

## THE CONSCIOUSNESS PROBLEM

by Mary Robinette Kowal

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The afternoon sun angled across the scarred wood counter despite the bamboo shade Elise had lowered. She grimaced and picked up the steel chef's knife, trying to keep the reflection in the blade angled away so it wouldn't trigger a hallucination.

In one of the *Better Homes and Gardens* her mother had sent her from the States, Elise had seen an advertisement for carbon fiber knives. They were a beautiful matte black, without reflections. She had been trying to remember to ask Myung about ordering a set for the last week, but he was never home while she was thinking about it.

There was a time before the car accident, when she was still smart.

Shaking her head to rid herself of that thought, Elise put a carrot on the sil-plat cutting board. She was still smart, today was just a bad day was all. It would be better when Myung came home.

"You should make a note." Elise grimaced and looked to see if anyone had heard her talking to herself.

But of course, no one was home. In the tiny space of inattention, the knife nicked one of her knuckles. The sudden pain brought her attention back to the cutting board. Stupid. Stupid.

Setting the knife down, she reached for the faucet before stopping herself. "No, no, Elise." She switched the filtration system over to potable water before she rinsed her finger under the faucet. The uncertainty about the drinking water was a relatively minor trade off for the benefits of South Korea's lack of regulations. They'd been here for close to three years, working on the TruClone project but she still forgot sometimes.

She went into the tiled bathroom for some NuSkin, hoping it would mask the nick so Myung wouldn't worry. A shadow in the corner of the mirror moved. Who had let a cat inside? Elise turned to shoo it out, but there was nothing there.

She stepped into the hall. Dust motes danced in the afternoon light, twirling and spinning in the beam that snuck past the buildings in Seoul's to gild the simple white walls. There was something she was going to write a note about. What was it?

"Elise?" Myung came around the corner, still loosening his tie. His dark hair had fallen over his forehead, just brushing his brow. A bead of sweat trickled down to his jawline. He tilted his head, studying her. "Honey, what are you doing?"

She shivered as if all the missing time swept over her in a rush. Past the skyscrapers that surrounded their building, the scraps of sky had turned to a periwinkle twilight. "I was just..." What had she been doing? "Taking a potty break." She smiled and rose on her toes

to kiss him, breathing in the salty tang of his skin.

In the six months since she'd stopped going into the office at TruClone, he had put on a little weight. He'd always had a sweet tooth and tended to graze on dark chocolate when she wasn't around, but Elise was learning to find the tiny pot belly cute. She wrapped her arms around him and let him pull her close. In his embrace, all the pieces fit together the way they should; he defined the universe.

"How was work?"

Myung kissed her on the forehead. "The board declared the human trial 100 percent effective."

Adrenaline pushed her breath faster and made the backs of her knees sweat. "Are you...?"

"Elise. Do you think they'd let me out of the lab if I weren't the original?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, of course not."

She should have been there, should have heard the success declared. The technology to print complete physical copies of people had been around for years, but they'd started TruClone to solve the consciousness problem. Elise had built the engine that transferred minds to bodies, so she should have gone into the office today, of all days.

She had forgotten. Again.

"I want to hear all about it." She tugged his hand, pretending with a smile to be excited for him. "Come into the kitchen while I finish dinner."

\* \* \* \*

Outside, the first sounds of the market at the end of their block began. Calls for fresh fish and greens blended on the breeze and crept in through the open window of their bedroom, tickling her with sound. Curled around Myung, with one leg thrown over his thigh, Elise traced his body with her hand. The mole at the base of his ribs bumped under her finger, defining the territory. She continued the exploration and he stirred as her fingers found the thin line of hair leading down from his navel.

"Morning." Sleep made his voice grumble in his chest, almost purring.

Elise nuzzled his neck, gently nipping his tender skin between her teeth.

His alarm went off, with the sound of a stream and chirping birds. Myung groaned and rolled away from her, slapping the control to silence the birds.

She clung to him. Not that it would do any good. Myung loved being in the office.

He kissed her on the forehead. "Come on, get up with me. I'll make you waffles."

"Ooh. Waffles." Elise let go of him, smacking his rump gently. "Go on man, cook. Woman hungry."

He laughed and pulled her out of bed with him. She followed him to the kitchen and perched on one of the wicker stools by the counter as he cooked. It almost felt like a weekend back when they were courting at MIT. But the mood broke when Myung laid a pill next to her plate. Her stomach tightened at the sight of the drug. She didn't want the distancing the medication brought on. "I feel fine today."

Myung poured more batter on the waffle iron and cleared his throat. "Maybe you'd like to come in to work?"

The room closed in around her. Elise lowered her eyes to escape the encroaching walls. "I can't." She hadn't gone in since she'd come home from the hospital. Every day she thought that tomorrow the effects of the concussion would have faded. That the next day she would be back to normal. And some days she was. Almost.

Myung put his hand on hers. "Then take your medication."

She had walked away from the car accident, but it had scrambled her brain like eggs in a blender. Head-trauma induced psychosis. On good days, she knew it was happening.

Elise picked up the pill, hating it. "You're going to be late."

He looked over his shoulder at the clock and shrugged. "I thought I'd take today off."

"You? Take a day off?"

"Why not? My clone." He paused, relishing the word. "My *clone* has offered to do my reports today."

"Is that—isn't that a little premature?" As she said it, she realized that she didn't know how much time had passed since the board had declared success. It felt like yesterday but it had been longer. Hadn't it?

"He's bored, which is not surprising since I would be, too."

If she went to the office, maybe she could see the clone. See the thing they had labored toward. Cloned rats and dogs and monkeys weren't the same as a man. Not just any man, but a clone of her husband. She swallowed against a sudden queasiness. "Who's overseeing him?"

"Kathleen. Sort of. I'll have to look over his report later but we've agreed to let him function as if he were me, to see how he does."

Which made sense. The ultimate goal was to make full clones of high-level people who needed to be in more than one place at once. "Am I a clone, Myung?"

"No, honey." He squeezed her hand, grounding her again. "You're not."

The thing that nagged at her was that she could not tell whether she didn't believe him because he was lying or because the accident had left her with delusions to accompany the hallucinations.

\* \* \* \*

Elise wiped the kitchen table, gliding the sponge across the teak in perfect parallel lines. The phone rang. Startled, she jumped and lost the pattern on the table. Putting her hand over her mouth to slow her breathing, Elise glanced at the clock to see how much time she had lost to cleaning. It was only 2:30. That wasn't as bad as it could have been.

The phone rang again.

She picked it up, trying to remember who had called her last. "Hello?"

"Hi honey. I need to ask you to do something for me." Myung sounded tense and a little breathless, as if the phone frightened him as much as it had her.

"What?" She slid a pad of paper across the counter so she could take notes. Clearly, today was not a good day and she didn't want to make that obvious to Myung.

"Would you come to the lab?"

"I..." A reflection in the window caught her eye, flashing like an SOS. "Today isn't a good day."

"The clone misses you."

His words stretched out as if they could fill the ten miles between the lab and the house and then everything snapped. "Misses me? It's never met me."

"*He* has all of my memories and personality. From his point of view, he hasn't seen you in months." There was a tension in his voice, his words a little rushed and tight. "Please. It's affecting his ability to concentrate. It's depressing him."

"No." The reflection twitched in the corner of her eye, becoming a spider until she looked at it. "I can't."

Myung hummed under his breath, which he always did when he was conflicted about something. She hadn't pointed it out to him because it was an easy way to tell when he didn't want to do something. He exhaled in a rush. "All right. How's everything at home?"

"Fine." She doodled on the pad. There had been something that she'd thought about telling him. "Oh. There are some carbon matte knives I want to get."

"Really? What's wrong with the ones we have?"

Elise hesitated. "These look nice. All black."

"Ah." She could almost hear his mind click the pieces together. "No reflections. I didn't realize that was still bothering you. I'll order them."

"Thank you."

"Sure I can't get you to reconsider?" He laughed a little. "I miss having you around the office as much as he does."

"Not now."

Elise hung up. Back to the office? Her stomach heaved and she barely made it to the sink before vomiting. Gasping, she clung to the stainless steel as the anxiety flung itself out of her. The back of her throat and her nose burned. If she went in, people would know, *know* that she was wrong inside.

\* \* \* \*

In the dark of the bedroom, Elise counted Myung's heartbeats as she lay with her head on his chest. "I'm sorry."

He stroked her hair. "Why?"

She lifted her head, skin sticky from sweat. "That I won't come to the office."

"It's all right. I understand."

At night, the idea seemed less frightening. She could tell herself as many times as she could count that the office was not dangerous, that nothing bad had ever happened to her there, but her body did not believe. "What's he like?"

"Who?" He lifted his head to look at her.

"Your clone."

Myung chuckled. "Just like me. Charming, handsome, devilishly intelligent."

"A troublemaker?"

"Only a little." He kissed her hand. "You'd like him."

"If I didn't, we'd have problems." Elise rolled onto her back, looking for answers on the ceiling. "You want to use me as a trial, don't you?"

"What? No. Don't be silly."

"Please, Myung. My brain isn't that scrambled." She poked him in the soft part of his belly.

"Hey!"

"It's the logical next step, if these clones are going to do what we told our investors they would. You need to see if a loved one can tell the difference. You need to dress identically with your clone and let me talk to both of you."

Myung hummed under his breath.

"You could bring him here." Elise kissed his shoulder.

He stopped humming. "Not yet. Too many variables. It has to be at the lab first."

"I'll think about it." Her pulse raced, just saying the words. But the queasiness was manageable.

\* \* \* \*

The knives arrived in the afternoon. Elise pulled them out of their shrink wrap and set them on the counter, forming three matte black voids on the wood. No reflections marred their surfaces. She ran a finger along one edge of the paring knife. Like a thread, a line of crimson opened on her finger. It didn't even hurt.

Elise held the cut close to her face, trying to see what would crawl out of her skin. The blood trickled slowly down her finger, exploring the contours. Without the reflections, her brain needed some other way to talk to her. She could help it if she opened the gap more.

"No. Myung wouldn't like that." Elise clenched her fist so the blood was hidden. "Put NuSkin on it, Elise."

Yes. That was the right thing. As she put the liquid skin in place, it occurred to her that if she printed herself a new body it would come with nothing inside. "But we solved the consciousness problem. It would come with me inside. With me."

She weighed the chef's knife in her hand and dropped it. The kitchen counter had all the vegetables from the refrigerator set out in neat rows. She had chopped a bell pepper without any memory of returning to the kitchen. Elise cursed. Hands splayed on the counter, she lowered her head in frustration.

The front door opened. "Honey, I'm home!"

Elise picked up the knife, then set it down and scooped the closest vegetables into her arms. Before Myung entered the kitchen, she managed to get them into the vegetable drawer in the fridge.

She let the door close and turned, smiling brightly. "Let me get your martini, dear."

Laughing, Myung caught her around the waist and kissed her. "How was your day?"

Elise shrugged. "Mixed. The usual. Yours?"

"Also mixed. My clone is ... well, let's say I'm learning how stubborn I can be."

She winced. "I could have told you that."

"Not." He kissed her nose. "Helpful."

She stuck her tongue out. Moments like this beckoned her to fall into them with their allure of normalcy. "Thank you for the knives."

"Sorry?"

Elise pointed at the carbon black knives laid out on the counter. "The ones you ordered for me came today."

"I—" Myung crossed to the counter and picked up the paring knife. "Elise, I didn't order these."

The floor of the room fell away from her. Elise grabbed the handle of the refrigerator

to steady herself. "But you said you would. We talked about it."

"When?" Myung's nostrils had flared.

"It's not a delusion." She swallowed and her throat stayed knotted. "You called me. You asked me to come to the office."

"Fuck." He slammed his fist on the counter. "Elise, I'm sorry. It's the clone."

Relief swept her so quickly that her knees gave way. She dropped to the floor, one hand still clinging to the refrigerator. The door cracked open, letting out a cool breeze that chilled the tears running down her face. Thank God. She had not imagined the phone call. She hadn't ordered the knives herself and forgotten. "The clone did it."

Myung crouched by her, wiping the tears from her face. "I'm sorry. He was working on a report and we let him use my office."

"You're letting him contact the outside?"

"No. I changed the passwords—"

Elise started laughing. "And he guessed?"

Myung's skin deepened in a blush and he shut his eyes. "Should have seen that coming."

"Yes, dear." Elise wiped her eyes. "Oh God. I thought it was another sign of crazy."

At that, Myung opened his eyes, pain creasing his brow. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." Elise stood, using her husband's shoulder to push herself off the floor. "He bought the knives I asked for."

"With my money."

"Well ... he's doing your work."

"Point." Myung got to his feet. "And I would have gotten them for you if you'd mentioned it."

"I thought I did." Giggles overtook her for a moment and they both stood in the kitchen laughing. When she caught her breath, Elise said, "Tomorrow, I'll come to the office with you."

The delight that blossomed on Myung's face almost made Elise withdraw the offer. Not that she resented making Myung happy, but she would disappoint him tomorrow. In the context of the lab, her slips of mind would be more apparent.

\* \* \* \*

Elise shifted on the hard metal chair in the observation room. To her left, a mirrored window hid the staff watching her. She angled her head so the reflections were not so apparent. No time for hallucinations today. The rest of the walls were pale blue Sheetrock,

meant to be soothing, but clinically cold. The ballast of one of the fluorescent lights buzzed just at the edge of her hearing. They would have to get that fixed.

She put her hands on the linoleum table in front of her and then in her lap again as the door opened.

Myung came in, dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans. He wore athletic socks but no shoes. Glancing at his feet, his dark hair masked his eyes for a moment, like a K-pop star. "We didn't have matching shoes, so opted for none."

Elise grinned, beckoning him closer. "Are they good for a sock-hop?"

He laughed, voice bouncing in a three-note pattern. "That is not on the set of questions."

"You." She pointed at him accusingly. "Aren't supposed to know what they are."

"I don't." Myung held his hands out in mock surrender. "But I'm guessing that it's not."

"Fine. We'll stick to the standards." Elise waved her hand to command him to sit across from her. Her heart beat like she was at a speed dating service. She looked at the list of questions she planned to ask each man. "When we got married, what did you whisper after you kissed me?"

Myung turned red and glanced at the mirror. He wet his lips, leaning forward across the table. "I think I said, 'How soon can we get out of here?'" His eyes were alive as if he wanted to take her right there on the table.

A flush of warmth spread out from Elise's navel to her breasts. At the wedding, his hands had been warm through her dress and she had been intently aware of how long his eyelashes were.

He looked out from under them now with his pupils a little dilated as if he also found the room too warm. "Next?"

"What is our most intimate moment?" Watching him, time focused itself in a way it had not done since the accident. Each tick of her internal clock was crisp and in sequence.

Myung's eyes hooded for a moment as he thought. "Yellowstone. We might have had the whole park to ourselves but there was also this profound sense that someone would catch us in the act. And that you would..." He hummed under his breath for a moment, sweeping his hand through his hair. "Let's just say, I knew that you trusted me."

Elise looked at the paper again. She had thought he would say that it was their first time after his vasectomy. At the time he had reveled in the freedom.

"Last question. Pick a number."

"That's it?"

"Yep."

Myung fingered the end of his nose, and Elise could not doubt that she was talking to



her husband. He nodded. “Very nice. Confirmed memory, subjective memory, and random.”

She tapped a finger on the paper. “No opinion please. Number?”

“Thirty-six.”

“Why thirty-six?”

He picked at the cuticle on his thumb. “Remember the time we went to see that puppet play, ‘Between Two Worlds’?” He waited until she nodded. “The guy who thought that he could win his predestined bride through Kaballah had this line, ‘Thirty-six, in that number lies the essence.’ It stuck with me for some reason.”

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Myung came in, dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans. Elise’s breath hung in her throat at the palpable *déjà vu*. She had seen printed clones dozens of times as parts donors but she had never seen one animated. Had she not been a part of the process to give a clone consciousness, she would have thought that her husband had just walked into the room. Like the other one, this Myung wore white athletic socks but no shoes. Glancing at his feet, his dark hair masked his eyes for a moment, like a K-pop star. “We didn’t have matching shoes, so opted for none.”

Elise pressed her hand over her mouth, trying to remember what she had said to the first one. No wonder they had wanted her to script her questions.

“Are you okay?” Myung—she could not think of him as anything else—took a step closer.

“It’s uncanny is all.” Wrong. She should not have said that out loud. It might skew his responses. “Shall we get started?” Elise beckoned him to sit across from her. She looked at the sheet of questions, trying to center herself. The calm certainty she felt before had stripped away, leaving her flustered. “When we got married, what did you whisper after you kissed me?”

Myung turned red and glanced at the mirror. He wet his lips, leaning forward across the table. “I think I said, ‘How soon can we get out of here?’”

Sweat coated her skin.

He looked out from under his long eyelashes. “Next?”

“What is our most intimate moment?” Watching him, Elise looked for some clue, some hint that he was not her husband. But perhaps he was, and the Myung she had met first was the clone.

Myung’s eyes hooded for a moment as he thought. “Yellowstone. We might’ve had the whole park to ourselves but there was also this profound sense that someone would catch us in the act. And that you would...” He hummed under his breath before sweeping his hand through his hair. “Let’s just say, I knew you trusted me.”

Elise looked at the paper again. Her hands were shaking and she could barely find air to breathe. Every nuance was the same.

“Last question. Pick a number.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.” Dear God, yes. She had helped create one of these two men, but she wanted nothing more than to get out of the room. Even though she knew he might be her husband, the uncanniness of having the same conversation twice threatened to shred her mind.

Myung fingered the end of his nose. “Very nice. Confirmed memory, subjective memory, and random.”

A shiver ran down her spine. “What number?”

“Seventeen.”

Elise had to stop herself from gasping with relief. Had they chosen the same number she might have screamed. “Why seventeen?”

“That’s the day we were married.” He shrugged.

Something, a darkness flickered in the corner of the room. It would be so much easier to drop into crazy than to keep thinking. “May I see you both at the same time?”

Myung stood. “Sure. I’ll ask him to come in.”

Forcing her mind into order, Elise folded her list of questions in half. Then half again, creasing the edges with her nail to crisp perfect lines.

The door opened and the other Myung came in. Elise had met identical twins before, but no twin had the commonality of experience that these two men had. One was her husband, the other was a copy and she could not tell them apart. They had even printed the extra weight that Myung carried so both had identical little pot bellies.

The clone carried microchip transponders in his body, and a tattoo on his shoulder, but neither of those were visible. As they talked, Elise slowly noticed a single difference between the two.

The man to her right watched every move she made. His eyes were hungry for her in a way that—“You’re the clone, aren’t you?”

She had interrupted the one on her left. The two men shared a look before nodding, almost in unison. The clone said, “How did you know?”

“The way you look at me...” Elise faltered. He looked at her like he was trying to memorize her.

The clone grimaced and blushed. “Sorry. It’s just that I haven’t seen you in months. I miss you.”

Myung, the original Myung, picked at his cuticle. “I told you she could tell the difference.”

“But you were wrong about the reason.” The clone smirked. “She could tell because you don’t love her as much as you used to.”

“That is a lie.” Myung tensed visibly, his fist squeezing without his seeming awareness.

“Is it?” The clone shook his head. “Everything else is the same, why would my emotional memories be any different? The only difference between us is that absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Stop.” Elise stood abruptly, her chair squeaking against the floor. She pressed her hand against her forehead.

Both of them looked abashed. In stereo they said, “I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her thoughts were fragmenting. The reflection in the window moved, a child trying to get her attention. Elise shook her head. “You brought me down to see if I could tell the difference. Now you know that I can.”

Her Myung said, “But not when we were separate.”

“No.” Elise fingered the paper on the table. “Which of you came in first?”

“I did,” the clone said.

They sat in silence. Elise tried to fold the paper into another square. “I think I’m ready to go home.”

“Of course.” Her Myung stood, chair scraping across the floor.

The clone leaned forward on his. “Won’t you stay for lunch?” His voice cracked as he asked, as if the request were more urgent than just a meal.

Elise raised her eyes from the paper to his face. The way his brows curled in the middle. The way his eyes widened to show a rim of white under the dark iris. The way his soft lips hung a little open. All of the minute elements that made the whole of her husband pulled, begging her to stay.

And the other Myung, the original, stood next to him, legs spread wide with a slight tension in his arms as if ready to protect her.

No. Not to protect her, but to protect his right to have her.

“Yes.” She put her hand on the clone’s, startled by the familiarity of the contact. “Yes, of course I’ll stay.”

\* \* \* \*

The smell of sautéing onions wafted in from the kitchen. Myung had offered to cook breakfast before going to work, his usual ploy when he felt like he needed to make up for something. Clearly, he had no idea that breakfast was like a confession that the clone was right; Myung did not love her as much as he used to.

That wasn't quite true. Myung loved her the same as before—what had changed was that now there was a version of him that missed her all the time. Elise stretched under the covers and the cotton caressed her body like a lover. "I am the forbidden fruit."

Myung's cell phone rang on the bedside table where he'd left it. Rolling over, she picked it up. Caller id showed the office. Elise got out of bed, not bothering with a bathrobe and carried it toward the kitchen.

Myung met her partway down the hall. He took it, mouthing his thanks even as he answered.

Elise lifted the hair away from her neck, knowing that it would raise her breasts and make her torso look longer, daring him to choose work over her. His eyes followed the movement. Lips parting, he reached for her. Stopped.

His face shut down. Myung put one hand on the wall and squeezed his eyes closed. Dropping her arms, Elise shivered at the sudden tension in his frame.

"No. No, I heard you." He leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor. "Did he leave a note or..." His eyes were still closed, but he covered them with his hand.

Elise crouched next to him. Her heart sped up, even though there was nothing she could do.

"No. I haven't checked email yet." Myung nodded as if the person on the other end of the line could see him. "I'll do that. Thanks for handling this. Tell Larry not to do anything until I get in."

He hung up. Cautious, Elise touched his thigh. "Myung?"

Her husband slammed his head against the wall. Elise jumped at the horrible thud. Cursing, Myung threw his phone down the hall and it ricocheted off the floor. Tears glittering on his cheeks, he hurtled to his feet. "He killed himself. Sent us all a video. By email."

Myung was halfway to the office before Elise could pull herself together enough to stand.

\* \* \* \*

On the monitor, the image of Myung leans close to the screen.

"This is the clone of Dr. Myung Han. I am about to kill myself by lethal injection. You will find my body in the morgue.

"Before I do, I want to make it perfectly clear why I am taking this step. With the animals we tested, the next step in this process is dissection. We must do this to be certain that the cloning has no unexpected side effects and to fully understand the mechanism by which the consciousness transfer works. My original knows this. I know this. He will not do it *because* the experiment has been a 100 percent success. We are identical, more so than any set of twins. He sees terminating the experiment as murder.

"Make no mistake, he is correct.

“Which is why I am terminating the experiment myself. I am not depressed. I am not irrational. I am a scientist. The experiment needs to continue.”

He stands and walks out of the room.

Elise stood behind Myung’s chair, scarcely breathing. He reached to restart the video.

“Don’t.” She stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. It was bad enough seeing it once, but to dwell on it courted madness.

Under her hand, he trembled. “I didn’t want this.”

“I know.”

He slammed his fist against the table. “If it had been me, I wouldn’t have done it.”

“But—” Elise stopped herself, not wanting to blame him.

“What?”

She saw again the clone begging her to stay for lunch. “He’s trapped in the lab all the time. Were you ever going to let him out?”

Myung slumped forward, cradling his head in his hands. After a moment, his shoulders shook with sobs. Elise knelt by the side of the chair and pulled him into her arms. The rough stubble on his cheek scraped her bare skin. She pressed closer to the solidity of him, as if she could pull him inside to safety. An ache tore at her center as she rocked him gently and murmured nothings in his ear.

She had known the clone for a matter of hours, or for as long as she had known Myung, depending on how you counted it. The two men had only a few months of differing experience. The bulk of the man who had died belonged to her husband. But the differences mattered. Even something as simple as a number. “Thirty-six,” she whispered. In that number lies the essence.

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As Myung went to the elevator, Elise stood in the door to watch him. She could not quite shake the feeling that he wouldn’t come home. That something about the place would compel him to repeat his clone’s actions. When the doors slid shut, she went inside the apartment.

In the kitchen, Elise pulled out the matte black knives that the clone had sent her and laid them out on the counter. He had known her. He had loved her. She picked up the paring knife, twisting it in her hands. It wasn’t right to mourn him when her husband was alive.

“Elise?” Myung stood in the doorway.

“Forget som—” Adrenaline threaded its way through all her joints, pulling them tight. He wore a plain white T-shirt and jeans; his face was smooth and freshly shorn. Myung had not had time to shave. This man was leaner than her husband. “I thought ... How many clones are there?”

He picked at the cuticle on his thumb. “Myung made just one.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Elise gripped the paring knife harder.

“I’m a clone of the one you met. Unrecorded. I started the process as soon as the building was empty last night.” He swept his hand through his hair and it fell over his eyes. “We have about ten minutes of different memories, so for practical purposes, I’m the same man.”

“Except he’s dead.”

“No. Ten minutes of memory and that physical body are all that is dead.” Myung—she could not think of him any other way—crossed his arms over his chest. “It was the only way to escape the lab. I had a transponder and a tattoo that I couldn’t get rid of. So I printed this body from an older copy. Imprinted it with my consciousness and then ... that’s where our memories deviate. As soon as we were sure it was a clean print, he went to the morgue and I left.”

She should call the office. But she knew what they would do to him. Insert a transponder and lock him up. “Why are you here?”

His eyes widened as if he were startled that she would ask. “Elise—the place where the original and I differ, the thing he cannot understand, is what it is like to live in the lab, knowing that I’d never be with you. He doesn’t know what it’s like to lose you and, believe me, knowing that, I hold you more precious than I ever did before. I love you.”

The raw need in his eyes almost overwhelmed her. The room tilted and Elise pressed her hand against the counter to steady herself. “I can’t go with you.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you to.”

“But you were going to ask me for something.”

He nodded and inhaled slowly. “Would you clone yourself ? So I’m not alone.”

Elise set the knife on the counter, in a careful row with the others. She walked across the room to stand in front of Myung. The vein in his neck throbbed faster, pulsing with life. “Is it any different? Being a clone?”

“There’s a certain freedom from knowing that I’m not unique. But otherwise, no. I feel like I am Myung Han.”

Putting one hand on his chest, the heat of his body coursed up her arm. “I need to know something.”

He raised his eyebrows in question.

“After the accident...” She did not want to know but she had to ask. “Am I a clone?”

“Elise, there’s only one of you.”

“That’s not what I asked. The original won’t tell me, but you—you have to. Am I a

clone?”

“No. You are the original and only Elise.” He brushed the hair away from her face. “Everything else is head trauma. You’ll get better.”

She had braced herself for him to say that she was a clone. That she had died in the crash and the reason she couldn’t think straight was because the process had been too new, that she was a failed experiment.

Elise leaned forward to kiss him. His lips melted against hers, breath straining as if he were running a race. She let her bathrobe fall open and pressed against him. Myung slipped his trembling hands inside the robe, caressing her with the fervor of their first date.

Parting from him burned, but Elise stepped back, leaving him swaying in front of her. She closed the robe. “When I’m well, if I can. I will.”

Myung closed his eyes, forehead screwing up like a child about to cry. “Thank you.” He wiped his hand across his face and straightened.

“They’ll notice that another body was printed and come after you.”

“Not right away.” He picked at his cuticle. “I took my original’s passport from the office. Knowing me, it’ll take him awhile to realize it’s missing.”

She felt herself splitting in two. The part of her that would stay here and see her husband tonight, and the part of her that already missed him. At some point, the two halves would separate. “Where are you going?”

He tucked a loose hair behind her ear. “Yellowstone.”

Elise caught his hand and kissed it. “I will see you there.”