



A Reason To Try (Carolina Rugby)

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Category: Sport

Description: Winning isn't everything, but some things are worth trying for.

Carolina DeLusso is a born and bred Jersey Girl, living and working in Consequence, North Carolina.

Yeah, she's heard all the jokes, and they still weren't funny.

Neither was working for an eccentric billionaire with more money than scruples.

Even worse, her boss just purchased a rugby team, and he's out of town, leaving her in charge. Her orders are to make sure the team manager is made welcome.

But Carolina doesn't know a thing about rugby or how to handle professional athletes. Especially not ones with ridiculous demands.

She is ready to call it quits when the coach challenges her to stay.

Will Carolina hoof it back to Jersey, or will Dane Barret give her a reason to try?

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:00 am

Welcome to Consequence.

Driving past the welcome sign for Consequence, North Carolina was nothing new.

I did it every day on my way to work. But I was headed in a different direction today.

Those bright blue letters against the weathered wood seemed almost ironic, given the circumstances.

Consequence was where I ended up after making the biggest mistake of my life.

Of course, it involved a man.

A little over a year ago, I was just like a million other Jersey Girls, thinking I'd make it in New York City.

Admittedly, I allowed myself to be flattered when I was headhunted by an up-and-coming tech firm.

And yeah, I let the big city lights, and the excitement of a new job woo me.

No, I had not planned to have a fling with my now ex-boss, who turned out to be married. God, it was awful. I felt awful.

He was a sleazy, worthless cheater. What was worse was that he made me one, too.

So, I skipped town, er , state, actually. I moved from New Jersey to North Carolina

and found a new job.

That's how I ended up here.

In Consequence .

Of course, I'd hoped my new role was going to take me far away, to places where I'd be able to forget my past blunders.

You see, I worked for Mitchell Knight, an eccentric billionaire and business tycoon.

But so far, the farthest away I'd gotten was Small Town, America . It was better than staying home, though.

No, really .

Consequence was a beautiful town, and the locals were warm and welcoming. But this job was proving to be a little insane.

Mr. Knight was by far the worst billionaire I'd ever met. Not that I'd met a bunch. He was just all over the place and he never confided in anyone.

It was impossible to guess what he was going to do or say next. Maybe that was the nature of genius. I had no idea. I sure as hell wasn't one.

But I was supposed to be one of three personal assistants the man had working for him. And yet, for some reason, I was always the last to know what was going on.

Like now.

The weather app on my cell phone chimed, alerting me to inclement weather, and I

rolled my eyes.

This was my first fall in North Carolina, and the storm warnings rang constantly.

But that didn't worry me yet. It was the new assignment I received via email at three o'clock this morning.

I spent two hours just trying to wrap my brain around what I was supposed to do.

Bought a training facility complete with accommodations for my new Major League Rugby team. Make sure the boys are welcome. -MK

MK was Mitchell Knight. But the email came from Myrna the Mouth. How that woman kept her job, I had no idea. She was rude to everyone, and she dressed like she could be on one of the Real Housewives shows. Any of them, really.

Anyway, she intimidated the shit out of me. I was lucky if I slapped on some face powder, mascara, and lip gloss in the morning. She probably spent three hours contouring her face.

I mean, I wasn't saying that like it was a bad thing. She could do her, and I would do me. It was more her poor attitude and rude behavior I had a problem with. But I was new here, so I just let it go.

What else could I do?

After she sent me the address, I spent the rest of the morning packing my own bags and double checking the electric and water companies had all been sent to this new training facility. Then I called the regular cleaning service Knight Global used regularly for all their buildings and made sure they got the place all neat and ready for move-in, which was supposed to be in about two hours.

FML.

We already had a bus on standby at the airport, which was one less thing for me to do. Then I made sure the orders for food, medical supplies, and sports equipment were already en route.

It seemed impossible that I would get all that finished by eight AM, but I did it. As per Mr. Knight's orders. Sent to me by Myrna the Mouth. Last thing I had to do was get my ass there before the bus pulled up at nine.

Like my neighbor always said, he was an older gentleman, a widower named Milton Johnson, this should be easy as pie .

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“Shit,” I cursed aloud in my tiny compact vehicle.

I missed the turn for the campground my boss had apparently just purchased and expected me to live in for the next six weeks.

My car wasn’t the only thing running on empty. I gave my empty travel mug a dirty look and clenched my jaw.

Making a U-turn in my small hybrid car and getting it to take the muddied path towards the little flag waving brightly across my GPS screen took more finesse than actual driving skill.

And begging.

A lot of freaking begging.

“Please do not crap out on me. Please, please, please, do not crap out on me,” I murmured as I rolled to a stop in front of a shitty looking cabin.

I shifted into park, grimacing as the energy gauge told me what I’d feared.

The battery was about dead. And, of course, the arrow on the gas gauge was tipped to the large E.

“Fuck,” I growled and slapped my hands against the dashboard.

When I’d bought that stupid car, I’d felt like I was doing my part for the environment.

But I've regretted it every single day since.

Do you know how many charging stations there were in Consequence?

Exactly one.

Inside my garage.

But I heard we were getting a Buc-ee's about five miles outside of town in the next three years or so and they had charging stations.

So, that was cool.

Not.

I mean, I loved Buc-ee's, but I didn't think I could wait three years for a charging station. And if that wasn't enough to ruin my morning, the next five minutes sealed it.

I checked my phone. Shit. I was late. It was after nine, but at least I had an hour before the bus— fuck!

As soon as I thought it, an enormous all black charter bus came barreling up the same driveway I'd just driven down. But without all the fuss my car had made, of course.

Jesus, he was going fast!

I gaped, mouth open as the huge thing pulled to a stop right beside my compact, splattering my perfectly clean driver's side door and window with thick mud and some gravel.

That was definitely going to leave a mark.

The morning had started out pretty shitty to begin with, but that was the filthy icing on the cake of this bitch of a day.

I was ready to read that idiot driver the riot act when the doors opened, and like three dozen veritable giants came trotting out of the thing.

These were not normal men.

They were monsters.

Humongous.

It was like a lineup of stunt doubles for Hercules or maybe Ares if we were talking about the cast of characters from the best show ever.

I meant Xena: Warrior Princess , of course. I used to devour that show when I was a kid, and I just started re-watching it recently.

Yay for streaming services!

Anyway, there wasn't one of these guys under six feet tall. And they sure as fuck looked like they all ate their Wheaties.

By the bucketful.

If the bulging biceps didn't give it away, it was their tree trunk sized thighs and shoulders that looked wider than the entire house I'd been renting in town.

One man stood out to me among the rest. He had wild-looking dark brown hair that looked like it had not seen a brush in a while. Of course, it didn't need one, either. His hair was thick and glossy, with big curls at the tips.

He had about an inch of beard in that same color, covering what I was sure was a ruggedly handsome face. I was staring. I knew I was, but I couldn't help it.

Emerald-green eyes glared at me, and my mouth gaped as I took in his tattooed hands and arms. The ink must go all the way up, I mused, seeing some of the scrolling work peeking out of his collar and up his neck.

Holy hotness.

“Are you the clown who rented this shit hole? Not impressed,” he barked, pointing a big beefy finger at me.

Fuck me now with that goddamn accent.

But any hint of admiration left my face the second I registered the words this gorgeous specimen of man had been shouting at me.

Did he call me a clown? Okay, that was not a compliment.

“Are you capable of speech? This is not acceptable! I asked for a real training facility. I've got six weeks to get these jokers ready for the season,” he rumbled, his emerald gaze glittering down at me.

Thank fuck for the car. I was stuck in my seat while this man tore me a new one, and it was a good thing, too. I might've fallen down to my knees and begged him to punish me for all my sins, he was just that hot.

“This is a team of professional athletes. We need a proper paddock— a field , for fuck's sake,” he growled when I continued to stare blankly.

“Shit. Coach is going berko,” one of the other men muttered.

“Hello? I said we can’t use some backwoods children’s campground for our practice field. How the hell are we supposed to get this team ready? Well? Are you deaf, too?”

This giant bearded fucker was going to blow a gasket.

I mean, I’d be concerned if I was his doctor. Veins were sticking out of his neck and his tanned skin was turning a dark, ruddy shade of red as he shouted at me.

Really, I kinda wished it made him uglier. Or at least mildly unattractive. But honestly, all that masculine outrage was downright sexy.

God, I was fucked up.

But sexy or not, who the hell did he think he was? This guy was not about to yell at me like that and get away with it.

Hell to the no.

I frowned, my New Jersey temper getting the better of me as I jumped out of the driver’s seat and slammed my door. I marched right up to the growling giant and pointed my finger at his chest.

“Hey,” I shouted, catching his attention. “I don’t know where you get off yelling at people, Mister, but I don’t give a shit how many touchdowns you score, you don’t talk to me like that!”

“Try.”

“Try what?”

“It’s called a try . Not a touchdown. When you score in rugby,” the bearded asshole

corrected me.

“Who fucking cares?” I yelled.

His eyebrows went sky high, and I wondered if maybe he didn’t see who he was shouting at through my tinted windows and all the mud. Maybe he regretted yelling at a woman. Still, it was no excuse for behaving like a giant butthead.

“Whoa. She’s got sass this one,” another man, who I ignored, said.

“Shut up, Tank,” the object of my ire barked, then raised his hands as if to ward me off. “Look, I’m sorry I shouldn’t have yelled at a woman ?—”

He enunciated the word, and I stopped him with a loud gasp. I mean, fuck that. I was too mad.

“You shouldn’t have yelled at a woman ? Oh, my fucking God. Tell me, is having a penis synonymous with being a penis where you’re from?”

“I only meant?—”

“Oh, I know what you meant. See, where I’m from, calling someone you don’t know deaf and clown are fighting words. So I am assuming, if I was a man, we would be fighting, right?” I asked, but no way was I going to let him answer.

“Regardless of what you think, I don’t need to be a man to argue with you,” I snapped. “Now, let me clarify a couple of things. I am not the clown who rented anything. And I can hear perfectly fine,” I replied, angry as hell.

“Look, Girl, it was a long trip, and this isn’t what we were expecting?—”

“DeLusso. My name is Carolina DeLusso. Not Girl . And I don’t give a rat’s ass if you need a nap after your flight, Mister?—”

“Barret. Dane Barret,” he mumbled, and seemed more amused now than angry.

Well, fuck him for that, too.

“Great. I’d say nice to meet you, but I’m not good at lying. Now, if you have any complaints, you need to bring them to Mr. Knight’s attention. Recognize that name? He’s the one who signed the big fucking check buying you and your team of professional athletes who play a sport no one in this country knows a single thing about!”

I knew I was being dramatic and rude.

But, in my defense, I felt overwhelmed. All the shit I scrambled to do that morning, and this man yelling at me, just tipped me over the edge.

To hell with this shitty day already.

But even knowing I was losing my grip, I still wasn’t done yet. My gaze drifted to my mud and gravel splattered car and, goddamn it , that was a scratch on the paint. Turning my head, I narrowed my gaze and pointed at that great behemoth then at my car door.

“Before I go, are you the jerk who splattered mud all over my car?”

“Look, Gir—I mean, Miss DeLusso , we need to talk about this. I didn’t come all the way here to live in some shitty batch,” he started again, but I stopped him with a shake of my head.

I had no idea what the fuck a batch was, and furthermore, I didn't care. Thunder boomed overhead, and the sky was getting darker. I took a breath and faced this monster-sized man, glaring at him, deciding somehow that he was responsible for my bad day.

“Normally, Mr. Barret, I would say I'd handle it, but you know what? I QUIT!” I screamed.

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Alright, so I wasn't exactly known for being levelheaded.

My reaction to the campground Mr. Knight's transport had brought us could have been better.

Truth was, it wasn't even that bad. I was just knackered. Exhausted from traveling with this band of merry idiots.

Fine .

It was more than that. Ever since this deal went through, I'd been out of sorts.

I was aggravated about the whole bloody purchase of my team by that feckless American billionaire.

I didn't want to be uprooted. Taken from my country and brought to this place where the people didn't know shit about rugby.

I'd already given my whole life to the sport. Rugby wasn't just a game to me. It was my identity, my passion, my reason for waking up every morning.

From the moment I first picked up a ball as a kid, I knew this was it. Rugby was mine.

The thrill of the game coursed through my veins like a potent elixir, fueling late-night practices and early morning training sessions. I had dreams—big ones.

I was slated to play for the All Blacks, the New Zealand national team, the very pinnacle of rugby achievement.

But that dream shattered the day an injury brought my career to a crashing halt. It happened in an instant—one moment I was charging down the field, adrenaline pumping, and the next, I was on the ground, pain radiating through my leg like a wildfire.

The world had blurred around me as I realized something was very, very wrong. It wasn't just the physical pain. It was the gut-wrenching fear of what this injury could and did mean for my future.

No. I never made it to the All Blacks. But I wasn't done with this sport yet. Now, I was coaching. Something I swore I would never do.

The transition was tough at first. But I was slowly finding my way.

After that fucker, Mitchell Knight, bought us, he sent a dozen Americans to train with us until the lease for our club ran out.

They were surprisingly alright guys. I'd expected poor players, but that was bad of me. Some of the newcomers had even followed my career, which was astounding to me.

I never made it, far as I was concerned. But I guess some people remembered me.

The press used to call me Great Dane . Some still do. It was because of my size, of course, and not any rep I had for being a dog with the ladies. I'd had affairs, of course. But nothing spectacular.

Nothing like her.

Ironical that the billionaire bastard who bought my team had named us the Carolina Rovers. Our logo was a big snarling beast of a dog—you probably guessed what kind.

That's right. It was a Great fucking Dane in a blue spiked collar.

But all of my baggage wasn't the fault of the curvy woman spitting fire at me with her near black eyes.

Here I was, banished all the way around the world, to North Carolina, and this woman, who happened to be named Carolina, had me completely flummoxed.

Was I drooling?

I managed not to wipe my mouth, but only just. I knew I was being a right prick. Just like I knew I had to stop.

But there was just something about her that drew my total awareness to her instantly, pulling me in like a moth to a flame. Keeping my attention like a dog with a bone.

I was used to women who bent under the force of my intensity. Ones who found my size and presence intimidating, often giving way to my demands. But not her.

Thank fuck.

I never enjoyed feeling like a bully. It was why I was still single.

This woman, though, she stood her ground, meeting my glare with a defiant fire that caught me off guard.

Like she was challenging me, daring me to bring my worst, and for a moment, I felt the ground shift beneath me.

There was an undeniable spark in the air, a tension that crackled like static electricity. But it was more than physical. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something deeper beneath her tough exterior.

Maybe it was the way her lips curved into a smirk when I got riled up or how her eyes sparkled with mischief and cheek.

Whatever I did, and I meant that in a take your pick kind of way, not an I'm innocent kind of way, I'd definitely gotten a reaction out of her. Like a fierce little kitten her fur was sticking up, fangs bared, and bloody hell, could she hiss.

It was a reminder that I wasn't the only one who had baggage.

I wonder what hers is. Wonder if I can carry the load for a while.

I shook my head roughly. What the heck was she doing to me? Was she a witch or something?

She was small. A short little thing. Barely five-two. But the rest of her, good God, the woman was fit. There was no denying that.

Several of the guys were staring, and I growled at them, making more than one avert their gazes.

Fucking pricks.

Something in me rose like a great green beast at the thought of those bastards perving on her. I didn't want to look too closely at it right now.

But I also wasn't so shallow to think that was the only reason she had me mesmerized. This woman, Carolina DeLusso, made me curious.

I knew better. Really, I did. But instead of apologizing and falling to my knees like I ought to have, of course, I doubled down on my asshole behavior. Clinging to it with both of my meaty fucking paws like it was a lifeline.

Fucking numpty.

The last woman I dated used to fall apart if I so much as growled. She was always whinging and moaning at me.

But this woman? No, I didn't cower her. Not one bit.

I was aware of my team in the periphery of my vision. The lads were getting a good fucking show, and that pissed me off more.

I didn't want them looking at her, seeing her, hearing her, smelling her.

Fuck. Could they smell her? I sure as fuck could.

She smelled like peaches and sweet cream. Like days filled with promises and nights filled with sin.

She smelled good. Very good. Just as good as she looked.

Suddenly, I wanted her all for myself. Hardly aware we were still going back and forth with this whole thing, I was so damn busy trying to get a grip on my emotions, I didn't register what she was saying until it was too late.

“Normally, Mr. Barret, I would say I'd handle it, but you know what? I QUIT!”

Wait. What?

Did I seriously just make this gorgeous female quit her job on the spot? Fuck. I had to do better.

“Get a fucking move on,” I yelled at the guys still hanging around.

I could see she tried hiding her body beneath her oversized sweater and leggings, but they only emphasized her hourglass figure and pinup girl curves.

The tits on her could fill even my hands and that ass. Christ!

My cock had perked up the second I caught sight of it when she turned round to slam her car door shut.

This woman was all sass and grit. Besides her gorgeous figure, her sweetheart of a face was just so damn pretty.

She had full, soft looking lips I could already picture wrapped round my cock. Her eyes were a deep, velvet brown fringed with even darker lashes. And that mouth.

Fuck me .

My gaze was glued to it. The woman had a devil’s mouth, and I couldn’t wait to hear what came out of it next. I stared into those captivating eyes, and a flicker of something new, of possibility, flashed through me.

Just like lightning.

Maybe, just maybe, I could have more than life as an ex-rugby player. Maybe I didn’t have to weather it alone.

But first, I had to figure out how to stop being a jerk. I opened my mouth to speak,

but the little spitfire was all riled up and turned around.

I fought the smirk that teased the corner of my mouth, recalling how she stomped her tiny little feet and came toe to toe with me. It was like watching a sparrow confront a hawk.

She was tiny but fierce, and there was a thrill in her defiance that was hard to ignore. Of course, I had to look down to meet her stormy gaze. She stood at least a foot shorter than my six foot three-inch frame.

“Look, I am sorry about Steven, the bus driver. He shouldn’t have parked so close,” I said, crossing my arms just to stop myself from reaching for her.

“Well then, Steven can find a hose to wash it off. As for you all,” she said, turning back to me one more time.

She shook her head, her gaze sweeping over all thirty-six of my guys and me.

“Here’s a list of your cabin assignments. They’ve been cleaned and prepped for your arrival. If there is anything else you need,” she said, a false smile in her tone before she turned back to face me with a snarl on her pretty lips, “figure it the fuck out yourself!”

Then she turned again, flashing that gorgeous arse my way, an adorable little switch when she walked, and stormed back to the tiny little car she’d been driving.

The men hooted and hollered, but I shut them up with a sharp whistle. I felt like a total idiot. Couldn’t believe I let my temper cause this little woman to quit her job.

“Wait! Come on,” I yelled louder, jogging to reach her side as another roll of thunder shook the sky.

“Give that here, Coach,” Koa Jackson, our record-breaking number 8, said and grabbed the clipboard with our bunk assignments she’d tossed at me.

He started shouting orders at the team, and I was grateful for the help. I’d do it myself, but I was occupied at present. I had other things to do.

Like learn to fucking grovel.

“Miss DeLusso, can I have just a second,” I said.

Sassy little thing ignored me, cursing under her breath, using her sleeve to try to wipe the mud off the handle.

“Go away,” she mumbled.

“Carolina, just let me try?—”

“Is that another touchdown joke? Anyway, no. You have no reason to try anything with me,” she replied cheekily,

“Stop. You’re ruining your shirt,” I muttered.

For some reason, watching her try to wipe that mud off with her pristine little sweater was making me feral.

“What do you even care?” she asked, shrugging her small shoulders and ignoring me as she patted her pockets and started checking in her bag.

I assumed she was looking for her keys.

“Why don’t you come sit down and we can have a chat?”

“Nope. No, thank you,” she said.

Rain started to fall, and I rolled my eyes to the heavens.

Her sweater was white.

Why God? Why must you test my strength this way?

Her big brown eyes widened as she continued to search her bag and pockets. The rain fell harder. It was almost blinding now, and the guys were grabbing their rucksacks and running to their cabin assignments. I didn't have to worry about them.

But her? I was worried, alright. Her car was smaller than one of those golf carts, and the road into this camp had been muddy when we got here and that was before this rain.

“Carolina, come inside,” I yelled over the boom of more thunder.

“What are you still doing here? Go away,” she mumbled.

I had two seconds of staring at her tight little buds peeking through her now see-through top before she realized two things at the same time.

First, that I was standing there, gaping at her glorious breasts, and second, she must have left her keys inside the car.

“No, no, no,” she growled and dropped her bag, typing rapidly on her phone.

Shit.

I felt like a huge asshole. I did all this. I fucked up this woman's day by acting like a

giant tool.

“Hey, Coach! That’s your cabin there. Me and the lads are off!” Koa yelled over the storm.

“That’s it, you are coming inside. We’ll get dry and figure this out,” I told her.

“What? I am not going with you!” she shouted as a bolt of lightning lit up the sky.

“Well, I’m not leaving you out here to drown,” I growled.

Then I did what I did best.

I used brute strength to get what I wanted. And that was her warm and dry, and tucked safely in my arms.

“Hold on,” I murmured, bending down and grabbing her behind the knees.

She yelped as I stood with her over my shoulder.

“Ah! Put me down! How dare you!”

“Oi! Stop wiggling or we’ll both fall in the mud,” I barked with a small slap against her sweet, curvy ass.

That got her attention.

She froze, but I kept that hand right on her plump posterior as I jogged up the stairs to my designated cabin.

“What’s the code?” I asked, taking a chance she’d know as I looked at the keyless

entry.

“They’re all set to 1234 until you change them.”

“That’s good,” I said, punching in the numbers quick as, then I crossed the threshold with my precious cargo.

“Okay. We’re inside now,” she said.

“Yep. That we are.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?” I asked, turning in a circle and looking for something I could use to wipe the rain off my face.

“Put me down!”

Oops.

I probably should have at that.

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Okay, someone pinch me.

One second, I was facing down a bearded mountain of a man, next I quit my job—thankfully out of my boss’ hearing range—then I locked my keys in my car, it started raining, and now, I was hanging ass over teakettle, just slung over some mountain-sized man’s shoulder like a sack of freaking potatoes!

What the heck is happening to my life?

“Put me down!” I yelled after we went inside his cabin and he’s still holding onto me like I weigh nothing at all.

Which was insane, I don’t weigh nothing. I’ve always been a realist, and realistically speaking I was a big girl.

Always was, always will be.

Heavy.

Thick.

Fat, some would and have said.

Or pleasantly plump , as my Dad characterized me, which really was not any better than being called fat.

But this guy, he just lifted me up and carried me around like I was one of those tiny

little waifs I used to wish I looked like so desperately when I was in high school.

“Put me down!” I repeated, and the oaf stopped short in his perusal of the cabin.

The hand on my ass squeezed, then froze as if he only realized he was inappropriately fondling me.

Wish I could have been righteously indignant, but the truth was, I kinda liked how it felt.

Being carried and caressed by a sexy giant was like top five bucket list, hands down.

Eeek! No. Bad girl!

Dear Lord, what was coming over me?

Obviously, it had been way too long since I’d gotten any kind of physical attention from a man.

The behemoth grunted as he bent over, lowering me to the floor carefully, like I was precious or something.

“Alright. Don’t throw a wobbly,” he muttered.

I admit, I had no idea what he meant by that. In fact, half of what he said was gibberish to me. And I was fairly certain it wasn’t a compliment.

Still, that accent was sexy as fuck, and the deep timbre of his voice seemed to slither right down to my girly bits, making them tingle and beg for attention.

Of course, that I found him attractive only pissed me off more.

I huffed out a breath, a little dizzy from being held upside down. Opening my eyes too quickly, the room was still spinning, and I would have tipped right over, were it not for his big, tattooed hands holding me up.

Holy fuck. Could he be any hotter?

“You alright, Caro Darlin’?” he murmured.

“What?”

“Uh, nothing,” he said, letting go of my waist to rub the back of his neck.

“I think we better find you something dry to put on,” he grumbled, and I noticed then he was looking at my chest and his cheeks, what I could see above his beard, were going all ruddy.

He turned and looked around, opening the front door and grabbing a bag someone had tossed up on his porch.

The wind was howling, and the rain was falling in buckets. The storm was definitely worse than the weather center had predicted.

“Shit. I won’t be able to leave,” I muttered, knowing full well that this far west storms tended to turn into hurricanes at the drop of a hat.

“Here,” he said.

He was holding a shirt out to me, something he must have found in the large duffle bag he was sifting through.

“Oh, um, thanks,” I murmured.

A shiver ran through me and since he'd already seen most of me through the stupid white shirt I wore, I figured why waste time playing coy?

Still, I gave him my back. I mean, I wasn't an exhibitionist.

Then I peeled the wet sweater off my body, trembling uncontrollably now that the cold had seeped in.

My bra was soaked too, and I knew it had to come off. I unhooked it, shrugging it off before I started putting my arms through the sleeves of his enormous shirt.

"Bloody fucking hell," he murmured, and I looked up, locking eyes with his in the reflection of the TV.

Uh oh.

"Oh my God! Turn around," I said, pulling his shirt over my head.

It smelled good. Spicy and masculine, and I wondered if he smelled the same.

"Not on your life," he rumbled and closed the space between us, spinning me around with one big hand on my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, my heart racing as I met his emerald fire stare.

There was a mixture of confusion and anticipation swirling within me, my breath hitching in my throat.

The intensity on his face held me captive, igniting something within me.

"This," he replied, his voice low and smooth, as he closed the distance between us.

Before I could even start to process what was happening, he pressed his mouth to mine.

The world around us faded in an instant. All I could feel was the warmth of his lips against my own.

It was electric—a rush of sensations that coursed through me, igniting every nerve ending.

This kiss was not soft or tentative. It was rough and deliberate. I moaned as his hands slid to the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

My mind raced, caught between the thrill of the moment and the weight of reality. I mean, I really didn't know this man past his name.

Dane Barret. Good name.

Oh, shut up, I told my inner voice.

But I couldn't help but fall into his arms as he kissed me deeper and more thoroughly than I'd ever been kissed before in my life.

Butterflies filled my stomach. But all too soon, those soft-winged flutters turned into pterodactyls beating their monster-sized wings, stirring up avalanches of emotion inside me.

This was too much too soon. But for the life of me, I could not push him away.

He felt big. And not in the sense that he was enormous, and I felt something equally large and hard pressing against my soft belly as he ravaged me with his lips.

Big as in important. Like destiny.

Fuck.

I should have pushed him away. Asked him what the hell was going on. But all I could do was lean into the kiss, surrendering to the heat that enveloped us.

Each heartbeat echoed in my ears, drowning out any logical thoughts.

It felt as if time stood still, the world outside our bubble falling away. I was lost in the intensity of his emerald eyes, now closed, as if he was savoring the moment just as much as I was.

I couldn't help but wonder how we had arrived here, two people caught in a whirlwind of emotions, each kiss unraveling the barriers I thought I had built around myself.

When we finally pulled away, breathless and wide-eyed, the reality of the moment hit me like a freight train.

"What was that?" I stammered, searching his face for answers, my heart still pounding in my chest.

I expected him to smirk, but he didn't offer a devil-may-care grin or snarky reply.

He looked every bit as bewildered as I felt.

"I don't know. But I don't want to stop."

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What was happening to me?

I was not a man who believed in fairytales and love at first sight nonsense. I didn't think I was particularly superstitious. But maybe that was just drummed into me by the media.

After all, my ancestors were spiritual people. We didn't perform the haka before games for shits and giggles. There was power in that ceremonial dance.

I had a fair mix of Māori and European blood. Most of the guys from back home did.

It shaped my identity, my connection to both cultures. So yeah, when I really thought about it, I did believe in magic.

It was a matter of faith. Of trust. A common thread that wove through my life and experiences, binding it all together.

This woman was magic.

From the moment I first laid eyes on her, I felt something I hadn't felt in years. She was unlike anyone I had ever met, with a presence that commanded attention and a spirit that radiated warmth.

It was as if the entire universe conspired to bring us together in that moment. I felt connected to her. Bonded in a way that transcended mere attraction.

Everything I felt ever since I first laid eyes on her was magic.

And kissing her?

Fuck me. Kissing her was like—if that wasn't magic, then I didn't know what was.

The feel of her soft skin pressed against me was a revelation. Desire flared to life in an instant, drowning out every other emotion. Like all the pent-up energy between us exploded into an inferno of lust and longing. It swirled around us like a living thing.

That she kissed me back stoked that primal hunger. Her lips were so damn inviting. Her flavor unique.

Delicious.

When our mouths met, it felt like the world around us just fucked right on off.

Time stood still. I lost myself to the feel and taste of her. The scent of her hair. The way she clung to me, like she couldn't get enough of me either.

“What was that?” she whispered.

Her chest heaved with the effort it took to catch her breath, and I knew that feeling all too well.

It mirrored the turmoil churning inside me. Like a tempest that refused to settle.

Lightning flashed outside, illuminating the room in sharp bursts. The storm raged on. Echoing the chaos in my heart. But even the wild winds and pounding rain paled compared to the turbulence brewing within me.

This was crazy. I was in no position to claim a woman. I had just started this job, and the last thing I needed was to complicate my life with romantic entanglements.

What if it didn't work out?

What if I got too close and things fell apart?

The thought sent a wave of doubt crashing over me.

But as I looked into her velvet brown eyes, I couldn't deny the fierce desire that flared within me.

It was primal, raw—a magnetic pull that seemed to draw me toward her despite the warnings echoing in my mind.

I wanted her so badly. Fuck. Maybe I even needed her.

There was something indescribable about this connection I felt. Like the universe had conspired to bring this woman into my life at this exact moment.

I felt it deep in my bones—a sense of fate, of rightness. It started as a whisper the second I saw her, and now, now it was roaring like a wild beast, urging me not to ignore it.

This wasn't a passing attraction. My feelings were more like a force of nature. Something that demanded acknowledgment.

The way she held my gaze, the fire in her spirit, spoke to me in a language that was beyond words.

No, I could not ignore it.

"I don't know. But I don't want to stop," I answered honestly, waiting with bated breath for her to decide.

It was intoxicating and terrifying all at once.

I yearned to explore this connection further. Was dying to dive headfirst into the mystery of who she was and what we could be together.

My Caro Darlin' was something extraordinary. I just knew it. And maybe, just maybe, we could be that together. It was right there, sizzling between us—the promise of adventure, passion, and a magic I didn't know I was missing.

I took a step closer, leaving not even air between us. The feel of her soft skin was driving me wild. All the unspoken possibilities were right there, tempting me like nothing else ever had.

Every instinct told me to embrace this moment, to explore the potential that shimmered in the air.

"I don't want to stop either," she whispered, her gaze heating as she licked her bottom lip.

The sound of thunder booming echoed like my heartbeat, matching the rhythm of my rocketing pulse.

I reached for her, wrapping my arms tightly around her curvy body, molding her to me. Fuck, she fit me just right. Like she was built to be trapped in my embrace.

"We go at your pace, Caro Darlin'," I whispered, meeting her gaze to make sure she understood.

"I need you to answer with words, Sweet," I said.

"Yes. I understand, please, Dane," she whimpered and nodded her head.

Her arms wrapped around my neck as she tugged me down to meet her plump lips. Her kiss tasted of desperation and desire and goddamn I felt both.

I knew it then and praised my luck. Carolina was caught up in the same spell as me. She felt that same intense awareness I felt.

Yes, I wanted her to know I respected her. But she needed me just as badly as I needed her. And I wasn't strong enough to deny us both.

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I wasn't the kind of woman men lost their heads over. At least, it never happened like this before.

Like lightning striking.

I only hoped when Dane recovered from whatever this was, he didn't leave a scar.

My body sizzled with unresolved need as his big hands roamed over me. He dropped plucking kisses on my mouth, sucking my tongue, my lips, everything he could reach as he undressed us both with skillful hands.

I wasn't exactly idle while this was going on, of course. Dane was sublime. His body was covered in thick, corded muscle, a smattering of hair, and gorgeous ink.

I traced the patterns with my fingertips, committing them to memory while I swallowed down every delicious growl and grunt.

He walked me backwards until my legs bumped the couch, and then he reversed us, so he was sitting, and I was standing like some sort of sacrifice before him.

"Oh, God," I moaned, dropping my head back and holding on to his shoulders to keep myself steady.

Dane licked a path from my neck, down the valley between my breasts, over my embarrassingly soft stomach, to the close cropped curls covering my needy sex.

My knees buckled, but his sure hands held me up. Quivering, I could barely

comprehend what he was doing as he parted my thighs and lifted me up.

“Wait. I’m too heavy,” I protested, but his glare stopped me mid-tirade.

As if to prove how ridiculous my statement was, he picked me up clear off the floor and draped my legs on his shoulders, both big hands of his gripping my hips and ass.

“I don’t know who told you that load of horseshit, but you just sit on my face like a good girl and let me show you how damn perfect you are,” he grunted, grabbing my ass and pressing me closer to his face.

Then he opened his mouth, his long tongue snaked out and Dane Barret made out with my dripping pussy like a man on a mission.

Pure need raged through me like a fever or wildfire. It was ferocious.

Exquisite.

Pleasure swelled like the tide, threatening to drown me. All I needed was a little push. As if he knew, Dane hummed deep in his throat while latching onto my clit with skilled lips.

The vibration from that lusty sound was enough to send me spiraling into orgasm.

I barely had time to come down from that high when he started kindling the flames again. Somehow, during those precious seconds when I’d closed my eyes just trying to ground myself, he’d lowered us both to the carpet in front of the fireplace.

“Need you, Caro Darlin’,” he growled, settling between my thighs.

I heard the familiar tear of a foil packet before I raised myself on my elbows, gaze

riveted to the proud erection jutting between his gloriously thick thighs.

Licking my lips, I watched as he rolled the latex onto his girthy cock and fitted himself at my entrance.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, his emerald gaze glittering down at me in the darkness.

“I’m ready,” I replied, my voice husky as I clung to him with wanton abandon.

We both groaned as Dane pressed inside my tight sheath. It had been a while for me, but even so, no one I’d ever been with was in his class.

Holy fuck.

“You’re so wet. So fucking hot and wet,” he growled and claimed my lips, cupping my face with his large hands as his hips rocked into me.

I met his thrusts, rolling my hips to meet him, needing that connection. It shouldn’t have felt this way. Like we’d done this a thousand times. Like my body recognized his.

My eyes remained open, fixed on his stare as we built fires with our passion. Stoking the flames with every caress, every nibble, every claim we staked on each other.

I never did this. Had sex with someone I didn’t know. But something about this, about him , just felt so right.

I had zero expectations. I meant, for after we were finished satisfying this totally extraordinary desire we had for one another.

But the way he filled me, the way his thick dick seemed to stroke every inch of me, finding secret pleasures, well, that was already beyond any hopes or fantasies I'd ever built. Dane was a superb lover.

But something about the way he watched me, intent on bringing my pleasure to its greatest heights, well, that touched more than my body, that touched my soul.

"Dane," I moaned as he started to move faster, harder, sliding in even deeper.

My clit throbbed, I needed to come. His lips closed around my neck, and he bit me once, making me gasp before rising to his knees.

"So fucking good. That's it, Caro Darlin'. Take it, take me deeper," he grunted, lifting me so I was practically sitting on his lap as he pounded into me.

"You're so deep," I moaned, arching into him, scratching his thighs as he brought me to new heights.

My gaze was stuck on Dane. This gorgeous mountain of a man looked like a god as he moved inside me.

So fucking hot and perfect.

His brows furrowed, and his chest started heaving. Dane lifted my legs, pressing them wider apart, then he reached for my clit, sliding it across the hardened nub, through the slick of my arousal, again and again, and again, until I was writhing beneath him.

"Need you to come, Caro Mine. Come for me. Now," he grunted, pressing harder, and that was it.

I came. Hard.

My eyes widened as his movements grew jerky and I gasped as I watched Dane chase his own pleasure while drawing out mine. Endless aftershocks and flutters wracked my body as Dane pumped his hips once, twice more. Then finally, he froze, his expression so intense it was beautiful to watch.

I couldn't have imagined when I received that email earlier this morning that this was where I would end up, having sex in the afternoon with a man I hardly knew while a storm thundered on outside. But even if I had known, I wouldn't have changed a thing.

Dane slid out of my well-used sex, removing the condom with a tissue he pulled out of a box on the side table. He took two more and gently patted my pussy, making me squeak.

But he wasn't done then. He grabbed the pillows and the throw blanket that were on the couch, and built us a tiny little makeshift bed, then he pulled me into his arms and snuggled me close.

"Are you okay? Was I too rough?" he whispered, kissing my temple as he held me.

I lifted my head, making sure he could see my eyes when I answered.

"You were perfect, Dane. Absolutely perfect."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I smirked, dropping a soft kiss on his chest and reclaiming my spot there.

"You were perfect too, Caro Mine."

I grinned as his chest vibrated with his rumbled words. Dane rubbed my back, kissing

my head, and keeping me warm with his body, and it wasn't too long before we both fell asleep.

Which would have been fine. If not for the fact he had thirty some-odd rugby players waiting to hear from him. Half of whom came barging into his cabin once the rain had stopped some ninety minutes or so later.

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Bloody fucking hell.

The woman was a sorceress. She fucking had to be. I hadn't even known her for more than a handful of minutes before I was buried balls deep inside her tight, wet heat.

It wasn't the fast jump to sex that was so shocking. It was the fact that I was fairly certain I was going to spend the rest of my life with this woman that had me silent as a fucking mime.

The sounds of her soft breathing were so goddamn cute, I grinned as I wrapped her in my arms, content to just stay right there all afternoon. But I must have dozed off too, because the next thing I knew, the heavy pounding of trainer clad stomping up the small porch to my cabin door had me jumping awake.

"Hey Coach, the fellas and I were—whoa, lucky cunt," Tank muttered.

A chorus of ohs and curses and other such fuckery rose inside the room and my poor little Caro Darlin' squeaked and ducked as much of her as she could under the throw blanket.

"GET THE BOLLOCKS OUT OF HERE!" I roared, tucking her under my own bulk to try to keep her out of view.

Three minutes later we were alone again, and I could hear the men hoofing it all the way across the fucking campground talking way too fucking loud about this here.

"Oh my God!" Carolina moaned.

She had her hands over her eyes, undoubtedly trying to shut me and this whole situation out. But I wasn't about to let that happen.

“Look at me, Caro Darlin’. Come on, drop those hands,” I instructed, using my best coach voice.

She did, and I wanted to clap at the tiny victory, but I refrained. Barely.

“I know a lot has happened in just a little while. And I know you’ve got some big thoughts going on in that pretty little head of yours. But know this while you’re considering how to proceed,” I said, going for broke. “Something about you calls to me, woman. I think this might be one of those once in a lifetime moments. I’d love to take time to woo you properly, get you to trust I mean business, but I can see it on your face that you’re about to run. Tell me you’re not,” I challenged her.

“Dane, look, this was a mistake. I mean, we don’t know each other?—”

“I know what you taste like when you’re coming on my mouth. I know the sounds you make. Every whimper and moan. Fuck, Caro, I know how your pussy feels when it’s squeezing my cock, begging me to fuck you deeper, harder. Don’t say we don’t know each other, because I know you, Caro Mine. And you know me too,” I rumbled.

“Good sex does not make a relationship,” she sputtered, shaking her head.

“This wasn’t good sex. This was fucking phenomenal sex, and you know it. Come on, what are you scared of?” I asked, and really, I wanted to know.

She huffed out a breath, squaring her shoulders even as she hid her sweet body from me with that tiny blanket.

“Okay, you’re right. I’m scared. Scared of being hurt, of being used, of being seen as

just another stupid woman who fucked somebody on the job?—”

“Hey, don’t talk about yourself like that,” I said.

“Before I started working for Mr. Knight, I worked for a tech firm in New York. The owner was this really smart hipster kind of guy, about fifteen years older than me, but nice looking and attentive. I had an affair with him,” she confessed, and my whole body tensed.

“Don’t tell me you’re in love with this guy?—”

“Love? Oh God, no! He was a total piece of shit. He was married and used me to cheat. I was publicly shamed and forced to leave my job, and it was awful.”

“Fuck, Carolina, I am so sorry that happened to you. But what does that have to do with us?”

She inhaled, motioning between us.

“It’s just, you work for Mr. Knight, too. If this gets out, we could be fired. Or worse. People will think I slept with you because I was trying to get noticed in the company or something.”

My heart squeezed, and I wondered if she even knew what she just admitted.

“Okay, I understand the problem, and I’ve got a solution.”

“What solution?”

“Go out with me, steady like.”

“Are you serious? What are you talking about?” she asked, her face adorably scrunched up in confusion.

“Dating. You and me. We agree to see each other exclusively,” I said, grabbing her by the waist and dragging her across my lap.

She dropped the blanket, wrapping her legs around me as she nuzzled my nose. Her lips parted. The feel of her hot sex sliding up and down my shaft was too enticing to ignore.

“You’re crazy,” she murmured.

“About you,” I growled, nipping her lip between my teeth.

She flexed her hips, rubbing herself on me. Coating me in her juices and I kissed her mouth. My lips were hard and relentless, seeking absolution only she could give.

“Oh God, Dane. That feels so good,” she moaned as I slid my dick along her slit, rubbing myself on her needy little clit.

“You can’t deny this is good, eh? You and me. Like magic,” I whispered.

“Please,” she begged, but I stayed her with my hands on her hips.

“Say yes, Caro Darlin’. Say you’ll do it. You’ll go out with me,” I said, sliding my hand between us and pressing two digits into her ready sheath.

“You don’t mean it.”

“I mean it, Carolina. Fuck, you’re so wet,” I groaned, her need soaking my skin, making me pant with lust.

“This is madness. You’ll get tired of me.”

“Never. I promise.”

“How can you be sure?” she whimpered as I dragged my fingers in and out of her torturously slow, using my thumb to rub small circles around her needy little nubbin.

“Because I believe everything happens for a reason. I thought God hated me, making me come to America to coach a sport I thought had given up on me. But I see the truth now. When they told me I was going to Carolina, they didn’t mean Consequence. They meant to you. My Carolina.”

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears, and I had a split second of real fear when I thought she’d deny me, deny us. But then she smiled. And the whole fucking world tilted on its axis.

“Okay. You’re right. I can’t deny this.”

“Are you saying yes?”

“Yes. I am saying yes,” she said, plastering her mouth to mine.

Carolina reached behind me for a condom, tearing the package open and sliding it on my cock. Never breaking our kiss, she put it on, then used my chest to lean on as she raised herself up and placed me at her entrance.

“So fucking perfect,” I groaned as she took me inside her hot curvy body, making me a part of her.

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“Mr. Barret!”

“Are you excited about the upcoming exhibition game against Anthem?”

“Mr. Barret, why does Carolina have two teams?”

“Coach Barret, who’s the woman you arrived with? I thought you were a bonafide bachelor?”

“Are you single, Coach?”

“I heard you two moved in together after knowing each other for just one day! Is that true, Coach?”

“Settle down everyone, I will get to your questions in a moment,” Dane said, his expression annoyed.

Two months had passed since we spent that tumultuous afternoon in his cabin, and honestly, it was the best time of my life. I never did turn in my resignation, but I did ask Mr. Knight to transfer my position from his assistant to that of one of the Carolina Rovers team managers in charge of PR.

It was a great switch and a better use of my marketing degree. Not to mention, I was learning a shit ton about rugby.

I knew Dane wasn’t about to discuss our personal life with the few reporters who came to this press conference, but even if he did, I wasn’t worried.

Sure, our romance was a whirlwind. But the best ones always were. Sometimes it just happened like that.

All I knew was I was happy. For the first time in my life, I had a man who loved me exactly how I was, and even better, I loved him right back.

Every night, when we finished loving on each other, Dane always asked me why I agreed to stay with him so quickly. And every night I told him the same thing.

“Because you gave me a reason to try, Dane.”