# Love Under the Law

**By Celina Page**

**Content Warning:** Contains descriptions of mental illness, suicide, medical trauma

### "Circumstances to be considered when determining member of a couple relationships

While social security law requires regard to all circumstances of the relationship in member of couple determinations, particular regard must be given to the following 5 factors:

- financial aspects of the relationship
- nature of the household
- social aspects of the relationship
- any sexual relationship, and
- nature of the commitment.

...

Different groups in society may have different views about what constitutes a member of a couple relationship. This may affect how the individual views their relationship, and subsequently how they present themselves to society or to Centrelink ... Each case must be considered on its own merits and not just the opinions held by the 2 possible members of a couple." ~ *Social Security Guide Version 1.343, released 10 October 2026*

As a second-generation queer, I was raised in Pride. I grew up learning how to fight hate with bigger, louder love. How to place a rainbow shield between me and the shame bombs lobbed by our oppressors. *We're here, we're queer, and we're not fucking taking it any more*. We being the operative word. A queer alone can be picked off. In groups we're even more terrifying than they can imagine. I know how to say a big, proud "fuck you!" to someone who wants to shame me into nonexistence. Together, our love can stop traffic, stop meetings, stop the profits of orange juice corporations.

I wasn't raised to be disabled. I was never taught how to fight an enemy who says "of course you can love who you love. We'll just take away everything you need to live." Pride, against this oppressor, may only get us killed. And we can't even point to a weapon. Neglect is sneaky like that. Someone can wield it while claiming neutrality. It's not specific people trying to kill you, it's just the system doing what it does. And what that system does is keep us apart. We can't rally together to support someone who lost their income due to loving the wrong person when

that same system is starving us out. I can shout my love from the rooftops, and then the ladder I needed to climb there will be quietly taken away in the name of fairness.

**Spring, 2020**

I'm lying by the window, watching a flock of birds fly home against a pink sunset, and I feel guilty. The rest of the world is struggling with lockdowns, isolation, and a forced change of pace, but I'm more stable and connected than I have been in years. I know people are dying, and it's awful, but my world has opened up. I'm settling in to my new apartment - after more than 3 years of homelessness, I was finally given a place in community housing. My housing case manager, one of two people allowed to be present on move-in day, grinned when she opened the door and said "Welcome home!" I could tell this was the best part of her job. Her organisation had even provided furniture, and some housewarming gifts. I cried touching the handmade blanket. She kept saying "you deserve this," emphasising it as though she knew I didn't believe it. I hadn't done anything to earn this, she did all the work to secure this place for me and the 8 other women on my floor, and all I did was try to stay alive. That's never been enough before, why should it be now?

My lounge room has floor-to-ceiling windows, so even on days I can't leave the couch, I get to bathe in sunlight. I have my own kitchen and bathroom, and even a balcony so I can get fresh air. And I'm being told I can stay here forever. I don't know if I believe it, but it's a nice idea. And less temporary than anywhere else I've lived.

And best of all, I can get a cat. Lockdown in transitional accommodation was rough. But how can I be lonely with a little furball who constantly wants my attention? My baby is as good as any anti-depressant. No matter how bad I feel, he'll force me to get out of bed at least to feed him.

It's not just having a home, though. Thanks to telehealth, for the first time in my life I'm not missing appointments. I'm rarely even late, and when I am, everyone is understanding of "technical difficulties." The service I've been getting temporary counselling from has extended their service, so I can get consistent therapy for a while. I can attend social events, even when I haven't showered in days. And more people are reaching out, desperate for connection. When everyone's life is online, I'm no longer on the outside looking in.

Sometimes it's hard to have sympathy for people who complain about being unable to go out and socialise for weeks at a time. The resentment bubbles up inside, threatening to burst out. *You think this is hard? I've done this for* years, *and I didn't have zoom parties and Jackbox games to console myself with*. But they're like a child who's dropped their ice cream for the first time. It's genuinely one of the most painful things she's ever experienced. Maybe the first time she's had to deal with her hopes being dashed right before her eyes. So you give her compassion, not dismissal, and she learns to show compassion in turn. In this moment, I need to reach past my own pain and find the kindness I needed the first time I felt isolated from the world.

My doctor and I have had to pause our evidence-gathering for my DSP application. Some things still need to be done in person. And I don't want to take up too much of her time when so many people need doctors. But it's ok for now, jobseeker is suddenly paying even higher than the pension, and all mutual obligations have been suspended so I don't have to keep applying for jobs I know I won't be able to do. I don't have to choose between food and healthcare, and I've even got money left over for a hobby. I've taken up hand sewing, and even though my pain stops me doing it as much as I'd like, it's nice to have something for my hands to do, and then something to show for it. I get to feel capable, even if it's just of making a shirt.

It's been a big adjustment, navigating my new social role as capital-D Disabled. Even though I can now see I've had disabilities all my life, it's different actually acknowledging them as such. Over the last few years I've been collecting diagnoses. The pain in my hip and back isn't just a constant companion, it's Chronic Pain. It turns out it's not just my mind that's disordered but my personality. Although I have plenty of mental disorders, too. So much so that I'm wondering if I was ever really a person, or just a bunch of diagnoses wearing a trench coat. But it's not just the understanding that comes with naming what's wrong with me. Disabled is now who I am. So much of our lives are dictated by our work, and I guess now my work is officially being disabled. Which is actually a lot of work, especially when you take into account the repetitive labour of proving it to the satisfaction of various government agents. But it's also not a job in the traditional sense, so I don't know how to identify.

The first question most people ask is "what do you do for work?" It's who we are. Being able to say "I'm a circus performer" became an important part of my identity. But even when that was over, I always had an acceptable answer. "I'm a waiter while studying" is full of potential. "I'm a disability support worker" lets people assume I'm a good person. Even "I'm a stripper" at least started conversations, even if I didn't always want to finish them. Each answer gave me a place in the fabric of our world. Over the last year I've been playing around with responses, trying to find a way of describing myself that gives me that sense of purpose, or at least doesn't feel like an apology.

"I'm too disabled to work."

"My job is existing while disabled."

"I don't."

"I'm a burden on society."

Nothing is really satisfying. It always leads to an awkward pause, and no one seems to know how to respond.

But these lockdowns are promising. The expectation to be productive has lowered. No one says "It must be nice getting to stay home all day" any more. Most people seem to have discovered that the chronically ill life isn't the lazy idyll they'd imagined. And more and more people are talking about the importance of mental health in terms of action, and not just "awareness". Sure, lots of them just seem to think ending lockdown will fix everyone's problems, but others

are talking about treatment and accessibility, too. The government might even fund mental healthcare for people before they're in crisis. Across the world, governments are actually housing the homeless - somehow when it becomes an immediate public health issue, the money can be found. And maybe, with more people having experienced reliance on social security, there'll be enough impetus to raise payments above poverty rates permanently.

And as we find this abundance of empathy and compassion in each other, as we share resources and willingly go without so others can survive, I find a new lightness building within me. Hope. Yes, I'm scared, and people are dying and we won't all make it through this and I feel that pain every day. But when the rest of us get through this, together, surely people will remember how hard it was and hold space for the people who still can't leave their homes. Surely they'll demand healthcare and dignity for everyone, show more understanding and less judgement. This tragedy offers us an opportunity for a better, kinder world, and surely, *surely* now that we've had a taste of that care, we won't just go back to the status quo.

**Summer, 2012**

I wake up slowly, dappled sunlight streaming through my window, and I can feel her next to me. Feeling me wake, she leans over me, hair cascading around my face, skin like a ripe peach. *Peaches and cream*, I think, *her cheeks are what people mean when they say that*. I know she'd hate that description, too, so I keep it to myself. She brings her lips down to mine, and I wonder if I'm still dreaming.

Her hands start wandering confidently, and at some point I'm aware I've never had a dream this tangible. My hands mimic hers at first, afraid of overstepping. She seems happy to take the lead, and I let her. They way she touches me gives me clues about how she likes to be touched. My body is pure bliss, but my mind keeps worrying about doing a good job.

K feels different than other lovers. I want to insinuate myself into her life. I put thought into where and how I can fit, what I can bring to her table. The baggage she brings with her seems made for my arms to carry - and if it's not, I'll mould them to fit around it. I want her friends to like me, for once not just because I need to be liked, but because I want them to accept me as an extension of her.

She's beautiful, and graceful and witty, but she's also spiky. She curates an image of herself, gorgeous and monstrous. She doesn't want to be liked by everyone, and she sits comfortably in others' distaste. And people are drawn to her. Whether they love or hate her, everyone has an opinion. I feel ungainly standing next to her. But she doesn't seem to notice my awkwardness, and wraps her arms around me, reaching up and claiming me like I belong there.

She introduces me to her various friend groups, expecting me to slot in effortlessly. Unfortunately, I've never really slotted in to any group. It's not her fault. Even in circus school, I didn't quite fit in. Fortunately, K fits so well she doesn't notice.

She's the face of an organisation that's lobbying for same sex marriage to be legalised. This on top of her academic career and day job. She does interviews, telling reporters that it would be ridiculous to think allowing "gay" marriage could lead to polyamory. Of course not, that's not what anyone wants.

And so I have to be a secret. You see, she already has a boyfriend, she can't openly have a girlfriend as well.

Personally, I'm uninterested in same sex marriage. I think the government should stay out of our relationships altogether, but I guess if the straights can have it, I want it, too. Just not enough to fight for it. I'm so impressed by her efforts, though. She's making waves, and I want her to change the shoreline.

At least I can tell my friends. And her family's had years to get over their disappointment at her sexuality, so I'm not going to get the blame. In fact, her dad likes me, despite his general disapproval of her choices. I give good parent, despite my working-class background and poor career prospects.

Of course, I can tell myself, and everyone else, that once my hip gets better, once I've recovered from surgery and finished my rehab, my career will improve. I'll be able to focus on training, put my energy into getting more gigs, maybe even get hired by a circus and ditch the freelance life. Lots of people don't make it in this industry, but everyone knows they're just not trying hard enough. I'll try hard enough. Despite my history of never sticking to a routine, once I'm not in pain every day, I'll somehow push through. I'll learn how to network, and I'll invoice on time. I might be suffering now, but I'm positive, and I have a bright future ahead.

And when the depression hits, again, as it always does, she's in another city. She doesn't need to see, or smell, the worst of it. I have savings from when I was able to work, so I can still take her out for breakfast when she visits. I can perk up for a few days, just enough to show a relatable form of struggle, and by the time I'd normally have to follow through on any commitments, she's gone again, none the wiser about what a terrible failure of a person I really am. I don't lie to her. I tell her I'm having a hard time, that I'm probably depressed, even though getting an actual diagnosis is more effort than I'm capable of. But I also don't show her everything. I don't show anyone everything. I tried that a long time ago, and it went so badly I learned never again.

And when it goes away, as it always does, eventually, I can tell myself that was the last time. Surely this time I've really pulled myself out of the hole. This time, I'll be able to hold down a job, and maintain my social circle, and look after my body properly. I'm still not lying to her, because I believe it. I can be very convincing.

**Spring, 2017**

I was one of the people worried about the plebiscite, but not for myself. I was worried for the youth, the closeted and the still questioning. This will be so bad for their mental health. Not me, though. I was raised without queer shame, so I don't need to be worried.

So I didn't see it coming when the reality of an entire country debating my human rights hit me right in the self-worth.

I have to watch politicians dangling human rights in front of me like a carrot - "if you're a good little abomination, maybe we'll give you some equality" - and then condemning me for getting pissed off. I'd rather not have them at all than degrade myself begging.

But I don't know what to say at work. I have a new job in a new industry - surely this time I'll find my footing and be able to work consistently - and my coworkers have apparently read me as straight. I haven't said anything, I'm still getting a feel for the place before I out myself. But it means they ask me ridiculous questions. "How do you think you'll vote? Myself, I've seen people being inappropriate on both sides of the debate, so I don't know." I don't know how to explain that if the right to marriage were only reserved for the polite, there would be a lot fewer married couples. I need this job, I don't want to be difficult.

But it takes a toll. Especially when the rest of my life is falling apart. I'm sick of hearing from well-meaning "allies" that I need to be nice, to win the flies over with honey, that righteous anger won't change anyone's mind. I don't want to change their minds. I don't want to have to be an activist at my day job, I just want to get through the fucking day so I can get to crying on the drive home.

It's hard to imagine ever having a long-term relationship, let alone considering marriage. It's hard to imagine even surviving the year. I'm being pushed out of my sharehouse, like I have so many sharehouses before, and I can feel the threads of my friends' patience wearing thin. A few have already snapped. I'm on the brink of losing everything in my life. It's happened before and I can see the pattern repeating, but my community's telling me that I'm crazy for worrying.

I'm a force of chaos tearing my whole life apart. I've always tried to put a good spin on the havoc of my life - I'm wild and free and exhilarating - but that costume is getting harder and harder to put on. There's a rot at the core of me, and if I'm honest, I've always known it. And no matter how hard I try to cover it up, it keeps threatening to spread. To spew its stench all over me, leaking out so that everyone can see how disgusting I am.

I'm trying to tell people how bad things are getting on the inside. I can't outright say I've been stockpiling drugs just in case, because that would just prove I only want attention, and therefore don't need help - and besides, then someone might take them away, and I need to know I have a way out. Everyone knows real suicidal people don't talk about it, so my throat freezes up whenever I try. But it's starting to feel like there's no way of asking for help that will actually get me help. I've tried telling doctors, calling the crisis team, but there's just no

resources to spare. Maybe it's my terrible communication skills, but I'm running out of ways to reach out.

When the results of the plebiscite are revealed, with a narrow majority of the country voting "yes", my friends celebrated. I tried to be happy for them, but it was a hollow victory. For me, the result wasn't worth the pain. And knowing 40% of the country didn't want me to have that right was something I could've lived without. But I could accept that the wider queer community had decided that my sacrifice was worth making, and I guess at least I get the consolation prize of being able to marry whoever I want. If I ever get to that.

But when I run out of reasons not to run through that stockpile, all my fears are proven right. When I can no longer hide the rot, and everyone can see the roiling, filthy guts of who I really am, they want nothing to do with me.

I do lose everything, including the comforting lie that suicide will be easy.

**Winter, 2023**

It's been a long commute home after an even longer day at the hospital. I'm freezing, and despite prescription-strength anti-inflammatories and my back support corset, aching all over. But when I open the door to my apartment, it's warm and welcoming. The heater's on, and I can smell dinner cooking. Beef and garlic and some unidentified flavour hits my nose like a warm hug. My cat, normally anxious and furious with me for being away so long, is calm and happy. M greets me with a kiss, and returns to the stove, ready to listen. I can breathe out. If I could come home to this every day, I might be able to handle the agony.

My friend is dying. The doctors won't tell us that, but I can see her wasting away, week by week. Already slender, her bones are now poking through increasingly translucent skin. Even her muscles are shrinking in on themselves. "Deconditioning," they call it, like this isn't a body shutting down everything it can to keep its heart beating. She can't stay awake more than 30 minutes at a time, and even when her eyes are open, she's barely coherent. She's reaching out through the fog in her brain, struggling to form words, and I'm reaching back, trying to shorten that journey so she can rest. Mostly, I know what she wants to say. She's scared, she's in pain, she's fighting. She wants to live, she wants to go back on the treatment that was working even if it kills her, she wants to be the one making decisions about her healthcare. She wants to go back to her life, to be well enough to go home. She's grieving a life that was taken away without her consent.

I'm there to advocate for her, but I don't know what I'm doing. She's surrounded by people who care about her, but somehow I'm the closest thing we have to an expert on dealing with the healthcare system, and that's terrifying. Really, I'm just the only one without anything else going on in my life, so now I spend my days researching healthcare laws, learning philosophical terms like *dignity of risk*, and figuring out how to word my complaints in a more sympathetic way. But her doctors don't care. Apparently she's just over the threshold for

actually starving to death, and none of her organs are failing, yet. I plead with one of the doctors to at least tell me they've got a plan for when her heart stops. She just shrugs, says that might not happen. I don't know what to tell the group chat.

I can feel my own health slipping away from me. The daily struggle to keep existing in a body and mind that's always in pain is getting harder. But I'm not on the brink of death, so it's hard to make time for that. And I'm carefully rationing my 5 allocated therapy appointments.

I put effort into seeming like a normal person when I'm at the hospital. I dress as well as I can, practise my neutral-but-pleasant face, my not-resting-bitch-face. I school my voice into a quieter, even tone. I slip up, but I'm getting better at returning to calm, inoffensive. I don't look like someone who's in constant pain, so I try to wait until I get home to stretch and pace and sigh. I'm not great at pretending to be normal, but I can tell I'm improving when nurses start treating me like I'm on their team and confide their suspicions that my friend is exaggerating her symptoms. I'm seen as a fellow carer, not an untrustworthy sick person. But this deception is exhausting, and my health slips further.

Sometimes I think I'm just there as a witness to her suffering. I keep making pacts with myself, ways to live with my ineffectiveness. Ways to feel useful. At least she was less alone. At least if she dies, she'll die knowing someone was fighting for her, even if I lost the fight. I'm trying to find a way to justify keeping on when I keep failing.

M's noticed my health getting worse. They care about both of us, but they're not good at the hospital, so instead they try to care for me. Ideally they'd move in temporarily, take care of things at home so I can just focus on trying to keep my friend and I alive, but since we're fucking that would risk my pension, and they can't afford to pay both our rents. Instead, we decide to chance a lower level of care. It's still risky, but since I'm on the brink of going back to the psych ward, the risk seems worth it. One night a week, while I'm at the hospital, they let themself in after work with my spare key. Cook dinner, clean up a little, give me a home to, well, come home to. A shoulder to cry on, a chest to lean on, arms to fall apart into. It's a glimpse into a life I'd kill to be safe in.

In the end, my friend survives. She figured out on her own that one of her medications was making her symptoms worse, and stubbornly refused to take it until it became clear to everyone else. She's still bedbound and high risk, but the hospital decides they've done everything they can, and since she's been there almost a year, they set a discharge date. She's supposed to have supports ready at home so she can be safe, but bureaucracy moves slowly, and her NDIS plan isn't approved until the Friday before her Monday discharge. The hospital doesn't care, though. They set a date and they're going to stick to it. She's probably just using this as an excuse to stay longer, because she just loooves being in hospital so much. I plead with various admin staff to at least provide some continence care. Surely it breaches some kind of duty of care to let her lie in her own waste for days until support can be arranged. "You're her carer, you wouldn't let that happen." I should have predicted that my part-time advocacy would be weaponised as an excuse to deny her the support she needs. This isn't really surprising if you're familiar with our systems of care. I have another friend who had all her

NDIS supports - meal preparation, bathing, personal care - cut for two days a week because she mentioned her boyfriend usually visited on weekends.

I'm not there on discharge day. Her partner takes a day off work to help get her home safely, which makes sense since he can actually carry her. They steal a bedpan on the way out.

M is burned out. I am, too. But neither of us have the energy to support each other. I can feel our closeness slipping away, and honestly I'm too tired to fight for it.

**Summer, 2026**

I find myself constantly evaluating my relationships through Centrelink's lens. A lover has a long weekend and spends it all at my place - does that change the nature of our commitment and mean she's now financially responsible for me? Another lover hates cooking, so when he visits I cook and he cleans up - does that count as sharing domestic duties and therefore mean the "nature of the household" is one that makes me dependent on him? If someone pays for my dinner when we go out, does that makes us financially linked and therefore partners in the eyes of the law? A friend sends a wedding invitation, with both X and my names on it. Are we now "presenting ourselves as a couple" for the government's purposes? And of course, there's sex. How many times am I allowed to fuck someone before the government decides we're a couple? How do they even define sex? Centrelink is my primary partner, capricious and vindictive, dictating the rules for all my other relationships. But they're too passive-aggressive to actually spell out the rules, so I have to guess and hope I don't get punished for some vague transgression.

X and I do go to the wedding, together. I'm not sure if I'm breaking the law by not informing Centrelink of this social event, but I also can't handle dealing with them any more than I strictly have to.

The ceremony is beautiful. I realise this is actually the first legal gay wedding I've been to. The love is so overwhelming I cry during the exchanging of vows. X quietly passes me a hanky, squeezing my shoulder. I lean in to his touch. My friend literally glows when she looks at her wife. For the first time, I think this is something I might want one day.

And the guests have to make vows to the couple, too. It's a good reminder that historically, part of the reason for having a wedding was to make the couple beholden to the community as a unit, and to oblige us, in turn, to supporting them in marriage. It was never just two people - everyone needs a community to thrive.

And just like that, I'm sad again. I truly am happy for them, but the envy creeps in, tainting the edges of my joy with unmet desire. X misreads my face, and reminds me he put ibuprofen in my handbag before we left. He's not wrong, though. I've been standing still too long, and my

hips ache more than they should. He is good at reading me, and helping me reduce my pain, both physical and emotional. I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but he's become a protector of sorts. Someone who wants to throw himself between me and everything that wants to hurt me, whether it's my neighbour's abusive ex, or my own brain. I'm not used to being considered worthy of protection. It's an adjustment, one I feel like I shouldn't enjoy, but I do. I like how safe I feel with X. I hug him, pressing my nose against his neck, and he smells like home.

The wedding photos are beautiful - and I have a favourite. When I first see it I can't help smiling. We're talking, unaware of the camera, and he's staring at me with so much love. Insecure though I am, I can't deny that look. And then I worry about how public these photos are. Could someone send this to Centrelink as proof that I'm somehow defrauding the government, even though we don't live together?

Another realisation dawns on me. I love him, too. He's crawled his way into my heart, where only a few people have ever reached. And I want him there. I want to jump on the relationship escalator and see where it takes me. I picture living with him, simple day-to-day interactions. Doing laundry together. Telling me about his day at work. Dragging his attention away from his game to spout my latest nonsense idea. Fighting over bills. Having someone to reach for when I wake up from a nightmare. Lying in his arms, breathing in his scent, feeling his heartbeat in my ear. The rhythm of a life I chose.

It sounds so romantic. Partners. I want it, I want that simple domesticity so bad it sits like acid in my stomach. Not having to plan when I see him around his work and my supports. Learning to share my life with someone else, and how to hold space for them every day. But if we take that step, there's no going back.

I'd lose my income, but also my housing and some, if not all, of my hard-won disability supports. He's already made it clear that he can't be my carer. And after burning out so many friends and lovers, I don't want that either. But if we're in an official relationship, he might not have a choice. And if it didn't work out, I'd be homeless with no income. I don't think I could survive that again.

We discuss it. He wants it, too. He doesn't think he can handle the responsibility. And in practical terms, there's no advantage for him. Even though the government would force me to be dependent on him, he wouldn't be able to claim me as a dependent. Financially, couples are separate entities, except when it comes to social security. And I don't have the functional capacity to be a homemaker. I'm nothing but a liability.

We sit with it. There's no conclusion. We don't get to put our relationship into a neat little box, but we're not selfless enough to let go of each other either. At some point, one of us will be forced to make a choice, but I guess until then, he, I and the government sit together in an uneasy truce.