

CLONED

A woman with long, wavy hair, seen from the back, wearing a white, flowing dress. She is looking out over a vast, cloudy sky. The lighting is soft and ethereal, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

A SHORT STORY BY

KAY L MOODY

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Cloned

A short story by Kay L Moody

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CHAPTER ONE

“**A**pparently clone is synonymous with slave,” Ecko said as she filled in the final boxes of her crossword puzzle.

With a huff, Treyu poked the little x in the top corner of her electronic Quad. He shot it a foul glare as the puzzle disappeared and returned to her home screen. “I told you to stop doing those. They’re filled with propaganda against low classers like us. I’ve known you for months and *I* know you’re more than a slave.”

His fingers curled back around the jade handle of his favorite knife. He dipped a gray rag into the metal tin of polishing cream before rubbing it against the blade. His tongue peeked out at the corner of his mouth as concentration overtook him. Each swipe against the blade came with strong, but gentle strokes. A promise that he would always care for this little knife in the best way he could.

Looking away, Ecco forced her back into the bookshelf behind her. She couldn't be making analogies like that in her head. Yes, Treyu would always care for the things he loved. But he was leaving for the far away city of Kraybanic tomorrow, and she'd never see him again.

Not to mention, she'd never be on that list of things he loved. Not her. Not a clone. A grimace overtook her face as she turned her head away.

Her sister was named Aurora, after a fairytale princess. And she was named Ecco, after the lesser version of a sound. A reminder that she would always be lesser because she had copied DNA. She was only created to provide for her sister's every need. Maybe she had dreams, but dreams were all they would ever be. How could any dream come true when she lived in a world where clone was synonymous with slave?

No, not even an incomplete like Treyu could care for a worthless clone.

A ragged breath shuddered out of Treyu. A breath that was as familiar as the knife in his hand. If he was allowed to nag her for doing crossword puzzles, she would nag him right back.

"Take off your boot, Treyu. No one is around."

His look of relief was immediately masked by fear. He looked over his shoulder past the bookshelf. "What about in childrens? They sneak around in there

and pop out all the time. If they see my foot, they'll tell everyone they know."

"It's an hour until curfew, the children are gone already. Go on," she said, letting the words glide out of her mouth to coax away his fears. "Lyndrea won't say anything."

The tension in his muscles eased at the mention of the librarian's name. She may not have been great for conversation, but Lyndrea was perfect for discretion.

Treyu dropped his knife onto the polishing rag before easing the boot down his leg. The soft leather bounced as it fell to the floor. A gentle sigh escaped his lips as he wrapped his fingers around the stump at the end of his ankle. After running around on a wooden prosthetic all day, his ankle was always sore.

He leaned into the bookshelf and dug his knuckles into the stump. The freedom from his poorly made prosthetic always turned his lips into the sweetest grin.

"Let me massage it."

"No," Treyu said as he turned his shoulder at her.

Ecko rolled her eyes. "Why do you always do that? It's just me. And I happen to be great at massages. Aurora makes me give her one at least once a day."

"It doesn't hurt," Treyu said as he turned his back to her again. He dropped his ankle away as a huff

escaped his mouth. "Why do people care about missing limbs anyway?"

She eyed his ankle, considering whether she should force the massage on him or not. At the last second, she decided not. With an exaggerated sigh, she said, "It's about money. That's what everything is about, isn't it? Well, money and tradition. You're only incomplete because you can't afford the surgery to get a permanent prosthetic. If you can't afford the surgery, then you're obviously not contributing financially to society the way you should be. Therefore, you should be treated like a drain on the economy. A bloodsucker to all the hard workers who make more than enough in one week to pay for a simple thing like prosthetic surgery."

"Bloodsuckers?" he asked with a playful grin. "I think you've been reading too much propaganda."

"Maybe I have," she said. She stretched her back until the little window over the bookshelves was in her sight. Now, she could watch the clouds. Such a simple pleasure and soon that would be taken away from her when Treyu left. She grimaced. "It's the same with me, isn't it? I was created to serve my sister. It's selfish to want my own money and my own life. No one wants to free the clones because then who will take care of everyone? Maybe it's not a great way to treat people, but this is the way things are. This is

what clones were created for. If things are really so terrible, the clones can emancipate, can't they?"

"Yes, Ecko, they can."

He gripped his ankle while his jaw flexed. His eyes stared back at her with an intensity that wasn't quite anger, but it was close. Now she'd done it. She'd gone and mentioned the one word that should have been omitted from every conversation between them in the last week. Yet, somehow, it seemed to be the only thing they talked about.

Emancipation.

His jaw flexed again as he dropped his ankle. He took up his polishing cream and knife and swiped the blade with short and heavy strokes. "You turned eighteen a week ago from today," he said. "That means you have until midnight tonight to do the paperwork. Just emancipate and come with me to Kraybanic tomorrow. I already bought you a ticket."

Bought her a ticket? Why would he waste his money when she already told him she wasn't going to emancipate? It was hard enough that he was leaving, but to spend their final hours together fighting? It was even worse knowing that going with him was her deepest dream. But she couldn't. And she couldn't tell him the truth about why she couldn't. Sometimes a lie was kinder than the truth.

"I'm staying with Aurora." Her voice sounded like a wisp of cotton in a heavy breeze. No. It sounded like an echo. Just a quiet, insignificant sound with no purpose at all. "What could I do in Kraybanic? No one would hire a clone anyway."

Treyu's blade started humming with the force of his strokes hitting the blade. He wrinkled his nose and said, "The clone academy is there. You can work in exchange for education. And they'll help you find a job." His face suddenly softened and he dropped the knife a few inches as he looked into her eyes. "Kraybanic is different than here. They don't despise low classers as much."

"You've only been there once. How do you know it's so different? I'm not willing to take that chance."

She didn't think it was possible, but somehow his nose wrinkled up even more. He shook his head, a touch of anger coming to the surface. "I don't understand. Aurora beats you and controls your every move. Even if people look down on low classers, it can't be worse than you have it now."

Ecko stood up to release the anxiety tingling through her limbs. Her frown deepened as she said, "I can't emancipate, Treyu. Stop asking me to."

He banged his fist into the carpet with a huff. "Yes, you can. You have until midnight." Hopping up to his foot, he moved toward her. As he inched closer,

she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from saying something she'd regret. Namely, something that involved the hot blush filling her cheeks. A frown etched onto his face matched with a pair of disappointed eyes. "You..." he started. But then he quirked his head to the side. "Wait. You *can't*? What do you mean you can't? You've always said you won't, but now suddenly you can't?" His eyes grew dark as he started to guess at the truth she was keeping from him. "What did Aurora say to you?" he asked.

She turned away and waved her hand casually. "I didn't mean it like that," she lied. "I just meant I already made my decision. It's too late. Look," she said pointing to the window. "That cloud looks exactly like a dragon."

Treyu's eyebrows knitted together as he took a short hop toward her. "You're trying to change the subject, but it won't work. I'm not giving up until you decide to emancipate. You deserve freedom. You have to—" The words came to abrupt halt as he glanced toward the window. "Wow, that really does look like a dragon."

Ecko propped her elbow onto the bookshelf in front of her and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. "I know," she said. "You can even see the teeth

in its mouth. And that tongue looks downright treacherous.”

His tongue peeked out the corner of his mouth while he sat deep in thought. He leaned into the bookshelf, and closer to Ecko, then finally said, “He doesn’t seem treacherous to me. I bet he has a castle somewhere that’s just for him. I bet he’s flicking his tongue because he’s in danger, but deep down, all he wants is *freedom*.”

He gave her a pointed stare, but she folded her arms in front of her chest and turned away from him. She wasn’t about to take his bait. He was angry, but there was nothing she could do about that. It would be even worse if she told him the truth, so a lie was all she could give. She needed him to think she *wanted* to stay with Aurora.

A puff of air escaped from his nostrils. “You deserve freedom, Ecko. Freedom *and* happiness.”

“I won’t emancipate,” she said as she tipped her chin up.

Treyu grabbed her shoulder, turning her to face him. He pushed the fabric of her shirt sleeve up to her elbow until the purple and green bruise covering her forearm was in full view. “Not even to avoid this?” he asked. The bruise was not a pleasant sight. He had been horrified to find out Aurora put it there simply because of some spilled water and a broken plate.

At least he hadn't discovered the one on her back. That one was bigger and fresher. But Aurora knew how to keep the worst injuries hidden. He let out an exasperated sigh and turned away from her. In a quieter voice, he said, "You deserve better than this."

A trickle of guilt crept up Ecco's spine. Her lips dove into a deep frown as she pushed her shirt sleeve back down. After placing her hand on his upper arm, she said, "Please, Treyu. We have so little time left; I don't want to spend it like this. I want to remember the cloud watching, not the fighting."

The tension in him melted away in an instant. He turned to face her, but she stared hard at the ground. She knew he was trying to catch her eye, but it would be dangerous to look up now. Especially when he stood so close. "That cloud looks like a book," he said, pointing toward the little window. "Normally that wouldn't be very exciting. It's just a rectangle, right? But that one looks like an open book, with some of its pages flipping. It's actually pretty impressive."

A smile inched onto her lips. She braved a glance at his face. His usual gentle demeanor had returned and he was clearly trying to make the most of the dwindling minutes they had until curfew. She brushed a hand along the side of the bookshelf and flinched when she almost touched the security button. When activated, it shot out knives at whoever had

pressed it. Supposedly, it was meant to discourage people from activating security except in the greatest emergencies. In reality, it was a barbaric system which Lyndrea and several library guests complained about loudly.

Once her hand was safe from the button, Ecco propped her elbow back on the shelf and dropped her chin onto her palm. She pointed out the window and said, "That one looks like a sword. It's just like the long one you have with the blue hilt." She glanced back at the polishing rag resting on the carpet. Only four small knives lay next to it. "Where is that one anyway? You usually bring your whole collection of knives and swords, but you only brought your favorites today."

Treyu's shoulders stiffened, but then he stood up straight. "I sold the rest of my collection."

It might have been comical how fast her mouth dropped, if it weren't because of something so grim. "What?" she asked.

He gulped and looked to the side, suddenly interested in a tiny piece of lint on his cotton shirt. "I needed the money to buy the train tickets to Kraybanic."

She covered her mouth as a lump simultaneously took up residence in her throat. It took every bit of willpower she had to force her mouth shut. How

could he sell them? He loved those stupid things. Her heart thumped as she remembered what he had told her earlier. "But you bought me a ticket, too, and I'm not going. Can you get a refund for one of the tickets? Then at least you'll have some money when you get to the city."

"No." He clenched his jaw as he shook his head with a jerk. "I'm not getting a refund."

"Why not?" she begged. It hurt bad enough that he was leaving. Why did he have to overwhelm her with so much guilt in the process?

"I'm keeping the ticket," he said with even more determination than before. He gave her a single glance, and then turned back to the window. "Just in case you change your mind."

CHAPTER TWO

They returned to their game of watching the clouds and Ecko wished it could last forever. But time was not kind and soon the sun was setting and closing time approached. A chime rang through the library as a warning. Treyu dipped to the ground and wrapped his knives into the polishing rag.

Ecko leaned into the bookshelf as she tried to think of something to say. She didn't need to say goodbye yet. There was still time for that tomorrow. But *something* sat at the tip of her tongue. The only problem was she didn't know quite what. Her stare lingered as she watched him pull his leather boot up his ankle and leg. She never would have realized she was staring if her Quad hadn't beeped at that exact moment. She'd had to charge it soon or the power would die.

When he was ready, they both stepped forward toward the exit. But even as time was not kind, fate wasn't either. The mess of her hair caught on a knot in the wooden bookshelf. Her foot slapped the ground as her body jerked still. With a huff, she said, "My hair is stuck. Hang on."

Without a word, Treyu reached over her and worked to free her hair. Eyes narrowed in concentration, he took a step forward until his body was less than an inch away from hers. The warmth of his chest burned around her and it took all her will power to keep from leaning in. The smell of his polishing cream danced into her nostrils and the soft cotton of his shirt suddenly looked very inviting. Heat rose into her cheeks at the thought.

"Got it," he said at last. It would have been fine if he had stepped away at that moment. But for some reason, he smoothed her hair and brushed his thumb across her cheek. He opened his mouth to say something and the proper thing to do would have been to stand there and listen. Just stand there. That shouldn't have been so hard. Instead, she did the worst thing of all. She looked up into his eyes while his face hovered mere inches away.

It should have done nothing. One little look, what could be the harm in that? But in that moment, everything changed. She looked into those beady,

black eyes and felt like she could disappear into them forever. All she wanted was to be enveloped in his arms and never leave.

And now, the truth of that desire was inconveniently broadcasting itself from every inch of her body. She tried to rein it in, but that proved more difficult than keeping her secret about Aurora.

Her breath caught in her throat as he stroked her cheek again. The smell of polishing cream was so strong, she could taste it. He leaned forward until his forehead brushed against hers. Their lips were so close...

No.

That was one thought she *had* to get out of her head.

"I'm in love with you," he whispered.

A gasp escaped her as she clutched the bookshelf behind her for support. Emotions exploded inside as she tried to process the impossible words. It was a dream. But how could he say that now? After all this time?

It might be too late.

In her head, it felt like years, but in reality, less than a second passed. She clutched the bookshelf trying to recover from the shock. Even more unexpected than his confession of love was the tiny click that sounded when her fingers touched the shelf.

Or rather, it wasn't the wood of the shelf and that was the entire problem.

Soon, the chaos in her mind was equally matched with the chaos outside it. A long knife, pointing downward, appeared through a trapdoor in the bookshelf. She stepped into Treyu's outstretched arms without a second thought as the blade fell. She sucked in a breath, but moved her leg just in time so the only casualty was her pants and not the skin on her leg.

He pulled her away from the shelf as another knife appeared out the trap door. She jerked her leg toward him, but it stopped with a start. The cut fabric from her pant leg had caught on another knot in the wood. Treyu pulled harder and the torment in his eyes almost felt worse than her sister's beatings. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"My le—" Her words were cut off when the newest knife fell and she angled her leg, missing the blade by a millimeter. She tried to yank her leg away, but the fabric only nestled deeper into the knot. He saw the problem by now and stuffed a hand into his boot to retrieve a knife.

Another knife appeared out of the trap door and fell at a new angle and faster speed. Soon, her leg would be severed if she couldn't escape. Then, she'd be an incomplete and a clone. Aurora would never let her leave the house again.

The leather stretched as Treyu pulled his hand from his boot. In his hand, he held a short knife with little birds carved into the wooden handle. Her favorite. Though, in this case, he probably only chose it because it was the first he could grab.

“Ecko!” the librarian called from the other side of the room.

“Her pants got caught on the bookshelf,” he called back.

“Hurry,” Ecko whispered. A tight knot formed in her thigh as she yanked her leg, yet again, in hopes to free herself. None of it did any good.

Treyu began sawing through the fabric of her pants just as another knife appeared. She had a feeling she wouldn’t be able to dodge this one.

“Pull your pant leg tighter,” he said.

She pulled again and braced herself for the pain. Before she could even squish her face up in preparation, the blade cut into her calf. Treyu gasped and sawed her fabric with increased speed. She yanked again and part of her pants ripped, which gave him the perfect angle to saw a good cut into the durable fabric.

“More knives are coming,” Lyndrea said as she rushed toward them. Her hands were filled with rolls of mesh and a skin sealing ointment.

Another knife fell, the blade aiming to slice off one of Treyu's fingers as he sawed. Ecko pushed his hand away just in time, barely noticing as it cut into her skin.

"Be careful," she said. "You don't need to lose anymore limbs. At least your foot you can hide."

Treyu ignored her warning and thrust his hand back, sawing at the fabric again. She yanked her leg forward trying to help as much as she could. "Can't you shut it off?" he asked as he worked.

This durable fabric was useful, if also annoyingly scratchy. But now, she wished for some of Aurora's silks that could snag on a feather.

"I'll try, but don't count on it," Lyndrea said. "The sequence usually won't stop until all the knives fall." She dropped her supplies and snatched the Quad hanging from her belt. "Stupid, arcane security measures," she muttered under her breath.

Treyu shot his hand backward with a grunt, narrowly missing another knife. Ecko shifted so at least the blade wouldn't cut deeper into the same spot on her leg. Three superficial cuts were better than one deep one. Still, she had to bite down on her tongue to keep from screaming in pain.

Treyu flinched when he saw her face and stuffed another hand into his boot. This time, the knife that appeared was his favorite. Curved blade, gold and

silver handle. He pushed both knives toward her pants and hacked away in a scissor-like motion.

Encouraged by his determination, Ecko clutched the cotton fabric around his shoulders and yanked herself toward him with every bit of strength she had. Now that the fabric of her pants had tightened further, he could slice through it more efficiently.

He sawed through the last threads just as a new blade fell. He threw his knives to the ground in order to pull her away from the shelf. The knife grazed her leg, but her thoughts were far too distracted by the muscular arms wrapping around her waist.

"I've got you," he said.

When she looked up into his eyes again, she was in more danger than ever of getting lost in those tiny black pools of obsidian. They were just as close as they had been a few minutes ago, except this time his arms were around her and she was certain his lips were as hungry as hers.

"Sit down!"

Ecko jumped at the sound of the librarian's voice.

"I have to patch you up," Lyndrea said. "Treyu, you should leave."

"I'll help you." He knelt down and stared at a bundle of snowy white mesh.

Lyndrea snatched the mesh from his hands. "Do you want me to get arrested?"

He pulled his hands away as if he had touched a fire. He stood up and said, "I'm sorry. When I'm here, I forget I'm an incomplete."

Lyndrea brushed the graying hair away from her face and sighed. "That's how I hope you feel." She glanced over her shoulder toward the front door. Only a few minutes to closing and then the police would be here to lock up. "But I can't let the police see me treating you like that."

"Of course," he said. "This library is the only sanctuary in town for low classers like us. I wouldn't jeopardize that for anyone."

Ecko flinched as Lyndrea pushed the mesh into one of her cuts. The gray hairs bounced around her ears as she shook her head. "I have to take care of these quickly or they might scar. If you get a scar Aurora didn't put there herself, she'll sue me for sure."

Fear gripped tight around Ecko's heart and spread through her body like a writhing snake. The irony of her concern suddenly hit her. Maybe Treyu was right. If her biggest concern wasn't a scar, but a scar that wasn't put there by her sister, then maybe Kraybanic was worth the risk.

Treyu stooped down next to her, his eyes gazing at her face. For a moment, she was certain he'd hold her

hand. Before he could move, Lyndrea pushed him back. "Go home, Treyu."

He pouted. "But I need to—" His voice trailed off and they were staring at each other again. Each time their eyes met, a cacophony of ripples flipped through Ecko's stomach, a much more pleasant sensation than the fear in her veins. They had so much to say to each other. Him especially. He had a lot of explaining to do, starting with why he chose that particular moment to confess his feelings. Why hadn't he told her earlier? It might have changed her mind about the emancipation.

But then again, maybe not.

Before their staring could linger, Lyndrea swatted Treyu back with gentle swipes. "Go on," she said. "You aren't leaving until tomorrow. Ecko gets three hours of freedom while Aurora is at classes. You'll have plenty of time to say goodbye."

Treyu's face immediately protested, but he didn't have time for a rebuttal. They all heard a roaring engine come to halt outside the library. It was a familiar noise which signaled the end of their fun. The police were here to lock up.

"Go!" Lyndrea hissed.

Treyu looked back and Ecko opened her mouth. But what could she say now? He opened his mouth, too, but it hung as empty as hers.

The front door chimed as it prepared to open. The noise made all three of them flinch. Before the police could appear around the bookshelf, Treyu rushed off toward the back door. As he jogged, he glanced back and his eyes seemed to see straight through to her soul. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

An eager nod was all she could manage in response.

Lyndrea swiped the mesh over the last bloody cut and popped the lid off the skin sealing ointment. She let out short breaths as looked at the spot the police would be appearing soon. It wasn't strictly illegal, but the police wouldn't like Lyndrea helping a clone. She brushed the ointment on in hurried stokes.

Ecko's skin tingled with a burning hot sensation as the skin fused back together. She jumped to her feet as the librarian threw the bottle of ointment over a shelf and out of sight. Ecko plucked the first book she could grab and tried to paste on a thoughtful look as the police rounded the corner.

"Time to lock up," came a gruff voice. Roscoe.

A shiver ran over her spine and down through her arms. It was a good thing Treyu had left already. His cousin was a serious police officer who hated incompletes more than he hated clones. Even if those incompletes were his own kin.

“What are you doing here, clone?” Roscoe asked. He sneered down at Ecco as if she were worse than sewer filth.

That shiver ran through her again, but she hid it by wrapping her arms around her stomach. She dropped her head as low as she could and shuffled toward the back door. He had asked her a question, but she knew better than to respond. Clones were generally meant to be silent.

“I’ll be going then,” Lyndrea said from behind her. “As always, thank you for your dedication.”

Ecco almost snorted. Dedication? More like unnecessary surveillance that assumed the worst of everyone. She ducked out the door and looked hopefully into the alley, but Treyu was already gone. Of course he was. It was too much to wish that he had stayed with curfew fast approaching, but she had wished it all the same.

A moment later, Lyndrea joined her in the alley. “How’s your leg? Any of those cuts feeling loose?”

“They’re fine,” Ecco said. She looked back at the door as the memory of the last few minutes flooded her brain. It started with Treyu and ended with the fear of Aurora finding a scar.

So much fear.

All of her emotions had been smothered through the years by the fear of what her sister could do. But

that much fear only proved she was human. And humans didn't deserve to be treated like this.

"You better hurry home," Lyndrea said. "Aurora won't be happy if you're late."

Ecko took in a deep, calming breath. She clasped her fingers and twisted her hands around. The gray-haired woman stepped down the alley as Ecko leaned against the brick wall. She twisted her fingers tighter and tried to ease the panic growing inside her. She bit onto her bottom lip and dug her teeth in deep.

If she did this, there would be no turning back.

She held her breath for five whole seconds before she moved again. When she did, she straightened her back with resolve. "Lyndrea," she called out.

CHAPTER THREE

The librarian neared the corner of the alley when Ecco's voice rang out. She turned back and raised an eyebrow in question. Lyndrea was usually quiet. She kept to herself and didn't like getting into other people's business. She let anyone into her library and knew full well it was considered a sanctuary for low classers like Ecco and Treyu. And since Ecco had been going there since she was nine, she had spent a fair amount of time around Lyndrea. But that didn't mean she knew Lyndrea all that well. Definitely not well enough for what she was about to ask. But none of that mattered now. She had made her decision and it meant she needed help.

"Is there any way," Ecco started. She twisted her fingers around again and curled them up into a ball twice. She scratched the side of her mouth and cleared her throat. "I don't suppose you have a couch or

something.” Her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she tried to form a coherent sentence. She sucked in another deep breath and forced the words out. “Can I stay at your place for the night? I can’t go home.”

Lyndrea blinked and her face showed absolutely no emotion. The last of the sun’s rays were dipping down the horizon which meant curfew was only minutes away. Being out past curfew meant spending a week in jail. Ecko couldn’t go home, but she had to go somewhere and she needed to get there soon.

At last, Lyndrea turned and beckoned Ecko toward her. “My apartment is down a couple blocks. Keep up.”

She didn’t wait for a response before marching down the sidewalk. Ecko tried not to act too giddy as she followed. Soon, they arrived at a short building with tiny windows.

“I’m on the fourth floor,” Lyndrea said.

The building wasn’t run down so much as it was old. Very old. The architecture must have been some of the oldest in the city. A place like this didn’t cost much. But then again, being a librarian wasn’t an especially lucrative career.

By the time they got to the fourth floor, Ecko was almost ready to run away. The deeper she got into the building, the more she felt like this was a very big

mistake. Huge posters adorned each wall. The posters all proclaimed low classer propoganda.

Keep the low classers in the slum where they belong.

Low classers should rarely be seen and never heard.

Lyndrea held her wrist chip over the scanner at the door to apartment number four nineteen. Plastered to the wall right by her door, a large poster said:

Freeing low classers is THEFT!

Ecko swallowed and took a tiny step back. This was a huge mistake.

The door clicked open and Lyndrea tapped a light switch on the wall. Lights illuminated the apartment and all the tension in Ecko's shoulders immediately released. Bookshelves lined the walls with rows and rows of friendly spines peeking out. The smell of old paper and ink wafted around like a familiar friend. Three light bulbs hung down from the ceiling, creating a cozy glow.

Before she could second guess herself, Ecko stepped inside. Lyndrea tapped the door control and a whoosh of air rustled as the door closed. The librarian's mouth turned up to a shy smile. She went straight to the second bookshelf and grabbed a periwinkle book. "Here's that book you've been asking for. They won't let me order it for the library

no matter how much I ask. But I have my own copy. You can read it tonight if you want."

Ecko's eyes went wide as she ran her fingers across the canvas cover. The gold letters on the spine shined in the cozy glow of the light bulbs. She'd never held a banned book before, but something about it made her feel powerful.

"I'm a clone, too," Lyndrea said. "I chose this apartment because I thought it made me look the least suspicious. Treyu is right. Kraybanic is better than it is here. Not perfect, but much better. I lived there and joined the clone academy. You have to do a lot of work, but it pays for your schooling. They found me the job here in this city and told me to never tell a soul I'm a clone."

The words washed over Ecko, but they hadn't sunk in yet. Lyndrea was a clone? An actual clone? More importantly, she was a clone with a job. Could this be true? Were there really clones who had found happiness? *Was* Lyndrea happy?

"Don't tell anyone," Lyndrea said under her breath. She sauntered off toward a kitchen at the end of the hall.

"I'm going to emancipate," Ecko said suddenly.

"I know," Lyndrea said. "I have a charger in the kitchen if you need to charge your Quad to do the paperwork."

Ecko skipped after Lyndrea since she did need to charge her Quad. Her skip quickly slowed to a walk as she took in the sight of the kitchen. There were books everywhere. They were stuffed into every corner and shelf available. A stack of them even held a small lamp. The whole apartment probably had at least half as many books as the entire library. Maybe even more. It was almost a library itself.

When Ecko stepped into the kitchen, the librarian jabbed a finger at a charging station in the wall. She nodded at it, lowered herself into a stool, and hooked her Quad up to the charger. "How did you know I was going to emancipate?" she asked.

With a shrug, Lyndrea said, "Why else couldn't you go home?" She pulled two cans of spaghetti from the cupboard and held them under the laser cutter. She frowned and said, "Why didn't you emancipate on your birthday? Why did you wait until the last minute like this?"

She located the paperwork on her Quad, but her insides squirmed. She used her teeth to dig into her bottom lip and her voice came out in a tiny squeak. "I *wasn't* going to emancipate."

The spaghetti plopped out of the can at the same moment that Lyndrea's mouth dropped. She quickly snapped it shut and grimaced. "Why not?" Her lips

pursed and she shook her head. "It's none of my business," she said to herself.

The other mass of spaghetti slipped out of its can into a second bowl. As Lyndrea set them in the zap cooker she shook her head again. "Seriously though, why weren't you planning to emancipate? You're smart and resilient. And you have Treyu and a ticket to Kraybanic. Why would you ever choose to stay?"

"Aurora said she would kill me if I tried to emancipate." The words were surprisingly easy to say now that she had made up her mind. It seemed so terrifying when that was her life, but it felt different now. Different because she wasn't going back to Aurora. If everything went according to plan, she'd never have to see her sister again. She began filling out her paperwork as she continued. "She has an untraceable poison and a chair to strap me down. I didn't choose emancipation because I didn't have a choice. Not really."

"That's illegal," Lyndrea said.

Ecko scoffed. "Who would question her? Even if they found poison in my system, all she'd have to do is claim I killed myself. They'd shrug, cremate me, and no one would think of me ever again."

The zap cooker beeped, but Lyndrea could only blink at it. Suddenly, she clenched her jaw and nodded to herself. "She wouldn't kill you. It was only

a threat to make you stay. Why would she kill you when it would mean losing her slave?"

Cold tingles ran up Ecco's arm as she formulated her response. The same fears that kept her tied to Aurora ran through her now. Her resolve faltering again. "If I emancipate, she loses her slave anyway. Once it's done, she has nothing to lose by killing me."

Lyndrea yanked open the zap cooker as she muttered a string of curse words mixed with other words which included *stupid government*, *clones are still human*, and *wicked administration*. "Don't tell anyone I said that," she said suddenly.

Ecco chuckled and took the steaming bowl of spaghetti. "I didn't hear you say anything. What are you talking about?"

The other bowl plopped down on the counter as Lyndrea took the seat beside her. She shoveled a spoonful into her mouth and said, "What changed your mind? Did Aurora have a change of heart?"

Heat tickled into Ecco's cheeks as she suppressed a smile. "No, I did. Or Tr.. someone else did."

Lyndrea cocked an eyebrow up and stared the answer out of her.

The tangles of spaghetti suddenly seemed very interesting. "Treyu told me he loves me. I know it should have been enough to do it for myself. And it is. But he also bought me a ticket. And then he told me

he loved me. And suddenly all my dreams looked feasible instead of impossible.”

Lyndrea snickered and shoved another bite of spaghetti into her mouth. She chewed, but each chew got slower until she stopped completely. “Wait, you’re serious? He told you he loved you this week?”

“Today,” Ecko said as she pushed her spaghetti around in the bowl.

“Today! This is a joke, right?”

Ecko’s face fell and the coziness of the apartment seemed to evaporate. “You think clones aren’t worthy of love? Is that why you’re single?”

Lyndrea snorted and a string of spaghetti flew out of her mouth. She scrambled for a napkin while peals of laughter escaped her. “I’ve never been in a relationship because I’m too afraid someone will find out I’m a clone.”

A heavy weight dropped over her eyes as Ecko lowered her eyebrows. “Then, what is it? You think Treyu was lying?” This wasn’t something she had considered. If he was lying, it was too late now. She had already missed curfew and Aurora would know she meant to emancipate. She’d be punished even if she didn’t go through with it. A sick and twisted fear boiled in the pit of Ecko’s stomach.

Lyndrea wiped the counter clean with a new napkin and got another to wipe her face. She shook

her head and smirked. "Why is it that when two people are in love, everyone else can see it but them?"

"What?"

After a short chuckle, Lyndrea said, "I thought he told you months ago. But I guess he's insecure about being an incomplete. He never thought he was good enough for you. And you never thought you'd be free of your sister, so I guess you never thought it was worth falling in love." A warm smile spread across the librarian's face. "Watching you two has been my favorite thing to happen in the library since I started working there. If anyone deserves love, it's you."

Warmth spread through her limbs as the words settled inside her. All of the wishes in her life were slowly transforming from dream to reality. This might actually be possible. Aurora would be angry, but as long as Ecko didn't go home she'd probably be safe.

For the first time in her eighteen years of life, a thread of hope danced in front of her and she dared to believe it was real. The one thing she wanted more than anything danced so close. It taunted her as it danced ahead. Close, but not yet within her grasp. Still, it was closer than it ever had been, and soon, it might actually be hers.

Freedom.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning, Ecko had a spring in her step as she walked to the library. She couldn't taste her freedom yet, but its sweet scent lingered around her, urging her forward. The last obstacle was the library itself. If Aurora was going to look for her anywhere, it would be there.

She stepped through the doorway, making no effort to hide the smile on her face. The moment she entered, Treyu was upon her.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "The train arrives soon and I thought we'd have time to say goodbye and... I had things to tell you. And..."

"I emancipated," Ecko said, cutting him off. He stopped with his mouth open wide, but then shut it again. The shock gave way to joy as her words sunk in.

"I'm sorry I couldn't explain. I wanted to wait until the last minute in case Aurora came looking for me. And you know she checks my messages. Have you seen her?" Ecko checked over her shoulder while a tangle of fear crept through her.

Treyu immediately assuaged the fear. "I haven't seen her the whole day. I can't believe you did it. I was sure you hadn't." His words slowed as his gaze dropped from her eyes to her lips. "Now, we can..."

He reached out to her, but it was all in vain.

At that moment, Aurora swept through the library doors with Roscoe hot on her heels. Swaths of mint green and cream silk hugged her body. Ecko took calculated steps backward until she nearly toppled over a short bookshelf. Her breath hitched and a cold fear overtook her limbs.

Though they were identical in appearance, it never felt like looking in a mirror when Aurora stood in front of her. Their clothes were different, and of course, Aurora's hair was shinier. But it was more than that. The true difference was in the eyes.

Aurora's gaze seemed to freeze whatever she looked upon. When looking into her eyes, all Ecko could feel was terror and hatred. Her own eyes didn't convey much other than shame and guilt.

But for what?

It's not like she was the one who chose to be a clone. Why should she feel shame for who she was? For something she couldn't help?

Maybe freedom meant more than running away. Maybe it meant believing in who she was and fighting for it.

In that moment, a burst of courage shot through her body. She stood taller and rolled her shoulders back. She stopped cowering and, for the first time in years, looked her sister in the eye.

Aurora gritted her teeth, noting the change at once. She swung an arm out to strike her, but then Ecko did something she had never even dreamed of doing. She ducked.

Aurora's hand swatted the air with a silent whoosh, causing her to lose her balance. Her feet danced as they searched for footing. She turned on Ecko with fire in her eyes. Rather than attempt to strike her again, "Aurora turned to Roscoe and said, "Get her!"

Roscoe's mouth to say something, but then he shook his head a fraction. "For... for what? I can't arrest her unless—"

Aurora sucked in a breath as she flashed her teeth at him. "I didn't tell you to arrest her," she spat. "I said *get* her." The rigidity in her face suddenly relaxed. She pasted on a sugary smile and said with a

honey-sweet voice, "You'll understand in a moment, Roscoe."

At that moment, Ecko noticed two things. The first was Lyndrea touching buttons on the library's security panel. The next, was Treyu putting something into her palm. At first, she thought it was just his own hand. But then, she felt the outline of a bird carved into wood.

Her eyes widened as she wrapped her fingers around Treyu's knife. She looked at him. Though he didn't speak a word, his eyes said *Just in case*.

Ecko tried to nod, but it got stuck when she saw Aurora's hand emerge from her satin purse. A stack of papers rested between her fingers, which she quickly handed to Roscoe.

He leafed through the papers for a few moments before he cocked an eyebrow up. "You're claiming insanity? You're saying your clone is incapable of caring for herself and she shouldn't be allowed to emancipate?"

Cold fear coursed through her veins. How could she do this?

Treyu took in a sharp breath. Ecko felt the muscles in his arm tense as his fingers formed a fist. "You can't do that," he said through his teeth."

"The paperwork has to be submitted within the hour," Roscoe said, ignoring Treyu. "And you'll need a witness."

Aurora wrapped her fingers around Roscoe's bicep. In her honey-sweet voice, she said, "Oh, but you can be the witness can't you? Haven't I told you how she attacks me and my things? Just the other day, she smashed one of my plates in a fit of rage."

"They'll never buy it," Roscoe said with a touch of regret. "It has to be someone who knows her well."

Aurora flashed her teeth at that, but immediately turned her face sweet again. She glanced at Lyndrea, who wasn't touching buttons on the security panel. Now, she had her face buried in a book. She seemed completely unaware of the conversation around her.

"You can do it, can't you, Miss Librarian?"

Lyndrea begrudgingly brought her eyes away from her book to look at Aurora with a confused expression. "Do what?"

The smile on Aurora's face turned up even more. She seemed to think Lyndrea's inattention would be an advantage. Ecko seemed to think it was an act.

"Oh, it's nothing really," Aurora said. "Just sign these papers."

Lyndrea stared Aurora up and down then said, "For what? I'm not doing it unless it benefits me in some way."

Aurora narrowed her eyes, but immediately fell victim to the game. "Name your price," she said.

Lyndrea flicked her eyes toward the doors of the library. It happened so fast, Ecko almost missed it. In fact, she would have thought it was nothing if Treyu hadn't grabbed her hand at that exact moment.

It was only then, that Ecko saw what they both had. The train hovered over the magnetic tracks until his settled in front of the library. They only had a few minutes to board.

"I want books," Lyndrea said. "I have a list of books the city won't let me put on the shelves. I want you to get a petition going to get those books in here."

In an instant, the scheme became clear. Lyndrea was distracting Aurora so Ecko could escape.

Ecko leaned forward and pulled herself away from the short bookshelf she had been pressed up against. Her sister didn't seem to notice the movement. She lifted one foot and brought it down as quietly as she could.

Treyu was already two steps ahead of her and tugging her along. She took another careful step forward, watching Aurora from the side of her eye as she walked.

The charade lasted until they were halfway to the door. Aurora seemed to realize she was being played.

She glanced back with a huff. When she saw Ecco moving, she roared into action.

The insanity papers fell to the floor in a flourish. "Keep the librarian subdued," Aurora growled at Roscoe. "And keep your back turned so you don't see anything I'm about to do." She dipped her head and stuffed her hands into her purse as she began digging around in it.

Treyu grasped Ecco around her forearm, but she shook him off. "Go. I have some things I need to say first."

"I'm not leaving you," he said as he planted his feet in the ground.

Ecco turned to plead with her eyes. "If we have to run to get on the train, you'll never make it. Not on your prosthetic."

Treyu's mouth dropped and her gut twisted into knots. She hated pointing it out like that, but it was true and they both knew it. "Fine," he said with a grimace. "But that means it's my job to help you up onto the train. If you aren't there in time, I'm coming after you."

She squeezed his hand and felt another burst of courage knowing he would do anything he could to help her. He started toward the train, but not before he made a pointed stare at the fold in Ecco's clothes

where he knew she was hiding the knife. Again, his eyes said, *Just in case.*

In a flash, he was out the door and Aurora was upon her, apparently having found whatever she wanted from her purse. The silk covered girl, snatched the folds of Ecco's durable fabric and raised a glass syringe high above her head. A sneer overcame her features as she prepared to inject the poison.

Before her hand could fall, Ecco raised her own weapon. The blade of the knife glinted in the light of the library and Ecco suddenly saw the rarest thing of all. A brief moment of fear flashed through Aurora's eyes. For once, *she* was at the mercy of her sister.

The next instant, the look vanished and a sinister laugh escaped her throat. "You wouldn't dare," Aurora said.

Ecco gripped the knife and pointed it at Aurora's chest. She held it with her thumb on top, just the way Treyu had taught her all those months ago.

"Why wouldn't I?" Ecco said. "What have you ever done that would make me pause?"

"Should I look yet?" Roscoe's voice said from behind a counter.

"No!" came Aurora's quick reply. "If you don't anything, you can't report anything." She readjusted the syringe and gripped onto Ecco's forearm. Treyu had grabbed that same spot only moments ago. When

he had touched it, it sent a warm flurry through her body. But with Aurora's grip, it felt cold as ice and tense as nails.

"You wouldn't dare cut me," Aurora said. "I'm original. I have fresh DNA. But you? You're nothing but a copy."

"That doesn't make me any less human," Ecco said. She shoved her sleeve up and revealed the purple and green bruise along her forearm. "I didn't deserve this or any of the others. I deserve freedom and for once in my life, I'm going to fight for it."

With a scoff, Aurora said, "You can try, little sister, but you will fail." She dug her thumb into the purple and green bruise in just the spot that hurt the most. A sharp pain ran up Ecco's arm as a gasp fell out of her mouth. Her eyes immediately slammed shut. The pain wasn't any worse than usual, but the surprise of it rendered her useless for one precious second. That was all the time Aurora needed to get the syringe into position.

The needle broke a few microscopic layers of skin as it entered, but Ecco wasn't about to give up. She ripped her arm away before Aurora could release the poison inside her.

The syringe flew through the air and fell to the ground with a shatter. Aurora flashed her teeth and lunged at Ecco until her fingers were clasped tight

around her throat. With no chance to catch her breath beforehand, Ecko's body already hungered for oxygen.

Her fingers gripped the wooden handle of the knife. This time, when she raised it, she wouldn't go for a threat. This time, she meant to use it. Not enough to permanently hurt her sister. Just enough to incapacitate her.

Just enough to get away.

Aurora tightened her grip and stars appeared in Ecko's eyes. She raised the knife and pushed it across her sister's forearm. She was careful to exert the smallest amount of pressure so the wound would heal easily.

Aurora's ear splitting scream shot through the library. She dropped to her knees just as the train started moving, beginning to hover away. That was Ecko's cue to leave.

As she dashed toward the door, she heard a flurry of angry voices behind her.

"Arrest her!" Aurora said. "She cut me."

"That's not what I saw," Lyndrea shouted back.

Aurora let out an angry burst of air just as Ecko reached the library doors.

"I can't arrest her without a witness," Roscoe said. "I didn't see what happened. You told me not to look."

“Check the security cameras,” Aurora said.

Ecko threw the door open. From behind her, she heard Lyndrea let out the tiniest of snickers. “Oh, I’m sorry. My security feed got turned off somehow. I *really* have no idea how that happened. I guess you’ll have no witness after all.”

That was the last thing Ecko heard as the library doors closed behind her. The train was moving forward, but slowly. Treyu stood on the platform of the last train car and held his arms out, eager to help her up. The worst was over now. Freedom just ahead.

Her legs propelled her onward. Just a few feet ahead. She jogged, then ran. Almost there. Her fingertips brushed across Treyu’s as she reached for him.

The next thing she knew, a biting pain broke out on the back of her head as a book slammed into her. The rustle of Aurora’s silks weren’t far behind.

Ecko’s steps faltered as another book slammed into the side of her head. A sharp corner of the cover hit her just below the ear. Soon, a warm trickle of blood slid down her neck. She reached forward to grasp Treyu’s fingers, but they were no longer there.

She glanced up and saw the train too far ahead.

“You can make it, Ecko!” Treyu said desperately. “Just keep running.”

He dropped to his knees to grab something from the train car, but it didn't matter. She was too late. The train was moving too fast. Her legs couldn't push her that far. Another heavy book slammed in between her shoulder blades and it was all she could do not to curl up into a sobbing ball of sorrow right then and there.

But she hadn't come all this way just to give up. She'd either get her freedom, or die trying.

A surge of energy thrummed through her muscles. She sprinted forward and focused on the hope in Treyu's eyes. A tiny smile appeared on his face when he saw her renewed energy. He shifted his focus back to the floor of the train car and seemed to finally find what he was looking for.

He lifted a coil of rope and got to his feet. The train moved faster and more books were flying, but each time her foot slapped the ground, she forced herself to believe she could make it.

Treyu held tight to one end of the rope and threw the rest out to her. She reached and grasped hold of it on the first try. Her hands burned as the rope slid through them. She clasped tighter and finally got a strong grip. Then, Treyu was pulling her forward.

Her feet barely graced the ground as she flew through the air, propelled by the velocity of the train and Treyu's constant pulling. Soon enough, the rope was flicked to the side as his hands wrapped around

her wrists. She toppled over him as she fell onto the train car. He wrapped his arms around her as if to check that she was real.

Blood curdling shrieks erupted from Aurora's mouth as she tried to catch the train. But a moment later, even the shrieks were fading away. With a flush in her cheeks, Ecko pulled herself off Treyu and got to her feet.

He wrapped his arm firmly around her waist and pointed to a cloud in the sky. "That cloud looks like a castle," he said. "I bet that dragon flew there and now he finally has his freedom after all."

Ecko smiled as she brushed a hand across the blood still trickling down her neck. Treyu started at the sight and quickly pulled a polishing rag from his pocket. He wiped away the blood and put gentle pressure on the wound. His fingers felt hot against her neck, but it was a whole different kind of heat from the rope burn. A much more pleasant kind.

He released the arm around her waist so he could brush the strands of hair away from her face.

"I dropped your knife," she said suddenly. Her chin fell. "You only had four left and that one is gone now." She sniffed and said with a frown, "I'm sorry."

He stepped forward until his hip brushed against hers. He cupped his hand around her cheek. "Ecko," he breathed. And then he went silent.

Her chest fell with heavy breaths as the rest of the world seemed to fall away. She pressed her forehead into the soft cotton of his shirt and breathed in the smell of polishing cream that she knew so well.

But apparently, that wasn't good enough for Treyu. He slid his fingers down the side of her face and tipped her chin up until their eyes met. His head was already dropping down toward her, but she closed the gap and pressed her lips against his.

Whatever awareness she had left of the world, it was all gone now. Nothing else existed but the soft cotton covering his strong shoulder and the silky strands of his hair that slipped between her fingers. He pulled her closer and somehow she felt his untamed desire even while he used the gentlest touch.

Ecko stood up on her tiptoes to enjoy him at an even closer distance. A thought of the future flitted through her mind and it sent a surge of excitement through her. Or maybe that was because Treyu's hand had trailed down until it settled into the small of her back. She tightened her fingers around his shirt and went right on kissing him. This was already more than any future she could imagine.

Freedom had never tasted so sweet.

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