

Something's  
*Different*



Quinn Ivins



# Chapter 1

WHEN HER SISTER CALLED INSTEAD of texting, Caitlyn's twin sense prickled. *Something is wrong.* Then she realized it was a video call, and sirens blared in her mind. *Oh no.* Her hand shook as she swiped to answer.

Chloe's face appeared on the screen, almost a mirror of Caitlyn's own, but her brown hair was shorter with shaggy bangs. Her heavy eye makeup looked smudged. "Hi."

"What's going on? Is Mom okay?" Caitlyn dropped onto the futon.

"Huh? Of course she's okay."

*Thank God.* Caitlyn took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "You scared me."

"Sorry. I should have known you would think someone died when I called." Chloe's lips quirked into a half-smile.

"You have to admit it's unusual. I can't remember the last time we did a video call."

"I do. It was when you found that spot on your foot, and you thought it was cancer."

"Right." Caitlyn's foot twitched. "In my defense, it looked exactly like the pictures online."

"Sure, until it came off in the shower." Chloe's grin was teasing, yet affectionate. "Oh, and the time you thought you found toxic mold in your apartment."

"If you had seen the documentary, you'd be worried too."

“Uh-huh.” Chloe chuckled, but then she turned serious. “Anyway, nobody died. But I want to ask you something, and I thought video would be best.”

“Okay.” Caitlyn tightened her grip on the phone. “What’s up?”

“Mom said you’re coming home on Friday.”

“That’s the plan.” Caitlyn gestured at the boxes behind her. “My lease expires tomorrow, so I have to leave. I’m almost packed.”

“And you don’t have a job lined up, right?”

Caitlyn winced. Chloe knew perfectly well that she had struck out on the academic job market. Everyone knew.

“Oh no—no. That’s not what I meant,” Chloe said quickly, as if reading her thoughts. “I know you didn’t get a professor job. Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring it up. I meant a *summer* job. Weren’t you talking about teaching online classes or something?”

“I’m looking at online tutoring, but I don’t have a job yet. Why do you ask?”

Chloe chewed her lip, gaze darting back and forth. “I’m in a jam, and I was hoping—well, I was wondering if you could help.” She sighed as though resigning herself to a bad reaction in advance. “It’s about my boyfriend.”

*Boyfriend?* Caitlyn searched her memory. Chloe often fell in and out of love in the span of a few weeks, making it difficult to keep track. “Do you mean the guy you’ve been talking to online? The one who lives in Colorado?”

“Yes. Nick. He bought me a plane ticket to visit him so we can finally meet in person. We’re going to spend the week together.”

“That sounds...nice.” Alarm bells rang in her mind. “Um, you’ve seen this guy on video and verified his identity, right?”

“He’s not a catfish.” Chloe huffed. “I’m not idiot. We chat on video all the time.”

“Okay, that proves his age and gender. But what if you get there and he turns out to be married? Or an axe murderer?” A shiver ran through her at the thought of Chloe knocking on the door of someone she’d never met in person.

“You’ve met people online before.”

“Sure. But usually it’s for a brief date in a public place. You’re flying to his city for a week.” Caitlyn frowned. “Are you staying at his place?”

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"Of course I am. We've been talking for four months. He's a normal person who works in accounting, not some monster from your anxiety dreams." Chloe seemed to catch herself and adopted a more conciliatory pose. "It's sweet of you to be concerned, but I'm sure about him. The problem I'm having is with my job."

Caitlyn tried to recall Chloe's latest employer. It was easy to lose track of her ill-fated stints in various unrelated occupations. "This is the one at the college?"

"Yeah, at Pulaski. I'm the president's *executive assistant*." Chloe made air quotes. "It's a really good job. I mean, my boss is kind of awful, and it's extremely boring. But I've never made this much money in my life—and the benefits are awesome. I have an actual retirement savings account for the first time ever."

"Oh wow. Those benefits are great." Caitlyn had never had a retirement account, a consequence of spending her twenties in graduate school. She shook off a pang of bitterness that her free-spirited twin had one first. "So what's the problem?"

Chloe took a deep breath. "They won't let me take time off. I'm out of vacation days and sick days. I'm out of everything."

"Why are you out of leave?" As far as Caitlyn knew, Chloe had been perfectly healthy.

"Because I just started two months ago, so I only had a handful in my bank. That's hardly anything."

*Typical Chloe.* She'd probably used the days on impulse, not bothering to consider if she might need them in the future. "So why can't you wait until you've earned more days?"

"Nick surprised me with the ticket. I can't ask him to pay a big fee to change the date—and besides, it would take months to earn enough vacation days. I don't want to wait that long to see him."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well..." Chloe drew out the word. "If I go to Colorado, I'll lose my job. But I really, really need to go on this trip. So I was thinking, since you're coming home anyway, and you won't have anything to do... I was wondering if maybe you could cover for me."

"Cover? You want me to impersonate you at work?" Caitlyn nearly dropped the phone. "You can't be serious. These people *know* you. They'd figure it out, and they'd probably have me arrested." Didn't Chloe remember

the pranks they'd played as teenagers? Sure, they had fooled a few teachers, but most of their friends had guessed within minutes.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "They don't know me at all. Ruth, my boss, barely looks at me, and the faculty treat me like an airhead. I'm one of the little people—the help. I don't think they'd notice if I grew a second head."

"Well, I wouldn't know how to do your job." The mere thought of trying to fake her way through someone else's workday made Caitlyn's blood pressure rise. It would be like walking into one of her stress dreams with no way to wake up.

"But it's easy. I answer the phone and do menial office tasks. Sometimes I take notes in meetings, but you just write down whatever they say. I'm sure my genius sister can figure it out."

Caitlyn noticed that Chloe said *genius* without the usual animosity, probably because she was asking for a favor. "Well, I appreciate your confidence, but I'm not going to pretend to be you."

"Fine." Chloe slumped. "I don't know why I even asked."

"Look, I'm here for you. You can ask me for anything else. But taking your place... If we got caught, we would get in so much trouble. You would lose your job for sure. Besides, I can't take a risk like that, especially when I'm going on the job market again in the fall."

"Sure." Chloe tugged at her hair. "I understand." Her bitter tone said otherwise.

"Anyway, it might not cost very much to change the ticket. You could reschedule for—um, when will you have five vacation days?"

"Five months from now."

Caitlyn winced. "Ouch. Well, maybe a long weekend..."

"Uh-huh." Chloe looked past the camera, apparently done with the conversation. "I should go. I'll see you when you get home."

"Okay. Love—" The call disconnected. "...you." Caitlyn hated to disappoint Chloe, who rarely asked for anything. But what else could she say to such a reckless proposal?

\* \* \*

*Just go in.*

Caitlyn stood on the porch of her childhood home, hesitating at the final step after four hours of driving. She had already told her mother about

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her job-market failure over the phone, but she wasn't ready to see the disappointment and worry on her mom's face.

Chloe would offer condolences, but with a hint of satisfaction that only Caitlyn could detect. After a lifetime of resenting her reputation as the underachieving twin, Chloe probably viewed Caitlyn's misfortune as validation that her freewheeling approach to life wasn't so bad after all. *Look where Harvard and a PhD had gotten Caitlyn—absolutely nowhere.*

Caitlyn just hoped Chloe wasn't still mad that she had shot down her outrageous twin-switch idea. She didn't want to deal with tension between them on top of everything.

There was only one way to find out. She opened the door. "Hello?"

"Mom, I love him!" It was Chloe's heated voice.

"You can't be in love with someone you've never met!" their mother said.

*Oh no.* Caitlyn cursed her awful timing. She glanced back at the sleepy residential street behind her, tempted to take a long walk before coming back to the house. But she'd already disappointed Chloe by refusing to cover for her. She couldn't abandon her twin now.

Caitlyn closed the door behind her, dropped her suitcase, and slipped off her shoes.

"You just don't understand," Chloe said. "Everyone meets online these days."

Bracing herself, Caitlyn rounded the corner and entered the kitchen.

Chloe and their mom stood on opposite sides of the table, where dirty dinner plates sat untouched. While their mom gripped the back of a chair, Chloe's arms crossed her body like a shield.

Caitlyn cleared her throat. "Hi."

Their mom turned her head. "Oh! You're home." She reached Caitlyn in two strides and enveloped her in a snug hug.

"Hey." Chloe walked over, dressed in yoga pants with a pink spaghetti-strap top. "Good to see you." Her hug was quick and loose. When she pulled back, tension creased her forehead.

There was no point in pretending Caitlyn hadn't heard the argument. "You were talking about Nick?"

"Yes." Her mom sank onto a kitchen chair with a weary *thud*. "Your sister wants to quit her job."

“What?” Caitlyn’s head whipped back to Chloe. “I thought you were going to cancel the trip.”

“No,” Chloe said. “That’s what *you* said I should do. But I can’t do that to Nick. He spent a lot of money on the ticket.”

“What about your money?” Caitlyn asked. “Your job is worth a lot more than a plane ticket.”

“Your sister is right. It has health insurance.” Their mother ran her fingers through her gray bangs. “When was the last time you had a job with benefits?”

“I’m perfectly healthy.” Chloe tossed her hair. “We should have Medicare for All anyway. It’s not my fault that America sucks.”

“Still, you can’t change America,” Caitlyn said. “Can’t you visit another time, when you have more vacation days?”

“Honestly...” Chloe’s bravado faltered as her gaze drifted to the floor. “I’m not sure how much longer he’ll wait for me.”

“What do you mean, he might not wait?” Caitlyn asked carefully.

“Long-distance has been hard for him. He cares about me, but he has said a few things like—you know, if we can’t see each other in person, what’s the point? Of course, I don’t want to lose my job. But Nick is more important.”

Her mother balled up her napkin. “If this guy cared about you, he wouldn’t want you to give up your financial security. A woman needs her own income. When your father left...” She closed her eyes, then shook her head and refocused on Chloe. “Well, I was grateful to have a job. I know your boss annoys you, but you should hold on to this opportunity.”

“I have to make my own choices. I’m not turning down the trip. And there’s no way I can go without getting fired.” Chloe glanced at Caitlyn. “Well, actually, I did think of a way, but Caitlyn said no.”

“What are you talking about?” Their mom frowned. “Wait. You don’t mean...?”

“I asked Caitlyn to cover for me. But, of course, she wouldn’t do me this one favor.”

“A favor?” Caitlyn’s voice rose. “This is so much more than a favor. We’d be risking—”

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"Yeah, I know." Chloe dropped her gaze and tapped her phone. "I'm going outside. Nick wants to FaceTime." As Caitlyn and their mother watched in silence, she walked out.

"Um, wow." Caitlyn rubbed her eyes. "I didn't think there'd be drama the minute I got home."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. That's not how I wanted to greet you. Are you hungry? Thirsty? There's pasta on the stove." Her mom got up.

"I'll get some in a bit." Caitlyn sat at the table. "I filled up on snacks an hour ago."

"Okay." Her mom sat back down and rested her chin in one hand. "I'm concerned about your sister."

"Me too. Doesn't sound like the best decision, to say the least."

"I don't want this to become another Jacqueline situation."

Caitlyn winced at the memory of the ex-girlfriend who had persuaded Chloe to accompany her ska band on a tour of North American dive bars. "Yuck. I hope this guy is a better catch than Jacqueline. All Chloe got out of that relationship was credit card debt."

"Well. I already told her I can't bail her out this time. I can't—" Her mom shook her head. "I can't be her safety net forever."

"Are you okay?" Caitlyn asked. "Financially, I mean? I know you said not to worry about paying rent, but I don't want to take advantage of you."

Her mother gave her a reassuring smile, but her eyes held a worried expression. "You're always welcome here. And I have enough money for my expenses. But if something were to happen to you or Chloe, some emergency—well, I don't have much extra."

Caitlyn's heart ached. Her mom had worked so hard to raise them, and the toll was written in countless lines on her pale forehead. The last thing Caitlyn wanted was to add to her mom's stress. "We'll all be okay. Chloe will come back and get a new job."

"If she comes back," her mom said quietly.

Caitlyn wanted to reassure her mom that Chloe would return, but the promise died on her lips. They both knew Chloe would follow her heart even if it led her straight off a cliff.

"I'm afraid she'll stay out there and become dependent on him."



“Yeah, that’s a possibility.” Caitlyn hated the idea of her sister stranded in Colorado with a stranger paying the bills. Chloe would feel obligated to continue the relationship even if her feelings changed.

Her mom looked at her seriously. “If Chloe had a stable job waiting for her, she’d be more likely to come home.”

“Yeah, it’s a shame that... Wait.” Caitlyn’s stomach dropped as she realized the implication. “Are you suggesting that I do what she’s asking? Pretend to be her?”

“You have to admit it would work. People used to mix you two up all the time. You have longer hair, but you could hide it with a headband or a scarf.”

Caitlyn’s heart rate accelerated. “But it’s such a ridiculous idea. I mean, what if I get caught? I’d get in so much trouble. We both would.”

“Caught how? If you think about it, how could they prove that you’re *not* Chloe?”

Caitlyn rubbed her temples. She supposed that if she carried Chloe’s ID, anyone who checked would conclude that she worked at Pulaski. “But five whole days of pretending? I can’t just wing something like that. I’d have to learn everything about her job, her coworkers, the college—plus all of the little things like her computer password.” Just thinking about it was overwhelming.

“You don’t have anything to do next week,” her mom said quietly.

The words stung. Whatever Caitlyn might think of Chloe’s choices, the reality was that she had returned home to mooch off her mother. Guilt flooded her chest. *I let her down.*

The front door opened, then closed. Chloe started up the stairs without acknowledging either of them.

Pulse pounding, Caitlyn pushed her chair back and stood. “Chloe, wait. Come in here.”

After a pause, footsteps descended the stairs. Chloe entered the kitchen with a wary gaze.

Caitlyn took a deep breath. “I’ll do your job next week.”

“Seriously?” Chloe’s eyes widened. “You really mean it?”

“Yes.” Caitlyn gulped. Was she really doing this? “But I have conditions. I want the money you’ll earn for the week—I think that’s only fair—and I’ll use it to buy groceries and other things for the house while I’m staying here.

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I also want you to give me your driver's license. You can use your passport to get on the plane."

"That sounds okay, doesn't it, honey?" Her mom looked between them, eyes shining with hope.

Caitlyn wasn't finished. "And I want you to spend the rest of the weekend telling me every single detail about your job, no matter how irrelevant it might seem."

Chloe broke into a smile. "Of course! I'll tell you everything. We can even look at photos online so you'll recognize everyone." She surprised Caitlyn with a fierce hug. "Thank you so much. You're amazing."

As Caitlyn hugged her back, anxiety churned in her gut. Maybe it would all turn out okay, but getting through a week as Chloe would be hell on her nerves.

*Thank God for my Zoloft.* Next week, she'd need every milligram.

\* \* \*

Caitlyn stood in the center of her childhood bedroom, contemplating the boxes and bags that she'd hauled from her car. The sight of all her worldly possessions piled at her feet made her realize how little she'd accumulated in St. Louis. Her entire wardrobe fit in three bags, each containing a mix of well-worn outfits from high school, preppy basics she'd bought on her grad student budget, and pajamas with stains and holes.

What she had was a lot of books. The stacks of compact boxes with labels like *methodology* represented the bulk of her spending aside from food and shelter. The only item related to a hobby was her guitar, ensconced in a hard-shell case with colorful stickers she'd applied back in college—the last time she'd had time to practice.

"Knock knock." Chloe appeared in the doorway, bearing her laptop. "Is that all you brought home?"

"Yeah, this is everything. My furniture wasn't worth the cost of transportation."

"You're lucky, in a way." Chloe gingerly stepped over boxes, making her way toward the bed. "I have so much stuff, there's no hope of getting organized. Like, I can't reach for my hairbrush without toppling a pile of accessories."

“I believe it.” Caitlyn could picture it perfectly, thanks to growing up across the hall from Chloe’s chaotic bedroom. “You know, Marie Kondo would not approve.”

“Who?” Chloe tilted her head.

“Oh, she’s an expert on home organization. You’re supposed to ask yourself whether an item sparks joy—and if not, you get rid of it.”

“I see.” Chloe tapped a box labeled *political sociology* with her bare foot. “So do these books spark joy?”

“Um.” Caitlyn could imagine joy—clutching her phone to her chest after receiving a job offer, glowing with satisfaction that her struggle had been worth it. *Maybe next year.* “You came to show me some things about your job?”

“Yes.” Chloe opened her laptop. “While you were getting settled, I made you a PowerPoint presentation.”

“Really?” Caitlyn sat next to Chloe on the bed.

“Of course. I’ve got some computer skills.” Chloe angled the laptop toward Caitlyn.

A map of the Pulaski College campus filled the screen. One of the buildings was circled in red with a text box reading *Dictator’s lair* along with a devil emoji.

“Uh, what’s that?”

“That’s the president’s office. Which brings me to the next slide.” Chloe tapped the arrow key. “Say hello to Ruth Holloway.”

Under the heading *BOSS* was a portrait of a woman with short, blonde hair and striking blue eyes, so vibrant they must have been digitally enhanced. With her arms crossed in her navy blazer and her chin raised, she appeared defiant, as though daring the viewer to challenge her authority. Instead of the amiable smile most college administrators wore in official photos, Ruth’s lips curved into the slightest hint of regal satisfaction.

“Um. Wow.” Caitlyn couldn’t stop staring. “She looks...” *Smoking hot.* “Intense.”

“That’s a nice euphemism.” Chloe smirked. “You mean she looks bitchy.”

As a feminist, Caitlyn didn’t use the word *bitchy*. Besides, it was inadequate. Ruth Holloway looked sharp and powerful, like every no-nonsense teacher or professor who had turned Caitlyn’s guts to mush during her many years of school. Caitlyn searched Ruth’s oval face. She looked young for a

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president, about forty, but it was hard to guess from an official portrait—some combination of foundation and Photoshop had smoothed away pores and any fine lines she may have had. “So what is she like?”

“Let’s see. She’s always making these exasperated sighs that I can hear from my desk.” Chloe made a huffy sigh and rolled her eyes, apparently mimicking Ruth. “She thinks she’s smarter than everyone around her, and she doesn’t bother to hide it.”

“Charming.” Caitlyn’s attraction wilted. Ruth sounded like one of those arrogant academics who belittled others to boost her own status. *I’ll feel right at home.*

“But sometimes that’s a good thing,” Chloe said. “Ruth doesn’t trust me to do very much, which makes my life easier.”

“I suppose that’s good for me.” Caitlyn studied the woman for another moment before ripping her gaze away. “What’s next?”

Chloe tapped the computer, revealing a bulleted list. “I typed up everything you’ll need to know, like my login and password, and how to handle requests.”

“Requests?”

“Yeah, meeting requests. People are always trying to get on Ruth’s calendar. They’ll email you because they’re afraid to ask Ruth directly, but you’re supposed to forward the requests to her. She’ll respond and let you know what to do. Usually, she just writes *No*. Then you write back to the person and say, you know, unfortunately, Ruth isn’t available. Something like that.”

“So she doesn’t meet with anyone?” How could Ruth run a college without holding meetings?

“Oh, she does. She meets with her friend Piper all the time and the senior staff. Here, I grabbed their photos from the website.” She flipped to a slide with eight headshots. “If you memorize their names, you’ll be fine.”

“That’s it? You must know more people than that.”

“Not really. Sometimes faculty stop by the office, so I put some of their pictures on the next slide—the ones who come most often. But you won’t need to remember their names. Just tell them Ruth can’t talk because she’s in a meeting.” Chloe grinned. “See? I told you it would be easy.”

“Easy,” Caitlyn echoed. The job itself sounded simple, assuming Chloe’s account was accurate. However, Caitlyn had the impression that tolerating Ruth Holloway for five days might be the hardest part of all.

## Chapter 2

CAITLYN FIDDLED WITH THE BUN that hid the true length of her chestnut-brown hair. *I should have cut it.*

At home in the bathroom, Caitlyn had thought she'd done enough to copy Chloe's style. Now, standing before the imposing building that housed the Pulaski administrative offices, doubt nagged at her.

A pair of Chloe's false lashes weighed down her eyelids. Caitlyn had even borrowed her sister's snug charcoal skirt and low-cut pink blouse, although she drew the line at the impractical high heels Chloe wore to the office. If anyone asked, her comfy flats were due to rapid-onset plantar fasciitis.

Aside from the frumpy shoes and unflattering hairstyle, she looked like Chloe. Didn't she? Growing up, they'd been mistaken for each other more times than she could count. Most people didn't notice the slight differences in their bodies and faces.

Her heart pounded as she pushed through the heavy door. In her head, she chanted reminders in an effort to calm herself down. *We're twins. We're identical. It's fine.*

A custodian nodded at her. "Good morning."

"Good morning." Caitlyn forced a smile as she strode past his trash bin.

The hallway was quiet, just as she'd hoped. Arriving an hour early had been the right call. No one saw her gaze dart around as she searched for the correct hallway, and while she could only imagine how her face looked—pale and terrified?—she was grateful to be alone.

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Tall glass doors loomed at the end of the hall, matching Chloe's description. A sign reading *Office of the President* hung from the ceiling, removing all doubt that she was headed in the right direction. Instead of reassuring her, the sight made her nauseous. This wasn't some obscure clerical role; Chloe's boss ran the entire institution. If Caitlyn was caught intruding, the penalty would be high.

As she reached the doors, she peered through the glass. A sleek wooden desk occupied the center of a spacious reception area. *Chloe's desk*. Could she really sit there for an entire week without anyone catching on?

Caitlyn dug in her purse until she closed her fingers around her key chain, now equipped with a stainless-steel key to the presidential office suite. As she held it up to the lock, her hand shook so badly that she missed the keyhole by half an inch.

*This is a crime.* Caitlyn Taylor had no right to enter the office. If she unlocked the door and walked in, she'd be trespassing. The badge dangling from her collar constituted identity fraud. Somehow, she'd made it through the weekend without backing out, but now the risk had become real.

Her lungs tightened until it was hard to breathe—a sensation she might have interpreted as cardiac arrest if she hadn't spent a lifetime experiencing it every time she risked getting into trouble.

It was the same feeling she'd had when her college roommate had persuaded her to try marijuana at a party. Afterward, while Shannon snored in the next room, Caitlyn had stayed up googling criminal penalties and researching how long the drug could be detected in urine and hair.

She'd had the same feeling in grad school after deducting bogus "school supplies" from her taxes until her burden no longer exceeded her bank balance. As the envelope with her tax return had slipped from her grasp, she'd jammed her fingers into the mail slot, hyperventilating as she desperately tried to retrieve it. But the steel box was secure, condemning her to months of worry that a SWAT team would descend on her apartment to haul her to jail over six hundred dollars.

Every time she broke the rules, she regretted it. *So what the hell am I doing?*

*I can't do this.* Caitlyn dropped the unused key into her purse. Her breathing slowed as her panic waned. Soon she would be safe in her car, driving away from the world's worst decision at forty-five miles per hour.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, causing her to jump and whirl around.

A tall blonde strode toward her, wearing a teal blazer with beige pants and functional brown loafers. *Ruth Holloway*. Her short, layered hair had grown since the photo portrait, and the waves were mussed. She also wore considerably less makeup. However, her blue eyes were even more vivid in person, the color popping even from several yards away.

As Ruth approached, she squinted at Caitlyn. “Who are you, and what have you done with Chloe?”

*Oh God*. “I...um...” Caitlyn trembled.

Ruth stopped a few feet away. “You’ve never arrived even one minute before nine, and now you’re showing up at eight? On a Monday, no less. I should alert the *Gazette*.”

Relief washed through Caitlyn, full-on meltdown averted. But now she was trapped. “I had an early appointment.” Her voice cracked.

“I see.” Ruth’s forehead creased beneath errant wisps of hair.

*Shit*. Caitlyn was already fucking up. Chloe would never schedule an early appointment. She’d been last out of the womb and late to every engagement ever since.

“Are you all right?” Ruth studied her. “You look flustered.”

Caitlyn flushed under the scrutiny. Chloe had described Ruth as so indifferent toward her that she wouldn’t notice if someone literally replaced her for a week. But the concern in Ruth’s gaze appeared genuine.

“I’m fine.” Caitlyn took a breath. “Thank you for asking.”

“Good.” Ruth continued to stare.

Caitlyn dropped her gaze to break eye contact, only to be confronted with the sleek curve of Ruth’s neck and the silky white blouse that drooped to bare a hint of cleavage. Ruth’s clothes fit, but they weren’t tailored, as though she’d grabbed her usual size at a department store and decided *good enough*. Still, the functional outfit couldn’t hide Ruth’s hourglass curves. Ruth was gorgeous and powerful with obvious intelligence behind her probing gaze. Caitlyn struggled to control her breathing as the vision in front of her, combined with the high-stress situation, overloaded her brain.

“Well?” Ruth gestured at the door. Her clear nail polish gleamed under the florescent lights.

“Right. Of course.” Caitlyn fumbled for the key. Avoiding eye contact, she unlocked the door and held it open.

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As Ruth whisked past her, Caitlyn detected the faint scent of lavender. It didn't smell like perfume. More like soap or shampoo. Ruth probably didn't bother with fragrance. She had the clean, polished look of a professional who maintained impeccable grooming with as little effort as possible. Minimal makeup, sturdy shoes.

Oblivious to Caitlyn's staring, Ruth disappeared into her office, leaving the door ajar—probably so she could yell to summon Caitlyn, a habit Chloe had warned her about.

This was her chance to run, to let Ruth think Chloe had arrived early and then split for good. But despite her wobbly stomach and rapid heart-beat, something drew her forward until she stood beside the assistant's desk.

She wanted to know more about Ruth.

The portrait hadn't lied. Ruth was young for a president, with intense and captivating eyes. How had she achieved so much at her age? Especially if she was as unpleasant as Chloe claimed.

Caitlyn was curious. Yet the brief encounter had driven home the point that she was deceiving a human being who would no doubt be horrified to learn the truth. Whatever Ruth's flaws, she didn't deserve to spend her day working with a fraud.

*And she'd hang me if she knew.* Meeting Ruth in person had left little doubt that she'd be livid if she found out the truth.

"Chloe?" Ruth appeared in the doorway. Her hair had been tamed into place. "Jack is stopping by at nine for a quick meeting. I assumed you'd still be arriving. But since you're already here, I'd like you to take notes."

"Oh sure. Absolutely." Caitlyn's head bobbed while she searched her memory for the name. *Jack Downey, Budget Director.* Chloe's presentation had included a photo of an Irish man in his mid-fifties, along with a note that he met with Ruth regularly. It had to be him.

"Thanks. See you soon." Ruth disappeared into the office again.

Caitlyn gulped. How could she leave now? If she wanted to avoid suspicion, disappearing before the meeting wasn't an option.

Jolted out of her indecision, Caitlyn plopped into the swivel chair. She located the power button and started the computer on the desk. As it whirred to life, she caught her reflection in a small mirror that Chloe had left on the desk, next to a slouching makeup bag. Aside from the headband, she looked like Chloe.



*Holy fuck. I'm really doing this.*

\* \* \*

*Something is wrong with Chloe.*

The thought had nagged at Ruth ever since she'd arrived. Now seated across from Chloe at the table in her office while Jack prattled on about the budget, Ruth grew even more suspicious.

What Chloe lacked in ambition, she made up for by being predictable. She usually arrived five minutes late, checked the voice messages, and then spent most of the day on her iPhone. As a receptionist, she was decent—personable, nice to everyone—but rarely lifted a finger outside of her assigned duties. Her notes were adequate, but minimal.

This morning, however, Chloe's typing was rapid, almost frantic. When she wasn't taking notes, her gaze shifted between Ruth and Jack as if she weren't sure which one would strike first. She also kept scratching her arms. It was unnerving.

Then there was her appearance. Chloe typically styled her hair in ringlets, crisp from a curling iron and frozen with hair spray. Today, she wore a cloth headband at her hairline, and the rest was knotted into a bun. Ruth wondered if the conservative hairstyle and skittish demeanor were related to Chloe's early arrival on campus and the supposed *appointment* she'd mentioned.

"One more thing," Jack said. "The VP came to see me."

Ruth's lips twisted into a sneer. "Oh? What did Alice want?"

"Another faculty position. The math department wants to hire, and she's supporting them." He held out his palms. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger."

Ruth scoffed. "Oh, come on. Another hire in math?"

"Well, they lost a full-time faculty when Donnie retired. They want to replace him."

"For God's sake." She rolled her eyes. "They lost a grouchy, old crank who was out on medical leave every other semester. Now they're pretending it was a devastating loss to the department?"

Jack cracked his knuckles. "I hear you. But the argument they'll make is that we could hire a new tenure-track professor for less than half of what we paid Donnie, so we'd still save money."

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"God, some of these full professor salaries are obscene. He made almost as much as a dean." Ruth shook her head. "Remind me, how much does a new tenure-track professor make?"

"Sixty thousand, plus benefits—so, eighty-five thousand."

"And how much would we pay an adjunct to cover his courses?" She asked the question slowly, as though prompting a small child.

Jack chuckled. "About twelve thousand per semester."

"Exactly. You'd think the *math* department could arrive at that point on their own, but I suppose I'm expecting too much. Anyway, we need that money in ten other places. Student services, for one." She glanced over to make sure Chloe wasn't transcribing her frank comments, then did a double take.

Chloe sat with her back straight and her fingers clenched into fists, eyes flashing with unmistakable fury.

"What's wrong?" Ruth asked.

Startled, Chloe dropped her hands into her lap. "Nothing." She softened her scowl into a more neutral expression, but her jaw remained tense.

Was Chloe angry on behalf of the math faculty? Why would she care? Ruth sat back and leveled a stern gaze at her. "If you have an opinion about our budget discussion, I'd be fascinated."

"I don't have an opinion." Chloe looked down at her lap.

Ruth pushed to her feet with a heavy sigh. Why even bother? "Okay. I'll deal with the math department. Keep me posted on summer revenue. Chloe, please send me the notes and then delete them."

"Okay." Chloe closed her laptop, slid out of her chair, and scrambled to the exit.

Jack jerked a thumb at the door. "What's up with her?"

"No idea." Then a sudden thought occurred to her. The scratching, the odd behavior, the irrational anger. Was Chloe on drugs?

Ruth massaged her temples. She had vowed to wait until noon before taking her second aspirin of the day, but she already knew she wouldn't make it.

\* \* \*

When Piper stepped into her office, Ruth took one look and knew there was bad news. Piper's inability to hide her true feelings was her only flaw as a public relations director.

"Oh God, what?" Ruth rubbed her forehead. "Just tell me."

"Okay." Piper wheeled a chair over to the desk. "The *Tribune* called, seeking comment about various faculty complaints." She sat with her notepad and crossed her legs.

*Great.* "Which complaints? There are so many—you'll have to be more specific."

"Enrollment is down, blah blah blah. The administration only cares about numbers and money. I gave them the usual spiel about our recruitment initiatives, but the reporter didn't seem interested. He asked about canceled summer classes, which makes me think he's been talking to Steve Stubbons."

"Of course." Ruth dug her fingernails into her palms. "Steve probably made a big deal about being faculty council president, as if that means he speaks for the entire faculty. Meanwhile, he only got elected because no one else wanted the job."

Piper consulted her notes. "The reporter said something about an arbitrary enrollment cutoff, basically that you canceled any class that fell below a certain threshold regardless of the circumstances."

"Oh, come on. Do you know what that arbitrary cutoff was? Five. Faculty wanted to run courses with *four students*. Meanwhile, the college is bleeding. We can't lose money year after year and stay in business. Why am I the only one who understands this?"

"They don't want to understand." Piper gave her a sympathetic smile. "If they engaged with the facts, they'd have to accept that no amount of ranting will make everything how it was twenty years ago. I think deep down, they know that, but it's easier to blame you."

Ruth shook her head. "Did you know math wants to hire? They want a new tenure-track position to replace Donnie."

Piper frowned. "Isn't math over budget?"

"They're all over budget," Ruth snapped, then instantly regretted her tone. "Sorry, it's not your fault. I suppose the *Tribune* needs money too. 'College president tries her best' doesn't generate clicks."

"I know you're trying." Piper's thick glasses magnified her kind eyes.

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The sound of laughter drew Ruth's gaze to the window.

A group of students clustered in the center of the footpath outside her office, having an animated conversation. One young woman gave her friend a playful push on the shoulder.

"Have you ever heard of the iron law of institutions?" Ruth asked, still watching the students.

"What do you mean?"

"Math cares about math. Steve Stubbons cares about Steve Stubbons. A nuclear bomb could wipe out the campus tomorrow, and the union's first priority would be a raise. Everyone cares more about their own interests than the success, or even the survival, of this college." Ruth turned back to Piper, determination welling in her chest. "So that's my job. I'm going to get us through this enrollment crisis even if it makes them all hate me."

"I'm not here to *make friends*." Piper drawled the last two words in a twangy accent.

Ruth gaped. "Huh?"

Piper blushed. "It's what they say on reality shows."

"Ah. Your guilty pleasure." Ruth picked up a pen and twirled it between her fingers. "Well, the saying is apt. A college president has no friends. Only adversaries and a handful of sycophants on the administrative staff—present company excluded, of course. I know you're on my side."

"Of course I am." Piper patted Ruth's arm. "So much is out of your control. The press may not understand that, but I do. All you can do is your best." It was the kind of thing Piper would say because their friendship predated Pulaski by fifteen years.

A notification appeared on the computer screen, announcing an email from Zachary Thomas, the chair of the board. The subject said, *Call me*. Ruth knew the body of the message would be blank, but she clicked anyway to be sure.

"What?" Piper asked.

"It's Zachary demanding a phone call. Which means he's mad about something."

"Ah." Piper stood. "I'll give you the room." She squeezed Ruth's shoulder, walked out of the office, and closed the door behind her.

Ruth leaned back and shut her eyes. She'd call Zachary in a few minutes. First, she needed a moment of calm.

Quinn Ivins

The stress was getting to her. She knew what her doctor would say. *Work less. Get more exercise. Take a vacation.*

On the desk, her iPhone buzzed. Ruth opened her eyes and checked the screen: Zachary Thomas.

Her break was over.

## Chapter 3

“OKAY, THANKS. I’LL MAKE SURE Dr. Holloway gets the message. Goodbye.” Caitlyn plunked the phone into the receiver, willing it to stay silent so she could fume in peace.

Two hours after the meeting, she still hadn’t calmed down. Of course, she was well aware of the practice of hiring cheap adjuncts instead of full-time faculty, but she had never imagined she’d hear an administrator—a president, no less—speak about the cost savings in such callous terms. It was infuriating.

How dare Ruth mock the faculty for wanting to hire a full-time professor instead of offering poverty wages and zero security to someone with an advanced degree? People like Ruth were the reason Caitlyn and most of her classmates couldn’t find permanent jobs.

Her righteous anger washed away any guilt she’d felt about lying to Ruth. If this was how she governed the college, she deserved an indifferent assistant who sent a stand-in to cover her duties—but that didn’t mean Caitlyn could tolerate four more days assisting a woman who represented everything she despised. If the stress of impersonating Chloe didn’t give her an ulcer, the rage she felt in Ruth’s presence would eat her from the inside.

*I’ll finish the day, and then I’m done.*

Peppy footsteps interrupted Caitlyn’s thoughts. A tall man with wavy, black hair and a well-trimmed beard came through the doors.

Caitlyn flinched and averted her gaze. She didn't recognize him, and she had no idea if he expected her to know his name. Hoping to appear busy, she typed a string of gibberish on her keyboard.

"Hi there." He waved a hand to get her attention.

*Act natural.* Caitlyn straightened her back and looked up. "She's in a meeting." So far, two different people had entered the office, seeking "a few minutes" with the president. Per Chloe's instructions, she had told them no—except for a woman named Piper Flemming, who had unrestricted access.

Ignoring her words, the man walked right up to the edge of the desk and grinned at Caitlyn with twinkling brown eyes. "Oh my God. We need to talk about Brenda."

"We do?" Caitlyn squirmed. *Who the hell is Brenda?*

"I always knew she was hiding something, but damn. Defrauding her own grandma?"

"Yeah... Wow." Caitlyn was utterly lost. "That's awful." It seemed like a safe response.

"I can't believe Nikolai hasn't dumped her yet. Do you think he just wants a green card?"

Caitlyn blinked at him. "Maybe...? I mean, it's possible."

He narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry, I'm a little out of it this morning. Could you just remind me—um, what are we talking about?"

His eyebrows shot up. "*90 Day Fiancé*. You haven't seen it yet?"

"Ah, right! Of course." Caitlyn laughed, but it came out false and near hysterical. "Wow, I totally spaced on that." She swished her hand. "One of those days. No, I haven't had time to watch it."

"Well, I came to grab you for lunch. Not a moment too soon, I can see." He gestured at the door. "Shall we?"

"L-lunch?" Whoever this guy was, he clearly had a personal relationship with Chloe—one she'd neglected to mention. How could she fake her way through an entire meal with someone who expected her to be conversant in Chloe's pop culture interests? "Thanks for the offer, but I'd better stay here and get some work done."

His jaw dropped. "Seriously?"

*Oops.* Wrong thing to say. “Er, what I mean...” Her voice cracked. *Oh God, I'm blowing it.*

“Okay, what's wrong? Did something happen? Are you possessed?”

“No.” It came out in a squeak. “Of course not.”

“But something's going on. You even look different. Your hair...” He gestured at the headband.

*Shit!* He was getting suspicious. She had to distract him. *Say something. Do something.* Caitlyn jumped to her feet. “I'd love to go to lunch.” She swayed and caught the desk as she processed the words that had popped out of her mouth. *Oh no.*

“Great! Do you need to call Gary?”

Gary? *Gary.* Caitlyn knew that name. He was the vice president's assistant, and sometimes he covered Ruth's phone line while Chloe was away from the desk. “Of course.” She plopped back down in the seat.

“I'm sure he'll oblige.” Miguel's mouth quirked as though they were sharing a joke, one that was beyond Caitlyn.

“Uh-huh.” Caitlyn consulted the list of extensions on the desk, then tapped the speaker phone button and dialed.

“My dear Chloe,” Gary answered within seconds. “How may I be of service?”

“Hi.” Caitlyn frowned at the odd greeting. “I'd like to take a lunch break, so would you mind answering Ruth's line until I get back?”

“Anything for you, fair maiden.” Gary spoke in an accent that was clearly American, but with an affected lilt. “May I ask what is on the menu?”

“Um, I'm not sure yet. Thanks. Bye.” She hung up and looked at Miguel. Miguel smirked. “I guess he still isn't over his creepy crush.”

“Guess not.” Caitlyn wrinkled her nose. Chloe's briefing hadn't included anything about Gary's weird behavior. What else didn't she know?

“Let's go.” Miguel inclined his head toward the door. “The usual joint?”

*Oh God, something else I'm supposed to know.* “Of course.” Caitlyn followed him out of the building, taking deep breaths as quietly as she could manage. *Be calm. Act natural. There will be plenty of time to panic in prison.*

Miguel led her across the small campus past clusters of modest brick buildings. It was nothing like the research university where she'd spent the past seven years, which had majestic buildings with arches, plus glistening structures that advertised the wealth of the business and medical schools.



Pulaski's campus reflected what it was—a small liberal-arts college with a modest endowment.

“So how did Nick take the news?” Miguel asked.

Caitlyn's footsteps faltered. Miguel knew about Nick? And the trip? They had probably talked last week, before Caitlyn had agreed to step in—but the question was so vague, she was afraid to assume any specifics. “Oh, about how you'd expect.”

“That's too bad. I hope you'll find a way to meet up soon. Maybe he can come visit you here.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Caitlyn's fingers twitched as she fought the urge to scratch her arms. Chloe had told her all about Pulaski College—well, minus the detail of her good friend Miguel—but she hadn't prepared Caitlyn to talk about Nick. Maybe she could steer the conversation into less dangerous territory. “Honestly, I'm still bummed, and I don't really want to talk about it. How are *you* doing?”

Miguel let out an exaggerated sigh. “I spent the whole morning on last-minute course prep. Then the copier ate my syllabus, and it took half an hour to find the jam. I really needed a break.”

*Course prep?* He must be a professor.

“Sorry about the copier. How's the course prep going?” Caitlyn asked, careful to not use any terms Miguel hadn't used himself.

“Not bad! We're starting with Sylvia Plath and then Anne Sexton.”

*Poetry.* Good to know. “That sounds great.”

“It's nice to start in the twentieth century. Students are less intimidated.”

“I bet.” Caitlyn rotated the campus map in her head as Miguel turned a corner. She'd memorized each building and how to navigate between them, but traversing the campus in person was another matter. She kept her footsteps just behind Miguel's, hoping he wouldn't realize she had no idea where they were going.

They arrived at a small café attached to an academic building. It was deserted with one bored-looking employee hunched over the counter, immersed in his phone.

“Do you want to just eat here?” Miguel asked. “Since it's not crowded.”

The thought of conversing as Chloe on campus, when anyone could walk in, made her squeamish. But a trek to some other location she was supposed to know could present more pitfalls. “Sure. Sounds great.”

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Miguel grabbed a flatbread sandwich and a Diet Coke, while Caitlyn selected a Caesar salad and a root beer. She'd been trying to drink less soda, but today wasn't the day to forgo all of her vices.

They sat across from each other at a small, square table, each starting with their drinks.

"So," Miguel said as he unwrapped his sandwich.

Dread curled within her as she waited to hear what he wanted to ask "Chloe."

"Did your sister get here okay?"

Caitlyn choked on her root beer. Coughing, she grabbed her napkin and hid her face behind it.

Miguel knew Chloe had a sister? Did he know they were identical twins? Keeping her cover would be even harder if Miguel was aware that someone else in town looked exactly like Chloe. The day just kept getting worse.

Regaining her composure, Caitlyn took a throat-clearing sip and set down her root beer. "Sorry. Wrong pipe. Yes, Caitlyn arrived this weekend."

"Cool. How's that going?" Miguel's expression was open and curious, providing no indication of what he already knew about Caitlyn and Chloe's relationship.

What would Chloe say? "Oh, you know—Caitlyn is still wallowing about the academic job market. I guess a fancy sociology degree isn't worth as much as you'd think."

"Whoa, did something happen?" Miguel looked startled.

Caitlyn frowned. What had she said wrong? "What do you mean?"

"Well, last time we talked you were a lot more sympathetic. Like, you seemed genuinely heartbroken that it didn't work out for her, and now you sound a bit...callous. Did you two have a fight?"

The words squeezed Caitlyn's heart. Chloe had said all the right things, but she'd had no idea Chloe cared so much. Caitlyn was ashamed that she'd assumed otherwise. "I didn't... Yeah, you're right." Caitlyn shook her head. "Of course I'm sorry for her. I guess I'm just in a weird mood." She shoved a forkful of lettuce into her mouth, still reeling at Miguel's words.

After a minute of awkward silence, Miguel checked his phone. "Oh, you texted me. It must have been while I was coming to see you."

*I did?* Caitlyn straightened and sucked in a breath. She hadn't texted Miguel, obviously—she didn't even have his number. Chloe must have done it from the airport. *Oh no.*

Miguel's eyes grew wide as he read the text. He looked up at Caitlyn, face contorted in shock. "Holy shit. You're Caitlyn?"

Caitlyn's chest heaved as she struggled to breathe. "What do you mean?" It came out in a dry rasp.

Wordlessly, Miguel slid the phone across the table.

Caitlyn picked it up and read the message:

*Hey darling just wanted to let you know I'm on my way to Colorado! Caitlyn agreed to cover for me, so if you see me at work it's not really me! Shhh don't tell anyone. And don't say anything to Caitlyn because she would freak out.*

A series of emojis followed, one with a finger to its lips and a few different smiles followed by a heart.

Hand shaking, she dropped the phone on the table. *I'm going to kill Chloe.* Then she remembered what Miguel inadvertently told her—that Chloe really did care about her job search. Chloe could be impulsive and reckless, but Caitlyn loved her. *I have to get through this for both of us.*

"I should have known something was wrong!" Miguel said. "You look identical, but your personality is obviously different. And Chloe would never miss *90 Day Fiancé*. Damn, I can't believe this."

"Okay," Caitlyn whispered. "I'm not denying it, but I can't talk about this here." She glanced behind her. They were the only ones seated, but a small line had formed at the register.

Miguel pushed back his chair and stood. "Come on, we can go to my office. Then you have to tell me everything!"

\* \* \*

Miguel led Caitlyn down a hall of faculty offices, past overflowing bulletin boards and a poster of William Shakespeare, to an office at the back of the building. The nameplate on the door said *Miguel Fumero, Assistant Professor*.

"Sorry, it's a bit chaotic. I'm getting ready for summer session." Miguel closed the door behind them. "We can finish eating here." He dropped

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his sandwich on a small, circular table in the corner and sat on one of the chairs. "All right, I can't stand it any longer. What's going on? When is Chloe coming back?"

Caitlyn sank into the opposite chair. She placed her salad in front of her, but she'd lost her appetite. "How much do you know about Nick? And Colorado?"

"I know that Nick bought her a ticket, but she couldn't get time off work and she was thinking of quitting. I told her to stay here and visit another time, but she was obviously conflicted about it. Anyway, I haven't talked to her since last week."

"Well, when I got home, she was determined to go on the trip. She was going to quit her job—but somehow, against all reason and sense, I agreed to take her place for the week. Honestly, I still can't believe I got talked into it. I was in a bad place, and my mom piled on the guilt, and I caved. I promise I don't normally do things like this."

"Ah, that's genius!" Miguel didn't look even slightly upset or judgmental. "So she can visit Nick and keep her job! Wow, it's really nice of you to do this for her."

"That's one word for it. I've been feeling like I lost my head." Caitlyn looked him in the eyes. "You can't tell anyone. Not a single soul. Please promise me."

"I would never!" Miguel held out his palms. "I promise. Chloe is my best friend at Pulaski. I wouldn't do that to her—or to you."

"Okay. Thank you. So how do you know Chloe?"

He brightened. "One day I had to drop something off at Dr. Holloway's office, and when I got there, Chloe was watching one of my favorite makeup artists on YouTube. We got to talking, and she's really sweet and hilarious. So we started hanging out."

"Cool." Caitlyn had a hard time imagining that Ruth Holloway tolerated her assistant watching YouTube on the clock. She supposed this was additional evidence for Chloe's claim that Ruth didn't pay attention to her. "So what do you think of Chloe's Internet boyfriend?"

"He sounds nice." Miguel shrugged. "I just hope they get along in person. And even if they have a good time together this week, long-distance is tough." Sadness passed over his face.

“It’s none of my business,” Caitlyn said slowly, “but you sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“Yeah.” Spots of color appeared on his cheeks. “I’m in a long-distance marriage. My husband lives in Vancouver.”

“Oh wow. That’s so far away. I’m sorry to hear that, although I can’t say I’m surprised. A lot of academics are in the same situation. So his job is in Vancouver?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not the problem.” Miguel’s teeth caught his lip as he seemed to debate whether to trust Caitlyn. “He’s not eligible to come to this country.”

Caitlyn resisted the impulse to ask why. “That’s a rough situation.”

“You’re not going to ask what he did?”

“It doesn’t matter to me. Besides, you just met me, and I’m actively committing fraud. I’m not in a position to judge your husband—not that I would anyway.”

“I appreciate it, and that’s why I’ll tell you.” He took a deep breath. “Preston had a difficult childhood. Well, that’s an understatement. He got into drugs, and he caught a trafficking charge when he was eighteen. After that, he got help, went to college, and became a nurse. But even though he’s been clean for a decade, the US won’t let him in. So that’s why he couldn’t move here.” Miguel watched Caitlyn closely as he spoke.

“That’s awful. They shouldn’t ban him for a teenage mistake.” Caitlyn hoped her face conveyed her sincerity and her lack of condemnation. “I’m on your side. Truly. He should be able to come with you.”

Miguel nodded sadly, the strain written all over his face. “We have one of the best immigration lawyers, but the authorities won’t budge. And the only job offer I got was here, so that’s why we’re long distance.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I really don’t know. Last year, I applied to every listing for poetry faculty in Canada—all two of them. I’ll go on the market this year too. But if nothing changes, I might need to choose between my marriage and this career.”

“That’s horrible. You shouldn’t be in this situation. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. Um, I didn’t mean to get so personal when we just met. Maybe it’s because you look like Chloe.”

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"That's reassuring, I suppose—that I look like her. I've been so terrified that someone will find out."

"I promise Dr. Holloway won't know the difference. Now that you know your way around, you'll be golden for the rest of the week."

*The rest of the week.* Caitlyn recalled her earlier vow to quit at the end of the day. In the heat of her rage, she'd been certain, but now she wasn't sure. Meeting Miguel had reminded her why she was there in the first place—for Chloe, who really did care about Caitlyn's job search. She didn't know what to do.

Caitlyn slogged her root beer back and forth. "You keep calling her Dr. Holloway. Does everyone? When Chloe talks about her, she always says Ruth."

Miguel laughed. "I think Chloe likes to imagine she's on a first-name basis with everyone. Most of us wouldn't dare, at least not before tenure."

"Yeah, I already have the sense that she's not too friendly with the faculty."

"No, and it's mutual. She's smart, and I guess she works hard, but she doesn't care what we think about anything. Faculty want shared governance. They expect a seat at the table, not to be informed after she already made a decision."

"She must think she knows better than the people who actually do the work." Caitlyn rolled her eyes. "Typical administration. They should all be shot into the sun."

"Don't let Dr. Holloway know you feel that way." He grinned and took a big bite of his sandwich.

"I won't. I plan to avoid her for the rest of the day, and honestly..." She braced herself for Miguel's disappointment. "I'm not sure how much longer I can do this."

Miguel covered his mouth. "Oh no. Why?"

"How can I spend a whole week as Ruth's assistant? She's awful. It's bad enough that I'm surrounded by everything I can't have. On top of that, I'm supposed to fetch coffee for a stuck-up administrator who is actively damaging the labor market. Chloe made her job sound boring. I didn't know it would be torture."

“But four more days won’t be so bad.” Miguel anxiously twisted and pinched his straw. “Anyway, the job comes with some perks. Like—like you can use the library for your research!”

“I can?” Caitlyn hadn’t considered this. “Chloe can check out books?”

“Absolutely.” He nodded vigorously. “Staff have the same privileges as students. You can access loads of journals online!”

“I have been worried about keeping up with research now that I’ve lost my grad school credentials.” Caitlyn frowned. “It figures that Chloe would have access to academic journals but not me. What a world.”

Miguel beamed. “But if you cover for Chloe, you can read all the sociology you want!”

It wasn’t that she *wanted* to read more sociology. After grad school, her brain was fried. But she’d need resources to work on new papers for conferences and journals. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Plus you can see how administration works from the inside. Who knows, maybe you’ll learn something that helps you on the market next year.”

“So far, I’m learning what I already know—adjunct labor is cheaper than hiring faculty, and administrators don’t care.” She stabbed a mound of lettuce with too much force. “Ruth certainly doesn’t.”

“Well, maybe you can meet some sociology professors. You could even come to department events if they’ve got any scheduled this week.” He was like a telemarketer desperate to stop her from hanging up. “Maybe it could even help you get a job *here* one day! You can network as Chloe and talk up your sister. I mean yourself. You know what I mean.”

Caitlyn had zero plans to mention her existence to anyone else at Pulaski. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m trying to stay under the radar until I can go home in a few hours.” *And I probably won’t be back.*

\* \* \*

When Caitlyn entered the house, her mom was waiting at the kitchen table, clasping her mug with both hands. “Well? How was it?”

“I don’t even know where to begin. At first, it was terrifying. I was ready to turn around and get my brain examined for even considering this ridiculous plan. But then Ruth—Dr. Holloway, whatever—saw me, and I had to stay for the day.”

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"Did everyone think you were Chloe?" The tremor in her mom's voice betrayed her anxiety. She'd probably spent the whole day worrying about both of her daughters.

"Yeah. No one suspected—well except for her friend Miguel, but only because Chloe flat out told him." Caitlyn grabbed a glass from the kitchen cabinet and filled it with tap water.

"Oh yes, Chloe mentioned him once or twice. The gay poetry professor."

"Yes. He's a sweet guy. But Ruth is awful. She's arrogant and insensitive and personally responsible for replacing full-time faculty with adjunct labor. I don't know how I can stand to be her assistant for four more days."

Her mom's thumb moved up and down the handle of the mug. "Oh, honey, I'm sure it will go by faster than you think. And it means a lot to me that you're holding the job for Chloe."

"How is Chloe? Have you heard from her since she landed?"

Her mom pointed to her phone. "She texted us. Didn't you get it?"

Caitlyn pulled her phone out of her purse and saw the notification. "I must have been driving." She swiped, revealing a selfie of Chloe with a man in his thirties. He had black, curly hair and big eyes. They beamed at the camera, his arm around her shoulders in a side-hug while their heads touched.

*Who are you, really?* Caitlyn scrutinized Nick's face, searching for some sign of his true intentions. Had he been honest with Chloe when they'd talked online? Did he really care about her? "Well. I'm glad she got there safely."

"Yes, but we need her to come back." Her mom trapped Caitlyn with a pleading gaze. "You're not quitting, are you?"

Caitlyn looked down at the photo again. Chloe looked bright and happy—the way she looked when she threw herself into some new adventure without a care in the world. If it didn't work out, she'd be crushed.

The first day at Pulaski had been harrowing, but she'd survived. She'd fooled everyone, even Miguel. A few more days could give Chloe security.

*This is something I can do for my sister, for my family.* Determination swelled in her chest. *Screw Ruth Holloway.* "No. I'm not quitting."

"You'll go in the rest of the week?" Hope filled her mother's voice.

*God help me.* "Yes."

A relieved smile spread across her mother's face. "Thank you, honey."



She took a big swig of water. “You’re welcome. I’m going upstairs.”

Caitlyn went upstairs to her childhood bedroom. Every time she entered it, she felt transported in time. Most of the decorations were from her teenage years—posters of pop stars and photographs taken with friends who had since moved far away from Linvale.

She walked over to her closet door, where she’d hung a photo of her and Chloe at their sixteenth birthday party, grinning with identical tiaras atop their heads. A sadness passed over her. She and Chloe cared for each other, but they hadn’t been close since high school—the last time they’d been in the same place.

Caitlyn could spot herself in any photo taken with Chloe, but she wondered how many of her friends and acquaintances would mix them up. Ruth hadn’t clocked her as an impostor, but what if she saw them side-by-side? Would she be able to spot her real assistant?

These days, the most obvious difference was their hair. Caitlyn walked over to her mirror and pulled off her headband, letting her grown-out bangs flop into her face. Then she pulled out the hair ties and let her hair fall to her shoulders.

Her boxes and suitcases were still on the floor in a heap. She opened the box containing items from her bathroom and dug around until she found her shears. Thanks to her meager stipend in grad school, she’d been cutting her own hair for years.

She yanked Chloe’s ID badge from her shirt and set it on the edge of the mirror for reference. Chloe had sparse bangs that skimmed her eyebrows, with a few longer strands near her ears. The rest of her hair was about an inch shorter than Caitlyn’s.

Growing out her bangs has taken years. But she couldn’t walk around with longer hair if she expected to last another four days in Chloe’s place. And despite her better judgment, she’d committed to seeing it through.

Holding her breath, she pinched a lock of hair between her fingers and lifted the shears. She snipped one strand and then another. As her reflection slowly morphed into one that more closely resembled Chloe, an unexpected feeling of loss stabbed at her chest. The unique identity she’d worked so hard to establish was falling around her on the floor—and the worst part was that no one would wonder where Caitlyn had gone, since she lacked a place in the world to vacate.

## Something's Different

Twenty minutes later, a rough approximation of Chloe's haircut stared back at her. She blinked, feeling the weight of the false eyelashes. As long as she didn't look closely, she could imagine it was Chloe's reflection.

*Four years of college, seven years of grad school, and I'm back here playing pretend.*

Caitlyn took a steadying breath and reminded herself that the gig would be over by the weekend. When she was done living Chloe's life, she could get back to dealing with her own.

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# SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT

BY QUINN IVINS

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