



# It Had To Be You

**Author:** *Danielle Jacks*

**Category:** Romance, M-m Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Who says a cinnamon hero has to be a guy?

Lara is the cutest, most annoying human I'll never adequately match up to. She's a charity worker by day and takes care of sick animals by night. She's the girl who always wins the awards but finishes last when it comes to relationships. She's like a sugar rush that never bursts, and I'm not that kind of hyper. The problem is, I'm the injured bird this time around and hers is the only offer I've had to nurse me back to health.

Can we survive the next six weeks, or will she drive me to do something more stupid than breaking my leg?

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:00 am*

## CHAPTER1

### MALLORY

Gay pride is one of my favourite reasons for visiting home. The cold British air hits me as I step outside Leeds/Bradford airport. It's August, so if I hadn't just spent three months mountain biking in Park City, Utah, it might not feel so nippy. I probably should have worn a bra under my camouflage tank top because my ladies are standing to attention. But subtlety has never been my style. I don't care who's looking at my body.

I drag my suitcase to the short-stay car park, wondering where my ride is. Lara's beat-up old banger lets out a burst of black smoke as it slowly makes its way through the barrier. It cost me thirteen quid for her to lug her sorry excuse for a vehicle into the airport. A taxi might have been a safer option looking at the state of it. We'll be lucky if we make it back to Kippax in this thing.

"Hi, Lara. When are you going to trade this runt in for a beast?" I ask, pulling open the car door, which creaks on its hinges.

"Hi, Mal. Don't be offended, Buttercup. She just doesn't understand you. We get from A to B and that's all that matters." She pats the dashboard like the car's another one of her animal friends rather than an old banger.

I frown. "Did you name your car Buttercup?"

"She's my favourite Powerpuff Girl and the name suits her." She gives her car

another stroke, beaming with pride.

I look more like the cartoon character in question than this rust bucket does. My hair is black in a pixie cut, and I have dark green eyes similar to Buttercup's. "Just because it's metallic green doesn't make it sassy enough to be a crime-fighting machine."

She laughs. "I've missed your lively personality."

Yeah. I've missed Lara too. Not that I'd admit it. Lara and I have been friends for as long as I can remember. She's the constant in my life that will always be; my chosen family. We have one of those push-and-pull relationships where small doses of time together work best, but I couldn't live without her. She's got a little too much sunshine in her step, and I like a black coffee before any conversation in the morning. I wouldn't call myself grumpy, I'm just not as full-on as her. I save my energy for adventures. Cycling, hiking, and canoeing are my ideas of fun.

Once my suitcase is on the back seat and I'm buckled in, she sets off. The car makes a few grunts before settling down into a low hum. The interior smells like it's been dipped in strawberries. It's sickly sweet.

"I told you to come and visit me while I'm working on my column. Then you'd get me at my best." I'm a journalist for an extreme sports magazine, Level Up, and I love it. I've never wanted anything so much in my life, and now I'm living the dream. I get to see the world and go on insane adventures. It's amazing.

"I can't leave my cats or the bat I'm nursing back to health." She gets that smile like she's in her happy place.

"Please tell me you're joking. I can't believe you'd pass on amazing views in Utah, Switzerland, or Norway. And people say I'm the crazy one."

“Working at the Cat’s Trust doesn’t exactly pay that well, and I’d miss my babies.” She stops at a junction and the brakes squeak.

“Aww.” I fake empathy, but Lara’s not the type to call me out. There’s nothing cute about being an animal carer. Maybe on paper or on the television it might look cool. But in reality, it’s poop scooping, hairy clothes, and weird-ass gifts that aren’t in the least bit cute.

Lara’s all about the simple life. Plain, cheap clothes, handbags from the market, and jewellery made from recycled bottles. She has a modest-sized house in a little village outside Leeds, with a small garden that looks like fairies vomited on it. She bought the property with the money her parents left her and she only lives a few streets away from where we grew up. She makes enough money to get by without fancy luxuries and she’s happy with that... or so she says.

When my mum died from the big C, it was my last tie to England. I tried harder with more motivation to get out of there. My three years at university studying Journalism finally paid off when I started uploading videos to social media. Instead of writing a sports column for a local newspaper, I got to try more adventurous stuff, and I was making money while doing it. The offer of a job at Level Up was a dream come true. Now I’m hoping to be nominated for the Extreme Sports Journalist of the Year. If you told my sixteen-year-old self this was possible, her mind would have been blown. Ten years later, I’m living the dream.

“Where are you going next on your travels?” Lara asks.

“I’m really excited about the next one because it’s something unique.” I rub my hands together. My next adventure is right up there on the extreme scale.

“Are you going to make me guess?” She glances in my direction before concentrating back on the road.

“No. I’m just building the tension for the big reveal. Wait for it... I’m going to Central America, Nicaragua. There’s a cool place where you can go volcano boarding.” I pause, waiting for her reaction.

“That sounds... dangerous.” Her lip curls down into a frown.

“Extreme sports are exactly that. That’s the whole point.” I shrug a shoulder.

Lara doesn’t take risks in life, unlike me. Personally, I think she plays it too safe, and it holds her back from getting what she wants. When we were kids, she missed out on so many things because she didn’t want to get hurt. She didn’t come on the rock-climbing school trip or army training day. To this day, I’ve never needed hospital treatment for an injury, and I’m living my life to the fullest.

“Have you ever thought about doing something not so scary?” She gives me a serious look.

I laugh. “What would be the fun in that?”

“It would be safer.” She nods like she’s agreeing with herself.

“Caution is for pussies.” That’s my truth. If I hadn’t taken risks, I wouldn’t be where I am today.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:00 am*

“Don’t you ever want to settle in one place? Lay down roots?”

“I’m not made for that sort of stuff.” I shake my head. When I left for New York to start working for Level Up, Lara was devastated. She didn’t speak to me for a month. Eventually, she came around and now we talk at least once a week. I don’t need roots. New York is just where I lay my head most often. Flying high is where I want to be, and I have Lara to bring me back to earth.

She bites her lip in that way she does when I’ve upset her. There’s nothing that would keep me in one place for long. It’s not in my nature. “At least I have you for the weekend.”

“That you do. Catch me up with what’s going on in your life. Have you met any cute girls lately? Anyone we’ll be meeting up with at Pride?”

“No. I haven’t had time to go out, and you know I don’t like those dating apps. I’m a single agent. But I have a new friend at the moment. Batty the bat. He got injured, and I’ve been looking after him for a few weeks. The vet thinks he’ll be well enough to go to the Butterfly Garden soon for his new home.”

Neither of us has ever had a serious relationship. I’m too skittish, but I’m not sure what her excuse is. She has commitments to the animals she cares for, but they don’t need her all the time. She chooses not to go out. I know of a few hook-ups she’s had, but there haven’t been many girls between her sheets that I’ve heard about.

We cross the city and finally make it to the small village where Lara lives. Her car makes one last puff of black smoke before she kills the engine. This place is full of

bad memories for me. Things I don't like to think about. I lost both my parents too soon and I don't like to dwell on what could have been. Lara is the same as me in that respect. We both lost the people who were supposed to guide us through adolescence, and that's partly why we're such good friends, even though we're opposites. We leaned on each other to get through the dark days.

The dirt track behind the row of terraced houses is uneven and full of rocks. It isn't wide enough to park directly next to Lara's house, so we have to walk the short distance. I drag my suitcase from the backseat and we make our way to her home. My luggage bumps over the stones and I see a few curtains twitch from our arrival. It's been at least a year since I last visited, so they probably don't remember me. Lara's long blue dress flaps in the wind as she walks. Her outfit is unflattering and doesn't show off her curves. Not that I'm checking out my friend.

She puts the kettle on when we get inside. I open my bag and show her the rainbow feathered bra I bought for tomorrow's parade. It's a custom piece by one of my favourite designers at Rebel Jacks. The vibrant colours are going to look gorgeous against my tanned skin, and I'm proud to be wearing it. I met Victoria Ainsworth, the designer, at a fashion show in New York, and she was excited about creating my outfit.

"What do you think?" I hold it up to my tank top over my bust. The feathers are soft as they graze over my upper arms.

Her eyes home in on me. They're big like a cartoon character's as she takes in what I'm showing her. A pink tinge brightens her cheeks, and she looks away. "That's really nice. Although it's barely going to cover you. I have a rainbow dress that I bought from town last week."

"Does it cover everything right down to your ankles?" I scrunch up my face to show I'm not impressed by that idea.

She frowns. “It’s long and flowing. Similar to the one I have on.” She glances down to look at the dress.

“Of course it is.” I shake my head. A little skin on show doesn’t mean you’re going to have a night of sin. Lara has a beautiful body from what I’ve seen, and it’s a shame for her to keep it covered up.

“I’m not as confident as you, and that bra wouldn’t look as good on me.” She bites her fingernail while looking back at my top.

“You don’t know that. You wouldn’t even try it on to find out.” I fold my arms across my chest, bunching the feathers higher up towards my collarbone.

I’ve never seen Lara in a bathing suit, never mind a bra top.

The kettle boils, and she focuses on the kitchen counter. “Do you want sugar in your tea?” she asks, pouring the water into the cups and ignoring my challenge.

“No, thanks.” I put my bra back into my suitcase and zip it up before pushing it towards the living room door. Taking a seat in one of the wooden chairs, I sit with my arm resting on the tabletop.

She adds milk and a spoonful of sugar to her cup, then brings them to where I’m sitting. She empties cat biscuits into a bowl before joining me at the table. Her tabby cat quickly makes its way into the kitchen and starts wolfing it down.

“How is your New York apartment coming along? Have you painted your bedroom yet?”

I’ve been talking about decorating for a long time, but honestly, I don’t spend much time there. I prefer to be out on the road, and my boss is happy to line up my business



trips so they flow together. “Actually, I have. There’s a guy at the office whose cousin is starting out as a painter and decorator. I gave him the keys before I left for Utah.” The only time anyone would catch me at home is when I have to hand deliver something to Level Up or I’m needed for a charity event. Handing over my keys was an easy choice, even though I’ve never met the guy doing the job.

“So, you haven’t even seen it?”

“No. I’m sure it looks fine.” I told him to paint it an off-white, so I’m pretty certain it can’t look that bad.

Her lips press together in a side frown. “One day, you’re going to burn out. I just hope you find a sanctuary that will give you the comfort you need.”

There’s no need for me to slow down even if Lara thinks I should. I’d rather live my life to the fullest and die young. Finding myself locked between four walls in what she calls a home sounds like hell to me. My cleaner spends more time in my apartment than I do, and I’d like to keep it that way.

We drink our tea before moving into the living room. Like old times, we watch reruns of Glastonbury videos, and I crack open a bottle of wine as the sun goes down.

## CHAPTER2

### MALLORY

Waking up with a cat clawing your forehead is like being beaten up by a hangover. Not that I drank that much last night. We shared a bottle of red, but the dregs still need pouring down the sink. I sit up and push the cat off. The sofa creaks as I unstick my ass from the fake leather.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:00 am*

After making a cup of tea, I check my work emails. My travel plans are all set for me to leave tomorrow, and my guide is meeting me at the airport. I update a few of my pictures on my Level Up blog, including one of my rainbow bra.

Lara stirs upstairs. Her footsteps are quiet as she moves from the bedroom into the bathroom. The door closes before the tap starts to run. She's in there for a good ten minutes before she materialises, fully dressed and bright as a button. She looks pristine in her long rainbow dress with her combed wavy brown hair.

I, on the other hand, look like I've been attacked by a cat when I catch a glimpse of my reflection in a nearby wall mirror. I can understand why the animal might have confused me for a bird's nest.

"Morning," I say with a yawn.

"Morning. Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." She smiles brightly.

"Your cat was the problem. He bopped me on the head." Using my right hand, I act out the hit on the head.

"He's not used to having human guests. It's usually the furry ones we have to stay. Moggy probably wants feeding. I'll get him some food and us a drink. Would you like any Quorn sausages?"

Oh, that's the little critter's name. I'd forgotten what it was and didn't want to ask as I should know. I retrieve my mug from the side of the sofa. "I'll never understand why vegetarians eat those. They taste like cardboard."

“They’re not so bad. I could make some toast if you prefer. I have strawberry jam.”

“Toast will be fine. What time are we going to Leeds?”

“The bus comes at one o’clock. You have time for a shower and whatever else you need to do before we set off.”

“Excellent. I’ve already dealt with my emails. A shower sounds good, though.” I follow her into the kitchen, where she feeds the cat from a tin. The smell is gross, but the little guy licks its lips. I put my mug on the counter and fill the kettle with water. Lara hums while she works her way around her space. She’s always been a happy soul. While she puts the bread in the toaster, I head back into the living room to tidy up my makeshift bed. One more night on the sofa and then I’ll be back in the luxury hotels or at least a familiar sleeping bag.

We eat before I go upstairs to use the bathroom, and she goes to feed the bat that’s staying in her shed. Apparently, he’s cute, but I’d rather not find out. I strip out of my pyjamas and have a quick shower. All the body wash and shampoos smell like Lara, which means maybe I do now too. The towel is enough to rub the wetness out of my hair. Using my neon makeup pallet, I decorate my face with rainbow colours. Once my feathers and hot pants are in place, I check myself out in the mirror. This is now a favourite outfit of mine. There are only two more things left to add, and that’s my wings and kitten-heeled boots. I officially look like the confident gay woman I am, and I love it. I’m proud to be me. That’s what today is really about. Being comfortable in myself and supporting others who need a confidence boost.

Lara’s fussing over her cat when I enter the kitchen. The toy mouse falls from her grasp as her jaw drops open.

“You like?” I ask, twirling around.

The cat goes for the toy, catching Lara in the crossfire. She jumps up, clutching at her wrist and cradling it to her chest. “Ouch.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, darting across the room.

She looks at the injury. “It’s just a little blood.”

I take hold of her arm so I can look at the damage. She has a few older wounds. The fresh bright blood shines brighter, but luckily, it’s small. I rub her wrist with my thumb, avoiding the new cut before bringing it to my lips and kissing it. That’s what I would have done if she fell in school, and even though she’s the loving one, I don’t want her to be hurt. “Is that better?”

Her big brown eyes blink slowly. She seems shocked that I did that. We’re no longer kids, but we’ve always taken care of each other. I don’t want the social boundaries that exist between other people to apply to us. We’re closer than that. “Much.”

“Do you have any plasters?”

She seems to shake off whatever was clouding her thoughts. “You don’t put a plaster on a cat scratch. It’ll be fine in a few minutes. Are you almost ready, or do you want to put some more clothes on?”

I point to the sky. “I need my heavenly wings, then I’m all set. You, on the other hand, could show some more skin.” It’s too easy to tease her. Stepping closer, I reach for the top button on her dress, but she swats me away. A giggle escapes my lips. Fashion is something we’ve never agreed on.

“I’m fine just the way I am.”

“How are you going to get a girl to fall for you when you’re hiding away the goods?”

“It’s what’s on the inside that counts, not how good my rack is.”

I touch the feather on my top. “Showing a little flesh means I’m guaranteed to score. What’s going to be your memory from Pride?” I bite my lip, amused, and her eyes cast down to my mouth.

She looks away quickly before licking her lips, making me wonder when was the last time she got laid. If the mention of me getting a few kisses causes this reaction, I’m guessing it has been a while.

“I don’t know,” she says. “The parade?”

“What was last year’s memory of going to the event?” I raise my eyebrow in challenge. I love the dancers and floats as much as the next person, but there is more to the day than that.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:00 am*

“The parade?” she says like a question.

“You are hopeless.” I shake my head.

She shrugs. “What? I just want to have a nice time with my friends and support the rainbow flag.”

“You’re cute, but if you don’t put yourself out there, you’re going to be an old cat lady by the age of thirty.” Lara loves animals but I don’t want her to wake up years from now and realise that’s all she has. Her happiness is mine too. She deserves to be cherished the way she cherishes everything around her. Putting everyone before herself isn’t necessarily a good quality. She could miss her chance at a relationship because she’s not looking out for herself. I both love and hate her kindness sometimes. If she was a little more selfish, she’d take more of what she wants. Animals can’t be her everything.

“Thirty isn’t old, and I’m already a cat lady.”

“You’re too good for this world.” Lara is like a saint. She’s the perfect good girl; smart, caring, and beautiful. It’s a shame she doesn’t let anyone see her full potential. She gets walked over by assholes and overlooked by girls who don’t see her beauty.

She checks her watch. “We’d better get a move on. The ‘world’ won’t wait for me.”

I think that was her attempt at humour, but it falls flat. We both make a dash for our final few things. Lara is taking a small handbag, and I unload my possessions into it. Lacing my black ankle boots makes me feel ready to rock Pride. Lara puts on ballet

pumps and then we're ready to go.

We exit the house and make our way down the dirt track. It's a short walk along the main road to the bus stop, and at least two cars honk their horns at us. I wave, while Lara smiles.

"Looks like you'll be turning heads today," Lara says.

"It's Pride. People are just being friendly to us."

"Sure. That's what this is." She glances down at my outfit before averting her eyes.

Leaping towards her, I wrap my arms around her back, hugging her. "Is Miss Sunshine needing a top-up of sugar?"

"It's not that. When you come to visit, I want to spend as much time together as possible, but I can already tell you're going to be busy today." She pouts.

I'm torn between the guilt she makes me feel and my need to keep my distance. I'm not good with proximity. That's partly why we work so well.

I tighten my grip on her for a second before letting go so I can return to her side.

"We talk all the time, or at least more than I talk to anyone else."

She smiles. "You're just a hard girl to pin down."

"Hey, I'm the one that likes to do the pinning." I wink at her and she shakes her head.

We see the bus before we reach the stop. Lara starts to run with her arm out, letting the driver know we want to catch it. I fold my arms over my chest and pick up my

pace. The bus parks at the stop and turns off the engine. The door opens, and Lara's first to climb on board.

"You're early," she says to the driver before checking her watch. "There's another five minutes until you're due."

"Everything's running smoothly. I'm about to take a quick break. You weren't going to miss anything," the driver says.

"Fabulous." She smiles brightly, handing over some coins. "Two ladies to Leeds, please."

"Lovely," he says, punching the request into the machine and printing the tickets. "There you go. Enjoy Pride."

"Thanks," we say in unison.

I follow her onto the bus, and people stare. Some smile and others roll their eyes. I blow an old guy a kiss, which he turns his lips up at. I can't help but smirk; nothing is raining on my parade on Pride Day. Not everyone in the world is supportive of others. Luckily, the opinions of strangers don't bother me like they used to. Passing ships only make small waves, and then they're gone.

We slide into a seat near the back. She leans away from me, careful not to crush my wings, and we both look out of the window.

"See, we have plenty of time. Plus, the main parade doesn't start for an hour." I tap my watch's face.

"Once we get there, I'll be able to relax with a glass of wine." She hunches over, showing her discomfort.



“You mean a sambuca shot?” I smirk, knowing full well she doesn’t mean that, but I’m trying to lighten her up. Lara likes everything to run smoothly, while I’m happy to go with the flow. She has nothing to worry about, though. We’re going to get there without any hiccups.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:00 am*

“No way. I don’t want to be on my arse before the parade starts.” The last time Lara did shots, I found her asleep in the bathtub. That was a long time ago, though.

We make small talk between ourselves, and after the driver has had a short break, the bus sets off. It doesn’t take long for us to reach the city centre, and I watch the familiar streets go by. Nothing much has changed since the last time I was here.

We get off the bus and walk from the terminal to The Headrow. It’s packed with people; some dressed up, others in casual clothing. The atmosphere is electric as happy energy flows all around. People line the barrier, trying to reserve the best views of what’s about to happen. Camping out for hours isn’t really my thing, but I’d love to be in their shoes right now. I don’t want to miss a thing. We weave in and out of the crowd until we find somewhere good to stand. Lara gets comfortable against a wall. Leaning into her, I fuss with her collar, and she pushes me away with a laugh. Once I settle next to her, I spot an old friend from school. I wave and signal to Lara I’m going to say hello. Then I make my way through the crowd.

## CHAPTER3

### LARA

I stare at Mallory’s ass as she walks away. She might think I’m a saint, but there’s nothing virtuous about the thoughts in my head right now. She’s gorgeous, and I’d love to kiss my way down her body. I close my eyes for a second, trying to shake my lustful thought. She’s my best friend and I shouldn’t be thinking about her ass or any other body part.

Maybe Mallory is right and I need to find a girl to take my mind off things—her. Nothing good can come from lusting over the wrong person. She’s made her stance on relationships very clear. She likes to travel and nothing is going to tie her down. One night with her wouldn’t be worth risking our friendship. I can never let her know how I feel, or it might ruin everything.

“What are you staring at?” someone asks from behind me.

I flinch because I feel like I’ve been caught doing something I shouldn’t be. “Oh, hi, Sophie,” I say, turning to face her. She’s one of my co-workers at the Cat Trust.

“Hello, Lara. I thought it would be harder to find you with all these people, but you stand out from the crowd.” She smiles brightly. We have similar dresses on, only hers is in pastel tones and knee-length.

“I guess it was luck that brought us together. Who did you come with?” I look over her shoulder for the people she’s with.

She looks into the crowd. “Some friends. Nobody you know. They’re around here somewhere. What about you? Did Mallory make it?”

I talk about Mallory a lot, so she knows how important she is to me. “Yes. She spotted someone from school so she’s gone to see them.”

“Weren’t you in the same year?”

“Yes, but we didn’t have all the same friends.”

She nods.

A few minutes later, Mallory finds us. “I must’ve lost her in the crowd. I’m sure I’ll

catch sight of her again later. Who's this, Lara?" She stands taller, eyeing my co-worker curiously.

Sophie holds out her hand. "Lara and I have the same shifts sometimes at the Cat Trust. I'm Sophie. It's so nice to finally meet the girl she talks about all the time."

My cheeks heat. Thanks for that, Sophie! Mallory didn't need to know that. "Not all the time," I say, trying to play it down.

"Okay, just Monday through to Sunday."

I point at her, trying to give her a stern look. "She's joking," I say, wondering what she's playing at. She's embarrassing me, but I'm not sure why.

"That's funny because she's hardly mentioned you." Mallory folds her arms across her chest. They don't seem to be getting off to a good start.

"That's because I'm the girl she would be dating if she'd just give me a chance and stopped waiting for someone to sweep her off her feet." She emphasises the someone making me cringe inside. Hopefully, Mallory didn't notice.

The air leaves my lungs. She did not just go there. "You're hilarious." My voice comes out like a squeak. I try to give her an even harder poker face, hoping she sobers up from whatever truth serum she's been injecting. I did tell Sophie maybe we could have dated if I wasn't in love with someone else, but I didn't say who that was. The main reason I told her that was to stop her asking me out, not so she could share it with the whole damn world.

"Lara could have any woman she wants. Unfortunately, she'd rather be home with her cat," Mallory says, not noticing the tension. She chuckles to herself.

I bit my lip hard, hoping Sophie has finished whatever game she's playing. Luckily, the parade is about to start, and she moves back towards her friends. We stand and watch the colourful flags, banners, and people stand proud. There are so many great costumes, from birds with huge feather rainbow wings to groups of people each dressed in one colour of the flag. Everyone waves as the buses and floats pass us by.

Mallory grabs my hand and pulls me along as the last organised group walks past. "Come on. Let's follow the parade down The Headrow."

The celebration is about to move down to the lower end of Leeds, and I'm happy to follow the parade down there. We're not the only ones to join the walk and we wave to those still standing at the barrier. The buzz I feel from their happy faces is overwhelming. The excitement and support for the gay community is why I love the parade. Even if I did hook up with a girl I liked at Pride, this moment would be hard to top.

"Shall we get a drink?" I ask as we finally make it down to Lower Briggate.

"Sure. Let's do it." We join the busy line of people. "Hey. How come you never mentioned Sophie before?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

I shrug. When I'm on the phone to my best friend, we don't have long to speak. I'm only interested in finding out what she's been up to and I don't want to waste time talking about myself any more than I have to. "She's just a work colleague."

"She seems fond of you." Mallory has a weird look on her face that I can't read. Maybe it's because Sophie was standoffish.

"Yes. I've told her I'm not interested in anything romantic with her."

"Why?" She scowls.

She's not you. "She's not my type."

"I guess it would be strange dating someone like yourself. Just think how many fur babies you'd have." Her words seem light, but her expression is full of distaste.

"We have a few things in common like our love for animals. She's local to Leeds and she likes the same movies as I do, but it's not wise to date a co-worker."

"Oh, so you've been to the movies together, and probably shopping looking at you both. You have the same dress sense, although she's not as pretty as you."

I blush. She's being nice rather than flirting, but it still quickens my pulse. "We've been out a few times... as friends."

She nods.

The line slowly goes down as we make our way to the bar. We get two plastic cups filled with red wine and take them to the main stage. A guy with a huge camera signals he wants to take our picture. Mallory hugs me tight as we smile at the lens. He gives us a card to look him up online so we can find the photo before moving on to his next shot.

The large speakers beside the stage blast out a heavy base between different entertainers. We listen to the music and tribute acts. The alcohol goes down a little too easily and day turns into night as we party the hours away.

## CHAPTER4

### MALLORY

There's no way I can hide it. I'm drunk as a skunk and ready to sing some karaoke. I love The New Penny. It's the oldest gay bar in Leeds and has the best atmosphere for making a fool of yourself. Flicking through the book of songs, I find Spice Up Your Life by the Spice Girls. I put in my song request and go back to stand with Lara.

"Are you having a good time?" I ask, feeling myself swaying from side to side.

"Yes. I've loved spending the day with you and wish you weren't leaving tomorrow." She hugs me tightly. Guilt pulls at my heartstrings, but I shut it out. I've missed spending time with her too... not that I'm going to admit it.

"We've got tonight, though. You could sing with me if you want to add some spice to your life." It's hot in here, and she's finally opened the top button of her dress.

"You did not request to sing a Spice Girls song." She loves nineties pop, and it's part of the reason I chose it.

“Oh, but I did, and I’m going to be the queen of pop while I light the stage up.” I show her my jazz hands, wiggling my fingers in the air.

The song finishes and we clap at the group of girls who have just sung one of Dua Lipa’s hits. My name is announced over the microphone, and I try to pull Lara up to the front with me. That was quick considering how busy it is in here. Lara stands her ground, refusing to budge from the bar.

“No way. I’m not doing it.” She shakes her head.

“Do it for me.” I give her my best cute pout, but it’s not softening her stance.

“No.” She starts to pull away.

The guy with the microphone shouts my name again. I frown at Lara before letting go. Slowly, I make my way to the front, onto the small stage, and take the mic. There’s a small television with a blue screen. My head spins, but it’s not from nerves. My vision is a little fuzzy around the edges, so there’s no way I’m going to be able to read the words on the tiny screen. Lucky, I think I know them all.

The festival sounds start with the introduction to the song, and I bust some moves. I start to sing and the words come flowing out. Shaking my bootie, I get into the song, and the crowd cheers. Even if I was terrible, these people would cheer, which isn’t a bad thing. I’m on the last verse of the song and I step towards the audience, loving the vibe. Unfortunately, I miscalculate the edge. My right ankle buckles, and I’m stumbling out of control. One minute, I’m dancing, the next, I’m falling. A guy tries to catch me, but it’s too late. My foot hits the main dancefloor as I slide off the stage. My ankle gives way again and I go down like a sack of potatoes. Even drunk, the pain is unbearable. I let out a scream before my vision goes black.

\* \* \*



People crowd around me as I come to. Lara grabs my arm, shaking me for a response. Her eyes are watery, although I'm not sure why she's had such a strong reaction.

"I'm fine," I say, trying to shake off some of the embarrassment.

"Are you sure? Did you hit your head?" She touches my shoulder, but I can barely feel it. I'm probably still in shock.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“No. My arms broke my fall.” I try to get up and a sharp pain in my right leg like glass pulls me back to the floor.

“You’re not fine.” Lara’s eyes travel down my legs to my feet. Her eyes widen and the tears she was holding back begin to flow. What can she see that I can’t?

Someone turns on the main lights and the bartender comes over with a first aid kit. I’m pretty sure I don’t need a plaster, even though this is more than a cat scratch. I lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling for a few seconds, and my world begins to whirl into a blur. How much more would this hurt if I was sober?

The crowd quietens down as the bartender talks. “Can you flex your foot?”

I try, but instead of getting the result I expect, I scream out in pain.

Lara grips my hand. “We’ll get a doctor to look at you.”

“We need to call an ambulance,” the bartender says, looking at her rather than me. He disappears into the crowd and the people part to let him pass.

“Hopefully it’s just a sprain,” I say, making Lara’s frown deepen. Does she think it’s more than ligament damage?

“Maybe.” She smiles for a few seconds but she doesn’t look convinced. The next hour goes by in a whirlwind. Two lovely paramedics load me onto a stretcher, and Lara follows me into the back of an ambulance.

I'm checked into Leeds Royal Infirmary and already know this is going to be a long night. The A&E department is busy, and I'm not the worst patient that's come in. Six police officers pass my bay with a guy with a large scar down his face. He looks like a villain from a warrior movie. There's a curtain closed around another bed which has people running in and out. A woman's pained scream pierces the air. I take a deep breath, already hating the place.

Lara pulls up a chair next to the trolley I'm lying on. "It's going to be okay," she says.

I glance down at my ankle, but my boot is still in place. Until it's removed, I won't know what it looks like. The sharp pains are real enough, though.

Her words sober me up. It's definitely not going to be okay. England used to be my home, but America technically is now. I have medical insurance, but that's not the point. I'm a workaholic. I don't want to rest an injury.

Plus, my apartment isn't practical, and it's across the ocean. A flight and a couple of taxi journeys are going to be hell. Then there are the long halls to consider in my building. With crutches, this all seems almost impossible. Let's hope by a miracle my ankle feels better in the morning. It's silly, but I cross my fingers behind my back. Lara catches my movement and copies the gesture.

Besides, I'm supposed to be going volcano boarding. I can't do that with a dodgy ankle. It's a dangerous activity without an injury. My future flashes before my eyes. What will my boss say? Other than a few trips to England every so often, I never take a day off. I need my job like the air I breathe.

My chest feels heavy as realisation sets in. If I can't work, everything I've achieved is at risk. What about the Extreme Sports Journalist of the Year Award? It's only August. What if I can't get enough trips in to finish my column? Dread takes over my

mind. This can't be happening. What if my boss gives it to someone else? Panic rises within me, and I try to fight it.

"Okay is the last thing this is going to be. It's likely I'll have to postpone my plans, and how am I going to get home?" I frown while my chest continues to rise and fall erratically. Let's hope it's a bad sprain and I'm back on my feet within a week. As a reminder of the trouble I'm in, my leg throbs.

"I'm here for whatever you need." Lara touches my arm. She's a good friend, and maybe I don't appreciate her enough. Even if I don't want to depend on her, I'm at her mercy for now. I've no choice but to lean on her.

"Let's just see what the doctor says."

We smile at each other, but it's weak.

Thankfully, we don't have to wait long until a young female in a medical coat comes to greet me. "Mallory Abbott? Hi, I'm Doctor Busby. I see you've been enjoying Pride." She looks at a few notes on her tablet.

"Hi. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. What's the plan, Doc?" I'm trying to be optimistic. That's all I can do right now and it's better than crying.

"Where does your leg hurt?" She taps on her tablet, writing something down.

"It's my ankle." I point to the right one.

"We need to get that boot off first. Then we can assess what's going on." She steps outside my cubicle and comes back with two nurses. They untie my laces and cut the leather away from my ankle. Once my foot is free, I can see the results aren't going to be good. My ankle is swollen like a balloon and dark as the midnight sky. Seeing it

makes the pain intensify. The gasp that leaves my lips doesn't cover the way I feel.

The doctor writes on her tablet again before she speaks. "I've ordered some X-rays. I'll see you back here when you're done."

A porter wheels me down to the X-ray department where the radiographer takes some pictures of my bones. Doctor Busby meets me back in the cubicle fifty minutes later. She assesses the pictures with a frown.

"I'm afraid it's not good news, Mallory," the doctor says.

"How bad is it?" Lara wraps her fingers around mine, and I welcome the support.

"You have fractures through the bones in your ankle. I've been in touch with the orthopaedic team and they have scheduled you in for the morning. You're looking at surgery to plate the broken bone on the outside of your ankle and six weeks rest to help it heal."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

The words echo in my head. Six weeks. Forty-two long days. One thousand and eight hours. Okay, now is not the time to be crunching big numbers. I'm so screwed. I can't rest for a month and a half.

I rub my forehead, trying to process what all this means. How am I going to get home, and how will I stay off my feet? I'll need food from the store and toiletries. Plus, I don't do relaxing. What am I going to do all day while trying to keep still? I like to stay on the move.

I've got a broken ankle. I have no choice but to follow the doctor's orders. This injury might just be the death of me.

## CHAPTER5

### LARA

Mallory's been sulking for the last two days. Ever since I brought her home from the hospital and made her sleep in my bed. I've moved to the couch so Mallory can be more comfortable. She won't tell me what the surgeon said to her and she's been grumpier than usual. I'm trying my best to stay positive, but it's hard. I want her to be better and happier.

"Morning. Sorry. I just need a few things from my drawer." I open the curtains to let some sunlight into the room, and Mallory shuts her eyes with a groan.

After a few seconds, she grumbles, "Morning."

“Do you need anything before I head to work?” I fuss over the bed, trying to fluff her pillow and shake out the quilt cover.

“My laptop, so I can try to write an article.” Her voice sounds rough, so I pour her a glass of water from the jug at the side of the bed. I pass it to her when she opens her eyes. It takes her a few seconds to take it.

“Sure thing.” I get some clean underwear from the dresser and change out of my pyjamas in the bathroom. I put on my uniform before I retrieve Mal’s laptop, along with some food. She hasn’t looked at it since the injury, so maybe this is progress. “Here you go.” I smile sweetly.

“Thank you.” She pushes herself up so she’s sitting against the pillows.

I check my watch. “It’s time for me to set off or I’ll be late. See you at teatime?” I’m not sure why I ask it as a question because she isn’t going anywhere, but I don’t like seeing her so glum. I’ve left her some food on a tray for her lunch and a fresh jug of water.

“Yes. I’ll be here. Waiting.” She rubs her eyes before focusing on the computer. I hesitate for a few seconds, but I don’t know what to say, so I leave. She’s not her usual talkative self, but I’m trying to inject some sunshine into her day.

I grab my car keys and a coffee to go before locking up. The journey to work is short and away from the traffic, so it only takes me a quarter of an hour. The Cat Trust is located on farmland surrounded by fields. It’s a beautiful sanctuary away from the busy roads. I park on the dirt track and let myself into the cattery. Meows fill the air as my cute friends strut around their cages. Warmth surrounds my heart like it normally does when I enter this building. I love my job.

“Good morning, my sweets,” I say to the orange kittens brushing up against the bars.

I go to him and stroke the thick fur on his cheek, and he purrs. It takes me a while to make it to the far end of the room because I give each cat a welcome. I locate the milk from the fridge before opening the cage with the kittens in and offer them the bottle.

“Morning,” Sophie says when she finally joins me a few minutes later than our start time.

“Hello. Did you have a good time at Pride?” She was out of line when we spoke at the parade. I’m not expecting her to apologise, but I’ll be more cautious with my words in future.

“Amazing. I spent some time with the Pink tribute act, if you know what I mean.” She winks at me. “Did you give Mallory a good send-off?”

Those two sentences together take my mind to a dirty place, but I refuse to let her catch me off guard again. My crush on my friend has nothing to do with her. “Actually, she’s still at my place. While in The New Penny, she fell off the stage and broke her ankle.” I frown but try to hide how devastated I am for Mal.

“That stage isn’t even high.” Sophie gasps in disbelief. It’s true, though. It only comes up to my knee.

“Doesn’t make it any less dangerous.” I start feeding the next kitten, trying not to let Sophie irritate me.

Woah, where did that thought come from? I’ve not felt like that about her before. Maybe it’s the lack of sleep.

“So, you being the great friend said she could stay on your sofa a while longer?” Sophie smiles, but it’s ugly. Is jealousy making her this way? I never realised she was



like this before. Plus, she was with someone else at Pride. I don't owe her anything. I told her we could be friends and that's what we are.

"She's in my bed, but yes. She's staying until she's better." I don't let my mind wander to the image of Mallory wrapped up in my sheets. Or maybe I do because that's what I'm thinking.

"Are you sleeping with her?" Sophie crosses her arms over her chest.

"Of course not." I scowl. This is none of her business.

"I'm sorry, Lara. I don't mean to make things uncomfortable between us, but I smell heartbreak." She gives me a sad look, but it doesn't seem sincere.

"It will be fine." I shrug, hoping to play down the bad mood she's putting me in. Sophie and I work together. I need us to be okay and not weird.

"I hope you know what you're doing. If not, I hope you're open to a rebound fling." She winks at me again.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“You never give up.” I smile, relieved she’s switched back to the light-hearted flirting.

“Good morning,” Bella, the farm owner, says.

“Morning,” we echo back.

Sophie gets the cat food out and starts dishing it out. I finish up with the kittens before helping her. Bella takes litter tray duty, and we all get to work. After feeding time, we give the cats some love before taking a break.

I rub my back before dropping into the cheap garden chair outside the cattery building. The legs of the chair scrape against the concrete.

“Have you hurt yourself while feeding the cats?” Bella asks, observing my movements. She sits closer to the table, even though it leans so steeply that it’s useless.

“No. I couldn’t get comfortable last night.” I rub my shoulder.

“Ah. I have those types of nights,” Bella says. As well as the Cat’s Trust, she also helps her husband with the farm.

“The difference is you don’t have a bed guest,” Sophie says with sass.

“It’s about time you met someone,” Bella says. She smiles, seeming genuinely happy for me.

“Don’t get too excited. My best friend is staying for a few weeks and she’s injured, so I’m taking the couch. I’m still single and happy.” I add the last part, hoping to get Sophie off my case.

“If you’re such good friends, why can’t you share the bed? You’re a dainty little thing. Surely there’s room for you both,” Bella says.

“Lara forgot to mention her best friend is her long-term crush.” Sophie gives me the stern eyebrow.

Yeah, I can’t leave things with Sophie. Being nice isn’t working, and even though I don’t usually get tough with people, I’m going to have to tell her to back off.

“Nothing good can come from keeping this a secret. You should tell her how you feel,” Bella says, and Sophie nods with a told you so smile.

Her signals are a bit confusing. Why does she want me to tell Mal? “If I do that, it might become awkward between us. Mallory travels a lot and doesn’t want a relationship.”

“If you don’t tell her how you feel, you’ll never have a girlfriend either because you’re waiting for her.” Bella sounds like she’s talking from experience, but she has her love life under control. She’s married to a kind-hearted man.

I scratch my earlobe. While I wouldn’t agree I’m waiting for Mallory, I guess on some level it is the reason I’m not dating anyone. No one matches up to her. Not that I’m going to admit that to my work colleagues. “I’m happy the way things are.”

“When was the last time someone made you feel special?” Sophie asks.

“You guys and the cats make me feel loved every day.” I hug myself to show I’m

getting the vibes. Bella copies the action.

“Not in the way I’d like to.”

“Ease up on her,” Bella says.

“Yes, Sophie. Lay off. The right girl is out there for you. She’s just not me. I won’t date a co-worker, which I keep telling you. If we fell out, it would upset the balance, and I like the way things are.” My words are careful but, hopefully, to the point. We need a clear understanding.

“I actually have been asked out on a date.” Sophie seems to be trying to save face, and I’m glad she doesn’t push me any further.

“Who’s the lucky girl?” Bella asks.

“She’s a singer, and I met her at Pride. Her name is Vanessa.”

Sophie’s a flirt and too full-on. She might want to date me, but she’s happy to explore her options. Plus, her attitude is a huge turn-off. I wouldn’t be interested in her, even if she only had eyes for me.

“I’m happy for you. Please tell me you said yes.” I muster as much enthusiasm as possible, trying to get things back to where they were before Mallory arrived.

She shrugs. “I don’t want to seem too keen, but I’m going to message her after our shift to give her the answer.”

“You tease,” Bella says, nudging her shoulder.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“I hope she turns out to be the girl of your dreams.” I give her a warm smile.

“Thanks.” She looks at the floor but smiles when she lifts her gaze.

We get back to work and finish caring for the animals before we move on to answering emails, then back to feeding time. That’s what I love about my job. It’s a bit of everything and a lot of caring for others.

### CHAPTER6

#### MALLORY

I’ve no choice but to make the long-distance call to my boss. I pick up my mobile and hit dial on the office’s number.

“Good morning. You’re through to Level Up. I’m Candice. How may I help?”

“Hi, Candice, it’s Mallory. Can you patch me through to Eve? I need to speak with her,” I say.

“Sure thing, Mal. I hope you enjoyed Pride.”

“It wasn’t too bad,” I say, not wanting to repeat my bad news.

“Good. Please hold the line.”

I bite my nail, waiting for Eve to answer the phone. It’s early in America, but she’s

usually in the office by now.

“Mallory, so nice for you to check in. Candice says you want to speak with me. Is there a problem with your travel or something?”

“Or something,” I mumble. “There was an accident while I was at Pride.” I pause, waiting for a response before I break the bad news.

“What kind of accident?”

“I fell off the stage in the karaoke bar.” I cringe, glad she can’t see me.

“Okay, so you need a few days off?” She sounds concerned.

“I have a pot on my leg for the next six weeks, and then I’ll need physio.” I fight back tears, thinking about what the surgeon said. My mobility might never be what it was, but I’m determined to overcome my injury.

“Oh my. I hope someone is taking care of you. How are you coping?”

Water leaks from my eye. It was irrational to think I’d be fired, but I’m relieved to hear her concern. “I’m still in England and my friend is looking after me. I’m pretty immobile at the moment.”

“But your fingers still work, right? Feel free to update your column, email me any articles you think will be good for the magazine, and promote a positive mind. Write about what happens when your fitness has to take a break or extend your details on Utah. The choice is yours. I’ll get Candice to call the company that arranged the volcano boarding and we’ll reschedule once you’re home.”

I feel better hearing her words. “Thank you. This means a lot.” The tears run freely

from my eyes, and I wipe them away.

“Look after yourself, Mal, and I look forward to an update.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

“Take care.”

We hang up, and I let out a sob. My boss has been understanding about my injury and my trip to Nicaragua has been postponed. That’s the best news. Plus, I can still run my column and maybe get a feature piece in the glossy magazine. I just need to map out a plan. I update my blog and add some pictures of me resting. Using my time to show how a fitness fanatic rests will be good for my mental health. It’s too upsetting for me to pretend to extend my trip. I scroll through the supportive messages, glad everyone is willing to wait for me. Once I’ve replied to a few, I turn off my laptop and stare at the ceiling. The high I felt from talking to my boss dwindles. What now? One thing I know is this is going to be a long day, week, month. I let out a huff, hoping I can live up to my blog optimism and show people I can enjoy life without extreme sports for the short term.

After spending way too long feeling sorry for myself, I assess my surroundings. I can get out of this bed, I just need to be careful if I venture down the stairs. With my crutches, I struggle to the top of the stairs. The bottom looks further away than before. This is a bad idea. I make my way back into the bedroom and sit on the bed. There’s a throb in my hands. It’s going to take time to get used to the crutches.

I look around the flowery room. Lara has rose print on her bed and curtains. There are fake flowers on the dresser, and even framed pictures of them on the wall. The extra pillows on the bed are comfy enough, but overall, I imagine this is the sort of room an older person would like. It’s just so Mary Sue. No one is this perfect. I knock one of the small pillows onto the floor, feeling better for making a mess.

Nice girls like Lara don't usually hide dark secrets, but if I'm going to survive the day, I need to find her dirty magazine stash or whatever gives her a darker side. She can't be a complete saint, even if I tease her by telling her that's what I think.

Moving around the room isn't easy, and I almost fall over the pillow I threw on the floor. Slowly, with crutches, I navigate the room. I start by snooping in her closet, which is full of boring dresses. Using the door, I lower myself down to sit on a small footstool. There's no loose floorboard or lock box. In fact, she's so neat there's not even a jumper that's fallen down the back or an old hideous T-shirt screwed up. Well, that's disappointing.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

Next, I check under her bed. It's a struggle to even lower myself down onto the ground. The floor is so clean under here I don't have to waste my energy venturing underneath it. Other than a shoe box of photos from her childhood, there's nothing interesting.

Once I manage to get back up, I sit on the bed to catch my breath. So far, I've found nothing. Not even dust balls. What kind of person doesn't have dirt under their bed?

After a short break, I continue my search, determined to find something. I've got my hands on her underwear drawer before I start to hesitate. Is it wrong to look in here? Knowing Lara, she won't have anything but white cotton knickers.

I tap my fingers against the wood, trying to decide if this is too much. Then I open the drawer. I come face to face with white cotton pants, just as I expected. "God, Lara. You need to learn to live a little," I mutter to myself.

"What are you doing?" Lara's voice breaks through my thoughts.

I jolt back, losing my balance and falling onto the bed. "You scared me half to death."

She moves across the room and looks into the drawer. Her hands search through the fabric until she finds whatever she was looking for.

"What were you looking for? If you need socks, they're not in here." She closes the drawer but not my suspicion of her hiding something. She doesn't know how much I need this dirt today. Is it a black thong or crotchless underwear she's hiding?

“Do you have money in the drawer or something? You know I wouldn’t have taken anything.” I frown but secretly hope it’s not cash she’s stowing away. I’m not sure why my mind jumped straight to her thinking I’m a thief, but it’s better than discussing how unimpressed I am with her plain white underwear. I’ll save that comment for later when I want to wind her up.

She narrows her eyes at me, taking her time before she speaks. “I didn’t think you’d steal from me. Don’t be crazy.”

“Then what’s the problem? Maybe I wanted to borrow some knickers.”

She puts her hands over her eyes for a second. I’m guessing she doesn’t believe my lie. Who would? I have a suitcase of things on top of the other dresser. What could possibly have her acting so cagey?

“Look, I’m not sure what you were doing, but I can’t talk about this with you. If you’ve forgotten yours... you can borrow mine. Just don’t tell me about it.”

Well, that made no sense at all, but by the way she’s turning red, I think I just found her darker side. My intention was to find something to tease her about, but the way she’s acting tells me I’ve embarrassed the life out of her, so I drop it. “What are you doing home so early?”

“I came to check on you before I go back to do the evening feed. The kittens need lots of food at the moment, so I don’t have long.” She rubs her forehead a few times.

“I’m fine. A little bored, but mainly okay. My boss is going to hold off sending anyone else to the volcanoes, so all I have to do is worry about getting better.” I keep my tone casual, hoping Lara will chill out. It’s not like she caught me smelling her underwear.

“That’s great news.” She moves over to the bed and helps me straighten up from the slump I’ve gotten into. “I could bring you a little kitten or a magazine if that would help occupy your time.”

“Like I said, I’ll be fine. I have my laptop, food, and water. I just need to figure out what will pass the time.” I fluff a pillow, pretending to get comfortable while trying not to glance at the drawer.

“I’m going to make a drink to have with my lunch. Are you ready to eat? Do you want some blackcurrant juice?” It’s after twelve, but I haven’t touched the pack she brought me.

“Sure.”

She passes me the food she’d already prepared for me off the floor before going downstairs. Once I’m alone, I stare at the drawer like I’m going to miraculously gain X-ray vision. Desire to break it open is burning an inferno in my mind. I’ve never been good at avoiding what I want. Luckily, Lara is only gone a short time. She comes back too quickly for me to have made a move towards it.

We sit on the bed and eat our lunch together. I try not to make any crumbs knowing how clean this room is. There’s an awkward tension in the air. Whatever’s in that drawer created it, and I look everywhere except at it. Lara doesn’t linger when she’s done eating. We say our goodbyes before she has to return to work.

Once alone, I can’t help myself. I get out of the bed and wander over to the drawer. Inside, all I can see is the fabric. Like Lara did, I slide my hands underneath the underwear and begin to dig around. It’s like having my arms in a bed of feathers. Everything is so soft.

Eventually, my hand finds a rubber ball-like object, and I pull it out. It’s pink and

looks like a rose. My eyebrows knit together because I have no idea what this is. The room is full of flowery things, so why is this one hidden?

I take it back across to the bed so I'm not balancing on the pot I have on my leg and sit down. I roll the object around, examining it from every angle. There's a tiny button on the side of the strange flower, and I press it.

The whole thing starts to pulse, and I put my finger over the hole at the top which starts to suck on me. My eyebrows shoot up.

Oh, my.

Is this what I think it is? Reaching for my phone, I Google rose vibrator and find the little sucker. After reading a few reviews, I come to the conclusion Lara's halo isn't so straight after all. If the people on these sites are telling the truth, this gadget is the work of a sinner. I put down my phone and stare at the toy. It's hard not to imagine my friend lying in this bed letting this vibrator do the work. Now I understand why she isn't interested in finding a one-night stand. My thoughts drift to a darker place. I get a visual of her spreading her legs. There's a tingle starting between my own legs and I clench them shut.

Woah. Where the hell did that come from?

Feeling spooked, I shuffle off the bed and put the sex toy back where it belongs before finding a re-run of *Friends* to remind myself what my union with Lara is all about. Platonic good times.

### CHAPTER7

#### LARA

I'm so embarrassed. Mallory and I never talk about sexual things, and my vibrator is in the drawer she was looking in. I'm not even sure what I offered her—underwear, my toy, or the dirty secret she was looking for. What was she even doing in my drawer? The heat in my cheeks is still burning when I return to work. Luckily, I'm the only one in the cattery, and I get to work feeding the kittens.

It's another ten minutes before Sophie joins me. "Why do you look like you've spent your lunch break running a marathon?" She eyes me suspiciously.

I shake my head. "I've no idea what you're talking about." My awkward moment does not need to be shared with anyone else.

"Did you catch Mallory naked after a shower or something?" She scowls.

"She can't get her pot wet, so that would be impossible."

"Sponge bath it was, then." She laughs.

"Get your mind out of the gutter." I fold my arms.

Sophie is hard to understand lately. One minute, she's jealous, the next she's suggesting something has happened with Mallory. Maybe it's because she's waiting for a development in our relationship.

“So, what has you blushing so hard?”

“You’re right. I’ve been jogging in my lunch break.” I’m a big fat liar, but it’s better than telling the truth. I can’t even talk about sex with my best friend, never mind a girl that’s interested in me and I need to set straight.

She frowns at my lie. “Okay.” I doubt she believes me because I don’t usually jog, but at least she drops the discussion for now.

The rest of my shift is uneventful, and I get through all of my tasks. By five, I’m a little nervous about going home. Bella’s taking night duties with the kittens and I’m ready for a hot bath. Sophie and I say our goodbyes before heading to our cars. I drive home and let myself into the house. It’s quiet downstairs so I make my way to my bedroom.

“Hey,” I say, poking my head around the door.

“Yo. Hey. Hi,” Mallory says.

Okay, that was weird. I need to act as normal as I can to break this strange tension. It’s fine. Self-love is an ordinary thing that I’m sure every single person does.

“I’m going to take a shower. Do you need anything first?” I smile sweetly, allowing my cheeks to wrinkle up.

“No, thank you. I have everything I need.” Her voice is higher pitched than usual.

I nod before grabbing a change of clothes and heading into the bathroom. Unhooking my bra and pulling my T-shirt off, I strip down until I’m naked. I turn on the water and brush my teeth while I wait for it to warm up. Then I climb into the shower, welcoming the refreshing heat.

Once I'm clean and dressed, I make my way back into the bedroom. Mallory is lying on top of the quilt, staring at the ceiling.

"How did today go?" I ask.

"It was a little slow but fine. I watched some episodes of Friends and looked at some mountain bike trails." She looks over at me.

"That's cool. I got to feed kittens and stroke a lot of cats."

She bites her lips. "Mmm. I bet that was fun."

"I love my job." I smile with pride.

"It must be nice to have all that pussy attention." She giggles.

"Yes. I love cuddles." I ignore whatever she's trying to imply. It's bad enough that she knows about my secret. We don't need to discuss anything like that any further.

"And more."

"Do you fancy moving downstairs while I cook, or would you prefer us to stay in the bedroom?"

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

She studies me for a second and I know the exact moment she decides to stop teasing me because her whole face changes into a relaxed expression. “I’m going stir-crazy, which is probably why I’m getting a kick out of teasing you. It will be good to get out of here.”

She sits up and I move to her side. “Here, let me help you.”

“Thanks.” Slowly, we make our way downstairs.

“Do you want me to putFriendson for you?” I ask.

“I’m capable of using a remote.”

“Right.” I smile.

Leaving her channel hopping, I make a vegetarian shepherd’s pie with sweet potato mash. My stomach is rumbling by the time it’s ready. Finding two plates in the cupboard, I serve it up before taking it into the living room.

Mallory pokes her fork into it. “I’m guessing there’s no beef in here?”

“Nope. Just fresh vegetables from the market and a bit of chive from my herb garden.”

“You’re as saintly as ever.” She says it like it’s a dig. It’s obvious I won’t be converting her to vegetarianism anytime soon. She’ll probably have meat with every meal when she leaves.



“Just doing my bit.” I smile.

“So, we’re not going to discuss the elephant in the room?” She taps her fork against the edge of the plate.

I thought we were past this, but Mallory doesn’t seem to want to let it go. It’s clear she’s talking about the vibrator. “What were you even doing in my drawer?” I ask, wishing we didn’t have to talk about it.

“I was bored and knew you couldn’t be as pure as the virgin princess you portray. I just wanted to find a little dirt.” She shrugs like snooping is a perfectly normal thing to do. Until now, I would have said I didn’t have anything to hide, but she found the only thing that I didn’t want her to.

I take a deep breath. We can be adults about this. If I explain, maybe she’ll let this go. “I’ve had sex so you know that’s not true. Do you feel better now you’ve found something on me?” My first relationship was with a guy from school called Robbie. We only had sex once, and it cemented everything I already knew. I’m a lesbian with no interest in the opposite sex. Mallory was there to hold my hand when I came out as gay.

“I would’ve preferred some dirty magazines.” She gives me a wicked smile.

I shake my head. “Nobody buys top-shelf material anymore. You can use your phone to find porn or pictures.”

“Lara Amelia Dodd, you kinky bitch. I didn’t think you had that knowledge in you.” She laughs light-heartedly.

Thank goodness this isn’t a big deal. Mallory is awesome like that and often knows the right thing to say. “If you thought I was so sweet and innocent, you wouldn’t have

been snooping.” I fold my arms over my chest, giving her a little sass.

“If you’d learn to show a little more skin instead of dressing like someone from the petticoat age, I wouldn’t be so suspicious of your pureness.”

I roll my eyes. “Long dresses are in fashion and they look good on me.”

“Whatever you say.” She sings the words.

“If I left it up to you, I’d be wearing hot pants, and then I’d be covered in cat scratches. My dresses are practical and a great fit for my reserved personality.”

“Until you’re alone in your bedroom and...” I cover her mouth with my hand.

“Don’t finish that sentence. We’re not lovers, so we don’t need to discuss this. Can’t we go back to you thinking I’m some kind of saint married to my job or whatever?” I let go of her and back away.

“You just took me by surprise that’s all.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have been nosy, and then you wouldn’t have unveiled dirt, as you call it.”

“I honestly believed I was going to confirm you were as saintly as I thought.” She looks serious. The picture of me she has in her head is unattainable. Maybe a nun could be as pure as she thinks I am, but I’m not that good.

“You didn’t prove your crazy theory, so let’s move on.”

“Okay.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

I narrow my eyes. Can it really be that simple? “Okay.” Finally, I think she’s dropped the subject.

Neither of us speaks for a few minutes and our attention turns to the TV. When we’re both done eating, I collect the plates and take them to the kitchen.

Around nine, I ask, “Shall I help you back into the bedroom?”

“Yes. That would be a good idea. Unless you want me to take the couch?”

“No. I have no problem giving you my bed.” What kind of friend would I be if I let my injured bestie sleep on the couch?

“Lara?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t we share the bed tonight? It’s got to be comfier than the sofa.”

We haven’t shared a sleeping place since we were kids. It’s going to be a long, painful six weeks if I don’t take her up on the offer. We’re both adults, and I don’t have an issue with her seeing more of my skin. It’s her that likes to create a problem that’s not there. Besides, it’s not like I sleep in skimpy pyjamas. “Sure. Let me lock up.”

I tidy up in the kitchen, secure the door, and turn off the light. I help Mallory up the stairs before we brush our teeth. She changes into her nightie in the bedroom and I

use the bathroom to slip into my silky pyjamas.

“Still covered up, I see,” she says when I enter the room. My pyjamas are full-length, and I’m glad it torments her. It’s been a strange day, and it’s fun getting under her skin.

“You wouldn’t want it any other way.” She laughs, and I crack a smile. We climb into bed and I plunge us into darkness. “Goodnight,” I say.

“Goodnight.”

## CHAPTER8

### MALLORY

I wake to the creak of floorboards. The curtains are shut and visibility is low, but I can make out my best friend’s shadow. Lara is moving around the space trying to quietly gather her things. Instead of revealing I’m not asleep, I watch her. She’s light on her feet and graceful in her movements. She pauses while looking in my direction, making me tense. After a few seconds, she begins to unbutton her pyjamas. The baby pink silky material looked cute on her when I saw them yesterday. Although they didn’t need fastening right to the top. She pulls down the bottoms and discards the garments before putting on fresh clothing. She uses the bed to hold her belongings as she gets ready for work. The vibrations are minimal, but it feels like a massage against my skin. I can hear the rustling of the fabric, and my eyes flutter open every so often, although I can’t see much. My mouth feels dry knowing she’s been naked in the same room as me.

Lara’s always been my best friend and I’ve never thought of her as anything else. She’s my rock and my family. Her getting dressed in the same room shouldn’t feel intimate, but something changed yesterday, and I can’t stop thinking about what I

discovered. She has needs. Ones that need fulfilling. I close my eyes, trying to get myself under control. I'm not the right person to help her.

She finishes what she's doing and then visits the bathroom for a short time. I listen to her descend the stairs. She potters around in the kitchen, probably grabbing breakfast and feeding the cat. Eventually, she leaves the house and the silence is deafening.

I feel like a terrible person. My interest shouldn't be spiked by finding a sex toy. I've opened a can of worms by snooping in her room. It was supposed to be an innocent game to pass the time, but I've complicated things. Before, I was joking about seeing more of her flesh at the parade. Now I'm kinda curious about what else she's got under those dresses. I shake the thought. I can't be lusting over my best friend.

Now I'm alone, I'm wide awake and there's no chance of me falling back to sleep. I hobble out of bed and open the curtains before trying to get comfortable on the mattress with my laptop. Lara's on the early shift today, so I don't think she meant to wake me. At least I'll get more time with her in the evening.

Pressing the power button, I boot up my laptop, accessing my blog. I add a picture of my leg from yesterday and caption the title 'Extreme resting'. Then I list all the things I did yesterday to pass the time. It's mainly dull things like watching TV and trying to creatively throw things in the bin. Methodically, I work through my day until I get to the snooping incident.

Usually, my best friend is a topic I'd class as off-limits. It's too personal and nothing to do with sports, so I've never spoken about her before. While my life is on pause, she's a big part of my day and the most interesting thing I have to talk about.

Have you ever had a 'Cinnamon Roll Hero' come to your rescue? My best friend is the kindest person I know. She took me home after my accident without hesitation, even though her place isn't big enough for the two of us. There's only one bed and

it's only a double.

I leave it at that; not ready to add my indiscretion. I don't have to own up to it and tell the world. The comments of praise for Lara start flooding in immediately and it makes me smile.

I wish I had myself a Cinnamon Roll Hero.

A true friend.

She's a keeper.

When I close my laptop, I'm feeling pretty good. The positive vibes are giving me a burst of energy. I will not waste today sulking. I'm going to use my new-found situation for the greater good. I've got six weeks to find a temporary me that can function like a human being.

I climb out of bed and I'm instantly slowed down by my leg. It takes me an hour to get washed in the bathroom and dressed into a baggy T-shirt with loose shorts. Using the wall and my crutches, I carefully make my way downstairs. The sun is shining and there's no reason to stay cooped up in the house.

Lying on the grass outside is a bad idea. I might not be able to get back up. It takes a lot of effort to drag a chair from the kitchen outside, but I finally make it onto the patio. I hold onto the back of the chair and try to get my breathing back under control. Lara's garden furniture is probably locked up in the shed, but there's a bat in there, so the wooden chair with a hard cushion is my only option. When my ass finally plonks down onto the seat, I sigh with relief. Things I take for granted just got a whole lot harder. But I did it. I've gained my first taste of freedom, even if it's only baby steps. A broken leg doesn't have to mean I'm stuck.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“Morning,” an older gentleman says from his garden two houses down. He has wild grey curly hair and is wearing a green t-shirt with a fishman on it.

“Morning,” I say, brushing my fringe away from my eyes. Usually, I’m fitter than this, but the task has made me sweat.

“Lara’s not home if you’re looking for her.” He peers into the garden, but I’m guessing he can’t see my pot.

I chew on my lip. I wonder how well he knows my friend. She probably doesn’t have many visitors, and hopefully, he’s looking out for her, but where does he think I got the chair from? “I’m staying with her for a few weeks.”

“She’s a lovely girl with a heart of gold.” He smiles warmly, and I relax.

“That she is.” A fuzzy feeling starts in my chest. I’m not sure what I would have done without her lately. If this injury had happened anywhere else, I would have been screwed. She’s all I have and I’m glad it’s her taking care of me. I thought spending long periods of time with her would drive me insane, but I was wrong. I miss her when she’s not around.

Moggy comes around my feet and starts to purr. At first, I ignore him, but he only gets closer. I lean down and stroke under his chin. He’s kinda cute, I suppose, even if his food does smell gross. He walks around me a few times before jumping up onto my knee. Before I know it, I’m stroking him like an evil Bond villain and talking to Lara’s neighbours like we’re old friends. Mr Hatta, aka fishermen, from two doors down, brings me a cup of tea and tells me all about the local wildlife.

Once it gets to lunchtime, I say goodbye and slowly make my way inside. The food Lara prepared for me is upstairs. Slowly, I make my way to the bedroom. The first few steps are easy to climb, but after a few more, the drop feels scary. My crutch gets stuck on the step and falls away from my grasp. It tumbles down the stairs, leaving me trapped mid-staircase. I slide down the wall until my hands are on the ground. I can still do this. Two good arms and a leg are enough for me to pull myself up. I begin to crawl.

“What are you doing?” Lara scolds from behind me.

I pull myself onto the landing and sit facing her. “I’m getting my lunch.” I’ve managed to get myself safely to the top. There’s no need for her to worry or give me a telling-off about it.

“I left it at the side of the bed.” She sounds angry, but I shrug it off.

“I’ve been out in the garden.”

“You should’ve waited. I could’ve helped you.” Her stern voice has already started to soften.

“I’m not completely broken. I can look after myself.” I give her a huge smile, although I’m fully aware I need her.

“I’m here to help. That’s the advantage of having someone to stay with.” She grabs my fallen crutch and brings it up before helping me to my feet.

“You were at work. I had it under control. Thanks for coming to my rescue, though.” I blow her a kiss because I can’t easily hug her.

“You’re so stubborn.” She scowls at me.



“It’s better than being wrapped in cotton wool.” She follows me into the bedroom.

“Sometimes everyone needs a little help.” She shrugs before we both sit on the bed.

“But not you. You’re always giving it to others.” Instead of showing my gratitude, a little jealousy is coming out. It’s not that I want to be more like Lara, but the kindness she has is special.

“Of course I help those in need. There’s nothing wrong with that. What are you trying to imply?”

“Nothing. I’m crabby because I was doing so well and, the second you got home, I showed myself up.”

“I’m fully aware you’re independent, but you can lean on me. We’re best friends.” She pulls me into a hug, surprising me. This feels like an emotional moment, which is unlike me. “I know you’re not one to take a breather, but let me look after you for a few weeks. Please.” She gives me the big doe eyes as she pulls away.

My gaze drifts to her lips and I quickly look away. “I am letting you. That doesn’t mean I’m going to stay in this room for the next five and a half weeks, though.” My tone hardens, but it’s more myself I’m weirded out by. I don’t think about kissing my best friend. I must have got too much sun or something.

She smiles. “Okay. We can work this out. I can be home more and I’ll see if I can split my shifts.”

It’s my turn to scowl. I don’t want to put her out any more than I already have. Plus, I was handling the situation. I would have worked it out. “No. You’ve done more than enough. If we’re going to function together in close proximity, you’re going to have to let me make my own mistakes.”

She nods. "I guess I am."

## CHAPTER9

### LARA

A couple of days pass and we settle into a routine. Mallory promised to keep her phone on her at all times, and I promised to stop checking up on her. Instead of rushing home for lunch breaks, I spend them walking around the local playing field. The fresh air is good to clear my head, and although I love my best friend, I'm lacking in personal space.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

The kittens are fed and the cats seem content. I lock up the cattery before heading to my car. I've got the next few days off and I'm looking forward to spending them with Mallory. "I'll see you next week," I say to Bella on my way out. She's in the field, picking some vegetables.

"Enjoy your days off." She smiles and waves.

I drive home and park my car in its usual spot under the trees on the dirt track. As I approach the front door, I spot Mallory in Mr Hatta's garden.

"Hi," I say as I approach the gate.

"Oh, hi, Lara. We're looking at some bird-watching magazines. Mr Hatta's been showing me what I can spot from the garden."

"You like studying birds?" My eyebrows knit together. I've seen her fussing over Moggy a few times, which was a welcome surprise, but she seems to be interested in animals in general. I never thought I'd see the day she found a hobby that wasn't dangerous.

"Apparently, it's a relaxing hobby, so I thought I'd give it a try." She holds her hands out like she's got nothing to lose.

I should be happy. At least she's keeping herself entertained and, as she told me the other day, I can't wrap her in cotton wool. Spending time with Mr Hatta means someone is keeping an eye on her and I'm grateful for that. I won't have to worry as much. "Cool. I'm going to get a shower. I'll see you in a bit."

It's not easy to pretend I can let her handle things, but I'm trying. By walking away, I'm trying to show I won't stress about how she got down the dirt track.

"You sure will." They go back to looking at the magazines and I carry on up the lane. She seems to be settling into a comfortable routine. Who would have guessed she'd enjoy something like that? A spark of hope flutters in my chest. Could six weeks change Mallory's outlook on having a real home? I shouldn't overthink this or it might lead to disappointment, but I can't help the smile it brings to my face.

When I get inside, there's an empty can of cat food on the side and Moggy doesn't move from his spot by the window. She even fed my cat. My mind is blown. She's told me more than once how disgusted she is with the smell. Moggy must be rubbing off on her more than I thought.

I go upstairs, shower, and change. Instead of completely covering up like I have been recently, I choose a white tank top and blue summer shorts. I find Mallory cooking after I've freshened up. "You could have waited for me. I would have made tea once I'd cleaned up."

"You've been at work all day. I'm going to take care of you. Besides, I'm on a roll today." She lets out a light-hearted laugh that sings to my heart. She hasn't been like this since the accident.

"Why, what else has gone right?"

She turns to look at me and eyes up my outfit with a satisfied grin. "I've managed to get around a little easier and make some friends. Mr Hatta is an awesome guy."

She could have used any word to describe him. She must have had respect for him. Go Mr Hatta. "He's a friendly chap. He's put my bin out a few times when I've forgotten, and he always greets me when he's out in his garden."

“There’s more to him than that. He runs the Neighbourhood Watch, a class at the community centre, and a bird-watching group. He’s seen more tits than me.” She says it so seriously it makes me choke on a strangled laugh.

“Do you mean bluetits?”

“It sounds lame when you say it like that.” She gives me a mischievous wink.

“There’s nothing wrong with loving animals. I’m glad even Moggy is getting a little attention from you.” I point to the empty tin.

“He doesn’t fuss as much when he has a full tummy.” She tries to sound casual, but I see the loving gaze she gives Moggy when she thinks I’m not looking.

I get out some plates and lay the table. Mallory cooks two omelettes, and we sit at the table to eat.

I break some egg off and take a bite. “The omelette tastes amazing. Thank you for doing this.”

“If there’s one thing I can do, it’s whip up a mean omelette.”

“That you can.”

“On one of my trips, we did a competition to see who could make the best quickest omelette, and I won.”

“Extreme cooking.” I nod. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

She laughs. “Of course. Slow and steady isn’t my style.” She pushes a bit of egg off her fork with her tongue, and I try to overlook how sexy it is.

It's just a bit of food, not foreplay.

"It's good to see you in brighter spirits," I say. My voice comes out a little higher pitched than usual.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“Yes. I’m done with the pity party now.” She puts down her fork and pretends to dust off her hands.

My best friend is back and everything is starting to feel a bit more normal. Including my unrequited feelings. I reach across the table and give her a high five.

Here’s to hiding my crush and enjoying the time I have with her. “I’m glad to hear it.” We smile at each other.

\* \* \*

“Shall we go up to bed?” I ask after too much ice cream and hours of *Friends* episodes.

“Yeah. We probably should. What are we doing tomorrow?” She drops her spoon from the sofa arm into the dish.

“Usually, on my days off, I feed the ducks in the park and go for a walk.” I look at her busted-up leg. “That’s not going to be an option.”

“We could feed the ducks if you want to.”

I pick up both dishes and spoons, ready to put them in the kitchen. “You really are converted. Next, you’ll be telling me you’re considering getting a real home so you can settle down.” I probably shouldn’t have said that, but a girl can dream.

“I wouldn’t take it that far.”

I get rid of the dirty dishes and return to the living room. “One can always hope.” Holding out my hand, I offer to help her up. She takes it, and I pull her to her feet. We’re close enough to kiss for a moment until I lean down and grab the crutches. I follow her upstairs and she’s already found a way to tackle them more confidently. One crutch wedges against the step, and the wall supports her weight. She passes me the other one to carry. She goes into the bedroom and I use the bathroom first. We swap, and I change into my pyjamas before we climb into bed and face each other.

“Hey, Lara... why have you never had a long-term girlfriend?”

I put my hands under my head and ponder the answer. “I’ve never met anyone better than my cat that I’d want to share my living space with.” I laugh at my lame joke.

“Be honest with me for a second.” Her face turns serious.

I’m not sure what has brought this conversation on, but I try again to give her an acceptable answer. “I’ve never met anyone who shared the same interests as me and that I could have a deep connection with.”

She thinks about my answer and a wrinkle forms on her forehead. “That makes sense. What do you mean by deep connection? What do you want?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. This is a difficult topic for me because the truth is, I’ve never met anyone who measured up to her. I’m single because I’m hung up on someone I can’t have. But I’m not dwelling on the truth. “This is heavy talk for so late at night. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m curious, that’s all. Are you avoiding the question?” She nudges me playfully with a smile.

“If I committed to someone, I’d have to go all in. I’d want to be looking for a long-



term partner. That kind of person might only stumble into my life once. It's not like I haven't had opportunities to date. I just want it to be right. Sophie at work keeps asking me out, but she dates lots of girls and she's not my forever."

Mallory's face falls. "Oh. I didn't realise you had someone wanting to take you out. If she cleaned up her act for you, would you consider dating her?"

"That's not going to happen." I shake my head. Sophie can only change for herself, and I've not liked the ugly that jealousy has brought out in her lately. She's a nice girl but definitely not for me.

"But if she did?"

I'm not sure why she's pushing this. Could she want more from our friendship? No. That can't be it. "I guess we'll never know." I shrug. "How come you've never found a travel buddy?" I flip the question, trying to take some of the heat off me and change my thoughts. Mallory likes travelling and being a free spirit. We're complete opposites and I need to remember that.

"I'm better alone. That way I don't have to worry about anyone but myself." That's such a Mal answer, but I've noticed the changes lately. She likes Moggy, even if she won't admit it.

"Cheers to self-loving." I lean over and switch the light off. My eyes are heavy and I'm ready for sleep.

"Yes. Cheers to that." We're both quiet, and I've almost drifted off when she adds, "And vibrating toys."

My eyes fling open and I stare into the darkness. I try to look at her expression but all I can see is her outline. There's not enough light in the room. A soft snore leaves her

lips and she doesn't stir again. Is she still thinking about my flower? And if she is, what does that mean?

## CHAPTER 10

### MALLORY

The bed is empty when I wake, and I'm alone in the room. There's a tiny gap in the curtains and a beam of light is shining through. I rub my hand across my face, trying to pull some of the sleep away.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

Using the crutches, I make my way into the bathroom to do my business before returning to the bedroom to change into some clothes. I lift my nightshirt above my head and drop it onto the bed. The few clothes I have are in a suitcase on top of the drawer. I'm down to my last pair of knickers, so I'll need to do some washing or give Lara control over my underwear. I hook the leg hole around my pot. With my good foot, I slowly lift them up until I can reach them with my hand. Then I add my other leg to the other side. My knickers are just about over my ass when Lara enters.

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't realise you'd be naked," Lara says.

I cover my tits, cupping them in my hands. "It's fine. I'm no less covered than I was at Pride."

"Shall I leave, or do you need some help?"

I arch an eyebrow. "That's a bit of a cheeky question from you."

She blushes while she looks everywhere but at me. "You know what I mean, but your answer is enough. I'll leave you to it."

She disappears from the room, making me smile. Maybe Lara is affected by me, or she's a prude. Yeah, it's probably the second option. I shake the crazy thought. I'm going to be naked for more than just a minute if I don't clean some clothes. I finish getting ready and she's waiting to help me downstairs.

"Can you help me with laundry? The pants you saw are my last pair."

She glances at my crotch. “We wouldn’t want you running around naked.”

“You’re silly. I can’t run anywhere.” I smirk because she knows I’m purposely saying the nudity would be okay, and I love messing with her. She grabs my clothes and puts a load in the washer. We have eggs for breakfast before travelling to the local park.

“Are you sure you want to get out of the car?” Lara asks.

“Of course. There’s no way I’m staying behind.” She opens the door for me, and I ungracefully fumble my way out. The uneven ground is hard on my arms as I struggle with the crutches. Lara side-eyes me, but she knows not to offer a hand. It takes me double the time to reach the lake and, instead of going to the water, I sit on the bench. My hands and forearms are throbbing. Someone needs to invent something better than crutches to help with a broken leg. Lara watches me and then sits down next to me. “Why aren’t you feeding the ducks?” I ask.

“I’m waiting for you.” She looks out at the lake. Maybe Lara knows me better than I know myself. She’s in tune with what I need. Before, I wanted to make the journey to the lake for myself. Now, I need a few minutes and she’s waiting. Has she always been so attentive? Yes. She’s amazing.

“Thank you. You’re a good friend.”

“Just because I waited on a bench?” She gives me a funny look. A cross between a frown and something happy.

“No. You’re always there for me. It doesn’t matter if I travel to the other side of the world, you’ll take my call.”

“That’s because we’re family.” Her smile is warm, and it’s good to hear her speak

fondly of our bond, but maybe I don't want her to think of me like a sister. Have my feelings begun to change, or is this injury doing strange things to my head?

"I'm lucky to have you."

"Since when did you become all sentimental? Are you feeling okay?" She touches my forehead.

I shake her off. "I'm fine. Just thinking out loud for once."

She rubs my shoulder. "You're a big softy at heart."

"I wouldn't go that far."

She wraps her arms around me, pulling me into a hug. "You don't have to pretend with me." The contact makes my insides do strange things. At first, I try to fight it, but then I welcome the love she's offering by returning the hug.

"Okay, I'm ready to feed the ducks now."

She gives me a knowing look, which I ignore. I'm not going soft or rethinking my cold apartment. My leg is the problem, not my life. All this is a glitch that will mend itself.

We walk to the waterfront and Lara breaks up the bread. I hold onto the rail while leaning into it for support. Taking a handful of crumbs, I throw them out onto the lake. The ducks immediately swim over and start gobbling it up. Scooping up more pieces, I chuck another handful into the lake, followed by another and another until we're clean out.

A guy starts throwing seeds and the ducks move on to their next meal ticket.

“Fickle little creatures,” I mumble.

“You and the ducks aren’t so different. You’re both looking for the next big adventure, or food parcel in their case.”

“I like trying new things and wouldn’t question what someone was feeding me. Unlike you who lives on nuts and raisins.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

She curls her lip in an unamused snarl. “Funny. Come on, let’s take a slow stroll.” She starts walking back the way we came.

“I can handle a bit more nature if you want to go squirrel-watching.” Mr Hatta has been telling me all about the creatures, and maybe I’m feeling more sentimental than I let on. Plus, Lara loves all animals.

“I’m not going to say no to spending time with you doing what I love.”

That warm feeling starts again, and I follow her into the woods.

\* \* \*

We cozy up under the covers and I press play on The L Word series. Lara leans over my shoulder to see the tablet screen. Her body is snug against my back and her breath is warm on my neck.

“Do you want a drink?” she asks.

“No. I’m good.”

“Or a biscuit?”

“No.”

“Cookie?”

“Isn’t a cookie a biscuit?”

“No, a cookie is a cookie.”

I turn my head to look at her. We’re only a few inches apart. “Okay. What’s going on here? Don’t you want to watch *The L Word*?”

“I’ve seen it almost as many times as *Friends*.”

“You can’t beat an old classic.” I turn back to the tablet.

“That’s true.”

A few seconds pass, but she’s fidgeting. “So, what’s the problem?” I ask.

“Nothing.” We fall into silence for a few more seconds. “It’s great having you here.”

“I’m enjoying being with you too.” I let the quiet settle between us and the only sound is from the TV show. It stretches out, but I can tell Lara isn’t concentrating on the programme. “Are you lonely not having someone to come home to?” I ask.

“I never said that.”

I lock the tablet screen to switch it off and place it on the bedside cabinet. We both turn onto our backs, abandoning any hope of settling into the show. “I take it back. You have Moggy and all your other animals. How could you possibly even pee alone?” When the cat wants feeding, he has no boundaries. It’s both annoying and cute.

“Very funny.”



“Maybe you just need some lady-loving.” I tickle under her chin, and she giggles.

“Stop that.” She pushes me away.

“What are you going to do? You can’t harm a person down on their luck. Did you see my leg?” I go to tickle her again and she lets me get close before grabbing my wrists.

“Of course I saw your leg. It’s like an anchor holding you here.” She smiles sadly.

Is that how she feels? It’s true, but I’ve not been thinking about how it made her feel. I like to travel and stay on the move. I’ve always been honest about that, even though I know Lara doesn’t like it.

“I’m not that bad. I come back. Always have. Always will.” I try to reassure her.

“And why is that? Are you sentimental?” She gives me the eyebrow, and I wonder if I’ve walked into a trap. She’s been saying I’m opening up to having deep feelings, and maybe she’s right.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“We’ve already been over this. I’m not soft in any way. Nope, not me.” I shake my head.

“Sure.” She prods me in the chest. “I don’t believe you. Do you want to know why?”

“Go on, hit me.” I pretend to shoot an arrow.

“You love me. Like, really love me. That means your heart isn’t full of ice.” She looks pleased with her answer.

I shrug. “I’ve never loved anyone except you.” I flip it back on her. I can’t deny my love for her, but she’s the exception, not the rule. We stare at each other. Her eyes are so beautiful. Her button nose is perfect, and those lips are so kissable. Without thinking too hard, I lean in and touch my lips to hers, giving her a quick peck.

“What was that for?” she asks when we break apart. I’ve been wanting to do that for a while. It might be selfish, but I’m not the saintly one.

“You’re right. You’re my weakness.”

She blinks a few times. “So you kissed me?”

“Yes.” My eyes shift over her face, watching her expression closely.

She moves fast towards me. Her lips touch mine, and she starts to kiss me. Not the quick touch like I gave her. She puts more into it. She devours me like she’s starved, sending a pulse down to my core. Her lips are soft and taste of strawberry. They’re

the most luscious lips I've ever touched. She finally breaks the kiss, and I feel drunk with lust.

"What just happened?" I ask, feeling a bit overwhelmed, confused, and horny.

"You tell me. You were the one doing the kissing." She touches her lips with wide eyes. Her expression is like a scared, feral animal. I might have started what just happened but she was the one that finished it.

Instead of blaming her, I say, "I felt movement. You were definitely kissing me. You practically jumped me." I squeeze my thighs together. That feeling between my legs isn't supposed to be there.

"Impulse. I had the urge and I gave into it."

"Okay." Lara is usually cautious, but I don't question her further because I don't want to ruin the moment.

We look at each other's lips again. "Is this a thing we do now?" She blinks a few times, then her gaze drops back to my lips.

"It might be."

She grabs my cheek and our tongues meet before our mouths. This time, it's even more intense. Our kisses are hungry and a tingle starts to slicken between my legs. This is so wrong, and right, and I want more. My hands run over her ass. It's firm and hotter than I imagined. Wait, when did I think her ass was hot? I'm not thinking clearly, and her butt isn't the only thing I want to touch. Like a horny teenager, I grab at her pyjamas, unable to control myself. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't put the brakes on right now. I'm too invested in getting my own way. I squeeze her tits. They're the perfect handful. Not too much and not too little. A moan leaves her

mouth before she deepens the kiss. She has more self-control than I do and she brings everything to an abrupt halt.

“We can’t do this,” she says before rolling away.

“Why not? It felt pretty incredible to me.”

“Because in five weeks, you’re going to leave, and then I won’t see you until Christmas.”

“I make one great Christmas present.” I arch my eyebrow, trying to keep the mood light.

She runs her fingertips over my collarbone and it feels amazing. “I’m sure you would, but we need to be smart. We’re friends, and that’s why we’ve had each other all these years. I don’t want to be jealous of anyone who gets to spend more time with you than I do, and I would if we took this any further.”

“Aww, that was a cute compliment.” I touch a strand of her hair. “As much as I’d like to say you’re wrong... I can’t.”

“Okay, so back to The L Word?”

“No. I have a better idea. Let’s tell ghost stories like we did as kids.”

“Okay, but only if I can hold your hand.”

“Deal.”

The stories are lame, but it’s fun. Spending time with my best friend is something I’ve missed and I didn’t even realise how much. The problem is, I enjoyed that kiss

more than anything and now my lustful thoughts are amplified.

## CHAPTER11

LARA

“I went off like a firework right there in my pants.” I shamefully cover my face. After what happened the other night with Mallory, I need someone to talk to and my boss has an understanding nature.

“It’s a good job you’re a girl and didn’t have some leakage. That would’ve been embarrassing,” Bella says.

“That’s a disgusting image. I’m glad I’m not straight and don’t have to deal with that kind of accident.” I cringe, and she laughs.

“It is pretty gross. But back to you... who put a stop to the make-out session?”

“Me.” I comb my hand over my hair.

“That’s good. Maybe there’s hope for the two of you yet.” She crosses her fingers and my stomach flips. I don’t know what’s worse—a little hope or a lot.

“What are we talking about?” Sophie asks as she joins us for the morning cat feed.

“Lara got a lady boner from kissing her best friend.” Bella laughs, and I bite my lip, waiting for Sophie’s reaction.

“What! You kissed Mallory?” She sounds outraged.

“Yes, but I shut it down.” I try not to look as excited as I did when it was just me and

Bella talking.

“If you’re handing out kisses, does that mean you’re finally going to give me a chance?” Sophie obviously thinks me and Mal aren’t going to work out. I’m uncertain what will happen with us too but that’s none of her business. Sophie is crossing the line. The way she is treating me is offensive.

It’s time I shut her down completely. “You’re a player, Sophie, and even if you weren’t, you’re not my type. I bet you had a date recently. Who did you spend your weekend with?”

“You didn’t answer my question.” She gives me the evil eye.

“Humour me and answer mine first.” I shrug, ready for us to be done with this weird dance.

“My new friend from Pride.” She bites her lip, holding back a smile.

“You didn’t keep the firework in your pants, did you?” Bella says, completely missing what’s happening here.

She rubs her hand over her face, looking sheepish. “Nope.” The end of the word pops in her mouth.

“And that’s one of the many reasons why I’m never going there with you.”

“Why Mallory, then? She’s not going to give you what you need either.”

“Maybe not. But we’ll always be friends. It’s different.”

I grab the milk and feed the kittens first while Sophie sulks. It’s hard working with

someone who fancies you and you don't like them back. I was clear about what I want this time and, hopefully, she got the message. Deep down, surely, we both know we wouldn't work. She wants hook-ups and I'm looking for marriage.

"We have a guy coming today with his daughters. I'm hoping one of my precious babies is getting adopted," Bella says.

"It's been a while since we had a flurry of people. I'll get on the social media page later and show off some of these beauties," Sophie says.

"It has, but I find it hard to let them go." Bella kisses one of the kittens on the head.

"Me too." I kiss a scrappy black and white kitten on the head, sharing the love.

We get to work and our chit-chat settles down until break time, when I meet the ladies outside.

"I want you to know I'm happy for you," Sophie says.

This girl is giving me a migraine. It's hard to believe any of her words are sincere, but I don't want to make things more uncomfortable at work. "It was just a kiss, but thanks. I don't want things to be awkward between us. I like having you as my friend. I don't want there to be any confusion between us. We can never be more than that. I'm sorry."

We're co-workers and less than friends since she started hitting on me. It's better for us to try and find middle ground, though. I could never give up the cattery, and it doesn't look like she's going anywhere either.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“You wound my heart, Lara, but I like being friends too.”

We hug, and I feel better about where we’re leaving things. I think we have an understanding now. Being firm and to the point helped. Shame I can’t be so open with Mallory.

\* \* \*

Mallory’s in the garden with a few of my neighbours when I get home. Mr Hatta is holding up one of his magazines and they’re all nodding. The view gives me a chuckle, which I stifle. They’re all really getting into whatever they’re doing, including Mal. I never thought I’d see her as part of a community like this.

“Oh, hi, Lara,” Mr Hatta says.

“Welcome home,” Mallory says. We haven’t kissed since two nights ago, and we’re both acting like it never happened.

“Are you having fun?” I ask.

Mal gives me a thumbs up.

“To observe the best birds, you have to be patient. Stealthy. It’s like breathing. If you do it consciously, you’ll get better results,” Mr Hatta says, making everyone nod other than me.

Have I just stepped into an eighties wise old guy movie or a comedy? I smile and

keep walking.

“I’m going to have a shower.” Mallory follows me into the house. She’s getting quick on the crutches. “What was that all about?” I ask once we’re alone.

“I haven’t a clue, but he makes standing around look interesting.”

“Not the birds, then?” She’s hopeless. I make us a drink of water and gulp mine down before wiping my mouth.

“We haven’t seen one bird from his list all day. It’s a slow hobby.” She sips her water.

“How long have you been out there?” I rinse my glass and place it on the draining board.

“You don’t want to know. Hey, do you mind if I join you in getting a shower?” Mallory asks causally.

My eyes widen. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

She waves her potted leg in the air. “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t need to. I can’t wash my hair very well because I can’t get in the shower with the pot. What if I slip on the smooth floor or lose my balance because I can’t manoeuvre well? Leaning over the tub is painful and hard because I can’t reach everything with ease. Last time I tried to have a proper wash, the shampoo wasn’t completely out and my hair feels like it’s full of dirt. I’m admitting I need you. Please can you help me get more than a sponge down?” She sighs heavily.

I frown, feeling like a crappy friend. “Sorry, I didn’t realise. I feel bad now. Yeah, we can share a shower. I’ll help you clean up before I get in.”

“Thanks.” She smiles in pure happiness, which makes me feel worse. She must have swallowed her pride to ask for this. If I’d been more in tune, maybe I would have realised she had a problem. Her hair hasn’t been as glossy lately and she hasn’t worn make-up. I thought she was slumming it while she was resting. Now I think I might have got that wrong.

We slowly make our way upstairs, although Mallory is getting the hang of moving around. She takes off her T-shirt, sits on the toilet lid, and dangles her hair over the bath. I pull down the shower head and turn it on. It would be hard to navigate the water, shampoo, and not get wet through, so I can already see why she needed help with this. I wet her hair before placing the shower head inside the bath. Unfortunately, I misjudge the power of the water and it shoots up into the air, soaking us both. Mallory screams, and I laugh.

“Sorry.” I lean over and switch the shower off. Then I grab the shampoo and lather up the soap. Mallory’s already pulling away from the bath. “Hold still.”

“My back’s hurting.” Her tone is childlike, and I instantly feel like we’re back at school. I was the sensible one, even back then.

“If you hold still, this won’t take as long.” I sound like my mother and it makes me smile. I miss her so much, and it’s nice to remember her every so often.

“You should try holding still with a dicky leg and a cramped-up back.” She moans again, breaking my memory.

I rub her head a bit harder, messing with her. “Trust me, the complaining is enough to make me stop.” I playfully tut.

I switch on the water and wait for the temperature to settle. Mallory leans over the bath, and when the water is warm but not hot, I begin to rinse out the shampoo. I rub

her hair and make sure I've got all the soap out before repeating the process, first with the shampoo, then with the conditioner. As I'm finishing up, Mallory puts her hand over the holes on the shower head, spurting water out in all directions. She laughs as I scream.

"I feel better," she says between giggles.

Pressing the button, I switch off the water. "I don't need a shower now, so you killed two birds with one stone. Mr Hatta must be teaching you something useful."

Mr Hatta is probably telling her about different species rather than teaching her ways to add the word bird to lame jokes.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“I still need a proper wash. Plus, my leg is itching like a bitch.” She scrunches her hand up like she’s imagining getting under the pot with her fingernails.

“Sit in the bath and dangle your leg over the side. Then I’ll pass you the showerhead.”

She gives me a mischievous grin. “You know what they say about water pressure. It’s a good stimulant.” She winks at me.

“And this is why I didn’t want to do this.” I put my hands on my hips. Without the vision she just created, I would have struggled with this next part, and she made it so much harder. I’m just helping a friend, I chant in my head.

“Lighten up. I’m having a little fun with you. A shower in the bath sounds like a good idea.” She begins to strip before I have a chance to object, and I try to look anywhere but at her. She removes her bra, skirt, and then struggles to get her thong down over the pot. Swallowing my nerves or lust or whatever you want to call it, I take pity on her and reach down to give her a hand. The pot isn’t sexy. My nails grate against the hard material as I pull the thong down. The scrap of material, on the other hand, is alluring. I can’t help but glance up at her face. She’s looking down at me and my mouth goes dry. My hand strokes down her good leg, lingering around her ankle. She closes her eyes briefly. I clear my throat, pushing down thoughts of reaching up to touch more of her. She slips out of her underwear and I put them on the side.

We smile at each other and it warms my heart. We’re friends, and I can try to keep my mind from wandering into lustful territory. Getting her in the bath is the hard bit. Her arms wrap around my waist and her breast is snug against my chest. She uses me

for support while she climbs into the tub. Slowly, she lowers herself down and swings her leg over the side. The pot thuds loudly against the plastic.

While undressing, I tried not to look at anything other than what I needed to. Now she's sprawled out like an upside-down cat, it's difficult to keep my eye level above her neck. She catches me looking at her hardened pink nipples. I'm a bad friend. Quickly, I glance away. I grab the strawberry body wash from the shelf and pass it to her before turning on the water. I rinse her down before giving her the shower head. What I really want to do is offer to soap her down, but I turn my back to her, hoping to get control of myself. I listen to the sound of the water and her movements, waiting for her to finish. She begins to sing a song about a rubber duck, and I can't help the laughter that spills out of me. It lifts my mood, and I'm thankful for the distraction. She takes her time, and I find myself singing along.

"Okay, get me a towel," she says eventually.

I do and switch off the water. She dabs her tummy and then sits up. Our eyes lock again and she licks her lips. I can't help but watch. We stay frozen, staring for a few seconds. The hairs on her arms stand up and goose pimples spread across her skin. She shivers, breaking us out of the moment. I blink a few times, remembering I'm supposed to be helping. Together, we struggle to get her back to her feet. We wrap the towel around her and she climbs out. Walking with crutches and a tucked-in towel is problematic, though. It falls down before she reaches the bed, exposing her gorgeous butt. We both chuckle because this was hard work. I guess there's nothing I haven't seen now.

Once she's settled on the bed, I leave her while I get my own wash. Let's hope I can get the visions of my best friend naked in my tub out of my head.

## CHAPTER12

## MALLORY

A couple of weeks have passed since my injury happened. Lara and I have got into a routine where her helping me no longer makes me feel weak. She no longer blushes when she sees me naked, and I've seen her in something less than a full neck-to-ankle outfit.

I'm the first to wake up for a change. Quietly, I go to the bathroom to pee before climbing back into bed. Lara's got her back to me and her hands tucked under the pillow. Her chest rises and falls. I can hear her soft breathing, which is therapeutic. Shuffling across the bed, I get close enough to snuggle up to her. She smells so good. Her strawberry body wash is probably embedded in my skin now, but it smells better on her. I push my nose into her hair, letting the scent fill my nostrils. It's so soft and beautiful. I run my fingers through the strands.

"What are you doing?" Lara asks, stirring from her sleep.

"Nothing," I say, bringing my hand around her waist. I pat her hip before leaning in to get nearer to her.

"Oh, okay. This is nice. I could get used to getting a hug in the morning." Her hand covers mine and she taps her thumb against my knuckles. After she saw me naked yesterday, I've felt closer to her, but also confused. We've hugged thousands of times, but this one feels a little awkward. Our relationship is stronger than ever yet it feels like we're in uncertain territory.

"It's better than being hit on the head by a cat." I try to deflect from the tension.

"You like Moggy, and his wake-up call is just as good."

The cat in question jumps on the bed, meowing loudly. "His love comes with clauses.

He's thinking about his stomach."

She strokes under his chin. "You love me for more than my biscuits, don't you, Moggy?" He purrs, taking her attention away from me.

I thought we were friends, Moggy! I'm beginning to understand the cat's personality, and even though he has Lara wrapped around his finger, I see both sides of him. He likes a snuggle around naptime, but now he wants a full tummy and to be let outside.

It doesn't take long for him to bend Lara to his will. "I'm going to make a coffee." She shimmies off the bed and Moggy follows her downstairs.

The bed feels empty now I've lost my two friends. Pulling myself up, I get comfortable between the pillows. I load up my laptop and go to my blog to update my status.

Extreme relaxing isn't possible when a cat cock blocks you. Feline lovers, how do you do it? Okay, so I wasn't actually cock blocked. One, I don't have a penis, and two, I'm not getting lucky. I'm still with the bestie and on target to be on my next adventure in four weeks.

I haven't seen the doctor yet, but I'm hopeful. I'll work hard with whatever physio he plans, and I'm determined to get my mobility back.

The replies come instantly.

Friends to lovers is the genre of a good book. Are you sure there's nothing more between you?

Kill the cat, she'll never know. :P



Don't harm the cat. Instead, get a tuna stash.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

Cats are supposed to be lucky. Adopt the cat and the bestie. Then you might get the benefits. :P

I add a comment underneath:

This isn't a romance novel. My bestie has a nice p... cat, but we're strictly platonic. She does look after me well, though. :)

I've spent most of the last two weeks bragging about my bestie, and I've chatted about her with my followers. I like to tease them. Usually, I'm giving hints about my next adventure or feature. Naturally, I'm talking about what's making me happy, and that's Lara. Once I've read a few more comments, I switch off my laptop with a huge smile on my face. Cat and bird jokes make the best innuendos.

I get a quick wash in the bathroom and make it downstairs as my coffee is ready to drink. Moggy has already finished his meal and is breaching the cat flap. The door makes a sound as he disappears.

"Why don't you come to work with me today? I'm on the late shift, so it's only me." She takes a drink of her coffee, eyeing me over the top of her mug.

"What would I do there?" I touch my lip, trying to imagine myself in her workplace.

She puts down her mug. "You could feed the kittens or just keep me company. It's up to you."

I lift my drink to my lips and take a sip. Lara doing the late shift drags for me because

Mr Hatta isn't out in the garden and there isn't much to do other than watch TV. Feeding cats is nothing like my job. It might be fun to live in Lara's shoes for a change. "Okay. You might have to help me clean up after. You always smell like a fleabag."

"I do not." She shakes her head, but we both know she jumps into the shower straight away when she's been at the cattery. The animals aren't dirty, it's just there are lots of them and cats have a distinct smell.

"I'll need to wrap my foot too." I'm going to look like a crime scene investigator or a food specialist with a bag on my foot, but it would be gross to accidentally stand in something. Plus, I'd need help getting it off.

She nods. "We have blue plastic covers to go over shoes if you want them. Don't pretend the cats won't melt your heart. You're not the ice queen you make out to be. I'm seeing your walls crumbling and you're allowed to show me you're excited." She gives me a smug smile like she's uncovered a deep revelation.

She's right; Moggy and the birds Mr Hatta has me stalking are interesting. Not that I'm going to admit it.

"I'm going to come with you, but don't think it's for the cats. I just fancy a night out." I shrug but can't hide my smile. I'm looking forward to this.

"If it's an eventful evening you're wanting, I could always get Mr Hatta to take you to the bingo."

I've already had to make up an excuse why I can't go with him, and she's just trying to prove I want to spend time doing the normal things she does. I draw the line at bingo, even if he says it's fast-paced. I don't want to find out. "Don't you dare." I point a finger at her.

She laughs and we finish up our drinks. When I see Mr Hatta out the window, instead of waving, I duck like I've done something naughty. Thank goodness I really do have a plan for tonight.

\* \* \*

Lara pulls up at the cattery at six o'clock. Her car gives one last puff of smoke before she kills the engine.

"You probably should get that looked at," I say.

"What?"

"The black smoke."

She bats the air. "My car's fine. It passed its MOT."

"It might not make it to the next one."

"Oh, hush."

She opens the car door with force and I take my time pushing my door open. I climb out as she makes her way around to my side. We head inside and she puts the shoe covers over my feet. Two of her colleagues greet us as we move further inside. Sophie must be the girl I saw Lara talking to at Pride—the one who has feelings for her. The other lady is older and has a wedding ring on her finger.

"Hi, Lara, and Mallory, is it?" the older one says, holding out her hand. When she realises I'm not in a position to shake it, she drops it to her side.

"Nice to meet you..." I say.

“Bella,” she fills in for me. Her boss is called Bella. Maybe I knew that.

After the introduction, she pulls Lara to one side and starts to talk business. I’m left staring at Sophie.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“I’ve updated the kittens’ feeding chart and another cat is coming in this evening,” Bella says.

The woman in front of me has a mean gaze and it’s unnerving. “I’m Sophie. I saw you at Pride, but I’m not sure if you saw me.” She keeps eye contact, but it’s not friendly.

“No, sorry, I didn’t,” I lie. For some reason, I don’t want her to know I’ve thought about her in any way.

Am I jealous? No. That can’t be it.

Lara and Bella walk away from us, chatting, and Sophie leans in to whisper, although there’s no need with the cats meowing in the background. “Lara likes you, although I’m not sure why. When you leave for America, make sure she knows exactly what you’re offering her.”

I’m not sure who this woman thinks she is, but I dislike her instantly. Lara can’t date her. It would make me enemy number one. I’m no pushover, though. She needs to know who she’s dealing with.

I whisper too, though I’m not sure why. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Lara and I are best friends. She knows that, I know that, and now you do too. She told me you fancy her, but I’m not a threat to you, so back off.”

“Lara might give me a chance if she thinks she doesn’t stand a chance with you. Tell her you’re too self-absorbed and you’ll never love her like I could.” Her words are

made against gritted teeth.

I've no idea what she's talking about. Did Lara use me as her excuse for turning her down? "I hope not. She's too good for you. Lara's sweet, and you seem like a bitch."

"I can be a better person for her. Actually, I already am. She brings out the best in me. It would be better for her to date someone like me than drool over someone who doesn't see her for the sexy, beautiful woman she is."

This woman is crazy. It's almost laughable. Lara always sees the good in people, so much so that maybe she doesn't realise the situation she's gotten herself into with Sophie.

"Her beauty is more than skin deep. She's a wonderful person." I try to put my hands on my hips and almost fall. Sophie doesn't help me.

"I bet she tastes delicious too." She licks her lips.

A growl escapes me. She must be jealous of our friendship and trying to provoke me. There's no need to give me that vision, though. There's no way I'd let Sophie's tongue anywhere near my girl's pussy. I mean... Lara's pussy. "Don't ever talk about her like that again."

"What's wrong?" Lara asks, coming to join us.

"Nothing," we both say in unison.

"I'm heading out," Bella says. She grabs her lunch bag and waves on her way past. "Goodnight."

"Me too," Sophie says. She hugs Lara goodbye, and I grit my teeth. "See ya."

“Bye,” Lara says. I stare at Sophie, glad when she finally leaves.

“What was all that about?” Lara asks when the door slams. We’re alone. Well, as alone as you can be with lots of cats.

“Sophie thinks she needs to warn me off you. Apparently, she thinks I’m the reason she can’t get in your pants.”

Lara stares at me open-mouthed. Instead of denying what Sophie says, she starts doing her job. I frown, unsure what just happened. Is she just mad with her friend, me, or did I hit a nerve? Why am I even questioning our friendship? Sophie is nothing to me. But Lara means everything.

## CHAPTER13

### LARA

I wantto strangle Sophie for what she said to Mallory. Given the opportunity, I couldn’t bring myself to lie. Sophie was both right and wrong. Sophie might think Mallory is what is standing in her way, but I already told her we weren’t going to be more than friends.

All she’s done is make it obvious we’re incompatible. Sophie wouldn’t be right for me even if Mallory didn’t exist. She’s unhinged and unpredictable. Natural progression should conquer all. It takes time to understand another person and see if they truly fit in your heart. Sophie is making me like her less and less.

I grab the milk for the newborn kittens and a chair for Mallory. “Come sit,” I say, setting up the feeding station. I’m ready to let go of my anger and enjoy the now with my bestie.



Mallory moves over, and I help her onto the flimsy chair. It creaks as she sits down. I put an old blue towel on her knee before going for the first kitten.

“It’s your turn first, sweet girl,” I say to the kitten, placing her on Mallory’s knee. She meows, already knowing what’s coming. These kittens are pretty in the know after a few weeks here.

“What’s going on right now?” Mallory asks.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“What do you think the towel is for? It’s not to keep you warm. It’s feeding time and you’re going to do it.” I retrieve the bottle from next to the chair and hand it over. We get the kitten to latch on, and Mallory cracks a smile.

“Where’s the little one’s mum?” she asks.

“The kittens came to us starving in a cardboard box. We don’t know what happened to their mum.” I frown. It’s sad that this is an all too familiar scenario, but at least they can come here for help.

“Aww, that’s awful. It’s a good job they have you.” She strokes the little one’s head.

“Yep. Someone has to feed them every two hours.” I smile. I love every cat that passes through the doors. Even the grumpy, timid, and scared ones.

“They’re more needy than me.”

I laugh. “Cuter too.”

“Hey, take that back.” She pouts.

I pretend to think about it. “Hmm...”

“If I didn’t have my little friend here and a broken leg, I’d be poking you right now.”

I wiggle my hands in the air. “Ooh, I’m scared.”

She frowns at me, but there's a hint of amusement. The kitten licks her lips and her eyes turn heavy. I swap her for one of her brothers, allowing it to snuggle back into the litter. We feed them all and Mallory gets more affectionate with each one. Seeing Mal enjoy this task warms my heart, but I try not to show how happy it makes me.

"What now?" she asks when we're finished.

"This shift is slow because we have two hours until the next kitten feed. Other than emptying litter trays, there's not much to do."

"Do you at least have a TV, or a book on bird watching?" She seems amused with herself for including the birds.

"You have a room full of the best hunters. No books required. Maybe it's the birds that need educating on staying alive."

"So, who do you fancy as your favourite?" She gestured around to the cats.

"I spread my arms wide. "These are my family. I don't have a favourite."

"I meant as a hunting champion. Moggy's your favourite. That's why he got to come home with you."

"Shhh! They'll hear you." I look around like we've been caught doing something naughty. She rolls her eyes.

"These cats do not speak our language."

"They can read our auras."

She shakes her head. "No, they can't."

I make us a drink and we settle down to play one of the games from the cupboard. Mallory wins most of them, but I don't care. I'm enjoying the company.

\* \* \*

It's late, or should I say very early when we finally get home. I park up, and tiredness washes over me. Slowly, I open the car door, and Mallory follows me out of the car. It's been great having her with me tonight, and the time went fast, but I'm ready to crawl into bed.

"Admit it. Looking after animals is a close second to extreme sports journalism," I say as I unlock the door. The cool air has revived my tired eyes a little.

"Now you're taking it too far. Actually, come to think of it, you owe me a day's work. You'll have to come to New York and help me pick out an adventure."

I let her step in front of me and through the door first. She turns on the light, and I lock the door behind us.

"What's this? I showed you mine, so now you want to show me yours?" Recently, I've seen enough of her to make me blush, and my choice of words gives me a visual I'd rather avoid.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“Yup. It’s only fair.” She arches her eyebrow, and I hope her line of thought didn’t follow my own.

“Surfboarding down a volcano isn’t comparable to feeding a few cats.”

We pause in the kitchen so we can get a drink of water before bed. This has become part of our nightly ritual, and I don’t even have to ask her if she wants one. I fill two glasses and hand one over, then I guzzle my water down.

“Surfing is done on the ocean. This is volcano boarding.” She puts her empty glass on the side and I put mine next to it.

She bites her lip and gives me a sharp nod like she’s pleased there’s a difference between lava and the sea. “Well, thanks for the correction. That makes your offer so much more appealing!”

I throw my arms in the air for dramatic effect. “Was that sarcasm from Miss Sunshine?”

She pulls a pretend shocked face. “What can I say? I get cranky when I’m tired. Let’s get up to bed.”

I stretch out and then yawn exaggeratedly.

She follows me upstairs and we start our usual nightly routine. I use the bathroom, she changes, and then we swap. Pulling the curtain, I’m extra careful to block out all the light, then we settle under the covers.

“Goodnight,” I say.

“Goodnight.” There’s a pause, and then Mallory adds, “I had fun at the cattery. Thank you for taking me.”

“Any time.” I reach for the light switch and turn it off before snuggling down into the covers.

“At least consider my offer of coming travelling with me. The doctor hinted my ankle wouldn’t be one hundred percent for a while. I might need you.” Her breathing comes out heavy.

“How come you’re only telling me this now?” I frown, even though she can’t see me.

“I’m trying to be optimistic, but if it means I can enjoy your company for longer, I’m willing to sacrifice a few more weeks being confined to England.” There’s a hint of sadness in her voice. Mallory’s job means everything to her and her determination is unmatched. If it’s possible to overcome the damage she’s done, she will do it.

“You’re going to make a full recovery. I have faith.” It’s silly, but I cross my fingers for luck.

“Thanks.” She makes a kissing noise.

“I’m just telling the truth.” I give her an air kiss back.

“While we’re being honest... what was Sophie’s problem earlier?” She yawns.

I suck in a breath. I thought I’d got away with not having this conversation. It’s dark, so she can’t see my face, and I decide to give her more than I did earlier. “You’re the woman every other girl has to measure up to.”

We're both quiet for a few seconds. "Why?" The word is crisp, and it hangs between us.

"Because you're fun, ambitious and there's never a dull moment when you're around."

Because you hold the key to my heart.

She goes quiet again, and I wonder if she's fallen asleep. "You're a hard woman to compare to also."

"Thanks."

Neither of us speaks again, even though sleep is slow to come to me.

## CHAPTER 14

### MALLORY

I went to sleep thinking about Lara's words, and they're still playing through my mind when I wake up. No one measures up to me. Even though I'm not usually physically present, she still would prefer me over someone else. Is her love for me platonic, or would she let me kiss her again? Is my lifestyle what holds her back? My pulse quickens, and I feel strange. There's a word for it, but it doesn't come easy. I'm lovesick.

She stirs, and a soft moan leaves her mouth, sending a tingle to my core. Like a sledgehammer, it hits me. All this time and I've never seen what's right in front of me. I have feelings for Lara. Subconsciously, maybe I've always known. I've wanted to see more of her body for a while, even if I made it sound like a joke.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

Another low groan leaves her mouth, and I close my eyes for a second, breathing deeply. My best friend is giving me inappropriate thoughts. I want to be the one making her groan. I watch her chest rise and fall. The curve of her breast is sexy. I want to run my tongue over them. I squeeze my thighs together.

“Morning,” she says, breaking my trance.

I flinch back and almost fall off the bed. That definitely wasn’t subtle. Get a grip, Mall! “Morning,” I say. My voice comes out as rough as sandpaper.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, touching my shoulder.

“Nothing. I was daydreaming.” I cover my face for a second, trying to get myself back under control.

“What were you thinking about?” She’s staring at me when I glance her way.

“Riding over the Cambrian mountains?” That definitely sounded more like a question than the truth.

Her hand moves to my collarbone, and she strokes along it. A soft moan of pleasure leaves my lips, and Lara’s eyes fill with something I’m unsure about. Desire, maybe. “Your leg will get better.”

The touch feels amazing, and I couldn’t hide my response. Lara didn’t comment on my reaction, and I’m not going to either. I need to get out of this house before I do something I might regret.



“What do you say to going to the pub for lunch? I could use a beer.”

She frowns. “You don’t have to hide from me. I know you’re worried, but I’m here for you.”

She totally misreads me, but I’m glad. I don’t want to explain I’m lusting over her. She’s made it clear she won’t kiss me again if I only want a fling. Sophie might not be what she wants, but what if she meets someone who meets her expectations? I’ll be left on the shelf. My mind is racing with all these overwhelming thoughts, and I feel like I’m going to puke.

“I just need some normality. Hanging out with your neighbours is starting to turn me into a bore.” I sit up and move my legs over the side of the bed.

“I thought you liked the birds.”

I wink at her before reaching for my crutches. That’s the problem. I’ve just realised I like one particular bird more than I should.

“I do like the birds, but I need to get my flirt on so I don’t forget how to do it.” My eyes widen. What the hell am I saying? I won’t be doing any flirting.

She bites her lip, holding in what looks like a frown. Have I upset her? Shit. That wasn’t my intention. “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

“Would you be my wing woman?” I’m going to hell for being this person, but I have to see her reaction. An almost frown isn’t enough.

Her jaw moves from side to side. “I’ll sit in the corner with a glass of wine.” When she’s finished talking, her bottom lip wobbles. I change tactics, but I’m not ready to drop this yet, even if it makes me a bad person.

“Don’t you ever get horny and want to eat some...”

She leans over the bed and covers my mouth. “Mallory!”

I shrug. “What?” I ask against her fingers. Her closeness is giving me a rush like never before.

“You can’t say things like that.” She uncovers my mouth.

“Why not? It’s only me and you. Plus, I’ve seen what’s in your drawer.”

“Leave my flower out of this.”

“You mean your vibrator?”

She pulls me back onto the bed and I drop my crutches. She pokes me in the side. “I told you not to go there.”

I laugh weakly, trying to swat her off but keeping her close. My heart is racing. “Too late. I already did.”

“You shouldn’t have been looking in my drawers.”

“I was snooping for some dirt... and I found it. Your halo is a little crooked.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“It is not. I’m a good girl and proud of it. That doesn’t mean I don’t have needs.”

“I hear you. Everyone has an itch they have to scratch, if you know what I mean.” I glance at her lips.

“Exactly. Can we drop this now?” She looks at my mouth.

“Yes. If you answer me one question. Who do you think about when you’re having your ‘me’ time?”

Her eyes almost bulge out of her skull. “Okay. I’m getting up. Do you want coffee?” She rolls off me and off the bed. “I’m going to make some toast too.” She walks to the door.

Disappointment fills me. “If it’s someone famous but embarrassing, I won’t tell anyone.”

She rolls her eyes and leaves the room. I usually enjoy teasing her, even if she doesn’t play along. I wasn’t poking fun at her, though. I was pushing for something completely different.

Taking my time, I go to the bathroom to pee and wash up. Finding a T-shirt and some loose shorts in my suitcase, I start to get undressed. I’m stark naked when Lara re-enters the room.

“Sorry. I thought you were staying in bed,” she says, blinking rapidly.

“It’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

“Are you having your breakfast up here, or are you coming down?” She averts her eyes.

“Give me a minute or five and I’ll be down.” My mood has dropped from horny to disappointed. Abandoning the idea of dragging shorts up my leg, I pull a skater dress over my head and put some knickers on.

Picking up my crutches from where they fell on the floor, I make my way downstairs. Breakfast is already on the table, and I put strawberry jam onto my toast. “What’s the plan for today?” I ask.

“I’m on the late shift again, so I’m going to do chores and relax in the garden unless you were serious about going to the pub?” She sounds sulky. Is she upset that I want to venture out? A sinking feeling starts in the pit of my stomach. I don’t want to dampen her spirit.

“No. I don’t know what came over me earlier. I’m just horny, I guess. Mooching around sounds perfect.” It’s about time I wash some of my own clothes.

Lara stares at me open-mouthed for a few seconds, and I think I might have shocked her by admitting I’m thinking about sex. She clears her throat and then starts eating like nothing happened. Has she always been this passive?

After the food and a hot drink, I poorly assist Lara doing chores, but at least she washes my things too. We hang everything out on the clothesline, then we sit in the garden with non-alcoholic raspberry cocktails.

It doesn’t take long for Mr Hatta to spot us. “Morning, ladies,” he says with a wave.

“Morning, Mr Hatta,” we shout in unison.

“Please, call me Colin. It’s a nice day for some garden romance.”

“I’ve already told you, we’re not a couple,” I say, shaking my head.

“I meant the pair of house sparrows.” He points to the roof.

“Oh, of course,” Lara says with a giggle. She’s amused by my new hobby with her neighbour.

“You won’t be saying that after they poo on your washing,” I say.

“Here I was thinking you’d got love for these birds, and now you’ve ruined it,” Lara says, smiling. She clearly thinks I’m invested in their relationship by the smugness in her grin.

“Hank and Dotty love a good white sheet to dirty,” I say.

She arches her eyebrow. “You’ve named them?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

She points at me. “I knew it. You love my garden birds, and you’re coming around to the English way of life.”

“Being here hasn’t been as boring as I thought.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“You fit in perfectly on our street,” Colin says.

“Thank you.” I smile, feeling good about his assessment.

I manage to get myself back in check before Lara goes to work. Once I’m alone, I take Lara up on her offer and find out what all the fuss is about. Let’s just say that flower can give a mind-blowing orgasm. I wipe it clean and leave it on charge when I’m done, just to tease her.

## CHAPTER15

### LARA

Today’s the day Mallory has her pot taken off. I’m leaving work early to take her to the hospital. I finish up with Mr Mittens, our new guest at the cattery, and close up his pen.

“I’m heading out. Has Bella arrived yet?” I ask Joel, my new co-worker. After talking to my boss, I decided it would be best to change my shift patterns to avoid working with Sophie. She’s not who I thought she was, and I’d rather avoid her than put up with her irrational behaviour.

The door to the building opens and Bella steps through. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You’re right on time. Thank you for doing this for me.”

“It’s no problem. Joel and I will stay out of trouble.”

“Speak for yourself,” Joel says.

“Go before you’re late.” Bella starts to push me towards the door.

“Thanks, guys. Bye.” I step outside and head to the car. I’m both nervous and excited for today. Mallory has been talking about leaving more and more lately, but I want the opposite. She’s happy here, I know it. I just wish it was enough.

My car starts on the third try, and I shift into gear. I drive home and park in my usual spot. Mal’s outside talking to Mr Hatta. They’re laughing. I smile while watching them, but I’m feeling sad. This could be the beginning of the end, and I have to let her go.

“Are you ready?” I ask once I get close enough for them to hear me.

“I’ve never been so ready for something in my life. Freedom, here I come.”

“Don’t get too excited and injure yourself again,” Mr Hatta says.

“I won’t, Colin. I have a date with a volcano.”

“Crikey. I guess I’ll see you back here in a week when you do your other ankle in then.”

“Very funny.” She hugs him goodbye before we make our way back to the car.

We drive to the hospital and Mallory sings along to the radio. “You’re very quiet,” she says as I find a spot in the multi-story car park.

“I am?” I’m beginning to dread the news the doctor is going to give her. It’ll mean losing my best friend all over again.

“Yes. What’s on your mind?”

I get out of the vehicle and then help Mal out of the tight spot. “Everything’s fine. Today’s a happy day. Let’s not put a dampener on it.”

“This is a great day, but I can tell you’re not exactly on cloud nine. Did something happen at work? Was Sophie there?”

We start our journey across to the hospital.

“No. Work was fine. Shall we get a coffee on the way in?”

“There’s something wrong, and I will get to the bottom of this. We can have coffee when we get home. I just want to get into the clinic and get this pot off.”

“Okay.” We check into the fracture clinic and take a seat.

The waiting room is full and the time moves slowly. Mal leans on my shoulder and is beginning to fall asleep by the time the nurse shouts her name.



## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“Mallory Abbott to room five.” The nurse disappears inside and we slowly follow her.

“Hello, Mallory. I’m Doctor Skye. How are you feeling today?”

We sit on the chairs on the far side of the table. “I’m feeling great, Doc. When do we get this pot off?” She smiles brightly.

“You’ll go into the plaster room in a few minutes, then I’ll get you a porter to take you to X-ray for some pictures.”

“I can walk, and I remember the way. What’s the porter for?”

“Once the cast is off, your foot will take some time to adjust. I’ve arranged some physio for you, but you still need to take it easy.”

Mallory’s face falls. “But I have plans...” A deep frown sets on her forehead. “Okay. Let’s get this party started.” She gets up from her chair too fast, and I have to help her steady herself.

We follow the nurse into the plaster room and two members of staff cut off the pot. I hold her hand but can’t look at the razor-sharp blade. The porter arrives a few minutes later, and I follow them down to X-ray. I sit outside on a bench while she has the pictures done.

We have to wait to see the doctor again, and Mallory’s lost some of her sparkle in the process. I’m a bad person because although I’m not glad she’s sad, I’m hopeful I’ll

get her for a bit longer. Guilt laces my gut. I can't be holding onto something that is inevitably going to change. Even if she stays a few more weeks, it's only going to end in tears for me.

"Mallory Abbott," the nurse shouts.

I follow her into the room as she uses the crutches to get herself through the door and into the chair.

"This is looking great, Miss Abbott. The X-rays have given positive healing results." He comes over and manipulates her ankle before asking her to do a few exercises. We leave the doctor's office with an appointment to see the physio tomorrow and a strengthening worksheet.

"One step closer to being good as new," I say when we get in the car.

"Did you see the dead skin on my leg? I look like a snake shedding a layer. I'll feel better once I've scrubbed down." She looks out the window and I can tell she's still upset.

"I have some strawberry salt scrub in the cupboard."

"You've been holding out on me." She smiles, and hopefully, I'm wearing those storm clouds down.

"Oh, I have. If you want a bath, I have essential oils, hair masks, and a strawberry body brush."

"A girl after my heart. Soaking in the tub with both legs under the water sounds amazing."

“Let’s get you home, then.”

We endure the short ride to my house and Mal doesn’t seem so gloomy. I run the bath while Mal starts on the strengthening exercises.

“It smells so good.” She rests the crutches against the wall and starts to strip. I avert my eyes, although I’ve seen it all before. I help her sink into the tub before leaving her to enjoy it.

## CHAPTER 16

### MALLORY

Physio went better than I thought. After an extra week of discipline, I’m finally getting somewhere. It’s slow, but I can walk short distances without crutches. I reach for my phone, ready to give my boss an update.

“You’re through to the fast-paced magazine Level Up. How can I help you achieve your goals?” Candice says, in happy spirits.

“Hi, Candice. It’s Mal. Can you patch me through to Eve?”

“Sure thing. How’s the leg?”

“Almost working.”

She laughs before putting me through to my boss’s extension. “Hi, Mallory,” Eve says when she finally answers. I’m guessing Candice spoke to her first.

“Morning, Eve. I have some good news at last.”

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“You’ve finally got a happy ending to the cinnamon roll hero story you’ve been pitching to our readers?” Her voice is full of excitement.

“What? That is not what I’ve been writing about. She’s my best friend.”

“If I could reach you, I’d hit you on the head with this month’s magazine.”

“She lives in England and I’m in New York. She has a cat and wants to settle here, and I do not.”

“Excuses, excuses... that’s all I’m hearing.”

“It’s practicality, not excuses.”

“It’s a shame. I would’ve offered you page three in the Christmas edition of Level Up for the story.”

I bite my lip. That is a prime spot, but she’s teasing me. I can’t fabricate a happy ending. That’s not my and Lara’s story.

“I’m sorry. I will add a closing piece before I get back on the road but it won’t be the story you want.”

“Aww, that’s disappointing. When can I expect you back in the office?”

“I’m going to book a flight home for next week.”

“Excellent. I look forward to seeing you.”

“Thanks. See you then.” I hang up.

I boot up my laptop and read through my old blog posts. Lara has taken up most of my content for the last two months. Have I been talking about my love for her before I realised it? I’ve had weeks to come to the conclusion it won’t work, though. The core of our situation hasn’t changed. I’m an explorer and she belongs here. I open a new post:

Morning, adventure lovers. I’ll be heading back to Level Up headquarters next week. I know some of you were expecting a love story between me and my bestie, but I’m here to set the story straight. My work is my big love. There will be no new girlfriend and no heart flutters. The road is my calling and adventure is what will give me comfort.

The comments flood in with a mixture of disappointment and excitement for my next adventure. I’m still unsure when I’ll be able to head up a volcano, but I’m determined to return to my happy place.

The stairs creak. Lara must be home from the cattery. I shut down my laptop as she enters the bedroom.

“Hey. I’m home,” she says.

“Yes. I can see. Welcome home,” I reply.

“I’m going to take a shower and then Mr Hatta’s invited us around for a barbecue.”

“Oh, that will be nice. It’ll give me the opportunity to tell him the good news.”

“Oh, yeah. What’s that?”

“I’m booking my plane ticket back to New York.” My expression, hopefully, stays blank. I’m not excited about leaving her, but it’s what I need to do.

Her face falls and a sick feeling twists in my gut. “What?”

“I’m doing much better on my leg now, and it’s time I went back to the city.” The words I’m saying make sense, but my heart feels torn.

“But... but you’re still healing.” Her eyes well up and she blinks back tears. Seeing her like this makes my own vision blur.

I clear my throat, trying to compose myself. “Come on, Lara. We both know I have to go back at some point.”

“I thought we had more time.” She rubs her eyes.

We can’t go back to the way things were before I broke my leg. Our connection is even stronger now, but I can’t put my life on hold any longer. My future is with the magazine, and I need to start looking forward.

“You could always come with me. Visit the zoo, see the city, and keep me company for as long as you want.” I hold my hand out to her. Maybe if Lara was in New York, I wouldn’t want her to leave either. I’ve always thought of myself as independent and unable to spend too much time with the same person, but she’s proven me wrong. I haven’t gotten bored of her for one minute while I’ve been here.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“For a holiday?” She pulls her eyebrows together.

“Or longer if you want to stay.” She’s so much more than my best friend, but I’m leaving things unsaid. A relationship is a big commitment. If she takes a leap of faith, we’ll be able to see where things go, but I don’t want to add pressure from the start. We don’t need a label until she’s ready to make things official.

“There’s nothing for me in the city.”

I’ve just named things she can do in New York. My gentle approach isn’t working and it’s hard to hide my desperation. I want her to come for us, and I have to make that clear. She needs to understand how serious I am. “There’s me.” I want her to choose me. Take a chance on me.

She licks her lips. “I have a cat.”

“I’m sure he can be shot. I mean, be vaccinated. You could start with a shorter trip like a holiday. See if you can adjust to the big city.” If she wants to see if we can be more, I won’t let any technicalities stand in the way.

“I’m not sure I want to leave my life here. What would it mean for our relationship? What if we fall out?” She bites her nail.

I step towards her, ready to show what I’m offering. She smells like the cattery, but I don’t care. “It’s time you let someone take care of you.”

“I... I... need a shower.”

Trying to be cautious isn't working. I need her to understand I'm serious. The more she hesitates, the more I realise what I want. "I don't care if you haven't showered. My boss was asking about what happened between us and I thought maybe we wouldn't work, but I have to ask if there's a chance you'd consider choosing me." My heart starts to race. She's always been there for me. She's the only girl I've ever felt close to. Now I'm not sure a friendship will ever be enough.

Her breath catches in her throat, and she struggles to get air into her chest. "You've talked to your boss about us? What do you mean, choose you?"

"For the last two months, I've been updating my followers about my cinnamon roll hero. They made me realise I'd be stupid not to fall for you. You're kind, caring, and a beautiful soul."

"Woah, back up a minute. What's a roll hero? And what exactly are you offering?" She shakes her head, confused.

"A cinnamon roll hero. It's a guy or girl that's sweet and will do anything for the people they love. We've been doing this dance around our feelings, but I think I finally understand it. You're made for me. I want more than what we had before my injury."

"I took you in when you needed me, I cared for you because I wanted to, and I'm nice because that's all I can be. My feelings for you are more than friendly, and I'm guessing you've worked that out lately, but I'm not a pushover. I can't uproot my life for you. I have my own life and I like where I am."

We stare at each other for a few seconds before she turns and heads for the bathroom. I'm taken aback by the fact she thinks I was calling her a pushover. I sit back on the bed, feeling numb. She turned me down. I told her I was interested in being more than friends and she said no.



I'm still sitting on the bed when Lara comes back into the room wearing just her towel. She looks at me on her way over to the drawers where her underwear is.

"I don't think you're a pushover," I say, combing my hand through my hair. My jaw tenses with distaste. It pains me that she thinks this.

"Good, because I'm not. In a different lifetime, I'd love to be your girlfriend, but we work better as friends."

My stomach sinks. She doesn't want to take a risk on me. "You're my one and only. We've always been close. These past few months have changed things, though. I'm not sure we can go back."

"Mallory, we'll always be BFFs. Nothing can take that away. We can go back to the way things were." Her voice is high pitched like she's in pain.

"I think you're wrong. Sophie thought you had feelings for me before I arrived and you're the one not willing to even give us a try."

Come on, Lara. Admit how strong your feelings are!

"I don't want to lose you. If we blur the lines any more, we will be risking everything." She puts her hands in mine and squeezes.

"That's what I do. I take risks and hope they pay off."

"Well, I don't." She moves back and gazes down at the floor.

I spread my arms out wide. "So, tell me what you do want from me. I've seen the way your nipples harden when you catch a glimpse of my skin. Your gaze drifts to my lips all the time, and you can't deny that you love me. Tell me what I'm doing

wrong?”

“You’re so... frustrating.”

“That’s not a good enough answer.” I work my way across the bed to stand in front of her. “Drop the towel, Lara.” We both hold the edge as we stare intensely at each other.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not a good idea.”

“Be reckless for once in your life and jump into the unknown with me.” Her tongue runs across her lips, and I can see her resistance is breaking down. She wants me as much as I want her. I lean in and bite her bottom lip. Not hard, but enough to make her flinch. Desire fills her eyes as our gaze meets again. “Drop the towel.” My voice comes out rough.

Her hands slowly drop down to her sides, leaving me the one holding the barrier between us. I loosen it and allow it to fall to the floor. I’ve always thought of Lara as shy, but she shows no sign of hiding away from me. She’s stunning.

Her beautiful pink nipples stand to attention and I’m dying to taste them. I run my hand up to her neck and pull her forward until our lips touch. I don’t go easy on her.

Instead, I kiss her like I’m starved, which I guess I am. This last month has been torture. My hand wanders down to her right breast and I cup it, giving it a firm squeeze. She moans into my mouth, which I absolutely love. My other hand pinches her left nipple.

“Oh, Mallory,” she moans into my neck as she softly kisses down to my collarbone. The soft tone of her voice tingles down to my core, and my pussy slickens. We’ve hardly started and I’m ready to come.

Her hands work the edge of my T-shirt, and I don’t waste any time helping her take it

off. I'm not wearing a bra, so when I lean in to kiss her lips, we're skin-to-skin. Her soft breasts feel amazing against my chest. I squeeze my pelvic muscles in anticipation.

"I want to touch you," I say in a raspy voice.

"You're always in a rush. Let's take it slow," she says softly.

Her hands reach for the button on my shorts, revealing the top of my black lace thong. She drops to her knees while unfastening the zipper. She pulls them down my legs and helps me out of them. Then she trails kisses from my right ankle and snakes around my knee and up my thigh. I close my eyes as she works her way up to my pussy, but instead of giving me what I want, she teases me by moving over my hips towards my belly button. When I reopen my eyes, she licks and caresses my navel. It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen. My mouth goes dry. "Get on the bed, Mal," she says through lust-hooded eyes, and I can't say no.

"Whatever you say." I wink at her, hoping to show I can control myself. I didn't take Lara as a girl to call the shots. While I'm getting comfy, she disappears under the bed. She pulls out the box of old memories and starts digging under the photos until she finds what she wants.

She takes out a beautiful purple ostrich feather with a jewelled handle. "I must've missed that when I was snooping," I say.

She gives me a coy smile. "Close your eyes."

I do as she asks and she moves beside me. Starting at my toes, she slowly caresses my body with the feather, awakening my senses. She rubs up over my knees and along my thighs. The soft feather grazes my panty line and over my navel while she works up to my chest. She softly pats over my nipples before lightly stroking my

breasts. The little hairs on my skin stand to attention. She works around my body, touching every part of me until she moves back to my thong, which I wish I didn't have on.

She pats it a few times and pushes the feathers through the holes in the material, and then swishes the feather from side to side. She repeats the movements until I'm desperate to remove my underwear. I reach down, shoving my hand into the wet folds of my pussy. I finger my clit a few times and then remove my thong.

My eyes meet Lara's. All I see is lust. She brings the feather back to my pussy, and I part my legs. The pressure is light as she starts to tease me. I close my eyes once more, and she increases the speed. She continues to increase the pressure until I'm pulling away from the duvet.

Her lips come crashing down on mine, and she replaces the feather with her fingers. That's all the invite I need. My hand moves over her breast and down to her pussy. I dip my fingers into her folds, finding her soaked. She moans, and I can't help moaning back. My index finger penetrates her entrance a few times before I home in on her sweet spot. We rub each other until we're making enough noise to wake the dead.

She dips into my entrance, and I do the same to her. We kiss and caress each other's tits. I move back to her clit and circle the swollen bud. She starts to finger fuck me, and I'm struggling to stay focused. I want to make her come hard. She adds a second finger, and I apply more pressure to her clitoris. Softly, I bite her lip, making her moan again. Her legs tense as I bring her closer to orgasm.

Her pussy's so wet, and my fingers easily slip over her clit. She feels amazing. Her moan starts low and builds into a scream as she can't fight back the pleasure anymore. She comes under my hand, and I bring my fingers to my lips to taste her sweet juices.

She brings her thumb up, and it grazes against my nub as she pushes her fingers in and out of me. My hand returns to her pussy and I dip into her entrance. I want my hand buried inside her when I come. We finger fuck each other, and I ride the waves of pleasure as I take what my best friend is offering. There's no holding back now. I arch my back and moan out my orgasm. My fingers leave her pussy so I can taste her as I enjoy my high. She moves closer to me, rubbing her pussy against mine.

"Fuck that was intense," I say.

"Mind-blowing." She kisses me a few more times, and I palm her breast. I could get used to this. We bring each other to climax a few more times before we finally fall asleep on the bed.

\* \* \*

I'm awake and Lara is between my legs, eating my pussy. I arch my back, pushing her head closer. "It's my turn next," I say.

She flicks her tongue over my clit, and I moan out her name. All these years I've been missing out. She doesn't go easy on me this time. She sucks on my clit and works me over like a pro. Her tongue works into the grooves of my pussy and my nipples tighten. I stroke my own breasts while enjoying the view between my legs. Lara doesn't stop until I'm screaming her name. I come uncontrollably. This time, I don't savour the release. Instead, I flip her over and repay the favour.

We snuggle on the bed. "Will you reconsider coming with me to America?" I ask.

She trails kisses on my arm. "I'm sorry, but my stance on that hasn't changed. I love you and you're my best friend, but maybe we're not meant to be more than this."

My heart aches. I feel like I've been punched in the chest and the pain is never going

to go away. Deep down, I know Lara's right. I don't want to move to England and she doesn't want to leave. Maybe love isn't enough.

## CHAPTER17

LARA

Today, I'm saying goodbye to two of my companions. The bat I've been caring for is moving to his new home, and Mallory is leaving. My nocturnal buddy is going to be dropped off first. He's well enough to join the bats at the Butterfly Garden in Leeds. I pack up his things and fasten his cage.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask Mallory once my flying friend is secure in the car.

"Yes. Any chance you'll do me one last favour?" she asks.

"Sure."

"Once I'm at the airport, I'll have to manage my bag, but will you take it down the dirt track?"

"Of course."

We lock up and drag Mal's bag down to the car. It was my decision not to go with her, but I'm still sad about her departure.

We're silent as we make our way across Leeds. Mal waits in the car while I deliver the bat. I don't even want to let this little guy go, never mind my best friend. A tear falls down my cheek as I hand him over. Once I've signed him over, I'm back on the road, wiping my tears away.

"I'm sure you'll have other animals to care for," Mal says.



“Yeah. I know. I just don’t like to let my friends go.” I burst into full-on crying and can barely see the road.

Mal rubs my leg as I blot my tears away. “I’ll be back in a couple of months. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Goodbyes just make me emotional. I’ll be okay.”

We fall back into silence for a few more miles and I manage to turn off the water works.

“You’ve been a truly amazing friend these past two months, and I hope you know how much I appreciate you,” Mallory says.

“That’s what friends are for.” Talking about our relationship in a platonic way is painful.

“It’s more than that. I’ll never love anyone as much as I love you.”

“Stop or you’ll set me off again.” I wipe my cheek.

“I just want you to know you’re a very special lady.”

“Well, thank you. I’m pretty fond of you too.”

We fall into silence again. I wish I could say yes to Mal and uproot everything to be with her, but I’d be sacrificing everything else I have. My home, my job, and my friends. Everything I’ve ever known is here. The idea of giving that up is terrifying.

The journey takes less time than I wanted it to. Everything I should have said and everything I have said swirls around in my head. I drive into the car park and find a

spot close to the airport building.

“Stay,” I say, closing my eyes. “Stay with me.”

“The magazine is my dream job, and there’s nowhere like that in England. As much as it breaks my heart, we can’t compromise such big things for each other, so let’s not make this any more painful than it has to be.”

I nod, unable to form the words. She gets out of the car, and I lift her suitcase to the curb. We hug goodbye and she starts to walk away. I watch her until I can’t see her anymore before climbing back into my car and sobbing uncontrollably. It takes me a while to come back to my senses. I’ll be getting charged extra if I don’t get my ass out of this expensive car park.

I cry the whole way home, and when Mr Hatta sees me, I can’t even muster a hello. I pour a glass of wine and raid the freezer.

Home alone with a big bowl of ice cream, I sit and watch Friends. My house feels empty now, even with Moggy on my knee. “It’s just me and you now, big guy.”

He meows and I stroke under his chin. By seven p.m. I take my sorry self to bed and more tears spill on my pillow.

\* \* \*

I feel numb the next day as I feed the kittens at the cattery. The joy I normally feel doesn’t come. I’m sluggish on my feet, and nothing seems to cheer me up. Bella and Sophie enter the cattery as my shift is coming to an end.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:01 am*

“Hello, Lara,” Bella says as Sophie gives me the evil eye. Yeah, she knows I asked to swap shift patterns.

“Hey, guys,” I say, pretending not to be so gloomy.

“Did Mallory get off okay yesterday?” Bella asks.

“Yes.” I smile sadly, holding back as much emotion as possible.

“Aww, don’t be sad. Christmas isn’t that far away,” Bella says, pulling me into a hug.

“I’ll be okay.” I bat back the tears threatening to leak out of my eyes.

“I knew this wasn’t going to end well,” Sophie says.

“Thanks for the support,” I say.

Sophie looks down at the floor. “I’m sorry. I should have been more supportive even if I knew what was going to happen.”

I take a big breath and shake off Sophie’s comment. “I’m heading out. I’ll see you both tomorrow night.”

Joel meets me at the door. We put on our coats and head out. “You should’ve said your friend had left,” he says as we walk down the path.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been good company today. I didn’t want to talk about Mallory,

to be honest. That's why I didn't mention it."

"That's fair."

"Enjoy your evening," I say.

"You too."

I get in my car and head home. When I arrive, Mr Hatta is in the garden talking loudly about birds. I wave, not wanting to be rude like yesterday, and he gives a thumbs up. I've no idea what that's supposed to mean, but I try not to overthink it.

Unlocking my front door, I go inside, expecting to be greeted by my hungry cat. There's an empty can of food on the side, and Moggy's nowhere to be seen. I rub my eyes. Maybe I'm over-tired and forgot to move the rubbish this morning. I potter around the kitchen and make a sandwich for my tea, which I leave on the kitchen table for after my shower. I take a bite before heading into the living room. There are rose petals and candles scattered all around the room. My heart starts to pound.

I follow the trail up into the bathroom, where a romantic bath has been prepared. There's a glass of wine and a book on the side. Turning my back on the treat, I go into the bedroom, where I find Mal stark naked on the bed.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"You're supposed to be enjoying the bath first," she says, arching an eyebrow.

My heart starts to beat wildly in my chest. "As if I'd get in the bath knowing someone was in my house. What are you doing here?"

"Good point, but hopefully you find my gesture endearing. I had to come back. I couldn't let the love of my life slip away." She sits up.

“Does that mean you’re staying here?” I take a step toward her, feeling light-headed. Is this real? Is she here because she couldn’t stay away?

“It means I’m going to figure out how we can make this work.” She smiles softly.

“What about the magazine?” I need more confirmation before I leap into her arms.

“Nothing is as important as you.”

Wow. She really does want me more than anything. Happy tears stream down my cheeks. I’m the luckiest girl in the world. I lean in and kiss her. “Do you mean that?”

“Always.”

That’s all the confirmation I need, and I’m ready to risk my heart to be with her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She leads me to the bathroom, and instead of me taking care of her, she repays the favour. Our future is unknown, and maybe it’s going to be hard, but the one thing I do know is if she’s willing to risk it all for me, I’m willing to meet her halfway.

THE END