wilder's book, *Wilder*:

Chapter 1

PIPER

"You have no idea the hell I had to go through just to get out to this cabin. I've faced death three times more than I have in my entire life," I tell the deer as I throw the rope I found randomly lying outside my late grandmother's cabin.

The rope lands right beside the struggling deer, who is trying to climb out of the hole in the ice, water splashing as the deer makes pitiful sounds of distress. I whimper when I realize the deer isn't smart enough to bite down on the rope and let me pull it out.

"I'm only doing this because of Bambi. That damn movie broke my heart," I say on a whimper as I ease out onto the ice, already slipping and dancing around to keep my balance.

I try to stay away from the softer patches that don't appear as frozen, as I quickly fashion a noose. I know it's morbid, but it's the only rope-tying trick I know that will be of any help. Thank my medieval-obsessed father.

It takes a few tries, but I finally manage to ring the deer's neck, and I pull quickly, freeing the small fawn from the water, then sliding to it carefully to undo the noose before I accidentally suffocate it.

It lies completely still for a second, and my breaths fog in front of my face as I bend over to listen for a heartbeat.

Just as my hair touches its stomach, then wild thing leaps up with a battle cry that scares the shit out of me, and I yelp as I crash backwards.

My eyes widen as the deer runs off, just as the ice beneath me gives out.

Everything happens so terrifyingly fast. My life doesn't even have time to flash before my eyes this time.

A bloodcurdling scream is shut off when I'm suddenly sucking icy water into my lungs, and my body feels like it's on fire and freezing at once, as I scramble to push myself back to the surface. Fortunately, I pop up in the same huge hole I've made instead of getting stuck under the ice, a newly realized fear of mine.

Just as my hands grip the edge of the burning cold ice, something firm grabs my wrist, and I'm completely yanked out of the water.

My entire body is shaking so hard, and my vision is dimming as something loud chatters. I think it's my teeth.

I feel myself moving, but I'm too disoriented to know what's really going on around me.

"Wake up!" someone shouts near my ear just as a motor revs to life somewhere around us.

"Dr. Harvey, got an icicle. How do we warm her up?" I hear someone asking.

Two male voices are talking around me, but my eyelids are too heavy. I'm not sure how this day went to hell so quickly. No good deed goes unpunished.

I feel like I'm moving, and I feel like I'm freezing too hard to care about anything else. Everything burns. Everything hurts. I'm almost worried my eyelids are frozen shut because I can't seem to open my eyes.

"Fucking wake up, you stupid fucking girl!" someone shouts close to my ear again.

Three voices. It's three voices instead of two. The appropriate fear is absent, since I'm positive I'm about to die anyway.

I open my mouth, trying to form words, unsure what really comes out.

"Did she just say something about Bambi?" someone asks.

I feel jostled when we come to an abrupt stop, and my eyelids crack open just barely, seeing blurry, tall men as someone presumably carries me.

“He said to strip her out of her wet clothes and skin-to-skin heat would be helpful.”

“Not it,” two guys say real damn fast, but I’m still stuck on the skin-to-skin thing.

“You can’t strip naked and spoon with her, you fucking idiots,” a girl’s voice cuts in, and I shudder either because I’m still literally freezing to death or because I’m traumatized and terrified.

“You do it. You’re a girl. She won’t freak out so bad,” the guy carrying me says as we’re suddenly inside a warm house of some sort, but everything is still too blurry to make out.

I blink for a few seconds too long, and when I come too, a man’s face is hovering over mine as he barks at me to *wake the hell up*.

My fingers touch a beard when I try to swat him away, but my hand falls to my side, too weak to really do much.

A girl’s face pokes in right beside him, her eyes wide and her hair blonde.

“*I took off your clothes,*” she tells me very loudly, annunciating each word like I’m an idiot.

Then panic hits, and I glance around, seeing a lit fireplace beside me.

“Her lips are blue. Maybe someone does need to strip down.”

“You do it,” the guy snaps at her.

“You do it,” she argues. “You’re like a furnace.”

He curses and stands, and I panic even more as he starts stripping. Sure, he has a nice body, but that’s really not the point right now.

I’m in a cabin with a lot of antlers sticking out of plaques, guns hanging on walls, and animals stuffed. And a guy is

stripping down as he and I think his sister argue about who puts off more body heat.

My gaze flicks toward the fireplace that I'm lying on front of...on top of what appears to be a fur rug of some sort. I swallow thickly when I realize there's a fur blanket over me.

I came to Tomahawk without realizing it's actually the setting for the Hills with eyes or whatever, minus the incestuous and radioactive deformities.

"Just so you know, I'm not going to touch you. Just take my heat if you want it," the guy says sourly, which admittedly puts me at ease a little.

I start scooting away from him when he climbs under the blanket with me, but when his warm foot brushes mine, it's like my survival instinct takes over.

I'm suddenly hugging him without even realizing how it happened, because he's *sooooo* warm. I think I whimper when the coldness starts to sting, my body trying to regain more heat.

He curses and tenses all over, but puts his arms around me. "It's like hugging a fucking popsicle," he gripes.

I don't even care about anything but stealing every ounce of warmth he has to offer right now, pressing as tightly as I can against him. It takes me a second to realize he still has on boxers, but I'm completely naked.

My breasts are pressed flat against his chest, and the warmer I get, the more awkward this entire situation becomes. It's like my brain is thawing and finally appreciating the gravity of this entire encounter.

He keeps my head tucked under his, likely to avoid the awkward eye contact thing.

I say nothing, since I still want more warmth right now. I'll freak out in a minute.

At least there's nothing sexual about the way he's touching me. I think this is clearly just what it looks like—a stranger grudgingly sharing body heat with a stupid girl who

tried to save a deer, when she knows nothing about ice or wildlife.

Day one in Tomahawk, and I almost died for a fourth time. Guess I know I'm selling that cabin now.

"What the hell is going on?" another woman's voice snaps.

I peer over the blanket just enough to see a woman with a wild bun on her head and an axe in her hand. I barely stop myself from fainting, because this is just getting more insane by the second, and I currently hate every horror movie I've ever seen that had a wilderness setting.

"Kai stole her from her home and is forcing her to have his babies," the blonde girl says from the other side of me, perched by the fireplace as she eats an apple.

I swallow thickly.

"Fucking really, Nila?" the guy holding me growls. "Why would you tell her that. Now she's going to—"

The bun lady is already squealing. "Where's that damn emergency phone?" she asks, pulling open drawers and shutting them.

I'm being really still and really quiet, praying for this nightmare to end abruptly.

"Ah ha! Found it! I laughed at that Liam kid when he dropped this off, but now I want to kiss him for it," she goes on, then dials someone.

They don't even have phones out here? If my tear ducts weren't still frozen, I think I'd cry right now.

"Penny, guess who's getting babies before you?" the woman says, and I pale.

"You're not actually having his babies," the girl beside me says, patting my shoulder as the guy continues to give me warmth and no babies.

Where the hell am I?

“Yeah, my Kai clubbed some girl over the head and brought her home,” the other woman, who I presume is their mother or their resident mental patient, says as she nods vehemently, not glancing at us.

“Doesn’t really matter how he got a girl. It just matters that he’s got one now, and I’m going to have babies before you. So ha!”

“Really not having babies,” the guy growls next to my ear as I start to squirm.

“Who are you?” I finally hiss.

“Kai Wilder,” he says as if that needs no further explanation.

“I’m Nila. His sister,” the girl with blonde hair tells me before pointing to the graying blonde on the phone. “That’s our mother. You’ve made her the happiest woman in the world.”

“For fuck’s sake, Nila, fix it,” Kai snaps at her.

“You’re the barbarian who is bringing home frozen corpses to reanimate. You fix it,” she deadpans.

“Oh, she’s adorable. I think. I can only see her forehead from here, so she could be unsightly, if I’m being honest. Hopefully she’s adorable. I want my babies to be prettier than your babies, if you ever get any, that is. Your Lilah is still on birth control,” the mother drones on, glancing in my direction.

“Are you on birth control?” Nila asks me seriously.

“Are you trying to fucking freak her out right now?” Kai growls. “Wait until my balls aren’t so close to her knees.”

I’m not sure if it’s the day from hell, the matter of me still being a bit hypothermic, or if it’s the fact I’ve possibly been abducted by crazed wilderness people for a breeding experiment, but I feel a little dizzy before it all fades to black.

Wilder will be coming in 2018. <3

About the Author

C.M. Owens is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of over 30 novels. She always loves a good laugh, and lives and breathes the emotions of the characters she becomes attached to. Though she came from a family of musicians, she has zero abilities with instruments, sounds like a strangled cat when she sings, and her dancing is downright embarrassing. Just ask anyone who knows her. Her creativity rests solely in the written word. Her family is grateful that she gave up her quest to become a famous singer.

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