

“My Name Is...”

By Lauren Rivers

Sunrise always came far too quickly for her liking. With a significant amount of effort her eyes fluttered open to see the same artwork she had spotted in a million other hotel rooms across the country. Someone had to buy the things in bulk since they were literally everywhere. They were usually something nondescript, a random splash of colors or a picture of something like a flower, but they were almost all the same. Rarely did any sort of major hotel chain decorate each room individually unless they were some sort of themed place and Kate made it a point to stay out of those.

More often than not they attracted the wrong kind of gentlemen and Kate Coyle did not need to learn the same lesson twice. It wasn't as if the man had been dangerous. All she knew was that the less said about the Jungle Room at the Fantasy Resort the better. She shuddered inwardly and pushed the memory from her mind, slipping gently out of bed. She was so good at doing it her date for the previous evening didn't even stir at her exit.

Her scaled feet touched the floor and made gentle impressions on the soft carpet. Searching around for her clothes she began running through the checklist. One of the things people in her lifestyle learned quickly was not to leave anything behind. Odds are you wouldn't get the chance to come back if you forgot something. Gathering her clothes together Kate stepped into her panties and affixed her bra with a level of skill that professed a large amount of practice taking them on and off. With a single fluid movement she slipped on her dress before putting her heels on one at a time.

Spotting her clutch purse on the table she grabbed it before spotting his pants draped over the chair. She slithered over to the garment removing his wallet and divesting it of any cash he happened to be carrying. After counting the amount and determining it to be a couple thousand she removed one of the hundred dollar bills and returned both it and the wallet to his pants. After all, he had been a good lay. The hyena slept on throughout her efforts, blissfully unaware of her preparations to depart. He was a businessman of some kind, one who had been rather unhappy with his wife and had decided that having a little fun with the sultry snake who had shaken her rattle as she walked past was just the thing.

They'd had a few glasses of wine before he'd offered to take her to somewhere nicer than this swanky party which Kate had technically not been invited to in the first place, but had rather managed to find a way to sidestep the rather expensive charity donation and earn herself a spot among the attendees.

Pretending to be excited by his offer Kate had eagerly accepted, telling him how exhilarating he was and all of the things men like to hear when they've become frustrated with their mates who for whatever reason no longer find them as satisfying as they once did. Kate had done this dance before. Though ostensibly a con artist, Kate wore whatever skin she needed to in order to make it from one day to the next. This man needed her to be the exotic lover who could not resist his charms, a persona she had perfected in no small part due to her mother's insistence.

While it was one she preferred not to use due to the fact it was one of her mother's favorites she had been left with little choice due to her dwindling resources as of late. With more than her fair share of cons ending badly she had needed a big enough score to get her out of town, and this hyena had more than fit the bill.

A tinge of guilt struck her as she walked towards the door. He was a good man, generally speaking. From what she had observed he was neither a misogynist nor an

abuser. He had seemed from all she had witnessed to be a generous and kind man to the point she was almost certain his wife was making a mistake by not mending their relationship. It pained her to add to his misery by leaving without so much as a good morning, but the nature of her lifestyle meant she could not be there when he woke.

With a deep sigh she silently closed the door and walked towards the elevator. Emotions couldn't factor into a con, her mother always said. *'You can't let your feelings cloud your judgment to be a good con artist,'* she'd told her. *'Emotions make things complicated. You can't afford the variables when you're running a job. Block them out.'* Try as she might, she could not purge them completely, nor could she forget her mother's instructions despite the fact she had not seen the woman since their split when she was sixteen. Kate had been running ever since.

Pushing thoughts of her mother out of her mind she made her way to the taxi stand and slipped into the backseat of a cab. Making eye contact with the driver, a handsome German shepherd, she nodded an acknowledgment. "Take me to the airport." Without a word, the car pulled away from the sidewalk to join the flow of traffic.

Somewhere high above the street her hyena companion was no doubt awakening to discover both his companion and his money gone from the building. Kate knew it was not likely he would report the money missing out of embarrassment if nothing else, but all the same it would be safer if she were gone before anyone came looking for her. Glancing down at her purse she considered how most women insisted their entire lives were in their bags. For her it was certainly true.

Being a con artist meant one rarely put down roots. The nature of the profession meant you were always on the move from place to place and that sometimes you had to disappear in a hurry. The good ones were smart enough to keep their belongings light and mobile. The theory was the more you had with you the more likely you would be to leave something behind or that it would slow you down. Kate had always kept everything she needed in her purse. From her money to a disposable cell phone, anything she carried had to fit inside or it wasn't necessary.

Reaching inside for her wallet she began to sort through the various ID's she carried with her. Different names and faces greeted her with each one, most of them from various states and countries, never once duplicating any details. She had memorized them all, keeping them different enough that she could recall any of their back stories upon request.

With the hyena she had been Rachel. An independent woman, Rachel had been there on behalf of a large donor to the charity event. She was single, liked red wine, and was a total foodie. Her apartment was somewhere in a luxury skyscraper downtown and she was a fan of jazz. The key to being good at slipping into these other identities was to keep your personal details specific enough so that people you encountered felt like they knew you but vague enough so that there were no details that stuck. If you did your job correctly no one would be able to describe you well enough after you left to be able to track you down.

The second part to that was that you had to be careful not to use the same identity too often. She picked Rachel's ID out of the wallet and returned it to the back of the stack. Knowing she would need a fresh one to make it through the airport she flipped through the names one a time.

Candy was a down and out stripper who would generally provide you a good time for a nominal fee. She tended to use this identity when she was looking for a short term place to stay. Usually the people who Candy encountered had a lot of cash and not a lot of common sense, but they were more than willing to throw caution to the wind for her sake. Generally Candy worked best with men but on occasion she would work equally well on women if she played it just right.

Some of the marks preferred a challenge. When she needed to play hard to get, that was when Alex came to the forefront. A tough chick with a bit of a biker edge, she was the sort to turn just about anyone down the first time. The trick was to act disinterested but just vulnerable enough that the mark kept pushing. Alex was the type to not reveal her inner feelings easily. To earn their way into her good graces the marks would usually have to prove how much they wanted to be her hero. The guys that made it this far tended to usually be worth it, at least for a little while.

Lisa was the persona she reserved exclusively for female marks. Her resident bisexual identity seemed to attract them more than if she claimed to play exclusively for the home team, maybe because they thought she had experience with both sides. When she was Lisa she tended to be shy but only long enough to get them to invest in her. Once they did Lisa turned out to be very interested in exploring her sexuality, among other things.

Finally she settled on the last one in the stack. Sarah Winters. Kate looked at the photo to recall the details of this persona. She was a nondescript college student looking to build a second career in something interesting, like cooking. An aspiring chef, she had left her old life behind to try her hand at something new. Sarah was pretty plain looking with no particular details to help her stand out, wearing little more than a white afghan sweater and a smile. Perfect.

Settling the ID into the clear sleeve at the front of her wallet she stored the rest in the usual compartment and returned her attention to the driver. The canine had made no effort to make conversation which would make forgetting her face even easier. The ones that liked to learn your life story sometimes could be problematic in making a clean getaway but the less that would make you memorable the better it was in case someone decided it was worth it to try to track you down. Most of the time, Kate was careful to leave just enough of a trail so that anyone she conned was slightly worse off for it, but not so burned that they would admit it to the world.

The majority of people tended to not want to reveal they had been manipulated, especially in the case of the types of men she tended to pursue. More often than not they would simply pretend it never happened, but if there was one thing a con artist knew was that everyone could only be pushed so far. Hurt someone bad enough and it wouldn't matter how much it would cost them, they would avenge themselves upon you.

As the cab pulled up to the airport Kate gave the driver a gentle nod before slipping a twenty through the window. The drive had been about twelve dollars so she made certain the tip was just enough to leave him happy. Climbing out on her fashionable heels she walked into the airport ready to leave this city far behind.

Making her way to the nearest ticket counter she slipped into the line. Same day air travel generally tended to be expensive, but she was certain she had gotten enough from the hyena to cover a flight, a place to stay, and a new set of clothes. Beyond that, she would have to figure it out when she got there.

Looking up at the board she considered her possible destinations. Traveling outside of the United States would be more than she could afford. It would have to be local. She scanned the list of available cities and only a few of them seemed to be within the next few hours. Two of them were places she had been running cons within the last six months, and at least three were places she was not welcome.

Before she knew it, it was her turn at the counter. Kate looked up at the attendant and offered a smile. "One ticket please." The peacock looked up with a uniquely avian head tilt and gestured to the board behind her.

"Where to?" The question hung in the air while Kate considered her limited options. Most of them were off limits to her for one reason or another. Of the three remaining choices she had left she knew only one presented the right criteria. Large enough to provide her some options and no one that would be looking for her. With a nod, she prepared her answer.

"Hartford Connecticut, please." Kate had not been back there since she was sixteen. Her mother had taken her there among one of their many homes, but it was perhaps the place she had remembered the best because it was one of the few places she had an actual friend. The life of a con artist's daughter is a complicated one, typically fraught with loneliness and always being taught to keep your cards close to your chest. The nature of the jobs her mother ran, both solo and with her involvement, rarely left time for friends. It was just fortunate circumstances that this con had required her to be enrolled in public school (under an alias, of course). Kate had befriended a young raccoon with dark hair and a warm smile.

For a few months, the two had been near inseparable. Then one day she had decided to tell her everything. Kate had shared her whole life story with her classmate. Ashley had listened silently, never interrupting. Once she had heard the whole thing Kate had expected she would be told to walk away and never come back, but instead Ashley had simply held her. Kate had never just been held by someone before. It was a feeling she would not soon forget. A few weeks later her mother pulled the plug on the con and with that, they were gone before she could even say good bye. The snake doubted her friend would even remember her.

Paying a little bit extra for the warmed seats reserved for reptiles, she boarded the flight and sat down. Staring out the window she took one last look at the city she was leaving far behind, not knowing what she was making her way into next. One thing one could say about the life of a con artist, it was never boring. One always found oneself in interesting situations, for good or ill. She sighed and leaned back, tuning out the takeoff announcements as she once again left another identity behind.

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Compared to where she had just left the weather was much less welcoming out east. Kate hoped this was not indicative of her fortunes given that her remaining resources meant her ability to travel anywhere else was unlikely. At least for the time being here was where she would need to stay until she figured out her next move. Kate had saved a fair amount of the money she had gotten from her last mark, but it would not last long.

Standing outside the airport she carefully considered her options. A hotel was too expensive. She could find a motel, but most of them knew who she was having run a lot of cons when she was a younger snake. While it was doubtful anyone would still be at any of them that would remember her, any good con artist knew better than to return to the scene of a con. That is, unless it was part of the con.

That left only one place, and she was not certain that she would be welcome there. With a dejected sigh, Kate hailed a taxi and climbed into the back.

* * *

To her relief her friend had not changed addresses in the intervening years. The house was the same as she remembered it, even down to the stones in the walkway leading up to the front door. Kate stood at the front gate for a moment steeling herself for the inevitable reunion and prepared for whatever reaction the raccoon would provide. With all the strength she could muster Kate stepped forward and pressed the doorbell.

For a long moment there was nothing. Perhaps no one was home. With a small amount of relief Kate relaxed until she heard the sound of footsteps approaching the front door. Before she could turn and run away, the door opened to reveal a young female raccoon with dark hair, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans with a black belt to tie it all together. Ashley did always have some nice fashion sense.

“Kate?” the raccoon said, almost as if she were seeing a ghost.

The reaction would not be altogether inaccurate, as she had vanished without a trace not long after telling her everything there was to know about her past. Kate could only manage a nod before Ashley opened the door and stepped outside. Seeing the young woman in front of her Kate recognized her as the same person she had known when her mother had taken her away. Her expression was unreadable, betraying nothing of her emotional state. Whether she was happy to see her or about to throw something in her face Kate could not tell, and for someone who made a living manipulating people it was rather disconcerting.

While she could tell everything about a mark within a few minutes of meeting them it was different with people who truly knew her. They were the mysteries. She could not read them near as well as people she intended to apply her skills towards. Drawing the moment out as long as possible, Ashley reached out a hand towards her face. When no slap came, Kate opened her eyes and felt the raccoon’s arms around her waist.

“Is that really you?” Ashley asked over her shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Kate held her for a few seconds longer before gently pulling away.

The raccoon looked her over and shrugged. “So what are you doing here? I haven’t seen you in...”

“Ten years,” Kate said. “I know.” She lowered her head in a rare display of humility. “Look, Ashley, I hate to do this to you but I need a place to stay.”

The raccoon considered her request while she scrutinized her, almost as if trying to confirm this was the same person she had known all those years ago. After what seemed like forever she exhaled and then folded her arms. “For how long?”

“I don’t know,” Kate admitted. “I just need somewhere to rest.”

Ashley looked at her and without a word stepped aside to allow her to enter. Her house was warm and inviting, with the main room consisting of a shared living room and kitchen. To the right was a small seating area with a plush, soft looking sofa, a glass coffee table, and a large plasma television. Assorted magazines sat in a neat pile next to the remote controls. The one on top seemed to be something about women's fashion.

The kitchen area had a small bar separating the two sections of the room. On the living room side there were two high backed stools to allow for comfortable dining. A typical setup for a small home, the fridge faced the front door with the sink in the corner and a coffee maker on its left side.

Kate remained standing in the center of the room, uncharacteristically silent. If this were a con she would know precisely what to do next with contingency plans for every possibility, including when to disappear and where to go next. For the first time since she could remember, she had no idea what her next move was going to be.

Closing the door, Ashley came closer with her paws in her pockets. "There's some food in the fridge, but I wasn't expecting company so we'd probably have to order in. I don't have an extra bed but the couch is comfortable enough. You're welcome to it if you don't mind sleeping with your feet hanging off the edge. I probably have a blanket or two around here somewhere."

"It's fine. Thank you," she said. Kate could tell her old friend had a million questions, but much to her relief she kept them to herself for the time being. Even if she had an answer for them she was not certain she was ready to give them just yet. The diamondback rattlesnake clutched her purse tight between her fingers out of habit grateful for something to occupy her hands.

It was then her friend noticed her lack of baggage. "You travel light," she said.

"Occupational hazard," Kate replied, keeping her head lowered.

"Well, I'm sure I have some pajamas around here you could borrow if you don't mind flower print." Ashley gestured towards the couch. "Sit down, you look like you're about to faint." The raccoon walked down the hall and returned a moment later with a folded up blanket and a pillow. "For later." She set them on the coffee table and shrugged.

Kate took a seat on the couch but kept the purse in her hands. "Thanks for letting me in," she began, "and for not asking questions."

"I'm sure you have your reasons, but at some point I am going to want to know what's going on." She let out a deep breath and joined her on the couch. "I never thought I'd see you again."

"Long story," Kate replied.

Folding her legs underneath her she reached for the phone. "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry. Feel like a pizza?" she asked.

Kate gave a weak smile and nodded. Other than a few pretzels on the plane she had not eaten in quite a while. The last meal she had shared with her previous mark had long since faded, and as she took in her surroundings it occurred to her how different her life was compared to Ashley's. Every day her friend woke up in the same place with the same job, knowing exactly what was in store for her. She could make plans beyond the next few days, something Kate had never been able to do before.

Running with her mother rarely meant being anywhere for longer than a few months and never knowing when she would pull the plug on the current con and move on

to the next one. They were always on the move, and with each new location came another identity and another con.

For the short ones they would stay in a motel and pay cash. This way whenever it came time to disappear they would leave no trace behind. They would always stay under a false name which did not match their alias in case someone saw them and came looking. Nicolette always had a million and one plans on how to disappear and had a chameleon like ability change her appearance on the fly, allowing her to move from one place to the next like a ghost. Even with a young daughter in tow it seemed like nothing would slow her down.

The longer cons were Kate's favorites. Anytime her mother needed to be somewhere for a longer period of time they would get an apartment, which meant she would get her own room and a new set of clothes to sell the lie. Sometimes she would even enroll her in school, though most of the time the elder snake insisted on teaching her the art of the confidence game instead, insisting that it would be the only education she would ever need.

It was on one of these long cons that she had met Ashley, and one of the few times she had a genuine friend to talk to.

The pizza arrived about twenty minutes later, delivered by a friendly looking hedgehog who received a rather generous tip from the raccoon. Ashley paused to smell the pizza before carrying the box to the coffee table and setting it down along with the paper plates and napkins. "I hope you're hungry,"

"Starving," she said.

Kate pulled the closest slice onto a paper plate and took a bite, savoring the first real food she had eaten in several hours. The pizza was at the perfect temperature, just warm enough to leave the cheese stringy and melted. She held the slice in the air taking several bites before she lowered it onto the paper plate.

Ashley returned with a pair of matching wine glasses and a bottle with a label Kate recognized as a popular Chardonnay. She shrugged and held the label so it faced her. "I don't know what you drink, so hopefully this is fine."

"I'm not picky when it comes to wine," Kate said, holding the glass out gratefully as Ashley poured. She took a test sip and nodded her approval. "It's pretty good. So is this pizza, as a matter of fact."

"It's from a local pizzeria. I order a pie from them about once a week, usually when I don't feel like cooking." Ashley pulled a slice onto a paper plate for herself. "Or when company comes."

"Sorry about dropping in on you," she said, offering a half smile.

"I'm more curious about what happened after you left," Ashley admitted. "I always thought you'd call or write me or something."

Kate shook her head. "It was against the rules."

"Rules?" Ashley asked.

"My mother's rules." She sighed. "You remember what I told you about what my mother really did for a living?"

Ashley nodded. "Well, I know she didn't work at the library. That much I could have guessed before you told me."

"One of the rules of being a con artist is to leave no traces behind. That means no friends, no family, no one that can tell anyone where you went."

“Sounds lonely,” Ashley remarked.

“To a con artist, the only people you can trust are your crew, and for my mom that was usually just herself. She didn’t trust many people,” she said.

Taking another bite of pizza, Ashley shrugged. “I don’t think I could live like that.”

“It’s not an easy life. You never have a chance to slow down. Every day is another con. You’re always on the move from one place to the next.” She lowered her muzzle.

“So why are you back here?” Ashley asked.

“Because I had nowhere else to go,” she replied. Kate sipped her wine and stared off into the distance.

Ashley set her pizza down and leaned over. “What happened?”

Kate opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. “You sure you want to know the answer to that question?”

The raccoon touched Kate’s smooth scaled hand with her paw and nodded. “Hit me.”

With a deep breath, Kate nodded. “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She set her wine glass on the table and shrugged. “I never knew my father. At least, not really. I know who he is, and what he does for a living, but I haven’t seen him since I was four. My mother decided she wanted to run a long con on him, and she was going all in for this one. She became his girlfriend and then his fiancé, and then finally his wife. All the while she wanted one thing, his family’s vast wealth and the power that came with it. For her I suppose it was the Holy Grail. After a few years, I came along. When my egg hatched my mother raised me, kept up the good house wife act, but after a while for reasons she never shared with me, one day she just packed me up and left him without so much as a word.”

“What about your father?” Ashley asked. “Did he look for you?”

“I assume he must have, but my mother was careful not to leave anything behind. She told me to take nothing with us, but I couldn’t just leave without something to remember my father.” She reached into her purse and held out a picture. “It’s the only piece of him I have.”

Ashley examined the photo carefully before handing it back. “I can see why you kept it.”

“From there, my mom taught me everything she knew about the confidence game. Before I was ten I knew every trick in the book and even a few that weren’t. By the time I was thirteen I was even helping in some of the cons. I guess at some point mom decided I wasn’t worth keeping around anymore and she left. She didn’t even leave a note.” Kate shrugged.

Ashley listened to everything, eating her pizza in small bites. Her tail waved gently behind her while she gestured for Kate to continue the story. “What did you do next?”

“What could I do?” Kate asked. “I started running cons. I looked for her now and then, but I never found her. She covered her tracks too well. Since I had no other plan and no place to go I just ran con after con until finally I ran out of options.”

“And so you came back here,” Ashley replied.

"I didn't know where else to go." Kate finished her pizza slice and set the empty paper plate on the coffee table.

Placing a paw on her shoulder, she gave it a gentle squeeze before picking up the box of pizza. "Well, you can stay here, at least for a little while. I'm going to put the pizza away. If you want more, the box is in the fridge."

"Thanks," she said, reaching for the blanket and pulling it over her.

Ashley returned a moment later for the wine bottle, taking a seat on the arm of the sofa. "I've got to get to bed, but if you want to watch TV the remote is right over there." With a smile, she placed the bottle in the fridge before disappearing down the hall.

Kate let out a deep breath towards the ceiling, curling up under the blanket. Turning the television to a random channel she was greeted with a commercial of a happy family. Quickly turning the television off she returned the remote to its place on the coffee table and decided it was best to attempt to get some rest. As tired as she was, however, sleep refused to come.

Despite her best efforts to calm her mind, serenity continued to elude her. Try as she might to stop thinking about the choices that had led her here every decision kept replaying itself over and over again. Kate glanced down the hallway at the door to Ashley's bedroom and shook her head. She should never have come back here. Her friend was more than generous to allow her inside but Kate had no right to ask for shelter when all she was good for was getting what she could and moving on.

She thought once again of the happy family she had seen in the commercial and all she could think of was that it was Ashley's world, not hers. Kate had never known the sort of life most people had led, only seeing glimpses of what it was like to be a normal person. Life as a con artist meant you were rather good at pretending to be someone else but rarely did you ever get an opportunity to simply be who you actually were.

Even though Nicolette had taught her everything she knew about running a con it was only after she had reunited with Ashley that she realized the difference between her and her mother. Her mother never took the time to make friends. To her, everyone was either a partner or a mark. For Kate, she had learned from the short time with her father how much genuine connections really meant between two people. He had loved her. Of that much she was certain. The time she had spent with him had taught her that to her mother she was simply an asset. It was not until she was old enough to participate in the cons that she had really come to understand that.

Kate pulled the blanket away from her and sat up on the couch. Listening for any sounds she slithered to a standing position. Hearing nothing, she began to gather up her few possessions. It had been a mistake to come here and burden Ashley with her problems. Her friend had welcomed her when she had no right to even ask.

There were a few things she could still try. All she needed was to get back out there and nab a big enough score. Kate picked up her heels in her fingers and padded to the kitchen. Hastily scrawling a note she signed it and then silently glided towards the door to leave.

"Going somewhere?" Ashley asked from behind her.

"I was just going for a walk," Kate lied.

The raccoon folded her arms. "Yeah, with all of your stuff?" she asked. "Where were you going to go?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," Kate replied.

“Do you even know what you’re going to do next?” she asked. When there was no answer she scowled. “Were you even going to tell me you were going?”

Kate lowered her head, unable to meet her friend’s gaze. “I left a note.”

Searching the counter she located the hastily scribbled message, tearing it from the rest of the pad before holding it up to read. “I’m sorry.”, she read aloud. “That’s it?”

“I shouldn’t have come here,” Kate said. “It was a mistake.”

Ashley walked up to her and shook her head. “The only mistake would be you walking out that door.”

“What?” Kate asked.

“You say you don’t know why you came back here, but I think you do. You may not know it but you are lost and looking for someone to help point you in the right direction.”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” she said.

Ashley shook her head. “It’s not about that at all. You’re afraid to depend on other people.”

Kate turned towards the front door, but her friend stepped forward to block her exit. “Move.”

“Do you really want me to?” the raccoon asked.

Kate frowned and looked at the door behind her. Her mother would simply push past her. For that matter Nicolette never would have come here at all. Torn between her two options she turned away from the front door. “You don’t want me here.”

Ashley shook her head. “If I didn’t want you here I never would have let you in the door. I saw you needed help so I offered it. No strings and no expectations. Now I’m here to help you if you want but if you’re just going to walk back out there into those cold dark streets then you go right ahead, but don’t expect me to answer the door the next time you come back.” She moved away from the door. As she walked past her, she stopped and touched her shoulder. “I can tell you’re not happy. Whatever it is that you’re looking for I can tell you that you won’t find it out there. Now if you want to go back to your old life it’s out there waiting for you. Though, if you’re tired of that and want to try something different, maybe you should try staying in one place for a while.” She removed her paw and stopped once more at the entrance to the hallway. “I’m going back to bed. If you’re still here when I wake up, I’ll help you figure it out. If not, good luck out there.”

Once she had disappeared, Kate turned back towards the doorway and unlocked it. Pulling open the door she stared out into the night and thought about the happy family from the commercial. There must be something to all that or so many people wouldn’t want it for their own lives, so it seemed. Kate looked down at her purse and heels and cast one last look out the front door before closing it and going back to the couch.

Setting her belongings on the coffee table she laid back and tried to sleep once more. This time, when her head hit the pillow, all she had were pleasant dreams.

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Ashley woke up to the sound of frying eggs and sizzling bacon. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes she sat up in her queen sized bed and swung her feet paws over the

edge, dropping to the carpet. Her interest piqued she wrapped her bathrobe around her before walking out into the kitchen.

Spread before her on the bar was a fruit tray with a variety of melon slices along with a yogurt parfait in front of each place setting.

Kate stood in the kitchen in front of the stove making the bacon while the toast and coffee attended to themselves. With a meek smile the diamondback rattlesnake held up a hand. "Morning."

"Good morning yourself," she replied. "What's all this?"

"It's breakfast," she said. "Well, most of it. I'm still working on a couple of things. I honestly thought you'd sleep a little later."

"I might have, if I hadn't smelled that bacon," she replied. Kate slipped a couple of slices onto each plate before returning her attention to the eggs.

"I hope you like your eggs over easy," the snake said.

Leaning in to smell the bacon, the raccoon gave her a warm smile. "And you cooked all this?"

"Well, not all of it. The fruit plate I bought, but everything else I made." She shrugged.

Ashley picked up her fork and speared a cube of honeydew melon. "Well, it all looks delicious," she said.

Kate smiled, depositing two perfect eggs onto each plate. The toaster oven beeped, rewarding the two with near perfect slices of toast. The trick was to get it just cooked enough so it was just slightly brown and crispy. Accepting the toast with a grin, Ashley spread butter on it allowing it to melt into the cracks.

Coming around the counter Kate deposited a mug in front of her and took the other seat. "I didn't know how you liked your coffee so I just threw in a little milk and sugar."

Taking a sip, Ashley let the warm liquid move around in her muzzle for a moment before swallowing with an approving nod. "It's perfect."

Apparently relieved, Kate smiled and began to eat her breakfast. "Well, be sure to eat it all, I may have cooked a little more than we needed."

"Just a little," Ashley agreed. Tasting every item on the plate she was impressed with Kate's cooking skills. The entire meal had been prepared to perfection. "You've really outdone yourself." After a few more bites, she turned towards the snake. "I don't suppose you know how to tend a bar?"

"I can, why?" Kate asked.

"Because after we finish here, I'm going to get you a job." Ashley wagged her finger at her.

Turning away slightly, Kate shrugged. "I've never had a real job before."

"Well, if you're going to stick around you're going to need one. It may not be as glamorous as what you're used to, but Sal is a good guy. If I tell him you're worth it, he'll give you a shot. Promise me you'll give it a try?" she asked.

Kate moved her eggs around with her fork before giving a sigh and nodding. "It can't hurt."

"Trust me, you'll love it."

* * *

The bar where Ashley worked was a small but popular local spot just off the main road. The location was close enough so it was still nearby the city but not so far away it was officially in the suburbs. Parking in the rear of the building, Kate looked over at Ashley as she opened the door. "I don't know if I can do this."

Ashley rolled her eyes at her friend. "If even half the stories you've told me are true, this is nothing. Now come on before I have to drag you in there."

Kate shrugged and looked down at her clothes. She was still wearing the same dress she had on when she had arrived at Ashley's the night before. Setting her heels on the floor of the car she slipped them on before casting Ashley a questioning glance. "Are you sure this is all right? I don't really have any other clothes."

The raccoon grabbed her by the arm. "Trust me, Sal likes hot bartenders. Now, would you just come with me already?" she asked.

Knowing she did not really expect an answer, Kate allowed herself to be dragged along as they walked into the back of the building. The rattlesnake followed her friend down the hall into a small office in the back corner where a badger sat at the desk looking at his records. From what Kate could tell they were the inventory of the various liquors he had in stock.

Ashley knocked on the door frame, and when the badger did not respond she coughed aloud. "Hey, Sal."

The badger looked up with a bit of a scowl and shrugged. "Oh, it's you."

"I brought you Tony's replacement." She gestured to the snake beside her.

Still looking at Ashley, he stared at her with a disbelieving expression. "I thought I was the one who did the hiring around here."

"Trust me. You'll want to hire her." Ashley wrapped her arm around Kate's shoulder. "Put this one behind the bar, you won't be able to fill the glasses fast enough."

Looking Kate up and down, he narrowed his eyes in scrutiny. "Well, you look cute enough." He rose to stand. "Tell you what. I'll give you an audition. You do well, you've got the job. You can't handle it, you hit the bricks. Fair enough?"

"I think I can handle that." Kate gave a nod.

"All right," he said, walking out the door. "Follow me." He led the two out to the main bar area. A few staff members bustled about performing daily prep work and cleaning, but most of them kept working as they took up a position behind the bar. Kate looked up at the badger who gestured towards the massive array of bottles. Behind the bar was practically every type of alcohol known to sentient life. Beneath it was an assortment of glasses and all the usual accessories like lemons, limes, and salt. From this setup one could make practically any drink one desired, and then some. "Make me your best cocktail."

Kate hesitated a moment, but with an encouraging nod from Ashley she stepped forward and picked up a tumbler, setting it down on the bar. Moving quickly she poured gin, cranberry, and lemon juice into the glass. Adding some cranberries and ice cubes she swirled it around with the motion of her hand before dropping some mint leaves on top and sliding it over to where Sal had taken a seat at the bar.

Her heart in her throat she held her breath as he took a sip, thinking to himself for a moment before he finally put the glass down on the bar and nodded. "You're hired. We'll try you out tonight and if it goes well, we'll go from there. Sound good?"

“I can work with that,” Kate said.

“Good. We’ll talk about specifics later. Right now, you need to find something a bit more appropriate for the ambiance around here,” Sal replied.

Ashley smirked. “Someone’s been reading their word a day calendar.”

“You know, employee reviews are coming up...”

“I take it back,” she said.

“That’s better,” Sal responded with a friendly chuckle. He reached under the bar and held out something towards Kate. “I don’t have one with your name on it yet, but this will have to do until I can get one more permanent.”

“Thanks,” Kate said, looking down at the plastic name tag. In bold white letters it stated ‘My Name Is’. With a small smile she affixed it to her dress and nodded.

“Perfect.” Ashley clapped her paws together.

“What is your name anyway?” Sal asked. “For the paperwork.”

“Kate.” She smiled. “Kate Coyle.”