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I had checked the dressing on Victor the billygoat’s foreleg and was turning to leave the pasture when I saw Kyle at the fence. The fancy clothes threw me off, but only for a second. Kyle is Kyle, no matter what he wears. Gray jacket and slacks, crisp white shirt, green tie, and black wing tips—all of it fit, none of it suited.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said as I approached.

“Nice threads.”

He nodded. “Project the positive, that’s key. Personal appearance is where it starts.”

“Is that working?”

“The suit? Haven’t even worn it until today. Made my first bid on a corporate account this morning.”

“Impressive.”

“I didn’t get it yet. But I’ll tell you what, Charlie, people love the EnCompass. It’s a quality product.”

“Sadie and Boyd think so, looks like.”

“They like theirs, yeah. Everybody who’s bought from me so far is just super-pleased.” He glanced at my belt. “Don still borrowing yours?”

“That’s right.”

We set off walking up the hill. “So what brings you to the zoo?”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about Mom.”

I waited.

“I don’t mean to pressure you or anything like that,” Kyle assured me. “I kind of think I know what you’re going through.”

“Do you?”
“This is top secret, Charlie, it’s not public knowledge,” he said in low tones. “I’m trying to get some distance from Brenda right now, you know.”

“Distance.”

We had reached the top of the hill. Kyle stood in front of me, his hands caught up in the old wrestler’s motion, his volume on the rise. “Brenda’s just a total and complete downer when it comes to my career change. I mean, she’s so negative. I try to explain there’s a revolution going on in navigation, but she doesn’t want to hear about it. She doesn’t have any faith in me at all. The environment at our place is just shitty, you know. I’ve slept at Mom’s the last few nights, on the couch in my office.”

“So you and Brenda are separating?”

“It’s looking that way. And I’m thinking, what if I get this corporate account? I’ll be able to afford a place of my own. You know, a home office combo type thing.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Doesn’t it? But I have to tell you, Charlie, I can’t see leaving Mom all by herself right now.”

I waited.

“The fight, you leaving. She’s taking stuff pretty hard.”

“She is.”

“I think it reminds her of my dad taking off. Old demons, you know?”

“Better and better.”

“She talks like she’s mad at you, but I think she kind of blames herself.”

“What makes you think that?” I said, with new interest. This angle was unexpected. So was this kind of subtlety, coming from Kyle.

“She and I, we’ve been talking a lot about the Brenda situation. How I need to get out of that environment. So yesterday I said to her, ‘What about the environment here? What made Charlie leave?’ She didn’t answer me. And you know Mom, she has an answer for everything.”
I was still pondering that when Brook appeared and asked me if I’d made a friend. I introduced Kyle. Brook shook his hand and asked if he’d ever seen a baby mountain lion before.

“Only in the newspaper, with Charlie holding it.”

“Want to see the real deal?”

“Could I?”

We headed toward Verity’s room, Brook explaining to Kyle that the cub was being treated for conjunctivitis. Kyle asked if that was the same as pink eye and she confirmed that it was.

“Man,” Kyle said, “I had that once. That sucks for the little mountain lion.”

Brook tossed Verity’s panda in the cage and then asked Kyle if he wanted to do the drops.

“Me?” Kyle said.

“Charlie will hold your jacket, I bet.”

Kyle took off his jacket and handed it to me. He unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves. Brook gave him the dropper and then went in after Verity. Kyle bent his knees and lowered his butt like a halfback waiting for the ball to be hiked. Soon Brook emerged, hugging Verity and his panda. She coached Kyle through the procedure, making much of his excellent aim.

“His breath was so hot,” Kyle said when the cat was back in his cage. “You think he wanted to bite me?”

“I’m sure he did.” Brook smiled at Kyle, sizing him up with frank, eager eyes.

“Wow,” Kyle said, shaking his head, “that was just... That was awesome.” He bent down and looked inside the cage, where Verity was busy extracting stuffing from the panda. He turned back to Brook. “Will you let him go when he gets bigger?”

“He wouldn’t make it without his mother to teach him. He’ll have to stay here.”

“Will you train him?”

“This is a zoo, Kyle, not a circus.”

“Meaning?”
“We don’t make our animals perform. We just ask them to be themselves.”

That notion seemed to hit home with Kyle. He pondered it a minute. “That’s all you should ever expect, isn’t it,” he said with gravity.

Next Brook asked Kyle if he’d like to see some grown up mountain lions, and he said he would love to. Tired of playing the coathanger, I tapped him on the shoulder and gave his jacket back. We set off for the large enclosure, Brook all warmed up now, dishing out wisdom to her new acolyte. A lifetime spent on the receiving end of Jean’s endless teachings made Kyle a shoo-in for the pupil’s role. He followed Brook all over the zoo, nodding vigorously whenever she made a point, shaking his head in sorrow or disbelief whenever she told of some policy or individual act of cruelty that resulted in the suffering of wild creatures. Brook was amazingly patient with him. To every one of his dumb sincere questions she made a thoughtful response. I followed along wondering if I should ask Kyle to give me back his jacket. Then at least I would have something to do.

After much strolling and pausing we finally reached the front gate. If I thought Kyle would exit through it before whipping out his PNS, I was thinking in a wishful way. Brook had barely finished thanking him for his visit when Kyle brushed his jacket aside and flashed the EnCompass in her face.

“I noticed that before,” she said. “What is it?”

Brook’s routine was tolerable even on a second take, but Kyle’s hadn’t even grabbed me the first time around. I excused myself, saying I would see about dinner.

The first thing I did when I got inside was remove the thawed chicks from the oven and slide them into their metal bowl. I then scrubbed the cookie sheet vigorously and lined it with foil for good measure. I mixed some peanut butter cookie batter, made balls and rowed them on the sheet. The cookies were starting to smell good when Brook finally came in, but if she noticed she didn’t say anything.
I pointed to her chicks and apologized for Kyle. “He just started selling those things. He’s all gung-ho.”

“I can see why,” she said. “What a neat machine.” She turned so I could see the EnCompass clipped to her belt. “He’s letting me try it out till tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“He’s donating it for the auction. Isn’t that generous?”

“Sounds like good business to me.”

Brook put the bowl under her arm and told me she’d be back to help in a minute. I heard her whistling some frisky tune as she worked her way back along the side of the cottage.

When she returned I was just pulling the first sheet of cookies out of the oven. She saw them and her eyes doubled in size. “That’s what I smelled!” She grabbed the egg turner from the drawer and slid it under one of the hot cookies. She bit off half of it and started dancing around huffing, trying to cool her mouth. I said I hadn’t heard her whistle before, but she was too involved with the cookies to hear me.

You’d think the heat of the first one would make her wait before trying a second. Not so. She ate three cookies without a pause and was going for her fourth when I intervened, complaining that she would spoil her dinner.

“Cookies for dinner!” she shouted. “That’s what I want.”

“You’ll have cookies for dessert. For dinner you’re having spaghetti with these meatballs I’m making. And salad, which you still have to fix.”

“Toughy.” She stuck her peanut buttery tongue out at me, giggling.

I got the vegetables for her and she began to wash them, asking me how I knew Kyle.

I told her.

“Was he out here on a peacemaking mission?”

“In a way, I guess.”

“That’s kind of him.”

“Not really. He has an interest in me patching things up with his mom.”
“Why’s that?”
“If I go back, he won’t have to worry about leaving her alone.”
“He lives with his mom?”
“Not usually. He’s feuding with his wife right now.”
“Hard to believe. He seems like such a kind guy.”
“You think so?”
“I wish everyone I talked to was that receptive. A lot of times people just humor me, but he was really listening. He cared about what I was telling him.”
“He does have a lot of enthusiasm. Too bad he doesn’t have more focus.”
“He seems very focused on selling the EnCompass.”
“Give him some time. If I know Kyle, he’ll lose interest. Something else will grab his attention.”
“Maybe he just hasn’t found the right thing before. You can’t just focus on any old thing, Charlie. It has to be something you care about. The thing, you know?”
“Like you and your animals.”
“Exactly.”
“Which reminds me,” I said, seeing my chance to expel Kyle from the conversation. “You heard anything about our goat killer?”
“I only know what I read in the Bee. The department’s up to something, what exactly I don’t know. I’m hoping you can tell me.”
“I don’t know any more than you do.”
“But you can find out.”
I waited.
“Don Mackey, your buddy at COUGAR ALERT. I’ll bet he knows exactly what’s going on.”
“You’re probably right.”
“I’ll bet he’s wondering where you disappeared to.”
“Yeah?”
“So maybe it’s time to let him know.”
“Are you asking me to spy for you?”
She showed me her small square teeth. “Didn’t you say you wanted to earn your keep?”

“Two days of mucking out cages, that gorgeous bandage on Victor’s leg—what’s that worth?”

“I appreciate all you’ve done, Charlie. You don’t owe me anything. I was kidding about that. You’re in a position to help people know the truth about what the department’s up to. I’m pointing that out to you, is all.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” I said, but even as I spoke the words I knew I would get the information for her. I wish I could say altruism alone made the task attractive to me, but that wouldn’t be the whole truth. What I liked most about the information Brook wanted is that no one else could get it for her.