

Xavier hoped to God that the paparazzi weren't waiting to pounce in the parking lot, bolting the short distance from the front door of his lawyer's office to his car, asphalt nearly sizzling in the July heat. He'd chosen a firm on the outskirts of Los Angeles county for that very reason; close enough to serve papers in the right jurisdiction, far away enough that no one would see him out here.

Celebrity breakups were always contentious, with tabloids spinning webs of gossip and rumors, and members of the general public gobbling them up, picking "sides" and generally worsening the lives of real people whose worlds are getting upheaved. This might have been the one and only time Xavier did not want to be famous, not as the son of a world-renowned singer and not as a guitarist of a once successful rock band. Xavier wanted to just be some asshole in his late thirties going through what many men go through at that age: a shitty, hostile, heartbreaking divorce.

He successfully plopped into the front seat of his red Maserati without incident. Xavier's car was the only one in the lot, but in his paranoid state, he couldn't help but glance nervously around the business park shrubbery for a stray lens. The bushes and trees were not manicured, and a few scattered leaves had fallen on the windshield.

Once he was certain that he was alone, Xavier retrieved a fresh pack of Sobranie Black cigarettes and a lighter from the front pocket of his dark wash denim vest. He held a button on the key fob to roll down the windows and dropped the keys in the center console. Xavier quickly lit his cigarette and left the pack and lighter next to the keys. Smoking brought him little solace. Twenty years ago, when he'd just started, it might have successfully calmed his nerves. Now Xavier just felt defeated and pathetic, looking for some kind of relief from this mess of his own making.

Between puffs, Xavier's phone rang in his pants pocket. *Claudette Armistead*. It was the name the world knew her by, but to her chagrin, she was not listed as *Mom* or *Mother*. He dug the phone out with his right hand, accepted the call, and wrestled it up between his ear and shoulder.

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Xav," she cooed, her voice full of saccharine affection. "How was the meeting with the lawyers?"

"Good. Fine. Uh, they said I have a good shot at maintaining all of the profits from the last three Knightfiend albums."

Claudette ignores this, getting right to the subject she actually called to talk about. "What exactly did Dowd and co. say about custody?"

"It was good. Custody's good." Xavier knew his lies wouldn't get past his mother, but he attempted anyway, just to keep his ego intact. "It's looking like 50/50, y'know, what we talked about earlier. Allison and I will likely have to stay in LA, so that Janie and Alina can stay at their school for the next year. Then they're promoted to high school, and we'll figure out what to do then."

Claudette was silent for a second, seemingly mulling over this response. Xavier just wished that she would say what she meant. His whole life had been a guessing game of trying to figure out what his mother wanted while she danced around his emotions. He took a drag of the cigarette while she let the tension fester.

"Well, that's good to hear. I wouldn't want to be too far from the girls. You know, it could always be worse. You could be stuck with some second-rate crappy clout chasing lawyer." Xavier heard the sound of Claudette's sneeze ring out over the speaker, and he immediately blessed her automatically. "Goodness. I had better not be getting sick. What was I talking about? Oh yes. Lawyers. You know, I bet Allison found herself a great lawyer."

"Mm-hmm."

"She's a very smart woman, Xav. You're lucky to have such an intelligent woman as the mother of your daughters."

"Is that what you called to talk about?" Xavier sighed, exhaling smoke. "How wonderful my ex is?"

"No. I wanted to see how my one and only son was doing during this difficult time in his life. And ask if you would be interested in having lunch with me today."

Xavier's cigarette was down to the filter. He opened the car door, tossed the butt on the ground, smashed it out with the heel of his boot, and closed it. The smack of the shoe scraping the asphalt, disappointing a crow who was hoping to receive a snack.

"I'll have lunch with you, Mom, but can we keep the subject of my divorce off limits? Just for one afternoon, at least?"

"I don't know if I can hold myself to that. But listen, Kenzie is making tacos."

"Real tacos or low-cal, low-carb vegan gluten-free tacos with Beyond Beef?" This was her private chef's go-to meal when Claudette wanted to be, in her words, "naughty" while dieting for her upcoming tours.

"You know I'm not going to dignify that question with a response, Xav. Be here in about an hour, mmkay?" Xavier knew there was no point in telling his mother that she couldn't just order him around like one of her employees, though the urge frequently passed through his mind.

“Okay, Mom. See you then.”

Claudette offered more pleasantries to end the call, which Xavier batted away with a quick “okay, love you too,” and hung up.

He took a moment to roll the windows back up and adjust his rearview mirror, staring at the top half of his face in the reflection. The lines around Xavier’s hazel eyes had deepened over the last year of his crumbling marriage, and the gray strands almost outnumbered the auburn ones in his shoulder-length hair. An objectively cringeworthy, stereotypical look for an aging rock star. Xavier vowed to get his unruly hair cut and dyed once the divorce was over. A new look for a new man living a new life. Hopefully.

He turned the car on, the radio automatically blaring KROQ. Just his luck, the last few seconds of “Enjoy Motion,” the lead single on Knightfiend’s second album. He was only twenty-two when it came out, and it changed his life completely. Thank God Allison couldn’t touch it. That song had paid for Xavier’s first house in Los Angeles. And got him laid a lot.

Xavier changed the radio to the Beatlemania channel. The upbeat chorus of “Baby You’re a Rich Man” played as he whipped the car around the corner of the parking lot, pausing at the stop sign before entering the frenzy of chaotic LA traffic. Someone in an ancient Honda Civic sped ferociously down the street and towards the freeway onramp, nearly smashing into Xavier’s Maserati and sending his heart into his throat.

He waited an extra second before getting on the freeway himself, not needing Google Maps to know how to get to his mother’s house from here. It was the fourth time Xavier had driven from the Dowd, Lehman & Associates office to see Claudette, which she requested mostly so she could gossip and attempt to bait him into giving out the juicy details on the destruction of his marriage.

It had become her pastime over the last six months. Boundaries were never her strong suit, but Claudette could smell despair a mile away. Attaching herself to misery was his mother’s love language. Xavier had few people he could talk to about this, since most of his friends were also Allison’s friends, so he did what he had done for most of his life, and leaned on his mother for emotional support.

Xavier put on a pair of black Ray-Ban aviators, dimming the glint of the afternoon sun in his eyes, while he joined the congested line of cars heading west towards the beach.