

The Encore - Excerpt

Mother Nature cut them a break: no humidity today. Instead the air was clear and balmy, complete with a mild breeze that was enough to feel good on Jane's skin without blowing her hair into her eyes. She breathed it in with a sense of relief. Strange how even a house that had no memories of Noel could somehow remind her of him, or at least remind her of the plans they'd never had the chance to bring to fruition. Family kinds of plans in particular.

But maybe it only hit her hard today because of Bobby and Anna being there. Maybe the silence of the house would seem peaceful again rather than empty when she got home, and things would be fine. Soothing, even. Comfortable.

Maybe.

She turned her attention to the sidewalk on which they ambled, and to the dog trotting obediently if disinterestedly next to her. It was a quiet street with no traffic at the moment, so she was more than willing to let him lead her wherever his nose and his curiosity took them, but he only kept to the straight line of the cement in front of them instead of sniffing at shrubs or grass or even—surely the dog equivalent of catnip or a ball of yarn?—the lone fire hydrant that they passed.

Nothing. His ears twitched once at the sound of a car horn that blared for a moment in the distance, but once all was quiet again, Otto's only movements were those of his legs, keeping a slow and steady rhythm that Jane didn't have the heart to push any faster.

Her mind was less on their path as they rounded a corner and more on what might be the least ridiculous way to ask a veterinarian about therapy for her dog when she finally realized just how far they'd already walked. They were only a stone's throw away from the good doctor's driveway. A small voice in the back of her head—the same one that often tried to get her to rein in some of her more impulsive decisions—suggested that this might be a mighty fine time to turn back. She would have sworn that voice sounded an awful lot like Lizzie's at the moment.

And Jane might have considered listening to it if it wasn't for a damnable and familiar spark of curiosity that often overshadowed that cautionary voice and that

flared up now at a glimpse of movement in the doctor's driveway. A dark grey car that was parked there—his car, presumably—had its hood up, and someone who was half-hidden by that hood was working on something beneath it. Home on his day off, or had he perhaps been sent home by a superior after his actions the other day?

None of your business, Jane...

No, of course it wasn't, and yet any alternative must have seemed better than facing the loudness of the silence waiting for her at home, because her feet were still headed in the doctor's general direction as if they had a mind of their own. And then they stopped, just as autonomously, in front of the rear bumper of the parked car.

She studied it while the clinking sound of metal against metal marked the activity of the as of yet oblivious would-be mechanic at work at the other end of the car. Some kind of sedan. It wasn't exactly old or beat up, but neither was it the kind of vehicle one might expect to see a physician driving. Maybe she was unjustly pigeonholing doctors in thinking that way, but she would have thought he'd have something more like a shiny BMW or Mercedes with a vanity plate that read something like #1 DOC or HLN HNDZ.

Well, no, maybe not this doctor, she thought, remembering the coolness of his eyes and rigidness of his posture.

And then before her mind could stray too far after the sudden thought that PP DOC would be a great license plate for a urologist, Jane cleared her throat and said, "Hi."

The clinking of metal stopped.

Jane put her free hand up to shield her eyes from the sun and peered around at the quiet street. "Nice day for a tune-up. Or are you just checking its vitals, Doc?"

Nothing but silence answered her, but after a moment, the face of Dr. Cullen Douglass appeared at one side of the car's hood to look at her.

Jane offered him a flick of a wave not unlike the one she'd offered him on Moving Day. She got pretty much the same response this time as she had then, which was to say, none at all. Undeterred, she countered with a blithe smile. "I'm Jane Freeley, your new neighbor—" She nodded her head toward the far side of his

house. “Thataway. And unless you have an evil twin running around out there, you’re Dr. Cullen Douglas, right? We kind of sort of didn’t meet at all at the hospital the other day.” Refusing to let her smile falter, she waited patiently for a reaction, any reaction. And she was prepared to wait as long as it took to get one.

Maybe he sensed that, because finally she got a curt nod that could actually have just been an involuntary twitch of some kind, but she preferred to be optimistic.

Instinct told her not to stick out her hand, because he was not likely to take it. Snap it off maybe, but not take it. Fair enough. “So you work with my sister-in-law, Lizzie Berkoff. Well—work, butt heads with... one or the other.”

Nothing. No reaction at all. Really? But she found it less off-putting than intriguing. He stood there and stared back at her as if waiting for her to come to her point. Deliberately turning up the wattage on her smile, she waited him out again instead.

Finally, he gestured at his car’s exposed engine. “Look, Miss Freeley...”

Mrs., she nearly corrected him out of habit, and even after a year it still felt strange somehow to swallow the word back. “Jane,” she corrected him instead.

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “I have an engine to fix, and I’m really not interested in whatever it is you’re trying to do here. Scout out prospects somewhere else, please.”

Prospects? She blinked. It was a cutting remark, the kind designed both to leave the recipient with no doubts that the conversation was over and to discourage any future attempts at one. Any normal woman would huff with indignation and perhaps hurl an insult before spinning on her heels and marching off to fume.

But no one had ever accused Jane of being normal. Instead of taking offense, she started to laugh, and it wasn’t a laugh that was intended to put him in his place and show him just how insignificant he was to her; it was one hundred percent pure, genuine amusement. “Scout out prospects—You think I’m hitting on you?” And as she said the words aloud, they seemed even funnier to her. Although maybe the good doctor did have his share of admirers, because some women really went for the whole dark and broody kind of thing, not to mention the medical degree. Some

women. But that he had cast *her* in that role... “Really? Because I’ve gone around to introduce myself to at least half a dozen other neighbors this week, and I’ve got to say, none of them seemed to interpret it as sexual harassment—unless I’m *really* doing it wrong. I only tore the clothes off the one, after all.”

His expression was guarded, but not quite guarded enough to mask his initial startle at her cheerfulness, and her teasing.

“Oh, don’t look so worried, Doc.” Unable to help herself, Jane patted one of his grease-stained hands. “Your virtue is safe with me, I promise.”

The look he gave her was wary, and it tempted her to be playful. Prickly people often did. *Be good, Jane.* And she tried, she really did. But when Otto sniffed the toe of Dr. Douglas’s shoe and gave it a quick lick, she couldn’t help but add, “Just so we’re clear, he’s not hitting on you either. But if it would make you feel better, I’ll be sure to have a long talk with him about boundaries when we get home. Which should probably be sooner rather than later, I suppose—” She glanced at her watch and spoke more to herself than to him. “—since I’ve got stacks of work waiting for me.” Figuratively, at least. The stacks were all in the form of computer files. “But... *A chi vuole, non mancano modi.*” —*Where there is a will, there is a way*— “Come on, Otto. Good luck with your car, Doc. Thanks so much for the warm welcome to the neighborhood.”

Tugging a surprisingly reluctant Otto away from both the man and the car, Jane led him back the way they’d come, still fighting back mirth and with the odd thought that if anyone else would have appreciated the humor in the situation, it would have been Noel.