



Christmas Shelter

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Destiny has unexpected plans when Patricia Burnet is forced to take a detour on the eve of her long-awaited Christmas vacation. A chance encounter with an abandoned dog leads her to the last place she'd want to be: the animal shelter where Carlota Lozano volunteers.

Carlota, a volunteer at the animal shelter, has decided to spend the night there due to an incoming snowstorm, wanting to ensure that the animals who couldn't be placed in foster homes will be well cared for. Patricia's arrival with the dog comes as quite a surprise, and not a pleasant one, as both women know each other and share an old grudge from the past that makes their relationship very tense. This wouldn't be a problem if Patricia could just leave the dog and go, but on her way to the shelter, the snowfall has become so heavy that by the time she wants to leave, her car is stuck on the road, forcing her to stay at the shelter with the person she considers her enemy. Can Christmas magic help them smooth things over?

Total Pages (Source): 27

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Chapter 1

"If it keeps being this cold, we'll end up frozen," Carlota says, rubbing her hands that have gone numb.

Carlota Lozano and her colleague, Vanesa Mateo, have just moved the last dog from the shelter into one of the indoor rooms prepared for when a cold wave or a strong storm, as is the case, is forecast to cross the country. It's Christmas Eve, and around this time at this shelter on the outskirts of Salamanca, temperatures usually hover near freezing, but today the thermometers have plummeted. Storm Graciela is passing through Spain, and the weather predictions aren't particularly good. Heavy snow and hurricane-force winds are expected. Both women volunteer at the Huella Figueroa Animal Shelter, a medium-sized facility that provides refuge to dogs and cats who, unfortunately, are abandoned by their owners. Carlota, a veterinarian by profession, has been coming to the shelter regularly for several years. She's in charge of examining the animals, prescribing medication, and keeping track of them, especially the sick ones, but on days like today, she sleeps at the shelter to ensure that those who stay there are well protected.

"We've been really lucky," Vanesa says while closing one of the cages. "The foster homes have had good availability, and almost all the animals are accompanied."

Carlota nods, relieved. Every time a storm is forecast, volunteers have to try to place the animals in foster homes because, despite the shelter being well-insulated against water and cold, some get scared easily, or those who are sick risk being alone for many hours. They don't always manage to get the shelter partners to collaborate, but this time they can say it's gone very well.

"I thought that, given the dates, many would say no," the veterinarian responds while approaching the coffee machine.

"I think there's more awareness now, and most collaborators are willing to help," Vanesa says while sitting at the table and opening a package of cookies.

"Awareness from some," Carlota responds firmly, "because there's still lots of scum who keep abandoning their pets like they're trash."

Both Carlota and Vanesa, who are the most veteran volunteers at the shelter, decided to become volunteers after noticing the number of dogs and cats found in garbage bins, tied to trees, or forgotten in the middle of a mountain without water or food. Neither understands how some human beings can be so despicable.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Vanesa asks after receiving a cup of coffee with milk. "You know they're safe and calm in here."

"I prefer to stay with them. Melcocha isn't doing well with her heart, besides, nobody's waiting for me at home, and rather than being alone there, I'll stay with them - they keep me warm," Carlota answers, shrugging her shoulders and grabbing five cookies to dunk in her coffee with milk.

Vanesa observes her with a mixture of pity and pride. She's known Carlota for many years and knows what a great woman she is, but she also knows her insecurity from all the teasing she received since she was very young about those extra pounds she's always carried. That doesn't let Carlota be completely happy; she's a beautiful, cheerful, and dedicated woman, but with a veil of sadness that she seems unable to shake off.

"This time I came well-equipped," Carlota continues, "I have my sleeping bag, prepared hot food, a bottle of wine, and my e-reader."

Vanesa smiles openly.

"Hey, have you been able to talk to any girls?" Vanesa suddenly asks, changing the subject.

Carlota's blush rises from her neck until it paints her face almost completely pink.

"No, not yet," she answers in a small voice. "Some have written to me, but I don't know how to interact with them."

Vanesa doesn't say anything, just nods and takes a sip of her hot drink. A while ago, Carlota confessed to her the confusion she'd started to feel about her sexual orientation. She's always dated guys and, although she's had a couple of long relationships, she's never felt completely comfortable with men, always feeling like something was missing, not to mention sex becoming boring after she's done it a couple of times. Seeing that the veterinarian wasn't doing anything to satisfy her curiosity, Vanesa encouraged her to open a profile on one of those dating apps, and after thinking about it for several weeks, Carlota decided to do it, but she feels very insecure about it.

"I don't think I'm cut out for these things, it all seems too forced," Carlota concludes and grabs another cookie from the center of the table.

"It's a bit weird at first," Vanesa offers, who has extensive experience using these apps, "but when you connect with someone who catches your attention, it's very exciting. Just relax," she says and stretches out a hand to hold her friend's, "go at your own pace, I'm sure you'll meet someone soon."

Carlota Lozano sighs. At thirty-six, she feels she's accomplished many things. She graduated with the degree she always dreamed of studying, works at one of the most important veterinary clinics in Castilla y León, is always surrounded by animals that

make her very happy, and has seen all of Europe thanks to her numerous trips. But Carlota doesn't know what it feels like to be loved and valued, because although she's dated several men, she hasn't felt that affection that most people say is romantic love from any of them, much less does she feel she's ever truly fallen in love. They say you can't miss what you've never known, but Carlota yearns to love and be loved in that way described in the hundreds of romance novels she's read throughout her life.

"Well, I'm heading out now, don't want to get caught in the storm," Vanesa says, pulling Carlota from her thoughts. "Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Yes, don't worry," the veterinarian answers while getting up to walk her friend to the door, "we'll be fine here."

The girls say goodbye with a hug, and as soon as Carlota secures the door, she turns to observe all those little animals who look at her with such affection, grateful that people like her exist to rescue them from that harsh moment of abandonment. The veterinarian smiles because, although she's there without another person for company, she feels like one of the luckiest women on the planet and for a moment, she sets aside those crazy desires she seems to have to know love... the love of a girl.

Chapter 2

Patricia Burnet beams with joy. At last, the clock strikes the end of her shift, marking the beginning of her mini-vacation this December, right before the Christmas holidays.

"You don't waste any time," a coworker teases as she hurries to clear her desk.

"Not a minute," she replies with a smile while shutting down her computer and scanning the veterinary clinic where she works afternoons. During mornings, Patricia rotates through various practices treating animals with cardiac conditions, her

specialty.

"Going somewhere?" her colleague Thomas asks with curiosity.

"To Gibraltar," Patricia answers, closing her purse.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Thomas whistles, impressed.

"That's quite a drive from Salamanca," he comments with a nod. "Aren't you worried about driving with the storm coming?"

In truth, Patricia is worried. Snowstorms like the one approaching this afternoon aren't common in Salamanca, and she would have preferred to be home when it hits, but she can't control the weather.

"If nothing holds me up, I'll be gone before it arrives and leave it behind," Patricia winks at him, making it clear he shouldn't keep asking, "see you when I'm back."

"Sure, safe travels."

Patricia exits the building and breathes in the cold winter air deeply. Dusk approaches, and the Christmas lights in the streets have just turned on. She's not passionate about Christmas, at least not since discovering Santa wasn't real, but she must admit that, deep down, she's never lost the Christmas spirit.

Her car sits parked two blocks away, and although she usually enjoys looking at the Christmas decorations shop owners use to decorate their windows, this time she rushes to her car because, as she told Thomas, she doesn't want the approaching storm to catch her leaving Salamanca. Though judging by the sky's appearance, completely covered in clouds, Patricia has her doubts.

She climbs into her car, where she'd already stored her suitcase this morning, and sets off to leave the city and drive to Gibraltar. It's five in the afternoon and, although she

normally leaves work at seven, she requested special permission to leave early. Even so, she knows she'll arrive past midnight at her destination, but that doesn't matter because she's heading to a specific place, the Blue Star Inn, run by her two best friends, Sonia and Yolanda, who started their business two years ago and whom she hasn't seen since.

Just as she leaves the city and drives along a secondary road, Patricia thinks she spots something moving a few yards ahead of her car and hits the brakes. When she manages to focus her vision, she realizes with dismay that it's a dog wandering between the shoulder and the road.

"Damn it," she mutters, checking her mirrors for other cars.

She approaches the dog slowly and quickly realizes from its appearance that it seems abandoned. Patricia can't help but curse internally because, although it's the most inconvenient moment, she can't ignore it and drive past. Frustrated, she turns on her hazard lights and pulls over to the shoulder. In the opposite lane, two other vehicles have stopped to prevent the dog from getting hit by another car, but Patricia is the only one who gets out to try to catch it. She goes to the back of her car and opens the trunk because she always keeps dry dog food there for cases like this, since there's an animal shelter near this road and it's not the first time people abandon dogs in the area hoping the shelter will take them in.

The dog stands still a few yards from Patricia's car, clearly scared and disoriented, and possibly blinded by the car lights, but this helps the veterinarian approach slowly while talking to the animal with all the tenderness she can muster as she leaves food on the pavement to try to lure it with food.

As she places kibbles, she moves away and gives the animal space to build trust. Minutes pass and cars pile up, but fortunately, people remain patient and let her do what she must until the dog, driven by hunger, begins to approach.

"That's it, sweetie, eat, here's some more," she says and looks down when she notices it's starting to snow. "Great," she adds with a grimace of displeasure, now she'll have to drive in snow, exactly what she didn't want.

With great patience, Patricia manages to get close and finally grab the broken rope the animal has tied around its neck. After that, without forcing it, she moves aside to let the cars pass so the animal won't stress. When they're alone and, after many pets and more food, she manages to get it into the car and closes the door. The animal sits and starts licking her hand when she sits beside it.

"Yes, I know you're grateful. It's better in here, isn't it?"

Patricia pets it and examines the rope.

"Let me guess what happened to you, your owners wanted to go on vacation and you were in the way. They left you tied to some tree, but you're very smart and finally broke free, right?"

Obviously, the dog doesn't answer, but Patricia feels certain her theory isn't far off. The dog is too gentle to have escaped from some orchard or warehouse where people still keep them alone all day for surveillance, like they're an alarm system.

"Well, now I'll take you to the shelter, you'll be better there and they'll take care of you," she says and when she starts the car, the snowfall intensifies.

Patricia activates the wipers at full speed and resumes driving with unease. She must admit she hadn't fully believed it would snow as heavily as they announced on TV, but she's barely covered a couple of miles and watches in amazement as the snow begins to stick to the road.

"Looks like we're in for an interesting ride," she tells the dog, which remains still in

the passenger seat, as if used to car travel.

Three hundred yards ahead, Patricia takes the turn onto the dirt road leading to the shelter. She's barely half a mile from her destination, but the snowflakes fall so hard that she struggles to see what's ahead and two curves later, her rear wheels skid and, before she knows it, her car is stuck sideways in a sort of earthen slope that has left the car tilted to the right.

"Are you okay?" she asks the dog, feeling her heart pounding from the scare.

The dog doesn't seem bothered beyond the unexpected movement of the vehicle, but when Patricia tries to return to the path, her wheels spin in the mixture of snow and mud and, despite her efforts, it proves impossible. The veterinarian knows she can curse and unleash all the expletives she can think of, but that won't solve her situation and she needs to think fast, because more snow keeps accumulating on the path and soon she could become disoriented.

"Okay, dog, the shelter isn't far, we'll have to continue on foot, but I promise they'll give you meat cans and you'll sleep warm."

Patricia puts on her coat, grabs her purse and the dog by the rope serving as a leash, and abandons the car to walk to the shelter hoping to get inside and call emergency services to send a tow truck or firefighters to find her. Although they aren't far, she and the dog—more because of her than the dog—take almost twenty minutes to arrive. Patricia rings the doorbell simply to try, she does it out of habit, but before she has time to look for a place to jump the fence, a female voice answers her and she hurriedly relates what happened to her.

The outer gate opens automatically and Patricia walks as fast as she can to the shelter's cabin door with the dog. When she finally reaches the porch, the door opens and she has to wipe the snow from her face to make sure the person she's seeing is

who she thinks it is.

"Carlota?" she asks confused.

"Hello, Patricia," Carlota responds, more surprised than she is.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Chapter 3

Time seems to have frozen as Patricia Burnet stands there for what feels like hours, staring at Carlota, that old acquaintance she doesn't hold fond memories of. The snow keeps falling, no longer in scattered flakes but now as an unrelenting icy curtain that transforms the ground into a white blanket. Next to her, her unexpected companion wags his tail as if he's facing a bowl of wet dog food rather than a person.

"Don't just stand there, come in, please, you'll freeze," Carlota says, noticing how the girl in front of her remains petrified.

Carlota can't help but smile because before deciding to enter, Patricia and her pet shake their heads at the same time. They step into a tiny room that appears to be some sort of reception area, and after closing the main door, Carlota opens another that leads to a larger space where individual cages of different sizes are neatly arranged, holding several dogs who wait expectantly and instantly burst into frenzied barking.

"Okay, okay, calm down," Carlota pleads, unsuccessfully.

Patricia takes in everything quickly, but doesn't miss certain details, like the armchair with a blanket thrown over it, an e-reader, and a nearly empty wine glass. It seems Carlota was in the middle of a cozy reading session when she showed up at the shelter.

"Who's this handsome boy?" Carlota asks, observing the dog with a smile.

For the second time in just minutes, Patricia finds herself in a strange dreamlike state.

She lifts her gaze and fixes it on the girl.

"I just found him," she answers while crouching down to pet him. "Some asshole abandoned him, but that broken rope tells me he managed to break free from wherever they tied him up. He was on the road, and luckily I was able to catch him, though it took a while."

Carlota's smile vanishes instantly, and her face contorts into an expression mixing rage and pain.

"Same old story," Carlota says while shaking her head and turning to open a cabinet. "I still can't understand how someone can abandon an animal to their fate, especially in this weather. Let's get him up on the table to dry him off."

Patricia nods and picks up the dog carefully. Although he's shown himself to be gentle, it's clear the animal has been through a lot, and in moments like these, he might feel cornered and react defensively. He allows himself to be picked up without the slightest problem, and Patricia lifts him onto a metal table at the back of the room, next to two cabinets containing everything necessary to examine and treat animals. The two veterinarians work together, thoroughly drying the dog, checking his paws, ears, teeth, and eyes. Then they move on to palpating organs to rule out any obvious injuries, and both conclude that the animal shows no serious damage beyond some scratches, thinness, and very long nails, which they decide to trim for his comfort.

Neither of them realizes it, but they've worked so synchronously that it seems as if they've been partners for a long time. While one dried the animal, the other examined him. Then Carlota, knowing where everything is, brought out antiseptic, ointment, and nail clippers. In silent agreement, each veterinarian handled a different part of the treatment, and in less than half an hour, the dog was on the floor devouring a bowl of kibble mixed with wet food.

"Hello, handsome," Patricia greets one of the dogs in a small cage. It's an overweight Chihuahua who watches her while wagging his tail but maintains a penetrating analytical gaze, as if figuring out where to attack if this strange woman gets too close.

"This is Troy," Carlota comments. "Apparently his owner has a new boyfriend who can't stand animals, so she decided to get rid of him after keeping him for months practically without taking him outside. That's why he's overweight."

Patricia blinks, perplexed. Although she's been practicing her profession for years and has collaborated several times with animal protection organizations and shelters, she can't get used to these cases where people - to call them something - dispose of their pets as if they were inanimate objects.

"These are Luca, Vito, and Sonic," Carlota continues with the introductions. "Their owners bought an apartment and, tired of them scratching everything, gave them to their ninety-year-old neighbor. The woman died, and they were left alone. The former owners didn't even bother looking for them."

Patricia feels like if she opens her eyes any wider, they'll pop out of their sockets. She couldn't be more shocked.

Carlota explains the case of each animal there and their stories. Patricia notices that the veterinarian is deeply involved because it's not common in places like these for volunteers to have everything so under control, mainly because there are usually so many animals that it's difficult to know them all in depth.

"We managed to place the rest in foster homes. They're warm and peaceful. Once the storm passes, they'll return to the shelter, though with luck, some of the volunteers might decide to keep one," Carlota says, hoping her wishes come true.

Both jump when they hear an unexpected loud noise.

"Well, looks like he was tired," Patricia says, realizing the noise comes from the newly found dog who's snoring loudly.

"This is what usually happens," Carlota explains. "While they're on the street, between confusion, fear, and the situations they have to face, they rest very little. When they get here and realize they at least have shelter, water, and food, they usually collapse for a good while."

Patricia feels miserable about having to leave, but at least she's been able to leave the dog in good hands.

"I hope he can find a good home soon," the cardiologist responds sadly. "Listen, I'm sorry, but I need to continue my journey. The car's stuck at the start of the path, between the mud and snow, I can't get out without help."

Carlota raises her eyebrows while opening her mouth.

"Getting out of here will be impossible, Patricia."

"I can't stay," the cardiologist responds. "I need your help."

Carlota sighs.

"Are you sure you want to drive in this storm?"

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"I am," Patricia concludes without saying anything more.

The cardiologist says goodbye to all the animals, cage by cage, wishes them happy holidays, and puts on the coat she had set aside as they prepare to leave. As soon as Carlota opens the main door, they realize that despite less than an hour having passed, the storm has intensified so much they can't see anything. There's a thick fog accompanied by those relentless snowflakes, and when Patricia decides to take a step, her foot sinks in, making it clear she'll need divine intervention to get out of there.

"Damn," she mutters, grimacing.

"I told you," Carlota says, putting her hand up as a visor to try to see anything in front of her.

"Let's go back inside," Patricia asks resignedly. "Maybe we can try again later."

They both go back inside, shake off the snow, and remove their coats. Patricia remains standing because she doesn't know what to do, she has no desire to interact with her old acquaintance. What she wants is to be on her way to Gibraltar, stop at a gas station in the middle of nowhere to rest and eat a vending machine sandwich, one of those with a long list of ingredients, mostly chemicals, but which would taste like glory to her. That's what Patricia desires, although for some strange reason, she also has a feeling of tranquility being there, which she attributes to being surrounded by animals, which is always comforting for her.

"Do you like it with milk?" Carlota asks, and seeing her companion's confused look, she lifts a mug and points to the coffee maker.

"Yes, more milk than coffee, please."

While Carlota is busy preparing the hot drinks, Patricia looks around everything again with genuine interest until she notices something she had overlooked; there's a folding bed in a corner and next to it, a plastic chair with blankets and what appears to be a sleeping bag, and on the floor, a large backpack.

"Do you sleep here?" the cardiologist suddenly asks.

Carlota, who already has the coffees ready, approaches her and hands her a mug.

"I didn't want to leave them alone. The ones who stayed are skittish, and Melcocha," she points to one of the dogs, "is sick. I wouldn't forgive myself if something happened to him while I'm warm and safe in my house."

Patricia's heart does a strange jump, and she doesn't understand why.

"I think I'd do the same in your position," the cardiologist concludes.

The two veterinarians fall silent, enjoying their coffee with milk that's warming them up, as the few seconds they spent outside have chilled them. Both are aware that there's a conversation floating in the air that neither wants to address, but the past has returned, and they can't avoid it.

Chapter 4

Charlotte sneaks glances at Patricia, who stands by the window, her gaze fixed on the thick curtain of snow that keeps falling as if she hopes it might suddenly stop, melt, and let her retrieve her vehicle to escape. The volunteer is still processing her former college classmate's presence at the shelter—she's the last person she would have expected to find on a day like today and definitely the last one she'd want to be

stranded with, because that's exactly what they are, even though Patricia refuses to accept it.

"If someone's waiting for you somewhere, you should call to let them know. I don't think you'll make it tonight," Charlotte suggests before finishing her coffee.

Patricia slowly turns her neck and looks at her in horror, though Charlotte is the one who's really scared, having felt like she was sharing the shelter with a possessed doll for a few seconds.

"I might not make it to where I was going, but I'm definitely returning home as soon as this stops," Patricia states dryly.

Charlotte nods in agreement and turns around to check if the dog Patricia brought in is still calm, unlike its rescuer.

"Why are you patronizing me?" Patricia snaps, and Charlotte sighs.

"I'm not patronizing you, but I can't do anything if you refuse to see what's obvious," she says, pointing at the window.

"And what's so obvious, may I ask?" Patricia demands, growing more agitated.

Charlotte presses her lips together in resignation before answering because she's just realized that Patricia isn't just frustrated because the weather and that abandoned dog ruined her plans—she's furious about being locked up with her specifically, because it's clear that Patricia is angry.

"It's not my fault you're stuck here," Charlotte says, "besides, you should be grateful you found shelter. Imagine if the refuge had been closed."

"I'm not going to thank you if that's what you're waiting for," Patricia wants to continue her senseless attack but stops when the dog gets up and sits beside her, throwing her off balance.

Charlotte looks at them and, despite the awkward situation, smiles at seeing the connection between her former classmate and the animal she rescued.

"Looks like he likes you," she says, trying to lighten the mood.

Patricia gives her a hard look, but then glances at the dog and somehow calms down a bit and decides to use this moment to take out her phone and send a voice note to her friends in Gibraltar to explain what happened. While Patricia records the note, she paces around the small room trying to calm her nerves and avoiding tripping over the dog, who follows her everywhere.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Where were you traveling to?" Charlotte asks when Patricia puts down her phone.

Her intention isn't to pry, or maybe it is a little, because somehow she feels very curious about what happened to Patricia's life, but mostly, she's trying to create a more pleasant atmosphere between them, because she's certain they'll be spending many hours together.

"Gibraltar," she answers without looking at her.

"Are you hungry?" Charlotte changes the subject. "Luckily, I brought several things, and there's enough for both of us to have dinner."

Patricia's whole body tenses when she hears how easily Charlotte assumes they'll both be staying there together all night, something she can't seem to accept.

"No, thanks, I don't want anything," she says and sits in a chair, facing the window.

The dog sits next to her and rests its head on her leg. Charlotte sighs and decides to bring up the topic she's tried to avoid at all costs because it makes her uncomfortable, but it's much more annoying to endure Patricia's curt and distant behavior.

"Are you really still mad about what happened?" Charlotte asks.

When Patricia turns to look at her, the volunteer again has the sensation of facing a possessed doll.

"Of course, wouldn't you be?" Patricia snaps.

"It's been a decade, Patricia, or more," Charlotte responds, shocked, "and no, of course I wouldn't be. We both applied for the same job with equally good resumes."

"You're wrong," Patricia attacks, standing up from her chair and pointing her finger at her. "It's true we applied for the same position with the same qualifications, but not with equal opportunities because I didn't have any family members working on the veterinary hospital board. They gave you the position because you were Gabi's niece, and that wasn't fair."

"What's not fair is you blaming me for that. We'll never know if my uncle had anything to do with the decision or not, he only has one vote, but even if he did, it's not my fault, Patricia, and it's not right for you to be angry with me."

"I'm not responsible for them giving it to you either, but while you secured a permanent position at the veterinary hospital, I was bouncing around various clinics with awful contracts and schedules for more than five years," Patricia rages.

"I'm very sorry that happened to you, but what did you expect me to do? Give up the position so they'd give it to you? Would you have done that?"

Patricia opens her mouth ready to say yes, of course, but bites her tongue at the last second because she knows it's a lie. Had it happened the other way around, she would never have given up her position to give it to Charlotte or anyone else.

"That's what I thought," Charlotte says. "I'm not asking us to become best friends, in fact, I'm fine with us just continuing to say hello when we cross paths in the city like we sometimes do, but out there a terrible snowstorm is falling and although it's hard for you to accept, you know you're going to spend the night here with me, so I'm asking for a little civility between us. I stayed here so the dogs would be okay, not to be uncomfortable because a former college classmate can't get over not getting the job she wanted and having to find another one."

"I have gotten over it, I'm not a child," Patricia defends herself, indignant.

Charlotte raises an eyebrow and crosses her arms, the dog barks at Patricia.

"You have two options, Patricia," continues Charlotte who, although she's a person who doesn't like conflicts and tries to avoid them, isn't going to overlook this one, "you can stay sitting there in that chair by the window while your body slowly grows numb from cold and hunger makes your mood worse, or you can swallow your pride and come by the heater and have dinner with me, I'm sure you'll have a better attitude with a full stomach. Besides, it's Christmas Eve, you should get into the Christmas spirit a little."

Patricia wants to protest and continue the argument, but she's aware that every word that has come out of Charlotte's mouth is loaded with reason. Right now, she's dominated more by rage at her current situation and hunger than anything else, so she takes the chair and drags it to where Charlotte's is, right next to the heater.

"Much better, what would you like to eat?" she asks, pointing to the cans and containers she has on the table. "If you'd like, prepare whatever you want while I feed the dogs."

Charlotte leaves her in front of the table and walks away to tend to the furry ones while Patricia, grateful for this truce of silence, watches her out of the corner of her eye.

Chapter 5

"Good night, beautiful," Carlota says to one of the small dogs after draping a blanket over her and closing the cage.

Patricia, who seems less grumpy now with a full stomach, watches Carlota from the

corner of her eye because, though she'd deny it, she's touched by how Carlota treats each animal in the shelter. Both veterinarians ate in silence which, to their surprise, felt quite comfortable, and when they finished, Patricia cleared everything while her former colleague wished the furry ones good night. The cardiologist approaches the window again and, to her horror, the snow keeps falling, and if visibility was poor before, now it's almost zero. She sighs, defeated because she has no choice but to sleep here, and when she accepts this fact, a shiver runs through her chest because spending so many hours with her former university classmate feels like punishment.

"I can lend you some comfortable pants to sleep in," Carlota says while pulling clothes from a backpack. "I always bring two because the first time I stayed here, one of the puppies peed while sitting on my lap."

Patricia wants to smile but reminds herself that nothing Carlota says should amuse her.

"Don't worry, I'm comfortable like this. I wore these loose sweats because I knew I'd be driving for hours," the cardiologist replies with a grimace as she remembers—again—that her trip has been cut short.

As if on cue, the dog she rescued lifts his head from his cage and watches Patricia for a few seconds. Then he yawns and lies back down.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"You've established a good connection," Carlota says, smiling because she notices the dog's behavior.

Patricia says nothing, tilts her head, and fixes her gaze back on the window. Carlota rolls her eyes and closes the backpack before disappearing into the bathroom. She spends about five minutes there and curses herself for choosing such a childish pajama right when that demon doll is staying at the shelter with her. Insecurity crawls up her neck and makes her nervous; at least the top is loose enough to hide the extra pounds that make her feel so ashamed. She wrings her hands, takes a deep breath, and opens the door to head straight for the corner where she keeps the folding cot and sleeping bag.

"There's plenty of room here for both of us. I used to sleep on the floor in the sleeping bag, but a volunteer donated this bed, and it's been amazing," Carlota explains while setting everything up for sleep. "Plus, I got this heated pad that keeps you from getting cold at all."

Patricia listens but her eyes only search for something to cover herself with tonight; there's no way she'll sleep with the woman who stole that job she wanted so badly because her uncle pulled strings. She spots some blankets and strides toward them under Carlota's watchful eye.

"I'll sleep on the couch with these blankets," the cardiologist declares.

Carlota raises her eyebrows and shakes her head. She's slept at the shelter many times and knows exactly how cold it gets. If Patricia doesn't bundle up well, in a few hours she'll be so numb she won't be able to sleep, but she won't insist.

"Suit yourself," Carlota responds, tired of trying to be nice to her former classmate who's being so rude.

Two hours later, Patricia Burnet curses her stubbornness. She's like a stiff board under the blankets, her legs and back ache because, although the couch is comfortable, it's not made for sleeping. She watches how Carlota has been breathing with enviable calm for a long time because as soon as she got into the sleeping bag, she closed her eyes and fell asleep. The cardiologist can't take it anymore; she'd resisted, but she's so cold she feels she'll break in two if she doesn't do something about it. She gets up as best she can and walks to the bed, approaches Carlota, and tries to guess if she's a light sleeper or one of those who doesn't notice anything.

"Are you asleep?" Patricia whispers, feeling foolish.

In response, Carlota moves slightly and lifts part of the sleeping bag so Patricia can slip in. The cardiologist immediately feels a warmth that comforts her and sighs at the comfort that's even better than her own bed. Carlota falls back asleep in seconds and lets out murmurs very similar to soft snoring that might drive anyone crazy, but not Patricia, whose eyes start to close slowly as if listening to a lullaby.

In the morning, Carlota wakes up early as usual. Moreover, when she's at the shelter, she gets up earlier than normal to properly care for all the animals. She needs to take them out of their cages so they can walk and do their business, and in times like these when a storm has reached them, the situation gets complicated, and she can only take them to a space in the back that has a roof to shelter them from rain and snow, but not from the cold. When she tries to get out of bed, she feels a warm hand on her side and realizes it's Patricia who's almost hugging her from behind. A flush hits Carlota's body, and she decides to move carefully to avoid waking her up. She fails in her attempt because as soon as she moves her arms, Patricia wakes up and, as if touching a hot iron, withdraws her hand so quickly she almost rolls onto the floor.

"Good morning," Carlota says nervously and stands up.

"Hi," Patricia responds with a raspy voice.

She was deeply asleep until a movement woke her up. She was going to stay curled up there when she realized her traitorous hand was on her former college classmate. Patricia wishes, more than anything in the world, that the snow has stopped and she can get her car out to flee from the shelter and from Carlota. She stands up and approaches the window. Things seem to have calmed down.

"Will you help me get the car out?" Patricia asks suddenly.

Carlota doesn't stop what she's doing, but she's annoyed by the rush the other veterinarian always seems to be in.

"You'll have to wait until I finish the animals' routine. If you want to leave now, help me and we'll finish sooner."

Patricia doesn't think twice, puts on her shoes, goes to the bathroom, and then comes out to share the work with Carlota. Once they've taken the cats to their litter boxes and let the dogs out, both veterinarians serve breakfast while the coffee maker indicates it's ready. Once again, the coordination between them is exquisite, and in a few minutes, they each have a cup in hand while watching the animals devour the contents of their bowls.

"Come on, let's see if we can move the car," Carlota says while putting her cup on the table.

Patricia nods and copies her. They put on their coats and head to the front door. The cold hits them, and although it has stopped snowing, the white blanket remains a major obstacle.

"Damn," Patricia exclaims and zips her coat up to her chin.

"It's still too early to get your car out," Carlota says while surveying everything.

"We have to try," the cardiologist responds, determined to leave now.

Carlota and Patricia start walking and have barely taken ten steps when the volunteer's foot sinks up to her calf. She stands still and looks at her former colleague who twists her expression once again because besides noticing that the snow is very high, she spots part of her car covered in it.

"This is a nightmare," Patricia lets out with a snort.

"Storms are like this, you need patience."

"I have little of that," the cardiologist responds and turns around. "Let's go inside, we'll wait a few hours."

Half a meter from reaching the door, Patricia, who's sulking without paying attention, suddenly loses her balance and stretches out her hand looking for something to hold onto to avoid falling. Carlota, who wasn't prepared for the jolt, slips, and both women fall backward into the snow. Neither has been hurt, the white blanket cushioned the fall, but Carlota can't help letting out a laugh because she finds the situation hilarious, especially seeing Patricia fall to the ground almost in slow motion.

"I wish we had cameras on this side," Carlota says, choking with laughter.

Patricia catches the contagious laughter and starts laughing with her colleague until she realizes she's lowered those walls she's built around herself when it comes to the veterinarian who stole her job. She sits up and stands to shake off the snow. Carlota sits up, but it's harder for her to get up, so she extends a hand for Patricia to help her,

and the cardiologist, though she's rude, takes it because she'd never deny help to anyone. When their palms join, a sensation of fullness embraces them both. It's so intense that both veterinarians are disconcerted, and once Carlota is standing, they let go quickly and hurry inside at a brisk pace.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Chapter 6

"Unbelievable, we still don't have internet," Patricia says, grabbing her phone for the umpteenth time to check.

Though the storm has lost its strength, she knows that without a snowplow clearing the road, getting the car out will be impossible, so she's resigned herself to spending most of the day entertained with her phone while Carlota reads on her e-reader. However, after lunch, the network went down and they're cut off from communication, and even though she's kept herself busy with the dogs, Patricia can't stand the boredom.

"What else could possibly go wrong?" she continues grumbling while pacing from window to window, with the dog glued to her ankle.

"You should give him a name," Carlota suggests.

"What?" Patricia asks, caught off guard.

"The dog. You found him and he likes you, it's only fair that you name him. Otherwise, I'll have to take the list we use for name assignments and give him the next one."

"And what's the next one?" Patricia asks with curiosity.

Carlota puts down her book and gets up to grab the list of names they use to christen the dogs and cats that arrive at the shelter.

"Well, the next one for a male dog is Stockholm," Carlota says.

"Stockholm?" she repeats in horror. "He doesn't look like a Stockholm, does he?" she asks the dog while petting his head.

The dog blinks and licks his lips, thinking she's going to feed him.

"He'll be called Coco," Patricia decides.

"Coco," Carlota repeats with a smile. "I like it. Assigned," she says and writes it down on the dog's file.

Patricia drops heavily into the armchair and lets out a bored sigh that makes her companion nervous. Carlota has been patient and wished with all her might that someone would tell them the snowplow had cleared the road so Patricia could leave. But she knows the shelter won't be a priority, that they'll clear populated areas first, and given the time, she'll have to spend another night with her grumpy companion, and she won't let her keep ruining her plans for another minute.

"Well," she says, putting down Coco's file, "it's time for some real fun," she adds and lets all the dogs out of their kennels.

"What are you doing?" Patricia asks.

It's not that the dogs bother her; after all, most of them are elderly or recovering, so they just come out of their kennels to lie on the blankets and not much else. Before answering, Carlota grabs a box and a couple of bags and places them on the table.

"What I planned to do this morning - decorate this place for Christmas."

To Patricia's amazement, Carlota opens the box and takes out a small artificial tree. Then she opens the bags and not only pulls out Christmas lights and ornaments but also Santa hats and reindeer ear headbands for the dogs. What horrifies Patricia most is that she connects a speaker to a downloaded Christmas playlist and places it on top of the microwave while she starts assembling the tree.

"Don't just stand there gawking, help me," Carlota asks Patricia with a huge smile while putting on a Santa hat.

Patricia stands petrified and looks at the dog kennels thinking about hiding inside one, but when she glances at the animals, she notices that most orbit around Carlota as if they'd caught her Christmas spirit, which seems to have rejuvenated the older ones and lifted the spirits of the sick ones. A bark from Coco startles her, and when she looks at him, he's in front of her wagging his tail at full speed.

"What?" she asks, holding back a smile. "You want a hat too? No, reindeer ears suit you better."

Patricia, after letting out a deep breath, decides she has nothing better to do and nothing to lose by helping, plus she likes the music as it takes her back to her childhood, and she's always liked Christmas, even though she never got over being told Santa wasn't real. She approaches Carlota and starts putting hats and headbands on the dogs.

"Now it's your turn," Carlota says, watching her from the corner of her eye.

Patricia narrows her eyes but gives in and puts on a hat.

"Happy?"

Carlota just smiles in response and continues decorating the tree. Her smile triggers

something in Patricia that she can't decipher, but it makes her feel comfortable, and for a moment, she forgets her bad mood and past grudges. She starts searching through the bags and pulls out more decorations to help Carlota, and for the next hour and a half, the two veterinarians hum carols and even dance with the animals while they finish putting up all the lights and decorations Carlota brought.

"It doesn't look bad," Patricia comments with satisfaction, observing the small lit tree and all the decorations placed on windows, doors, and anywhere they could hang something.

"I love Christmas," Carlota says and adjusts her hat. "Will you feed the dogs while I prepare our dinner?" the volunteer proposes.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Patricia looks at her watch and realizes with surprise that the afternoon has flown by and it's time for dinner.

"Yes, sure."

Again, they seem very synchronized, and all Patricia has to do is ask Carlota about the animals' medications; otherwise, she manages perfectly while her companion this time prepares broth and beans for them, accompanied by a pre-cooked potato omelet.

"You came well-prepared," Patricia comments, genuinely surprised.

The night before, she'd already noticed Carlota had everything, but she was too upset to mention it.

"I've stayed with them before," Carlota responds, "and the first time was really rough. I stayed in that armchair where you wanted to sleep yesterday, and I was naive enough to think a sleeping bag would be enough to stay warm. I froze all night, not to mention my back. As for food, there wasn't even a microwave then, just the coffee maker, and I had to survive on packets of cookies and junk food that upset my stomach for a couple of days."

"How awful," Patricia comments.

"You can't imagine. That's why I ran a campaign and asked shelter members to donate other materials they didn't need, and that's how we got the bed, microwave, and other utilities. Now I come prepared, I bring my e-reader and some movies downloaded on my laptop, so I don't get bored if things drag on, like they have."

"I should get one," Patricia says, picking up Carlota's e-reader to take a look. "They say the battery lasts forever."

"It really does," her companion answers.

Patricia opens the cover, and Carlota's pulse races because it's set to display the cover of the book she's reading, and she just hopes Patricia doesn't recognize it.

"Oh, you're reading Writers?" the cardiologist asks, surprised.

Carlota wishes the ground would open up and swallow her.

"Yes, well, a colleague recommended it, but I'm just at the beginning."

Patricia arches an eyebrow, amused.

"Victoria Rivas and Micaela de Luca are my favorite writers," Patricia says, leaving Carlota speechless. "Did you know they're a couple?"

Carlota knows, but in the middle of a flush that lights up her cheeks like flames, she pretends to be unaware of the fact with a clumsiness that Patricia finds very entertaining.

"Well, well no, actually, I didn't even know their names."

"Right..." Patricia says. "In a few months, they're coming for a book signing at a bookstore in the city. If you like the book, you could buy the paper version and get it signed," she comments mischievously.

"Yes, maybe I will. Shall we clean this up?" Carlota changes the subject, feeling her heart might jump out of her mouth.

"Of course," Patricia responds, and while helping her clean up, she can't stop thinking about the fact that Carlota is reading lesbian literature.

She's never wondered if her former colleague was one of her own, and it didn't matter to her, and it unsettles her that this detail generates so much curiosity now.

Chapter 7

Patricia Burnet hasn't slept this well in weeks. She doesn't know if it's the city's cold, her yearning for a few days off, or the amount of work she's had lately, but since getting trapped in this shelter on the outskirts of Salamanca, she crashes at night and doesn't open her eyes until the next morning. She doesn't want to move, but a noise that's been drilling into her ears for minutes threatens to make her leave the cozy sleeping bag she's tucked into. She frowns because her mind, now waking up, detects a familiar sound, but no matter how hard she thinks, she can't pinpoint what it is.

"The snowplow," Carlota whispers as if she's inside Patricia's thoughts.

The cardiologist's eyes snap open, and she sits up with such force that the thin structure of the folding bed wobbles, making Carlota fully wake up with her heart racing.

"What's wrong?" asks the volunteer, also sitting up and placing a hand on her chest.

"The snowplow machine," Patricia repeats the information and jumps out of bed.

She peeks through the window and, to her delight, the day is quite clear. Although a white blanket still covers the ground, the snowplow is clearing the entire path, making Patricia smile with pleasure, though for some reason she can't identify, she's not as happy as she should be knowing she'll be able to leave these four walls where she's been confined.

"It usually takes about twenty minutes," explains Carlota, who has also gotten up and walks to the window.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

The two veterinarians remain mesmerized watching the machine do its work, as if they're observing a piece of art in a museum. It's Coco's two barks and the whips of his tail that snap them out of that state.

"Good morning, Coco," says Carlota, stretching her lips into a smile and approaching the cage to pet the animal.

Patricia watches them and cracks a smile. Coco looks at her with those deep coffee-colored eyes while melting into the volunteer's affection.

"Well, I better get started," Carlota says while looking at the cages, "if I don't start now, time will get away from me."

"I'll help," Patricia answers faster than she would have liked.

Carlota nods, and when she's about to take a step, she freezes in place. Patricia has taken the lead, and she, in an innocent gesture, has lowered her gaze to fix it on her backside. The jolt catches her by surprise, and she feels her ears start to burn as a flush overtakes her.

"Are you okay?" asks Patricia when she notices the volunteer has barely taken a couple of steps. "You look unwell."

"Period," Carlota answers without thinking and wishes she'd come up with something different. "When I'm close to those days, I get these sudden hot flashes."

"Me too," says Patricia, opening her eyes wide to emphasize her words, "nights are

worse for me."

Carlota nods again and this time does walk, making sure to look where she should. She's still not entirely sure she could have anything with a woman to feel a spark of excitement for her former college classmate. She's certain she doesn't want it to be precisely her who catches her attention, even though they're getting along cordially, Carlota knows Patricia still harbors resentment over the job position they both competed for.

They coordinate as they have these past two days and in less than an hour have managed to walk the animals, clean the litter boxes, and serve their food. Now, after preparing good coffee, the veterinarians sit at the table enjoying a silence that's only interrupted when Troy or another dog decides to lick their paws.

"I'm going to change," says Carlota, getting up with the empty cup. "Do you want to use the bathroom first?"

Patricia looks up and can't help but scan her ex-classmate's body. She hasn't done it on purpose or with any intention, but Carlota turns tomato red again, making the cardiologist tilt her head in a triumphant smile. After discovering she was reading Spain's most famous sapphic writers and noticing certain attitudes, Patricia is sure the volunteer isn't one hundred percent straight.

"No, go ahead," answers Patricia, shifting her gaze to her cup to give her a break, "you go first, I'll go after."

Carlota hurries and locks herself in the bathroom, cursing that reddish color that paints her body every time a situation causes her embarrassment or impression. Patricia takes advantage to make a call, she needs someone to help her get the car out because she has a feeling that just pushing it won't be enough to get it out of the ditch where it got trapped. Otherwise, she'll have no choice but to try or call a tow truck.

"Well, look who's showing up here," is the first thing Patricia hears when her interlocutor answers the call.

The cardiologist smiles and shakes her head.

"We talked two days ago, stop being so dramatic."

"You get me used to receiving a message from you every day," she accuses laughing, "only to disappear whenever you feel like it."

Patricia lets out a laugh, and Coco lifts his head to see what's so funny to his savior.

"I need you to come give me a hand," Patricia asks, getting to the point, "it's a very long story, but my car got stuck on a road and I hope I don't have to resort to a tow truck."

"Are you okay?" the girl behind the phone worries.

"Yes, nothing happened, but I've been at the shelter just outside the city for two days. The storm ruined my plans and until now the snowplow hadn't come through," explains Patricia, who has returned to the window and observes the exterior.

"Give me the address, I can come now because later it's impossible."

Patricia Burnet hangs up the call after explaining how to get to the shelter just as Carlota exits the bathroom. The cardiologist takes advantage to freshen up and change clothes because she wants to be ready when help arrives. Again she feels an unease she can't identify, she's supposed to be celebrating that the snow has stopped and that, finally, she can get her car out to leave. Then she thinks that, although her plans went awry, it hasn't been bad here at the shelter, surrounded by furry love and helping these animals that are always in need of affection because some heartless

people have decided to get rid of them.

"We can go to your car whenever you want," says Carlota when Patricia approaches one of the cages.

"Someone's coming to get me. I thought maybe for us, just pushing, it would be impossible to get the car out. My ex has one of those huge trucks that can handle anything and I'm sure it won't take us any effort to get going."

Carlota would have liked to help her ex-classmate, but she knows the girl is right and it's possible they wouldn't even manage to move the car a few inches. The minutes pass so quickly that neither of them expects it when the doorbell rings and they get scared to death because all the dogs start barking like crazy.

"Okay, okay," says Carlota trying to calm them down unsuccessfully and heads to the main door with her second cup of coffee in hand.

When the volunteer opens the door she freezes, once again. On the other side is a woman in her thirties with wavy brown hair, a fine nose adorned with a piercing, and the brightest blue eyes she's ever seen. The girl strikes her as very striking, but that's not what keeps Carlota with a dumbfounded expression, it's that she realizes Patricia's ex is a woman.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Hi, I'm Aida, I'm here for Patri," the girl says kindly but with a serious expression.

Carlota doesn't have time to open her mouth because, with a broad smile, the cardiologist appears and approaches her ex-girlfriend to give her a kiss on the lips. The volunteer, who still hasn't recovered from her surprise at discovering Patricia is a lesbian, chokes on her own saliva and starts coughing uncontrollably, making the cup she's holding shake so much that all the dark liquid ends up staining the floor.

Aida looks at her raising an eyebrow suspiciously. Patricia's eyes open like two giant plates because Carlota, besides coughing, is so red that she fears she might collapse.

"Easy, try to breathe," says Patricia while patting her on the back.

A minute later and with tears in her eyes, Carlota manages to compose herself.

"I'm sorry," she says embarrassed, "I choked stupidly."

"Patricia has that effect," Aida throws out and tilts her head in a mischievous smile.

"I'll get my coat, say goodbye and come out," says the cardiologist without giving time for her ex-girlfriend's comment to echo any further.

Patricia returns inside and says goodbye to all the animals promising she'll return to visit them. Coco no longer wags his tail as fast, now the animal looks at her with sadness and when the veterinarian pets him, the dog lets his head fall into her hand.

"He'll miss you a lot," says Carlota observing the scene, "he's connected with you and

hoped you'd take him to your home."

Patricia's heart crumples.

"I'll try to find him a good family," she says sadly, "my schedule doesn't allow me to give him the time he needs because having him alone in my apartment all day is awful. Having an animal locked up and without company, for me that's abuse."

"It is," confirms Carlota, "but despite that, many people keep them warm and well cared for. They leave them alone because they have to work, but as soon as they're with them they give them a good quality of life. That's better than being alone in a cage."

Patricia nods and finishes saying goodbye to everyone. She grabs her things and, before heading to the door, turns to face Carlota.

"Thanks for taking me in these days," says Patricia and smiles. "I'll see you around, as always."

Carlota smiles and accompanies her to the exit. She says goodbye to both women and when she sees Aida put an arm over Patricia's shoulders, a new wave of heat hits her hard. The volunteer's head spins so much she has to grab onto the doorframe. She doesn't understand why she feels this way and even enters a state of sudden denial, because the last time she remembers having this sensation was when her ex-boyfriend started flirting almost blatantly with another girl during a night out. Carlota shakes her head and frowns, there's no way she could have felt jealous of this Aida.

Chapter 8

Carlota has lost track of how many hours she's been sitting in the same position. Since Patricia left, she's been at the table with her fourth or fifth cup of coffee of the

day - she's lost count.

Her plan was to keep reading the Writers book until her coworker Vanesa arrives at the shelter to replace her, but that simple fact of knowing with certainty that Patricia likes women has her completely unfocused and unable to think about anything else. That's why Carlota doesn't notice when her coworker opens the door and enters the shelter, nor when she approaches and greets her; she only becomes aware of her presence when Vanesa nearly gives her a heart attack by touching her shoulder to snap her out of her trance.

"Hey, want to come back to earth?" Vanesa says, shaking her.

"Jesus," Carlota startles, jumping to her feet, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I noticed," her coworker smiles. "What were you thinking about with that concentrated look?"

"Nothing in particular," Carlota lies.

Vanesa doesn't believe her because she knows anyone in that state has their mind very occupied, but decides not to push it.

"Well, how did the lockdown go?" Vanesa asks, until something catches her attention and she smiles when she sees Coco. "And who's this handsome furry guy?" she asks, approaching his cage.

"His name is Coco," Carlota explains, "a girl found him on the road during the storm and brought him here, though you won't believe what happened to her."

When Carlota begins to explain Patricia's story to her coworker, Vanesa prepares herself a cup of coffee and sits across from her, listening with such interest that she

barely blinks.

"That's wild, so you haven't been alone these two days, I'm so glad," Vanesa comments.

That's when Carlota explains that she already knew Patricia from their university days and that there's been some tension between them over a job position dispute, but that's not what catches Vanesa's attention - what really sparks her curiosity is her coworker's final comment.

"She left this morning when her ex came to pick her up, who's a woman."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Vanesa's eyes narrow as she focuses on Carlota with a smile.

"Why are you emphasizing the fact that her ex is a woman?"

Again, and as it's becoming an habit she doesn't like, Carlota feels herself getting hot and her cheeks flushing.

"I wasn't emphasizing anything, I just stated the obvious," she defends herself, flustered.

"An obvious detail that wasn't necessary - it was enough to say her ex came to help her," Vanesa teases.

"What's the big deal? It just surprised me, I didn't know Patricia liked women."

"Well, look at that, your former classmate is one of us. Here's your first lesbian friend," Vanesa claps. "It's fantastic, you can meet up with her to go out and start meeting girls, her friends, for example."

"What?" Carlota gets agitated. "No way would I meet up with Patricia, besides, I doubt she's forgiven me for what happened with the job position, and you don't know how harsh she can be when she wants to," she starts saying, increasingly nervous and flushed. "I assure you she hates me, Vanesa, not to mention Patricia would never agree to meet with me."

Again, Vanesa's dark eyes narrow, and Carlota lets out a huff.

"What?" she asks uneasily.

"You're saying she wouldn't meet with you, but you want to meet with her, don't you?" she asks, leaning forward.

Carlota coughs and for a moment fears she'll choke again.

"I don't know why you're saying that, I don't want anything with Patricia," she stammers, increasingly uncomfortable.

"I didn't say you wanted anything with Patricia, you're the one saying that," Vanesa continues to prod, delighted with the new situation.

"You're impossible," Carlota blurts out.

"Sometimes, yes," Vanesa admits, getting serious, "but you know what I think?"

"I'm not sure I want to know," Carlota responds fearfully.

"Doesn't matter, I'll tell you anyway. I think you like this Patricia a little bit, that's why this conversation is making you so nervous."

"I don't like Patricia," Carlota insists, standing up. "How could I like such a harsh woman? You haven't met her, if you knew her you'd understand."

"You're right, I haven't seen her, maybe you could ask her to come by sometime and introduce us," Vanesa continues to press.

Carlota doesn't answer and starts gathering her things, ready to leave.

"Hey, don't get mad," Vanesa says, approaching her. "I didn't mean to make you

uncomfortable, it just caught my attention that you pointed out her ex was a woman, that's all. But if this Patricia hasn't sparked even a tiny bit of curiosity in you, then it's fine, we won't bring up the topic again, I promise," her coworker assures and hugs her.

Carlota accepts the hug while her increasingly confused mind wonders if she really wants to forget about Patricia completely.

"Everything okay?" Vanesa asks her.

"Yes," she responds, still dazed, "I'm going home. I desperately need to sleep in a real bed."

"Of course," Vanesa responds.

Carlota grabs her purse and says goodbye to each animal one by one before leaving.

"By the way," Vanesa says before Carlota walks out the door, "how did you two sleep if there was only one mattress?" she asks mischievously.

"I'm sure you can figure that out on your own," Carlota responds, rolling her eyes.

"Yes, yes I can," Vanesa laughs. "See you at the adoption fair?" she asks as a goodbye.

"Of course, try not to be late."

Chapter 9

Only a day has passed since veterinarian Patricia Burnet left that shelter that kept her isolated for two nights. She has managed to sleep in her spacious bed, but she doesn't know if it's the frustration she feels from having interrupted her trip that made it so hard to fall asleep, ending up dozing off past two in the morning, and now she's there, sprawled on her couch with such laziness that she's carefully considering whether to go shopping at the supermarket or not, though she must do it because her fridge is empty, since she made sure to use up everything she had before leaving for Gibraltar. Her phone suddenly starts vibrating and she stretches like a feline to grab the device resting on the low table in front of the TV. She brightens with a smile when she discovers it's her friend Sonia calling, one of the owners of the hostel where Patricia was going to spend her free days.

"What's up, beautiful?" Patricia greets her friend.

"I'm with Yolanda, so don't say anything dirty," Sonia blurts out, and a boisterous laugh echoes through the speaker.

"Don't worry, I save the dirty talk for Yoli in private," Patricia replies mischievously.

"You bitch," Sonia laughs, showcasing that good camaraderie she has with the veterinarian.

Patricia met Yolanda many years ago, during a night out in the famous university

streets of Salamanca, and they clicked immediately. After several drinks, they ended up making out in the bathroom of one of the many bars they visited, only to end up sitting in front of a fast-food joint filling their stomachs and sharing their troubles. They quickly became close friends, and later Sonia arrived to form a solid relationship with Yoli that works very well to this day – so well that the two women are now married and run a highly sought-after hostel in the British overseas territory of Gibraltar.

"Tell us the truth, did you get tangled up in some girl's bed and that's why you didn't come?" Yolanda asks, who has previously made all sorts of bets with her wife about the real reason for Patricia's absence.

"No," the veterinarian repeats with a huff. "I know what happened to me is very surreal, but I'm telling you the truth."

"You lost," Patricia hears one of her friends say.

"What does that mean?" the veterinarian asks.

"Yoli said you were surely busy with a woman, while I bet you had a massive hangover. See, neither of us got it right, but according to our rules, I'm the winner," Sonia explains matter-of-factly.

Patricia's eyes widen in amazement, though she knows that coming from those two, anything of this sort can be expected.

"Even if you don't believe it, I spent two days and nights stuck in an animal shelter, and to my bad luck, a former college classmate I don't get along with works there as a volunteer and..."

"I won, I won!" shouts are heard. "She was with a woman, doesn't matter doing what.

Rules are rules."

Clicks, laughter, and hurried footsteps are heard, and Patricia can't help but smile. Her two friends have an enviable relationship, and although they sometimes act like kids, the veterinarian hopes that when she has a partner, they'll get along as well as they do. The three girls stay on the phone while Patricia tells them in detail everything that happened those days, and she also reminds them who Carlota is because even though neither of them knows her, Coco's savior had vented to them when all that stuff about the job position happened.

"But I still have some free days that I plan to use to visit you," Patricia points out. "Do you have anything available for these dates?"

Yolanda types on the computer to check their reservations.

"We have a double room free on the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh," says Sonia, reading what her wife has found, "though you know you can always stay with us."

"I appreciate it, but there's no way I'm staying there with Yolanda snoring and you waking up at hours that should be illegal, plus, you have a business and the least friends should do is support it."

The three friends agree to meet those days, and Sonia promises the veterinarian to have a tour ready through Gibraltar's streets and markets. Once they say goodbye, Patricia stays observing her living room and realizes how empty and impersonal it looks with the little decoration it has, especially during these special dates when many people put up lights, ornaments, and the typical Christmas tree. With a jump, she decides to get off the couch to buy some things to give life to her home, besides stopping by the supermarket to get provisions.

Patricia walks through the crowded streets and pulls up her scarf, covering even her

mouth because these days, after the storm, the cold has settled in making this Christmas in Salamanca one of the coldest she remembers. She turns a corner to locate a store, the biggest in the area that offers all kinds of varied items, from stationery to decorations to paints and tools of all types. The veterinarian's goal is to make her apartment look more cheerful and not as dull as it is now. Just as she has chosen a couple of packages of lights and ornaments for the tree, she stops to look at some wooden reindeer that have caught her attention, but a very peculiar smell hits her nose and she doesn't recognize it until she turns her head and finds Carlota, who is beside her grabbing several of those figures and putting them in a cart packed with items to the brim.

"Oh, hi," Carlota greets when she realizes Patricia is beside her looking at her. "What a coincidence finding you here."

Patricia blinks several times, a bit disconcerted without knowing why.

"We live in the same area, Carlota, it's normal to run into each other often," she answers stupidly.

The smile fades from Carlota's face and, although she tries to hide it, her face shows the disappointment she feels at the cardiologist's response. Patricia is trying to understand why she's behaving this way when her former classmate says goodbye and heads straight to the checkout lines to pay. She decides to continue with her shopping, but the buzzing in her head makes her look for Carlota to apologize because she didn't mean to be harsh, but that response came out of her mouth without being able to control it. She spots her walking with two giant bags, and the volunteer, always polite, gives her a nod and leaves the store without looking back. Patricia scolds herself for her absurd behavior and decides that the next time she sees her, she'll apologize and try to be nicer.

"Well, time to get to work and bring some cheer to this house," Patricia says after

arriving at her apartment, changing into comfortable clothes, and taking out everything she bought at the store.

She pours herself a glass of the wine she just bought and patiently starts assembling the small Christmas tree she had stored in the closet. She stands it up and puts on the lights, some ornaments, and some details to make it look nice. She laughs when she takes out several personalized objects that Aida gave her a couple of years ago – they're very small frames containing different photos of them from some of the trips they've taken together. Their friendship is sincere, and Patricia is grateful that after a long relationship, they both have overcome the breakup and decided to remain friends. Every few months, they take a trip together and as a memento, they take some peculiar photo, and from there, her ex-partner has taken those snapshots to make her a Christmas gift. Although Patricia feels excited, she doesn't feel that festive spirit she experienced that night at the shelter when, together with Carlota, they decorated the place. She frowns and, as if moved by an invisible hand, searches for Christmas songs on her phone and puts on a Santa hat, seeking that feeling she thinks she's missing.

"I must be crazy," she says laughing at herself while moving to the rhythm of a carol she has found on a playlist.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

When she finishes putting everything up, she pours herself a bit more wine and, from the corner of the living room, observes everything satisfied with the result. She frowns again and takes a long drink from her glass, although she has enjoyed this moment she's given herself decorating her house, there's something still missing and, although she suspects what it might be, she refuses to think that if Carlota had been there with her, everything would have been much better and more fun.

Chapter 10

"I don't know why I listen to you. Going out in this cold should be illegal," Patricia says, hugging herself as she walks beside Aida among the Christmas market stalls.

"Don't be such a killjoy. You're on vacation, and you're not going to stay locked up in your house all day."

"Just until the twenty-seventh," Patricia smiles, and Aida rolls her eyes. "Are you buying anything?"

"I don't know," Aida shrugs and keeps walking, wrapped in her puffer jacket as if the cold doesn't affect her. "Maybe yes, maybe no."

"Always so mysterious," Patricia shakes her head.

Aida winks at her and nudges her with her shoulder. Patricia laughs and returns the gesture, but when she's about to defend herself from her ex's next attack, a sound coming from nearby makes her freeze.

"What's wrong?" Aida asks, and Patricia raises her hand asking for silence.

Aida furrows her brow, not understanding why she's asking for quiet with all the noise around, but then the sound happens again through the commotion, and Patricia's eyes widen like saucers as she smiles.

"Holy crap," she says in surprise.

"Are you going to tell me what's happening?" Aida starts to lose patience.

"I think it's Coco," Patricia responds.

"Coco? The dog from the road?" Aida asks.

Patricia nods while scanning everything expectantly until two new barks help her confirm that it is, indeed, Coco. Her eyes start scanning everything around her until, three stalls ahead, she spots the animal shelter's booth that they set up every year at the Christmas market to encourage people to adopt instead of buying pets.

"They're over there, come on, let's go," Patricia says.

Aida hasn't had time to see the shelter's booth or understand what's happening, but she has no choice but to start running when her ex-girlfriend grabs her hand and pulls her forcefully toward where Coco is. When they arrive, the dog is indeed there, and when Patricia greets him, the canine goes crazy with joy and raises his front paws to rest them on Patricia's waist. She hugs him and kisses him under Carlota's perplexed gaze, whose heart starts racing inexplicably when she sees Patricia burst into the booth with such joy - something that only makes sense when the goofy smile that had formed while watching Patricia and Coco's scene vanishes as soon as she notices Aida's presence, Patricia's ex.

"Who is she?" Vanesa asks, pointing at Patricia and snapping her out of her trance.

"Patricia, the girl who rescued Coco," she responds with her eyes fixed on her.

"And the other girl?" Vanesa continues asking.

"Her ex," Carlota answers, unable to hide her discomfort.

"Aha," Vanesa smiles.

Carlota turns her neck and looks at her.

"What?"

"Nothing," Vanesa laughs.

Carlota clears her throat, realizing how obvious her attitude is, and tries to relax her expression.

"What a connection," Vanesa says, addressing Patricia. "I'm Vane, Carlota's partner," she introduces herself, extending a hand that Patricia shakes.

The cardiologist looks over Vanesa's shoulder and focuses on Carlota, who responds by raising her hand when Patricia greets her.

"I'll take him," Patricia says suddenly. "I'll adopt him."

"That's true love," Aida quips, greeting the dog.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Vanesa turns to Carlota with a huge smile on her lips, the same one they both get when they find a good home for any of the shelter's animals, but Carlota stands stunned and doesn't react, so she turns back to Patricia.

"Alright, you'll need to fill out all the documents for us to do the evaluation, but I assume there won't be any problems," Vanesa says.

"Yes, I know how it works, though I'd like to take him now so he doesn't spend another night in the shelter," Patricia says, crouching in front of Coco.

Carlota exchanges a glance with Aida and for a moment feels she can't compete with those blue eyes, but immediately reminds herself that tonight is about Coco's well-being and not the emotional mess dancing in her mind.

"Take him," she says, surprising all the women.

"Really?" Patricia perks up and gives Carlota a smile that warms her heart.

"Really. You rescued him, and besides, we know each other. Get him out of here tonight and come by the shelter tomorrow to sort out the paperwork."

"Did you hear that, Coco? You're coming home, thank Carlota," Patricia says, unhooking the carabiner that connects Coco's leash to a chain.

"Well, that's settled then," Vanesa resolves. "We'll give you some kibble until you can buy some, and you can take that bed over there."

"I'll take the kibble, but the bed isn't necessary. I'll prepare something comfortable for him, and tomorrow I'll go out and buy him everything he needs. Right, Coco?"

"Good thing you didn't want any pets," Aida laughs and takes the leash while Patricia accepts the bag of kibble.

"Shut up," Patricia responds playfully, and Carlota feels a strange and very uncomfortable sensation in the pit of her stomach.

She doesn't need to be a scientist or love expert to identify what she's feeling - she's sure they're jealousy pangs, but she can't understand why she feels this way about Patricia when, although she's known her for many years, the truth is she doesn't know anything about her.

"Well, then I'll stop by the shelter tomorrow and formalize the adoption. Thanks for letting me take him tonight," Patricia says.

The two volunteers say goodbye to Coco, and when Patricia and Aida leave, Carlota watches them until they disappear into the crowd.

"She's cute," Vanesa says.

Carlota nods like a robot.

"And friendly."

"That's because you were here. With me, she's very unpleasant," Carlota counters.

"I find that hard to believe," Vanesa says, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, believe it. I ran into her the other afternoon at the Christmas store, and she was

really rude when I greeted her," Carlota comments with a weary sigh.

"That sucks," Vanesa laments.

"Why?" Carlota asks intrigued.

"Because, even though you insist on denying it, it's obvious you like Patricia, and it bothers me that she treats you that way."

"I don't like Patricia," Carlota responds so quickly that even she realizes how false it sounds.

"Whatever you say," Vanesa smiles and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

Chapter 11

"Are you nervous because you recognize this place or because you're going to see Carlota?" Patricia asks Coco as they get out of the car to enter the shelter.

This morning veterinarian Patricia Burnet is in a different mood. She woke up to licks and, although she didn't enjoy having to go out so early in that dreadful cold to walk her new pet, having Coco at home has brought her a joy she's rarely felt. She can't explain it, but it's a feeling of love and happiness that confirms she made the right decision in adopting the dog. They went together to the pet store to buy food, a bed, and all kinds of items so the animal would be comfortable and adapt well to his new home. Patricia didn't want to leave him alone at home on his first day, so she decided to bring him to the shelter with her to finalize his adoption.

They walk along the path that separates the car from the shelter's gate and, after a few minutes, a metallic voice answers and lets the two visitors in. As soon as the veterinarian steps on the step before the door, it opens and Carlota appears, watching

in horror as Patricia comes accompanied by Coco, which can only mean one thing; that she's changed her mind and wants to return him.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Has something happened?" asks the volunteer, thrown off balance.

Patricia frowns while Coco wags his tail enthusiastically.

"We've come to finalize the adoption," answers the dog's new owner, "we talked about it last night."

Carlota releases all her held breath and puts a hand to her chest with drama worthy of a novel.

"I thought you had changed your mind," she explains with relief. "Usually, when adopters come with the dog it means they want to return it."

"Like it was a piece of clothing?" asks Patricia, annoyed by people's stupidity.

"Yes, you know humans often leave much to be desired, but please come in, it's too cold for you to be out there."

Coco, as if the enclosure where he spent a few days was his second home, enters at a fast pace while sniffing everything he finds. Patricia feels a wave of nostalgia hit her in this place she had labeled as her temporary prison, and she doesn't understand why because she was only there for a couple of days, but she accepts that she had a better time than she'd thought and that memory will be hard to forget. The veterinarian looks at the cages and wants to greet the furry ones, but realizes they're all empty.

"Where is everyone?" Patricia asks, puzzled.

Carlota, who was pulling a folder from the file cabinet, looks up and connects with her former colleague's gaze.

"They're in the outdoor kennels. They only spend time inside here when there's bad weather and those we can't place in foster homes are safer than outside," Carlota explains.

Patricia nods, she didn't quite understand how the shelter operated. When she was there, Carlota showed her the area where the animals stayed and felt relief when she realized that, at least in this shelter, the space is so well equipped that regardless of the season, the furry ones are comfortable and protected.

"Have you adopted out any others?" Patricia asks with interest.

Carlota smiles and her nose wrinkles in such a funny gesture that Patricia finds herself staring like a fool.

"Melcocha has a new home," she comments, happy. "We had received an application for his adoption and, after reviewing it, we approved it. It's a family from Zamora, all adults and with a house that has all the amenities for him and his condition. They want to give him happiness for whatever time he has left, you know he's sick and we don't know how long he'll last. The couple's oldest son is a veterinarian and will handle his follow-up care."

Patricia feels that wave of indescribable happiness again, like the one she experienced that morning with Coco and soon discovers that this feeling comes from finding a better quality of life for animals that are homeless. The veterinarian decides she'll find time to collaborate with a shelter, as a professional she has all the tools, but as a person who loves animals she can do much more.

"Do you mind if I make myself some coffee?" Patricia asks after suppressing a yawn.

"This gentleman here made me wake up earlier than I intended."

Carlota lets out a nasal laugh and looks at Coco with affection.

"I'll make it for you, so I can make one for myself too," answers the volunteer walking toward the machine.

Carlota takes out the cups and serves the hot drink. The smell enters her nostrils and she takes advantage of this moment, while her back is to Patricia, to take several breaths to calm herself. It's hard for her to maintain composure when she's with her former college classmate because it's really difficult to discover what her attitude will be toward her after seeing that one day she's somewhat friendly and another she's completely standoffish. She turns to hand over the coffee and, to her misfortune, their fingers brush causing Carlota to nearly drop the cup. But she's not the only one who felt that sharp pinch with the contact, Patricia experienced it too and, if there were already things she didn't understand, now she's completely thrown off balance.

Both try to hide it as best they can, one blowing on the cup and the other looking at the liquid to avoid eye contact. The discomfort is palpable and it's Patricia who decides to speak because since she ran into Carlota at the Christmas shop, she's had a pending conversation with her.

"Hey, I'm sorry I was so rude that day we saw each other," Patricia blurts out and Carlota looks at her. "Sometimes I don't even understand the responses I give to people."

Carlota feels a pleasant murmur in her chest.

"Don't worry, it's forgotten."

Patricia smiles in response and winks at her naturally making Carlota's heart flip and

speed up worryingly.

"What are you going to do these remaining holiday days?" asks the volunteer, who needs to fill the silences before she goes crazy.

"I'm going to resume my trip to Gibraltar. The shame is that it'll only be two days, but I really want to see that place and visit my friends, so it'll be worth it, even if it's for a short time."

Carlota's eyes light up in a way that really catches Patricia's attention.

"It must be beautiful at Christmas. I was in London two years ago for the holidays and the decorations and markets are amazing," the volunteer says, "if you like Christmas even a little bit like I do, you're going to love it. I hope you'll show me the photos next time we meet."

Patricia doesn't know what's happening to her, but her pulse has quickened and she feels her head throbbing. An unknown force—and terrifying one—pushes her to open her mouth and, although she fights it, her tongue moves freely without her being able to control it.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Do you want to come with me?" Patricia shoots and Carlota almost chokes on her own saliva. "My friends' hostel is amazing and if you like Christmas so much, it's the perfect getaway."

Carlota feels a heat that overwhelms her. She finds it hard to read Patricia, at times she's quite unpleasant and now she's inviting her to travel with her. There's no way she's going to embark on an adventure with a woman who makes her so nervous and who has mood swings that drive her crazy.

Chapter 12

When Patricia's mind repeats the words that just came out of her mouth, she can't believe what she just did. She looks at Carlota and the volunteer's face of absolute astonishment, and she wants to bang her head against the wall. She immediately feels stupid, and at the same time, a strange feeling mixing disappointment with insecurity at Carlota's lack of response invades her, making her search for the best way to rectify.

"I'm sorry, you probably have plans," she stammers, flustered, and seeks Coco's gaze as if he could help her out of this awkward situation she got herself into, "I don't know why I said that."

"But did you mean it?" Carlota finally reacts, her pulse racing so fast she feels her body could start bouncing at any moment.

"Uh, yes, of course," Patricia answers and frowns while trying to understand what the hell is going on in her head for her mouth to keep saying things she's not sure she

ordered.

"In that case, I'd love to go with you. I wouldn't miss a few days in Gibraltar during Christmas for anything in the world," Carlota assures with such enthusiasm that Patricia's lips curve into a silly smile she can't control either.

"Well, great," she says and nervously runs her fingers through her hair.

"So what's the plan then?" Carlota asks, trying to identify if her urge to jump for joy is about the trip or because the trip is with Patricia.

"Well, I don't really have much planned, the only sure thing is that we'll sleep at my friends' hostel, other than that, we can improvise. Gibraltar is pretty small, so we have plenty of time in two days to see the markets and walk through its streets."

"I'm dying to go," Carlota claps. "Are you taking Coco?"

"I don't think so, I don't think it's a good idea to subject him to such a long trip or walk him among so many people like those in the Christmas markets, it would be too much stress for him now that he's adapting to his new life."

"I agree," Carlota concurs. "Have you thought about where you'll leave him? If you can't find anything, he could stay here, Vanesa will take care of him, and after all, he already knows this place."

"I appreciate it, but if possible, I don't want him to sleep here again. I'll talk to Aida, she already knows him and I'm sure she'll be happy to watch him. Besides, Coco liked Aida, right, Coco?"

Coco tilts his head when he looks at Patricia as if assessing his new owner's level of craziness. Carlota looks at her too, though she's not assessing her madness, but

wondering if that friendship between Patricia and Aida includes any of those extra rights that friendly exes give each other while they remain single.

"You seem to get along very well," she says, trying to gather information.

Patricia looks up and nods, showing little interest in talking about her relationship with her ex-girlfriend.

"Yes, better than when we were together. Anyway, should we exchange numbers to finalize the trip details?" Patricia suggests.

An hour later, Patricia enters her house with Coco after finalizing the adoption and agreeing with Carlota that they'll call each other and meet to buy some things before leaving.

"What a mess I've gotten myself into, Coco," Patricia says, and the dog looks up, "and it's all your fault, if you hadn't shown up, this wouldn't have happened."

Coco completely ignores her and walks to his bowl to drink water. Patricia sighs, thinking she's losing her mind more and more, and picks up the phone to call Aida and ask her to watch the dog during the days she'll be in Gibraltar.

"Yes, of course, no problem," Aida says. "Do you want me to bring him to my house or would you prefer I stay at yours so we don't move him?"

"Well, I'd prefer the second option to avoid disturbing him too much," Patricia responds.

"Alright, but it'll cost you one of those potato omelets you make so well."

"You sell yourself cheap," Patricia smiles, and when Aida is about to drop one of her

pearls of wisdom, she cuts her off, "wait, there's something I haven't told you."

"Something like what?" Aida perks up, sitting on her kitchen counter to listen to the gossip attentively.

"Carlota is coming with me on the trip."

Though Patricia can't see her, she knows exactly that Aida's right eyebrow just raised and she's smirking.

"What have I missed?"

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Nothing, I lost my mind, seriously, suddenly I was there in front of her listening to myself tell her to come with me."

Aida's laughter would be contagious for Patricia if they were talking about anyone else, but now she can't laugh.

"Wait, are you telling me you didn't want to invite her?" she asks, still laughing.

"It wasn't my intention, honestly," Patricia concludes.

"But you did it."

"Yes, I know I did it, but it was this weird impulse I couldn't control," Patricia defends herself.

"If you say so..."

"What are you implying?" Patricia asks, frowning.

"That I highly doubt you did it unwillingly, Patri. Nobody invites anyone anywhere if they don't want to. Maybe you hadn't consciously planned it, but deep down, you want her to go with you, admit it."

"Carlota?" Patricia exclaims, scandalized, "but I don't even like her."

"Do you really not like her? Because it seems to me that you do like her, and you're just being stubborn, convincing yourself that you should dislike her. Like it or not,

the reality is that she hasn't done anything to you, Patri, she got a position you wanted, that's true, but it wasn't her fault."

"That doesn't matter, it doesn't mean I have to like her."

"I didn't say you like Carlota," Aida laughs, "you just said that."

Patricia flushes until her ears burn.

"That's not what I meant, I expressed myself wrong."

"I think you didn't, you expressed yourself perfectly," Aida says. "Don't do what you always do because it drives me crazy, Patri, you like the girl and there's nothing wrong with admitting it."

Silence answers for Patricia, who's unable to keep denying it.

"Great," Aida says happily, "now what you need to do is stop being grumpy and make a plan to win her over, though I don't think that'll be too hard for you," she adds and lets out a mischievous laugh.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Patricia asks, laughing this time too.

"Come on, Patri, if I've noticed it after seeing her just a couple of times, you must have noticed it too after seeing her for longer. She's into you, she just doesn't know it yet."

Patricia feels a sudden flutter in her chest hearing from Aida something she also suspects.

"It's possible she likes me a little, yes, but that doesn't mean it'll be easy with her."

Besides acting like an idiot, I think Carlota is quite insecure and very lost when it comes to women."

"Well, who better than an experienced woman like you to show her the way," Aida smiles, "I remind you that I was the most straight woman in the world and not only did I end up with you, but now I only date women."

They both burst into loud laughter remembering it.

"It's very different, you're shameless and weren't afraid to try new things, Carlota isn't like that," Patricia says.

"Don't underestimate her so much, I'm sure she just needs a little guidance. Anyway, I'm not going to give you lessons on how to win over a woman, you can do that on your own, all I can do for you is take care of Coco."

Patricia smiles to herself and holds back the response she was going to give because, in her opinion, Aida could give many seduction lessons to her and anyone else, as she's become an expert at seducing women.

"I appreciate it, let's keep in touch."

Chapter 13

"Good morning," Carlota smiles and hands a large thermos to Patricia, who sits in the car with a sleepy expression.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Patricia takes it and stares ahead, trying to remember when she thought it would be a good idea to wake up so early to drive the many hours ahead of her. Carlota, who was loading her things into the trunk, walks around the vehicle and drops into the passenger seat.

"Are you okay to drive?" asks the volunteer, watching her travel companion in the same position with the thermos in her hand.

Patricia blinks several times. It's not really that early, but since she knew she'd have to leave before dawn, Aida decided to stay at her house that night so Coco wouldn't be alone at any time. They stayed up talking late, and the result is that Patricia feels sleepy and has zero desire to drive.

"Yeah, yeah," she confirms, nodding her head. "I'll wake up properly soon."

The volunteer nods while fastening her seatbelt.

"We can take turns if you want," Carlota offers. "We can stop somewhere to rest and recharge. I came prepared."

Patricia smiles. She had already noticed during those nights at the shelter that Carlota likes to have everything arranged to be comfortable, and she has no doubt that besides the coffee thermos, she's brought other provisions.

The journey begins, and they both decide to play some music, mainly because they feel a bit awkward, and to avoid the uncomfortable silence, they fill it with a playlist that Carlota has prepared.

"Seriously?" Patricia bursts out laughing when she hears a Christmas song of dogs barking and howling.

Carlota's ears turn red.

"That slipped in," she says embarrassed while fiddling with her phone. "I use it to cheer them up at the shelter during the holidays."

Patricia realizes that the girl isn't just embarrassed but very flustered, and she thinks what's happening is that she doesn't want the cardiologist to have that image of her. In an uncontrolled movement, Patricia extends her hand and touches Carlota's thigh, who jumps slightly but tries to hide it.

"Leave it on," Patricia requests, referring to the song. "It actually sounds good."

Carlota looks up and, although Patricia can't see her, she knows her travel companion's eyes are sparkling. Maybe it's because of things like these that Patricia is starting to like her; the volunteer is a simple woman who appreciates these moments that, however silly they might be, seem to delight her.

"We could stop at that rest area," Carlota suggests when she sees a sign announcing it a kilometer away. They've been in the car for several hours, and she wants to stretch her legs.

"Yes, we can have breakfast, looks like there's a café," Patricia answers, squinting to scan the rest area.

"No way. I brought hornazo that I made last night and several homemade cookies," Carlota responds, almost licking her lips.

Patricia's stomach growls at hearing this; she knows it's a heavy breakfast, but being

from Salamanca, she loves hornazo, especially when it's homemade. The cardiologist parks the car and while she goes to the bathroom, Carlota sets everything up for breakfast. When she returns, she discovers amazed that her companion hasn't just prepared a couple of delicacies, but there's also a small cooler with cold drinks.

"I wasn't sure what you'd want, so I brought juices, sodas and water, besides the coffee."

"I want it all, honestly," Patricia laughs, "driving makes me very hungry."

With a smile worthy of a child receiving a nice gift, Carlota cuts a piece of hornazo that she hands to Patricia and serves her a cup of coffee. The two veterinarians eat leisurely and talk about trivial topics; the weather, the car, and even the route they need to take to reach their destination.

The journey continues as planned and to Patricia's surprise, it isn't uncomfortable at all. They've both loosened up quite a bit and have moved on to talking about more personal things without touching on emotional topics. They discuss families, hobbies, and even some cases that have come to their clinics. Carlota is fascinated because, although she didn't want to specialize, she finds Patricia's work as a cardiologist very interesting.

"Finally, we're here!" Patricia exclaims exaggeratedly when they reach Gibraltar and find the hostel.

"It wasn't that bad," Carlota responds, stretching her back.

"Says the one who didn't have to drive," the cardiologist teases while parking.

Carlota raises her eyebrows. Patricia laughs.

"Hey, I offered to switch at least ten times so you could rest."

"You mean those ten times we stopped at different places because you wanted to buy a magnet or take a photo up close?" Patricia continues, teasing her.

Carlota turns red again; if she weren't such an insecure woman, she could surely take these comments as jokes because she knows Patricia is just kidding, but she struggles to control that feeling. Patricia notices and tries to help.

"I wanted to see those places too," she says after turning off the engine. "It's been a fun trip, I usually do them non-stop, but I liked it better this way."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Then stop complaining," Carlota becomes bold, smiling as she gets out of the car.

They grab their suitcases and walk to the Blue Star Hostel, and as soon as they cross the door, they find Yolanda at the computer. The woman looks up and, seeing it's her friend Patricia, her eyes light up and she smiles broadly, though she can't hide her surprise at seeing her accompanied.

"You look gorgeous," Yolanda hugs her after coming out from behind the counter.

"You didn't tell me you were coming with a hottie," she whispers.

Patricia pulls away from her friend; she hadn't told the married couple anything because she knew they would subject her to questioning that she wanted to avoid at all costs.

"This is Carlota, a former college classmate and volunteer at an animal shelter in Salamanca."

Yolanda's almost imperceptible gesture when realizing who the companion is doesn't go unnoticed by the cardiologist. Fortunately, hurried footsteps make all three women turn to see a very cheerful Sonia coming to greet them.

"Well, look who it is," exclaims Yolanda's wife while throwing her arms around Patricia's neck.

"Honey," Yoli calls her, "this is Carlota, Patri's friend," the girl says and winks at her wife.

Sonia gives Carlota two kisses, and all four engage in a conversation about their journey from Salamanca.

"Well, we'll take you to your room so you can drop off your things, and then you can come over to our place. People eat early here, but it'll be good for you to rest and recharge for tomorrow," Sonia explains.

"I need a shower," Patricia says, grabbing her suitcase.

"Your hostel is beautiful," Carlota comments as they walk to the room.

"The property was a mess, but the investment allowed us to do the renovations we wanted, we're very proud," Yolanda responds, well aware of all the efforts she and her wife have made to make the Blue Star Hostel what it is today.

After climbing some stairs, they reach a double door, painted in pale pink with a sign that reads Machacón. Each room in the hostel is named after towns in Salamanca, in honor of its owners' homeland.

Patricia's face is priceless when they enter; the bed - as it couldn't be otherwise in these cases - is a double, no sign of two separate beds.

"I'll talk to them to see if there's another room available," the cardiologist suddenly says.

Carlota, who was already unpacking, looks at her as if she were performing acrobatics in the middle of the room.

"If that comment came from me, I'd understand," says the volunteer, "but from you, I'm amazed. We've already slept together, Patricia, and not precisely in a spacious bed. Stop bothering your friends and go take your shower, because I'm starving."

Patricia is speechless; the way her companion has spoken to her, far from bothering her, has sent a dangerous current through her body, one of those that emboldens you to kiss someone who has dared to speak to her like that. But she just nods, rummages through her things, and goes into the bathroom. Half an hour later, they're in the married couple's house, a space within the same hostel that consists of an open-plan living room with kitchen and dining room with a wooden division that delimits the bedroom area.

"This is delicious," Carlota says while enjoying dinner.

"Calentita is a typical dish from the area, and this," Yolanda points to another plate, "is called Rostro and it's Sonia's favorite."

"It's very good, but I prefer the hornazo," Patricia blurts out without knowing her comment has delighted Carlota.

"They're completely different things, Patri," Sonia tells her while watching her friend just shrug her shoulders.

After dinner and talking for a while, the friends make plans for lunch the next day. Sonia and Yolanda have prepared a route through the center with several recommendations.

"We won't be able to see you until lunchtime," Yoli explains, "we have a guy who helps us in the afternoons or when we're really busy, and that's when we're more free."

"Don't worry, girls, we'll do some sightseeing and then come back to have lunch with you."

The women say goodbye and the veterinarians go up to their room. As they had done

at the shelter, they coordinate well; while one brushes her teeth, the other puts on her pajamas and prepares the bed. Patricia feels an unusual nervousness and knows it's her conversation with Aida that has her like this; accepting that she likes Carlota and that it might be reciprocal leaves her mind corrupted knowing they'll share a bed.

"I'm exhausted," Carlota says, pulling Patricia from her thoughts.

"Me too, but when I'm this tired, I find it hard to sleep," the cardiologist responds, getting into bed.

Carlota, as soon as she covers herself with the comforter, falls into a deep sleep. Patricia sighs because she doesn't understand this woman's ability to fall asleep so quickly. She moves uncomfortably because she knows she might not be able to rest that night. She's wrong - very wrong - because that little sound Carlota makes while sleeping, which helped her fall asleep those nights at the shelter, works its magic on her again, and little by little she falls into a pleasant drowsiness that isn't even interrupted when she thinks about how wonderful it would be to hear it every night in her own bed.

Chapter 14

"Did you sleep well?" Carlota asks when Patricia finishes stretching.

"Yes, I thought I'd have trouble falling asleep, but I was knocked out. How about you?"

"Perfect," Carlota says, sitting up. "If I wasn't so hungry, I might not have woken up," she admits, blushing.

Patricia looks at her and can't help but smile. She knows Carlota carries a few extra pounds, but she sees nothing wrong with that and doesn't understand how someone could feel intimidated by something so trivial. She finds her very attractive, and she grows fonder of that shy, even bashful air that seems to follow the volunteer everywhere.

"I'm hungry too," Patricia says to help her feel better, despite the fact that thinking about food right after waking up makes her nauseated. "So, if you'd like, we can get dressed and go down for breakfast. We need to load up on energy to explore Gibraltar's markets and streets."

"Great, you go in first," Carlota says, pointing to the bathroom.

Patricia takes her up on the offer and locks herself in to take a shower. She tries to hurry and not linger as she would at home, and as soon as she finishes, she puts on her underwear and exits the bathroom to get dressed outside and leave it free for Carlota.

The naturalness with which Patricia comes out drying her hair and saying she can go in catches Carlota off guard. Her eyes almost pop out of their sockets, and her breath freezes in her throat when she sees Patricia in her bra and panties. To say her pulse has quickened would be an understatement because Carlota feels her heart has moved from its place and pounds against her chest, begging to break free. But what definitively confirms that she likes her former colleague very much is the sudden, uncontrolled pulse she feels between her legs, forcing her to close them to calm the need for contact she has felt at Patricia's near-nakedness.

Carlota's strange movement and her flushed cheeks are like a bright signal for Patricia, who no longer has any doubts about her suspicions regarding Carlota's preferences. As if synchronized, she also feels a jolt between her legs that paralyzes her for a few seconds while Carlota, unaccustomed to feeling this way, devours Patricia's body with her gaze, unable to contain herself, making the canine cardiologist feel fire on her skin as Carlota's eyes trail over her.

"Where are the towels?" Carlota suddenly asks, feeling so stupid she just wants to run away.

Patricia takes a breath and moves her right arm to point at the dresser where the clean towels rest while wondering if this is a good moment to kiss her companion or if it might be too rushed.

"Thanks," Carlota says and manages to tear her gaze away from Patricia to grab a towel.

Patricia steps aside and keeps following her with her eyes until Carlota grabs the clothes she wants to wear and finally locks herself in the bathroom.

"Damn," Patricia whispers, letting out the air she's been holding in her lungs for the last few seconds, those in which she's also been holding back the urge to kiss her.

Surprised by her body's reaction and the strange situation they've just experienced, she takes a couple of deep breaths with the clear intention of calming her heartbeat and focusing, but while getting dressed, Patricia can only think of one thing: kissing Carlota. The matter becomes something like an obsession because minutes pass and that thought remains there, torturing her until Carlota comes out of the shower and smiles at her shyly, wrongly thinking that Patricia has already forgotten about that moment of connection they had earlier.

"Ready?" Carlota asks, eager to leave this room where she feels her desire for Patricia grows like an unstoppable snowball.

"Yes, sure, let's go," Patricia responds, grabbing her coat.

They both leave the room as if it had just caught fire and advance down the hallway toward the stairs as if they had agreed not to use the elevator. Patricia walks ahead, trying to find something to think about that will help her forget these obsessive urges to taste Carlota's lips, but she can't find it even in those abstract landscape paintings decorating the hallway walls. When they reach the stairs, Patricia starts descending with some urgency, and Carlota follows her, panting while her mind tries to piece together all the pieces that don't let her see clearly how far her feelings for Patricia go, but she won't need to because when Patricia reaches the landing, she can't contain herself anymore and lets her body act and take what it needs, so she stops abruptly and turns just as Carlota reaches the last step, passes her hands around her neck with a gentleness that makes the volunteer dizzy, and kisses her.

Carlota feels like she's floating on a cloud that simultaneously makes her dizzy. The kiss gives her an adrenaline rush that mixes with an intense tingling that runs through her body until it paralyzes her and makes her smile absurdly against Patricia's lips, who catches her laughter and stops the kiss. They look at each other without saying anything for a split second, but Carlota doesn't need more for all the pieces to suddenly fit together and conclude that she's falling in love with Patricia.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself," Patricia says to ease the tension of the moment.

Carlota shakes her head without losing that silly smile.

"It's okay."

Again, they both remain with their gazes locked, trapped in a silence that isn't uncomfortable, but they don't know how to break either.

"I think we're a bit nervous and overwhelmed," Patricia finally says after clearing her throat a couple of times. "How about we go get breakfast and talk about this later, when we're more relaxed?"

"I think that's a good idea," Carlota agrees.

During breakfast, they both manage to relax, but the topic gets put aside because one of Patricia's friends stops by to greet them and tells them about one of the markets they can't miss. Carlota shows enthusiasm, and Patricia, who feels a tremendous need to please her, looks it up on the map they were given, and they both leave the hostel as soon as they finish breakfast.

The day passes, and neither of them feels the need to talk about it because they want to enjoy everything they visit and feel they have time for everything. Besides, they feel very comfortable walking and sharing this experience together, where they behave like a couple without barely realizing it. Carlota loves stopping at all the Christmas stalls they find along the way, and Patricia loves pressing against her back and wrapping her arms around her waist while looking at the ornaments.

"Are you having a good time?" Patricia asks while they're queuing to enter the restaurant they've chosen for lunch.

Again, she's behind and Carlota in front, between her arms.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Very much," Carlota answers in a somewhat mechanical way that disconcerts Patricia.

"Is something wrong?" she asks worriedly, thinking that maybe she's going too far with her displays of affection.

Carlota stays still and doesn't answer because since the restaurant manager told them they had to wait fifteen minutes until they could enter and they've stayed still at the door, her mind has returned to that kiss Patricia gave her at the foot of the hostel stairs, and now she's the one obsessed with repeating it, but she's not sure if Patricia would want her to do it in front of all these people.

"Carlota, have I done something that...?" Patricia can't continue her question because the volunteer turns on her heels, rises on her tiptoes, and plants a kiss on her lips that surprises Patricia.

"Sorry," Carlota apologizes with cheeks red as tomatoes, "I just really wanted to do that," she says and lowers her gaze, embarrassed.

Patricia observes her for a few seconds in silence and then breaks into a charming smile.

"Don't ever apologize for that again, I really wanted it too," Patricia tells her just before the waiter tells them they can come in.

Patricia and Carlota spend the whole day out and return to the hostel after dinner. They're exhausted after a long day of sightseeing, but when they're both climbing the

stairs that lead to their floor, they're very clear about what's going to happen, and the fatigue seems to disappear suddenly, giving way only to the nervousness that Carlota feels at the idea of being with a woman.

Patricia is the one who opens the door and enters first, feeling that with each step she takes, her heart grows wilder and the need between her legs barely lets her breathe, but when she turns around ready to continue with those kisses they've been sharing all day, she finds Carlota paralyzed under the doorframe.

"Is something wrong?" Patricia asks worriedly.

"I've never been with a woman."

Chapter 15

Patricia freezes. She doesn't know whether to move, speak, or just wait for Carlota to say something else. At this point, she had already figured out that her companion didn't have much experience, but knowing she has never been with a woman makes her feel nervous and burdened with a huge responsibility because she thinks the situation is walking a tightrope. Carlota might or might not enjoy intimacy with someone of the same sex. The seconds tick by and the atmosphere thickens, Patricia doesn't want either of them to feel uncomfortable, so she steps forward and approaches the volunteer.

"Okay, but do you want to?" Patricia asks, looking into her eyes, "we don't have to..."

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Carlota answers with a firmness that impresses the other veterinarian.

Patricia smiles and, although if it were up to her she would devour Carlota to satisfy

this crazy desire she feels, she decides to take it slow and show more affection than the lust she feels. The more experienced of the two begins to caress the other, who lets herself be touched, and leads her to the bed so they can be more comfortable.

"If you need to stop, I..."

Carlota interrupts Patricia again, this time with a kiss so charged with sensuality that the cardiologist feels a flash of electricity shoot through her back. Even though Carlota has never been with another girl, she believes that having been with men gives her some experience and knows what's going to happen next. She's wrong, not for a second had the animal shelter volunteer imagined that making love with Patricia would be an experience so full of intense and pleasurable sensations.

"You're beautiful," Patricia tells Carlota, who's completely melting from the kisses her companion is planting on her neck.

Carlota thinks she won't live to tell about this thrilling experience when Patricia leaves a trail of kisses down her chest and to her belly while caressing her legs. The first contact between the cardiologist's hot mouth and her center of pleasure makes Carlota moan—for the first time—so loudly that she immediately blushes with embarrassment and brings a hand to her mouth.

"Don't hold back," Patricia says, looking up to meet Carlota's eyes, "I love hearing you."

The two women enjoy each other for a long while. As it had happened whenever they'd done anything together, they've connected in an exquisite way, making both experience several orgasms that have left them exhausted. Carlota's inexperience hasn't been a major impediment, the shy girl isn't so shy in bed, and she's quickly taken to Patricia's body with amazing ease.

"Are you okay?" Patricia asks while trying to catch her breath.

Carlota turns toward her and smiles with a flushed face.

"I should be asking you that," the volunteer smiles.

Patricia bursts out laughing and covers her face with both hands. Now she's the one dying of embarrassment because in the last few minutes she managed to come twice and couldn't help writhing, screaming, and asking her companion for more. She, who's quite uninhibited in sex, has rarely reacted in such a visceral way the first time she's intimate with someone, it's usually after some time when Patricia gains confidence and drops those filters that are usually put up at the beginning of any relationship.

"Sorry, I had trouble controlling myself," Patricia apologizes.

"I really liked seeing you like that. I don't know, you seem a bit vulnerable, authentic. Nothing like that mean girl you often are," Carlota answers and caresses her face.

Patricia feels a pang of guilt for her behavior toward Carlota all this time.

"I'm so sorry, Carlota, I really don't know why I reacted that way. Or well," Patricia corrects herself, "I do know. I wanted that position and when they gave it to you, all I could think was that your uncle had pulled strings for you. I was petty and it never crossed my mind to think that you're very good at your job and, despite having someone there supporting you, you deserved it as much as I did."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Carlota doesn't answer, just smiles and gives her a soft kiss on the lips. Then she turns and looks at the ceiling as if searching for some answer in the tapestry decorating it. Patricia lets her be for a few minutes, but then starts thinking that Carlota might now regret what happened between them.

"What are you thinking?" the cardiologist asks with uncharacteristic shyness.

Carlota opens her mouth but doesn't turn to look at her.

"I'm a little scared," she confesses. "What I felt was extraordinary and I'm terrified of not knowing how to handle it. I've been confused for a long time, you know? I had started noticing girls and didn't know what it meant. At first, I thought it was just the result of failed relationships with guys, but when I saw you that day with that grumpy face at the shelter door," Carlota smiles and closes her eyes to shake her head, "something finally woke up inside me."

Patricia also smiles and affectionately caresses her arm.

"When we were locked in there," Carlota continues, "that feeling kept growing, but I denied myself those feelings because besides not knowing if you liked women, I was sure that a beautiful girl like you would never notice me."

As if spring-loaded, Patricia suddenly sits up and looks at her questioningly.

"I don't understand why you say that, you're beautiful, Carlota, plus you're fun, smart, and kind. If anything, it should be the other way around and I should be wondering how a girl like you could notice me."

Carlota looks at her sadly, as if thinking those words aren't true.

"I've never been able to control my weight," she answers heavily, "and truthfully, I don't see anything wrong with it, in fact, I go to the gym several times a week, I move around all day and I have good eating habits where I allow myself many treats, but I also eat very healthy. My bloodwork is perfect, but it's been many years of hearing the word fat used as an insult toward me. It started when I was little, when I was in school, and although they don't say it to my face now, I've seen it in the eyes of several guys I've dated."

"They're idiots," Patricia blurts out, making Carlota laugh. "We live in a time where looks seem to be everything and there's nothing more wrong than that. Years ago, I dated a super pretty girl, I was the envy of many because it was like dating a beauty queen, but that was only on the outside because inside she was the most horrible woman I've known. Envious, mean-hearted, toxic... I can tell you hundreds of negative things about her. I saw her a few months ago, completely unrecognizable. What I want to tell you with this is that the beauty or stunning looks that many brag about today end with time, it's unstoppable. We should focus on people who warm our hearts, who make us feel safe and who truly love us."

Carlota is speechless. She's starting to know a side of Patricia she's never seen before and she loves it. Having noticed her and now being together in that bed is more than a gratifying experience. She moves closer to the cardiologist and kisses her tenderly again, letting out a sigh.

Patricia hugs her and suddenly extreme exhaustion hits them both. It's not just the physical activity, it's that they've both opened up so much to each other that they feel their bodies floating and they can't help but close their eyes and fall asleep very close together.

Chapter 16

The day dawns under a relentless curtain of rain, but Patricia and Carlota don't mind their plans being ruined because they've replaced them with something they consider much better: sex. They've spent hours between caresses, confessions, and cuddling, and now they're sitting with pillows against their backs, exchanging furtive glances and typical silly smiles.

"Hey," Carlota says. "Just to clear things up, no hard feelings about the job thing? I'd like to put that behind us."

"Yes, of course, please forget about that and my stupid behavior," Patricia says, embarrassed. "I stand by what I told you yesterday, and I promise it's water under the bridge. Besides, to be honest, I must confess I wouldn't trade my current job for anything in the world. I love my specialty, and now I visit different clinics during the mornings seeing only animals with heart conditions, and in the afternoons, I work part-time at another clinic."

Carlota's mouth opens in a strange expression, and her eyes narrow as she points an accusing finger at Patricia.

"You hypocrite," she says with a smile that spreads to Patricia, "acting all mean and accusing me of stealing your job when you actually don't care," she adds, pushing her affectionately.

Patricia's laughter makes it hard for her to speak.

"Back then, I did want it," she says in her defense.

"So what? Do you live stuck in the past?" Carlota asks, rolling underneath Patricia between laughs.

They spend several minutes like this, playing between silly reproaches, stolen kisses,

and lots of laughter.

At one-thirty sharp, both are showered and heading down the stairs toward the inn's dining room, where they're meeting Yolanda and Sonia for lunch.

"Can I ask how long you've been dating?" Sonia asks in the middle of lunch.

Carlota feels herself blushing and feels incredibly grateful that they're Patricia's friends and not hers because that saves her from having to answer.

"Well," Patricia clears her throat while glancing sideways at Carlota and smiling, "we're not officially dating, let's say we're getting to know each other."

The wink Patricia gives Carlota makes her heart leap, causing vertigo and a wide smile.

"That explains why you haven't told us about her, although if you'd told me you'd been together for months, I would have believed it," Sonia says.

"Me too," her wife adds.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"Why's that?" Carlota asks intrigued.

"Because of your chemistry. You show a connection that many couples who've lived together for years would want. My prediction is that you have a great future together," Yolanda jokes, raising her wine glass.

"That's reassuring," Patricia laughs, "by the way, I haven't introduced you to Coco," she adds, reaching for her phone.

"Who?" Sonia asks, looking at her wife, who frowns and shrugs.

"Coco, my dog," Patricia responds.

"Your dog? Since when do you have a dog?" they both ask simultaneously.

"For a few days now. He's the reason I got trapped in the shelter with Carlota, isn't he cute?"

Patricia stretches out her arm and proudly shows them her phone screen. In it, there's a photo of Coco wearing the reindeer antler headband she put on him the day she and Carlota decorated the shelter.

"How beautiful," Sonia says, snatching the phone from her hand.

"My goodness, look at you now, Patricia," Yolanda says with raised eyebrows. "Not only are you in love again, but you're also a dog mom."

Patricia smiles and immediately puts an arm around Carlota's shoulders to pull her into an affectionate hug. Carlota, for a moment, felt some insecurity after Yolanda's comment because it reminded her that Aida is in Patricia's life, but when she hugged her that way, she felt stupid for feeling like that and immediately understood that, for Patricia, Aida is the past and she is the future.

When lunch ends and after checking that the rain has decreased to barely a drizzle, they both decide to go for a walk to visit another Christmas market that Yolanda and Sonia recommended. Protected under a huge red and black umbrella they've borrowed and that Patricia holds, the two walk leisurely among the crowd, stopping at all the stalls, completely immersed in the Christmas atmosphere offered by the songs playing through the speakers and the decorations and lights everywhere.

"I love Christmas," Carlota says, stopping in front of a stall full of nativity scene figurines and other Christmas ornaments.

"I like it more this year than others," Patricia smiles before giving her a kiss on the forehead.

Carlota feels a wave of warmth envelop her body after the kiss and looks at her tenderly for the comment. She loves this sincere Patricia who has removed that shield of being determined to be mean to her.

"I love it, isn't it beautiful?" Patricia asks, holding a snow globe with her free hand.

Carlota nods without saying a word and, before Patricia can make another comment, takes out her wallet and pays for it.

"What are you doing?" Patricia asks surprised.

"You liked it and I wanted to give it to you, I hope you don't mind," Carlota says,

blushing.

"No, of course not, but you didn't have to do that," Patricia says smiling.

Carlota shrugs and buttons up her coat.

"I wanted to do it," she says, pressing close to Patricia to avoid the cold.

"Well, I loved it, thank you so much for the gift."

"I'm really sad to leave, I had such a good time," Carlota says the next morning, when they've just gotten up and have their suitcases open on the bed.

"Me too, but we can plan another getaway soon, and we'll take Coco."

"That would be great, we could go camping and do some hiking, Coco would have so much fun," Carlota agrees.

"Well, you'll be in charge of organizing that trip because I took care of everything for this one," Patricia teases.

"You've got some nerve," Carlota complains laughing.

Patricia gives her a kiss on the cheek that echoes throughout the room.

"Go take a shower, we need to check out. I'll take the things to the car meanwhile," Patricia says, already ready to leave.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

As soon as Carlota locks herself in the bathroom, she grabs the suitcases and runs out of the inn. She regrets not being more creative and thinking of an excuse that didn't involve dragging suitcases, but at least she managed to leave the inn without Carlota, exactly what she wanted. She runs quickly to the car, leaves the suitcases, and from there runs to the Christmas market to return to the room fifteen minutes later, flushed and breathless.

"You took a while," Carlota says, who has just gotten out of the shower.

"I got distracted looking at shop windows," Patricia lies, trying to breathe slowly.

When they go down to reception, they say goodbye to Yolanda and Sonia with their promise to visit them in Salamanca next time. Patricia and Carlota head to the car and, when they get in, Patricia turns to the back seat and grabs the bag with the gift she bought a few minutes ago.

"Here," she says, handing it to Carlota.

"What's this?" she asks, though she can't hide the excitement in her eyes.

"Look inside and you'll know, I couldn't find wrapping paper," she says with an innocent expression.

When Carlota opens the bag, Patricia can't believe that something as simple as a puzzle could make her so happy. They saw it when they were walking through a market on the first day right after lunch, but the store was closed at that time and they couldn't go in. To Patricia, it seemed like any other puzzle, but Carlota was fascinated

that it was an advent calendar made up of twenty-four small boxes to assemble a part of the puzzle each day.

"I can't believe you bought it for me, thank you so much," Carlota says, hugging Patricia so tightly that the cardiologist thinks she would do anything to see her this happy always.

Chapter 17

Several days have passed since Patricia Burnet and Carlota Morán returned from Gibraltar, from that express getaway that not only allowed them to visit the most beautiful street markets they had ever seen but also to get to know each other in a different way. They haven't been able to see each other since they arrived in Salamanca because both have been swamped with work, and between one thing and another, they haven't met up, although they do talk on the phone daily. Patricia is adapting to her new routine with Coco, waking up earlier than she used to take him for walks, and on days when she knows her workday will be longer than usual, she usually takes him to Aida's house, who seems delighted by the animal's company.

"Have a great New Year's Eve!" Patricia bids farewell to her coworkers at the clinic where she works in the afternoons.

It's Monday, December thirtieth, and the next day she works a few hours in the morning, only attending the clinics if there's any cardiac emergency, but otherwise, she's free to relax and enjoy the last days of the holiday season.

She gets in her car and drives carefully, the streets packed with people who, as always, are out doing their last-minute shopping. That afternoon, Patricia feels nervous and wants to get to her ex-girlfriend's house as soon as possible to vent and ask for help.

"It's freezing cold," Patricia says, bundled up in her coat when Aida opens her door.

"Last year was worse," Aida replies and lets her in, "this year it's fine."

Patricia shakes her head; her ex-girlfriend has always had a strange relationship with weather. She loves heat and hates cold, but she tolerates it better than anyone, in fact, she usually walks around the house in light clothing, even without the heating on.

"Did you get another tattoo?" Patricia asks, moving closer to examine her.

Aida smiles like a mischievous child.

"I went for a touch-up and took the chance to get this flower," she points to her right shoulder. "I've promised myself not to visit Anton's studio anymore this year."

Patricia raises an eyebrow; she's heard that same promise for years. Her ex-girlfriend is addicted to ink, she remembers that when they started dating, she already had a couple of small tattoos, and then they met Anton, a guy who opened a studio downtown, and from that moment on, the girl became a regular. Aida, with very fair skin, has always had a body anyone would envy, genetics have favored her, and with just a couple of boxing workouts a week, she maintains a stunning figure.

Coco appears sliding across the living room floor when he hears his owner's voice and approaches the vet, wagging his tail vigorously.

"Have you been good?" Patricia asks the dog, "of course you have, because you're such a good boy."

"He is," Aida confirms.

Patricia smiles with satisfaction.

"Next week I probably won't bring him every day," Patricia explains as she walks to the couch, "I only have three scheduled surgeries, and Coco won't have to spend so many hours without me."

Aida pouts and looks at Coco with puppy eyes.

"But you'll still have to be at the clinic in the afternoons," Aida says, and Patricia narrows her eyes.

"Hey, get your own dog," says the vet, knowing that Aida and Coco have formed a beautiful friendship bond.

"Now that I'm calmer and working from home, it wouldn't be a bad idea to visit the shelter. I've realized I spend too many hours alone sitting in that chair, and since you've been bringing Coco, I get up more, go outside, and clear my head," Aida says, and Patricia notices a hint of sadness.

"Are you okay, Aida?"

Aida nods.

"It's just that after spending so much time traveling and setting up the company, having casual sex and not dating anyone, I've reached the point where I want to share with someone, I don't know," Aida shrugs, "go on dates and all that."

Patricia smiles, pleased. Aida, fed up with her boss, left her job and decided to start her own company. From there, she spent quite a while focused on achieving her goal. She had to make many trips, close deals, seek financing, and meanwhile, she stayed single, sleeping with practically every woman she could because, in her own words, she needed to drain stress somehow. During that time, she refused to engage in a more formal relationship, and despite Patricia's advice, the girl had decided to continue with that life that the vet certainly finds empty.

"About time," Patricia says, clapping.

Aida rolls her eyes; it's not that big of a deal.

"Well, tell me. What's wrong?"

"How do you know something's wrong?" Patricia asks, settling into the couch.

"Patricia, I know you too well. I know there's something you want to tell me," Aida answers with certainty.

Patricia breathes and releases the air slowly.

"I want to ask Carlota to spend New Year's Eve together, but I don't know how to do it or even if I should. I don't want her to feel overwhelmed and think I'm too intense," she says in a rush, flustered.

Aida stretches her lips into a big smile.

"You don't know how happy I am for you," she says and takes the vet's hand affectionately. "I thought you'd never get over me."

Their loud laughter makes Coco lift his head and look at them suspiciously.

"Well, I think you can just tell her directly," Aida says, changing her mind when she sees the horrified look on the vet's face, "or not."

"It just seems too rushed, and I don't want her to think I'm too intense," repeats the canine cardiologist.

"You could drop hints when you talk to her, mention that you and Coco will be spending the night alone at home," suggests Aida, not too sure because she would just ask directly.

Patricia's eyes light up.

"Yes, I can even tell her that this year will be the first time I'm not spending it with my family and that I'm not sure what to do," adds Patricia, who thinks it's a brilliant plan, "and if I don't see results, I'll say poor Coco is a bit sad."

Aida looks at her, thinking she's never seen her ex-girlfriend like this, nervous and inventing a dramatic story just to get the girl she's seeing to spend New Year's Eve

with her.

"Well, I think it's perfect," Patricia continues and stands up from the couch, "come on, Coco, we have a plan to execute."

Patricia says goodbye to Aida, promising they'll see each other when she returns from her family home in the first days of the new year. The vet wastes no time and heads to her apartment, polishing the plan she has devised to invite Carlota over.

As soon as she showers, serves Coco's dinner, and pours herself a glass of wine, she calls Carlota as they've been doing since they returned from Gibraltar.

"Fortunately, we haven't had any new arrivals at the shelter, I couldn't stop by earlier, I've had so much work at the clinic that I couldn't keep up," Carlota tells her, letting out an exhausted sigh. "And you?"

"Same here, we haven't stopped working, we've had a wave of patients because many people are going on trips and want to confirm everything's okay with their pets," Patricia answers, gathering strength to execute her magnificent plan.

"What days," Carlota says. "By the way, Patri, I was thinking of asking if you'd like to spend New Year's Eve together at your place or mine. Since it's Coco's first after the adoption, we could do something special, but with the storm coming back to Salamanca, I think it's better to stay at the shelter. There are four dogs and a cat without foster homes, and I don't want to leave them alone. What do you think about having our New Year's celebration there?"

Patricia falls silent. After spending those days overthinking and today crafting a plan with Aida, Carlota goes and proposes it so spontaneously and directly. She feels foolish and understands why her ex-girlfriend suggested she just invite her over without all the drama. Seconds pass, and as the cardiologist remains silent, Carlota

blushes, thinking she's overstepped.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to overwhelm you. Just that since we'd both mentioned we didn't have plans for New Year's Eve, I thought..."

"Yes I want, we want," she corrects herself, looking at Coco. "I think it's a good idea, I wanted to ask you too, but I didn't know how."

Carlota smiles.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

"You know you can tell me anything," the volunteer responds. "I'd love to be with you anywhere, but especially at the shelter where everything between you and me began."

Chapter 18

"I think it's unfair that I have to do this," Patricia protests, wrinkling her nose while tilting her head back and forth.

Carlota, who's finishing setting up the shelter's fold-out bed after taking out the containers they brought and preparing the appetizers, turns toward Patricia trying to hold back her laughter.

"I can't do everything, we have to split the tasks," she says, biting her lips to contain the laugh that threatens to escape.

"And why do I have to prepare grapes for the dogs with their little meat cans? Do you know how bad this smells?" she asks while rolling little balls with her hands as if making homemade meatballs.

"Because we drew lots and you got picked," Carlota reminds her while lowering the volume of the speaker she turned on with her Christmas playlist as soon as they arrived.

"I think you cheated," Patricia continues protesting.

"Stop complaining and think about how happy they'll be when they can eat the grapes

with us, just look at Coco."

Patricia shifts her gaze to her left, where Coco sits next to her with his right paw on her foot while wagging his tail frantically. The other dogs are on her other side, drooling with the same anticipation.

"I don't know how you can like this food when it smells so bad," Patricia says, talking to the dogs, "but then again, you're little pigs who would eat poop, who am I to judge?"

Three hours later, both women have long finished dinner and, while Carlota arranges the small plates with grapes and meat balls on the table waiting for the twelve bells to strike, Patricia opens party favor bags and places little party hats on the dogs. A powerful thunder makes the shelter's windows rattle, reminding everyone that it's raining outside. Peluco, one of the dogs, howls nervously because loud, sudden noises frighten him, but Carlota solves it by turning up the music.

"One minute left," Patricia says, filling two champagne glasses.

After that, they each grab two plates of meat balls and, as soon as the first bell strikes, they excitedly place them in front of the dogs while grabbing their own plates with grapes. While they try to keep pace with the bells, Coco licks his chops after finishing ahead of time, and when the last bell rings, Patricia and Carlota kiss and hug amid barks while thinking they couldn't have chosen a better place to start the year.

Epilogue

Three months later

"Why are you smiling?" asks Carlota when Patricia, who was standing still beside her in silence, suddenly flashes that typical smile that comes from remembering

something that had been hiding in a corner of the mind.

From the mischievous expression drawn on her girlfriend's face, Carlota knows that smile with its teasing hints has to do with her.

"Nothing," Patricia answers as a laugh escapes her.

Aida, who's with them waiting in line at the bookstore where Victoria Rivas and Micaela de Luca are signing books, decides to take a step back and remove herself from the middle before knives start flying and catch her in between.

"Like hell it's nothing, you're laughing at me," Carlota snorts.

The truth is that what Patricia remembered isn't even funny, but she's caught a case of the giggles and can't stop.

"You better speak up if you're still planning to ask her to live with you," Aida drops while moving one foot in front of the other with a distracted air, flipping through the book pages as if this had nothing to do with her.

Carlota's jaw drops and Patricia's laughter stops dead.

"You're going to ask me to live with you?" Carlota asks, her pulse racing.

"Why do you have such a big mouth?" Patricia says, ignoring Carlota to address Aida, whom she wants to smack with her copy of the book.

"I'm not big-mouthed, I'm saving you from yourself, plus I'm sick of your indecision. You've been driving me crazy for a week asking for help to find the best way to ask her. Well, this is it, ask her now and stop pestering me and Coco," Aida blurts out.

"Well said," applauds a woman standing behind her in line.

Patricia feels her ears burning and her hands shaking, but she knows now isn't the time to strangle Aida, that can wait until later, now she needs to focus on Carlota, who stares at her open-mouthed.

"Do you really want us to live together?" Carlota asks, feeling like she's floating.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:01 pm

Patricia clears her throat and her cocky smile from minutes ago transforms into one of those goofy ones she can't control when Carlota looks at her that way.

"Yes, I've been thinking about it for weeks. I'm not saying we should do it right now, but if you want to, we could start thinking about it and move in together in a few months, when we find something that works for you, me, and Coco."

Patricia's heart pounds in her head when she finishes speaking. She feels she might suffocate if Carlota takes too long to answer, but the volunteer seems to lack that indecision that affects Patricia with everything related to important steps, because she doesn't take even a second to respond.

"I would love to live with you and Coco," she says enthusiastically.

"Really?" Patricia asks stupidly before hugging her.

"See? It wasn't that hard," Aida says, rolling her eyes.

Patricia glances at her sideways and winks.

"Now tell me what you were laughing about before," Carlota breaks away from Patricia's embrace.

This time it's Aida who lets out a laugh, stepping back again and positioning herself right next to the woman who spoke to her earlier.

"Mind if I wait my turn with you?"

The woman looks at Aida, and she feels how that penetrating gaze pierces through her, causing a sudden current that leaves her breathless. Aida furrows her brow, the woman is older than her, maybe fifty?

"No, but don't try to cut in line, because I'm the type who bites," the woman responds.

Aida no longer cares about her age.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Patricia asks Carlota while watching the two women.

"Don't change the subject," Carlota insists, and this time Patricia turns to her and grabs her by the waist.

"Fine," she finally agrees, "I was remembering the day we got trapped in the shelter and I discovered you were reading Writers."

"And what about it?" Carlota doesn't understand.

"You turned red as a tomato and started saying a bunch of silly things like you were only reading it because someone recommended it or that you didn't even know who the writers were."

Carlota blushes just like that day and Patricia smiles, pulling her closer with more determination, bringing her lips to her ear to whisper.

"That's when I started suspecting you liked women and, even though at that moment I was determined to be angry with you, there was a part of me that was overjoyed that was the case."

The kiss with which Carlota responds to Patricia's words is so heartfelt that even the writers themselves have to stand up from their chairs to see what's happening when

those present start whistling and clapping, inspired by Aida and her mysterious companion.