

Chapter 2

S i e n a

“Slow down. For the love of God, act natural.”

I hiss the words at Shyla’s back, hurrying to catch up as she hustles down the UOB football field at a clip that announces that we’re somewhere we’re very much not supposed to be.

I’m certainly no stranger to being in places I shouldn’t—trespassing, breaking and entering, outrunning beach security when they catch me skinny-dipping in the bay in the middle of the night.

But this particular scenario—interloping on a busy college football stadium in broad daylight among dozens of people—requires a different kind of finesse.

The kind of cool and calm Shyla clearly doesn’t possess. Her bright blond hair flutters behind her as she hurries across the busy football field toward the black, white, and maroon husky painted at the fifty-yard line.

“Act natural?” Shy throws over her shoulder with a laugh. “What’s natural about two women and a toddler loitering around a football field? I can’t believe I let you drag me into this.”

“You can’t? You’d think after eighteen years of friendship, you’d be used to all the dragging. And there’s no one I’d rather share this

moment with than my two besties.” We come to a stop in the very middle of the field, and I nuzzle the blond, curly-haired two-year-old hiked over Shy’s hip, whispering, “Don’t tell your mom, but I can’t wait to corrupt you the second you turn sixteen.”

Shy laughs as Rosalie clumsily grabs for my face. “Can’t you at least wait until she’s twenty-one?”

“Says the woman who got us our first fake IDs at sixteen.”

“*You* got us those fake IDs.”

“Oh, right. That was definitely me.” I tweak one of Rosie’s tiny pigtails. “My dad was so pissed when he found those. Stomped around the house for days.”

I take in the field around us. We’re surrounded by several tall, deliciously built men tossing footballs. Some of them hopping around sets of orange cones laid out. A couple running laps at the far end of the field. And, strangely, a towering, dark-haired man with the tightest bubble butt I’ve ever seen, chatting up some girl with a massive German shepherd on a leash.

The sight makes me breathe easier. If Shy, Rosie, and I aren’t supposed to be here, that dog certainly isn’t. It’ll be the perfect scapegoat in case of emergency.

Your Honor, I call the happy, oversized dog to the witness stand.

The man tosses us a glance over his shoulder. I can’t make him out too well from here. But by the way he lingers on us, I think he knows we shouldn’t be here.

For some reason, that only makes me laugh.

“So, now that we made it, what do you want to do?” Shy asks, drawing back my attention.

“Honestly, Shy? I didn’t think that far ahead.” I hook my thumbs around the straps of my white overalls and turn on the spot, eyeing the stands towering behind both sidelines. “I kind of wanted to make it down here just to say I did.”

I find what I’m looking for in the top left corner of the far stands.

Two seats that look like all the others around. But those seats were home to some of the best nights of my life. The very best memories with Dad during the college football season.

Mom would join us sometimes, as would Shy and her parents, but football was our thing. Mine and Dad's. It started mere months after Dad caught me breaking into their home and raiding the kitchen in the middle of the night. After Mom and Dad took me in at thirteen, like I'd been theirs all along.

"Oh, Cee." Shy loops an arm around my waist and tugs me into her side when my breath hitches. I shut my eyes and employ every ounce of self-control not to tear up. "He really would have gotten a kick out of seeing you down here."

I manage a pinched smile. "Yeah. He would have."

Which is why Shy, Rosie, and I spent the last twenty minutes playing covert ninjas inside the stadium, trying to make it here without ending up in the slammer.

This time last year, on the first anniversary of his death, I'd settled for spending a couple extra hours at Ship Happens, the bait and tackle shop I inherited when Dad died. Spent the rest of the night listening to Mom, and Carla and Evan—Shy's mother and father—tell stories about him over a cribbage board.

This year, though, it's like my dad was calling me here. All the way to Oakwood, the next town over from Baycrest where I grew up, both before and after the new life he gave me.

And it wasn't about coming here to sit in our old season seats. For whatever reason, I felt like Dad wanted me *here*.

Down on this field. Standing right in the middle, where I am now.

My gaze affixes on a football being thrown nearby. It arcs perfectly between a guy in an official-looking UOB T-shirt and the aforementioned bubble-butt owner, who shuffles to make the catch with the kind of grace, agility, and glutes I shamelessly admire.

"Daddy," Rosie coos.

“That’s not Daddy, Ro. Daddy is away, remember?” *Misses her dad*, Shy mouths at me when I shoot her a curious look. My heart pinches. There’s a lot of that going around.

Shy turns her attention over my shoulder, in the direction of the guy I’d just been ogling. “He’s cute. You want Rosie to wing-woman you an introduction?”

I *think* we’re looking in the same guy. It’s slightly confusing, considering *cute* is the last thing I’d label him. Even from here, I can tell he’s something else entirely. He’s got two full tattoo sleeves, for crying out loud.

“Hell no. He looks like one of them.”

“Oh, yes. The big bad athletes you refuse to go near after Tom. Shame.” She tilts her head, perhaps just now noticing his killer ass. Not sure what took her so long. “Here, let me take a picture of you on the field. Your mom will love this.”

Shy’s right. Mom had always been more tolerant of the batshit habits I brought into their home—the sneaking out at all hours of the night, cutting out of class, slowly corrupting good-girl Shy when we became friends after my parents took me in. Found them entertaining, even.

I hand Shy my phone and shake out my shoulders and the heavy weight of grief off my chest. Gussy up my hair for the picture, straighten the straps of my overalls.

Ignore the sudden commotion on the field behind me.

“Hey—*hey*—watch your head, lady—”

Shy’s eyes go wide, tracing a trajectory in the sky behind me. She drops my phone and shields Rosie with her body just as something painfully solid smashes into me, knocks the wind out of me. Sends me careening forward. Flailing my arms to break my fall, keep from smashing my face on the field beneath me.

I land on the ground with a shocked yelp. Face down, overalled

ass up. And the wrecking ball that just did its best to obliterate me lands behind me.

Or rather, he landed draped *over* me, in a melee of muscled arms wrapped around my waist to catch me. Break my fall as though the damage hadn't already been done. A thud of thick, solid thighs hits the backs of mine, and the juncture of bent-over hips slaps into my ass in a way I'd very much appreciate if I hadn't just nearly swallowed a mouthful of grass.

All things considered—and by all things, I mean the stinging pain in my elbows and knees—this isn't so bad.

Mr. Wrecking Ball may need to brush up on his knight in shining armor skills, but he smells like a delicious mix of heady pine and clean man-sweat. His body certainly feels like the impressive product of the aforementioned man-sweat, all hard and strong behind me.

Really, this isn't so bad at all.

His arms clench around me, lifting me with perfect ease to allow me to plant my hands underneath me. He dips his head, peering over my shoulder—trying to make eye contact I'm frankly unready to return given the way he's still cuddling me doggy-style on this well-attended football field.

"You all right?"

I clear my throat. "I definitely didn't expect to get trampled close to death today, but there are much worse ways to die."

Flash.

Our heads snap up.

Shy peers over my phone with as close to a shit-eating grin as I've ever seen on her. "Now, this is one hell of a picture."

Mr. Wrecking Ball peels himself off me and scrambles to his feet. Sitting back on my heels, I'm struck by the length of this man's shadow. He's a giant.

“I am so sorry.” He steps around me as I brush the grass off my overalls.

What do you know? Mr. Wrecking Ball happens to be the grace, agility, and glutes I watched catch that football a minute ago.

Up close, I see he’s much more than a backside and athleticism. He’s high, sharp cheekbones and a perfect jawline. A full mouth. Wavy dark hair, a little floppy on top, and an intriguing scar slashing across his left cheekbone. Full tattoo sleeves along both arms. He’s deep, earnest brown eyes that belong around your mother’s dinner table at Thanksgiving, as he regales the family with wholesome stories of cat rescues and road-side cleanups.

Then the corner of his mouth stretches in a smile and . . . no. I was wrong. This isn’t a nice boy you simply bring home to Mom. This is a man who charms the pants off your parents, opens the car door for you after dinner, and drives you to a dark corner of a nearby parking lot to fuck you lights-out in the back seat, because he couldn’t wait ’til you got home.

Also, he looks incredibly familiar.

“I hope you’re okay.” He holds out a hand to help me up with an impressively fretful furrow to his brow. Once I’m on my feet he reaches for me again, eyeing my grass-stained front. As though he means to brush me down but then thinks better of touching a strange woman in the breast area.

What a shame.

“Totally fine.” I wipe off my overalls. “Can’t say the same for my knees tomorrow, but who hasn’t woken up a little banged up after a doggy-style tryst on the ground?”

The man chuckles almost uncertainly. Like he wants to laugh but can’t decide whether it’s particularly gentlemanly to laugh at a joke like that. His gaze drifts to Shy, as though seeking her permission.

Where the hell have I seen him before? The face, that build . . . I’m positive that I know him.

He seems to relax when Shy offers her own laugh and hands me my phone. “Here, I assume the photo shoot’s over.”

“Daddy.” Rosie throws out her arms toward the man.

“Not Daddy.” Shy kisses the top of Rosie’s head and shoots Mr. Wrecking Ball an apologetic look.

“She’s very sweet.” He waves at Rosie. Then he zeroes in on my phone, and there’s definitely no trace left of that amusement. “Hey . . . I know this is probably a weird thing to ask, but is there any chance you can delete that picture?”

I swipe at my phone, bringing up the photo in question. There I am on all fours, pink in the face, hair disheveled, with this beautiful man plastered on top of me. And we look *good* together.

I turn the screen around, letting him have a look. “Are you sure you don’t want me to send you a copy instead? This is definitely *plaster above your bed* material.”

He peers at the screen one long moment, and I certainly don’t miss the twitch at his jaw as he stares at us all tangled up. Nor the way his eyes find me beyond my phone, taking me in like it’s the first time he’s seeing me properly.

He clears his throat, gaze cutting to Shy before settling back on me. “It’s not really a good time for me to be seen having a public . . . What was it? ‘Doggy-style tryst on the ground’?”

“Oh, now I’m intrigued. You’re saying there’s usually a good time for it?”

His lips twitch. “You’d be doing me a favor. If you deleted the picture.”

My thumb moves over my screen. “There. All gone.”

“Thanks.” He pushes the hair off his forehead a little uncertainly and holds my gaze, doing his very best to hypnotize me with the deep brown of his eyes and that hint of a smile. It might have worked, had I not been too busy trying to place him.

Shy hikes Rosie up her hip. “Cee, maybe we should ”

She indicates the opening under the stands we'd snuck out from. Because we're not supposed to be here, and we're definitely not supposed to be drawing attention to ourselves.

"Right. Well, it was nice to meet you. Sort of." I hook an arm around Shy and start leading us back to the exit, but the man catches up quickly.

"What brings you out here, anyway? The school only gives special permission if you're working with one of their trainers." Shy and I double our steps. Mr. Wrecking Ball tucks his hands into the pockets of his black athletic shorts. He's keeping pace with us, and without looking I can tell he keeps shooting sidelong glances my way. "By the awkward silence, I'll assume this isn't exactly sanctioned?"

"Of course it is." I don't slow down in the slightest. "We're upstanding citizens, me and Shy. Rosie especially. And I resent the accusation."

"She's an alum," Shy adds. "Helping out the Huskies with . . . you know. Their social media. Hence the photo shoot you ruined."

"Exactly." I suck in my cheeks to keep from laughing, patting Shy's arm as we move around a set of orange pylons on the field. "We'll get 'em next time, when the mean man isn't here to run me over."

"The Huskies' social media, huh?"

The edge in his voice tells me he didn't buy that for a second. Also, that he's willing to make us pay for it.

Mr. Wrecking Ball cuts us off, coming to a stop in front of us, forcing us still. He shoots a quick grin at Shy. Or rather, at the overload of cuteness in her arms.

He isn't wearing UOB-issued clothing, so maybe he doesn't work here. His friend is, though. The guy with the light brown hair and curious frown making his way over to us now.

Shit.

I'm going to get a two-year-old imprisoned. Her mother will kill me.

Mr. Wrecking Ball settles an amused gaze on me. "I'll tell you what. You need a good shot of the field for the Huskies? I know where to get you one."