

THE PASSIONATE SHEPHERD TO HIS LOVE

Come live with me, and be my love;  
And we will all the pleasures prove  
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,  
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,  
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks  
By shallow rivers to whose falls  
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses,  
And a thousand fragrant posies;  
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle  
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool  
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;  
Fair lined slippers for the cold,  
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy-buds,  
With coral clasps and amber studs:  
And, if these pleasures may thee move,  
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherds' swains shall dance and sing  
For thy delight each May-morning:  
If these delights thy mind may move,  
Then live with me, and be my love.

— CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1599)

# Chapter One

AUTUMN 2000

CONSTANCE MARIE BALTIMORE. I'D HATED THE NAME since I could write it. Naturally, I blamed my mother. She was in her Harlequin Romance phase and Dad had been reading way too many books on how to keep expectant mothers happy. Mom thought that Sarah, Katie, and Jessica were all too plain, too *common* names for a second daughter. In grade school, I begged for the nickname "Connie," but even that grated on me.

*I'm going to get it legally changed*, I decided as I sat on a toilet in my high school restroom. Well, squatting was more like it. The wood in the toilet a few inches under my butt read *PISS HERE* in crooked letters, and it gave me the creeps to think someone actually spent the time to carve it in. I squatted as my thighs burned with lactic acid, trying not to let the sharp crackle of paper alert anyone that I was putting on a pad.

The door opened, and two girls clicked their way to the communal sinks.

"When did you realize you loved him?" asked a breathless voice.

The other girl giggled. "I know exactly when. We were lying in bed and he was staring into my eyes. He said I was the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Get *out!*"

"It's true. I think I want to marry him."

"But you're only seventeen! Are you sure?"

The faucet opened, and paper towels scraped from the dispenser. "More sure than I am of anything."

"God, I envy you."

"Don't envy me," said the girl as they walked out the door. "You'll find yours soon enough."

I sighed, unable to stop a flood of jealousy. I'd never been in love. In all my eighteen years, I'd never had a serious boyfriend. All five of my first dates were total disasters. Either the guy only wanted in my pants, or we had zero in common. People said you had to kiss a lot of frogs to meet your prince, but I doubt they spent four years kissing horny toads.

And it's not I was hideous or anything. People actually said I was pretty. Okay, most compliments came from my immediate family, but *still*. It was something.

My theory was that I didn't look like a typical senior. I looked like a substitute teacher. My nose was always in a book, and I didn't care about fashion. My best clothes were hand-me-downs from my older and only sibling, Alison. She reminded me constantly that my inherited wardrobe came from her "fatter" days, before double zeros became her reality.

Ugh. It's hard having someone so gorgeous in the family. It's like she's the blazing Sun while I'm stuck as dinky little Pluto.

But I won't get into that just yet. All I could think of was my absolute hatred of periods. Why'd they always hit right in the middle of class? I'd be taking notes or listening to a lecture and then *boom*. That horribly icky familiar warmth boiled up and

seeped into my underwear. I'd cross my legs trying to dam it all back. At the bell, I'd sprint for the bathroom like a greyhound on a racetrack.

Mom said it was my cross to bear, but she never went six straight weeks with a period. Mom finally booked an appointment with a gynecologist who spent fifteen minutes drilling me on safe sex, how the Pill doesn't protect against STDs, and that I needed to take it at the same time, every day, in order to prevent pregnancy. I almost laughed, thinking, *Don't worry, Doc. I'll die a virgin with or without this thing.* So I started popping them every morning first thing, waiting to see if I'd also gain a flawless complexion and perfect nails. Neither happened.

Enormous wooden clogs filled the space between the stall door and the floor as a familiar voice said, "Hey, Boob."

I never knew why Dee Ramsey called me "Boob". My breasts were the size of grapes next to her double-D watermelons. "How'd you know it was me?" I asked, picking up my jeans then wondering why, because it's not like she had X-ray vision and could see me half-naked through the door.

She chuckled. "Recognized the shoes. And the hour-long break on the pot. Honest to God if you don't take a piss like everyone else. You know no one cares if they hear ya give the pad a rip?"

I would've shot back a witty remark, but jarred at her peculiar Irish drawl. "What's with the accent?" I asked, crumpling the pink paper and shoving it into the garbage. "You high on Lucky Charms or something?"

She laughed—even this sound was audibly different—and the enormous clogs whispered against the bottom of the door. *Good Lord. She's pressed against the stall.*

Even though she'd been my best friend since fourth grade, sometimes Dee was still a total mystery to me. Once she came to

school with bright purple hair. When I asked her why, she'd shrugged and said, "I dunno. Haven't you ever just *felt* purple?"

But she was fun and easy to talk to. She listened to me whine about my sister, the dorkiness of my parents, or my lack of a boyfriend (although sometimes it was hard to confide this, since Dee never suffered from a vacant love life).

"Top a'da mornin' to ya, lassie," Dee said, and I swore her voice sprouted shamrocks. "Me Mum's sis be coming by dis aft'rnoon. Heard she flew all da ways from Dublin."

"Well, that explains it," I said, flushing the toilet, hiking up my pants, and pulling down my sweater. I opened the door, and she practically fell on top of me, her crimped red hair falling into my face. "Perv! You peeking through the cracks again?"

She laughed and slapped my shoulder as we moved to the sinks. "Sorry, lassie, but you're not me type. Ah know ya love me an' all, but ya mustin' be gettin' ya hopes up, ya hear?" She pointedly glanced at her wrist, as if a watch was there.

"What are you looking at?" I asked, drying my hands.

She smirked mischievously, her voice finally back to normal. "The Pill should work by now. You excited to be on it?"

I rolled my eyes. "Nope. Should I be?"

"You bet! Now you can have sex without worrying about it!"

"Good to know, seeing as how I was so inconvenienced before." As Dee rolled her eyes, I collected scraps of discarded trash, squished down the heaping garbage can, and rewashed my hands.

"Why do you always do that?" she asked, genuinely perplexed. "It's stupid picking up after people."

"No, it's not. It's leaving a space better than we found it."

"Whatever," she said as we exited the bathroom. "I'm not touching other people's crap. You couldn't pay me enough."

Lunch was almost over, and the eager rumble of students clamored up the stairs. Since our school fit nearly two thousand

people for three grades and only had two lunch breaks, the entire building shuddered when the last bell rang.

"I love being on the Pill," Dee said breezily. "Only gained three pounds. And they came off easily."

I gave her a knowing smirk. Dee didn't use the Pill to regulate her period. She had other motives that slingshot her to the pharmacy counter once a month.

The overhead florescent light snapped on and off, flickering our shadows on the moldy carpet. I wondered if I would ever see fully functioning lights in the building, or a graffiti-free stall in the bathroom. "How's Elliot?" I asked. Elliot was her latest fling and the future king of his choice fraternity. The most popular girls gave a collective howl when he'd come to school with a beaming Dee on his arm. I was thrilled that he'd not chosen one of the anorexic socialites.

"Hmm?"

"Mr. Right." That was my nickname for him, since he thought of himself as God's gift to women.

"Oh." Dee pouted as we turned a corner. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

She gave a cavalier toss of her red curls. "Mr. Right turned out to be Mr. Wrong. I broke up with him two days ago."

I hid my surprise beneath a sympathetic smile. "But I thought everything was going great."

She frowned at the dirty carpet. "He slept with Rachel Morgan. *Again*. You know I don't take that kind of shit. Not from anyone."

I touched her shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, and I knew she was. She was used to crap like this happening to her. And I didn't like Mr. Right anyway.

"I was only with him for the sex," Dee reminded me.

"I know."

We said nothing for a while. Just kept walking.

The bell rang and our classmates thundered toward us like a monstrous tsunami.

Seconds before we collided, I said, “Bastard.”

Dee nodded. “*Total* bastard.”

We smiled at each other. I told myself that the best of friendships were forged on moments like this.