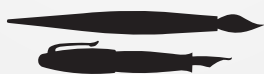


LETY
OUT
LOUD

BY
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CHAPTER 1

Furry Friends Summer Camp

If Lety Muñoz could adopt any animal in the world, it would be Spike, the sweet black-and-white terrier sitting across from her on the lawn at that very minute. Lety was outside the Furry Friends Animal Shelter along with other summer campers. All of them wore shorts and teal-blue Furry Friends T-shirts and sat quietly as the shelter's owner and veterinarian, Dr. Villalobos, told stories about the

various dogs and cats at the shelter. Lety liked how Dr. Villalobos's voice rose high with excitement and then dropped low when a story turned serious. He had colorful tattoos on both arms and long, dark hair pulled into a braid that snaked down his back. He was like no other veterinarian Lety had ever seen. Still, it was Spike that drew her gaze. The small dog wore a blue bandanna and gnawed at a twisted piece of rope.

“Our shelter is full of dogs and cats that were surrendered by their families,” Dr. Villalobos said. “Others were picked up as strays by our rescue team. Spike was brought to the shelter for the first time by highway patrol. He was chasing cars. Can you believe it?”

Giggles and gasps erupted from the campers, but Lety was stuck on Dr. Villalobos's words: “brought to the shelter for the first time.” She wanted to raise her hand and ask what he meant. Had there been a second and third time? Luckily, Dr. Villalobos began to explain.

“Spike doesn't have a winning record with forever families,” he said. “He knows how to high-five, shake hands, and roll over, and thanks to one of our volunteers, he's finally mastered how to sit and stay, but every time he's adopted, he's brought back to the shelter. Everyone says he's too wild.”

Spike let out a playful bark, as if saying, “That's right!”

Lety shook her head in disbelief. Too wild? She'd only just met Spike, but to her Spike seemed like the perfect dog. He was super cute with his glossy black-and-white coat, pearly white teeth, and warm brown eyes. He was smart, too, and barked every time Dr. V. mentioned him. What kind of people would give him up?

"The good news is that Spike is going home with a foster family today."

One of the kids started to clap and soon all the kids joined in, but Lety hesitated. In just the few minutes she'd been at the shelter, she had already fallen in love and wanted Spike for herself. She didn't want to clap for him leaving. Lety nudged her best friend, Kennedy McHugh, who was sitting next to her.

"What is a foster family?" Lety whispered. "Can someone still adopt Spike?"

"Let me ask," Kennedy said, raising her hand. Lety smiled, relieved that Kennedy was always willing to speak up for her when she wasn't sure the correct way to ask something or didn't want to sound stupid in front of other kids. Dr. Villalobos called on her right away.

"Will Spike still be available for adoption?"

"Yes, but I'm putting him on hold for now," he answered. "Some time with a foster family is the best thing for Spike."

He's become super popular after being on the news this past weekend. And now the whole city wants to adopt him," Dr. Villalobos continued. "Does anyone know what he did?"

"I think I saw it on the news," one of the campers shouted. Lety hadn't seen anything on the news. At home, her parents watched only a Spanish news station, and it covered everything going on in Mexico and Central America, but nothing about Kansas City.

"If you saw it on TV, then you know that Spike is a star now," Dr. Villalobos continued. Lety leaned forward as Dr. V. explained that last Friday one of the shelter volunteers took Spike for a walk to improve Spike's leash walking.

"Taking a leisurely stroll on a leash is a serious accomplishment for Spike," Dr. Villalobos said. "Spike has only two speeds: roadrunner and rocket blaster."

All of the kids chuckled, except Lety. Again, she nudged Kennedy.

"What is a 'rocket blaster'?"

"He means a spaceship sort of thing," Kennedy answered.

"Rocket blaster." Lety repeated the words to herself. She imagined Spike in a space suit blasting off into the sky over the clouds, wagging his tail as he zoomed into space. She laughed.

“Spike was strolling along on his leash when, without warning, he pulled free from the volunteer,” Dr. V. said. “With the leash dangling behind him like an extra tail, he darted off toward a parking lot. When the volunteer finally caught up to him, she found Spike scratching and whining at a car. This was strange behavior, even for him. So the volunteer looked inside the car and quickly saw why Spike was upset.”

Dr. V. paused. All the kids wriggled with anticipation. Lety bit down on her lower lip, wondering what was inside the car: A fresh pile of dog bones? A long-lost dog sibling whose scent Spike had never forgotten?

“In the backseat, with all the windows closed, was a crying baby girl. This was Friday afternoon. Do you remember how hot it was on Friday?”

Lety gasped. Since school had let out two weeks ago, she and Kennedy had spent almost every day at Kennedy’s neighborhood pool. It was so hot last Friday that Lety’s watermelon Popsicle melted into a pink sticky puddle before she had a chance to have a taste. While they swam, the radio DJ kept warning everyone that they were under an “orange ozone alert” and to drink lots of water.

“I’d like to leave her parents in a hot car,” grumbled Hunter Farmer from under a baseball cap.

Lety knew Hunter from school. He had also been a fifth grader last year at El Camino Charter Elementary, but he was in Mrs. Morgan's class and not Mrs. Camacho's. Mrs. Camacho had all the English Language Learners like Lety as well as other students like Kennedy. She called the English Language Learners her "ELLs," which made Lety think of slimy sea creatures. She didn't want to be an ELL, she wanted to be just another El Camino student who could say things like "my bad" and "cool" and have a smart dog like Spike.

"Was the baby okay?" Kennedy asked.

"The volunteer called 911 and the child was saved," said Dr. Villalobos. "Now everyone wants to adopt the hero dog that saved a child." Dr. V. leaned down and gave Spike a big smooch on his head. The terrier turned away from his rope long enough to swipe Dr. V. with two wild licks. Dr. V. wiped his face with the sleeve of his *Star Wars* T-shirt. What a dog, Lety thought.

"Spike will be going home to a close family friend of mine today where he can run around, chase squirrels, growl at his own shadow, and all the other crazy things he does. And the moral of this story is what? Anyone want to take a stab at what you learned from this amazing dog?"

All of the kids raised their hands, but Lety hesitated.

She had to collect the words just right in her head before she spoke them. As Dr. V. began calling on the other campers, she hoped no one took her answer before she could put the words together.

“Do not forget your babies in the car,” said Brisa Quispe with a snap of her fingers that made all the kids laugh and add their own snaps. Lety looked over at Brisa and flashed her a thumbs-up for the sassy answer. Never boring, Brisa responded with a formal salute that made Lety giggle.

Besides Kennedy, Brisa was also one of Lety’s best friends. She’d been her best friend since they met in fourth grade when Brisa arrived from La Paz, Bolivia. Lety, who had arrived in the United States from Mexico the year before, was assigned to be Brisa’s desk buddy. As her desk buddy, she helped Brisa understand assignments and how things worked in the classroom. Together, Lety and Brisa charged through English spelling words, verbs, and contractions. In no time at all, Brisa and Lety weren’t just desk buddies. They were lunchroom buddies, recess buddies, sleepover buddies, and summer pool-time buddies.

“Good answer. Anyone else take away a lesson?” Dr. V. asked.

“Listen to your dog,” Kennedy said.

“Good. Next?”

“People are stupid and dogs are smart,” Hunter said.

“A little harsh.” Dr. Villalobos winked at Hunter. “But in this case, you’re mostly right. Anyone else?”

Lety raised her hand and Dr. V. called on her.

“Sometimes people or pets that are unwanted can still become heroes if we just give them a chance,” Lety offered.

Dr. Villalobos nodded and slapped his hands together.

“Best answer of the day.” He beamed. “Brilliant!”

Lety tried to suppress a smile, but holding back a smile was like trying to keep Spike from being a rocket blaster. She let the smile pour over her entire face, proud that she had taken her time to find the correct words. It was something she had been working on for the past year with Mrs. Camacho’s encouragement. Then, as if Spike also understood how important speaking up was to her, he dropped the rope he’d been chewing, trotted over, and gave her a few licks on her cheek. She buried her face in his fur and gave the hero dog a hug while Kennedy and Brisa nuzzled in to give Spike a few loving pets, too. Above all the coos and baby talk from Kennedy and Brisa, Lety heard Hunter’s voice.

“More like dumbest answer of the day.”