

The Boonies

XAVIER

I stared out through the empty dark-wood room. In a shaft of sunlight, dust particles flowed in currents.

"Uh..." I began, acknowledging the realtor staring at me through her spectacles. "It's nice, but isn't it kind of

She remained chipper. "This beautiful Victorian has been standing here in New Canaan since 1900."

"Yeah," I confirmed. "That's a little too old."

"Of course," the perky redhead went on, angling on her stiletto, "let me show you something more contemporary."

I followed her out of the Victorian home. Pausing for a moment on the wrap-around porch, I breathed in the fragrant country air.

Marco and I had only driven an hour from New York, and we were in a completely new environment.

Connecticut! The boonies!

I was immersed in the sounds of nature. Birds, bees, the breeze through the trees.

The realtor was opening the door of her red Mustang convertible.

"You'll follow me?" she asked. "I have a feeling you will *love* this next option, Mr. Knight. It's a true architectural gem."

"Sounds great," I called, climbing in the backseat of the beamer.

Marco and I followed her car. We were surrounded by woods and small, winding roads. New Canaan had a small town center with a few restaurants, a post office, and a general store, but that was about it.

This was simple living. It was the perfect place to grow up.

"Nice break from the big city out here, huh, Marco?" I asked.

"Indeed, sir!" he replied. "I'm sure Angela will love it."

I smiled, resting my arm on the open window, letting it catch the breeze. *Angela would love it here.*

A few minutes later, we pulled into a long driveway that continued uphill for what must have been a mile.

We stopped in front of a modern home with a flat roof. The walls were accented with teak wood, but they were mostly constructed of glass. It was a house of windows.

"A little different from the last home, don't you agree?" The realtor called, flipping her sunglasses on top of her head.

"Totally," I agreed.

She led me up to the house and turned the key in the front door. As she entered, I held it open for her.

For a moment, I was blinded by the familiar flash of a camera.

Not again.

I glared at the bushes, where I could make out a round lens. Before I could stop myself, I gave the photographer the finger.

Would that photo ruin the surprise for Angela? Or worse, would she think I was with another woman?

Just when we were getting back on track ...

I grimaced, imagining the worst. But as soon as I closed the heavy wooden door behind me, my anger dissolved. The house was *beautiful*.

"So, Mr. Knight," the realtor began, smiling, "welcome to the masterwork of Elliot Noyes, student of the groundbreaking Marcel Breuer?"

I stared at her blankly.

"Very important architects," she explained.

"Ah...beautiful."

The floors were made of wide slats of light wood. The rooms bled into one another with the open floor plan. The whole space was bathed in bright morning light.

"Wow," I exclaimed, crossing the room and gazing out at the backyard.

It was massive. Beside the house was a vegetable garden—a maze of flower beds stretched beyond it.

It looked like a fairytale.

"It's really something, isn't it?" the realtor asked, standing beside me. "And you could easily install a playscape over there for the children."

She pointed to the far right corner of the yard, on the edge of the forest.

It was perfect.

The realtor led me through a master bedroom with heavy curtains that could cover the huge windows, the four remaining bedrooms, and an enormous kitchen that would please any chef.

I imagined Angela padding over the wooden floors in bare feet. I imagined making a fire in the fireplace and reading the twins a story. I imagined hosting Christmas dinner with all of Angela's family gathered around the dining room table.

"I'll take it," I said.

The realtor was obviously pleased. "Are you sure?" she asked. "We haven't even gone over pricing."

"Money's not really an object."

I beamed at her. Though I'd burned a ton of cash in Tokyo, it was still true. Money was no problem.

Especially when it came to the most important thing in my life: my family.

I set up another meeting so we could take care of the necessary paperwork, and then we said goodbye.

From outside, I gazed at the beautiful house. My house. Our refuge in the country. Our little slice of paradise.

After a few moments, I hopped back into the beamer.

"That's the one, Marco!" I told him.

"It's lovely, sir."

"It sure is ..."

Marco drove us back down the winding driveway, and I stared out into the woods that would one day become a familiar sight.

This was the perfect place for my kids to grow up.

As Marco drove us back to Manhattan, I got lost in daydreams.

I would bring my family to this ice cream shop here, that playground over there ...

I couldn't wait to tell Angela. She would be so surprised.

The house was great, but as much as I wanted to believe it, I knew it wouldn't fix everything. I had to show Angela that I would be able to build a *life* we would love, which included a new job for me, too.

I took out my phone and pulled up my email. Flipping through my sent messages, I decided to follow up on the most promising contacts.

I'd sent out emails to old clients and contacts a week ago now, and I had only heard back from a few. And what I'd heard was all negative.

I sighed. I hated degrading myself this way.

I hated asking around for opportunities when the last thing I wanted was to work for someone else.

As CEO of Knight Enterprises, I was the person who gave out opportunities.

That was an important part of who I was, and one that I didn't want to give up. Even without my father's company.

I locked my phone, staring out the window.

Henry had told me Knight was going to shit. Maybe I could reach out...

No. Too easy.

I wanted to find something that was totally mine.

But what could that be?

I wanted to work, yes. But on my own terms.

Just then, my father's words came to me:

"I can make a business from what I love the most."

That one realization was all it took for him to change career paths and build a business of his own. A business that was not only lucrative—but rewarding.

It was an interesting idea. I let my mind run wild.

What did I love the most?

I loved travel, too. But I was done with hotels. I loved nice cars, nice clothes, nice food ...

And then it hit me.

I pulled a business card from my wallet.

Al Tenenbaum

Master Distiller

Brooklyn, New York

It couldn't hurt to reach out to him, right?

Xavier

Hey, Al.

Xavier

It's Xavier. I ordered the Tennessee bourbon the other day.

Xavier

Wondering if you have some time to meet this week, I have a business proposition

...

ANGELA

I dug my fingers into the soil and nestled the broccoli seedlings into the hole.

I gave the plot a dash of water, and smiled out at my garden. It had grown significantly since Xavier and I went to the flower farm.

Plants covered nearly half of the large balcony. I had my vegetables, my fruits, and my flowers.

I would have to wait for summer for most of the fruits and vegetables, but I had enough to keep me busy. The kale and lettuce were sprouting new leaves every day, and the hyacinths were starting to grow.

Looking out at all the green around me, I felt a burst of excitement.

Spring was here. Things were growing, my children among them.

I looked down at my huge belly. As if one wasn't enough of a miracle, there were *two* babies growing in there.

My huge stomach made me feel like a whale. But it also made me feel capable. Almost magical.

I was growing a little boy and a little girl.

At the same time!

It was a long winter. It was cold and dark, and for much of it, I'd felt alone.

But as the snow thawed, I knew I was stronger because of it.

Spring was here, and with it came my husband. Ahead of me were longer days. I had summer tomatoes, strawberries, and hydrangeas...

A knock on the glass door pulled me from my reverie.

I turned to find Xavier standing on the other side, holding a bouquet of yellow roses.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, rushing to him and sniffing the flowers.

"They're gorgeous!" I gushed. "Thank you!"

My husband smiled at me. The glimmer in his eye was back, and it made my heart soar.

"You're gorgeous," he replied with his signature wink.

I took the huge bundle of flowers in my arms.

"Someone's in a good mood," I observed.

It was contagious. I couldn't stop smiling.

"It's because I have exciting news for you."

I raised my eyebrows expectantly. Had Xavier found a new job?

"It's for all of us," he clarified, reaching out to touch my belly.

We stood like that for a moment, smiling down at the babies inside.

"Well ...what is it?"

He took my hand and guided me to the couch.

"When your dad was here the other day, he got me thinking," Xavier began, "about how, you know, a penthouse might not be the perfect place for babies."

I frowned. I hadn't thought about it much. The penthouse would be fine for our babies.

"But I'm sure—"

"So..." Xavier interrupted me. "I bought us a house!"

My jaw dropped.

"What?!"

"A house?"

Xavier smiled at me expectantly.

I had no idea how to respond. The idea was exciting, but what did he mean?!

"It's in Connecticut," he explained. "It's in the middle of nowhere! You'll love it! Just wait until you see the yard and gardens...we can install a playscape for the kids!"

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it.

"Our children will have a childhood like yours," he continued, "with a backyard to run around in."

I took my husband's face in my hands and kissed him. I was excited about the house, but I was more excited by his excitement.

It meant that Xavier, the one I knew and loved, was coming back.