

Excerpt from Mended
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Xander Wilde

The magic of rock and roll—it casts a spell on you. I’m no exception. I’m a band manager and I’m living the dream, touring with The Wilde Ones, helping them secure their well-deserved place in the music industry. I love being a part of it all, especially watching the band perform live—the crowds, the cheers, the music. It’s a high and a low all at once and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Every step of the way with this band has been fun, exciting, stressful—every possible emotion. Obviously we’ve had some breaks but mostly we all put in a lot of hard work—myself, Garrett Flynn, Phoenix Harper, River Wilde, and now Zane Perry.

“Can you hear me now?” he bellows.

I nod my head as my heart pounds in my chest. My hands feel cold and clammy and a nervousness that makes me weak and shaky takes over. Doubts race through my head and I’m questioning if he’s going to make it through this. A vague awareness that something bad could happen kicks around in my mind and I can’t shake it. The Wilde Ones are doing a sound check on stage and Zane’s not on his game.

It’s July and the weather has been brutally hot. But today it seems cooler. Maybe it’s the California weather maybe it’s the excitement of being home. The Beautiful Lies Tour bus finally rolled back into our home state of California after six months away. When we pulled into the amphitheater, we could see tanned kids in board shorts and bikini tops already lined up at the will call window. Security guards in polo shirts directed us to the artist parking lot, and we were officially home. Tonight we’ll be headlining our biggest show to date. We’re on tour without my brother, River, and still more than half of the shows are sold out, including tonight’s. River quit the band—touring just wasn’t for him but even so the album is on its way up the charts. Who knows it may even hit gold status.

The songs on the album were written and sung by River but are performed in concert by Zane. Having him as my brother's replacement has been the key to our successful transition in a world where replacing leads is normally unsuccessful—simply put, we're lucky as hell to have him. River promised to make a surprise appearance at our next stop. It's going to be epic.

But tonight is all about the arena—Mountain View and the Shoreline. “That's enough,” I yell to the band and call rehearsal. This place is the biggest outdoor venue we've played and I couldn't be more stoked—or more nervous. A sold out show and a rocking opening band—what a combination. But a lead singer with another cold and a weakened voice that can't be heard throughout an amphitheater scares the shit out of me.

I head straight for the bus and spend the next few hours hashing out a song with Nix that he calls a jumbled mess of muscular sense and big-riff sunshine—whatever the hell that means. All I know is that it needs help and that's why he's turning to me. I hadn't played guitar since I was eighteen but for some reason over the course of this tour I've picked it back up. At first I used whatever was lying around but last month I had my mother mail my old one to me and it feels like home. It's a light blue and brown Gibson and I had to have it because it was the guitar that Slash played on. Playing again seems to help pass the time and brings a calm over me that I haven't felt in awhile.

Hours pass and before I know it, it's almost show time. We make our way over to the Amphitheater, do the typical festival schmooze fest, and then settle back to wait. Waiting for them to take the stage is always the most nerve-racking time. I'm sitting in the practically vacant makeshift meet and greet area back stage and sipping a beer in a worthless effort to calm my nerves when a voice travels through the sound system. It's a powerful and emotive mezzo-soprano range that is nothing short of explosive. She sounds unlike any singer I've ever heard before—with only one exception, Ivy Taylor. I push back the memory of her name and the emotions it evokes—the memories are just too painful. I can't see her on stage but I know that the voice belongs to Jane Mommsen. Her band Breathless is playing right before The Wilde Ones.

A hand on my shoulder startles me. I twist and glance up as Amy sits down beside me, crossing her legs. “Hi, Xander. I thought I saw you earlier at the hotel.”

She's a beautiful woman—long, wavy dark hair, petite figure, very natural looking. She's wearing jeans, a blue shirt with some kind of foil design, and silver sandals. Grinning at her I say, "Finally we catch up. Can I get you a drink?"

"I'd love that. How's life on the road been?"

"You know, it has its ups and downs but actually not bad. You?"

"Jane's been going full-force for a while now. But the tour ends with the summer. I'll be glad to be back in LA."

Standing up, I laugh. "I know the feeling. I'll be right back, let me grab us that drink." Tossing my empty bottle, I make my way to the coolers lined up under the tent and grab two beers. I know she'd rather have a glass of Chardonnay but beer it is. Amy is Jane's assistant and I've taken her out more than a few times. We went to high school together and Amy and I know most of the same people so whenever I need a date, I ask her. Last time I saw her was almost nine months ago when I took her to River and Dahlia's wedding.

Heading back to the table I hear Jane yell out to the crowd, "Are you ready for three of the hottest guys in music?" The audience starts screaming and the stage lights dimming the guys that it's the fifteen-minute countdown until they take the stage. The band huddles together in their typical pre-performance stance. I'll have a quick drink with Amy and then join them. As I hand her the bottle my fingers touch hers and we both grin, knowing that we will end up alone by the end of the night.

"You sticking around for the whole show?"

"I think I might," she smiles.

"How about we ride back to the hotel together and grab a real drink at the bar?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"Great. Time for me to get back to work."

She rises from the table, I do the same. She stands up on her toes and kisses me quickly on the lips. "See you tonight," she smiles.

"Catch you later," I say and then cross the room to join the band.

"You're late," Nix snickers. "What's with you two anyway?" he asks.

I shrug my shoulders. "Nothing. We casually see each other once in a while."

Garrett raises an eyebrow. "Chicks are never cool with casual."

Shaking my head at him, I don't bother to disagree. Amy and I have been doing this for years. It works for her and for me. We like each other's company but only see each other sporadically. I'll call her once in a while and we'll go out but we are in no way exclusive. I don't ask her about other men and she doesn't ask me about other women. I grab the bottle and pour the amber liquid into the shot glasses stacked on the cap. It's our pre-show routine. A shot and a prayer, so to say. It's Garrett's turn tonight to 'pray' so this should be good.

He raises his glass. "Here's to hoping Xander gets laid so he'll get off our backs."

Tipping my glass back, I quickly down the amber liquid. It burns as it makes its way down my throat. Once we've all drunk our two shot maximum before a show Garrett follows his toast up with, "Seriously man, you need to get laid."

The guys laugh and I actually join in. Jerking off in the small bathroom on the bus is definitely one of the downsides of touring. I've slept with a few girls at some of our stops but screwing groupies isn't really my thing. I'm not one to have time for a girlfriend but I'm also not about to pull my dick out backstage, so it's been a long six months.

Zane coughs after he slings back the shot and I look at him with concern. "You're going to a doctor tomorrow."

He shakes his head. "Yes, Mom, if you say so."

"I'm not kidding. Your voice sounds like shit."

"It's a fucking cold. I took some medicine. I'll be fine."

"Doctor. Tomorrow. I mean it. I'll have Ena set it up."

"I can always sing," Garrett chimes in and I smack the back of his head.

"Hey. I can."

The lights start to flicker and I look at Zane with that feeling of uneasiness again. Second time this tour he's coughing and hacking. We're screwed if he really gets sick. He nods at me as I pat him on the back. Slinging his guitar over his shoulder, he heads out first raising his arm in the air. The crowd goes crazy. The six foot guy is a chick magnet and no one misses my brother tonight. Garrett heads out next yelling, "Great to be here Mountain View!" and Nix follows with his trademark nod. Zane skips his normal charming banter and I know he must be saving his voice. Again, I think about how we're fucked if he gets sick.

I stand at the edge of the stage all night until they finally come to their last song. “It Wasn’t Days Ago,” is a simple but crowd affecting ballad and Zane belts it out. Shouts from nearly thirty thousand fans call for an encore. Turning away from the microphone Zane coughs again. Biting his thumbnail he looks over at me and I slice my finger across my neck.

“One more song for tonight,” he tells the screaming fans and my blood pressure rises. “This one is a cover, an ‘ode to’ I’ll call it. It’s for Xander Wilde, the band’s manager and it’s his favorite song. Everyone ready?” As he starts to sing Linkin Park’s “Iridescent,” I close my eyes and listen. When he hits the chorus his voice gets so low my eyes snap open. Zane turns to grab a bottle of water while the guys continue to play but I can tell something isn’t right.

Last night definitely didn’t go as planned—a visit to the ER, then sleeping in a chair next to Zane all night on the bus because the steroids he was given freaked him out. It’s noon and Amy and I are just arriving at the Pelican Hill Resort. Breathless was leaving right after the show last night so Amy had already planned to ride with us and meet up with them in Irvine. She invited me to some party being thrown by her band’s label that I would have rather not gone to but Ellie, the tour manager, insisted we all go for the good PR.

I’m exhausted and really need some sleep before dealing with the press and tomorrow night’s show. The paparazzi have been everywhere—by the bus as we exited to the waiting car in LA, outside the doctor’s office, at the gates of Zane’s father’s house, and now they’re here in Irvine at the hotel.

To avoid the chaos awaiting us in the lobby, I call Ellie, who is already here, and ask her to check me in and meet me at the pool bar with the key. Draping my arm around Amy, we head that way. I’ve been here a few times so I know my way around. Cutting through the grotto and over to the pool and cabanas, I steer Amy to the right and stop in my tracks as all the air rushes from my lungs.

My body floods with adrenaline and my gut twists. I don't even have to do a double take because I'd know her anywhere. There's no mistaking her. She's just so beautiful—the elegant planes of her face, those high cheekbones, red lipstick, her platinum blonde hair shorter than it used to be tucked behind her ear, that face of an angel. She looks the same. No, she looks better. Her skin glistens in the sun and my gaze automatically follows the shape of her long legs. They look smooth and tan against her white bathing suit. An ache forms in my chest as I think about running my fingers up them. She's still that eighteen-year-old girl I once knew but now she has the body of a woman—lean and toned and full of curves. When she moves it's so familiar it doesn't seem like a day has passed—and everything I ever felt for her, it's all still inside me.

My pulse races at the mere sight of her. She's lounging in the cushioned chair reading a magazine just outside a cabana. My heart slams harder in my chest when she sticks her earphones in her ears like she always used to do and it transports me back to the last time I saw her do the very same thing. We'd skipped school and were at my grandparents' house—their pool. She was lying on the lounge chair listening to music and singing along—her voice so full of soul. I'd moved to sit with her under the guise of putting lotion on her back. She sat up and smiled that shy smile she didn't need to have when she was with me. I squeezed the tube into my hand and after rubbing them together I slowly applied it to her back kneading my way up and down, touching every inch of her that I could.

It brings me back to the here and now when she suddenly sits up and looks over at me. Her eyes pin me in place. She looks at me as if she remembers me for who I was, what we were, not what I did to her. With my chest pounding, memories of us keep flashing through my mind. Fighting a smile, I wonder if she's thinking the same thing—remembering what we were, what we shared, how we loved.

She quickly breaks our connection when she averts her eyes over to the man handing her a drink. I suck in a deep breath trying not to feel sick at the sight. He's nearing fifty, wearing a terrycloth robe. He's about my height, dark brown hair, meticulously groomed facial hair, and not exactly ripped but fit. He's Damon Wolf, a man I've never actually met but hate all the same. I've seen their picture on TV and in magazines. He's her agent, her fiancé, and I'm sure he's the reason she's not singing anymore.

She looks up at him with that same forced smile she used to give people she just wanted to appease and mouths “thank you.” I have a sudden urge to go over and deck him when her gaze shifts back to mine and he pulls her chin back to look at him. I can sense a discomfort between them. We could sense each other’s feelings even when we weren’t near each other.

Amy’s hand slides down my face and I have to blink a few times before I can hear what she’s saying. Glancing one last time at Ivy I see that she’s staring at me again. Then suddenly her mouth forms a scowl and she flicks her attention toward him. Hooking her arm around his neck, she pulls him down for a kiss and I think I might throw up.

“Are you okay?”

I nod. Not able to say a word.

“Isn’t that Ivy Taylor over there? The girl you used to date in high school?” Amy asks. There’s an irritated tone to her voice I’m not used to hearing and it makes me agitated.

“Yeah, it is,” is all I say. She’s not just a girl I used to date...she’s the only girl I ever really loved. She’s also the girl whose heart I broke. Seeing her now brings back all those feelings I blocked, ignored, tucked aside. So many times over the years I wanted to go after her and tell her the truth—but I never did. Why I don’t know. Then one day it was too late—she had gotten engaged.

Amy chatters on. “I think that’s Damon Wolf with her. We should go say hi.”

My body goes cold and my face blank at the thought. I straighten and just as I’m about to say, “No fucking way,” my phone vibrates in my pocket. Squinting at the screen, I see that it’s my brother. I look over to Amy and motion toward the bar. “Hey, this is River. I need to take it. I’ll meet you over there in a minute.”

“That’s fine. We can catch up with them later. I’ll go order us a drink.” She smiles and starts toward the bar.

Turning around to avoid staring at Ivy, I answer the phone. “It took you long enough to call me back.”

“I was in a meeting and stepped out as soon as I could, so don’t start. What did the doctor say about Zane?”

“He’s out for the rest of the tour and we’re fucked.”

“You sure? You’re back in LA for almost two weeks after tomorrow night right? Isn’t that enough time for him to heal?”

“Technically yes. But his old man wants him out. The doctor said that he couldn’t be sure how long the blood that accumulated under his vocal cords had been there but obviously last night, the amount of ruptured vessels was enough to cause his voice to change. He advised at least two weeks of rest before another evaluation to see if surgery is necessary. Zeak wants his son to take a longer period of time off. He’s just afraid that if Zane keeps singing and it keeps happening, scar tissue will build up and cause his voice to change forever.”

“Do you blame him?”

“No I don’t,” I tell River and I feel like shit that I have to put him in a position to do what he didn’t want to do in the first place. But I also know that if I don’t, the band won’t survive. If I have to cancel this tour—the Wilde Ones are done. So I ask, “Did you talk to Dahlia?”

He sighs. “Yeah, I did. She’s cool with it, Xander. I’m just trying to figure it all out.”

“You know I’ll do whatever you need me to do, right?”

“Shit why can’t you just be an ass and make it easy for me to say no?”

“Because you have no idea what this means to me.”

“Actually I do, and that’s why I’m going to make it happen. But Xander, remember I can’t play a twelve string.”

Laughter and relief take hold of me. I feel a huge weight lifted off my shoulders.

“Right now I wouldn’t care if you only played the violin,” I joke.

He laughs and I add, “You’ll be here tonight?”

Now he sounds slightly annoyed. “I said I would. We might be a little late so don’t get your panties in a wad.”

“That’s cool. Thanks for everything. Hey, one more thing.”

“What?”

“Ivy Taylor’s here.”

“No way. Have you talked to her?”

“Fuck no. You know she won’t talk to me. And besides she’s with that asshole.”

“You should talk to her. Tell her the truth.”

“What’s that going to do now? She’ll just think I’m lying.”

“You want me to talk to her? I can explain everything.”

“No. I don’t need my little brother to fight my battles. I’ll talk to her if I feel the time is right. Do you hear me?”

“Whatever you say. Look, I have to run but I want to discuss this later. And Xander...you don’t know he’s an asshole. Just because Dad said his name once doesn’t mean shit.”

“Right. Okay, see you tonight,” I say and end the call. My head is spinning knowing that after all these years I’m actually in the same place she is. I want to talk to her, tell her everything but what would it matter now anyway. Glancing behind me, I catch another glimpse of her with him that turns my stomach. He’s such a slime ball. Since his father was hospitalized and he took over the business, he’s been scooping up labels, tearing them apart, and rebuilding them with bands he thinks are better fits. My guess is he picked up Jane’s label—that’s why he’s here. I heard they were having some financial difficulty and he’s just the kind of bottom feeder that would want to capitalize on not only being her agent but now also her producer. The sight of him touching Ivy makes my skin crawl.

Damon Wolf—two of the last words my father ever spoke to me before killing himself, and I never knew why. Of all the guys in the world Ivy had to end up with him—why him? I look up and they’re gone. But I’m anything but relieved. Rubbing my chin, I’m antsy, agitated, pissed as hell, but feel more alive than I have in years.