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## Chapter 1

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**E**velyn's feet hurt.

She wasn't big on parties. She went to them because she felt like she should, but she wasn't great at small talk, and loud music made her slightly uncomfortable. Ivy and Jared were good friends of hers, though, so she'd dolled herself up and come along to Ivy's birthday like a good friend would. And she was regretting wearing her pretty, new high heels, because her feet hurt. *Badly.*

Whoever said heels were invented so women couldn't run away had clearly been in the right. The shoes that had looked so pretty and elongated her legs just right in the shop were now just doing double duty as torture devices. Though that could just be that she'd been ducking between groups of people for three hours to avoid running out of things to talk about. The other side effect of that habit was that she'd had the same conversation approximately thirty times. *How have you been? Are you still working at the gym? Any man on the scene?* It was that last one that cut her, because the answer was always the same—no man, happy being single, thank you for your interest, have a good night.

But the true reason behind her persistent singleness had

walked in maybe an hour after she'd arrived, and Amos Campbell was looking *good*. But then, he always looked good. He carried the bulk of his six-foot-something body with easy grace, muscles rippling with his every movement. How a man could look like that when he ran a café packed full of sweets and pastries was beyond Evelyn's comprehension. He wasn't even very often at the gym where she worked, though she knew he held a membership. She'd seen him work out maybe fifteen times in the year that she'd worked there, and each time, seeing the man work up a sweat had almost put her into heart palpitations.

Amos Campbell was the real reason Evelyn hadn't committed to any of the half dozen dates she'd been on since arriving in Shepherd's Creek a year and a half ago. None of them measured up to the gorgeousness of the down-to-earth café owner. It had come to the point that she couldn't go into the coffee shop without blushing the colour of a tomato, and she was in there twice a week, so the man who barely noticed her probably just thought she was perennially sunburnt to within an inch of her life. Unless he'd actually noticed her response to him, which would arguably be worse.

Because Evelyn wasn't Amos' type of woman—and everyone in town knew what women Amos went for—put-together, confident, and plentiful. Ev was none of those things. While she was road-tripping her way to Shepherd's Creek, she'd lived out of the back of her car—comfortably—for three months, because she didn't give much of a shit about clothes. Her red hair curled in ringlets that refused to be tamed. With the freckles across her nose, she looked more like a Raggedy Ann doll than a supermodel. And she wasn't the kind of openly available woman that Amos went through like pairs of jeans. It might not be fair to call him the town bike, but if you were just looking for a good time, everyone knew Amos Campbell was not going to try to stick around for a long time.

Which begged the question—why had he inspired a crush of this massive extent in her? She wasn't even usually attracted to

classically handsome men, among whom, Amos, with his cut cheekbones and permanently stubbled jawline, definitely counted. She liked rugged men, though, and he classified as one of them, even if he was only eight years older than she was. Not that she'd done her background reading or anything. Definitely not snooped through his personal details in his membership file at the gym.

She'd definitely snooped through his file at the gym.

She couldn't explain it, the draw she felt to this man who, as far as she was aware, didn't know her beyond sometimes remembering her coffee order. It had all started when she'd seen him with his puppy, standing in the street outside the café and holding it out to show it to a little girl. It was a tiny little thing and looked even smaller next to such a big man, but he had picked it up and cradled it in his hands so gently, it had melted her heart from twenty-five paces. And then the little creature started peeing right through his fingers and directly onto his shoes, but Amos just let out a laugh that could have powered the whole town for a month and repositioned the puppy so the stream missed his boots. And Ev had melted just a bit for him, but like a snowball just starting to roll down a mountain, it had only grown worse from there.

And now, he was standing over on the other side of the room from her, and she could feel her face getting hotter just by his proximity. Her fair redhead's skin allowed her to hide nothing, and having Amos in the same room, laughing his booming laugh, running a big hand across his close-cropped, dark blonde hair, made her want things she could never have.

Because Amos Campbell wouldn't want a shy, retiring receptionist when he could have legions of beautiful women. The town player had far too many options to settle on little old Evelyn Johnson. Not that she wanted to be just another of his women, to be looked at by the folks of Shepherd's Creek as just one more of Amos' conquests. It was just that... well... she kind of wanted to be his woman.

Strike that. She *really* wanted to be his woman. The sort of

want that had her moaning his name when playing with her battery-operated-boyfriend, that had her blushing every time she even walked through the door of the coffee shop that bore his name. She wanted him to want her, with a desperation so fierce, it almost felt like she could force him into wanting her back. But so far, it hadn't worked, and she'd been waiting for him to notice her for too damn long. It was time and past to get over this crush.

And everyone knew the best way to get over one man was to get under another.

So, that was her mission for tonight: find another man to foster a crush on. Someone who could help her get over this doomed infatuation with Amos. If only she could find a way to see past him to anyone else.

She exited what felt like her thirtieth small talk conversation of the night and ran into Ivy in the kitchen when she went to get a drink of water. "Big party, huh?"

"You know the eighty-percent rule?" Ivy said, swiping a hand over her forehead. "The one where only eighty percent of the people who RSVP actually show up? That is not in effect tonight."

"Can I help with anything? Want me to take some food around?" She gestured to the mountain of finger food on the kitchen counter.

"Actually, could you do me a favour?" Ivy looked reluctant to ask. "It might take a trip or two, but we need more ice. Would you mind grabbing some more from the freezer in the basement?"

"How many do we need?"

"One for each of the buckets, so I guess about five? It might take you a few laps."

"I work in a gym," Evelyn protested with a laugh. "I'm sure I can handle it."

"You're a wonder. Thanks, Ev."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Evelyn walked down the stairs into the quiet chill of the basement.

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Amos was having a terrible night. He had actually been looking forward to coming out tonight—owning his own business as well as functioning as its head chef meant he rarely had time to relax—but he'd neglected to consider the way his past would catch up with him when he set foot outside of the limits of his café.

Amos liked sex. He'd never made a secret of that fact, and once he had grown from a lanky teenager into a relatively well-built man, he'd never had to work particularly hard for it. The fact that he had a lot of women and rarely took one into his bed more than once had never troubled him, until six months ago. Until his mother, deep in her dementia, had confided in the stranger she thought him to be about her concern with her son "whoring himself around". She'd never again recognised him well enough that he could ask her about the confession. That he could ask why she'd never told him she was ashamed of the way he picked up and put down women like hot coals.

It wasn't until he'd decided to change his ways that he realised the whoring-around thing pretty well described the way a lot of people thought about him. He'd grown up in this town, started his own business from scratch, contributed to the community as best he knew how, but for some reason, the only thing people had seen of him was his bedroom habits. He could hear the joke in the way people talked about him, Casanova Amos, with him as the punch line. *Had a bad breakup? Don't worry, just see Amos. Problems with your husband? I'm sure Amos will be happy to help you out.* And the women of Shepherd's Creek, whom he'd once appreciated in all their forms and glory, now seemed determined to lead him astray. It was like they couldn't believe he'd made the decision to reform himself, and once he'd tried to explain it enough times that he could recite the speech from memory, he just stopped explaining. Just started saying no. Which was easier, but arguably no more effective. There were still always the women with wandering

hands or flirting that wouldn't quit. He still couldn't get a beer at the Local without being propositioned, and when he said no, there was always this expectant pause, like they were all waiting for the punch line of the joke. *What do you mean, no? You're Amos Campbell.* Like his entire identity was comprised of the things he'd once done with his cock. They couldn't fathom that he might not be interested; that's what his reputation had done for him, made him into some kind of Dial-A-Dick, always on call, no matter what.

And that hurt.

He wished his mother had told him years before that he should clean up his act. He wished he'd never started his manwhoring ways to begin with, because while he'd once said he'd never regret the time he'd spent with all the wonderful women he'd known, he had found that, actually, he could. Because it had all been meaningless, a mindless seeking of pleasure he could no longer understand. Why had he been so obsessed with getting his dick wet, to begin with? Couldn't he just have spent a little more time getting personal with his right hand and avoided all of this in the first place?

It was the shame that made him sick now, especially because, since walking in the door of the party, he'd already spotted three women he knew biblically. And that was just in the one *room*. One of them was slowly but unsubtly making her way over to him, and he shifted around the groups, trying to keep people between the two of them.

It didn't work.

"Hi, Amos," Bea Barrie purred, sidling up to him.

"Hi, Bea," Amos said in complete resignation. He looked around for an exit strategy.

"How have you been?" Bea asked.

"Good, thanks," Amos returned, doing his best to shut down the conversation.

"That's great. I've been good too, you know."

"Really?" He desperately tried to make eye contact with Jared

over the top of the sea of people between them. Surely, his host was obligated to get him out of this damn situation.

"Yeah, really good. You know what would make me heaps better, though?"

"What?" He was barely paying close enough attention to realise she was still speaking.

Bea slid one hand around his waist and pressed her body up against his. "You could."

He snapped his head around so fast, he almost smacked his chin into her nose where her face was moving toward his. As though he'd just take a two-word invitation and latch on to her lips. Was that really who he had been around women like Bea? So willing to leap into bed with them that all it had taken was a member of the fairer sex telling him to jump? So hungry for the touch of a woman that he'd taken anything that was offered to him?

Firmly, he pulled her arm from around his waist and set it back by her side, then he took a step back. "Bea, I'm sorry, but I'm not interested."

She didn't take the hint, sashaying closer to him once more. "Come on, Amos. We had so much fun together." Then she put the final nail in the coffin in Amos' eyes, though she didn't seem to know it. She added, "This isn't like you."

"Jared!" Amos burst out. His host finally turned to look his way. "You still need help with that stuff?"

*What?* Jared mouthed. Amos flicked his eyes down toward Bea, all but suctioned to his side, and Jared's face cleared with understanding.

"Yeah, could you give me a hand?" he called across the people between them.

"I'll see you another time," Amos told Bea, hoping fate made a liar of him but knowing that she'd be at the café for her morning coffee tomorrow, the same as every other day.

"I sure hope so," she said with a seductive smile. It only had the effect of making him feel sick.

He carved his way through the collected people to meet Jared.

"What was that about?" his host asked.

"She attached herself to me," Amos explained. "I needed an out. What can I help with?"

"Women, am I right?" asked Jared, who had been happily married for seven years and had a two-year-old daughter whom he loved with all his heart. "Why'd you need to escape?"

"She wouldn't listen when I said no. You know, if I were a woman, we'd call that sexual harassment. There'd be a Me-Too movement in my name already."

"If you're looking for sympathy," Jared said drily, "you will not find it here. You made your bed when you let that many women into it."

"I know, I know," Amos said heavily. "It just bugs me when they won't listen." He hated the tone that came into his voice that made him feel like he was whining. He knew intellectually that his concerns were real, that his history didn't make him less entitled to respect than any other man. But it was hard to remember that, when others seemed so much less inclined to give him that same respect.

"I get that. Come on, brother, I'll put you to work. I need some more ice. Reckon you can get some from the basement?"

Amos cracked his neck one way, then the other. "If it'll get me out of this room, I'm your man."

He followed Jared to the door at the top of the stairs leading to the basement before they heard Ivy call his name.

"Jared, can you please convince your daughter to go to sleep?" she asked from the end of the hallway.

"Oh, she's my daughter when you don't want to take her up to bed?" Jared said, but his tone was fond.

"If she wasn't your daughter, she'd be a damn sight less stubborn," Ivy said with a grin.

"You right here, man?" Jared asked Amos. "Freezer's on the left, past the washing machine. You can't miss it."



Amos gave him the thumbs up and headed down into the basement.