

SASHA VIVELO

A DEAL WITH
BUDDY PROZAC'S SON

MY CAR DRIFTS PAST the mouth of the broad suburban driveway. The white house belongs to the brother-in-law I've never met. Light bulbs blaze in sconces on either side of the front door.

The car comes to a halt with a loud crack. The right front fender has chewed up the wooden mailbox post, breaking off some good-sized splinters. Worse, the blow knocked the post askew in the ground. The whole thing, black mailbox with wrought-iron scrolls and all, leans sideways at a wild angle. This is all I need on an illicit visit to my husband's nephew.

I have a condom in my back pocket.

At the sound of the doorbell, footsteps creak from somewhere within; but he leaves me waiting on the porch for a few moments. I notice the neighborhood. Floodlights, tall white facades, aluminum siding, garages, and a BMW in a driveway. A safe, quiet scene. It's late, and I haven't eaten. I'm hungry for a chocolate chip cookie, something I haven't had in two years. I wrap my arms around my waist.

The door opens. I expected an awkward, nerdy boy, pimply and plain, a college student caught in the unforgiving peaks and valleys of a belated puberty. Neil, my husband Jason's nephew, looks instead like any reasonably popular college guy.

He swings the door wide while keeping one shoulder safely hidden behind it. "Hi," I say. "I'm Marie. You must be Neil. I—"

He freezes, staring past me. "What did you do to my parents' mailbox?"

I force a social laugh and shrug. "Nice to meet you," I say. "Forgive me for a sloppy parking job?"

His gaze moves from me to the mailbox and back again. He steps aside to let me in. We stand in the hallway for an awkward moment, looking at each other.

He wears a charcoal-gray, loose-fitting long-sleeved t-shirt, a pair of jeans so clean that I'm guessing his mother washed them this morning, and white athletic socks. His medium brown hair, the same color as Jason's, shines with health. He keeps the heels of his hands tucked inside his shirtsleeves as he closes the door.

"It's good to finally see you in person," I say, making sure to keep eye contact.

Neil shifts, sliding his socks over the stone tiles of the entryway. "Well, this is my house," he says, then puts a hand to his forehead. "God, I sound like an idiot."

In the living room behind him, chairs upholstered in crushed velvet stand on an Oriental rug below a dustless white mantel.

"No, you don't," I assure him.

"Wow," he says, staring at me. "You're prettier than I expected." His eyes shift and focus somewhere on the wall behind me. He looks mortified.

"It's OK," I say, but my tone sounds dry.

"Are you mad?" he asks. "About me being blunt?"

I start to slide my hands into the narrow pockets of my jeans but think better of it. Instead, I extend a hand and brush his elbow with my fingertips.

"Of course not, Neil," I say. He reaches out to a row of four light switches behind him. Fidgeting, he flips one a couple of times, and the living room light goes off and on again.

"Yeah," he says. "You know, I'm just kind of overwhelmed that you're actually here. Uncle Jason has some pretty crazy ideas, huh?"