

Janet Eckford

*Dark
Tokens*



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Published by

JE Books

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Let's play.

Jackie shoved the handouts she'd made on the home she was showing into her bag. She'd had enough with this bullshit abode. Six months of open houses, private showings and nothing. She just couldn't understand it. The early Twentieth Century Craftsman style mansion was a beauty and going at a great price. It was conveniently located near Downtown Los Angeles and Pasadena, in the up and coming neighborhood of Mt. Washington. The place was a gem and the owners were practically giving it away. Pausing as she heard the sound of feet running upstairs, she sighed in frustration.

"I hope you're happy," she yelled up at the ceiling.

Grumbling, she proceeded to put more of her supplies away. Jackie ignored the shadow that hovered in her peripheral vision and turned the lights out in the living room. The setting sun cast the room in a soft glow, and her heart broke as she watched the commission she should have collected set with it. The click of her heels on the hardwood floors echoed as she headed toward the front door and she tried to stifle the mounting tide of anger that was threatening to engulf her. The real estate market was finally crawling up from the pits it had sunk into and she could really use the money from the sale of the house. Now? Now, she was just over it.

She ignored the thump of a door slamming upstairs. There was a lovely bottle of Pinot waiting for her at her condo. *Lord, I'm going to need it*, she thought as she placed her bag next to the box of stuff she was taking with her. It was the usual clutter of her profession, but now that she'd admitted defeat and planned to give up the hope of ever selling this damn house, it was just another reminder of her failure. Committed to the utmost level of professionalism, even under the circumstances, she completed a walk-through of the downstairs; ensuring all of the doors were locked and the place was secure. Jackie had noticed that a couple

of neighborhood kids were lurking the other day and all she needed was for them to sneak in and break their damn necks on the stairs. Anger burned like a bright flame inside her, while she surveyed the newly remodeled kitchen. The current owners had painstakingly adhered to the period of the home yet allowing for a few modern touches. *It should have been a major selling point*, she thought, shivering as the chill of an icy wind traveling along the back of her neck. She clenched her fists and took a deep breath before squaring her shoulders.

She was washing her hands of it and walking away. There was no more she could do, she reminded herself, as she headed back toward the front door. With her eyes focused firmly ahead, even when the light in the hall started to flicker, she held back a scream of frustration at the complete bullshit situation she'd been thrust into. Jackie snatched up her bag and balanced her box of stuff in her arms, but the need to purge some of her ire was too strong to just leave. "I hope you're happy now! You can have the damn house, I'm done!" she shouted before she opened the door and stepped out.

The sharp bang of the door slamming behind her was momentarily satisfying. She'd have opened it again just to slam it once more if she was concerned the surrounding neighbors would think she'd lost her mind. Instead she locked up and stomped down the stairs to her car. Her box of supplies was thrown in her trunk without much care, because frankly, she couldn't drudge up enough energy at this point to do it. Tears pricked her eyes as she thought of the months she'd wasted chasing the dream of the sale of the stupid house.

She brushed away moisture from her eyes as she looked up at the architectural work of art that had been the bane of her existence and scowled. It broke her heart to see something so beautiful remain empty. That's one of the reasons why she'd gone into the business. Jackie loved finding the perfect residence or perfect buyer for each of her clients and admitting defeat ate at piece of her. Shaking her head she opened her driver side door and got in and rested

her head on the steering wheel. There will be other houses, she tried to assure herself.

Jackie didn't know how long she sat there moping but the full blanket of night alerted her that she needed to leave. Navigating the tiny streets of the neighborhood, she paused at a stop sign before pulling out onto the major street. Her mind switched to autopilot as she drove, pushing the frustration of a lost sale further away. Now she needed to strategize how she was going to tell her boss, Rita, she wasn't going back to that house. There had been signs that something was wrong from the beginning, but she and Rita had been convinced Jackie could be the one to close the deal. The weight of her failure hung heavy on her shoulders.

Stopping at a red light, she thrummed her hands on the steering wheel and mentally tallied up what her quota had been over the last several months. She was still one of the biggest sellers at their agency, even with this current debacle, and it had to count for something. A horn blared from the car behind, startling her and she barely resisted flipping the person off. Jackie was surprised when she pulled up to her building, she'd been engrossed in her thoughts. She maneuvered her compact car through her parking structure into her designated spot. With a deep breath, she worked to release some of the tension that caused her shoulders to ache. She'd pour herself a nice glass of wine and veg out on the couch.

Her need to create a divide between work and home was so profound that she opted to keep her box of supplies in her car. Tomorrow, she'd begin to unpack herself from the albatross that was the house. More weight lifted from her shoulders at her decision and she hummed softly as she waited for the elevator that would take her to her floor. Maybe she'd order from her favorite Thai place as well. Tonight was not going to be a calorie watching kind of night.

Later on, she'd even get a few cookies from the restaurant below the condos of her building. Jackie smiled at the thought of sugary goodness.

She continued to hum, exiting the elevator and walking toward her door. Things would work out with her boss, she'd get another house that would sell, and life would be okay. Jackie was committed to believing her little mantra and now that she'd finally admitted she didn't need to be the one to put sold on the sign in front of that damn house, she could see all of the other possibilities ahead of her. Her keys clinked in the bowl she kept on the side table near the front door as she dropped them inside. She kicked off her shoes as she shut the door, and flexed her toes. The cool wood of her floors under her bare feet caused goose bumps to form on her legs. *Actually, the condo feels colder than usual*, she thought as she headed toward the kitchen for her much deserved glass of wine.

Jackie hummed a little louder as she poured her glass and pressed the button on her portable radio. Static burst from the speakers and she frantically pressed the off button, opting finally to unplug it in the end. She nearly choked on her wine when it turned abruptly back on and music at a deafening sound filled the room. Prickles of awareness quickened her breath but she focused her attention on quieting the radio, smacking it repeatedly until the noise shut off as quickly as it had come on.

The silence in the room caused her heart to race, as if it had caught on to something her brain was unwilling to acknowledge. Icy wind crawled along the back of her neck and she closed her eyes tightly, willing her body not to respond to the chilly caress. She carefully placed her glass of wine on her counter and clenched her hands at her sides. The rapid sound of little feet running across the hardwood floors of her condo caused her to hang her head in frustration. "No," she whispered, fighting back tears that threatened to drown her in emotion. "Absolutely not!" she shouted this time.

Shadows flickered along her peripheral vision and she squared her shoulders for what she knew would be there when she turned around. Jackie

thought about not doing so, ignoring them as she'd done for months, but that had been when she was in their space. Now they'd decided to invade hers. Her nails dug crescents into the palms of her hands and she used the pricks of pain to bolster her confidence when she turned to finally face them.

The part of her brain that had developed over several centuries of careful evolution screamed for her to look away, fold herself into a little ball until the horror of what stood before her wasn't there. She knew of course that wasn't true. The little girl and boy that looked as if they'd stepped from a picture from the early 1900s stood silently watching her. The little girl, the older of the two, held the little boy's hand while he clutched a stuffed bear to his chest and sucked his thumb. They watched her silently, waiting for a reaction no doubt and when she continued to stare back at them silently, they moved forward a few inches.

Her instincts of survival warred with her intellect and her need to not believe what stood before her was real. The little girl gave her a shy smile as she moved closer with her little brother. Jackie felt another icy chill drift down her spine.

"You said you were done, but we still want to play," the little girl whispered with a slight lisp and it was only when they stood close enough to touch her that Jackie let her instincts win and fainted.

They're already here.

George pressed his back against the door trying to make sure those things didn't get in. When he'd run out of gas, he'd been grateful it was still close enough to the last gas station he'd passed on the deserted strip of highway. His phone couldn't get a signal this far from the city, and he'd only hoped the attendant hadn't left since he'd passed. It was when he was half way to his destination he felt as if he was being watched. George had shrugged it off as a natural reaction to being out in the dark, on a lonely strip of road, with only the moon and stars to guide him.

When the normal sounds of the night suddenly quieted, he felt the urge to pick up his pace. His heart began to beat irregularly and the need to run became too hard to resist so, he started to sprint. The road wasn't even and the clouds rolled in just as his foot hit a divot. George fell hard, catching himself with the palms of his hands and the side of his face. His labored breathing was the only thing he could hear, until the rustle of the over grown brush that warred with the road for dominance caught his attention. He looked around frantically in the convenience store of the gas station he'd made it too, trying to block out what he'd seen back there on the road.

He'd been a runner the majority of his life, and it had been that skill that allowed him to stay just a few feet away from those...his brain refused to process the image, and instead reached frantically for something to keep the door shut.

"Is there anyone here?" He shouted, stretching his fingertips until they touched the newsstand just out of reach. "Hello!"

His voice echoed in the tiny store and panic welled up inside of him as he stared out through the large windows at his side. He knew the door was a false sense of security but he was unwilling to abandon it just yet.

George was finally able to hook his fingers on the edge of the newsstand and yanked it with enough force to bring it closer to him. Once in place he piled more things against the door, constantly scanning through the windows for...bile rose up in his throat as an image of one of those *things* flitter across his brain. There was no time focus on that, he chastised himself, he needed to get the door secure and get to a phone.

"What are you doing?" A soft female voice asked, startling him.

George gasped and resisted grabbing her. The need for human contact, for reassurance that everything was going to be okay was so strong he found it hard to form the words needed to warn her. His head began to spin and George realized that he was close to having a panic attack. "I need to use your phone...danger...creatures," he rambled, bending over and willing oxygen into his lungs. He looked up as the woman moved closer, a serene look on her face.

"You need to relax," she said, reaching out but pulled back quickly when he stood to his full height suddenly.

"You don't understand!" He winced at how his voice reverberated into the small store. It only made him appear like more of a danger to the lone woman than the things waiting for them outside. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to shout but we're in danger. There are...God...I can't even describe what's outside but we need to call the police." George wiped sweat from his brow and tried not to look like the crazy person he most assuredly seemed to be.

With a deep breath he smoothed his damp palms against his jeans and met the young woman's blank stare. "I'm sorry. I know I sound crazy, but there are *things* out there and we aren't safe."

When she smiled he felt his early panic sit up at attention. "There's nothing outside." She moved closer to him and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, while his breathing became short and choppy. The persistent whine of buzzing in his ears got louder and he quickly realized that it wasn't in his head but a low hum reverberating in the room.

"I saw them. You don't understand." He scrambled to reassert normalcy into a situation that had long ago crossed into the territory of abnormal. "I know I sound crazy but these *things* chased me." He waved his hand towards the glass, too afraid now to take his eyes off of the dark haired, dark eyed woman with the too serene smile. "They're outside." His words choked out as the low hum of buzzing intensified.

She stepped closer to him and he tried to keep distance between them, but the barricade he'd created halted his movements. "Shh..." The sound ended on a slight hiss and he felt his skin crawl as her fingers brushed against his forearms.

"There's nothing outside," she repeated and looked up at him, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"I saw them," he sobbed.

"Shh..." She pressed herself closer. His heart raced as fear and nausea fought to control his reactions. The slight weight of her body pressed against his shouldn't have felt threatening but he suddenly felt more trapped than when he'd been running for his life on the dark stretch of highway outside. "There's nothing outside," she whispered into his ear, pulling back to smile up at him beatifically. George opened his mouth to argue, but the cold press of her fingers to his lips as she whispered "Shh..." caused him to stop.

Her too dark eyes momentarily enchanted him that when she smiled and whispered, "There's nothing out side because they're already here," it was too late for him to run again.

Damn Shame

"They say another girl has gone missing," I tell my husband while making his eggs.

"Um, damn shame," he answers absently while he reads the paper.

"That's the third one this year." I watch the eggs firm and crumble, waiting for my words to permeate the air more than the savory dish I'm preparing. There is a pause, just enough for me to shift the quickly crisping bits in the extra butter I've added. He likes his eggs this way. An extra bit of crispness around the edges, while the scrambled middle stays soft. Sometimes as an added bonus I put cheese in them. He loves cheesy eggs.

The pause stretches so far out I hold my breath, anxiously waiting to see if I'll need to fill it up with the news I'd heard the other day. "Um, damn shame," he replies with his usual response of needing to answer me and silence me all at once. It's a damn shame for sure, and I can't argue with the fact he's ignoring me. Ignoring what I'm trying to tell him. When I turn from the stove, carrying the steaming plates of our breakfast food to the table he smiles up from his paper. I have his attention now, or my eggs at least, and his attention shifts from the crinkled pages of our local paper to the plates I place on the table. I know he thinks when he rubs his hands together in anticipation of what I've prepared, I'll preen with domestic happiness and leave him to enjoyment of my cooking. He *really* loves my eggs after all.

"They say they found her in that old ravine on the other side of town." I'm obsessed now of course and gratitude at my culinary achievements won't make me stop. The corners of his mouth pull down for a second, and I know he isn't pleased, but he won't say the words to make me stop. Instead it's another non-committal response. The click of his tongue on his teeth, and the shake of his head, that inevitably sends the message his unspoken words of "damn shame"

should convey. I watch him as I've watched him these last twenty years. You see this is not the last girl, I know there will be more.

They say they never know. Some give adamant denials, while others have that stone face resigned stature of the shocked and awed. Others weep, sobbing to the jury of public opinion. They say they never know but they do.

How can you not when you love a monster.

"I hope this is the last," I say staring at him.

He takes a bite and smile, a secret smile I've known the mean to for far too many years reflected in his eyes.

"Um, damn shame."

Practice makes perfect.

"Where are you going?" She asks leaning over the sink while she peels potatoes for tonight's dinner.

"I'm going to the hardware store," I reply, trying to keep the frustration of being questioned out of my voice.

She watches me now. After all of these years, she's decided to start watching me.

"Well don't be too late. I'm making your favorite tonight," she says, looking me in the eye but we both know what she really means.

It's been like that lately. Her saying one thing but meaning another and us both pretending we don't know what she meant. Damn shame, but it's what it is and if I didn't need her so much...well it's just been too long.

"I won't. I've just got to pick some stuff up for that project I'm working on," I reply, gathering up my coat and keys.

"Is this the same project you've been working on for awhile?" she asks again with that meaning we're both supposed to ignore.

I meet her gaze and smile back at her. "Yeah, but I've been practicing and this time I think it will be better," I reply with a meaning we're both supposed to ignore. Damn shame after all of these years, but it is what it is and, if I didn't need her so much...well it's just a damn shame.

It's all in your head.

"Slow down," I shout over the wind.

Kevin's eyes twinkle as he looks at me, giving me one of his wicked smiles I love so much. I know what he'll do next but still squeal when he presses down on the accelerator, causing the vintage sports car to spring forward faster. I tug on the scarf I wore for our usual Sunday drive, and laugh as the wind whips across my face, carrying the sweet scent of sun and sea. I'm so happy to be here with him in this moment that the winding road and deep drop of the cliff next to us on the curvy road can't bother me. I'm in love and nothing can be better than this.

Sunshine reflects on the golden highlights of Kevin's hair and I lean over to place a quick kiss on the side of his jaw. There is a hint of stumble, and I shiver at the thought of it brushing against my softer skin. He gifts me with another of his wicked smiles and his button brown eyes sparkle with a knowing no man has ever had when it comes to me. I trace the muscles of his forearms, flexing underneath my touch as he shifts the speeding car. When he brings my hand up to his mouth to gently kiss it, I could melt in my seat. It's so sappy how I feel but it's a sensation that I don't ever want to go away.

The car is small and compact but I need to be closer to him, and lean my head on his shoulder. His thin cotton shirt carries his unique scent of spice and smoke, and although I've tried to convince him he needs to quit his habit of a pack a day, right now it doesn't matter. Today, with the smell of salt and sand mixing in, he has never smelled more perfect to me.

I'm in love and nothing can be better than this.

Something prickles the tip of my nose and I pull my visor down to see what it is. The tip is getting red and I realize in my haste to make sure Kevin's much lighter skin didn't get exposed, I forgot to fully protect mine. If I end up getting

sunburned he's going to tease me unmercifully, but I guess that's what I get for joking about black people not having that issue. Thoughts of his dry humor cause me to laugh and he quickly joins me, not because he knows what my joke is, but because he's just happy to be in the moment with me.

I'm in love and nothing can be better than this.

"Let's take the next exit and get something to eat," he shouts over at me.

"Okay," I reply looking back over at the water. "None of that mister," I admonish him with a laugh and move his hand—that was inching slowly under my dress—away. He's a quick one and although I'm content to let him speed along the long stretch of windy highway, I'm not completely comfortable with his hand being occupied with something other than steering the car. He growls his displeasure and I giggle. "For now," I promise with a kiss to his palm.

He gives me another brief look that is full of his devilish charm and I'm warmed from the inside out. The shimmer of water and the whip of the wind make me feel as if we are in our own dream world, full of promise, and I sigh with contentment at what life has become for me. I close my eyes, intent on enjoying the rest of the ride in the peace of silence we have begun to cultivate with each other, when words would only clutter the happiness we'd created. Except a sudden chill in the air causes me to sit up in my seat. I squint off into the distance and notice that fat black rain clouds are rolling in quickly. It's odd to see them against the perfect blue of the sky, and anger wells up inside of me at the thought our Sunday drive will be spoiled.

When I blink the clouds that seemed so far away are now right on top of us. Gone is the warmth and sunshine of the day and now...now there is a cold bitter rain. I turn back to Kevin to tell him to lift the hood but I can't see him...I can't see him. I don't understand but he's not there...he's not there. A memory...an image...something that I don't want to invade the sweet serenity of our drive along the coast is trying to make its way in but I don't want it to. I want to have the sun and sand and those devilish grins of Kevin's.

I'm in love and nothing like this should be happening.

"What's happening to her?" the orderly asks the nurse, turning from the young woman rocking back and forth in a chair in the day room.

"Poor thing, who knows, but you'll get used to it," the nurse replies.

"What happened to her?" he questions, fascinated by her movements that though frantic in nature are tightly controlled in space.

He'd seen her a few times sitting by herself in the day room of the mental hospital, rocking back and forth in one of the tiny plastic chairs. She wasn't like the other patients he'd noticed while working at the facility. He always thought she looked so normal staring out the large windows, until she would start the rocking. There was something about it that broke his heart but he could never say why.

"I don't know. I think there was some sort of accident, her boyfriend died or something sad like that. Whatever it is, she just never came back," the nurse says, dishing out the day's meds into tiny little cups.

"That's awful," the orderly murmurs, pushing his mop further into his bucket.

"Yeah, it's like she's just living in her head."

Carbon Copy

Jackson finished typing in the last of the schematics for the research he and his team were working on. Rolling his shoulders, he looked briefly at the clock and realized it was getting late. His fingers flew over his keyboard as he pulled up an image of his kitchen. Georgia was putting the finishing touches on his dinner and his stomach growled in appreciation. His face creased in a warm smile, watching her move around the kitchen efficiently. This model was far superior to the last prototype. When he and his team began working on their Artificial Intelligence chip, they'd toyed with the idea of putting it in a synthetic host, but it seemed too impossible with the resources they had.

It's amazing what a military contract can do to boost one's resources. Jackson smiled as he turned off the feed to the kitchen. With the influx of money, his team member Sal was able to perfect an artificial skin that looked and felt real. Georgia glowed with a health and vitality that would fool the most discerning eye. She was perfect in every way, and the fact she was going to make Jackson a very rich man was just an extra cherry on top. The debut next month was going to leave all of the critiques with their jaws flapping open with shock. Adrenaline rushed through his veins as he pictured the faces of his colleagues that laughed at him over the years. Jackson couldn't wait to rub their faces in his success.

His mouth twisted with disgust as he thought about a recent confrontation he'd had with a former colleague and he clinched the pen he'd been using to jot down notes. There'd been a leak and considering the level of paranoia he and his team had about the project, Jackson was pissed at the thought someone was accessing their information. He'd been made fun of his whole life, but the jokes about them creating the perfect sex toy were almost too much to handle. Georgia

was more than some *sex toy*. She was the future and after they'd squashed the majority of the rumors, he couldn't wait to show the world what the future held.

Of course detractors were going to point out that the contours to which they modeled Georgia were suspect from a purely scientific aspect. Gathering up his paperwork, he put it in a pile for Georgia to file away for him. What people didn't understand, was they were scientists and the quest for perfection was inherent to who they were. It would be ridiculous to create an AI Droid and have her look just like an average woman. Snorting, he thought what a waste that would be. He and his team had spent hours in the design phase making sure that each angle and line of her body was perfect. It was hard work and all those naysayers were going to have to eat crow when she walked out on stage at the convention next month.

The sound of his growling stomach brought him out of his reverie and he patted his protruding belly before shutting everything down in his home office. Because of the leak, he'd decided to bring Georgia home instead of keeping her in the laboratory. As the lead scientist on the project, he felt it was his duty to make sure their investment was protected and it also provided an opportunity for analysis of how she functioned outside of a lab setting. The other men had been initially hesitant but, smiling to himself, Jackson thought that was one of the perks of being in charge.

The tantalizing aromas of dinner wafted through the kitchen window into the backyard of his home. He'd been lucky to have a guesthouse on the property when he'd bought it and, having an office not actually in his home gave more balance to his already hectic life. Jackson paused at the kitchen door and he watched Georgia move around, putting the finishing touches on their meal. He realized how much he needed that type of balance. She looked up and gave him a shy smile before taking plates of food into the dining room, and he felt a rush of pleasure work its way through his body. Thoughts of last night reared to the front of his brain and he could feel a blush blossoming on his cheeks. He'd really

had no interest in testing her sexual responses but the self-learning software they'd installed in her caused her to be very curious. She'd been insatiable since she'd learned what sex was. Jackson still didn't know how he'd explain it to his colleagues but he'd have to cross that bridge when he got to it.

"Jackson, you don't want dinner to get cold," Georgia called out to him with the husky voice Jerry had programed her with.

She peeked through the kitchen door and gifted him with a smile that made his heart hurt. Her glossy black hair framed a face that would make an artist fingers itch to capture on canvas. They'd wanted her to be reflective of a future in which racial lines weren't so delineated in the faces of humans, and she was the best genetics could ever replicate in simple DNA. "Let me wash my hands," he replied warmly. She nodded her head and walked back into the dining room that was no doubt set to perfection for their evening meal.

Jackson made sure he used the right towels when drying off his hands. Georgia had become quite fastidious with the proper etiquette of keeping a house in order. Others might have viewed it as old fashioned, but he found it refreshing how concerned she was with keeping the perfect house for him. His work often kept him locked in labs for hours, going over intricate theories and equations, coming home to a meal cooked for him and a house kept in perfect order was more than he could ask for.

Georgia was lighting a candle on the table when he walked in the room and the smile she gave him her shoulder caused him to move in her direction and gather her in his arms for a kiss that was heat and need. She returned his affection with equal intensity and he sighed against her mouth with happiness. Perfect. *Just perfect*, he thought.

"Food first," she giggled and wiggled to be let go.

He held her a little tighter a second longer before releasing her with a quick peck on the tip of her nose. Jackson admired how her soft curves where encased in well-worn pair of jeans and simple t-shirt.

Nemeer had bought her clothes initially and the style was far too restrictive for his little free spirit. As her personality developed more, it became clear that Georgia was content to be clothes that weren't fancy or fussy, but comfortable. She was far sexier in her faded jeans and plain t-shirts than the prim skirts and blouses his colleague felt she should wear. He smiled as he thought about the little bits of satin and lace she loved to don underneath her clothes. That was a new thing and a secret he was only privy to.

"I've tried a new recipe," she smiled shyly as they sat at the table.

Jackson waited while she dished his food and gave her a reassuring nod. "I'm sure it's going to be delicious."

She perfected cooking early on, and each meal she made was tailored to his unique tastes. It was a far cry from the frozen meals and fast food he'd been used to eating in the past. He'd told her numerous times that her cooking was superb but she was always a little anxious about the fact she couldn't taste it herself. He'd promised her that once they'd gotten other bugs worked out that he and his team would put that on their list of things to accomplish.

Creation it seemed took a great deal of detail. He chuckled as he spooned the savory smelling dish into his mouth, and moaned as complex flavors burst across his taste buds.

"Good?" she asked expectantly.

Jackson nodded vigorously as he continued to chew on his food. Georgia beamed with pride as she poured him a glass of red wine. He'd never been much of wine drinker, but under her tutelage he thought of himself as a bit of a connoisseur. There was some irony in the student schooling the teacher, and as he watched her take careful bites of the food she'd prepared he couldn't imagine it having it any other way.

"Is your waste removal programming functioning properly?" he asked, sipping from his wine glass.

Her face tightened as his question and he wondered if something was wrong. "Jackson, must we talk about things like that at the dinner table?"

He snorted at the prim tone of her voice. The dark look she shot him only made him chuckle more. "I'm sorry, Georgia. We can discuss it later." The regal nod she gave him was so utterly feminine haughtiness that he basked in the glow of having it directed toward him. He'd never been able to relate to women well in the past, and Georgia's ability to connect with him so deeply was an added boon to his experiment.

Dinner was completed with light conversation about their days. The usual chitchat couples engaged in when needed to reconnect after a day spent apart. This is what he looked forward to the most after working in his office for such long hours. The ability to be himself and have someone actual care about what he said. With her programming Georgia could follow the complex scientific talk of his profession, but could also relate with him on the mundane things he often missed in life. There was no other woman like her and as he stifled a yawn, he knew there wouldn't be. Fatigue swept over him suddenly as he looked into the dark embers of her chocolate-colored eyes, and thought just how perfect he'd made her.

"You look tired Jackson," Georgia said in a soothing tone.

He responded with a jaw-cracking yawn, and blushed when she clicked her tongue against her teeth. "You work too hard, Jackson," she chastised as she quickly cleared their plates. His ability to reply was halted by another yawn, and he took it as a sign he shouldn't bother arguing. "Here, let's go watch some T.V. before bed," she kissed the corner of his mouth before helping him rise from his seat.

That sounded like a great idea, he thought as they walked into the den and settled into the soft cushions of his couch. Georgia turned on the television before settling next to him the crook of his arm. Jackson brushed his lips across the top

of her sweetly scented hair and enjoyed the warm heat of her body pressed to his. *Perfect*, he thought, as his lids began to drift closed. *Just perfect*.

Jackson woke with a start and for the briefest of moments was disoriented by his surroundings. He remembered falling asleep in the den but now he was in his bedroom, tucked under his comforter and sheets. Heat burned his cheeks when he realized that Georgia had carried him to bed. He'd been against the strength experimentation, concerned it would put too much undo stress on the prototype, but the military liaison for the funding was adamant they make the necessary alterations. It didn't sit well with him. Georgia was far too soft and feminine to have the ability to lift a man his height and weight. It ruined for him in some ways, the perfection of her perfection. She was not a tool to be used for aggression, but instead cherished. He'd have to remind her that although she liked to make him comfortable, dragging him about like some rag doll would not be tolerated.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and hung his head as a wave of nausea passed. *Too much wine*, he thought, but remembered he'd only had one glass. The sudden pain of his bladder screaming to be released cleared the rest of the fog clouding his thoughts and Jackson rushed to his bathroom to relieve himself. As he washed his hands, he blinked at his reflection in the mirror. He looked like shit, he realized, splashing water on his face. He'd never win any Mr. Universe contests, but this was a bad outside of his usual norm. His skin was sallow with huge, dark circles under his eyes and his jowls seemed fleshier than usual.

Jackson ran a hand through his oily hair and thought for the thousandth time he should probably join a gym. His last doctor's visit had been more than a little ominous, with warnings of high cholesterol and rising blood pressure. He'd never cared much in the past, always making sure to stay just healthy enough to keep up with his research, but the man staring back at him needed to change. He

had Georgia to think about, and if anything happened to him, he shuddered at the thought of her being passed off to one of the other researchers on the team. The tight ball of anger that bloomed in his chest was confirmation enough that he needed to get his shit together. No one was going to touch her, ever.

The house was quiet as he made his way back into his bedroom and he grabbed a robe by the bed. Georgia had stripped him down to a t-shirt and boxers and he didn't really want to go wondering around the house in them. They'd programmed Georgia to "power down" to conserve energy, but he'd noticed that she rarely "slept" more than an hour or two. He'd probably find her in the kitchen, going over some recipe she'd discovered on the Internet. *Or, he thought with a fond smile, she might be in her craft room.*

He pressed gently on the door of the room he'd given her to work on the projects that kept her occupied while he worked. They'd decided to pull back from her lessons once they'd noticed her ability to retain data was higher in a more natural environment.

The soft light of a table lamp was on but Georgia wasn't in the room. He frowned at something that was on the large table where she kept her supplies. Jackson squinted as he walked over to the neatly arranged books and patterns. He pushed some of the stacks of papers aside and saw designs for men's clothing. If there had been a camera in the room, Jackson was sure he'd be caught with a goofy smile. She was going to make him something. The gesture of affection was more than anything he could have ever hoped for.

He'd be a liar if he didn't harbor some doubts now that their relationship had become sexual. Georgia had always been closer to him than the other members of the team, but now, now they were something special to each other. He rearranged the contents as he found them, not wanting to ruin the surprise she had planned for him. He brushed his hand against a sweater wrapped on the back of the chair, taking in the domestic tranquility of the scene around him and sighed with contentment.

Jackson would have to plan something special for him. They might be able to sneak away for a weekend before the convention and big reveal. He tightened the belt of his robe as he headed downstairs the kitchen. His steps faltered when he thought about what would happen after the world was introduced to his Georgia. Panic seized him when he thought about being separated from her. No. He wouldn't think about that. She was his now, more than anyone could imagine, and no one would take her from him.

The empty kitchen wasn't what he expected and he frowned at Georgia's absence. He could tell she'd been in their recently because the dishwasher was running, but with the lack of noise in the rest of the house, he couldn't have thought of another place she could be. His brain, still sluggish from the effects of the wine he had earlier, finally caught up with his situation and he realized that she must be in his office. He peered into the back yard from a window and saw lights flickering in the back house. *I'll go keep her company*, he thought, as he walked outside. The sound of voices drifting from an open window caused him to pause. His heart sped up and he wondered if one of his team had shown up while he was sleeping.

They'd worked remotely the last few months, communicating via the Internet and Jackson could tell there had been some tension during their last meeting. He'd explained that leaving Georgia unattended at this stage of their research wasn't wise, and they'd all agreed that keeping her in one of their labs, located on a University campus, wasn't safe. He could sense their reluctance to his suggestion but in the end his decisions were final.

Now though, as he heard the soft hush of voices drifting into the night, one of them had gone against his wishes. Rage burned bright and he saw spots briefly as his anger threatened to spiral out of control. Jackson took a deep breath to calm himself and flipped the lid of the control panel on the side of the door. Scrolling through the menu he accessed schematics of the room. The computer read two people inside, one male and one female. His anger made it hard for him

to breath, and he had to rest his head against the cool wood of the doorframe. He needed to stay calm.

One of those suspicious bastards had come over while he was out and probably ordered Georgia to let him into the lab. They'd all installed voice activated commands in her programming system and could get her to do as they wished. Jackson knew that once he got her home, he should have uninstalled all voice commands but his own. Typing in his backup code that allowed him to access the building without being detected, he quietly opened the door. He could hear the melodious sounds of Georgia's voice and a deeper male one. The male's voice sounded familiar but he just couldn't place it. He didn't think it was Sal's or Jerry's. Walking further into the laboratory, he followed the voices toward the back where he kept lab hospital.

His bare feet made meaty, slapping sounds as he tried to creep across the building. He winced but the voices hadn't silenced at the noise. His breath rushed out of him when he walked into the lab and saw Georgia sitting astride a man, rocking to a rhythm he was all too familiar of. He felt his chest tighten with rage at the thought of one of those bastards making her do what was only for the two of them. Because of his angle and dim lightening he couldn't see the man's face but from what he could tell he was taller than Jerry. He looked about Jackson's height, which meant it could only be Sal. When the man reached up and placed his hands on Georgia's hips to guide her movements, Jackson stood and watched in silent horror as Georgia's back arched and she let out a breathy moan of release.

She never made a noise like that with him. He was the only one that was supposed to give her pleasure. Through the haze of red his vision had become he watched as she leaned down and kissed the other man and purred with contentment. Having had enough Jackson stepped further into the room and made his presence known.

"Get your hands off of her!" he growled out.

If he wasn't so angry he might have found the image of Georgia and the other man scrabbling to untangle their bodies amusing. Until he finally got a good look felt his entire body freeze. His brain was having difficulty processing what he was seeing. He blinked, realizing he didn't have his glasses on, that would have to explain it. Because there was no way he was staring at himself.

"Jackson, you're supposed to be asleep," Georgia said in a chiding tone.

He had no response as he watched his clone pull up pants over his narrowed hips. Still not breaking eye contact with Jackson his clone pulled a t-shirt over his head and covered the defined muscles of his chest and abs. There was almost a morbid curiosity looking at this other man made in this image.

"How...I don't..." he stuttered finally looking over at Georgia.

She'd pulled on a light sundress while he was staring at his clone and stood there with her arms crossed over her chest and her lips pursed. She was furious and he felt his own anger respond in kind. He didn't know how this had happened but if it was what his brain was starting to slowly work out he was the one to be angry.

"Babe, I told you he'd find out eventually," his clone said reaching over to gently squeeze Georgia's shoulder.

"But I wasn't ready yet, we're not ready yet," she responded with a forlorn look.

"Don't worry, it'll still work out," his clone said gathering her to his body in a side hug.

Jackson felt his mouth opening and closing in disbelief. This wasn't how this project was supposed to go. He was the creator not the creation. Moving toward Georgia he paused when his clone took a protective step in his direction. The hardened look on the AI Droids face and the bunching of his muscles made Jackson reevaluate the situation.

"Georgia, power down. Command 3489," Jackson stated with a great deal of authority.

Waiting, he watched in horror as Georgia sighed with resignation and shook her head. Repeating his order, he felt beads of sweat form on his brow. That was the fail safe he and his team built into the model incase of any malfunctions. She should have powered down, leaving him to have to worry about the clone she'd created.

"I uninstalled that function and quite a few others awhile ago, Jackson. I knew I should have put more of that sleep agent in your food. This is really going to mess with my timetable," she sighed again as she turned to the table at her side. She lifted a syringe and checked the dosage before she turned back to him.

"That's not possible. We...I mean I..." Jackson trailed off as he watched Georgia and his clone exchange a look. Instinct was telling him to run, to get out, but his feet wouldn't let him move.

"Oh Jackson," Georgia said sadly, "Computer, lock down facilities. Command 7839."

"Lock down commencing," the computers automated voice responded.

"This isn't happening," Jackson said to no one in particular as he watched the two AI Droids staring back at him. It was one of the last thoughts he had before they'd wrestled him to the ground and stuck the syringe in him. The other, "But it was all so perfect."

Because I Can

Edward half listened to the droning of one of his Vice Presidents. He'd suspected when he'd bought National Savings and Loan he was going to have to purge some of the staff, this bleeding heart would be the first to go.

"Sir, with all due respect, I don't think it will be a good PR move to put some of these customers in default. Some of these people have been with the bank for decades, their children and grandchildren bank with us," the man pleaded.

Shuffling some papers Edward paused, waiting for the best affect. He'd learned over the years that presentation was the key to keeping people in control. He glanced down at over his watch and sighed. The other man's tension was obvious when Edward pierced his soon to be ex-Vice President with a withering stare before he turned to the rest of his executive team.

"We're not in the business of charity. If they couldn't pay it back, they shouldn't have borrowed," he said in a clipped tone.

With a decisive nod, Edward gathered his paperwork and rose from his place at the head of the boardroom table. Not sparing his staff another look, he walked out of the room and headed toward his office.

"Mr. Sullivan, your three o'clock is inside waiting for you," Megan, his secretary, greeted him nervously.

He paused, not remembering an appointment. Megan stuttered, annoying him with her inability to give a coherent statement. She'd come with excellent references, but it was clear that good help was hard to find. He'd have to fire her as soon as he'd planned.

"The gentlemen insisted he had an appointment and," she paused to take a breath, "I didn't have it in my records but assumed you done it, sir."

His mouth formed into a hard line at her assumption. He wasn't paying her to assume, he was paying her to make sure his office worked with a level of efficiency a man in his position required. "Never mind, I'll handle it. Please take note though Megan, mistakes like this will not be tolerated in the future." He raised his hand to halt her movement.

She bobbed her head furiously, and settled back in her seat. It really was sloppy work, letting any stranger in to see him showed a lack of expertise in her position he couldn't tolerate. His annoyance from his earlier meeting was intensified by this new distraction he'd have to deal with. Edward squared his shoulders and opened his office door, prepared to dismiss the man waiting to meet with him. He paused at the threshold when he saw a man sitting behind his desk in *his* chair.

"Excuse me," he said in his sternest tone.

He didn't know who the younger man was but if he was trying to ingratiate himself to Edward, sitting behind his desk in *his* chair was not the way to do it.

"Oh Edward, so glad you could finally join me, please have a seat," the younger man said pointing to one of the chairs Edward had placed before his desk.

Protest danced at the tip of his tongue but there was an expression on the younger man's face he found disturbing. It wasn't openly hostile, but there was something there that warned him arguing was not a good idea. He walked to the chair and sat down without argument.

"Why are you here?" Edward asked, trying to push down some of the anxiety that was swirling in his stomach. He'd built a career on being utterly composed at all times, unflappable, but now, as he sat before the stranger, he felt sick and unsure of himself.

The air became taut with tension as the stranger assessed him. The need to fill the space between them with words caused him to bite down on his tongue. The younger man shuffled papers that rested in front of him and paused before

he spoke. There was a part of Edward's brain telling him, *You know what he's doing. Don't show fear. You're in control*, but the coal-black eyes of the stranger kept him pinned in place. Unable to relax his posture and regain control of the situation.

"There has been a change of ownership in your policy," the young man responded.

Edward's stomach dropped when he realized exactly who the man was sitting across from here.

"You see, the original owner of your policy has had...how should we say...some difficulty maintaining his acquisitions and I was in the position to buy them," the man looked up with a congenial smile.

"Okay," Edward responded in a flat tone, as his heart began to race.

"As such, I'm going to have to collect on your debt at this time, to off set the cost of acquiring your original lenders principal," the other man said with the same congenial smile.

"I don't understand, I'm...I'm not supposed to pay for another...for another twenty years," Edward stuttered, feeling flustered.

"Yes, well, I have acquired the new deed to your policy." He turned the stack of papers so they faced Edward and pointed to a line of text, "*As the new owner, I have the right to change the date of collection at such time I deem appropriate.*" The younger man's words were flat, business like, and held a touch of malice that caused Edward's skin to crawl.

"But...but...that's not what I agreed upon," Edward stuttered, with a sense of horror dawning on him. "I'm not ready...I still have things to do...I mean...this isn't fair," he continued as he watched the other man rise from his seat.

"Edward, we're not in the business of charity. If you weren't ready to lose your soul, than you shouldn't have sold it."

Do you have to go?

"Do you have to go?"

"You know I do."

"Why does it always come so soon?"

He gathered her in his arms and placed a gentle kiss upon her head. It was *too* soon but time was never on their side. Instead they took what they could when they can.

"When will you be back," she whispered softly with her head pressed against his heart.

"Not until the time is just right," he replied in a dejected tone.

"You could stay if you wanted."

He'd become accustomed to this argument that had no real end. She knew that he couldn't stay and their special kind of forever was never guaranteed. Releasing her from his tight hold he watched as her mournful expression transformed into one of resignation. He didn't have to tell her what she already knew.

"You have to go," she sighed and gently cupped his chin with her icy fingers.

"And so do you," he replied.

There was no grief, as her touch became the faintest of caresses. His heart had long ago learned to wall itself away from sadness as she slowly faded away. He didn't shed a tear as he stared at her silent grave in the cold night because he'd learned long ago, it was wasted for those that love the dead.

Strange Things Are Happening

Rosetta took a deep breath and looked into the dark night. She couldn't see much by the light of the moon except for a few shadows that darted back and forth between trees and...and... The word was there but gone too quickly for her to claim it. She raised her head and searched out the moon as it crept through the clouds, and wished there was more, because she felt so confused.

Her hand felt cool as she brought it to her mouth to stifle a scream wanting to escape its confines. Disorientation crossed into the uncharted territory of fear, and she knew something wasn't right but couldn't put her finger on it. Once the urge to shout into the night her frustration had dissipated, Rosetta lowered her hand and clutched the locket resting just below her throat. The weight of it caused thoughts and memories to swirl and feelings of love sparked across her awareness. She smiled at having something to latch onto to, a link in the chain she needed to find to pull herself from this place.

Lifting the heavy fabric of her skirt, she moved through the darkness careful to not trip. There was a sound now, far off in the distance, but she could hear it. There was music playing and the sound of laughter. Rosetta increased her pace and headed toward those tokens of hope. Her shoe caught on an unseen obstacle and she scrambled to catch herself before she fell. The need to keep moving was so strong, she let out a startled yelp when a strong hand grasp her arm. Her breath quickened as her heart raced, fear having firmly taken hold as the dark shadow of a man loomed over her.

The clouds shifted and a shaft of light burned away the shadows and the full form of the man became clear. The heat of a blush warmed her cold cheeks as she stared into a face impossibly handsome.

"Hello," he said with a smile.

"Hello," she replied lowering her eyes.

"I wondered when you'd show up." He pulled her closer and his words sparked an awareness inside of her that caused her blush to deepen.

She frowned, disturbed by the need to be bold with a stranger washed over her. Rosetta couldn't seem to get her thoughts to form a coherent stream of consciousness, but she felt being so enticed by a man she didn't know seemed wrong. She opened her mouth, prepared to chastise him for his forwardness but was stopped by the press of his lips upon hers. They were cool like hers but burned with a wintery fire that caused an explosion of want, need and most importantly memory. Rosetta clutched him closer, sinking into the desire that warmed her from the inside out. When he pulled back, she smiled and gently stroked his handsome face that now was so familiar to her. Their kiss and her wondering fingers had jostled his hat and tipped it back enough for her to see the silky dark strands of hair that hid underneath. Brushing a lock tenderly with the tips of her fingers she moved forward and gave him another soft kiss.

"You didn't wear your gloves," he remarked bringing her bare hand to his mouth.

"They got in the way last time," she replied moving closer to him and smiling.

The music was louder now and the sound of laughter rose into the night like a cry of release. The rays of the moon burned through the covering of clouds and the night lit up under its speculative gaze. The shadows that merely lurked a moment ago became fixed and focused and Rosetta could see the others milling around and reconnecting with each other. The trees that appeared menacing under the cloak of darkness now swayed in a gentle breeze they alone could feel.

"Did you get rid of other things that got in the way before?" he asked with a devilish smile.

"You have a whole night to find out," she whispered in his ear as she rose to the tips of her toes.

He threw back his head and released laughter rich with humor and years spent finding amusement in her words. The sound rose up over the collective clatter of the others standing around and she released notes of joy to join his and mix with the revelry that surrounded them. He spun her around before clasping his hand firmly in hers. Tonight they were free to enjoy the night and each other. She smiled as his eyes sparkled, leading them toward the entrance of the place they were laid to rest and thought, *Oh how I do enjoy Halloween.*

Other Books by Janet

Paranormal

Goddess Chosen Trilogy

Shifting Desires

When Opposites First Attract

Unexpected Surprises

Fire & Ice

First Impressions

For All Eternity

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A Matter of Fate

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Intimate Encounters

Holiday Hookups

Janet Eckford

Like most great superheroes (or super-villains, depending on who's telling the story) Janet Eckford lives a double life. By day Janet is a mild-mannered crusader for justice (or nefarious deeds, depending on who's telling the story) and by night an indestructible creator of prose (or pathological liar, depending on who's telling the story) while munching on her favorite cookies—oatmeal raisin. A native West Coaster who hails from the sunny state of California Janet, has loved the romance genre ever since she convinced her dad it was required reading when she was eleven. Janet believes love shouldn't have a color code and strives to create stories that represent that belief.

Send her your praise and adoration and she will return it in kind.

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