

Herding Cats

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Herding Cats

Characters

- STELLA A twelve-year old female tabby cat, probably 30s to mid-40s in human years. She's plucky and spunky, and if there's an alpha cat in the group, it's Stella. She's completely devoted to Kelly and cherishes her fellow cats. But she's innately afraid of (and prejudiced against) dogs, due to a traumatic event from her past.
- BUDDHA A large male cat and Stella's litter mate, so also likely in the 30s to mid-40s human range. He is smart, literate and enjoys the finer things in feline life. He may come off as a tad snobby but he loves Kelly and his fellow cats. A British or upper-crusty New England accent (think Frasier Crane) would suit him well.
- LUPIN A male tabby cat, 7 years old, perhaps late 20s to late 30s in human years. He's a former "street cat" who loves to play. He's proud of his urban, tough-guy upbringing, but he's also sweet and a little naïve. A Brooklyn or Jersey accent would work for him.
- CHARLIZE A female pit bull dog, 4 years old, somewhere in her 20s or 30s in human years. Scrappy, loveable and sympathetic to anyone's difficulties in life. She wants to be friends with everyone, even those who behave antagonistically toward her.
- KELLY The human female owner of the pets, mid 20s to mid-late 30s. She's having a very difficult time at her job, which has her constantly on edge. She's not a "crazy cat lady" by any stretch but she's concerned about animal welfare and is very affectionate toward her pets.

Setting

KELLY's apartment, with furnishings including a dining area and a comfy couch – There are scratching posts, cat toys lying around, food bowls and other hints that we're in a cat lover's place. One of the toys is a turbo scratcher, which is a circular scratch pad surrounded by a track with a ball that a cat can bat around.

ACT ONE: SCENE ONE

LIGHTS UP on:

BUDDHA: sitting on the couch with one leg over the other, leafing through a copy of *Catster* magazine.

LUPIN: Lying on the floor on his back, tossing and catching a cat toy.

We observe them for a few moments. Then STELLA enters, takes a few steps and catches sight of LUPIN, who is unaware she entered. She wears a mischievous smile and ducks behind the couch. She pops her head up and looks. She ducks down, and a few seconds later pops her head up on the other side of the couch. BUDDHA sees this and shakes his head. He starts to say something, but STELLA puts her paw over his mouth. Then she moves away from the couch, crouches, wiggles her tush and pounces upon LUPIN! She puts her face right onto his.

Herding Cats

STELLA
BOOGABOOGABOOGABOOGA!!

LUPIN (completely startled)
Yeaaggh!!

STELLA
Yer catnip or yer life, varmint!

LUPIN
What?!

STELLA
I said yer catnip or yer life, putty tat!

LUPIN
My catnip, my catnip! Wait... Stella?

STELLA (getting off him)
Well yeah, who else?

LUPIN
Oooh, Stella, ya got me good that time!

STELLA
I'll say I did. Hey Buddha, did you see that pounce?

BUDDHA (face in magazine)
M-hm.

LUPIN
Ya got me, Stella, but when ya least expect it, I'm gonna get ya back! Don't forget, yer messin' with a bona fide—

STELLA and LUPIN
Street cat.

STELLA (cont.)
I know, I know. Well it looks like the score is: girl cat – one, street cat – zip. *(beat)* Heyyy... what's that gizmo there? I haven't seen that before.

STELLA points to the turbo scratcher.

LUPIN
Oh, wait till ya see this. Stella, this... this thing is like – incredible. Here, check it out.

LUPIN crouches down and scratches the turbo scratch pad.

Herding Cats

LUPIN (bliss)
Aaaaaahhhh...

STELLA (amazed)
Whoaaa...

LUPIN
C'mon, give it a try!

STELLA crouches down too and scratches the pad.

STELLA (bliss)
Mmmm... oh, this is wonderful!

LUPIN
Ain't it the best?

STELLA
Ohhh, that makes my claws feel so good! Hey Buddha, you gotta try this.

BUDDHA
No thank you, you two enjoy your plaything.

STELLA
Oh come on, are you gonna sit on your backside all night looking at that smut?

BUDDHA
Smut? What do you mean, smut? This happens to be the definitive periodical for the modern American feline enthusiast.

STELLA and LUPIN
Smut.

BUDDHA
Oh, what would *you* know about it?

STELLA
Let me guess, you're gawking at a *Persian*, right? All fluffy and prissy and luxurious?

BUDDHA
Of course not! I just happen to be looking at photographs of, um... oh, what do you have against Persians, anyway? Persian is a perfectly noble and respectable breed.

STELLA (scoffs)
Pfft, "Breed." Well I happen to think there's no *breed* more *noble* and *respectable* than us D.S.H.'s. Right, Lupin?

Herding Cats

LUPIN
Uh, D.S.H.'s?

STELLA
Yeah, Domestic Short Hairs?

LUPIN
Of course, ain't it the truth!

STELLA and LUPIN do a fist bump.

STELLA
Let's scratch some more, Lupin.

LUPIN
Okay, but Stella, it gets even better than that... watch this!

LUPIN bats the ball around the track, and STELLA's jaw drops in amazement. (While the scene plays out, BUDDHA turns the magazine lengthwise, as if he's looking at a centerfold).

STELLA
No. Way.

LUPIN
Is that the coolest thing ever ya ever seen, or what?! Go ahead, try it!

STELLA bats the ball around.

STELLA
That is like, so... *compelling*.

LUPIN
Ain't it great? Ya hit the ball, and then it rolls around, and then it stops, and then ya hit it again! I could do this all day long.

STELLA
It sort of puts you in a trance.

LUPIN
Yeah, it's like, uh—what's the word... uh, "memorizing"? Is that right, Buddha?

BUDDHA (admiring his "centerfold")
Mesmerizing...

LUPIN
That's it, mesmerizing.

Herding Cats

STELLA

Yeah. And you know who would have really loved this? Benji.

LUPIN

Aw yeah, Benji woulda gone to town on this thing!

BUDDHA (scoffs)

Benji? He would have torn it to shreds within minutes, and that would have been the end of it.

STELLA (looking heavenward)

You're probably right, but that would have been worth seeing. Ah, we miss ya, Benge.

LUPIN (looking up and offering a salute)

We sure do, old buddy.

STELLA (sigh)

Anyhow... where'd this doodad come from?

LUPIN

Kelly got it for us. Just this morning.

STELLA

Of course, Kelly! I should've known. Kelly's the best.

LUPIN

She sure is the best! I heard her say she got it from the Amazon?

BUDDHA

Listen. First of all, let it be said that I am also of the opinion that our beloved Kelly is in fact, as you both rightfully proclaim, "the best". But let it also be said that yon gadget did *not* come from the Amazon. The Amazon isn't home to scratchy toys. It's home to rainforests and mangroves and macaws and anacondas and piranhas and tree frogs and cats.

LUPIN

Cats? Cats like us, Buddha?

BUDDHA

Actually, rather large cats, Lupin. Like pumas and ocelots and margays and jaguars.

LUPIN (mimicking driving a car)

Jaguar? Ya mean like "Jaguar – the art of performance?"

BUDDHA (smiles)

Well observed lad, but I mean actual jaguars. Anyhow, what were we just talking about?

LUPIN

Um, Kelly?

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Yes, Kelly! Say, Kelly's running rather late again tonight, wouldn't you say?

LUPIN

Yeah, later than usual, even. Do ya think everything's okay?

BUDDHA

I can't think of any reason for concern.

LUPIN

Yeah, but usually she's fed us and gone to sleep by this time. I wonder what's keepin' her out tonight.

STELLA

Well isn't it kind of obvious?

BUDDHA and LUPIN (beat)

No.

STELLA

Her *job*, you guys. Her job has been keeping her out late most nights. And I think it's got her pretty stressed out.

BUDDHA

"Stressed out?" I hadn't noticed.

STELLA

Then you haven't been paying attention around here, Buddha. Kelly's just not herself lately.

LUPIN

Ya know, now that ya mention it, Kelly seems pretty tired a lot of the time. Ya might be on ta somethin', Stella.

STELLA

Darn right I am.

BUDDHA

Hmmm. Curious. Stella, do you really sense a heightened state of anxiety in Kelly?

STELLA

Yeah Buddha. And it's really unfair, you know?

LUPIN

Unfair? Whatcha mean, Stell?

STELLA

Well, I have the feeling that some humans work super hard but don't have too much to show for it.

BUDDHA

But Kelly's an intelligent human of high moral character. Surely her employers recognize that.

Herding Cats

STELLA

Maybe, but the three of us don't know all the details.

LUPIN

Gee Stell, I *hope* that job ain't too hard on Kelly. Is there anything we can do to help?

STELLA

Well, I think the best thing we can do is be extra cute and snuggly, so that when Kelly gets home, the first thing she'll do is go through the lovey-dovey routine with us. That always makes her happy.

LUPIN

Yeah, good call, Stell.

BUDDHA

Agreed. And when she arrives, I shall convey to her my most irresistibly precious countenance, by which I mean—this:

BUDDHA makes a cute expression.

BUDDHA (cont.)

And then, I expect she will bestow upon me a most pleasing chin rub!

LUPIN

Sounds good, Buddha. But *I'm* gonna roll over and show her my belly. And then she's gonna *scratch* my belly. Like this. (*he scratches his belly*). And then I'm gonna go "aaaahhhhhh."

STELLA

Oh, you guys with your chin rubs and belly scratches. Know what *I'm* gonna do? Do ya?

BUDDHA and LUPIN

You're gonna wiggle your tush.

STELLA

I'm gonna wiggle my tush! And then I'm gonna pounce! Surprise, Kelly! Then I'm gonna nuzzle her, all nice and soft. And later, I'm gonna lie down on her lap and she's gonna pet my head and sing me the Sweetie Darling song.

LUPIN

Hoo boy, that's such a girly song.

STELLA

Well duh, I'm a girl.

BUDDHA

Quite. (*beat*) Oh, I think I hear her approaching! Is everything the way Kelly left it, ere her departure?

LUPIN (looks around)

Yeah, I think we're good.

Herding Cats

BUDDHA (claps paws)

All right then. Places, everyone!

BUDDHA puts the magazine down, and starts giving himself a cat bath.

STELLA and LUPIN play ping-pong with the new toy, but after a moment STELLA looks back to BUDDHA.

STELLA

Buddha, you really think everything's okay with Kelly?

BUDDHA (reassuring smile)

Of course it is. Just have confidence in her. It's not as if she's doomed, you know.

KELLY enters.

KELLY

Augh! I'm doomed. I'm totally screwed! Work sucks! Work sucks work sucks work sucks. Sucky suck suckity sucks. Bust my tail for four years and every day it's (*silly voice*) "That's not quite what we're looking for, Kelly" or "We don't think the market is trending that way, Kelly" or "You should consult with Madison, Kelly!" Madison?! That *phony*? They're gonna kick my butt to the curb, I just know it. How on earth am I even supposed to—

KELLY notices the cats, and her mood brightens instantly.

KELLY (beat, cont.)

Aw, hey you guyyys.... Momma's home!

The cats look at each other dubiously, then speak:

STELLA, LUPIN and BUDDHA

Hi, Kelly!

KELLY

Well meow meow meow to you too! Oh, do you guys like your new toy?

BUDDHA

Well, *they* certainly do, but I simply take pleasure in your company.

KELLY approaches BUDDHA. He makes his cute face.

KELLY (cont.)

Aw, Buddha, there's my big big boy... who wants a chin rub?

BUDDHA

As a matter of fact, *I* would fancy a chin rub!

Herding Cats

KELLY rubs BUDDHA's chin and he scrunches his face in delight. He sprawls out on the couch and relaxes happily. Next, she approaches LUPIN, who has rolled onto his back, curled to one side with his paws in the air, the classic "love me" cat pose.

KELLY

Hey Lupin. Oh, how's my loopy little Lupin? Can I scratch that belly?

LUPIN

Well, if it ain't askin' too much?

KELLY scratches LUPIN's belly and he makes the contented sound he promised. While this happens, STELLA sneaks out of KELLY's view.

LUPIN (cont.)

Aaaahhhhh...

KELLY (tapping LUPIN's head)

Such a nice fuzzy belly.

KELLY turns, expecting to see STELLA, but she doesn't see her (but the audience does). STELLA is shaking her tush.

KELLY (cont.)

And how's —uh, Stella? Stell? Oh Stell-lah? Are you hiding, you silly—

STELLA springs, and tags KELLY's feet.

STELLA

BOOGABOOGABOOGABOOGA!!

KELLY (cont.)

Oh! Stella, you sneaky little devil! Pouncing your mumma! You got me, you funny bunny.

As KELLY speaks, STELLA nuzzles KELLY's legs, classic cat-style. KELLY vigorously pats STELLA in return.

KELLY (cont.)

Aw, who's a good kitty?

STELLA

Good kitty? Let's see, that would be—*me*.

KELLY

Who's my little angel?

STELLA

Um, me again.

Herding Cats

KELLY

Who's the sweetest girl in the whole world?

STELLA

Ooh, that's a tricky one. Wait, don't tell me... it's... *me*.

KELLY (quick kiss on STELLA's head)

Hey, tomorrow's gonna be a big day for you guys. And I have just the thing to mark the occasion.

KELLY exits stage left, which is where the kitchen would be.

BUDDHA

"Big day?" "Mark the occasion?" That sounded rather auspicious. I wonder what she meant?

LUPIN

Guess we'll find out, Buddha. Say, Stella, I gotta hand it to ya, that was a really good pounce! Can ya show me again how ya shake yer tuckus like that?

STELLA (she demonstrates; he imitates)

Sure, Lupin. The key is, it starts with the hips. You build up a nice swaying motion in the pelvis... don't be afraid to shake it... yeah, that's it... squeeze along the thigh bones... and then engage the booty muscles.

BUDDHA

Gluteal.

STELLA (stopping)

Huh?

BUDDHA

Gluteal muscles.

STELLA (beat)

I like the way I said it better.

KELLY reenters, holding up a can of tuna. BUDDHA and LUPIN go wide-eyed. She pops the lid off the can and heads toward the dining table.

KELLY

Okay, who wants tuna?

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)

TUNA!! TUNA TUNA TUNA!! OH BOY!! YES!! YUM YUM!! ME WANT TUNA!! (*etc*).

STELLA gets up casually. BUDDHA and LUPIN leap up in ecstasy, and swarm KELLY.

KELLY

Aw, you guys excited for your num nums?

Herding Cats

BUDDHA and LUPIN
YES!!

STELLA
Jeez you two, it's just fish in a can.

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)
FISH IN A CAN!! WOO-HOO!! YUM YUM YUMMY!! YIPPEEEEE!! *(etc).*

KELLY dishes out three bowls of tuna while BUDDHA and LUPIN cling her like magnets. BUDDHA and LUPIN consume their food while making sounds of extreme satisfaction. STELLA nibbles much more tentatively.

KELLY
Bon appétit!

KELLY's phone rings.

KELLY (answers phone)
Hello...? Oh hey, Suze... no, no problem, I just got home... Just gave the cats some tuna and it's a purring symphony in here. Except Stella's just picking at hers... that's really not like her... Huh? Oh, come on, do we really have to talk about work...? Well it stunk to high heaven, all right...? *Yes*, I had my annual review today... and *yes*, it totally sucked donkey butt. They're talking about putting me on probation, can you believe that?! After all I've done for them... *probation?* Give me a freakin' break! Look, if they fire me – and I'm not saying they're going to – but just in case, can I move in with you for a while...? Well in that case, can we talk about something else, *please?* *(beat, then smiles broadly)* Yesss, I did see Eric again... yesss, I did... noooo, I didn't, cause I'm not like you. We're going out again this weekend... no, not tomorrow. Suze, where's your memory? I'm *fostering* tomorrow, remember?

At the mention of "fostering," all the cats perk up in surprised attention.

KELLY (cont.)
Exactly, the one from the shelter... I stopped over there at lunch today, you know, to fill out some paperwork. And Suze, I gotta tell you, *she* is such a little beauty.

BUDDHA mouths "she?" to the others with a delighted expression. STELLA rolls her eyes.

KELLY (cont.)
Anyway, it's just till she gets a forever home. Won't take long for a cat this pretty. Her name is Coco. Isn't that cute?

BUDDHA mouths "Coco" with joy. Another eye roll from STELLA.

Herding Cats

KELLY (cont.)

What...? Suze, it's no big deal for me to foster. I've fostered tons of cats... I'll get the work situation figured out... I don't know how. There'll be a last-second miracle, all right? Well, guess I'd better jet... gotta hit the hay. Yep, still on for Wednesday... 10K, 5K, no K, whatever's okay with me... Love ya, bye.

KELLY hangs up while the cats eat. Something catches her eye and she goes to pick up the Catster magazine.

KELLY (puzzled)

That's... funny.

The cats pause eating and wear slightly alarmed expressions.

KELLY (cont.)

I don't remember leaving that there.

STELLA raps BUDDHA on the back of his head.

BUDDHA

Oi!

KELLY

Hey! What was that?

STELLA (in BUDDHA's face)

Dude! You can't leave Kelly's stuff lying around like that! You trying to freak her out, or something?

BUDDHA (right back in STELLA's face)

I'm not *freaking* anyone, dear sister. It's not as if I rearranged the furniture. It's just a cat mag!

KELLY (getting between them)

Hey hey hey, no kitty fights. There's enough tuna to go around.

STELLA gets up and goes to lie down on the couch.

STELLA

It's all right, I'm full.

LUPIN (pointing)

Hey, look over there! A real foxy Siamese!

BUDDHA (looking)

Where?!

LUPIN

Dibs!

Herding Cats

LUPIN grabs STELLA's abandoned tuna for himself. KELLY sits on the couch and pats STELLA.

KELLY

You okay, Stella? It's not like you to leave tuna behind.

STELLA

Enh, just not that hungry, I guess.

STELLA stretches and yawns, then places her head on KELLY's lap.

KELLY

Awww, that's my Stella. My little snuggle bug.

STELLA

Kelly, you're the best human ever.

KELLY (singing)

Close your eyes, snuggle near me,

Let your whiskers gently curl.

Let the dreams come, sweetie darling,

Go to sleep, my sweetie girl.

STELLA naps peacefully. KELLY gets up and kisses her head.

KELLY (whispering)

Good night, Stell.

KELLY kisses LUPIN and then BUDDHA.

KELLY

Good night, you two. Big day tomorrow.

KELLY exits (left, to her bedroom). BUDDHA and LUPIN look at each other.

BUDDHA (smiling).

Coco.

LIGHTS OUT, END SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

STELLA is on the couch, aiming a laser toy in front of a crouched LUPIN, who follows its every move and tries to tag the dot of light. They have a conversation while playing.

STELLA

I don't know, it's just that I've never seen her so nervous – or angry – about her work before.

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Me neither, but ain't Kelly supposed to be a real hotshot at that job? Didn't Buddha say that her old boss thought she was a Chevrolet?

STELLA

I think you mean protégé. But times change, Lupin. And this "probation" stuff has her really worked up, whatever that is.

LUPIN

Yeah, but things can't be too bad if she's fosterin' another cat, don'tcha think?

STELLA

I hope you're right. And I hope Buddha realizes that Kelly's not trying to find him a soul mate.

LUPIN

Whoo, ya sure got that right.

BUDDHA enters, pacing nervously. STELLA and LUPIN become more interested in BUDDHA than their game.

STELLA

Oh, and speak of the devil...

BUDDHA

Hello there, my name is—no, no... Greetings and salutations, you must be—no, no... Bonsoir madame, tu eres une plus magnifique... no. Why good evening, would you care to groom...? No, too forward... Ah, I know: Nice to meet you, now won't you please lick my ears? No—*much* too forward. Um... um... *what?* What are you looking at?

STELLA

You all right over there, lover boy?

BUDDHA

Of course I'm all right, why do you ask?

STELLA

Well, you seem awfully nervous about—

BUDDHA

Are you sure I'm presentable?! Is my tail properly coiffed? Are my whiskers straight?

STELLA

They're perfect, but I can't say for certain that your head is on straight.

LUPIN

Ya sure are girl-crazy, Buddha.

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

I'm not girl-crazy, I'm just trying to look respectable for our distinguished guest.

LUPIN

Yeah, but why are ya—

BUDDHA

Do you suppose she's a Persian?!

STELLA and LUPIN shoot BUDDHA knowing grins.

BUDDHA (cont., scoffs)

Fine, savor your "touché" moment, the lot of you.

During the following dialogue, LUPIN gets up and looks out the window.

STELLA

I don't wanna rain on your parade, Buddha. But aren't you forgetting about something? About a major, life-changing event from your past?

BUDDHA

No, what do you mean?

STELLA

Wellll, you know, um... Lupin?

LUPIN (beat... makes scissor fingers)

Snip snip?

BUDDHA (pained expression)

You would dare besmirch this joyful moment by reminding me of my alteration?

STELLA

Aw, c'mon Bood, we all went through it, and we're better off for it.

BUDDHA

Is that so?

STELLA

Well *I* think so. Don't you agree, Lupin?

LUPIN

Yeah. I think it helped to temper my wild untamed street-cat spirit and instill a sense of... inner peace.

BUDDHA

Oh did it now?

Herding Cats

LUPIN (bows)
Yep. Namaste.

BUDDHA

Well bully for you. But for certain cats, though the physical apparatus may have been disrupted, the mental virility remains fitfully intact. I am proud to be one of those cats.

STELLA (getting up)

That's cool, Buddha, but you know how these foster situations work. This cat's just gonna be with us for a little while until she gets a permanent home.

BUDDHA

So?

STELLA (giving BUDDHA a side-hug, patting his shoulder)

So, we're on borrowed time with her. Just don't want you getting your hopes up, big bro.

BUDDHA (sighs)

Yes, yes. Sage advice.

STELLA (beat)

Say Buddha, what's "probation?"

BUDDHA

Beg pardon?

STELLA

Yesterday Kelly said that her bosses might put her on probation.

LUPIN

Yeah, and Kelly sure sounded steamed about that.

BUDDHA

"Probation" refers to a period of enhanced scrutiny, in which one is closely monitored so that his or her performance may be evaluated.

STELLA

You think it's anything we need to be concerned with?

BUDDHA

Of course not. This is *Kelly* we're talking about. I cannot imagine a human of higher caliber.

STELLA

Well, I hope you're right, because Kelly really—

LUPIN

Hey! Here comes Kelly now!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Oh! Is Coco with her?! Is she exquisite?!

LUPIN (observing, then walking back from the window)

Lessee... um... nope, no cat. Just a big bag of dog food.

BUDDHA

Ah.

Everyone freezes for a beat, wide-eyed.

STELLA, BUDDHA, and LUPIN

DOG FOOD?!

KELLY enters, in conversation on her phone. She has a bag of dog chow.

KELLY (on phone)

Yeah, I just walked in... Hey, hang on a second, Suze, got my hands full here...

KELLY exits to the kitchen. The cats just stare after her. STELLA looks especially stunned. KELLY reenters, only without the dog food.

KELLY (on phone)

No no, Coco was already gone when I got there. She was adopted early this morning. I'm not surprised. She was such a stunner. Anyway, I'm happy for her. But... I didn't exactly leave empty-handed... I'm fostering a *dog* instead... pretty cool, huh? No, I'm not crazy... *No Suze*, I am *not* compensating for trouble at work. It's not an easy job – working with writers? Producers? Agents? It's like herding cats! And for some reason they're all high on *Madison*... yes, her... the shallow snobby evil backstabber... what? (*grimaces*) Yes. Yes they did. But the probation is only temporary, and when I impress them with my pitch, they're gonna feel like fools for even considering it. *Please*, no work talk, okay...? So anyway, Suze -- you know how it's loud and chaotic in that shelter, right? But when I approach this adorable dog, she doesn't make a peep. She just wags her tail and looks at me with these big soulful eyes, and I pet her, and she gives me kisses... And you know what her name is? *Charlize*... Yes, just like the actress! Isn't that adorable...? Huh? What about what? Oh, they'll be fine. They said she gets along great with cats... oh no no no, it's not gonna be anything like that. When was that, four years ago, already? Yeesh. But this dog's a total sweetheart... Well, I'd better go to the car and get her... of *course* I left the windows open a little... Huh? What do you mean, *why*? Duh, because she needs *help*, that's why, Suze. All right, talk to you later.

KELLY hangs up and puts her phone down.

KELLY (cont.)

Seriously, even sisters can be so clueless.

KELLY exits. The cats look stunned for a long moment.

LUPIN

You guys... am I hallucinatin'? Did Kelly really say she's bringin' home a, ya know, a—

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

A dog. Man's alleged best friend. *Canis familiaris*. You heard correctly, Lupin. But what a dizzying thought.

LUPIN

But is that a good idea? A *dog*? In *here*? With *us*? Ya think Kelly's gone meshugganah?

BUDDHA

Perhaps her faculties have been affected by her career difficulties, but... *no*. Of course not. Kelly would never do anything to jeopardize our—

STELLA

What the hell is going on here?

BUDDHA (beat)

Hm?

STELLA

I said, what just happened?

BUDDHA

You heard Kelly. Apparently, we're about to have some canine companionship.

STELLA

"Canine companionship?!" You mean some *mutt* that's gonna tear our faces off?!

BUDDHA

Oh, come now, Stella. You know that Kelly makes informed decisions regarding her foster pets.

STELLA

What?! An informed decision to turn the Terminator loose on us?

LUPIN (looking out window)

Heyyy, don'tcha worry, Stell. If this dog starts any trouble, I'll handle it. Don't forget, I'm a—

STELLA

Street cat, yeah yeah yeah. Famous last words, Lupin? And are you kidding me, Buddha? The foster cats that Kelly's brought home have all been just that—*cats*. Not some mangy *dog* that's gonna thrash us.

BUDDHA

Truly, Stella, I'm rather taken aback by your lack of faith in Kelly's judgment. She wouldn't introduce an animal into the home if she thought it would present a menace.

STELLA (losing composure)

Buddha, are you losing it? Do you hear what you're saying?! "Present a menace?" Cuz that's exactly what this is! A big nasty flea-bitten cat-eating *menace*! And... and...

Herding Cats

BUDDHA (calmly)

And, it would behoove you to take a deep breath, and let panic give way to reason. Kelly would never do anything to cause us harm. And besides, didn't she say that this dog has an exemplary relationship with cats?

LUPIN

Yeah, she sure did, Buddha, Called her a sweetheart, too.

BUDDHA

"Sweetheart." Now that hardly sounds threatening. You know, it's odd, but I suddenly find myself intrigued with the prospect of receiving such a unique visitor.

LUPIN

Heck, a real dog in the house... who knows, it might be... fun?

BUDDHA

Precisely, Lupin.

STELLA

Fun? This is gonna be a *disaster!* I—I can't believe you two are taking this so casually. I have no idea what I'm gonna do.

BUDDHA

Oh, but Stella, it's not as if this dog is ever going to do unto you what happened when we were—

STELLA appears frozen in fear. BUDDHA puts his paw to his forehead – he knows he's said too much. He touches STELLA's shoulder to comfort her.

BUDDHA (cont.)

Oh... oh dear. I've allowed my memory to lapse. You're preoccupied with what transpired in the past, aren't you? But I assure you, Stella, what happened then was a purely random—

STELLA (pulling away from BUDDHA)

I don't want to talk about it.

LUPIN

Ohhhh, ya mean...?

LUPIN makes a snarling "angry dog" expression, scary, but in a LUPIN sort of way.

STELLA

I said, I don't wanna talk about it, all right?

BUDDHA (sigh)

Very well. But I assure you Stella, any animal entering this space will have been thoroughly vetted by Kelly.

LUPIN

Yeah! Don't be afraid. Just be yourself, Stella!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Exactly. Show her your charm, that Stella magnetism. Perhaps demonstrate that pounce routine you're so fond of? As Lupin says, just be yourself and I'm sure you'll develop a strong rapport with... what was it now—er, Charlotte...? Charlene...? Chardonnay?

LUPIN

Charlize.

BUDDHA

Charlize. That's a rather glamorous name, isn't it?

LUPIN

It's awful pretty.

STELLA

Yeah, gorgeous name for a stone-cold killer.

LUPIN

Stella, yer worryin' too much. Like Buddha said, Kelly wouldn't let nothin' bad happen.

STELLA

And speaking of Kelly – all this stuff about her *job*? It sure doesn't sound like *that's* getting any better. It actually sounds worse than yesterday! She sounds so freaked out about it! You do realize, if she loses her job, that would be especially bad for *us*?

BUDDHA

Hm, I must concur, that line of discussion did sound somewhat portentous. But Kelly's a sharp—

STELLA

Do we need to deploy the nuclear option?

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)

Whoa, whoa. No way. Out of the question. Hold your horses. Calm down. (*etc*).

BUDDHA (cont.)

There's no need to overreact. As I was about to say, Kelly is a sharp-witted and very creative human. I'm sure she'll work out her issues at her place of employment in short order.

STELLA

Yeah, just in time for us to get eaten by Sharp Teeth.

BUDDHA

Charlize.

STELLA

Whatever.

Herding Cats

LUPIN (looking out window)

Hey! They're comin' inside! It's Kelly, and... it's her! The dog!

BUDDHA

Oh! What does she look like, Lupin?

LUPIN

She looks, eh, I dunno... cute... but tough?

STELLA

Oh, kill me now.

LUPIN

Hey, I think she's one of them pit bull terriers!

STELLA

I'm outta here.

STELLA tries to exit, but BUDDHA blocks her.

BUDDHA

Stella, this is no time to succumb to fear.

STELLA

Yeah, and it's no time to succumb to murder, either. I'll be under the bed for the next six to eight weeks. Y'all enjoy your relationship with Shark Week.

BUDDHA and LUPIN

Charlize.

STELLA

You bet.

KELLY enters. As she does, BUDDHA quickly goes to the couch, LUPIN goes to far stage right, and STELLA hides behind the couch, with only her eyes peering warily over the top.

KELLY (gently, to offstage)

Oooh, that was a nice walk, wasn't it? Come on in, girl. Are you nervous? This is *your* home too. It's okay, come on inside. Don't be shy.

Long beat, then CHARLIZE bursts in, with no hint of shyness whatsoever. She moves about the space quickly, sniffing everything in sight.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE (rapid fire)

Oh boy oh boy oh boy oh boy look at this place it's so big wowww everything smells so good in here hey look at that oh boy oh boy is that a table (*sniff*) yep smells like a table now look at those things ooh I know what those are those are food bowls oh boy oh boy when's supper time heyyy I think I smell dog chow somewhere oh baby I bet that's for me oh boy oh boy oh boy and that's a couch over there ooh I can't wait to jump on that oh boy oh boy oh boy that's gonna be fun ooh that's a funny looking toy there I've never seen a toy like that before and heyyy you know what it kinda smells like cats in here and—

CHARLIZE spots BUDDHA, and gasps in surprise.

CHARLIZE (cont., normal speech pace)

I was right! *You're* a cat! A real pretty cat!

BUDDHA

Oh, um, are you - are you referring to *me*?

CHARLIZE

Of course I am! Look at all that pretty fur!

BUDDHA (swelling with flattery, getting up)

Oh?! Well... *thank* you, pleased to make your acquaintance!

CHARLIZE

Hey, do you mind if I smell ya? That's how I familiarize myself with new things, I smell 'em.

BUDDHA

Then by all means, please do.

CHARLIZE sniffs BUDDHA all over, and he giggles a little. KELLY starts snapping photos with her phone.

KELLY

Ohmygosh, this is like the cutest thing ever.

CHARLIZE

Mmmmm, you have such a nice scent... so catlike. Say, I don't mean to be forward, but are you familiar with the expression "mining for diamonds?"

BUDDHA

As a matter of fact, yes... oh! You mean you wish to mine for diamonds with *me*?

CHARLIZE

Would you mind? It really helps me settle myself when I'm in a new place.

BUDDHA (beat, modestly)

Of course not. It would be my privilege.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE
Oh, thank you.

BUDDHA turns around, and CHARLIZE begins to rapidly sniff his tush.

CHARLIZE (sniffing)
Mmmm... ohhh, yes, that's nice, that's so good...!

KELLY
Hey... hey hey hey. Hey girl!

CHARLIZE spins to look at KELLY.

KELLY (cont.)
C'mon, sweetie, there's nothing there for you.

CHARLIZE
Oh, I beg to differ!

CHARLIZE immediately goes back to smelling BUDDHA's backside, only this time, with exaggeratedly deep inhalations.

CHARLIZE (cont.)
Oh yeah, oh yeah... that's it! That's the stuff! Mmmm so good...

KELLY moves in and separates the sniffer from the sniffee.

KELLY
All right all right, c'mon now, no butt sniffin', no butt sniffin'. Seriously, I don't understand why dogs do that.

CHARLIZE
Well you shouldn't knock it until you've—*(gasps)*. Look! Another cat!

CHARLIZE goes over to LUPIN.

CHARLIZE (cont.)
Hey there!

LUPIN
Uh, hello! Nice to meet ya.

CHARLIZE
Say, do you mind if I...?

LUPIN,
Uh, no, go right ahead.

CHARLIZE sniffs LUPIN.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Now *you* have a very distinct aroma about you... hmmm, what is that smell? It's so... rugged.

LUPIN (proudly)

Oh, I do believe that would be the smell of the *street*.

CHARLIZE jerks her head back and speaks with faux toughness.

CHARLIZE

Wait a minute. Are you tryin' to tell me that you're a *street cat*?

LUPIN (faux toughness)

Yeah, what about it?

CHARLIZE

Well ya don't *look* like a street cat.

LUPIN

Oh yeah?

CHARLIZE

Yeah!

LUPIN

Well how would *youze* know, anyway?

CHARLIZE

'Cause I'm a street dog, that's how.

LUPIN

Well ya don't *look* like a street dog.

CHARLIZE

Oh yeah?

LUPIN

Yeah!

CHARLIZE

Huh. I betcha don't even know the song of the street.

LUPIN

What? Youze tellin' me I don't know the song of the street?

CHARLIZE

Yep.

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Well I bet *youze* don't know the song of the street!

CHARLIZE

Says who?

LUPIN

Says me!

CHARLIZE

Oh yeah?

LUPIN

Yeah!

CHARLIZE

Then *bring it*, cat-face.

LUPIN

Consider it *brought*, dog-ears.

*LUPIN and CHARLIZE square off like they're about to have a fight... but
but after a moment, they break into a sort of patty-cake. As this happens,
KELLY makes a phone call.*

LUPIN and CHARLIZE

Alley cat, alley cat, prowlin' through the night!
Lookin' for a scrap, and scrappin' for a fight!
Saw himself a dog and thought he'd throw down,
But it was a Great Dane, so he ran right outta town!

KELLY (on phone)

Ohmygosh, Suze, Suze... the dog is *playing* with Lupin. It's the most adorable thing I've ever seen in my life.... And they're making the funniest little sounds at each other...! I'll send you a video... okay, bye!

KELLY hangs up and keeps taking pictures and videos with her phone.

CHARLIZE

Not bad, not bad. But that doesn't prove you're a real street cat.

LUPIN

Well I ain't convinced *youze* a real street dog.

CHARLIZE

Well then – second verse, different from the first.

LUPIN

A little bit better and a whole lot worse.

Herding Cats

LUPIN and CHARLIZE

Bulldog, bulldog, scroungin' for some food,
Seen himself a pigeon and now he's in the mood.
Birdie got spooked, flew high into the sky,
Doggie looked up and caught a turd *in the eye!*

LUPIN

Hey! You know the song of the street!

CHARLIZE

You know it too!

LUPIN and CHARLIZE

You really *are* a street (dog) (cat)!

They laugh and hug.

CHARLIZE

That was fun! We'll have to do the other twenty-four verses some time.

LUPIN

You got it. So, it's Charlize, is it?

CHARLIZE

Yeah, that's me all right.

KELLY

Oh, darn it! Stupid battery... oh, what did I do with my charger?

KELLY exits stage left.

CHARLIZE

Hey, she seems pretty nice.

LUPIN

Kelly? Aw yeah, you're gonna love her. Hey, ya know somethin' Charlize, I think youze was named after a human movie star, or somethin' like that.

CHARLIZE

Really? I was?

BUDDHA

I also believe that is correct.

CHARLIZE (hamming it up)

No kidding... how about that! Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank the Academy.

Herding Cats

STELLA (still hiding)
Oh, brother.

CHARLIZE
Who said that?

BUDDHA
Oh, nobody. We just happen to have a... um, you know, a... ummm—

LUPIN
Ghost?

BUDDHA
Exactly. There's a ghost living in the apartment.

CHARLIZE
No kiddin'? A real live ghost?

LUPIN
Yeah, uh, one of them supernaturalistical sorta things, ya know?

CHARLIZE
Wow... Ain't that a kick in the head! Anyway, what's your name?

LUPIN
Lupin.

CHARLIZE
Lupin? That has a nice ring to it. What does it mean?

LUPIN
Well, it can mean something that's like a wolf. But it's also a kind of flower.

CHARLIZE
Oh, you mean something wild and strong and free, but also sensitive and beautiful?

LUPIN
Aw c'mon, yer gonna make me blush.

STELLA (still hiding)
Oh *please*.

CHARLIZE
There it is again!

Herding Cats

LUPIN

What? Oh yeah. The uh, ghost. Right.

BUDDHA (in STELLA's direction)
Ruddy insolent ghost, if you ask me.

CHARLIZE

This place is just full of surprises, I tell ya! Anyway, what's your name, big fella?

BUDDHA
Buddha.

CHARLIZE

Oh, that's lovely. What were you named after?

BUDDHA

An enlightened teacher, considered by some to be an avatar of the divine path.

CHARLIZE

Well my goodness! (*curtsies*) Oh, sacred one, I pledge my eternal loyalty.

BUDDHA (playing along)

Rise! Rise and be counted, devoted follower!

STELLA, fear or no fear, has heard enough. She springs up.

STELLA

Oh, enough with the freakin' love fest already! He wasn't named after some enlightened avatar dude! He was named Buddha because when he was a kitten, he had a big belly! Like on little statues you get at a place that humans call a *flea market*! I should know! I was with him when he got that name!

CHARLIZE

I knew it! *Another* cat!

CHARLIZE rushes toward STELLA, who runs to the other side of the couch.

STELLA

Whoa, whoa, back off.

CHARLIZE

Hey, you're a girl just like me! We're gonna be like sisters! Let me smell you!

STELLA

Look, "sister," you're not smelling anything. If you have to talk, do it from over there.

BUDDHA

Stella! You're being very rude. Charlize has been nothing but cordial, courteous, and effervescent. You owe her a far better reception than this crude display.

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Yeah Stell, she's nice. Youze ain't got nothin' to be scared about.

CHARLIZE (forehead palm)

Scared...? Oh, I should've known. You're *afraid* of dogs.

STELLA (scoffs)

I'm not afraid of anything.

CHARLIZE (coy smile)

Really?

STELLA

Really.

CHARLIZE pauses for effect, then rather non-aggressively says:

CHARLIZE

Boo!

STELLA scampers behind BUDDHA for cover. LUPIN snickers.

CHARLIZE (cont., laughs)

Sorry, dumb joke, just couldn't help it. But you've got nothing to worry about. I love cats.

STELLA (embarrassed)

What, for breakfast?

BUDDHA and LUPIN

Stella!

CHARLIZE

Nah, it's all right guys. I know where she's coming from. It's just how it is with some cats. But if I may say so, Stella—can I call you Stella?

STELLA

Call me whatever you want, or don't call me at all. Just don't come any closer, all right?

CHARLIZE (disappointed)

Do you want me to leave?

LUPIN

Ya can't leave yet, Charlize. Ya just got here!

BUDDHA

We certainly don't mean to make you feel unwelcome. It's just that we'll apparently have to work our way out of a rather deep-seated bias. Won't you please continue with your discourse?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Well, I was just gonna say that I got to be friends with a lot of really cool cats at the shelter, and if they were here, I'm sure they'd vouch for me.

STELLA

What are you talking about? What cats?

CHARLIZE

Well, let's see, there was Rajah, and Pumpkin, and Edison, and Mercedes, and Cuddles, and Mia, and Coco, and—

BUDDHA

You knew Coco?

CHARLIZE

Yeah, and she sure was a real looker. Anyway Stella, I'm just saying, cats and me have always been tight. But if you want me to keep my distance, then that's what I'll do.

STELLA

Smartest thing you've said all day.

BUDDHA

Oh Stella. Charlize, please accept my humble apology for my sister's behavior.

CHARLIZE

No sweat.

LUPIN

Hey uh, hey Stell? Can I try something? Something that might change your mind a little?

STELLA (beat)

Knock yourself out.

LUPIN

Charlize, could ya please open yer mouth real wide?

CHARLIZE

Um, sure.

CHARLIZE opens her mouth as wide as possible.

LUPIN

Wow, look at those choppers...

STELLA's jaw drops. She gasps loudly and her paw goes to her chest.

LUPIN (cont.)

Nah, it's all right... okay Stella, watch this.

Herding Cats

STELLA

Wait, no – what are you doing? Lupin! Are you crazy? Don't do that!

LUPIN places as much of his finger/paw as he can into CHARLIZE's mouth.

LUPIN,

Uh oh, the big bad doggy's got me!

CHARLIZE

Grr, grr... thath righth, I gothya now, kithy kath!

STELLA (gasp, swooning)

I think I'm gonna pass out...

LUPIN

Stella! We're just jokin' around here!

CHARLIZE

Yeah Thtella, ya goth nuthin ta worry abouth.

LUPIN frees his paw from CHARLIZE.

LUPIN

See, Stella? Ain't nothin' to be afraid of.

STELLA (spent)

Oh, thank goodness.

STELLA heaves a huge sigh of relief and flops backward onto the couch.

LUPIN

Whoa, that was kinda freaky.

CHARLIZE (giggling)

Yeah, that was a trip!

LUPIN and CHARLIZE attempt a high-five, but something's off.

LUPIN

Hey, that's funny... our paws don't fit.

CHARLIZE

Ohhh, that's right. But it's not you, it's me. I'm double-toed.

BUDDHA

Double-toed? Do you mean to say you're affected by polydactyly?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Yeah, I got extra piggies on my paws. It's rare in dogs, but I hear it's a little more common in cats?

BUDDHA

Indeed it is. Stella also has the polydactyl condition.

CHARLIZE

Really Stella, you've got it too?

STELLA looks at her paws. She's not exactly friendly, but she's a little less cold than earlier.

STELLA

Yeah... I thought I'd never meet anyone else who has it.

CHARLIZE

Will you show me?

STELLA flashes a nervous eye at BUDDHA, who nods. CHARLIZE slowly raises her right paw for STELLA to see. STELLA raises her left paw in response.

CHARLIZE (cont.)

I mean, will you show me... up close?

STELLA again looks to BUDDHA, who smiles and nods. STELLA gets up and takes two slow, cautious steps toward CHARLIZE. But KELLY enters, breaking the moment. STELLA, startled, scurries back to where she was. KELLY is hiding something behind her back.

KELLY

Well I can't find that silly thing... Guess there'll be time for videos later. But I've got a better idea anyway... and I think you guys are gonna *love* it.

KELLY reveals what she's hiding - a bag of cat food.

KELLY (cont.)

Okay, who wants kitty food?

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)

KITTY FOOD!! WOO-HOO! OH YEAH KITTY FOOD!! YAHOOOO!! (etc).

KELLY

Okay, okay you guys, hang on. You know, tonight, I think it's best if cats eat near the couch.

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)

EAT NEAR THE COUCH!! YAHOO! WOWEE! YIPPEE!! EAT THE COUCH!! (etc).

Herding Cats

KELLY dishes out three bowls of cat food. BUDDHA and LUPIN eat happily, while STELLA again just picks at hers. KELLY exits to the “kitchen” after feeding the cats.

CHARLIZE

Wow, you must really love your cat food, huh guys? Um... guys?

STELLA

You're wasting your breath. Don't bother talking to Buddha and Lupin at supper time. They're totally food-crazy. Especially when it's tuna. But even if it's just regular cat food, they tune the real world out.

CHARLIZE

Yeah, I hear you. I've had my share of friends who go completely bonkers at dinner time.

KELLY reenters, with the bag of dog food.

KELLY

And who wants dog food?

CHARLIZE (ecstatic)

DOG FOOD! OH YEAH!! I LOVE DOG FOOD!! DOG FOOD! DOG FOOD! ARROOOOOOO!!!

KELLY

You must be hungry! Charlize, I think you'll eat over here at the table tonight.

KELLY pours food for CHARLIZE, who then eats happily.

KELLY (cont., laughs)

One big happy family of little piggies... Stella? Aw sweetie, you're hardly eating again. Is your belly bothering you?

KELLY gently presses STELLA's tummy. She gives a slight groan.

STELLA

Unnnngh. Nah, I'm fine, just not too hungry, no biggy.

KELLY (takes phone)

Aw Stell, I think maybe the vet should check you out. Oh, where is that stupid phone charger? Wait a minute – did I flake out and leave it in the bathroom?

KELLY exits to the bathroom. Something catches STELLA's eye, and she stares daggers at CHARLIZE.

BUDDHA

Mmmm...! Oh, I must say, tuna or no tuna, these feasts of Kelly's are simply scrumptious! Delectable! The perfect culinary capstone for a true epicure.

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Yeah, and they taste good, too. *(beat)* Hey Stella, whatcha lookin' at there?

STELLA

What the hell does that dog think she's doing?

LUPIN

Uh, I dunno... eatin'?

STELLA

But that's *Benji's* bowl.

LUPIN

Yeah, so?

STELLA

So, *nobody* eats out of Benji's bowl.

STELLA gets up and takes a step or two toward the happily unaware CHARLIZE.

LUPIN

Yeah, but I really don't think he'd mind.

STELLA

I mind. That bowl is sacred. I'm not gonna sit back and watch that mutt slobber all over it.

BUDDHA

Stella, what difference does it make what bowl Charlize eats from?

STELLA

All the difference.

LUPIN

Uh, I ain't sure I like where this is goin.' Stella, what are you fixin' to do here?

STELLA starts to crouch into her pounce position.

STELLA

Put that dog in her place, that's what.

BUDDHA (nervous)

Stella, I do not think disturbing Charlize would be prudent at this moment. Please, stop and reconsider.

STELLA

No, I'm gonna do what I gotta do. It was your idea, remember? "Demonstrate that pounce routine? Show her that Stella magnetism?"

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Stella, I meant for that to happen under the proper circumstances and you know it.

LUPIN

Gee Stella, what's gotten into ya? Ya seemed so scared of her a couple minutes ago.

STELLA

That's ancient history. I'm not gonna let her poop all over Benji's memory any longer.

STELLA wiggles her tush.

BUDDHA

But Stella, some dogs prefer not to be interrupted while they're *eating*. Stella, no—!

STELLA "pounces" CHARLIZE, as KELLY reenters.

STELLA

BOOGABOOGABOOGABOOGA!!

CHARLIZE, completely startled, roars in STELLA's face.

CHARLIZE

DON'T TOUCH MY FOOD!!

STELLA gasps and winces.

STELLA

Stay away! Don't hurt me!

CHARLIZE (cont.)

NOBODY TOUCHES MY FOOD!!

STELLA raises her claws in defense, terrified.

STELLA

Leave me alone!

CHARLIZE (cont.)

DO YOU WANT ME TO BITE YOU?!!

STELLA, with a shriek, slashes at CHARLIZE with her claws.

STELLA (screams)

Aiee!!

CHARLIZE

AIIGH! YOU SCRATCHED ME!

Herding Cats

KELLY
Ohmygod!

CHARLIZE (in STELLA's face)
YOU SCRATCHED ME! YOU SCRATCHED MY FACE, CAT! HOW DARE YOU! I TRY TO BE NICE TO YOU AND THIS IS WHAT YOU DO? YOU WOUNDED ME!!

STELLA is displaying her claws and "hissing".

STELLA (hissing voice)
Stay awayyy... Stay away from mee...

KELLY (rushing toward CHARLIZE)
Oh, no... you're food-aggressive.

CHARLIZE
DID YOU SEE WHAT SHE DID?! SHE ATTACKED ME!! SHE SLASHED MY FACE!!

KELLY
Come on, come on girl! Let's go outside, it'll be all right, let's go outside.

KELLY corrals a still-ranting CHARLIZE and they exit.. STELLA levels a furious look at BUDDHA, then storms offstage to the unseen bathroom.

BUDDHA
Oh dear...

BUDDHA and LUPIN share a very nervous look with each other. After a few moments, LUPIN casually picks up STELLA's uneaten cat food.

LUPIN
Uh... dibs?

LIGHTS OUT, END SCENE TWO

SCENE THREE

STELLA is behind the couch, staring distrustfully at CHARLIZE, who is lying on a dog bed which has been added to the scenery. CHARLIZE looks back at STELLA with a half-guilty, half-frustrated face. BUDDHA, on the couch, and LUPIN, playing with the turbo scratcher, flash curious looks at STELLA, CHARLIZE and one another. KELLY enters from the kitchen, wearing running-appropriate attire, including a Knight Rider t-shirt, on her phone.

Herding Cats

KELLY (on phone)

Oh, she's adorable... And Buddha and Lupin really like her... no, she's fine, just a scratch on her nose... yeah, it was kinda scary, a lot of hissing and barking. Still, I'm surprised that Stella went all Wolverine on her... I don't know, it's just how some dogs get when they're around food. It's an innate thing. Everything's calmed down, although Stella's been watching her like a hawk since their little episode. Anyway, I've been separating them at meal time – cats in the kitchen, dog in the living room... right... what? Yesss, last night was very nice... Eric is awfully fun to be around... um, that's jumping to conclusions, but let's say I'm madly in "like" with him... what's that...? No, work is worse than *ever*... I swear, it's worse than herding cats! Why? Because they just put *Madison* in charge of my focus group. MADISON! She's a total fraud, she's completely unscrupulous and now I'm supposed to answer to *her*?! Are you kidding me – I *trained* her and she's my supervisor now?! She's younger than me!! What a load of bull...! No Suze, the other networks aren't hiring. Believe me, I've looked. You know, it's fortunate the cats and dog don't understand me, 'cause if they did they'd probably mutiny... Look, let's continue this discussion at the park, okay...? No Suze, I am *not* a hot mess. Bye.

KELLY clicks off her phone.

KELLY (cont.)

I'm a hot mess. (*beat, then to pets*) Okay, mumma's gonna get all sweaty and winded now. You guys are gonna be good when I'm gone, right?

STELLA (long beat)

Well don't look at *me*.

KELLY

All right, see you later.

KELLY makes four kissing sounds, then exits. There's a long pause while everyone looks at each other awkwardly.

LUPIN

Uh, what's "mutiny" mean?

BUDDHA

It means insurrection.

LUPIN nods, then just shrugs with a puzzled look. Another awkward silence follows.

CHARLIZE

I said I was sorry, you know.

STELLA

I *hate* eating in the kitchen.

CHARLIZE

But that wasn't my idea.

Herding Cats

STELLA

I'd rather eat in the litter box.

LUPIN

But youze ain't been eatin' much at *all* lately, Stell.

STELLA

That's not the point, Lupin. It's nasty in there.

LUPIN

Aw, c'mon. It ain't too bad.

BUDDHA

Really, Stella, it's just the kitchen. There's no need for fuss.

STELLA

Oh yeah, well what about the two giant roaches living under the stove?

BUDDHA

Urgh, you're right about that. Repellent.

LUPIN

C'mon you guys, that's Frank and Mary you're talking about!

STELLA

So gross.

CHARLIZE

I said I was sorry, all right? Look, if it means that much to you, then you three can eat here, and I'll have my dog chow in the kitchen, okay?

BUDDHA

That is a gallant gesture, Charlize. But I assure you that the environment in which we consume is of no importance to us.

STELLA

Easy for you to say, Buddha! That's 'cause you and Lupin go hog-wild every time food is stuck under your noses, no matter where you are. I happen to like having supper in *here*, because I like being around *Kelly*, all right?

CHARLIZE

Look, it's settled then! You cats eat in the living room. I'll eat in there, with... Frank and Mary.

LUPIN

That's big of ya, Charlize, but it ain't up to us. That's somethin' Kelly would have to decide.

CHARLIZE

In that case, can we drop it for now... *please?*

Herding Cats

STELLA

Uh, sure. Can you *drop* nearly biting my face off?

CHARLIZE

C'mon Stella, I'm trying to be friends here! Can't you give me a break?

STELLA

Break? Like how you tried to break my neck in two?

BUDDHA

Stella! That's quite enough from you! Charlize has been genuine and forthright in her apology, and you owe her the courtesy of respecting her sincerity. And do not forget that this all arose from an incident of *your* instigation.

LUPIN

Yeah, Stell, and Kelly said that Charlize didn't mean nothin' by it. It's just in her dog DNA, or somethin'.

CHARLIZE

That's all right, guys. You don't have to defend me. I'll just... keep out of Stella's way. But can I ask you a few things about what Kelly was saying?

BUDDHA

A change of topic would be most welcome. Please do.

CHARLIZE

Who's this "Suze" that Kelly's always talking with?

BUDDHA

That would be Suzanne, Kelly's sister. Currently pursuing studies of the legal profession.

LUPIN

Yeah, Aunty Suze. Not as keen on cats and dogs as Kelly is, but a pretty nice lady, ya know?

CHARLIZE

I see. And...Eric?

BUDDHA

Ah, he is Kelly's new romantic interest. If you ask me, she appears to be rather smitten with this chap.

LUPIN

Yeah, they've been hittin' the town together. She sure does get cow eyes when she talks about that guy.

CHARLIZE

Gee, that's pretty sweet, I guess. But Kelly talks about her job a lot, too. I guess that's not going so good?

LUPIN

Naw, her job's been really hard on her lately. She says it's like "herding cats..." whatever that means.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Huh... I've heard that expression before... at the shelter. But what exactly does Kelly do? You know, for work?

BUDDHA

Our dear Kelly has a most captivating profession. She works in the entertainment industry.

CHARLIZE

Entertainment industry? Wow, you mean like she's a singer, or an actor, or an acrobat?

BUDDHA (laughs softly)

No. Kelly works for one of the major broadcast networks. She's involved in the cultivation of new programming.

CHARLIZE

You mean TV shows? Those things that humans are always looking at?

BUDDHA

Yes. Kelly's job is to develop such shows. But to hear her describe it, it's an arduous undertaking. She works hard, but she finds herself at odds with supervisors who don't share her creative inclinations. Or worse, colleagues who would appropriate her ideas for their own. Apparently, it's a rather dog-eat-dog enterprise... if you'll please pardon the expression.

CHARLIZE

Sure, no problem. So... how long have you all been with Kelly?

BUDDHA

Just over twelve years for Stella and myself. We've been with her since our kitting. And Lupin joined us five years ago.

CHARLIZE

Has it always been the four of you?

LUPIN

Nah, up until a coupla years ago, there was Benji, too.

CHARLIZE

Benji... Benji... hey, I know that name!

LUPIN

Really, ya do?

CHARLIZE

Yeah! That's a dog, right? A famous movie dog!

STELLA (scoffs)

Leave it to a *dog* to say that. I don't know who you're talking about.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Well who *was* Benji, then?

STELLA

He was a cat. He was *all* cat.

LUPIN

Yeah, he was a cat that Kelly got a long time ago. Way before Stella and Buddha, in fact. He was a good fella, a little kooky maybe.

BUDDHA

“Kooky?” That’s putting it mildly. He was a blooming lunatic.

LUPIN

Aw, Buddha, he wasn’t a bad guy. He just had his own way of doing things.

BUDDHA

Yes, if by “his own way of doing things,” you mean being a loony.

LUPIN

Nah, Buddha, ya got him all wrong, he wasn’t a loony, he was—

BUDDHA

Unbalanced?

LUPIN

No, he was, uhh—

BUDDHA

Unhinged?

LUPIN

Nah, I wouldn’t say that, he was just—

BUDDHA

Deranged?

LUPIN

Nah, he wasn’t deranged. He was, uhhh, he was—

STELLA (fiercely proud)

He was *great*.

CHARLIZE (beat)

Tell me about him.

Herding Cats

STELLA

Toughest cat I ever met. Always had your back. Always stuck up for you. Never took any crap from anyone. No matter *what* species they were.

BUDDHA

Really, Stella, he used to climb the curtains.

STELLA

That's what they're there for.

BUDDHA

He would chew on Kelly's toes while she was on the commode.

STELLA

Those were love bites.

BUDDHA

He would claw gashes into the screen door.

STELLA

And the breeze felt nice. Buddha, just 'cause you didn't see eye to eye with him, that didn't make him a nutjob.

CHARLIZE

Where's Benji now?

LUPIN (beat)

Well... he... he crossed the rainbow bridge.

CHARLIZE

Crossed the rainbow bridge? You mean, he passed away?

LUPIN

Yeah.

CHARLIZE

I'm so sorry to hear that... what happened?

LUPIN

Nothin', really. He just got old. Nineteen years... that's a long time for a cat to hang around.

CHARLIZE

Sounds like he was really special. I would have liked to meet him.

STELLA (getting hostile)

Oh, just listen to you— "I would have liked to meet him." You know something? If he'd been here, when you pulled your stunt on me? A little scratch on your precious little nose would have been the least of your problems.

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Stella! This hostile grandstanding is pointless! Charlize has apologized, must I remind you again—for a disturbance that *you* initiated. It is *you* who should be apologizing to *her*!

STELLA

Well I'm not talking about *her*, I'm talking about *Benji*. And if he were here, he'd be taking action. He wouldn't just be sitting on his duff waiting for miracles that never happen.

BUDDHA

What in heaven's name are you talking about?

STELLA

I'm talking about doing something about Kelly's job situation.

LUPIN

C'mon Stell, you know there ain't nothin' we can do about that.

STELLA

Of course there is. There's the nuclear option.

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)

Whoa, whoa. No way. Don't say that. We can't do that. (*etc*).

CHARLIZE (beat)

What's the nuclear option?

STELLA

Well *Charlize*, since no one has the guts to do it, I guess it doesn't matter, now does it?

CHARLIZE

I was just asking a question.

STELLA

You're better off asking something else. Something like, "What's gonna happen after Kelly gets fired and she can't support me any longer?" Your being here only complicates things, dog.

CHARLIZE

Fine, fine! I'll just get out of your face, then! I'd rather hang out with the roaches than take this abuse. I thought it was going to be nice being here with all of you, but I guess I thought wrong. Living here is worse than herding cats!

LUPIN

Herding cats? Are ya gonna tell us what that means now?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE (indignation directed at STELLA)

You want to know what “herding cats” means? Well here’s a few thoughts on that. Maybe it means that you’re up against an impossible situation and you have no control over it. Like when you think you’re finally getting a little peace in your life but everything is really *chaos*. Or maybe it’s when you try to help but you’re not wanted. Or maybe – just maybe – “herding cats” means that finally – finally! – a nice human like Kelly is willing to take a chance and stick her neck out for you... but it doesn’t matter, because when you try to be nice, all someone else does in return is *hate* you. It means everything is *bad*.

CHARLIZE exits, storming off to the kitchen and leaving the others to silently react.

LIGHTS OUT, END SCENE THREE

SCENE FOUR

BUDDHA is on the couch, looking at a copy of The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss. LUPIN is on the floor, playing with a cat toy – a ball that lights up as it moves around. He’s amazed and puzzled by the way it lights up – he goes wide-eyed, scratches his head and makes expressions showing his bewilderment. After a few moments, he speaks.

LUPIN

I don’t get it. I don’t get how it does that. It’s blowin’ my mind, ya know?

BUDDHA

You’re referring to the luminescence?

LUPIN

Nah, I mean the way it lights up.

BUDDHA

Would you care for a primer on optics?

LUPIN

Ya mean yer gonna tell me how it works?

BUDDHA

If you’d care to know.

LUPIN (shakes head)

Hmmm, nahhh. I wouldn’t wanna spoil the mystery of it. *(beat)* Hey, where are the ladies at?

BUDDHA

I imagine Kelly is preparing to go to work, as per usual. And perhaps Stella and Charlize are sleeping in, this morning?

LUPIN

Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, whatcha lookin’ at there, Bood?

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

This? Oh, it's something from Kelly's collection. A so-called classic of children's literature. It's quite fascinating, really.

LUPIN

Oh yeah? What's it about?

BUDDHA

From what I can gather, the plot concerns a cat—

LUPIN

Hey, I like it already!

BUDDHA

Indeed! As I was saying, there's a cat who pays an unexpected visit to two human children and entertains them with his mischievous antics. He introduces all manner of mess and disarray and rambunctiousness. But in the end, he simply cleans it all up and departs.

LUPIN

Really? Sounds interestin', I guess.

BUDDHA

Hmmm, yes, but it's not at all realistic.

LUPIN

Oh no?

BUDDHA

No. I mean, since when do cats wear hats? Creatures as naturally elegant and handsome as us have no need to top our noggins with berets or bowlers or tuques or trilbies or fedoras or fezzes.

LUPIN

Yeah, or wigs.

BUDDHA

Wigs? Perish the thought that any cat should be encumbered by anything as garish as a wig.

LUPIN

I sure as heck wouldn't wear one... not unless it was some kinda emergency, ya know.

BUDDHA

Exactly. And furthermore, why would this cat try to—

LUPIN

Hey! I think I hear Kelly comin'! Ya better put that away, Buddha.

BUDDHA (putting the book down)

Oh! Right indeed. *(claps his paws, whispers)* Places!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA starts another cat bath and LUPIN plays with the ball. KELLY enters, dressed for work and on her phone.

KELLY

Hi Buddha. Hi Lupin... uh, hello? Hi, this is Kelly Larson. I'd like to make an appointment for Doctor Thompson to see my cat, please... Stella... yes. Well, she hasn't been eating much for the past few days. She only picks at her food and then goes to lie down. And she spent last night tucked away in the bathroom, away from the other cats. That's really not like her... changes? Nothing I can really think of... Well, I've been fostering a dog for a few days, and Stella wants nothing to do with her yet, so I guess it's been a little stressful for her. But the lack of appetite began before I got the dog, so I'd really like her to be seen as soon as possible... yes... oh, you have a cancellation... right now? Mmm, I can't make that—I have to go to work. What's her next availability... ooh... I see. I'll come in now then. I can be there in fifteen... *(eye roll)* yes, my boss will be cool with it, I'm sure... thanks for squeezing us in. I'll get her now. Bye.

KELLY hangs up.

KELLY (cont.)

All right, you guys, I guess I'd better go get—hey, I don't remember leaving this here.

KELLY picks up The Cat in the Hat with a puzzled look. BUDDHA makes a guilty look.

LUPIN makes tsk-tsk fingers at BUDDHA. KELLY puts the book down.

KELLY (cont.)

I swear, I must be losing my mind these days.

KELLY exits stage left.

LUPIN

Gee Buddha, ya think something's wrong with Stella?

BUDDHA

I can't be sure, Lupin. I certainly hope not. But you and I have both had issues with gastric upset in the past, and the vet patched us up in short order. So, let's try not to worry just yet.

LUPIN

All right, Buddha.

KELLY reenters, leading a sleepy STELLA by the paw.

STELLA (woozy, in some discomfort)

Uuuuuuugh... where we goin'? I'm tired.

KELLY

Come on, Miss Princess. We're gonna see the vet this morning.

STELLA

Noooo, I feel fine. She's gonna poke my tummy and talk to me in that silly voice... "Hewwo, Stewwa..."

Herding Cats

KELLY

Okay, you boys be good, and we'll be back in a little while. *(to kitchen)* Charlize? Come on girl, you don't have to stay in there all day. Come play with Buddha and Lupin.

STELLA

Come onnnnn, Kelly... I don't need to see the vegetarian. She's gonna stick her fingers in my mouth.

KELLY

Yeah, meow meow meow. I know you don't feel good. Let's go, furry face, no more protesting. Vet's gonna get you straightened out.

STELLA

I wanna see her diploma this time.

KELLY and STELLA exit. BUDDHA and LUPIN process this for a couple seconds.

LUPIN

I dunno, Bood. Stella's actin' pretty wacky there. Hope she ain't delirious or nothin'.

BUDDHA

Hmmm, I don't think so, Lupin. After all, she spent the entire night feeling out of sorts – in the lavatory, no less. She's bound to be a bit less than lucid.

LUPIN

Yeah, I guess you're right. *(to kitchen)* Hey Charlize, ya comin' outta there? Ya can join us in here, ya know.

After a few seconds, CHARLIZE shuffles in, looking and sounding humble.

CHARLIZE (shyly)

Did you know that in the event of an atomic detonation, roaches would outlast every other species on earth?

LUPIN

Frank and Mary been braggin' again, huh?

CHARLIZE

They sure have some stories to tell. Hey—where's Stella?

LUPIN

Stella ain't feelin' too good, so Kelly's takin' her to the vet.

CHARLIZE

Oh? Well I hope she's all right... Wait! Oh no. Does this have anything to do with what I did?! I sure didn't mean to—

BUDDHA

No Charlize, don't worry. This is a touch of routine digestive distress and nothing more.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE (beat)
You think so?

BUDDHA
Of course. Don't be alarmed.

CHARLIZE (sighs)
Well, that's a relief. I still feel bad about what happened. I just – I just can't help it, you know? If someone gets near me when there's food around, I just... blow a fuse. It's like I'm not even myself.

BUDDHA (nodding)
We understand.

CHARLIZE
I wanted to say I'm sorry, but I wanted to give Stella her space.

LUPIN
Smart thinkin', Charlize. Stella can get kinda hot under the collar sometimes, so good idea to let her cool off.

BUDDHA (eye roll)
Perhaps. But as I recall, you already issued an apology. And don't forget that Stella had a very significant role to play in the unpleasantness.

CHARLIZE (sigh)
Maybe. It's just a shame that some cats get so uneasy around dogs.

LUPIN
Yeah, but Stella wasn't always like that.

CHARLIZE
She wasn't?

LUPIN
Nah, she wasn't 'fraid of dogs until this thing happened, back in the day. Back when we was—uhhh—

LUPIN realizes he's said too much and covers his mouth.

CHARLIZE
Back when you were what? (beat) C'mon you guys, don't leave me hanging here!

LUPIN
Mmmm, Stella don't want nobody talkin' about it. Sorry, Charlize. Hey, ya wanna play with some cat toys?

CHARLIZE
C'mon, Lupin, wouldn't it be helpful if I knew how Stella got to be the way she is?

LUPIN
Well, yeah, I guess yer—

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Tell you what – you tell me about Stella, and then we'll play with cat toys.

LUPIN (beat)

All right, but look. Ya gotta promise ya won't say nothin' to Stella about this, okay?

CHARLIZE

Of course, I can keep a secret if you can.

BUDDHA (betraying unease)

Heavens, must we relive that dreadful experience?

CHARLIZE

C'mon Buddha, how bad could it have been? Please, tell me.

BUDDHA starts to shake his head, but then he sighs and nods.

BUDDHA

Very well.

CHARLIZE

Thanks, guys. So... why is Stella scared of dogs?

BUDDHA (deep breath)

Four summers past, we were in the process of relocating. That is to say: Kelly, Stella, Lupin, myself and Benji.

LUPIN

Yeah, we was movin' from Kelly's folks' house to this here place, ya follow?

CHARLIZE

Yeah, sure. Did something happen while you were moving?

BUDDHA

Yes. We four cats were settling into our new space, getting ourselves familiar with our new environs.

LUPIN

Scopin' out the pad, ya know?

CHARLIZE

Sure, I gotcha.

BUDDHA

And whilst we were acclimating ourselves, Kelly was moving her belongings from her vehicle into the living space. She'd left the front door open in order to facilitate the process. So, as a measure of safety, Kelly confined us to the kitchen.

CHARLIZE

I see. So, what were you guys doing in there?

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Nothin', really. Stella caught a nice sunny spot near the stove. Me an' Buddha found some shade under the table. And Benji – well, he jumped right on top of the fridge. He was perchin' up there, like one of them gargoyle things? It was safe in there, or so we thought.

CHARLIZE

Or so you thought? You mean... someone got inside?

BUDDHA

Yes...

CHARLIZE (beat)

Well, who? Oh, you mean...

BUDDHA (beat, nods)

A dog.

CHARLIZE

A dog got into the apartment while Kelly was moving her things?

LUPIN

Yeah, some stray roamin' the neighborhood. Musta strutted right inside while Kelly wasn't lookin'.

CHARLIZE

But wasn't the kitchen door closed?

BUDDHA

Yes, but unbeknownst to us, the door was in a state of disrepair. The dog breached it with ease.

LUPIN

Yeah, he burst right into the kitchen! And he was a *big* bruiser, believe me. And I tell ya, there was somethin' not right about him.

CHARLIZE

Oh no... how could you tell?

BUDDHA

From his eyes. It was the eyes that I remember most – a vicious, yet vacant stare, as if the senses were intact but the mind was in decay. He must have been unwell, though I cannot say what was afflicting him.

CHARLIZE

How awful... what happened next?

Herding Cats

LUPIN

So, this dog's sniffin' and lookin' around, and the first cat he sees is... Stella., just floppin' in the corner by the stove. And before she even knows what's happenin', he gets right in her face! He's growlin' and snarlin' and barkin', and she's tryin' to crawl under the floor. All she can do is start hissinn'... and then he rears his head back, opens his mouth real wide, ya know? And then he SNAPS – wraps his big ol' jaws right around Stella's neck! She's too stunned to make a sound – oh baby, we thought she was a goner right then and there. He's ready to crunch her right in half! Me an' Buddha are shakin' like a coupla leaves... But then...

CHARLIZE (beat)

But then what? What happened?!

LUPIN

Benji. That's what happened.

CHARLIZE

Benji interfered?

LUPIN (getting animated)

And how! Benji jumps all the way down from the top of the fridge, fast as a cheetah! An' he says: hey you, uh—*darn*—dog, let go of my friend, or I'm gonna belt you in your—*fluffy*—face and kick the livin'—uh, *stuff*—right outta you! Only them ain't the words he used, if ya get my drift.

CHARLIZE

Right! Go on.

LUPIN

So, the big brute just spits Stella out, ya know? Ptooeey, right onto the floor! An' he says “Yer dead meat now, pussycat.” An' he lunges at Benji—gives him a good chomp right here, on the shoulder! Drew blood on him... Boy, that musta smarted somethin' fierce. Now—this is the point where any cat with half a lick of sense in him—even a street cat—would try to high-tail it outta there. Either that or keel over and pray for a quick kibosh. But not Benji.

CHARLIZE

What'd he do?!

LUPIN (beat)

He laughed. Can you believe that? He laughs at the big behemoth! Laughs like a maniac! An' he says, “All right, dog, ya wanna dance? Then let's dance.” And then—pow! He cuffs 'im right on the nose! An' then pow pow pow! Three lefts, right to the kisser! An' then pow—a right paw to the ear! An' pow! Another left to the mug! He's workin' him over with ones and twos and rights and lefts and combos! Dog's face is all scratched and scuffed up, and he runs right outta the kitchen, yippin' and whinin' all the way outta the building, and we hear Kelly goin' “Get, get! Get outta here!” An' we ain't never seen him since.

CHARLIZE

My goodness. Was everyone all right?

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Well, Benji and Stella needed a couple shots after that. And from that day forward, Benji walked with sort of a limp, ya know?

CHARLIZE

Oh, that must have been so frightening.

LUPIN

Yeah, it sure was scary when it went down. And we was all really shook up for a while. I mean, everyone but Benji.

CHARLIZE (beat)

Wow. It's unfortunate... but I understand why Stella feels the way she does about dogs... and the kitchen. And about Benji, too. He was a real hero to her.

LUPIN

Ya can say that again.

CHARLIZE notices BUDDHA, who's pouting with his arms crossed.

CHARLIZE

What's wrong, Buddha?

BUDDHA (pouty)

Nothing.

CHARLIZE

I'm not sure I believe you.

BUDDHA

I said, nothing's wrong.

CHARLIZE

Are you ashamed of what happened?

BUDDHA

Of course I'm not ashamed! Whatever gave you that ridiculous idea?! I'm—I'm...I'm just...

CHARLIZE

You *are* ashamed, aren't you?

BUDDHA (beat)

Well... she's my sister! It should have been *me* protecting her.

LUPIN

Hey, not every cat's a fighter, Bood.

Herding Cats

BUDDHA (scoffs)
Poppycock.

CHARLIZE

No, Lupin's right. But if you want to protect Stella, isn't there something else you could be doing? Something *we all should* be doing?

BUDDHA

Something else? To what do you refer?

CHARLIZE

Helping Kelly with her job situation! Stella's obviously super worried about that. And frankly, we *all* should be. Look guys, I happen to know that when a human loses her job, it doesn't always work out well for the pets.

BUDDHA

Yes, but what could we possibly do? We're three cats and a dog, not a *deus ex machina*.

CHARLIZE

But what about that thing Stella mentioned? The nuclear option?

LUPIN

Oy! No way!

BUDDHA (forehead palm)
Oh, not *this* again.

CHARLIZE

Well why not?!

BUDDHA (exasperated)

Look, I know Stella means well, but deploying the so-called nuclear option would involve invoking unknowable forces of unspeakably dangerous powers. There's every reason to believe we wouldn't all survive.

CHARLIZE

But isn't Kelly worth the risk? And Stella? And the joy of living your lives together?

BUDDHA and LUPIN just look around, embarrassed.

CHARLIZE (cont.)

Silence, huh? Great. *(beat, sighs)* Well a deal's a deal. I'm ready for the cat toys, Lupin.

LUPIN (humbled)

Nah, that's all right. I don't feel much like playin' now.

Everyone sulks as LIGHTS FADE OUT. END SCENE FOUR..

Herding Cats

SCENE FIVE

KELLY is sitting at the table, trying to do some work on her laptop (or a notepad), but she's obviously frustrated and not having much success. CHARLIZE is on her dog bed, holding a rawhide bone. She senses KELLY'S frustration and pays more attention to her than the rawhide. And offstage, BUDDHA and LUPIN are making a ruckus, banging on the door and carrying on like children.

BUDDHA (OS)

Please Kelly, let us out! Liberate us, we beseech you!

LUPIN (OS)

Yeah Kelly! We wanna play! C'mon, let us out, pleeeeeease!

BUDDHA (OS)

Please Kelly! Grant us this day our freedom! Viva la libertad!

LUPIN (OS)

Yeah, Kelly! Freedom!

BUDDHA (OS)

Free as the gazelle runs! Free as the whippoorwill soars! The freedom that releases the soul from the shackles of degradation and sets it aflutter with the exuberance of anticipation!

LUPIN (OS)

Yeah, what he said!

BUDDHA and LUPIN keep at it a few seconds longer, ad-libbing and making noise. KELLY gets up, stomps offstage, and opens the unseen (bedroom) door.

KELLY (OS)

Guys! Chill out, please! Mumma's trying to work so that we don't get kicked out, okay? Thank you!

KELLY reenters, heads back toward the table, then catches herself. She turns back to the offstage bathroom area.

KELLY (cont., OS)

Stella? Stell? Come on baby, it's time for your medicine.

After a few seconds, KELLY reenters, leading STELLA by the paw to the couch. KELLY holds a small syringe in her other hand. She guides STELLA, who sits upon the couch.

KELLY (cont.)

Come on, silly goose. This is gonna be way more comfy than behind the toilet. All right, let's open up...

STELLA opens her mouth with a grimace. KELLY gives STELLA the medicine.

Herding Cats

STELLA
Bleah... tasty.

KELLY kisses STELLA on her head.

KELLY
Rest up, Stell.

KELLY heads back to the table, but the noisy racket at the bedroom door starts again.

BUDDHA and LUPIN (OS, ad-libbing)
KELLY! LET US OUT!! COME ON KELLY!! RELEASE US!! FREEDOM!! (etc).

KELLY spins around.

KELLY
GUYS!!

Silence. KELLY sits at the table and makes a phone call.

KELLY (cont., on phone)
Hey Suze...? No, just trying to get some work done but Buddha and Lupin are going gonzo, so I locked them in the bedroom... I don't know why, it's a boy-cat thing, they just do that sometimes... so anyway, did you read it...? All right then, what did you think?! Yeah... yeah... uh-huh... What? No, it's not...! No, it's not just like *Stranger Things*! Because that show's set in the eighties, and mine... isn't. And my show has werewolves and that one has, I dunno, vampire lizards or something...! What do you mean, werewolves aren't cool anymore? Everyone loves werewolves...! What? Well I'm totally screwed then! No, no Suze... yes, I wanted your honest opinion... sorry.

The cat racket starts up again.

BUDDHA and LUPIN (OS, ad-libbing)
KELLY!! KELLY KELLY KELLY!! LET US OUT!! RELEASE US FROM BONDAGE!! (etc).

KELLY
Wait, hang on... BUDDHA! LUPIN! PLEASE!

The racket stops.

KELLY
Suze? Look, I'm calling because... welllll, Stella's vet bill was more than I expected... they did an x-ray and I had them do bloodwork too, just to be sure. I couldn't say no – it's *Stella*! They gave her an antibiotic and some pain medicine. Said her belly felt pretty tender but she should be doing better in a few days. Anyway... I was hoping you could help me with a teensy-weensy loan...? Well forget the loan—how about a handout? C'mon Suze, you're gonna be a big rich lawyer someday...! What? What school expenses? All right, I guess I'll have to sell body parts, then... no, I know it's not your fault. Look, I'd better go. I'm not gonna get any work done here tonight... I don't know, Starbucks I guess. Bye.

KELLY hangs up and plunks her face on the table. Right on cue, more cat chaos:

Herding Cats

BUDDHA and LUPIN (OS, ad-libbing)

C'MON KELLY LET US OUT!! WE WANNA PLAY! PLAY WITH US! WOO-HOO-HOO!!

KELLY makes a you-gotta-be-kidding me face, gets up and goes to the bedroom door.

KELLY (OS)

HEY! If I let you guys out, are you gonna calm down?

BUDDHA and LUPIN (OS)

YES!!

KELLY opens the door and is swarmed by BUDDHA and LUPIN. They cling and act loco.

BUDDHA and LUPIN (ad-libbing)

WOO-HOO-WOO-HOO-WOO-HOO-WOO-HOO!! YIPPEE! PLAY PLAY PLAY!! WOOHOO!! (etc).

KELLY (exasperated)

All right all right all right! I swear, you guys should have your own cartoon. Come on, you two...

KELLY leads the two goofballs offstage into the kitchen.

CHARLIZE (beat)

What. On. Earth... has gotten into those two?

STELLA

I dunno. Just happens sometimes. Especially with the males. Vet says all of a sudden they just go "crazy cat."

CHARLIZE

Does the vet have a name for it?

STELLA (beat)

Crazy cat.

CHARLIZE

Oh. What's Kelly gonna do about it?

STELLA

She's gonna give them some kitty ganja. I'm kinda surprised she didn't think of it sooner.

CHARLIZE

Kitty... ganja?

STELLA

Yeah. You know, catnip?

CHARLIZE

Oh... right. I've never actually seen a cat on catnip before.

Herding Cats

STELLA (eye roll)
Well, you're in for a real treat.

KELLY reenters, with a giddy BUDDHA and LUPIN right on her heels.

KELLY
I can't believe I didn't think of this sooner.

She sprinkles catnip on the turbo scratcher, then goes to the table and gathers her things.

KELLY (cont.)
Charlize? Stella? Have I ever told you what *angels* you are?

*KELLY shoots BUDDHA and LUPIN an exhausted look, shakes her head, and then exits.
BUDDHA and LUPIN alternate taking deep sniffs from the scratcher.*

*MUSIC starts: the instrumental version of "The White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane.
BUDDHA and LUPIN speak between "hits."*

BUDDHA
I'm not getting anything (*sniff*) – are you getting anything?

LUPIN
No I ain't gettin' anythin' (*sniff*) – are you gettin' anythin'?

BUDDHA
No, I'm not getting anything – are you getting anything?

LUPIN
No I ain't gettin' anythin' – are you—

BUDDHA and LUPIN point at each other and giggle like they're totally stoned.

BUDDHA and LUPIN
Hahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!!!

LUPIN (cont.)
Whoa, man! That is some really good stuff, man!

BUDDHA (big grin, super giddy)
My goodness, I suddenly find myself aloft with whimsy!

LUPIN
I'm so high, man!

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Um, what the –

STELLA

Just keep watching.

LUPIN (pointing at the turbo scratcher)

Whoa, check it out, man!

BUDDHA and LUPIN bat the ball around the turbo scratcher a few times.

LUPIN (cont.)

Whoaaaa...

BUDDHA

Whoaaaa... amazing!

LUPIN

Whoaaaa, man...

BUDDHA (starting to get up)

Whoaaaa... how absolutely spellbinding! Wait, what's this? What's this feeling in my limbs?

LUPIN (starting to get up)

What's happenin', to ya, man?

BUDDHA

I'm suddenly filled with the urge to twist and gyrate!

LUPIN

You're so high, man!

BUDDHA and LUPIN freeze and gawk at each other for another beat, then giggle again.

BUDDHA and LUPIN

Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahaaaa!!!

Now the two high-as-a-kite cats start doing a slinky rhythmic dance.

CHARLIZE

Oh. My. Goodness.

STELLA

Glad you stuck around for this?

LUPIN

Whoa, man! I'm dancin'... I'm dancin'!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

I'm possessed of the terpsichorean muse!

LUPIN (laughing)

Yer *dancin'*, man!

BUDDHA

Look at me! I'm doing the "crane!"

LUPIN

I'm doin' the mashed potato!

BUDDHA

I'm doing the "swan!"

LUPIN

I'm doin' the funky chicken!

CHARLIZE

How long are they gonna be like this?

STELLA

Don't worry, not too long.

As if on cue, BUDDHA plops to the floor and starts snoring. LUPIN follows suit, landing his head on BUDDHA's belly. Music stops. As the snores fade, CHARLIZE speaks:

CHARLIZE

Well now. That was different.

STELLA

Worth the price of admission, I hope.

CHARLIZE (laughs softly)

Those two are a hoot.

STELLA

Um, yeah. They have their moments.

CHARLIZE

Living with male cats is kinda like living with puppies.

STELLA (puzzled)

You've lived with male cats before?

CHARLIZE

No... puppies.

Herding Cats

STELLA

You've lived with puppies?

CHARLIZE (smiles)

Yeah.

STELLA (long beat)

You mean you... *had*... puppies?

CHARLIZE

I did.

STELLA

When?

CHARLIZE

Just last year.

There's a pause as STELLA lets that sink in. When she speaks, she has a more placid tone – less icy than she's ever acted toward CHARLIZE.

STELLA

Tell me about them.

CHARLIZE

Really?

STELLA

Yeah.

CHARLIZE

Well, I was living as a stray—street dog, right? And as summer's coming around, I'm feeling more and more hungry... and thirsty... and tired... and oh, I was getting *big*—you should've seen me. I spent a lot of time hanging around this little restaurant... there was a lady who worked there who would sneak me scraps out the back door. She was nice... she was really nice. Anyhow, one night, I felt so exhausted that I just lay right down behind that restaurant, and next thing I know, I wake up... and I'm in an animal hospital. And a vet's there, and so is the lady from the restaurant... and so are four tiny, adorable, perfect little pit bull puppies.

STELLA (touched)

Wow...

CHARLIZE

Three boys... and a girl. A little girl puppy who looked a lot like me. Boy, they were a rowdy little bunch. Growlin' and tusslin' with each other and nippin' at me... they were so cute. And they drank me dry, let me tell you! Until they all fell asleep underneath me, of course.

STELLA

Where... where are they now?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

I'm not sure, Stella. But I know the restaurant lady said she was gonna work really hard to get them all adopted. She was dedicated, you know? I can't be positive, but I've got this really strong feeling—deep inside—that they're okay. I think they were lucky.

STELLA (beat)

I guess we've all been lucky... but, how did you end up at the shelter?

CHARLIZE

The restaurant lady already had two dogs – older dogs – and a little human child to take care of, too. She was spending a lot of time and money on us. And one day I heard her say something about how her boss just couldn't keep her on board if she was gonna miss more time from work. So, she took me to the shelter, and told them to take good care of me.

STELLA

Geez, that stinks.

CHARLIZE

Yeah... but hey, look at it this way – if that hadn't happened, I never would've met any of you! Right?

STELLA (shakes head gently)

You sure have a positive way of looking at things.

CHARLIZE

I try. So... you and Buddha have been with Kelly since you were kittens?

STELLA (nodding)

Since we were a few weeks old.

CHARLIZE

How'd you all get together?

STELLA

Well, our mom didn't really want much to do with humans. I heard Kelly say she was what was known as a feral cat. She would roam around finding stuff for us to eat. She was a really good hunter, you know? But still, Kelly would leave her food in her dad's old barn behind their house. We were born in that barn, up in the hayloft. Me, Buddha, and three brothers and a sister. Anyway, one day our mom stopped showing up to feed us.

CHARLIZE

Oh no...

STELLA

And Kelly knew we didn't have much of a shot out there on our own. So, she raised us from the ground up – she bottle-fed us, she took us to the vet – she worked so hard to keep us healthy. Eventually she got some friends to adopt the rest of the litter, but she kept me and Buddha.

CHARLIZE

Wow... Kelly's really amazing.

Herding Cats

STELLA

Yeah.

CHARLIZE

What about Lupin?

STELLA (laughs)

Lupin? Well, a few years ago, Kelly was out shopping at the pet supply store, and they had a few cats there available for adoption. They'd picked up Lupin as a stray, you know, a—

STELLA and CHARLIZE

Street cat—

STELLA (cont.)

Right! Anyway, he's there in his cage, and when he sees Kelly he starts acting like a big old ham. Rolling onto his back, showing her his belly, purring real loud, and tagging her between the bars. She knew right away she had to have him.

CHARLIZE (laughs)

I love it. And... Benji?

STELLA (beat, more somber)

Kelly found Benji in the woods behind her folks' house. She had no idea where he came from or how he got there. He was pretty wild, but he took a liking to Kelly. She decided that he'd be better off with her than out there by himself. It took him a while to adjust, but he got used to being a house cat. He became totally devoted to Kelly... and later, he was... he was...

CHARLIZE

He was really special to you... wasn't he?

STELLA looks at CHARLIZE intensely... after a beat, she nods.

CHARLIZE (cont.)

Awww, Stella!

STELLA

What?

CHARLIZE

All this talk about family is getting me choked up!

CHARLIZE gets up and quickly heads toward STELLA.

STELLA

Whoa, whoa! What are you doing?!

CHARLIZE

I wanna *hug* you!

Herding Cats

STELLA scrunches defensively and displays her “claws.” CHARLIZE sees this and stops.

STELLA (beat, intensely)
We’re not there yet.

CHARLIZE (beat, disappointed)
Oh... oh. I should have known better. Sorry.

CHARLIZE slogs back to her bed, while BUDDHA and LUPIN begin to stir and yawn.

STELLA
Looks like the two flower children are waking up.

CHARLIZE
Huh? Oh... right.

BUDDHA and LUPIN sit up and stretch.

BUDDHA
Aaaaaaahhh. What a delightful siesta.

LUPIN
Aaaaaaahhh. Yeah, what a good snooze.

BUDDHA
I feel fully refreshed and ready for a good catnap. *(beat)* Oh, hello Charlize, hello Stella.

CHARLIZE
Hey.

STELLA
Hey.

LUPIN
Heya, ladies. Whatcha been up to?

CHARLIZE (beat)
Nothing... just girl talk.

LUPIN (nervous)
Ohhh, girl talk. Were youze, uh... talkin’ about stuff that’s been happenin’ – nowadays? Or stuff from – a long time ago? Cuz there ain’t much point in wastin’ yer breath over what happened a long—

KELLY bursts back into the apartment. She’s on her phone and she’s breathless.

Herding Cats

KELLY

Ohmygod! Suze! Suze! She's stealing my idea... she's stealing my idea...! I said, my evil *bitch* supervisor is stealing my idea...!! What?! I AM CALM!! Andy just called me... Andy – the director of new programming development... and he said that they have to make some cuts, and they're ending my probation early... and that if I don't make a successful pitch tomorrow, then I'm out on my ass...! YES!! No, those weren't his exact words, but do you know what he told me?! He said that I should look up to *Madison* for inspiration, because she made such a good pitch for her werewolf show... *her* werewolf show?! MY WEREWOLF SHOW!! She's scamming everyone, and there's nothing I can do about it... what? Because it's her word against mine... oh Suze, what am I going to do? If they fire me, I won't be able to keep all the cats, and Charlize will have to go back to the shelter! I'll never find a cheap place that allows pets... and technically I'm only allowed to have two cats! Lupin isn't even supposed to be here!

LUPIN

What?!

KELLY

And neither is the dog... No, I can't move back home – Dad's allergies would kill him... Suze, I have no idea what I'm gonna do... I can't lose my pets! Can I come over... *please...?* I'm on my way... bye.

KELLY hangs up and looks one at a time at STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN, and CHARLIZE. She begins to sob and exits the apartment. The pets spend a long silent moment, in shock.

LUPIN

Oh, man. I'm an undocumented illegal.

STELLA gets up, and marches to the center of the room.

STELLA (to LUPIN)

Are you in?

LUPIN

Yeah, I'm in.

STELLA (to BUDDHA)

Buddha?

BUDDHA

Yes.

STELLA (to CHARLIZE)

And you?

CHARLIZE

Heck yeah, I'm in.

STELLA

All right then. Let's do this. The nuclear option.

Herding Cats

Fast BLACK OUT. End of SCENE FIVE. End of ACT ONE. INTERMEOWSSION.

ACT TWO: SCENE SIX

BUDDHA and LUPIN, much against their will, are on the floor; doing sit-ups or abdominal crunches, and moaning from exhaustion. STELLA is holding BUDDHA's feet to the floor and CHARLIZE is doing the same for LUPIN.

BUDDHA and LUPIN
UNNNNGGGHH!!

STELLA
C'mon, one for Morris!

BUDDHA and LUPIN
UNNNNGGGHH!!

CHARLIZE
One for Lassie!

BUDDHA and LUPIN
UNNNNGGGHH!!

STELLA
One for Rum Tum Tugger!

BUDDHA and LUPIN
UNNNNGGGHH!!

CHARLIZE
One for Rin Tin Tin!

BUDDHA and LUPIN
UNNNNGGGHH!!

STELLA
And one for Kelly!

BUDDHA and LUPIN
UNNNNGGGHH!!

With a big grunt, BUDDHA and LUPIN accomplish one more repetition. STELLA lets BUDDHA go, and CHARLIZE follows suit with LUPIN. The two male cats flop flat on the floor; and huff and puff in exhaustion.

BUDDHA
Are you... are you going to explain... why this is necessary?

Herding Cats

STELLA

Because – you need to be strong. You’re the brawn of the operation. That’s your role. And Lupin is recon.

BUDDHA

When the devil was this decided?

STELLA

Just now.

BUDDHA

Well if I’m the brawn, and Lupin’s reconnaissance, then which role are you?

STELLA

I’m the brains. And Charlize is moral support.

LUPIN (thumbs-up from floor)

Roger that.

CHARLIZE

What? Wait – moral support?

STELLA

Yeah.

CHARLIZE

Are you saying I’m some kind of cheerleader, or something?

STELLA,

Look, it’s a good job. Are you in, or aren’t you?

CHARLIZE (frustrated sigh)

I’m in.

LUPIN (getting up and pointing to each “role”)

All right, we got brains, we got brawn, we got recon, and a bonus moral support dog. So all we’re missing is our—

LUPIN, STELLA and BUDDHA

Point man.

CHARLIZE

Um, did you say “point man?”

BUDDHA

Correct, Charlize. A very important role, that of the point man.

CHARLIZE

Well what’s the point man responsible for?

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Amongst other things, the point man completes the procession of unity.

CHARLIZE

“Procession of unity?” What’s that?

BUDDHA

In the deployment of the nuclear option, the procession of unity refers to the—

STELLA

Guys, we’re short on time, so save the explanations for later. Lupin, you’re recon, which means you’re in charge of recruitment. Who are you thinking of enlisting as point man?

LUPIN

The way I see it, there’s only one choice – I’m gonna ask Rocko.

STELLA

Rocko? Who’s Rocko?

LUPIN

He’s this cat I knew from back in the day, but he lives in the neighborhood now, a couple blocks over. Tough guy – stocky, ya know? Anyways, I got a favor to call in, so I know he’s good for it. Code of the street, and all.

STELLA (nodding)

All right... all right, that could work. But how are you gonna get out of here? Kelly’s got the place secured so that we can’t get out – so that we’re safe in here.

LUPIN

I got it all worked out, Stell. I squeeze through the old mouse hole in Kelly’s bedroom – ya know, behind her bed, the one she ain’t never had fixed – then I climb up that ventilation whatchmacallit, all the way up, and I run across the roof—

CHARLIZE

Guys—

LUPIN

Slide down the rain spout, run through the yard and scale over the fence—

CHARLIZE

Guys—

LUPIN

And then I’m free and clear, all the way to Rocko’s place.

CHARLIZE

Guys!!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Yes, Charlize?

CHARLIZE

This is ridiculous! Why would you send Lupin on some dangerous mission to find some cat that you don't even know, when I'm *right here*?! Forget about Rocko! I'll be your point man!

STELLA (beat)

Huh?

CHARLIZE

I said, let *me* be point man.

STELLA (beat)

But you're not a cat.

CHARLIZE

So?

STELLA

So, the nuclear option requires four *cats*. Everybody knows that.

CHARLIZE

Are you sure? (*beat*) Buddha?

BUDDHA

Hmmm, yes, Charlize, I'm afraid that according to all the classical folklore and oral histories, deploying the nuclear option necessitates the exclusive participation of four cats. I know you mean well, but it's best that we do not tamper with the prescribed methodology.

CHARLIZE

Seriously?

BUDDHA

Yes.

CHARLIZE (sigh; hugs LUPIN)

Fine... well I guess you should get going, then. Oh, please be careful, Lupin.

BUDDHA

Yes. Better be on your way, Lupin. If Kelly returns home to find you absent, that will put additional strain on her frayed faculties.

LUPIN

Right!

LUPIN salutes the gang, then scampers off to the bedroom. STELLA follows him.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Oh Buddha, I don't know about this... Lupin out there on his own like that? It seems so risky, you know?

BUDDHA (nodding)

I share your apprehension, Charlize. But if anyone is up to the task at hand, it is Lupin. He is, after all, a resourceful and very agile cat.

CHARLIZE

You really think he can do it?

BUDDHA (smiles, nods)

I do. Please share in my confidence.

From offstage, STELLA lets out a BLOODCURDLING SCREAM.

STELLA (O.S.)

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!

BUDDHA

Then again, perhaps my conviction was premature?

STELLA burst back in – she's manic and hyperventilating, staring with a crazed look. As the next dialogue is spoken, LUPIN enters, wide-eyed.

CHARLIZE

What happened?! What's wrong?!

STELLA

We... we can't get out... we can't get out! We're trapped in here!

LUPIN

The mouse hole, youze guys... it ain't there no more. It's been fixed.

BUDDHA

Fixed?!

LUPIN

Yeah, somebody musta patched it up. I bet that Eric guy did it, and we didn't even know about it.

STELLA runs about the space, looking for another way out.

STELLA (eventually seizing LUPIN's arms)

Kelly's lousy rotten goody-two-shoes wanna-be boyfriend fixed our only way of getting out of here?! But we can't do the nuclear option without another cat! We have to find another way! Buddha, grab Lupin's feet! I'll take his arms and we'll throw him through a window!

LUPIN (pulling out of STELLA's grasp)

No way! Are you crazy?!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Stella, please... you know we can't do that.

STELLA

Then our plan is ruined! We're done for!

CHARLIZE

Stella! We're not done for! Let *me* be your point man! I know I'm a dog, but so what?! You've got nothing to lose at this point!

STELLA

No! It won't work if you aren't a cat!

LUPIN

Yeah, ya gotta be a cat, Charlize. Tell her, Buddha.

BUDDHA

Charlize, I'm afraid Stella is correct. Everything that has been told throughout the ages regarding this radical undertaking says that it can only possibly work if—

CHARLIZE (firmly)

Benji would have done it.

STELLA (beat, snapping out of her hysterics, eyes boring into CHARLIZE)
What did you say?

CHARLIZE

You heard me.

STELLA (anger growing)

I'm not sure I did.

CHARLIZE (defiant)

I said, *Benji* would have done it.

STELLA

You have no business talking about—

CHARLIZE

Oh, like hell I don't, Stella. And you know that if he were in your place, he would have the guts to include *me* in your exclusive little party.

STELLA (daggers)

You've got some nerve, *dog*.

CHARLIZE

Damn right I have, *cat*. Look, Stella. I know about what happened, with you, and *Benji*, and that dog that attacked you. And I know that—

Herding Cats

STELLA

WHAT?! You know about *THAT?!*

CHARLIZE

Yeah, that's right.

STELLA (to BUDDHA and LUPIN)

You told her! You told her about *THAT?!*

LUPIN,

Well, we uh—uh—we better do more exercises!

BUDDHA

Righto!

BUDDHA and LUPIN flop to the floor.

STELLA

I can't believe you told her! BUDDHA! LUPIN! GET UP! GET UP AND LOOK AT ME!

CHARLIZE

Oh, knock it off, Stella. Quit yelling at them. How about: *you look at me* instead.

STELLA faces CHARLIZE, ready to breathe fire.

CHARLIZE (cont.)

As I was saying, I know that—hell, *you* know that Benji would have done anything to protect you. Anything to keep you all together. Anything to help Kelly. Even if it meant risking everything by including a *dog*.

STELLA does a long slow burn at CHARLIZE. She's practically steaming.

CHARLIZE (cont.)

What do you want to do about it, Stella? You want to fight me?

After a tense moment, KELLY enters, on her phone.

KELLY

Yes... yes, of course I understand. I fully understand the gravity of the situation. No, I'm not being sarcastic... Yes, I know that you're in charge now, Madison. (*beat, eyes closed, teeth gritted*) I mean, I know that you're in charge now... Miss von Teufel.

KELLY hangs up. She smiles at the pets, but her eyes are full of tears.

KELLY (cont.)

Guys... I know that you can't understand what I'm saying to you, but I want to tell you that... I tried. I really tried always to do what's best for you and keep you happy. And no matter what happens, or where you end up, I'll always love you... all of you... no matter where you are.

Herding Cats

KELLY hugs BUDDHA, LUPIN, CHARLIZE and STELLA in succession, then takes her things and exits the apartment, crying. The animals are silent for a long moment.

STELLA
You've got it.

CHARLIZE
What?

STELLA
You've got it. The job. You're point man.

CHARLIZE (beat)
Thank you.

STELLA turns to LUPIN.

STELLA (to LUPIN, pointing at CHARLIZE)
When it's time for physical contact... with her... *you* do it, all right?

LUPIN
Yeah, no problem – understood.

STELLA gets on the couch and starts to lie down.

LUPIN (cont.)
What do we do now, Stella?

STELLA
Grab some rest while you can. Tonight, we're going nuclear.

LIGHTS OUT. End of SCENE SIX.

SCENE SEVEN

All the animals appear to be asleep: STELLA and BUDDHA on the couch, LUPIN by the turbo scratcher on the floor, and CHARLIZE on her dog bed. STELLA opens her eyes, stretches, and then she puts her paws to her belly and makes a pained sound.

STELLA
Unnggh... Guys... you awake?

LUPIN (stretching)
Yeah, I couldn't sleep. Been too busy thinkin'.

BUDDHA
Doubly so for me.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Same here.

STELLA

Guess that makes four of us.

CHARLIZE (beat)

Well... so what happens now?

STELLA

Buddha, you explain it as well as anyone.

BUDDHA

And to think I'm the brawn of the operation. Anyhow, Charlize – are you familiar with the disparity in the comprehension of vocalizations, between humans and their pets?

CHARLIZE

I'm—I'm not sure. How do you mean, Buddha?

BUDDHA

Take Kelly, for instance. You understand everything she says perfectly well, correct?

CHARLIZE

Sure, why wouldn't I?

BUDDHA

Ah, but therein lies the imbalance. For you see, whilst you understand human speech perfectly well, humans in turn merely hear from us a collection of wordless utterances. In cats, this is known as "meowing." And in dogs, it's referred to as "barking."

CHARLIZE

Oh, sure. I've heard humans talk about meowing and barking plenty of times.

BUDDHA

But have you considered *why* humans only hear such vocalizations, without perceiving the concepts of language, semantics or syntax?

CHARLIZE (beat)

Gosh... no, I've never really thought about it. It seems to me that most humans seem to know how we're feeling – if we're happy... or scared... or hungry. I haven't really paid much thought to the idea that humans don't understand us word for word. Why do you think that is, Buddha?

BUDDHA

No one knows for certain, Charlize. Humans are such a curious species. Perhaps they're so preoccupied with their own problems and fears and aspirations that they've drained themselves of the energy required to truly *hear* us.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

Wow, you really think so?

BUDDHA

Well, it's a theory held by some cats. But alas, Charlize... therein dwells the mystery... and the *secret*.

CHARLIZE (beat)

Secret?

BUDDHA

Yes! For you see, there are a select few... a very limited number... of humans... who comprehend cats and dogs perfectly well.

CHARLIZE

There are?

BUDDHA

Correct! And these humans are known as...

CHARLIZE (beat)

Known as what?!

STELLA, BUDDHA and LUPIN (overly dramatic)

Eccentrics!

Music: something sci-fi-ish or Twilight Zone-ish.

CHARLIZE

Eccentrics?

BUDDHA

Yes... most unusual, idiosyncratic humans... each invested with a particular strangeness, quirk, and charm.

CHARLIZE

Strangeness, quirk, and charm?

BUDDHA

Strangeness!

STELLA

Quirk!

LUPIN

And charm!

CHARLIZE

Yowza... and these humans are called eccentrics, you say?

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Yes. And every era brings its own eccentrics, who solely can bridge the gap between human, *canine* and feline.

CHARLIZE (fascinated)

Like, wow... but, who started it all? Who was the first eccentric?

BUDDHA

Now *that* is a very perceptive question.

CHARLIZE

Um, thanks. But what's the answer?

BUDDHA (scratching head)

Well let's see, what would be the most efficient and illustrative means of edifying you... hmmm. I suppose we could try pantomime, or interpretive dance, or – ah, I know – a protracted series of detailed lectures!

STELLA (scoffs)

We don't have time for a protracted series of details lectures.

LUPIN

Hey, wait a second youze guys – look!

LUPIN retrieves KELLY's cell phone from the table, which she's forgotten to take with her. He approaches the gang and holds it up.

LUPIN (cont.)

This thing'll show ya all ya need to know, Charlize.

BUDDHA

Of course! Kelly's bi-directional data transceiver! Gather round, everyone.

LUPIN sits on the couch with STELLA and CHARLIZE sit to his sides. He holds the phone up so all the pets can see what's on screen. BUDDHA paces behind them like a professor holding class. The audience sees projections behind the pets, representing what's seen on the phone.

BUDDHA (cont.)

Now Charlize, do remind me, what was your question?

CHARLIZE

I was asking who the first eccentric was?

BUDDHA

Ah, yes. The identity of the first eccentric is a matter of speculation and rumor. But there are some who believe it was an ancient Greek scribe known as Aeschlyus.

STELLA

Siri, show me... Aeschylus!

Herding Cats

(Optional SFX: Siri's voice: "Okay.") We see a projection: a statue of the playwright Aeschylus, with a cat superimposed.

CHARLIZE
Um, Esk-ill-uss?

LUPIN
Yeah, the father of classical theatrical expression, ya know?

CHARLIZE (huh?)
Um, sure.

BUDDHA
Yet others contend that it was a sainted French noblewoman of the fifteenth century called Jeanne d'Arc.

STELLA
Siri, show me... Jeanne d'Arc!

(Optional SFX: Siri's voice: "Here you go.") We see a projection: a painting of Joan of Arc, with a dog superimposed (my choice would be a Basset hound).

CHARLIZE
Uh, Jeannie Dark?

LUPIN
Yeah, defeated the British at the Siege of Orleans during the Hundred Years War, ya know?

CHARLIZE (well, color me humble)
I did not... I did not know that.

BUDDHA
And still, there are others who say that the first eccentric to receive the divine gift was the Neanderthal man –

STELLA
Siri, show me Neanderthal man!

(Optional SFX: Siri's voice: "You got it.") We see a projection: a picture of a Neanderthal and a saber-tooth-cat.

BUDDHA
Who did battle with the mighty *S. Fatalis*—

LUPIN
A.K.A. the saber-toothed tiger of pre-historiological times, ya know—

BUDDHA
Before being fossilized in the tar pits of La Brea.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE (baffled)

Uh, so the person who's gonna help Kelly is a Greek theater guy or a French war lady or a fossilized tiger dude?

STELLA, BUDDHA, and LUPIN

No!

CHARLIZE

No?!

BUDDHA

No! If an eccentric is to help Kelly, then it must be one of *her era* – of the present day. And *in* the present day, eccentric humans are only found in the most eccentric industry of all.

CHARLIZE

Which is... what?

STELLA, BUDDHA, and LUPIN

The performing arts.

CHARLIZE (beat)

The performing arts? You mean like singers, and actors, and acrobats?

BUDDHA

Yes. And musicians, and artists, and authors. Even a professional athlete or two.

CHARLIZE

But what do these—eccentrics—have to do with how we're gonna help Kelly? The nuclear option?

Music starts: Also Sprach Zarathustra, aka the theme from 2001: A Space Odyssey. A montage of projections begins: photos of celebrities posing with cats or dogs.

BUDDHA

Because the nuclear option entails that the four of us make contact with an eccentric whom Kelly herself holds particularly fond and dear.

CHARLIZE

You mean we go visit some famous human that Kelly's a fan of, and ask them for help?

BUDDHA

Yes, but not physical contact. *Psychic* contact.

CHARLIZE

Psychic contact? But how?

STELLA, BUDDHA, and LUPIN

Through the *ritual*.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

The nuclear option is the *ritual*?

LUPIN

Yeah, and they say it's dangerous!

CHARLIZE

Dangerous? But why?

BUDDHA

Because traversing the spiritual plane of thought is said to unleash great quantities of pure, unbridled energy.

STELLA

And they say there's always a sacrifice involved.

CHARLIZE

There *is*? Oh man, you guys have all but turned my brain into yogurt... but which eccentric are we supposed to contact? Who's the famous human that Kelly admires so much?

BUDDHA

Well, there's the question of the hour. Who, indeed?

STELLA, BUDDHA and LUPIN put their paws on their chins, as if in deep thought.

STELLA, BUDDHA and LUPIN

Hmmmmmm...

A long moment passes as the cats think, leaving CHARLIZE in terrible suspense.

CHARLIZE (long beat)

Well come on you guys, don't leave me on a cliff here!

All the cats gasp and look at each other, as if they've had a "eureka!" moment.

BUDDHA

Yes! Of course! The answer is obvious! Stella, are you thinking what I'm thinking?

STELLA

Yes! Yes I am! Lupin, are you thinking what I'm thinking?

LUPIN

Yeah! I'm thinkin' what youze thinkin', and youze thinkin' what Buddha's thinkin', which means that *I'm* thinkin' what Buddha's thinkin', which means that were all thinkin' what everyone else is thinkin', and so—

CHARLIZE (super melodramatic)

GUYS! The suspense is killing me! Who?! Who is the eccentric that we must contact in order to save Kelly?!

Herding Cats

STELLA, BUDDHA and LUPIN
Siri, show me... HASSELHOFF!!

The theme from 2001 crescendoes, and we see a projection of the man, the myth, the legend... David Hasselhoff.

This continues into a montage of Hasselhoff photos, the last one showing him holding a cat (Google it!) The cats raise their arms in a sort of reverence, until the music stops.

CHARLIZE
Wait, who?

STELLA
Hasselhoff! Respected by men! Desired by women!

BUDDHA
Hasselhoff! Canonized by half of western Europe!

LUPIN
And he's got a talking car, too!

CHARLIZE
So let me get this straight: to help Kelly, we hafta do the *nuclear option*... and the nuclear option means doing the *ritual*... and the ritual means spiritually contacting the *eccentric*... and the eccentric is this Hasselhoff guy?

LUPIN
Yeah, and Kelly sure loved him. She would watch his TV shows for hours.

CHARLIZE
And you're saying this guy can help Kelly? Through *psychic contact*?

BUDDHA
The odds of success may be low, but if we find ourselves in his favor, then perhaps... just perhaps.

CHARLIZE
Well this is something you don't hear every day.

BUDDHA
And we must prepare for action, as time is obviously short.

LUPIN
Yeah, we gotta start rehearsin' like right now, you guys! This is gonna hafta be one slam-dunk heads-up laser-focused practice session, and I mean like pronto!

CHARLIZE
Okay, gotcha... but what was that you were saying before, about a *sacrifice*?

Herding Cats

STELLA
Townhouse!

BUDDHA
Er—safely within the confines of this townhouse, as friends and allies, supplicants and petitioners, canine and feline, one and all!

STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE (speaking the words)
Woof woof, meow! Woof woof, meow!

BUDDHA
And we do so with the aim of protecting the livelihood, restoring the confidence, and preserving the sanity of our beloved guardian and protector: the human known as—Kelly!

STELLA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE
HAIL KELLY!!

LUPIN takes a framed photo of KELLY from the box and holds it overhead. He and everyone else look upward, then at each other, as if they don't know what to expect.

STELLA (through gritted teeth)
Keep. Going.

BUDDHA
Er—and to achieve our goal, we dare make this intrepid call, to transcend the barriers of space, time, and species—to humbly beseech the one human who might answer our invocation, a paragon of artistry and masculinity—the noble eccentric known as—Hasselhoff!

STELLA
HAIL HASSELHOFF!

From the props, LUPIN holds up a People magazine with Hasselhoff on the cover.

LUPIN
HAIL HASSELHOFF!

CHARLIZE (over-the-top Southern preacher voice)
Hallelujah and hail, ah say! Ah say haaaaaillll him in his glory! Haaaaaillll him in his grandiosity! Ah say haaaaillll to the mighty Hasselhoff!

Everyone stares at CHARLIZE nervously.

CHARLIZE (beat, normal voice)
What? I thought we were supposed to be enthusiastic!

STELLA (beat, gritted teeth)
C'mon, go on!

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

Er—yes! Hasselhoff! Who captured the hearts of ladies and gentlemen, of boys and girls of all ages!

CHARLIZE

Who so gallantly performed in *Jekyll and Hyde: Direct from Broadway!*

STELLA (sophisticated “Jekyll” voice)

How do you do, good sir?

CHARLIZE (scary “Hyde” voice)

Mwahahaha!

STELLA (sophisticated “Jekyll” voice)

I say how do you do, good sir?

CHARLIZE (scary “Hyde” voice)

Mwahahaha!

LUPIN

And who did go triple platinum in the proud nation of Disneyland!

There is a CLAP of THUNDER, all the LIGHTS FLICKER, and everybody freezes in wide-eyed fear for a few seconds.

LUPIN (cont.)

Wha—what just happened?!

CHARLIZE (gulp)

Did we do something wrong?

STELLA (to LUPIN)

Switzerland, you doofus! Not Disneyland! C’mon, you have to say it right!

LUPIN

Uhhh—who did go triple platinum in the proud nation of... *Switzerland?*

Everyone stiffens as if something bad is about to happen. When nothing does, STELLA speaks:

STELLA

I think we’re okay... keep going, Buddha!

BUDDHA

Umm—Hasselhoff, who set the Guinness World Record for the most observed human on television!

LUPIN

Uhhh- who ably portrayed Michael Knight, crimefighter and master of automotive artificial intelligence!

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

And Mitch Buchannon—lifeguard, heartthrob, and noble protector of the *peaches* of Los Angeles!

Another, LOUDER CLAP of THUNDER, the LIGHTS GO RED, and everybody SCREAMS and runs offstage (or hides behind the couch).

STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE

AAAAIIIIIEEEE!!!

After a few seconds, everyone retakes their positions, freaked out again.

CHARLIZE (scared)

What – what was that?

STELLA (scared)

Yeah, what was that weird color?

LUPIN (scared)

Oh jeez, I think that was *red*. Wasn't it?

CHARLIZE

I don't know, I'm a dog! Dogs can't see red!

LUPIN (scared)

Well neither can cats, but I'm pretty sure that was red! Oh man, I don't think this is workin'!

CHARLIZE

But what—what'd I do?!

STELLA

You said *peaches* of Los Angeles! It's *beaches*, not peaches!

CHARLIZE

What? I didn't say "peaches."

A third, even louder CLAP of THUNDER. LIGHTS GO RED again. Everyone screams and scatters once more.

STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE

AAAAIIIIIEEEE!!!

Another few moments, and everyone assumes their positions again. BUDDHA and LUPIN look scared, CHARLIZE wears a guilty look, and STELLA just looks ticked off. STELLA shrugs her hands at CHARLIZE, as if to ask "well?"

CHARLIZE

Uhhh... protector of the... *beaches*?... of Los Angeles?

Herding Cats

The gang ducks and covers again, expecting the worst. After a moment of calm, LUPIN speaks.

LUPIN

Uh, are we okay? Are we still alive?

STELLA (puffs a couple breaths into her paw)

Yeah, alive here.

CHARLIZE (pats herself down)

Yeah, me too.

BUDDHA (lightly slaps cheeks with both paws)

I am also still functional.

LUPIN (pinches himself)

Ow! Okay... I'm good too. But uh, are we doin' this right?

BUDDHA

I... I can't be certain. We'll have to hope that our benediction has been accepted.

STELLA

Yeah. But we have to keep moving. Buddha. It's time for phase two.

BUDDHA

Yes... phase two: the homage. Props, Lupin?

LUPIN

Props, gottem right here.

MUSIC starts: the theme from "Knight Rider".

Lupin rummages through the props and hands them out: a spacy-looking visor or glasses for BUDDHA, toy guns for STELLA and CHARLIZE, and a leather jacket for himself. LUPIN and BUDDHA put on their props, while STELLA and CHARLIZE hide behind the couch. BUDDHA gets on all fours and LUPIN sits right on top of him, pretending to drive him around like a car.

BUDDHA

Vrrrooom! Vrooom vrooom vrrrooom!! Screech!

LUPIN

Why'd you stop, Kitt?

BUDDHA

My sensors are detecting trouble up ahead, Michael. I think we'd better investigate.

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Good thinking, Kitt... say, who's that over there?

STELLA and CHARLIZE spring up and run towards BUDDHA and LUPIN.

STELLA and CHARLIZE

Help! Help! Help us!

LUPIN

Who are you?!

CHARLIZE

We're defenseless maidens!

STELLA

Yeah, and we're on the run from corrupt government agents!

LUPIN

Corrupt government agents? Then you'd better come with us!

BUDDHA

No Michael, it's a trap!

LUPIN

Trap?!

STELLA and CHARLIZE wield their toy guns.

STELLA (Russian accent)

Hahaha! Zat ees right, American. Vee are not maidens. Vee are sexy Soviet spies.

CHARLIZE (Russian accent)

Right, American. And vee are here to steal talking Pontiac Firebird, for make benefit of glorious Kremlin!

STELLA

But first, you vill die, from our glorious Soviet engineered laser guns.

BUDDHA and LUPIN

Laser guns?!

CHARLIZE

Zat ees correct, Meester Agent Knight! Now say "dos vedanya" to wretched capitaleest republic!

BUDDHA

Duck, Michael!

LUPIN spins off BUDDHA and shields himself behind him, while STELLA and CHARLIZE fire their "lasers."

Herding Cats

STELLA and CHARLIZE
Pew pew! Pew pew pew!

LUPIN
These sexy Soviet spies mean business, Kitt!

BUDDHA
But my armor-reinforced hull will only withstand so much laser fire, Michael!

LUPIN
If only a beach-based rescue squad were here, maybe we'd stand a chance!

BUDDHA
You mean—?

LUPIN
That's right, Kitt!

LUPIN scrambles out of his leather jacket and everyone puts their props down. The animals all surround the heap of props, backs to the audience.

MUSIC starts: the theme from "Baywatch."

After a few moments of fumbling around, all four characters turn around and face the audience in a line. BUDDHA is now wearing red swimming trunks. The other characters are wearing luxurious wigs. LUPIN's wig is long and blonde. He also has a whistle around his neck.

The animals smile at the audience and toss their heads back like fashion models. BUDDHA flexes his muscles while the others run their fingers through their hair. Then everyone runs in place in slow motion, like in the Baywatch opening titles. After a few moments of this, STELLA and CHARLIZE run offstage while BUDDHA and LUPIN speak:

BUDDHA
Another safe morning at the shore, C.J. No incidents reported.

LUPIN (girlish voice)
That's right, Mitch! We're the best lifeguards in all of Los Angeles County!

BUDDHA
And the best looking, too! Say—what's that over there? Sounds like trouble!

LUPIN
Trouble? Where?!

LUPIN blows his whistle. STELLA and CHARLIZE reenter. They're holding something in their hands that we can't really see.

Herding Cats

STELLA and CHARLIZE
Help! Help! Help us!

BUDDHA
Look, C.J.! Defenseless swimsuit models!

STELLA
Help! We lost our surfboards—

CHARLIZE
And the totally gnarly California riptide is dragging us out to sea!

LUPIN
We have to rescue them, Mitch!

BUDDHA and LUPIN “swim” over to the flailing STELLA and CHARLIZE.

BUDDHA
Hurry, ladies! Take our hands... wait! You're not swimsuit models!

STELLA
That's right! We're—

STELLA and CHARLIZE throw off their wigs, and put on what they're hiding in their hands—those little caps that make you look like a shark.

STELLA and CHARLIZE
Great white sharks!

LUPIN
Oh no, Mitch! If these sharks eat us, that might be bad!

BUDDHA (flexing)
But these sharks are no match for my deltoids.

LUPIN (flaunting)
Or my naturally sun-bleached hair.

CHARLIZE
Arrgh! Curse you, Baywatch! You may have won this time, but—

STELLA and CHARLIZE (Russian accents)
Ve'll be back!

BUDDHA and LUPIN
Soviet sharks!

Herding Cats

The LIGHTS TURN BLUE for a moment and a CHIME sounds, as if from a clock tower. The sounds of the rain and storm begin to intensify, over the moody, tribalistic music we heard earlier.

CHARLIZE

Hey! The light! That was *blue* just now! But why did that happen?

LUPIN

Yeah, and what was that bell?

BUDDHA

I'm not sure – but it may have been a signal, to let us know that we are indeed finding favor!

STELLA

Yeah, or it just means the storm is making all the electronics in town act real screwy!

LUPIN

Yeah, and that storm sure is gettin' stronger, ya know?!

BUDDHA

Yes! As our ritual proceeds, the elements become unmoored and threaten to careen into chaos!

CHARLIZE

Then we'd better hurry! It's time for the last part, right?

STELLA

Right... the final phase... Buddha?

BUDDHA

Final phase: the attestation of our guardian and protector—the human Kelly Larson!

STELLA and CHARLIZE

HAIL KELLY!

LUPIN

C'mon guys, grab your stuff!

The animals rummage through the props again, and each one comes away holding a different item. From left to right stand BUDDHA, STELLA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE.

BUDDHA

And so that our eccentric benefactor may know precisely the human whose honor we pray he restore, we hereby offer an attestation of Kelly Larson, via this presentation of her most preferred personal effects!

BUDDHA holds a bottle of hair spray aloft.

Herding Cats

BUDDHA (cont.)

I present: Kelly's favorite hair elixir!

BUDDHA sprays his head a few times, sneezes, then drops the hair spray.

BUDDHA (cont.)

And now we convene the procession of unity!

BUDDHA and STELLA clasp paws together. With her free paw, STELLA holds aloft something from a cosmetics kit, such as a makeup brush or powder puff.

STELLA

I present: Kelly's favorite facial cosmetic!

STELLA daubs a bit of the powder onto her face, then drops it.

STELLA

And now we extend the procession of unity!

STELLA and LUPIN clasp paws. With his free paw, LUPIN holds aloft a bag of turkey jerky.

LUPIN

I present: Kelly's favorite food, a tasty bag of—

STELLA

Wait! That's not right, Lupin! *Point man* gets the food!

LUPIN

What, are ya sure?!

BUDDHA

Yes, Lupin! The comestible is for the point man! The wearable is for you! Quickly, switch with Charlize!

STELLA

Yeah, switch with *her*!

LUPIN

Oh jeez... uh, all right!

LUPIN hastily switches items with CHARLIZE, so that she now has the turkey jerky, and he has a pair of ladies' underwear, which he holds aloft.

LUPIN

I present: Kelly's favorite... bloomers!

LUPIN looks on cluelessly for a moment, while the storm and music escalate.

Herding Cats

STELLA
Hurry, Lupin!

LUPIN makes a helpless face, then slips on the undies.

LUPIN
And now we extend the procession of unity!

LUPIN moves to clasp paws with CHARLIZE, but it can't be done!

LUPIN (cont.)
What? Oh no! Our paws! Our paws don't fit!

CHARLIZE
It's because I'm double-toed, remember?!

BUDDHA
Yes – your polydactyly! But Stella has the same condition! Stella, you must join Charlize in procession!

STELLA
No... I can't... I can't! Buddha, you do it!

The LIGHTS FLASH RED as a loud THUNDER clap sounds.

BUDDHA
But I cannot, Stella! Only you can make the physical connection! Change places with Lupin!

STELLA
But I can't! She's a dog...

LUPIN
But you guys! Ain't Charlize supposed to eat the food first?!

BUDDHA
You're right Lupin! Make haste, Charlize! Consume the food!

CHARLIZE
I present: Kelly's favorite food—bag of tasty organic turkey jerky!

CHARLIZE takes a bite of the turkey jerky. As she munches, LUPIN quickly switches places with STELLA. He's now between BUDDHA and STELLA, holding their paws.

CHARLIZE (with a mouthful of food)
And now we complete the procession of unity!

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE lunges her free paw toward STELLA. STELLA is frozen in fear. The LIGHTS GO RED and stay that way, while the thunder rages.

BUDDHA

Stella, quickly! You must complete the procession before we lose favor!

STELLA

I can't... I can't... she's a dog... I'm afraid!

BUDDHA

Stella, you *must!*

STELLA nervously, weakly reaches out to the still-chewing CHARLIZE. CHARLIZE adopts a look somewhere between brokenhearted and wildly vicious... she can't help it.

CHARLIZE

DON'T TOUCH MY FOOD...!

STELLA

I can't do it!! She'll attack me... she'll hurt me.

CHARLIZE

NOBODY TOUCHES MY FOOD!!

LUPIN

Oh no! Charlize's food aggression is actin' up again! She can't help it! Stella, ya gotta get past it!

STELLA

I can't get past it!

CHARLIZE

DO YOU WANT ME TO BITE YOU?!!

BUDDHA

Stella! You must complete the procession now! It's the only way to save Kelly! STELLA – PLEASE!!

STELLA

All right! I'll do it! FOR KELLY, I'LL DO IT!

With a mighty yowl, STELLA lunges and clasps the paw of the snarling CHARLIZE.

The LIGHTS GO BLUE as we hear a clock CHIME TWELVE TIMES.

The animals freeze with an amazed, transfixed look on their faces. When the clock stops, the lighting goes back to normal, and the sounds of the storm fade out. The characters continue to stare in amazement, still locking paws together. After the chaos dies down, BUDDHA speaks.

Herding Cats

BUDDHA

We've... we've done it...

STELLA

The nuclear option...

CHARLIZE

The ritual...

BUDDHA

We've completed it.

LUPIN (pinching himself again)

Yeah, and look! None of us are dead! Ow!

CHARLIZE

Did we... did we really help Kelly?

STELLA

I... I guess we'll find out... what happens now, Buddha?

BUDDHA

We wait. And I know how I plan on passing the time, that's for certain.

BUDDHA lets go of LUPIN's paw, and flops on the couch to sleep.

LUPIN

Man, you said it, Bood.

LUPIN takes off the undies and drops them. He picks up KELLY's phone and puts it back on the table. Then he plops on the couch beside BUDDHA.

LUPIN (cont.)

I gotta hand it to ya Buddha, youze a pretty strong guy, proppin' me up on your back like that. You really was the brawns of the operation.

BUDDHA (eyes open)

Really?

BUDDHA flexes his arm and feels his bicep.

BUDDHA (cont.)

Thank you, Lupin.

BUDDHA makes a contented smile and closes his eyes. STELLA and CHARLIZE turn their attention away from the guys, and realize they're still clasping paws. With a long look of mutual respect, they slowly let go.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

What are you gonna do now, Stella?

STELLA

I think these two have the right idea.

STELLA goes to the couch and plops down to sleep.

CHARLIZE (yawns, goes to lie down on her dog bed)

Mmmm... sounds good to me... but wait a second... shouldn't we... clean up first?

STELLA, BUDDHA and LUPIN (sleepily ad-libbing)

Oh yeah. That's right. We gotta clean up. We'd better get to it. Better get the lead out. (etc).

LUPIN (sleepy)

Hey Stella... would ya start cleanin' up now... and I'll join ya in a jiff... *(snores)*.

STELLA (sleepy)

Sure Lupin... hey Buddha, would you mind... giving me a hand... *(snores)*.

BUDDHA (sleepy)

Certainly Stella... Charlize, would you please assist me... with the life-changing magic... of... tidying up... *(snores)*.

CHARLIZE (sleepy)

Sure... Buddha... I just need a little... nap... first *(snores)*.

As LIGHTS FADE OUT, everyone snores.

END OF SCENE EIGHT.

SCENE NINE

LIGHTS UP on the sleeping pets and the still a mess. KELLY enters, huddled in her raincoat and/or holding a soggy umbrella. She sees her phone right away but does not notice the animals or the mess.

KELLY

Oh, *there* you are...

KELLY picks up the phone and dials.

Herding Cats

KELLY (on phone, exhausted)

Hey Suze... no, I missed your messages. Forgot to take my phone with me. No... last night definitely was *not* conducive to getting work done. You know it seemed that like every time a semi-reasonable thought started to pop into my head, the lightning would go off...? Boy, that storm was intense... was it as bad on campus, too...? Really, and you were still able to study through that racket...? What can I say, Suze – you’re a freak of nature... oh, and speaking of freak of nature, my neighbor was just telling me that the storm was making all the lights go kablooey... yeah, you remember that civic alert system they installed here, back in the fifties...? Exactly, with the colors... blue for “all clear”, yellow for “whoa Nelly” and red for “kiss your butt goodbye”? Well apparently the storm was wreaking havoc with it last night... real Twilight Zone sort of stuff... I dunno Suze, they built this place during the Cold War – guess they thought we all might go nuclear. Like in that YouTube video that Dad showed us, the one with the little cartoon turtle. What was that called...? “Duck and Cover,” right. Oh, and apparently the bell on the old clock tower went on the fritz too... yeah, ringing at all the wrong times. Where’s Marty McFly and Doc Brown when you need them? Oh geez, Suze, I hope it didn’t freak out the cats and dog... yeah, I’d better go check on them. Ok, bye.

KELLY hangs up and finally turns to look at the sleeping animals and the mess. Her jaw drops in surprise, but after a moment she stifles a laugh and smiles.

KELLY (cont.)

Oh my goodness. Oh. My. Goodness. Did... *you* do this? I totally left all the doors open, didn’t I... and you guys had a crazy pet party.

KELLY picks up the bag of turkey jerky.

KELLY (cont.)

I guess I won’t be eating this now.

As KELLY surveys the area, BUDDHA awakens, and with a horrified look sees that the mess is still there. He nudges LUPIN, who will in turn look freaked out and awaken STELLA. KELLY picks up the hair spray.

KELLY (cont.)

Hmmm, I don’t know, you guys. Maybe mousse would be better for you, or – I know. Styling putty.

CHARLIZE also wakes up and wears an “O.S.” look. KELLY picks up the undies.

KELLY (cont.)

All righty then. You really got into *everything*, didn’t you?

KELLY picks up one of the wigs and giggles.

KELLY (cont.)

Oh my gosh... Suze and I used to play with this stuff years ago... when did we have that Baywatch party? Was it before or after our X-Files party? I think it was before... I pretended to be C.J. and she pretended to be Summer.

KELLY picks up one of the shark caps. She snickers and puts it on her head. She turns and sees the wide-awake, nervous-looking pets.

Herding Cats

KELLY (cont.)

Well hello there, naughty doggy and crazy kitties.

STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE (nervously)

Hiiii, Kelly.

KELLY

You guys had a grand old time tonight, didn't you?

STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE

Noooo, Kelly.

KELLY

Don't worry, I'm not mad. I needed a good laugh and you gave it to me. So thank you for that.

STELLA, BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE (puzzled)

You're welcome, Kelly?

KELLY

Hmmm, maybe I could attach little brushes to your paws and you could help clean up... or I know, I could get one of those roombas and you could ride around on it.

LUPIN

Hey, that'd be kinda fun.

KELLY (cont.)

Aaaanyway... I guess I'd better... hello, what's this?

KELLY notices something from the mess of props – an envelope. Still wearing the shark cap, she takes it opens and reads the letter inside. After a moment, she sighs and smiles.

KELLY (cont.)

Ohhh my goodness, I haven't seen this in *ages*. I thought I'd lost it! I'd nearly forgotten all about it.

She sits in the middle of the couch, with the cats to her sides. She looks to CHARLIZE.

KELLY (cont.)

Hey Charlize, you want to join us up here? It's okay girl, come sit next to Lupin.

CHARLIZE gets up and sits beside LUPIN, so that from left to right on the couch it's BUDDHA, STELLA, KELLY, LUPIN, and CHARLIZE. KELLY has a bittersweet look.

KELLY (cont.)

That's a good girl. You know... if we're not going to be together much longer, then this is how I want to remember us.

KELLY smiles at her pets and strokes them all. Then she goes back to the letter.

Herding Cats

KELLY (cont.)

I can't believe you turned this up... this goes back to when me and Suze were kids... when we decided to write letters to our favorite celebrities. Suze sent a letter the state attorney general, and I sent mine to, well... ahem.

KELLY clears her throat and reads:

KELLY (cont.)

Hey, Kelly! How's it going? Caught any good waves lately? I have to say – I've been in this business a long time but I've never received a fan letter like yours. Have you really seen all two hundred forty-two episodes? Kelly, you rock! You have great taste in TV, and I'm proud to declare you an honorary member of the Baywatch. But seriously, I'm flattered that you asked for my advice. So, you want to be a producer some day? Perfect – we need more sharp young minds in the biz. And my advice is simple – never give up. This industry is a tough one. One day you're on top of the world, and the next you're herding cats as far as you can see. But if you can dream it, you can do it. So think big – take chances – go nuclear if you want to! I hope I'll get to see you accepting an award on stage someday, but until then I hope these words give you the encouragement to animate your success. Yours truly – Hoff.

KELLY pauses, scanning over the letter.

KELLY (cont., sigh)

Wow, I must have read this a thousand times when I got it... I always meant to have it framed, but it got lost. And you guys found it? Oh, such good kitties and good doggy.

KELLY tousles all the pets' heads, then looks back at the letter. She starts to speak much more deliberately... the words are taking on real meaning now.

KELLY (cont.)

Think big – take chances – go nuclear if you have to... nuclear... animate your success... herding cats... animate... animate.

KELLY goes wide-eyed, like a light bulb just clicked on over her head. She jumps up.

KELLY (cont.)

I've... I've got it. *I've got it, you guys!* I know what I have to do!! It was right here all along! Hoff, you rock!

KELLY hurriedly hugs and kisses each pet one at a time

KELLY (cont.)

Love you! (*kiss*) Love you! (*kiss*) Love you! (*kiss*) Love you! (*kiss*).

KELLY takes her belongings, starts to exit, but turns back to the pets.

KELLY (cont.)

No one's breaking us apart. No one. Not now, not ever. Did you hear that?! SUCK IT, MADISON!!

KELLY makes a fist, then turns and exits. The pets stare in amazement.

Herding Cats

LUPIN

Wow, youze guys.

STELLA

Wow is right, Lupin. Did – did we...

CHARLIZE

Did *we* really have something to do with that?

BUDDHA

We shall see, Charlize. We shall see.

CHARLIZE looks over at STELLA, who half grimaces-half smiles, holding her belly.

LIGHTS OUT, END SCENE NINE.

SCENE TEN

LIGHTS UP, and we see that the place has been cleaned up. The animals rest in their usual places, while KELLY speaks on the phone.

KELLY (on phone)

Soooo, anyway... I'm just calling to let you know that... oh, you knowww... they love it! They love my pitch! What? No, not them. Screw them! I've defected – to Cartoon Network...! Yes, it's an animated show! It's about these three cats, right? And they get into all these crazy adventures, right? Oh, all sort of things... they conspire against Russian agents, they wrestle sharks, they hobnob in Hollywood, all sorts of stuff. And—get this – their headquarters is inside the mouse hole in their harried owner's bedroom... what? No, I fixed it... *yes*, I mean me – look, give a girl a trowel and some drywall and she's pretty handy, okay? Anyway, I've got the perfect title. Are you ready? Ahem — “Cats on Catnip...” isn't that cute..? I know! Oh, but there's another character too – this totally cool dog that joins them on their missions... what kind? She's a pit bull! Oh, Suze – they wanna meet with me next week... I mean, I know it's just a start, but it's a start, right...? Thanks! And hey, kick butt on those exams for me, okay, Counselor? Love ya sis... bye.

KELLY hangs up and giddily goes toward her bedroom area.

CHARLIZE

You guys... I think we really might have done it... I think we might have saved Kelly!

LUPIN

Just like Kelly saved all of us.

BUDDHA

Well put, Lupin. And I have a compulsion to do the most unusual thing, as means of celebration.

CHARLIZE

What's that, Buddha?

Herding Cats

BUDDHA (beat)
Dance.

LUPIN
Then what are we waitin' for? Let's boogie!

CHARLIZE
Yeah!

BUDDHA, LUPIN, and CHARLIZE get up and dance. STELLA starts to get up, but clutches her tummy and sits back on the couch. She observes her celebrating friends with a wistful smile.

CHARLIZE (cont.)
Hey Lupin, show me that chicken thing you do.

LUPIN
Oh, ya mean like this?

LUPIN does the "funky chicken" and CHARLIZE imitates and laughs.

CHARLIZE
We did it, you guys! We're heroes! And it was Stella's idea all along. Stella, come celebrate with us!

STELLA weakly stands, clutching herself.

STELLA (in pain)
Celebrate? Yeah, let's celebrate... uh... I... I ... better lie down... oh no.

STELLA lets out a long groan and collapses down on the couch.

STELLA (cont.)
Unnnnnnnggggh...

The other animals rush to STELLA's side.

BUDDHA, LUPIN and CHARLIZE (ad-libbing)
Stella! Oh no, Stella! Are you okay? What's happening? (etc).

STELLA
I don't think I can move, you guys...

CHARLIZE
Oh no! The sacrifice! The sacrifice you talked about! Oh please Stella, don't let it be you!

STELLA (calmly, smiling through the discomfort)
No... that's not it at all. I think that part about a sacrifice was all made up. Gosh... seeing you all celebrate like that? That's the best thing I think I've ever seen in my life. But I don't think it's in the cards for me, you guys...

Herding Cats

LUPIN (starting to choke up)

Not – not in the cards? But then what’s happenin’ to ya, Stella?

STELLA (smiles at LUPIN)

Nothing, Lupin... it’s just my time, that’s all

BUDDHA

Your time? Oh no... Stella.

STELLA (taking BUDDHA’s paw)

It’s okay, big bro... it’s okay.

BUDDHA

Oh, my dear dear sister. Is it really so?

STELLA (smiles at BUDDHA)

Yeah Bood, I think so. We sure had a great run together, didn’t we guys?

LUPIN

But... Stella... ya can’t cross the bridge just yet...

KELLY reenters, and sees the animals at STELLA’s side. She rushes over to STELLA.

KELLY

Anyway, it’s time for... what? Oh no. Stella? Stella?!

KELLY tries to move STELLA, but she resists. KELLY is getting distraught.

KELLY (cont.)

C’m on baby, we gotta get you to the vet. Oh no, Stella, please! Let me help you! I’ll get your medicine!

STELLA puts a paw on KELLY’s shoulder, smiles and looks right into KELLY’s eyes.

STELLA

It’s okay, Kelly. It’s okay. I’m ready... I’m ready to go now. And it doesn’t hurt anymore.

STELLA and KELLY share a long gaze together. KELLY pets STELLA gently.

KELLY

Oh, Stella...

STELLA

You’re gonna be okay, Kelly. I know you are. And I’ve got a really good feeling about that Eric guy.

BUDDHA

Stella... my heart is breaking.

Herding Cats

STELLA

Hey Buddha, if I see any cute Persians, I'll put in a good word for you.

LUPIN (sobbing)

See you over the bridge some day, Stell?

STELLA

Lupin... you gotta take care of Kelly for me, okay? She's gonna need a good street cat.

LUPIN

You bet I will...

KELLY (singing through tears)

Close your eyes, snuggle near me,

Let your whiskers gently curl.

Let the dreams come, sweetie darling,

Go to sleep, my sweetie girl.

STELLA (to CHARLIZE)

Hey... you know something? You really are a sweet dog... Charlize.

STELLA smiles, then closes her eyes and is still. The others hug and stroke her for a long moment, then quietly get up and exit offstage. The lights isolate the peaceful STELLA, who continues to remain still, until a voice is heard.

CHARLIZE (O.S.)

Stella... Stella?

STELLA stirs, and sits up with a long stretch and yawn.

STELLA (yawn)

Mmmmmmm... where am I?

The lights reveal CHARLIZE, who is occupying stage right.

CHARLIZE

Hey Stella, over here!

STELLA

What, where? Who's there...?

CHARLIZE

I'm right here, Stella.

STELLA (beat)

Charlize?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE
Yeah, it's me.

STELLA
But... where are we?

CHARLIZE
Well, I'm back home, and you're on the rainbow bridge.

STELLA
I am?

The LIGHTS begin to cycle through rainbow colors.

CHARLIZE
Yeah, see... isn't it beautiful?

STELLA
But... if I'm here, and you're there, then how can we be meeting like this?

CHARLIZE
You know, I'm not really sure how this works? I just know I'm here to have a conversation with you.

STELLA
But—the rainbow bridge—that means I... I can't! I can't be... I have to go back!

CHARLIZE
No Stella, you can't. It's too late now.

STELLA
No, I have to go back! I have to make sure Kelly's all right!

CHARLIZE
Stella, you don't understand... it's been four years.

STELLA
Four years?! But how is that even possible?

CHARLIZE
Well, I think time passes differently for you than it does for the rest of us now.

STELLA
But... is this conversation even *real*?

CHARLIZE (smiles)
Search your heart, Stella! Does it *feel* real?

STELLA puts a paw to her chest.

Herding Cats

STELLA

It... does. This *is* real. But... is everyone okay back home? Kelly... is Kelly all right?

CHARLIZE (smiles)

She sure is, Stella.

STELLA

She is? But her job—she was so worried! She thought she was going to be...

CHARLIZE

Stella, Kelly did it. She won! She's a real producer now.

STELLA

She is? But her TV show idea... was it successful?

CHARLIZE (nods)

Yeah, and it still *is* successful. "Cats on Catnip" has been on the air for three seasons now. It's a really fun show. It's what they call a cult classic. They even got that Hasselhoff guy do a cameo as a schnauzer.

STELLA

They did? That's amazing! But what about that—that werewolf show? The one her boss stole from her?

CHARLIZE (scowl)

Oooh, you mean "A Howling in Muncie"? Meh, not so good. Got the ax after two episodes. Y'know, Kelly was gonna sue for plagiarism, but Aunty Suze said it wasn't worth dragging out.

STELLA

Aunty Suze?

CHARLIZE

Yeah, she graduated and became an entertainment attorney. Buddha says that's what you call an oxymoron.

STELLA (little gasp of concern)

Buddha! Buddha... and Lupin. Are they okay, are they still—

CHARLIZE (smiles)

They're as awesome as ever. They've put on a few years, but still find all sorts of fun ways to get into trouble.

STELLA

I miss them... I really miss them already... but how do you know all this, Charlize?

CHARLIZE

Well, I never left.

STELLA

You mean you're—you're still with Kelly?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

I am.

STELLA (beat, smile)

She adopted you.

CHARLIZE

Yeah, she sure did.

STELLA

I always knew she would.

CHARLIZE

She really is the best. But it's not just us, you know? There are others now.

STELLA

Others? Who?

CHARLIZE

Well, Kelly married Eric two years ago. He's such a great guy. You'd adore him.

STELLA

I knew he was the real deal.

BUDDHA and LUPIN appear on stage, going through the actions of telling stories to young children.

CHARLIZE

And it gets better. They adopted a little pit bull puppy named Wilby, and a kitten named Xena.

STELLA

Aw, they did? That's so sweet!

CHARLIZE

Yeah, and they're tons of fun to have around. Lupin's been teaching them the song of the street, and Buddha loves telling them our story, especially the stuff about the nuclear option.

STELLA

The nuclear option? But, did we really *do* anything to help Kelly? I mean, all that happened is she found that old letter.

CHARLIZE (smiles)

Did we really do anything to help Kelly? C'mon Stella, search your heart again. I think you know the answer to that question.

STELLA (beat, paw to chest, smiles)

You're right, Charlize, I think I do know the answer. And now you have a little puppy and a kitten, and you tell them stories about us?

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE (cont.)

Yeah! They love hearing about what we did, and how you fought so hard for Kelly. They say “tell us about Aunty Stella again!”

STELLA

Aunty Stella... gosh.

CHARLIZE

But that’s not all... there’s someone else, too.

STELLA

There is?

CHARLIZE

Yeah, there sure is.

KELLY appears on stage, clearly holding a bundle with a baby swaddled inside. She smiles and shows the bundle to BUDDHA and LUPIN, who smile and sniff gently.

CHARLIZE (cont.)

Her name is Laura. She’s a really beautiful baby.

STELLA

That’s... wonderful.

KELLY, BUDDHA, and LUPIN quietly exit.

STELLA (cont.)

But... how are *you* doing, Charlize?

CHARLIZE

I’m doing great, Stella. I love my family. Oh, and I still go to doggie therapy, once a month.

STELLA

Um – doggie therapy?

CHARLIZE

Yeah, you know, for my food aggression? It’s going really well. Kelly does clicker training with me. It’s sort of fun.

STELLA

I’m so happy for you, Charlize.

CHARLIZE (beat)

You know, Stella... we mourned you. We really did. And we’ll never forget you.

STELLA

I’ll never forget you, either.

Herding Cats

CHARLIZE

You know something? Kelly put up a photo on the front door – this is at our new house, I mean. It’s a picture of you, and you’re crouching down, getting ready to pounce on Lupin, on the day Kelly brought him home.

STELLA (smiles)

I remember that day.

CHARLIZE

And every morning when she leaves for work, Kelly blows that picture a kiss, and says “Love ya, Stell.”

STELLA (peaceful sigh)

Thank you, Charlize. Thank you for sharing this with me.

CHARLIZE

You’re welcome, Stella.

STELLA (beat)

What... what happens now?

CHARLIZE

Cross the rainbow bridge, Stella. Cross the bridge.

After a long beat, STELLA nods. Then she smiles and holds up a paw.

STELLA

Polydactyly.

CHARLIZE laughs softly and holds up a paw.

CHARLIZE

Extra piggies on our paws.

CHARLIZE clasps STELLA’s paw... and then STELLA pulls CHARLIZE into a gentle embrace. After a few moments, they separate.

CHARLIZE

See you around, Stell.

STELLA

See you around, Char.

CHARLIZE exits. STELLA looks out at the path ahead of her.

STELLA (cont.)

Well all righty then, I guess I’d better be going, ummm, forward? Yeah. Forward’s a good way to go. Wow, what a magnificent place this is... and hey, what’s that smell? *(sniffs)* Oh, is that tuna? *(sniffs)* Wow, it *is* tuna... that’s the best smelling tuna I ever smelled... can’t wait to have me some of that. It’s just I’m not quite sure where to, ummm—

Herding Cats

STELLA spots someone in the distance ahead. She waves.

STELLA (cont.)

Oh, hello, you over there? Hi! I'm uh, I'm kinda new here, and I'm not really sure what I should—

STELLA gives a little gasp.

STELLA (cont.)

Benji?

STELLA begins to smile widely as LIGHTS FADE OUT. The End.