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# Animal Café

## Chapter 26 - Falling for pets

"Clara! Get out of that capsule!"

"..."

"There is no shame in having a crush. It's normal."

"..."

"Everything is going to be fine! Anyway, you can't hide in there forever!"

"..."

"Just come out already, so we can talk about it at least!"

Why did this happen to me? It was not fair. Yesterday, I admitted to Asha that I had a crush on Oreo, and then, everything went sideways. To make a long story short, I wanted to approach Oreo in a friendly manner and see if my feelings made sense and to inquire about hers as well, but because of an unfortunate series of events, it didn't happen.

This morning, when Lucy returned to the café, Oreo wasn't with her anymore because her shift was over. And then, the reality sank. I had to walk back to the pethouse as well, and Oreo would be there for the next few days, not hidden behind a mask, and I would have to face her. Yesterday, I was ready, but today, I wasn't anymore.

So I hid inside one of the capsule rooms located on the upper floor of the café and closed the door so nobody could see me freak out.

But my friends were clever... They knew I was in there even though they couldn't see me.

"Claraaa... If you don't get out of there, you'll be late for your appointment at the college. Remember, you have to meet with your guidance counselor today. Vix and I will walk you over there."

And I forgot about that too. I had an appointment with Tim to confirm what program I would study for the next few years. I picked finance, but I wasn't so sure anymore how good of an idea that was. In that field, I would have to talk to people all the time, and, clearly, it wasn't where my skills were. So I didn't know what to do anymore.

"That's enough, Clara! Open that door right now, or I'm doing it myself."

"..."

There was no escape possible since vanishing into thin air was not an option. My only way out was that white sliding door, and my oppressors were waiting for me on the other side. Resigned to my fate, I pressed the unlock button and cracked the panel open, just enough so I could look out using only one eye.

Asha's face was only a foot or two away from mine, and at the back was Vix, hand stuffed in her kangaroo pocket and hoodie hiding her upper face as usual.

"Clara! You can't act like that. You have to face your issues, you know."

"... I don't want to."

"Why not? If you like Oreo, it's a good thing. There is nothing wrong with that."

"... I'll... I'll mess up."

"Mess up? Mess up what?"

"... Everybody... will hate me."

"What? What are you talking about? Nobody will hate you because you like her."

"... They won't?"

"Aaah! Clara! You are always so weird. Alright, get out of there now. You are really going to be late for your appointment. We will discuss this after. We can't have this conversation if I can only see one of your eyes through a crack."

"... o... okay."

I pushed the panel open and crawled out of the capsule. Instead of helping me up, my two friends just walked out of the room. Being alone was what I wanted a mere second ago, but now that they disappeared from my sight, I had an urge to run after them. As much as I didn't want to face my fears, I knew they were the ones who could help me do it; I needed them.

"Wait for me!"

I followed them downstairs, said goodbye to Lucy, and headed out.

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"So, Clara. I heard that you decided on your career?"

"... You... heard?"

"Yes, your friend Lian was in my office yesterday to tell me she wanted to become a nurse. And she said you wanted to become a nurse too."

"..."

"Okay... Let me guess... With the face you are making, she made that last part up just to be in the same class as you. That's what I thought."

That wasn't surprising. Accalia had an appointment with Tim yesterday and probably babbled something inaccurate about me. Because of the number of students that he sees every day, his bullshit detector effortlessly uncovered the lie. Accalia didn't really want to go back to school,

and on top of that, she didn't want to be in a class filled with strangers only. I couldn't blame her for that since I had the same fears, but at least I understood that it was not how things worked.

"So, then. If you don't want to become a nurse, what did you pick?"

"... Would... finance... be okay?"

"You don't sound so sure... You know that you don't need me to approve your choice. It's YOUR choice. I will help you succeed whatever you decide to do."

"... Okay."

"What is it? You are not sure it's what you want?"

"I... I don't know, Tim. I don't know if... I will like it... or if I can do it well."

"Oh, I see. I see. Basically, what you mean is that you are a normal person?"

"..."

What kind of question was that? It threw me off balance, more than I already was. When I came here today to announce my decision to him and explain my concerns, I had expected him to prove me right. In my head, he was going to tell me that it was a terrible idea and propose a new set of options for me to choose from. But that was not what he did at all. Instead, he seemed to insinuate, through sarcasm, that my argument was flawed.

"Clara, you can't really know what you are getting into until you try it."

"..."

"Look. Just this morning, I had a student in my office. He spent two full years studying chemistry just to realize that it was not for him. So now he is moving to information technology."

"..."

"You know, young people like you rarely know what they want to do in life. Yes, some of them do, they want to be a doctor at the age of ten, but they are the exception. Everybody else is not sure about what they are doing, and that's normal. You have to try things and discover what you like the most. And even more in your case because you haven't been exposed to many things yet. From what you told me, you were quite sheltered and didn't have much opportunities or encouragement to try new things."

"... okay..."

"Allow yourself to try new things. If you want to give finance a shot, do it."

"But... What if I fail?"

"There is no such thing as failing when you try something new. That's something you keep hearing on social media, but it's not based on reality. What you have to do is to make a decision and commit to it. After that, it's just a series of different paths to follow, but there is no failure. If you don't like finance, you then make another decision. If you like it but have difficulties progressing, you make more decisions based on that. The only failure is when something is not

making you happy, and you don't take action to change the situation. Since your choices are the only things that you can control, not making them would be a failure."

"Oh... I've never looked at it this way..."

"So, Clara... What do you want to do? In two days, it's going to be too late to apply to a program."

"... I... I think I'll do it."

"Finance?"

"Yes... I want... to learn."

"Great. We will fill up the paperwork then. I can't tell for sure, but I get the feeling that it's a good choice."

"Okay..."

"Oh, and one last thing... The two girls who were with you when you showed up, are they your friends?"

"Yes."

"Why were they sitting on the floor? All your friends are sitting on the floor... It's a bit odd."

"Oh... I'll tell them not to do that."

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After my appointment at the college, Vix, Asha, and I walked in the direction of the pethouse, traversing a nice park. It wasn't too far away, but still, that was enough time for them to press me about my Oreo situation. I couldn't do anything to change the topic because they were on each side of me, clamped to my arms and holding me hostage. Whether I wanted it or not, I'd have to talk about this.

"Why are you so scared, Clara? Oreo is super nice. You know that."

"But... I don't want to cause trouble."

"What trouble? You keep saying that, and it makes no sense."

"I'm... not supposed to... date a petgirl."

"What? Who told you that? Lucy?"

"Nooo... Nobody... It's just... Aaah!"

"Asha. I think Clara is having another mental breakdown. She imagines things."

"Yes... I think so too. Clara, why do you think you can't date one of us? I mean, officially."

"I... I don't know... Maybe people will get... jealous? I know the petgirls like to play with each other a lot."

"..."

"..."

"Bhahaha!"

"Hahahaha!"

What did I say? Vix and Asha burst into laughter for no reason. It was almost offensive. I stopped walking and crossed my arms. It wasn't fair. I was already not good at socializing, and seeing them making fun of me wasn't helping. It wasn't cool.

Vix spun around and wrapped her little arms around my waist.

"Aaah! Clara! You are so cute."

"..."

"We are not making fun of you, but sometimes you say funny things."

"... What... What did I say that was funny?"

"Nobody in our group gets jealous of each other... Well, we do, like when Lucy gives us a special privilege, but it's not in a bad way."

"No? But, there are no couples at the café... So you don't know..."

It was Asha's turn to chip in and correct me.

"Wrong!"

"Wrong?"

"Yes... Misti and Trixie are together... I thought you knew that already?"

"..."

"What? That surprises you?"

"... Yes... Trixie... she always wants to date me."

"Yep... and she wants to date me, and Vix, and Meeka, and every other cute girl with a pulse. But this is just her being playful. Misti and her just like it that way. They may be an atypical couple, but they are a couple nonetheless. Guess why Lucy sent Misti back to the pethouse as soon as Trixie broke her arm. When Trixie is sad, she needs her girlfriend."

"... I... I didn't know that... but... They have... sex. With all of us."

"Aaah. Clara... so what? You can have a special person in your life and still have fun with your other friends if that's what you want to do. The only difference is that they talk to each other to make sure that they agree on it first. In this case, it's pretty obvious that both Misti and Trixie are totally fine with playing with the rest of us."

I didn't expect to hear that... To me, a couple always meant exclusivity. But perhaps this traditional vision of the world had been corrupted by my limited experience. Now that I think about it, at the café, many clients were couples, and they played with the pets together, sometimes grabbing their boobs. I never saw a girlfriend scolding her boyfriend because he looked at one of the sexy petgirls or vice versa. Only Lucy scolded people at the café.

So, was I this much disconnected from reality?

"Clara. We know you like having sex with us a lot."

"..."

"Don't make that face. You know it's true even if you are turning all red. Don't be like Vix and deny it over the pretense of looking cute and innocent!"

"HEY! I'm not like that, Asha!"

"Yes, Vix. You are! You act all shy in bed, but we all know you are a perv!"

"Heeey!"

Now, the two petgirls were running around me, trying to catch each other. I didn't even know who was chasing who anymore. But even if Asha didn't get an opportunity to explain why she was telling me something this embarrassing, I had a good idea about where she wanted to go with it. Basically, if I were to date Oreo, would I still want to have sexy fun with the other girls? Because of my misconception of what being a couple meant, I had not realized that a couple could still want to sleep with other people. I thought that once two people were officially together, it closed all doors, end of the story. What Asha had just told me caused my corrupted thoughts to fly out of the window.

Vix eventually managed to catch Asha and was now pulling her ears. The fox girl didn't seem to like talking about her sexual behaviors all that much. Asha ended up sitting on a park bench at the end of their fierce battle, and Vix sat on top of her lap.

"Clara... Come here! Let's talk!"

"Aaah! Do I have to?"

"Yes! Come! We are going to be serious this time. We want to help."

"... okaaay!"

My snickers dragged on the fine gravel pathway leading to the bench. I dropped my butt on it, but I just slid down on my back with my hands resting on my belly. Of course, this defeated posture wouldn't have been complete without a long sigh that didn't go unnoticed.

"Uh oh. Clara is deflating."

"..."

"So, let's start from the beginning. Why do you like Oreo?"

"I... I don't know."

"You don't? How come? There must be a reason."

"I think... she is cute."

"Vix is cute too, and you don't act like that around her. Unless you don't think she is cute?"

"Nooo... Vix is cute too! You all are!"

"So what is it then?"

"I... I don't know... Her eyes..."

"Her eyes? Everybody is teasing her because of her angry eyebrows..."

"Nooo... She is super pretty. She looked... so..."

"... sooo?"

"So... So... Cute..."

Both Asha and Vix threw their arms in the air just to let them fall back down at my inability to use a diversified vocabulary. It was not my fault. Their question was hard. What did I like about Oreo? If I knew, I wouldn't be so confused about the whole thing. I never had a crush on someone before, so it was like asking a taxi driver to talk about cakes. I wasn't qualified for this.

Instead of reprimanding me, Vix straddled Asha and took a good look at her.

"Asha?"

"Yes, Vix?"

"You are cute, Asha!"

"Oh? Am I? And what do you mean by that, Vix?"

"Asha, your dark skin looks like milk chocolate, and it makes me want to eat you."

"Aw! Thank you. Tell me more, Vix."

"Certainly, Asha. Your black hair is so soft. I just can't stop playing in it."

"That's nice. Is there something else that you like, Vix?"

"Yes, Asha. When I'm around you, I feel funny in my stomach, and all I can't think of is to get hugs from you. Also, I find your presence reassuring. When I'm sad, I always feel better if I can be around you."

"Aaaw! Vix. You are so sweet. And me, I think you are adorable because you are always trying to hide under your hoodie. It's also funny when you refuse to share your fox towel with anybody. I like how you steal my soap too while denying it."

"Hey! I don't do that!"

"Yes, you do. Misti told me."

"She is wrong! I used your shampoo once, and that was it!"

"The avocado one?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's not mine. That's Accalia's. It smells so good. I steal it too."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Okay... We went on a tangent... Let's stay on the topic, or we will confuse Clara even more."



Too late. I was already confused. What started as a potential example to show me how to describe a person other than reusing the word cute had turned into a criminal confession. I did hear Accalia complaining about her shampoo disappearing in the past, and now I knew the reason.

But as Vix said, we needed to stay on topic. They had tried to show me a way to express my feelings, and I got the message. It was my turn to attempt to put my feelings into words.

"Well... Oreo... I don't know her much at all... But... She is shy, like me. And quiet too. She doesn't push me as hard as the others do... And then, when she ate her croissant, she bit a corner of it, then with her small fingers she pulled the soft crumb out of it first... Oh, and then, when I saw her for the first time, she was all tied up on the bed. It scared me a lot at first, but then, when I understood she was okay, and she let me untie her, it felt very good. The catsuit she wore was also not like the pet costumes. It was much thinner, and she didn't look like Oreo the café cat. Everybody told me that she had weird eyebrows, but because her hood had big eyeholes, I could see them, and no, they were super nice... and her big black eyes... I really wanted to keep looking at them... all the time. Oh, and she climbed on me too, and she was so light. I mean, it didn't feel hard at all to hold her in my arms, and when we kissed... she didn't rush things. But she tasted good, and I didn't want her to stop... but then a bit later, Accalia came in the room and said that we had to eat something. And when she was sleeping that night, she looked so peaceful. I touched her nose, and she wriggled it... it was funny. I mean, I did the same to Accalia, but she was just drooling. And... and.... And... .. Oops..."

Vix and Asha were looking at me, eyes wide open, not blinking, and their smile was gone. They seemed shocked.

"Vix? Asha?"

I poked them gently with my finger to see if they had died of boredom... but then Asha's lips moved.

"C... Clara?"

"..."

"I didn't understand anything, but you spoke more words just now than the total sum of everything you've said since we met you..."

"... Sorry..."

Vix got off Asha and transferred to my lap before wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Clara! I'm sorry to tell you that... but this is very serious."

"..."

"You are in love!"

"..."

"That's it. You and Oreo will go on a date tonight. Right, Asha?"

"Oh, yes. It's critical."

Asha sprang to her legs, so did Vix, and they each pulled on my arms to get me in motion, but I resisted. Not only had I not processed what had just happened, but on top of that, there was a huge problem with their spontaneous plan.

"Come on, Clara! Don't act like this! This is going to be fun!"

"... Wait... wait!"

"What? What is it now?"

"I... I've only been on a date once... With Trixie... And I messed up... almost."

"Ah, that doesn't count. Trixie is a piece of work. She was probably too intense for you. With Oreo, it's going to be super awkward and awesome. Vix and I will take care of everything. You can count on us!"

Awkward and awesome? Could those two words even co-exist? Somehow, being aware of my own personality and Oreo's, it was probably a good way to describe what would happen next. The awkward part of the expression was a given, but we would have to see later about the awesome portion of it.

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"Hold Clara's hand, Vix, or else she is going to run away again."

"... I'm not... going to run away."

"We don't know that."

Vix must have confused a few words here because instead of holding my hand, she wrapped her arms around my waist for a hug. Where did they expect me to run? We were in the elevator leading to the pethouse. My only way out would be the ceiling trap, like in movies, but I was way too short for being able to reach it, even if I were to climb on top of Vix's head.

It was so nerve-wracking, though. Asha had something in mind but didn't want to tell me about it. All I suspected was that she tried to arrange a date between Oreo and me. Otherwise, she left me in the dark. I didn't think Vix knew what would happen either, but she didn't seem

overly bothered by it as my situation didn't impact her. I supposed that having spent years around her crazy friends had made her immune to all their twisted plans.

After our elevator ride, we entered the pethouse as if there was nothing special to it. However, my little heart was beating quite fast for obvious reasons. Plus, I couldn't help but wonder what Oreo and Trixie were doing at the moment. Between the rabbit girl's need for more intense affection and the cat girl's passion for bondage, it wasn't that hard to imagine what branch of activity they more than likely choose to distract themselves while waiting for us to return home.

Asha called for them.

"Trixiiiiie! Oreooooo! We're home! Where are you?"

"In the bedroom!"

Yes, Trixie's muffled reply was the least surprising one-liner of the day.

"Clara. Go see them. I need to devise a plan with Vix while you keep them busy."

"Ashaaa... You don't need to do that!"

"It's CRITICAL that we do that!"

"..."

"Clara! Imagine what would happen if we don't take action on your crush! You'll become sad, the café will close, then all the pets will have to live under a bridge or in the sewers. And then... It's going to rain every day... and... you will stop shaving your legs, and you'll never be able to get another date ever again.

"..."

Vix pulled gently on my sleeve.

"Don't worry, Clara. Asha tends to be overly dramatic when she gets excited. Go see Trixie and Oreo. We will join you in a minute."

"... O... okay... But... It's not true that I will stop shaving my legs."

"I know... Asha just lost it. It will pass in a few minutes."

While Asha trotted happily toward the kitchen, Vix invited me to go upstairs. Definitely, all the petgirls had their quirks, and Asha was no exception.

Half understanding that they were just having fun at my expense, I still obeyed their wish and began ascending the large carpeted stairs. Why did it have to be so big? Unfortunately, I was now on my own, and I would soon face some sort of deviant sex scene featuring my two other friends.

As I approached the closed bedroom door, a bunch of random thoughts traveled through my mind. Things were getting complicated too quickly. Like the confusing reality that Misti's girlfriend, Trixie, was having a sexy time with the girl I wanted to date. How was my brain supposed to process that without shorting?

I pressed my forehead against the door and rested my shaky hand on top of the handle, not really sure if it would be a good idea to push it down. What if I started to cry when I stepped into the room? Why would I cry anyway? But if I didn't cry, would it mean that I didn't care that much about Oreo, after all?

My paranoid head turned sideways until my ear touched the cold wood. I could hear two little voices inside the room. They were not loud, as if not to let me hear... but I could...

"Oreo! This is so awesome!"

"Yes."

"I hope Clara won't be mad at us for doing this without her."

"I don't think she will. She never gets angry. Well, she got angry at me once, but it didn't last long."

"We probably should have asked first."

"Mmm... Probably, yes. Now I feel guilty."

Oh, no! They WERE doing sexy things, and they thought it would bother me. Was Oreo told that I had a crush on her? And when she decided to have sex with Trixie during my absence, she thought it would bother me or make me jealous? That was one of my worst fears. If my friends were to change their behaviors around me for fear of hurting me, it would be catastrophic. I didn't want that at all. I didn't want to be treated differently than the others. I wanted my friend to be themselves around me and not act weird just to keep me happy. Did they think so little of me? Did they think I was incapable of understanding if they decided to do fun activities without me? I didn't want them to hide things from me. I wasn't strong like them, but I wanted to learn to be.

I felt horrible. Even if I had not even stepped into the room, I had already ruined their intimate time indirectly. Oreo said she felt guilty, and that was a terrible thing. I didn't want her to feel guilty for doing what she loved.

No. I loved her too much to let this happen. I had to be strong! I would show them that I was not as fragile as they thought and that they didn't have to change because of me. For the sake of my friend's happiness, for my sake, I would stand tall for once.

I pressed the handle and pushed the door open, squeezed my eyes shut as a means to muster some courage, and cried my resolve.

"OREO! I... I don't mind if you have sex with Trixie!"

"..."

"..."

Silence. Was that too much? I cracked one of my eyes open, and my face returned to its usual beet red. What have I done?

On the bed, facing each other, were Oreo and Trixie, wearing their casual street clothes. Each of them held a book in their hands. There were more of those familiar books in between them here and there on the mattress. Their puzzled state was understandable. They were not having sex, weren't naked, and not even in range for a kiss.

"Clara? Did you hit your head somewhere on the way home?"

"You... You are not... having sex?"

"Uh? No... But now that you mention it, I wouldn't mind. Rawr! Come here, Oreo!"

Out of the blue, Trixie jumped on Oreo and tried to grab her boobs. The agile dark-haired catgirl rolled onto her back, a bit too used to this kind of assault, and hit Trixie on the head a few times with her book.

"Gah! What was that for, stupid cat!"

"You are crushing Clara's books!"

"Oops... I'm sorry."

My books? I thought they looked familiar.

Trixie briefly looked at me, grabbed a couple of them before hiding them uselessly behind her back, as if I wouldn't see her sneaky move.

"Those are... my books?"

"Oh... hehe... Yes... kind of. We found them in the closet, and we just HAD to go through them... I... I hope you aren't mad. I know, I know. We should have asked first. But it was Oreo's idea!"

"Hey! It was your idea, Trixie! Not mine!"

"You participated in the crime. Clara will have to punish you!"

"She will punish you too!"

"No, I have a broken arm, remember. I'm super extra fragile!"

All my fears had been for nothing. Trixie and Oreo didn't feel guilty about anything. They just found my used books and had fun going through them; I didn't mind at all. This wasn't good. I made a fool of myself because I didn't trust my friends. This assumption that they were having sex and feeling guilty because of a fear of hurting me couldn't have been more wrong. Actually, what I had done just now was give them a very good reason to be scared of my reaction the next time they would decide to have some intimate time. How would they ever feel at ease if they knew I would imagine things and overthink it?

I silently walked to the bed and grabbed one of the books before handing it to Trixie.

"Clara?"

"Here. This is my favorite book. It's the one we read together the first time you visited me. You can have it."

"... You are... giving me... your favorite book?"

"Yes. It's yours now."

"Like... forever?"

"Yes."

"... AWWWW!"

The small blonde girl threw herself in my arms and hugged me tightly for a long moment, then she abruptly bolted out of the room, holding her book high above her head.

"VIX! ASHA! LOOK! CLARA GAVE ME HER FAVORITE BOOK! HAHA! I'M HER FAVORITE PET! YOU GUYS SUCK!"

Immediately after the rabbit tornado left, the room turned dead silent. More than unexpectedly, I ended up alone with Oreo, who stared at me with her beautiful black eyes.

"You... gave her... your favorite book?"

"Hehe... No. But it's one I like."

"Oooh... You tricked her."

"You said... I had to punish her."

"Hehe."

"Oreo, my favorite book is this one. And you can have it if you want."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"..."

"..."

"Can... Can I give you a hug, Clara?"

"... yes."

This feeling... again. Just the thought of receiving a hug from Oreo made me feel funny. Every time we were alone together, it was always the same. In the past, our hug had quickly turned into kissing, and then we couldn't discuss anything. This time around, I wouldn't let that happen. I would gladly give her the hug she asked for, but I wouldn't lose control. We wouldn't end up cuddling or kissing. After all, Vix and Asha were working on a secret plan for this afternoon, so it was really not the time to be too intimate; that would throw a wrench in our day. Anyway, if Trixie were to come back and see us exchanging fluids, she wouldn't hesitate to join.

I crawled on the bed toward Oreo and knelt in front of her. She did the same. Oreo hugs... They always felt so good...

She wrapped her little arms around my neck and pressed her lips on mine.

"Mmm!"

"Mmmm!"

Okay... That didn't quite go as planned, and now, thinking was no longer an option. We fell on our side on the bouncy mattress, and the springy motion made one of the large pillows flop over our head, giving us some extra privacy.

At least the bed knew what it was doing.

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