



Falling **HARD**



Jae

Chapter 1

A WARM ARM STARTLED JORDAN awake when it wrapped around her from behind like a boa constrictor suffocating its prey. Grunting, she opened her eyes.

Bright morning light illuminated a bedroom that wasn't hers and fell onto a string of clothes leading from the door to the bed. The gleaming red numbers of an alarm clock next to her read 8:11 a.m.

Damn. She needed to get going if she wanted to make it home to feed Tuna before heading to the airport to pick up Simone. She pushed back the covers and tried to slip from the bed, but the woman behind her had other ideas and wouldn't let go.

Jordan glanced over her shoulder.

The redhead from last night was snuggled up to her, still asleep, a smile on her face.

Jordan grinned. She loved putting that blissful expression on women's faces. Carefully, she lifted the arm from around her hip and snuck out of bed. Picking up her clothes led her to the door, but leaving without a word wasn't her style. Colleen was still sleeping as she tiptoed past the bed to the bathroom. *Guess I wore her out.*

A shower would have to wait until she made it home. She slipped into yesterday's clothes. Since she didn't want to root through Colleen's bathroom cabinet to see if she had a spare toothbrush, she just squeezed a dollop of toothpaste onto her finger and rubbed it over her teeth.

Just as she was rinsing her mouth, the door opened and Colleen entered, wearing not a stitch of clothing. "Good morning," she said, her voice still raspy from sleep.

"Morning. I hope you don't mind that I helped myself to some of your toothpaste."

“I don’t mind at all. I could even offer you my shower...” Colleen stepped closer and wrapped her arms around Jordan, pressing her naked body against her. “And some company.”

A shiver went through Jordan. She let out a groan. “I hate saying no to a beautiful woman, but I can’t. I have to pick up a friend from the airport, so I really have to go.”

Sighing, Colleen withdrew her arms. “Will you call me?”

It would have been easy to just say yes so she could leave without a long discussion, but she never made false promises. She’d already made it perfectly clear last night that she wasn’t looking for anything beyond hot, casual sex. But it seemed Colleen needed a reminder of the rules. “Listen, Colleen. I really wouldn’t mind a repeat performance, but like I told you last night, I don’t do relationships.”

Colleen folded her arms across her bare chest as if Jordan hadn’t seen every inch of her already. “Never ever? Not even when you meet a woman you really click with?”

Was that what she thought was going on between the two of them? Yeah, they had steamed up the bedroom, but beyond that, Jordan couldn’t see herself with Colleen—or with any other woman—for the rest of the month, much less the rest of her life.

“Never ever,” she said firmly. With a playful grin, she added, “I’m too gorgeous and too good in bed to tie myself to just one woman and deny the rest of the female population the pleasure of my company.”

Colleen shook her head. “God, you’re unbelievable.”

“That’s what you said last night,” Jordan quipped.

A light slap hit her in the arm, but then Colleen laughed, and the frown on her face smoothed out.

Jordan smiled. She went back into the bedroom and put on her ankle-high leather shoes before straightening. “It doesn’t have anything to do with you, really. You’re beautiful and funny and smart.” As far as she could tell, at least. They hadn’t exactly spent a lot of time discussing politics, science, or literature—or anything else for that matter. She looked deeply into Colleen’s eyes, not wanting to leave her with a bad feeling about the entire experience. “Any woman would be lucky to date you.”

“But not you,” Colleen said.

Falling Hard

“Not me. It’s just the way I am. A commitment is the one thing I can’t promise, but for everything else, you can call me any time.” She pressed her card into Colleen’s hand.

Colleen read it and wolf-whistled. “You’re a surgeon? I should have known.”

Jordan grinned and waggled her fingers. “What can I say? We’re good with our hands.”

They walked to the front door, and Colleen kissed her with a heat that told Jordan that she *would* call. With a spring in her step, she strode toward her Mercedes coupe.

* * *

In the dense rush hour traffic on the 101 Freeway, it took her more than an hour to make it from Colleen’s posh condo in West Hollywood to her quiet neighborhood in South Pasadena.

Finally, she steered the coupe along the tree-lined cul-de-sac on which she lived.

A large, white moving van was parked at an angle in front of her duplex. It was blocking the driveway, its rear door open and the ramp extended in the direction of the house. Two movers in blue overalls were currently carrying a sofa toward the unit on the right.

After having the house to herself for a couple of weeks, she was apparently getting new neighbors.

She eased the convertible to a stop at the curb, grateful that there was plenty of street parking available, and climbed out.

Her neighbor Barbara was in the front yard, removing dead branches from her azalea bushes. When she saw Jordan, she grabbed her cane and walked over. “Good morning. Looks like your carefree bachelorette days are over.” She nodded at the moving van.

“Nah.” She’d just have to be a little more careful about entertaining her “lady friends,” as Barbara called them, in the fenced-in backyard she shared with the people in the other half of the duplex. Making out in the hammock required too many acrobatics anyway. “Who knows? Maybe the new neighbor is a single woman and a total babe.”

Barbara swatted her as if she were a misbehaving child. “Maybe it’s an eighty-year-old geezer who’ll want you to take a look at his bad hip and

keep you up at night because he's snoring loud enough for you to hear through the common wall."

"I'll set him up with you, then." Jordan plucked a leaf from her friend's silver hair.

Something thumped inside the van, and they both turned toward it, waiting for the new neighbor to emerge from the vehicle.

The first thing Jordan saw was a floor lamp, then a worn sneaker. As its owner walked down the moving van's ramp, Jordan's gaze traveled up a gorgeous pair of legs. There was absolutely nothing wrong with the new neighbor's shapely hips, and if she kept Jordan up at night, it wouldn't be because of her snoring.

Her jeans were worn to a soft-looking pale blue and molded to her curvy body. God, she loved a woman in jeans, especially if the woman in question had such a perfect butt.

The stranger entered her part of the house and reappeared a minute later, probably to get another piece of furniture out of the moving van. Now Jordan was able to catch a glimpse of her face too. *Wow*. Her new neighbor looked as fine from the front as from the back.

Her quiet neighborhood had just gotten a whole lot more interesting.

Jordan admired the easy way she moved, graceful but without any pretenses. "I think I'll go over and introduce myself."

Barbara shook her head at her. "You're unbelievable."

It wasn't even ten o'clock in the morning, and she'd already heard it twice today. That had to be a record, even for her. "What?" she asked as Barb continued to give her a disapproving look.

"What about Simone?"

"Simone? What about her? We're just friends. Besides, I'm just being neighborly."

"Mhm. That wasn't what people called it back in my day." Despite her protests, Barbara followed her up the driveway, carrying her cane more than actually using it.

Jordan lightly gripped her elbow and helped her circle around a two-wheeled dolly and a stack of moving boxes that were piled up next to the van, waiting to be transported inside.

When the new neighbor saw them, she paused halfway up the ramp, which brought her chest even with Jordan's eye level. It was hard not to

Falling Hard

stare at so much God-given perfection, but she managed to keep her gaze on the woman's face. Not a hardship either, really.

She didn't look like one of the models or actresses Jordan often had on her arm and in her bed. The light dusting of freckles across her nose put her into the *cute* instead of the *beautiful* category. By Hollywood standards, she could probably stand to lose a few pounds. She wasn't wearing any makeup, and her blonde hair was pulled back into a slightly messy ponytail, but she was still a very attractive woman—if you went for the girl-next-door look.

Jordan didn't. At least not usually. But something about her new neighbor made it hard to stop staring at her.

Barbara elbowed her in the ribs.

"Good morning," Jordan said belatedly.

"Hi," the blonde answered. "I hope we're not disturbing the entire neighborhood with all the noise we're making."

We, Jordan mentally repeated. Was there a boyfriend or a husband and maybe a gaggle of kids, or was she talking about the two movers helping her? Other than the two men in blue overalls, Jordan couldn't see anyone.

The woman stepped down from the ramp to let the movers unload another piece of furniture.

Compared to Jordan's five-foot-eleven frame, she was petite.

Barbara nudged her again, making her realize she was still staring.

"Oh no, don't worry about it, dear," Barbara said.

Jordan looked back up into the woman's eyes. Now up close, she could make out their color. They were a light green, with copper flecks circling the pupils. With a smile, she offered her hand. "I don't mind noise at all," she said. "I'm Jordan Williams, your better half."

A cute wrinkle formed on the woman's forehead. "Excuse me?"

"I live in the other half of the duplex," Jordan said, pointing at the unit to the left. The duplex had been designed like two individual homes that sat side by side, sharing just one common wall.

"Oh." The new neighbor chuckled, took off the work gloves she wore, and reached for the offered hand. "I'm Emma Larson."

Emma. Jordan had always liked that name. She shook her hand, surprised at the firm grip, and used the moment to check out Emma's fingers. No wedding band or other rings on either hand, and she kept her nails short.

That earned her a tick on Jordan's is-she-or-isn't-she-a-lesbian checklist. "Beautiful name for a beautiful woman," she said with a soft smile.

Emma let go of Jordan's hand and tilted her head in a way that made it appear as if she were looking down at her, even though she was several inches shorter. "Do lines like that actually work for you?"

For a moment, Jordan was taken aback. Few women called her on her flirting within seconds of meeting her. But she always enjoyed a challenge. "That's not a line," she said with an unwavering smile. "It's a fact."

"Ignore her." Barbara nudged her aside and shook Emma's hand. "I'm Barbara Mosley. Welcome to the neighborhood. I'm sure you'll like it here."

"Thank you. I know I will."

"So, what brings you to the area?" Jordan asked. *Relocating for work or to be with a boyfriend...or a girlfriend?* She didn't ask the last part out loud, sensing that she needed to tone it down a little. Apparently, her new neighbor wasn't in the mood for flirting with a woman this early in the morning...or at all.

"What makes you think I'm not from around here?" Emma asked. A grin crept onto her face, making the copper sparks in her eyes dance with mischief. "Did my decidedly un-Californian tan give me away?" She glanced down at her skin that was as white as Barbara's beloved Iceberg roses and looked as soft as the petals.

Jordan laughed. "No, actually, it was the truck." She pointed at the side of the moving van, which advertised the services of a moving company in Portland, Oregon.

"Ah," Emma said.

She didn't answer Jordan's initial question about what had brought her to South Pasadena. Well, maybe she didn't like revealing too much about herself. Jordan could respect that. Besides, the mystique only added to her neighbor's attractiveness.

"Let us know if you need anything." Barbara pointed at her house. "I live right next door."

"Yeah. We'd be happy to help you feel at home here. I know all the best places in town, and I don't mind playing tour guide," Jordan added. Mentally, she reviewed tomorrow's operating schedule. "In fact, if you're an early riser, I could introduce you to the best coffee shop in town tomorrow morning."

Falling Hard

“No, thanks,” Emma said. “I’ll be up to my neck in moving boxes all day tomorrow, so I won’t have time for coffee.”

The no had come so quickly it was as if she hadn’t been tempted for even a second. *I must be losing my edge.* “Maybe another time, then.”

Emma gave a noncommittal nod. “Maybe. If you’ll excuse me, I have to show them where that goes.” She hurried after the movers, who were lugging a chest of drawers toward the house.

Jordan’s gaze followed her until Barbara’s chuckle interrupted her enjoyment of her neighbor’s perfect butt. She turned toward her. “What’s so funny?”

“You getting rejected. That’s a first.”

“Nah,” Jordan said. “It’s happened before. For some inexplicable reason, there are a few misguided women who are immune to my charm.”

Barbara patted her arm. “They don’t know what they’re missing.”

“That’s what I tell them.”

They grinned at each other.

“I know it’s not the same, but do you want to come over and have that cup of coffee with me?” Barbara asked.

Jordan took her hand and squeezed it. Her husband had died nearly three years ago, and her children didn’t live in the area, so Barbara sometimes got lonely. Not that she’d ever admit it, but Jordan sensed it, so she made a point of dropping by regularly for a cup of coffee or to help her in the garden. “Normally, I’d love to, but I’m already running late. I’m supposed to pick up Simone from the airport.”

“Oh, she’s back in town?”

“Yeah, just for a few days. She’s got a client in LA who wants to expand, so she’s here to take a look at his product line.”

“Tell her to come over and say hi. She’s such a nice girl. I really don’t understand why you don’t date her.”

Jordan shook her head. “Like I keep telling you, neither of us is in the market for a relationship. We’re just friends.” Friends with occasional benefits, but she didn’t add that, knowing Barb might not understand.

“Friends who I caught making out like a couple of teenagers in that sports car of yours the last time she visited.”

Oops. “You saw that?”

“I see everything, young lady.” Barbara stomped her cane onto the driveway. “So why aren’t you two together?”

“That’s... It’s just not what we want. We...”

A loud meow interrupted her. Her calico, Tuna, stood at the other end of the driveway, giving her a demanding look.

Saved by the cat. “Sorry, Barb. I have to go. My mistress is calling. Do you need help getting back over to your house?”

Barbara snorted. “I’m seventy-four, not ninety-four. I can walk the few steps to my house just fine.” Then her expression softened. “But thanks for asking, dear. Now go and take care of the many females in your life.” Again stubbornly carrying the cane instead of using it, she marched back to her house.

Jordan watched her for a moment and then glanced over at the other side of the duplex, hoping for another glimpse of the new neighbor.

Another demanding cry made her tear her gaze away.

“Hold your horses. I’m coming.” She hurried up the driveway. “Jeez, if I wanted to get chewed out for not coming home until the morning, I would have gotten a girlfriend!”

Chapter 2

MOVING REALLY WASN'T FOR SISSIES. Emma's back was already aching from lugging around the heavy moving boxes, and she was glad she had arranged a babysitter for Molly ahead of time via Vettedsitters.com.

With Molly out of the house for a few hours, she couldn't get underfoot, and the first thing she associated with the new city would be a fun day at the park, not all this chaos.

Emma counted the neatly labeled boxes stacked against the built-in bookcase in her new living room.

Nine. Which meant there were two more outside. Good thing the rest of her books were stored on her e-reader.

When she went outside to get the two boxes, her neighbor was just leaving the house too.

She had changed, and the white button-down shirt she wore now looked great against her rich dark brown skin and her naturally coiled, black hair, which was cut close to her head and amplified her great cheekbones and her full lips. Her jeans clung to her long, muscular legs and emphasized her slim waist and the slight flare of her hips. Jordan's loose-limbed stride oozed confidence.

Emma touched her thumb to the bare spot at the base of her ring finger, annoyed at herself for even noticing the way her neighbor looked.

When their gazes met across the driveway, Jordan flashed a grin.

Emma couldn't believe the woman had hit on her. Her flirting had been obvious, even for someone who was as rusty as she was. Admittedly, it was a bit flattering and had bolstered her self-esteem, which had taken quite a beating in the past year. Once upon a time, she might have flirted back, but experience had taught her to stay away from a player like Jordan Williams.

She knew Jordan's type. Women like her were easy on the eye but hard on the heart, and she was determined to never again give anyone the chance to hurt her. If she got involved with a woman again at some point down the road, it would be with someone who knew the definition of commitment and faithfulness.

So she just lifted her hand in silent acknowledgment without returning Jordan's smile and climbed into the moving van. Her to-do list was as long as the Great Wall of China, and flirting with the admittedly good-looking new neighbor wasn't on it.

* * *

As usual, LAX was a zoo. The automatic doors of the terminal swished open, and Jordan jogged through. Cursing under her breath, she dodged past tired travelers, crying children, and chatting groups of tourists with large suitcases blocking her way.

She craned her neck to follow the signs toward domestic baggage claim. As she rushed past, she glanced at the large digital monitor listing the arrival times of various flights. *Damn*. It showed Simone's plane as having landed an hour ago.

By the time she reached baggage claim, she was starting to sweat. Simone hated waiting, and usually, Jordan hated being late. In her family, being fifteen minutes early had been considered being late, and it had taken her years to become a little more relaxed about tardiness.

Nearly running, she rounded the corner.

There she stood, next to the by-now empty conveyor belt. God, Simone looked good...and annoyed. Her black corkscrew curls bounced up and down with every impatient tap of her foot, and her dark eyes narrowed as she watched Jordan approach.

Jordan cringed. "Sorry," she called across the distance between them. When she reached her, she greeted her with a hug and a kiss that lasted a split second longer than usual between friends. "I got held up."

Simone shook her head at her. "Oh, yeah. I can imagine by what. Or should I say by whom?" Despite the rebuke, there was no bite in her tone, only gentle teasing.

That was the nice thing about being just friends with benefits. No jealousy dramas.

Falling Hard

“I wish,” Jordan said. “For once, it wasn’t a woman that made me late.” Well, okay, the sleepover at Colleen’s and then trying to flirt with her new neighbor hadn’t helped, but if not for Tuna, she could have driven directly from Colleen’s condo to the airport. “I had to feed my cat.”

A grin spread over Simone’s face. She looked left and right to make sure they were alone. “Is that a euphemism for eating pussy?”

Jordan laughed. God, she had missed this crazy woman. “Has anyone ever told you you’ve got a dirty mind?”

“You did, but you didn’t complain back then.”

True. They had met right after Simone’s high school sweetheart had broken up with her, and Jordan hadn’t minded being her rebound woman. She had expected them to go their separate ways after a few hot romps, but instead, they had become friends. “I won’t complain tonight either, but the only dirty thing about feeding my cat is the way the kitchen floor looks afterwards.”

Simone’s laptop bag started to slip from her shoulder, and she caught it before it could crash to the floor. “So you really got a cat? You? The woman who once said getting a pet was the first step toward being tied down with the matrimonial ball and chain?”

“I didn’t get a cat.” Jordan reached for Simone’s suitcase and led the way toward the exit. “The cat got me. One day, it showed up on my doorstep and wouldn’t leave, no matter how many times I shoed it away. Finally, I just gave up and took it in.”

“I always said that you’re just a big old softie,” Simone said affectionately. “Before you know it, a woman will sneak into your life the same way.”

“Won’t happen,” Jordan answered with confidence. “Tuna is the only female who’s ever gonna live with me.”

Simone nearly lost her laptop bag a second time because she was laughing so hard. “Tuna? You seriously named your cat Tuna?”

Jordan shrugged. “She never came when I called her by any other name, but whenever I called ‘Tuna’ and opened a can, she was right there.”

Laughing, Simone followed her to the car. “Thank God you don’t want kids, or you’d end up calling them Pizza, Burger, and Cake, after your favorite foods!”

She reached for Simone’s laptop bag. “Shut up and give me that thing before you drop it.”

“And that’s how the little frog found a new home.” Emma closed the book and looked down at her daughter to see if she had grasped the meaning of the story.

Molly yawned. She had worn herself out at the park with the sitter and exploring the house, sliding across the gleaming hardwood floor in her socks. “That was a good story, Mommy.”

“Yes, it was.” She had picked it to help her daughter get settled into her new home and routine.

“At first he was so sad, but then he liked the new house because it was right next to a creek,” Molly said as if she had to explain the story to Emma, even though she’d been the one reading it to her.

Emma smiled at how cute she was. “What about you? Do you like our new house too?”

Molly nodded. “I like the tree.”

“I bet.” Emma laughed. If she had let her, Molly would have climbed the mulberry tree in the backyard.

She waited, but Molly didn’t say anything else, and Emma didn’t want to force it. She had a feeling that the five-year-old hadn’t yet realized that this wasn’t just a fun vacation in an exciting new place. Of course she had told her daughter that they would be staying for good, but Molly hadn’t fully understood yet that it meant they wouldn’t be returning to the only home she’d ever known and to her friends in Portland.

For now, she was content, surrounded by her toys that Emma had unpacked while Molly had been with the sitter.

Molly yawned again and pressed her cheek to Mouse, her favorite stuffed animal.

Emma tucked the covers more securely around her daughter and then bent to kiss her forehead. “Good night. Sleep well.”

“Night, Mommy.”

She flicked off the bedside lamp and tiptoed to the door, already hearing Molly’s breathing fall into the more regular pattern of sleep. At the door, she turned around. The astronaut night-light cast a gentle yellow glow across Molly’s face.

Falling Hard

For several seconds, she stood in the doorway and watched her before making herself move. She still had several boxes to unpack so Molly would wake up to a house full of familiar objects tomorrow morning.

Several hours later, she folded up the cardboard box that had held her urban fantasy novels and then glanced at her watch. It was already past midnight, and she had slept very little the past two days while they'd been on the road. A wide yawn made her jaw pop.

Enough was enough. The boxes of office supplies would have to wait until tomorrow. So would all the other things going into the tiny third bedroom that she would turn into her office.

Maybe it was a good thing that she'd left behind all of the kitchen utensils, taking only some pieces of furniture, her clothes, her books, and all of Molly's things. Chloe had offered her the ice cream maker, the wineglasses they had bought in Venice, and the knife set their best man had given them as a wedding gift, but Emma hadn't wanted any of it. Those had been *their* things, stuff they had bought together or received as a couple, and she didn't want that reminder every time she caught sight of them.

This was a fresh start, and that meant new kitchen utensils. She'd have to go shopping tomorrow.

She wandered through the still-unfamiliar house, touching a wall here and one of the arched doorways there as if to mark them with her personal scent and make them hers. It was a beautiful house, but—like Molly—she couldn't quite grasp that it was her home now. Maybe it hadn't fully hit her either that there was no going back to the life she'd once had.

Sighing, she stopped in front of Molly's room and peeked in through the door that she'd left ajar so she would hear if Molly woke up.

Even in her sleep, her daughter's small hands held on to Mouse, as if the stuffed animal were a lifeline keeping her afloat.

Had she done the right thing by uprooting their lives and finding a new home for them, or had taking Molly to the town where Emma had grown up been an entirely selfish thing?

Only time would tell.

She tiptoed across the room, tucked the covers closer around her daughter, and watched her for a few seconds longer before sneaking out.

God, she was exhausted. After a quick shower, she slipped into the new bed that had been delivered this afternoon.

The guest room in their home in Portland had been transformed into an office, so Emma had slept on the couch for the last year. Now lying in a real bed felt strange, even though her aching muscles definitely appreciated it. Her thoughts wandered to the last time she'd slept in a bed, back when her life had still been happy and normal. Or maybe it hadn't been, and she just hadn't realized.

Had Chloe held her that last night? Had they made love? Or had it been one of the rare nights that Chloe had been called back to the hospital? Had she returned muttering about wannabe beauty queens who refused to let the ER residents touch their faces and insisted on having a plastic surgeon come in for a few stitches?

Now, of course, Emma could no longer be sure that those emergencies had ever really existed and hadn't been just fabricated excuses so Chloe could spend the night with her lover. Since the infidelity had come to light, everything Chloe had ever said to her had come under suspicion.

Resolutely, she pushed away those fruitless thoughts. She'd lost enough sleep over Chloe during the last year, wondering when it had all started to go wrong and why she hadn't noticed sooner. That had to stop now.

It took a few more minutes before she could shut off her brain and fall asleep.

When she startled awake some time later, it was still dark outside. She reached for her cell phone on the coffee table that served as her bedside table, only to discover that the phone wasn't there. Neither was the coffee table.

Then she remembered. She wasn't in the living room back in their house in Portland. She was in her new bedroom. For several seconds, she couldn't figure out what had woken her. She was still bone-tired, so why the heck wasn't she still asleep?

Banging noises drifted through the wall.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

For a moment, she thought it was Molly, pounding on the wall because she was scared. But before she could jump up and race over to her, she remembered that Molly's room was on the other side of the bathroom, at the front of the house. This wall was the one she shared with Jordan, her new neighbor.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Falling Hard

Jesus, what was she doing? Playing indoor basketball in the middle of the night?

Thump! Thump!

Then a loud, ecstatic scream came from the other side of the wall. “Yes! Just like that. God, yes, right there!”

Emma let her head fall back onto the pillow and groaned. Well, at least someone was getting some while she had lived like a nun for the past year.

“Don’t stop!”

It wasn’t Jordan’s voice but that of another woman.

Emma couldn’t believe that Jordan had flirted with her and even asked her out for coffee even though she had a girlfriend. Were there no faithful people left on earth?

Or maybe the vocal woman wasn’t Jordan’s girlfriend but just some stranger she had picked up in a bar.

Why was she even thinking about it? It wasn’t any of her business what her neighbor did on her side of that wall—unless it kept her awake.

The banging and moaning lasted for quite some time. Apparently, her neighbor wasn’t all talk and no action. Emma had to giggle at the thought and then pressed a hand to her mouth. Since when was she a giggler? She definitely needed some sleep.

But with all the sounds coming from next door, that wouldn’t happen anytime soon. The moans, groans, and little screams seemed to go on forever.

Maybe she should have accepted that invitation for coffee after all. Her neighbor had amazing stamina; she had to give her that. Then she grinned wryly and shook her head. Sex with someone like Jordan wasn’t worth the inevitable heartache, not even sex that made you scream so loudly that you woke up the neighbor.

After a while, the rhythmic pounding of the headboard against the wall started to speed up. “Yes, yes, yes. God, Jordan!”

Then, finally, there was only silence.

Thank God! Emma hooked one leg over the covers in her favorite sleeping position and prepared to go back to sleep. Just as her thoughts started to drift away and that feeling of heaviness overcame her, the rhythmic banging started again.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

With a grunt of frustration, Emma yanked the covers up over her head. But after a while, she started to sweat. It wasn't because of the hot sex happening on the other side of the wall, she told herself; it was because she was stuck beneath the covers, where the temperature was heating up.

Were they done?

Carefully, she poked her head out from beneath the covers and listened into the darkness.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"So good."

"No," Emma muttered. "That's not good at all. I have to get up early tomorrow morning, dammit." Why on earth couldn't she at least have straight neighbors? If one of them were a man, their middle-of-the-night romp would have been over already.

"More! Harder! God, yes!"

The framed poster she had leaned against the wall toppled over. She hadn't hung it yet because she hadn't wanted to disturb the new neighbor with her drilling so late in the day. But apparently, Jordan Williams had no such compunctions.

Grumbling, Emma got out of bed, snatched up her pillow and blanket, and marched into the living room. Great. Now she was back on the couch.

At least here she couldn't hear the energizer bunnies next door anymore.

With a grunt, she pulled the blanket up to her chin. What a welcome to the neighborhood!

Chapter 3

JORDAN GLANCED AT THE DASHBOARD clock while she drove. It was already half past six. Usually, she didn't mind the ten-or-eleven-hour days at the hospital, but Simone was only in town for a few more days, so she had promised to take her out to dinner at a nice restaurant.

She had loved having her friend stay with her for the last two days. After not seeing each other for almost a year, their reconnecting in the bedroom had been explosive. But, truth be told, she also looked forward to having her house to herself again, with no one who left their stuff all over and no guilty conscience if she didn't make it home on time because she had ended up having to open a patient's abdomen instead of removing his gallbladder laparoscopically.

When she pulled into the driveway, she once again found something blocking the access to the detached garage she shared with her neighbor. This time, it wasn't a moving van. It was a little girl.

"What the fuck?" Jordan had never had a child play right in front of her house. Sometimes, the neighbors' kids were playing soccer on the street, but unless the ball rolled up her driveway, they usually stayed off her property.

Jordan left the car at the bottom of the driveway and climbed out.

She had lived on this street for almost three years, and she'd never seen this kid before, at least not that she remembered. Maybe it was someone's grandchild here for a visit. She'd never been good at guessing children's ages, but the girl didn't look older than three or four, too young to wander around the neighborhood on her own, especially since it was probably close to her bedtime.

The girl was kneeling in front of the garage, drawing on the pavement with red, blue, and white sidewalk chalk. Half of it dusted her bib overalls and her fair cheeks.

When Jordan rounded the car, she caught a glimpse of what the kid was drawing: some kind of animal with huge triangular ears. Either it was the stuffed lion she clutched in her free hand, or it was supposed to be Tuna, who lay next to the girl, her tail swishing back and forth across the chalk drawing, adding a fourth color to her fur.

“Um, hi there,” Jordan said from several steps away, not wanting to scare the kid.

The girl’s head shot up, her lopsided blonde pigtails flying. She stared at Jordan with large eyes but didn’t return the greeting or say anything else.

Admittedly, her eight-week rotation in pediatrics during med school had hardly made her an expert when it came to kids, but she was fairly certain that children were supposed to be able to speak in full sentences by that age.

“Hi,” she said again.

The girl continued to stare.

“Aren’t you a little too young to be outside all on your own?”

“I’m not young—I’m five!” the girl declared, scrunching up her nose as if Jordan had offended her.

Jordan had to smile. So the kid was a bit older than she had thought. Maybe she was small for her age, or maybe Jordan needed to brush up on child development. “I was starting to think you couldn’t talk.”

“Of course I can talk,” the girl replied immediately. “But Mommy says I’m not allowed to talk to strangers.”

Well, at least the mother had some common sense, even though she let the kid run around alone outside. But then again, maybe that was okay for a five-year-old. Jordan had no idea about the do’s and don’ts of raising children.

“That’s a good rule,” she said because she didn’t know what else to say to a child. “My mother taught me the same.” She hadn’t really. The army posts she had grown up on had been a safe environment for Jordan and her sisters.

The girl colored in the right ear of the animal she had drawn and then peeked up at Jordan. “My name is Molly, and this is Mouse.” She held up the stuffed lion.

“Mouse?” Jordan repeated.

Falling Hard

Molly nodded as if naming a lion *Mouse* was a logical thing to do. Well, Jordan figured she couldn't complain too much. She had named her cat after a fish.

"What's your name?" the girl asked.

"I'm Jordan, and this is Tuna." She pointed at the cat.

"Jordan?" Molly repeated. "But that's a boy's name! Jordan from my preschool class is a boy."

Figures. The girl thought Tuna was a perfectly fine name for a cat and chose to focus on her name instead. Jordan scratched her head, not sure how to explain.

But luckily, Molly moved on to the next topic before she could think of an answer. "Is Tuna your cat?"

"I guess so. At least I've been chosen as the person who has to pay for all the cat food."

The girl giggled. "Is it a boy cat or a girl cat?"

"She's a girl," Jordan answered.

"Does she sleep on your bed at night?"

Jeez, this kid was asking a lot of questions. Jordan was starting to feel as if she were in a police interrogation. "Sometimes." Not in the last two days, though. Since Simone had arrived, Tuna had looked for a quieter place to sleep. Jordan suppressed a grin.

The girl watched as Tuna rolled over her drawing, getting even more chalk all over her fur. "Bad cat! Stop it!"

"Yeah, stop it, Tuna. No destroying the art."

Tuna stopped rolling, but just as Jordan thought she had finally asserted her authority over her furry roommate, the cat licked her tail.

Jordan blinked. *Was that a kiss my ass?*

"Maybe my mommy will get me a cat too," the kid said.

You can have mine was on the tip of Jordan's tongue, but she had a feeling the girl would take her up on it, and then she might have two very annoyed parents on her hands.

"Where is your mommy?" Jordan asked. "Where do you live?"

Molly proudly rattled off some address in Portland, even though Jordan was pretty sure her mother would have a rule about telling a stranger where she lived too.

Wait a minute... Portland? Did that mean...?

“Actually,” a voice to the right said, “that’s our old address. We live here now, remember, Molly?”

Jordan looked up.

The door to the neighbor’s part of the duplex had opened without her noticing, and Emma stood in the doorway. A hint of sweat gleamed on her forehead, as if she had either worked out or lugged around furniture or moving boxes. Instead of the sexy pair of jeans Jordan had seen her in two days ago, she was wearing gray sweatpants that were baggy at the knees. Even that old, ratty thing couldn’t hide her lush curves.

Jordan stared at her. *Damn*. It rarely happened, but apparently, her gaydar had been off. Her cute neighbor was straight. Not that Jordan had ever let that bother her. In her book, most women were straight—until they weren’t. But Emma had a kid and very likely a husband, and if there was one rule that Jordan always stuck to, it was to never, ever get involved with someone who was in a relationship.

At least it explained why Emma hadn’t been interested in having coffee with her. Maybe she hadn’t lost her mojo after all.

“I’m sorry.” Emma nodded down at her daughter and the chalk drawings all around her. “It looks like we’re blocking your garage again.”

“It’s okay. We all have to make sacrifices for art, right?” Jordan couldn’t stop the wink or the automatic grin she flashed Emma. Flirting with women was ingrained into her DNA, so it was hard to cut it out now that she knew Emma was off the market. Well, establishing a good relationship with her new neighbor was a good thing, even if that relationship would never be extended to the bedroom.

Emma laughed. “Yeah, well, this artist has to go to bed now. Come on, Molly. Let’s get you cleaned up and into your jammies.” She held out her hand to the girl, apparently not minding the red chalk that clung to the small fingers.

“But Mommy, I haven’t finished the cat. Look, it has no tail.” Molly pointed at the chalk drawing.

“How about we finish it together tomorrow, after you’re back from kindergarten and I’m done with my clients?”

“Yay!” Molly jumped up and skipped across the driveway toward her mother. “Can you draw me a giraffe too? And a Saint Bernard!”

Falling Hard

The girl jabbered on and on all the way to the door, and for a moment, Jordan exchanged an amused smile with Emma before both mother and daughter gave a quick wave and the door closed behind them.

Only when her own front door opened did Jordan remember that she had someone waiting for her.

“What are you doing out there?” Simone called.

Jordan looked from Emma’s door to the chalk drawing and then to Simone, who was all dressed up, ready to go out. “Um, nothing. Let me take a quick shower and we can go.”

As she walked over to her side of the house, Tuna jumped up and ran ahead of her.

“No! Don’t let her into the—”

Too late. Tuna slipped past Simone and disappeared into the house, no doubt heading straight for the living room to leave chalk dust all over the couch.

Jordan sighed. She had definitely been right—getting a pet was the first step toward being tied down by the shackles of domesticity. But at least she didn’t have to wrangle an energetic five-year-old into bed. The only female she’d take to bed today would go there quite willingly.

Grinning, she sauntered toward Simone to kiss her hello.

* * *

The next morning, Molly’s first day at school, wasn’t off to a good start.

Molly sat at the breakfast table, clutching the spoon without even touching her cereal.

“Hey, little dreamer. Don’t forget to eat, or you won’t have enough energy to keep up with the other kids in your class.”

The spoon clattered to the table. “I don’t want to go to stupid school.”

Uh-oh. Emma put her coffee mug down. “But, honey, you loved preschool, and I bet you’ll love kindergarten just as much.”

Molly’s bottom lip quivered. “I won’t. Kindergarten is stupid. I want to go home.”

Emma’s heart ached. So far, Molly had seemed to love the new house and getting to stay home with Emma for a couple of days, but now that she was trying to get them settled into their new routine, it stopped being a fun

vacation. "This is home now, Molly," she said gently. "Why don't you go today and give it a chance? You might like it."

"No!" Molly kicked the table, toppling over her glass of milk.

"Molly!" Years of motherhood had honed Emma's reflexes. She tried to catch the glass but was a second too late.

The white liquid spilled over the table and splashed onto Emma's lap. She bit back a curse and jumped up. Her wet pants stuck to her thighs, but that would have to wait. Milk dripped onto the floor as she rounded the table, pulled Molly from her chair, and knelt in front of her so that they were nearly at eye level.

"Listen, Molly. I know you miss your old room, and you miss Kenny and Sarah."

Molly stared at the drops of milk on the floor, not looking up into Emma's eyes. "And Mama," she whispered.

Emma swallowed. Her eyes burned, even though she had thought she didn't have any tears left. She wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her tightly, not knowing what to say to that. It wasn't as if Chloe had spent a lot of time with Molly, even when they had lived in the same house, but for a moment, guilt still clawed at her.

To her relief, Molly cuddled against her and hugged her back. After a moment, she pulled back and frowned. "You're all wet, Mommy."

"Yeah, because a certain someone knocked over her glass of milk." She nudged Molly's chin, making her giggle and the tears in her eyes disappear.

It would have been easy to distract her now and change the subject, but Emma knew she would have to address this sooner or later. Still kneeling, she looked into Molly's eyes. "I know you miss her, honey. I'm sure she misses you too." She didn't believe that last statement, but what else was she supposed to say to her five-year-old?

"Then why can't she come live here too?"

"Do you remember when you and Jessica stopped being best friends?"

Molly nodded.

"Well, sometimes, that happens to adults too, and then they go their separate ways and no longer live together. That's what happened to Mama and me."

Falling Hard

Molly sniffed once and scrunched up her face in that way that meant she was thinking hard about something. “Will you find a new friend, like Kenny and Sarah?”

“I’m sure I will one day, honey.” But it wouldn’t be the kind of friend who would move into the house and make her daughter cry when she left. “And I bet you’ll find plenty of new friends in kindergarten. Want to know why I’m so sure?”

Molly softly swayed back and forth, her hands behind her back. “Because I’m smart?”

Emma chuckled and realized that Molly was repeating what she had often told her in similar conversations. “Well, that and because we’re gonna stop at a bakery on the way to school and get cupcakes for everyone.”

A broad smile spread over Molly’s face. “Cupcakes! Can I pick them?”

“Yes, you may—if you help me clean up the milk. After all, it’s your mess, so it’s your responsibility.”

They worked together to wipe down the table and clean the floor. Of course, Molly was adding to the mess more than really helping.

When they were done, a glance at the clock revealed that they had to leave. No time to change into a dry pair of pants.

Emma grabbed her car keys and Molly’s backpack, and they headed out.

Just as they left the house, the door on the other side of the duplex opened and Jordan stepped outside, followed by an attractive black woman of about Emma’s age, who carried a laptop bag over her shoulder.

Emma hadn’t seen Jordan’s girlfriend yet, but she had heard her plenty for the last three nights. She had to admit the two made a nice-looking couple, but she couldn’t help wondering if the poor woman knew that her partner had a wandering eye.

“Good morning,” Jordan said, and her girlfriend echoed it.

Yes, that was definitely the voice of the vocal woman who had kept her up for several nights in a row. Emma struggled not to blush as she returned the greeting and quickly pulled Molly toward the garage.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jordan walk her girlfriend to a car that was parked at the curb. The logo of a rental company was emblazoned on its side. Apparently, the two of them were in a long-distance relationship or something. Then Jordan pushed her lover against the driver’s side door and kissed her.

Christ! This woman really had no shame. Bad enough that she had kept Emma awake with the seemingly endless banging—pun intended—but now she had to suck face with her lover while Molly watched?

Not that Molly *was* watching. She was so used to two women kissing that she didn't even spare them a glance.

Calm down. Yes, her new neighbor was possibly an ass who was flirting with other women even though she was in a relationship, but it was none of her business.

Intent on ignoring them, she strode toward the shared two-car garage, opened the large door, and pressed the button to unlock her Toyota Prius. The key fob didn't beep, and when she reached out for the driver's side door, it didn't open. Frowning, she took a step back and tried again.

Nothing.

She pressed the key fob repeatedly. Normally, a red light flashed, but now it didn't. *Great.* Today, of all times, the battery in the fob needed to be replaced. Had she seen any extra batteries when she had unpacked the moving boxes?

She couldn't remember.

"Mommy?" Molly tried to peer around her to see what was going on. She sounded worried.

"Everything's fine. We'll be on our way in a second." Thank God the car's producers had planned ahead for such emergencies. She pulled the mechanical key from the side of the key fob and inserted it into the driver's side door lock.

But luck wasn't on her side today. When she turned the key, it didn't budge. She carefully pulled it out and tried again—with the same result.

"Is there a problem?" someone asked from the other side of the garage.

Emma looked up and met Jordan's gaze over the roofs of the Prius and Jordan's sports car. "No," she said quickly and tried not to let her frustration show as she jiggled the key in the lock a little.

"We're getting cupcakes," Molly announced.

"Oooh, cupcakes! That's great."

Jordan's very white teeth gleamed against her flawless dark skin. There wasn't a wrinkle in sight, even though Emma guessed her to be slightly older than her own thirty-two years. With the day she was having, Emma found it strangely annoying.

Falling Hard

“If I can get the da...dumb door open,” she muttered.

Instead of getting into her car and driving off, Jordan came over to their side of the garage. Her gaze wandered down Emma’s body, and it took Emma a second to realize she was staring at the way her milk-drenched pants stuck to her thighs.

God, the woman was a pig. Her girlfriend had left less than a minute ago, and here she was, already checking out another woman.

“Something wrong with the car?” Jordan asked.

Emma pulled the key out of the lock and let her hand dangle down. “The door won’t open.” She demonstrated by pressing the unlock button and halfway expected the door to open and embarrass her, but it didn’t happen.

“Hmm.” Jordan stepped next to her, and they both bent at the same time to peer into the lock, which brought their faces within inches of each other. When Jordan turned her head to look at her, her warm breath washed over Emma’s lips.

Emma’s traitorous heart picked up its beat. Quickly, she stepped back to create some space between them.

“I take it you tried the mechanical key?” Jordan asked. Her gaze was no longer on the lock but fixated on Emma’s lips.

“I did. It wouldn’t open either.”

Chloe would have taken the key from her and tried it herself, making Emma feel as if she couldn’t even handle as simple a task as inserting a key correctly. But Jordan didn’t reach for the key. Instead, she asked, “How long have you had the car?”

“Five years,” Emma said. “We bought it when Molly was born.” *We*. She squeezed her eyes shut for a second. When she opened them again, she looked right into Jordan’s eyes.

Jordan didn’t ask questions, at least not about the other part of the *we*. “Have you used the key in the door before?”

“No.”

“I’ll be right back.” Jordan walked back to her side of the garage. When she returned a few seconds later, she pressed something into Emma’s hand. “Here. Try this.”

Emma stared at the blue-and-white can. “What’s this?”

A mischievous grin stole across Jordan’s face. “Lube. It can do wonders for orifices that haven’t been used in a while.”

Was everything the woman said a double entendre? “I can’t imagine you having that problem,” she muttered under her breath.

Jordan tilted her head. “Sorry, I didn’t catch that. What did you say?”
“Nothing.”

“Mommy, what’s lube?” Molly piped up. “And what’s an odi...odifice?”

They looked at each other like two kids who had been caught with their hands in the cookie jar and then burst out laughing. As much as she wanted to, Emma could no longer hold on to her annoyance. “You’re getting me in trouble,” she whispered to Jordan. To Molly, she said, “She’s talking about the door lock, honey. Ms. Williams gave me some lubricant spray to put in the keyhole.”

“Jordan, please,” Jordan said. “Otherwise, I’ll start feeling like a kindergarten teacher, and I think I just proved that it wouldn’t be the best job for me.”

Emma suppressed a smile, not wanting to reveal that she did find Jordan amusing every once in a while. She nodded her acknowledgment and turned back toward the car door. They really needed to get going. She pulled the cap from the aerosol can and sprayed a bit of the lock lubricant into the keyhole.

“Put a little on the key too,” Jordan said. “If you have never used it in the lock before, there could be some dirt in there.”

Emma sprayed a little lubricant on the key, inserted it again, and slowly turned it. This time, the lock opened immediately, and she could pull the driver’s side door open. “Yes!” Her legs weakened with relief. She had already imagined herself getting the car towed and spending hours at the dealership, and she really didn’t have time for that today.

Molly jumped up and down, doing a victory dance.

With a grateful smile, Emma handed back the can. “Thank you. You’re a lifesaver.”

Jordan returned the smile and tipped an imaginary hat. “Glad I could help.”

She might be a player and a cheat, but there was genuine warmth in her brown eyes. Emma felt Jordan’s gaze on her as she turned, opened the rear door for Molly, and buckled her into the booster seat in the back before climbing behind the wheel.

Falling Hard

When she backed out of the garage, Jordan still stood next to her sports car, the can in one hand while she waved at them with the other.

* * *

That evening, when Emma carried the garbage to the curb, Jordan's girlfriend got out of her rental car. With her laptop bag slung over one shoulder, she walked up the driveway. A friendly smile lit up her face as she saw Emma. "Hi."

"Hi." Too embarrassed to stick around for more of a conversation, Emma waved and walked back to her door.

Just as she was about to step inside, a curse made her pause.

"Dammit," Jordan's girlfriend murmured. "If my head wasn't attached to my neck, I swear I'd forget it too."

Emma turned. "Is there a problem?"

"Yeah. Jordan gave me a key, but it seems I forgot to actually take it with me when I left for work this morning." She put down her laptop bag. "Guess I'll just sit here and enjoy the view of this lovely cul-de-sac until she gets back."

Emma hesitated and then gave herself a mental slap. Her embarrassment at having heard the woman have sex was no reason to leave her sitting on the doorstep. "Why don't you come in and have some coffee with me while you wait?"

"Really? That would be great. Thank you."

As she led the stranded woman into the kitchen, Molly came running from her room. "Mommy, can I—?" She slid to a stop when she saw the stranger.

"This is Molly, my daughter."

"Hi, Molly. I saw you this morning, but I didn't have time to stop and chat."

"You kissed Jordan," Molly said.

So she had seen them kiss after all. Emma bit her lip so she wouldn't burst out laughing at the wide-eyed look on the woman's face.

But to her credit, she recovered instantly and smiled. "I did. Jordan tells me you're the famous artist who painted the beautiful drawings on the driveway."

Molly beamed at the praise. "I made them all myself."

“All of them? Wow.”

Jordan’s girlfriend really was beautiful, especially when she smiled, which she did often. Would she still be so friendly if she knew that her girlfriend had asked Emma out for coffee?

“Molly, this is—” Emma gave the woman a questioning look.

“Simone,” she said, “who apparently forgot her manners along with her key.”

Emma smiled. In Molly’s direction, she added, “She’s Jordan’s girlfriend and will stay with us until Jordan comes home from work.”

“Actually,” Simone cleared her throat, “Jordan and I are just friends.”

Just friends? Emma stared at her. *Excuse me, but the last time I shouted out a dozen Oh God’s at three in the morning, I wasn’t with a friend!*

“It’s complicated,” Simone said with a mild smile. “But we really are just friends.”

“Can I have a cupcake, Mommy?” Molly asked, apparently bored with the adults’ conversation.

“Now? We just had dinner.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“Do you want me to warm you up a little of the leftover carrots and peas?” Emma asked, even though she knew the answer already.

Molly scrunched up her nose. “No. I’m hungry for cupcakes.”

Emma sighed and decided to make an exception just this once. It had been Molly’s first day at school after all. “Okay. But just one.”

Seconds later, Molly disappeared back into her room with a pink-frosted cupcake.

“Do you want one too?” If she had counted correctly, there were two left over.

“I really should be a good girl and say ‘no, thanks,’ but life’s too short to deny yourself, so...yes, please,” Simone said with an impish grin.

Emma turned on the new espresso machine she had bought the day before and placed the two last cupcakes onto plates. They sat on the couch in the living room. For a minute, silence ruled as they ate their cupcakes.

Simone pulled out a phone. “I’ll let Jordan know where I am, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

Falling Hard

A few quick flicks of her thumbs, and then Simone put the phone back into the pocket of her blazer. “I hear you’ve only just moved in.”

So Jordan had told Simone about her? Had she mentioned that she had asked her out within a minute of meeting her? Probably not.

Emma licked cupcake crumbs off the corner of her mouth and nodded. “On Monday.”

“How do you like it so far?”

“I love it. It’s quiet, but there are plenty of stores and restaurants just a few blocks away, and the schools are great. I actually grew up here, so I thought it might be nice for Molly to live here. What about you? You don’t live here?” She indicated the other side of the duplex.

“God, no.” Simone chuckled. “I love staying with Jordan for a few days, but any longer than that and we’d probably end up killing each other. I’m not a slob or anything, but...”

“Life’s too short to spend it cleaning and putting things back into their rightful place?”

“Exactly.” Simone took another hearty bite of her cupcake. “Finally a woman who understands, unlike Jordan.”

Actually, Emma preferred some order too. While she didn’t want to feel as if she were living in a museum, with not a single item out of place, a little structure always helped her feel more balanced. She hadn’t pegged Jordan for a fellow neat freak.

But apparently, she had misjudged her in other ways too. Jordan might be a player, but she wasn’t a cheat. That made Emma feel better about living in such close proximity to her. She didn’t want her daughter to grow up around people who thought faithfulness was a thing that had gone out of fashion somewhere in the last century.

“So, where do you live?” Emma asked.

“Chicago. I’m only here for the week to meet with a client.”

Emma glanced at the laptop bag leaning against her coffee table. “What do you do?”

“I’m an independent business consultant,” Simone said. “Sounds pretty highfalutin, right? It basically means I do research, analyze the data, and come up with fresh solutions.”

“That sounds a lot like some of what I d—” Before Emma could finish her sentence, the doorbell rang.

Molly raced to the door.

“No opening the door without me, honey,” Emma called. “You know that.” She got up. “That’s probably Jordan.”

Indeed it was.

When she opened the door with Molly at her hip, Jordan stood on the other side of the threshold, a black leather jacket thrown over one shoulder. Her casual confidence seemed to surround her like a magnetic force field.

Emma shuffled backward to resist its pull.

“Hi,” Jordan said. “I heard you granted asylum to my forgetful friend.”

There it was again: friend. Now that she knew Jordan wasn’t in a relationship, she felt guilty for assuming she was a cheat. She couldn’t quite look her in the eye. “Um, yes. We’re in the living room. Why don’t you come in?”

When Jordan stepped inside, the hall somehow seemed smaller, as if she were filling it with her personality.

“We had cupcakes,” Molly announced as she followed them to the living room.

Jordan arched her brows as she looked from Molly to Simone. “I thought you wanted to go out for dinner.”

“Traitor,” Simone mumbled in Molly’s direction, but she was smiling. “Yeah, but I was hungry for cupcakes.”

She and Emma burst out laughing.

Jordan looked from one to the other. “Want to let me in on the joke?”

“You needed to be there.” Simone got up from the couch and kissed Jordan hello.

Even though staring wasn’t the polite thing to do, Emma couldn’t look away. This wasn’t how she would greet one of her friends, but it also wasn’t how she would say hello to the love of her life.

Yeah, well, the love of your life is back in Portland with her little medical assistant, so maybe you should stop holding other people to your standards.

She promised herself to give Jordan a chance. Maybe if she looked more closely, she would see the person that Simone saw in her instead of the pathological flirt.

Yeah, just don’t look too closely, a sarcastic voice inside her head piped up, sounding annoyingly like her mother, who, at finding out that Emma

Falling Hard

had filed for a divorce, had helpfully declared that she had never liked Chloe anyway.

“Thanks for the coffee and the cupcake,” Simone said when Emma walked them to the door. “It was great to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Emma answered and found that she meant it. When the door closed behind Jordan and her friend, she resolved to sleep on the couch tonight. Listening to a stranger have sex was one thing, but when you actually had coffee with the woman, that made it even more awkward.

Sleeping in a real bed would have to wait a while longer.

* * *

As soon as the door closed, Simone backhanded her across the shoulder. “You dog!”

“Ouch!” Jordan rubbed her shoulder, even though it hardly hurt. “What? What did I do?”

“No wonder you’re not planning on moving.”

“Uh, what? Why would I move?”

“Because that’s what you usually do after three years, and if I’m not mistaken, that’s about how long you’ve lived here.”

Jordan shook her head at her friend and took the laptop bag from her to carry it to her side of the duplex. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What is the longest you have ever lived in one place?”

“Same city or same house?”

“House,” Simone replied.

Jordan thought about it for a moment. “Three years.”

“See? The three-year mark is when you usually get itchy feet and start thinking about greener pastures.”

Did she, really? Jordan had to admit that she’d recently started to entertain the idea of leaving Griffith Memorial Hospital and doing a fellowship at another hospital. Man, she hated being so predictable. “Then why am I still here, wiseass?”

Simone smirked. “Maybe because you’re enjoying the view from your nice little duplex. Not that I could blame you. Your new neighbor is a cutie.”

Cutie? Totally hot, that’s what she was. And she was nice too. Not that Jordan usually cared about that. “She’s got a kid, Simone.”

“So? Moms can still be cute, can’t they? I sure plan to be once I have kids.”

Jordan paused in the middle of unlocking the front door and stared at her. “You want to have kids?”

Simone patted her arm. “Don’t worry. Not with you. But yeah, one day, I’d love to have one or two.”

Why had she never known that about her friend?

“One day soon, hopefully,” Simone added. “Because my biological clock is ticking so loudly that it’s starting to keep me up at night. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.”

Jordan had no idea what to say to that, so she sought refuge in a joke. “Well, I can’t help you with that, but if you’re not sleeping anyway, I could give your hormones a workout that will keep them in tip-top shape.”

Simone’s eyes smoldered. She took the key from Jordan, unlocked the door, and pulled her directly to the bedroom without pausing to let her put down the laptop bag first.

Looks like we’ll lose our restaurant reservation, was the last clear thought on Jordan’s mind before she dropped her leather jacket, set the laptop bag on top, and tackled Simone to the bed.

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FALLING HARD

BY JAE

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