

CHASING CHELSEA

MASTERS OF THE CASTLE, BOOK FIVE



MAREN SMITH

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



“*W*e always do whatever you want to do.” Swinging one leg fitfully under the table, the blonde at the booth across from Chelsea’s sulked over her latte. “Why can’t we ever do what I want?”

Directly opposite her, a lanky man in glasses dropped his head to hang a moment before he shook it. “We do what you want all the time.” Raising his head again, he frowned at her. “Besides, this is what you wanted to do.”

Her tall frame folded into a narrow booth only a few feet away, Chelsea tried not to eavesdrop. She bent over her job application, the fourth she’d filled out this morning alone. Coffee shop barista. Yeah, she was scraping the bottom of the local job-market barrel, but here she sat, filling it out anyway. According to the news the recession was over, but that was small consolation when someone was still out of work. Five months and counting. Chelsea rubbed her brow; her unemployment benefits had long been exhausted, leaving her to live off her savings alone. She’d lost her apartment two weeks ago, and although she’d found a cheaper place to live on the east side of town, there was a waiting list with her name nowhere

near the top. She'd taken to living in her car. The way she figured it (and she'd taken to figuring it every single night before she tried to sleep), if she was very careful—very frugal—she had maybe three more months to find a job. After that, she wouldn't have enough money for first, last and deposit. At four months, she wouldn't just be homeless, she'd be out of money too.

Yeah, she had problems enough of her own without renting someone else's. Still, the couple a few tables over remained just loud enough to be impossible to ignore. Try as she did to keep her eyes on her application, it was like trying to sit three feet away from an on-coming train wreck.

"This was what *you* wanted!" the blonde accused, arms folded angrily across her chest.

"You said—"

"Of course, I said I wanted to go!" she hissed. "But there's no shopping there, Ben! What the hell are we going to do for ten days if we can't shop?"

"Oh, I don't know—how about *we play at the damn Castle!*"

She didn't know Ben or the woman he was with, but if asked to take sides, Chelsea thought he could do better. Spoiled, materialistic, little rich girls with their blinged-out fingernails and haughty attitudes drove her crazy, especially since she didn't have the money right now to be either spoiled or materialistic and the only thing she'd done to her nails in months was bite them... and seriously, when was the last time she'd been out shopping just for the fun of it? Granted, she'd been to Wal-Mart the night before, but a five-dollar sandwich from the deli hardly seemed like it should count.

Stifling a sigh, Chelsea tried again to concentrate on her form: *What kind of work are you interested in?* Anything with a paycheck sprang right to the tip of her writing fingers, but Chelsea restrained herself. Barista was not her dream job, but

it didn't have to be forever. It just had to get her by until something better came along...

"No malls, no salons." The blonde was ticking the vacation faults off on her fingers now. "You can even say goodbye to these suck-ass lattes because I'll bet they don't even have those there. We'll be making our coffee by the potful in our hotel room, like savages. I'll bet they have powdered creamer too."

Chelsea's stomach rumbled. She hadn't had breakfast yet. Trying to swallow back her irritation, she rubbed her forehead again. She still had half that deli sandwich sitting in her purse, but if she could hold out until suppertime, then she wouldn't have to waste more money on food until tomorrow morning. She didn't mind going hungry if it meant she could make her money stretch farther. She never thought she'd be out of work for so long. This was starting to get scary.

The argument at the other table heated up a notch.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Ben scoffed, his voice rising again. "We're going to the Castle, Beth. The *Castle!*"

"Why are you saying that like it's a good thing?" Beth folded her arms even tighter across her chest, her mouth pulled into a mutinous scowl. "This is my vacation too. I want beautiful clothes—"

"They provide your clothes!"

"I want to go bar hopping all night—dancing and drinking and—"

"Fucking?" her boyfriend snarled.

Oh, this was getting ugly.

Bracing her head in her hand, her long red hair providing a curtain by which to block out what was happening across the room, Chelsea forced herself to focus on the nearly complete application: *Provide three references.*

"You didn't used to mind that about me, baby," Beth snarled with saccharine sweetness. "Maybe if you weren't such a jack-ass, you wouldn't be minding it now, either!"

Grabbing her coat off the stretch of booth beside her, the blonde erupted off her seat and stalked off, leaving Ben laughing angrily after her. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home!”

Ben wasn’t laughing now. “Home? Three hundred miles away, home? What about the vacation?”

“Go by yourself! I’ve changed my mind!” Shoving open the door, Beth left the coffee shop, her heels clicking fast and angry across the pavement—not toward the bus depot, but toward the massive parking lot where acres of cars with license plates that hailed from all over the United States were parked and waiting.

“You can’t change your mind!” Ben shouted, seeming not to care at all that both Chelsea and the two attendants at the counter were staring openly at him now. Cursing, he erupted out of his chair now too. Grabbing his coat and a manila envelope off the table, he ran after her. “Beth! Damn it, I’ve already paid for the fucking thing!”

But Beth wasn’t stopping, and by the time he reached the exit, Ben must have realized the vacation he’d bought just wasn’t going to happen. Swearing violently, he slammed out of the coffee shop, leaving a very heavy silence in the room once the glass door swung softly shut again.

“Wow,” one of the attendants said. Both Chelsea and his companion laughed, twin sounds of unease.

Finishing the last few questions, Chelsea took the application back up to the counter and handed it to one of the attendants. “I don’t suppose you know when I might expect to hear back on this?”

“A couple of days, I guess,” the man behind the counter said. Teenager, really. She probably had a good ten years on him. When—if—she was hired as the next barista, this would probably be her boss. Yikes. She made herself smile anyway. “Thanks,” she said quietly and left.

It was a cool spring morning. She paused just outside the coffee shop to pull her jacket on. At the covered depot across the lot, two buses were loading passengers. There was no advertising on the sides of either transport, but no one grew up in the small town of Granger without hearing at least one or two lurid (and probably greatly exaggerated) details about this particular coffee shop and the bus depot attached to it. Those buses only had one destination: The Castle, a fifteenth-century architectural monstrosity turned luxurious adult resort. Originally built in Scotland, it had been brought stone by stone across the Atlantic and reassembled amongst the corn and wheat fields of Ohio. Twin guard shacks and a curtain of trees kept it hidden from prying eyes. In the winter though, sometimes colorful flags on grey stone turrets could be glimpsed from certain stretches of the highway.

Castle customers came and went from this depot on a daily basis, making this coffee shop one of the busiest restaurants in town. If they were short-staffed enough to put a help wanted sign in the window, then maybe they wouldn't wait too long before calling her for an interview.

The sound of raised voices pulled her attention to the other side of the depot parking lot. Ben and Beth were still going at it, now nose to nose in front of their car and shouting loudly, although what exactly was being said was hard to make out, even from this distance.

"Jackass!"

Chelsea heard that word clearly enough.

"Bitch!"

She heard that one, too.

She didn't need to listen to the rest to know she was likely witnessing the death of a relationship. Sad, she supposed, but at this point, they could probably both do better.

Shaking her head, Chelsea dug her keys from her purse and was about to head for her car, when she was stopped by the

sight of a familiar yellow envelope sticking out of the top of the coffee shop's outdoor garbage can. It was the one Ben had grabbed before chasing after his angry girlfriend. In neat letters across one upper corner were penned the words, "Castle Itinerary."

I've already paid for the fucking thing.

A car door slammed. Chelsea jumped, glancing back across the lot in time to see the sulking blonde in the car now and Ben stalking angrily around to get in on the driver's side. Neither one of them looked happy, but at least they were leaving together. They were also leaving their itinerary in the garbage can.

...already paid for...

Her curiosity got the best of her. Plucking the envelope from the trash, Chelsea quickly walked away, her face reddening at the thought that someone might have seen her digging this out of the trash. She might be homeless and desperate right now, but she didn't want to be seen acting that way. Moving quickly through the parking lot, she wasted no time digging her keys from her pocket and getting into her car. Safely ensconced behind the steering wheel, she stole a furtive look around to make sure no one was watching before opening the envelope.

She honestly expected to find little more than a few colorful Castle brochures inside, maybe a list of risqué resort activities and the check-in information. What she found, however, was two pre-paid bus tickets, a pair of medical records, and a receipt for ten days with everything—room, meals and costumes—paid in full.

Ten days, paid in full and then thrown away! What a waste. And here she was, living in her car.

Chelsea shook her head, tsking once. Two weeks ago when she was shivering in her sleeping bag with eighteen inches of new snow on the car, she'd have killed for something like what

she was holding in her lap. She looked at the bus tickets and then at the buses, which were still loading.

Loading right now, in fact.

Good lord...

Chelsea checked her watch and then the tickets, half laughing at herself already because it didn't matter how long she had—

Fifteen minutes...

—before the buses drove away and the tickets became invalid—

Fourteen minutes now...

—this vacation wasn't hers. She hadn't paid for it; *she* didn't have any business just taking it.

Did she?

Why couldn't she? The person who *had* bought it didn't want it. He'd thrown it in the garbage and walked away. Just because he didn't want to take advantage of ten full days of prepaid room and board, why did that automatically mean she had to let it all go to waste? All that money—she looked at the receipt; wow—almost five grand for ten days.

Twelve minutes...

Forget it, Chelsea told herself. Twelve minutes wasn't enough time to throw her things together and go.

Except, what things did she need, really? Food, clothes, a private hotel room—the Castle itinerary in her hands promised all of that would be provided. What else did she need but this envelope, her purse and the Wal-Mart sack from the backseat with all her toiletries already gathered together inside? How pathetic was that? She'd be the only person on that bus with a Wal-Mart sack for luggage.

Chelsea cupped her mouth, alternately staring at the envelope contents and then her watch.

Ten minutes...

She really shouldn't be thinking about this. It was so dishonest.

But, who would know? Who would even care? If this was dishonesty, then it was victimless. The rightful owners didn't want the vacation anymore, and what she was holding in her hands was ten nights that she wouldn't have to spend sleeping in her car. By the time she got back, she'd be ten days closer to having her name at the top of the list for one of those new apartments across town. Ten days richer for not having to buy groceries. And surely the Castle got newspapers; she could fill out job applications every morning, check her email for replies and maybe even search nearby cities for something—anything—better than coffee barista. At this point, all of that was one benefit after another in her eyes.

Chelsea couldn't believe she was seriously considering this. The dishonesty part—this wasn't the sort of person she was. And what if the gossips were right? Was the Castle *really* an adult-oriented resort? Chelsea wasn't even sure what that meant.

But... so what if it was? The other guests could do whatever they wanted, that didn't mean she had to participate. It could be squid-oriented for all she cared. That wouldn't change the fact that she was getting a ten-day free ride. She could spend her time in her room, reading a good book and relaxing until it was time for the bus to load her up and bring her home again.

Five more minutes...

This was insane. What if she got caught?

How could she get caught? She had the receipt right here. She had medical records and a—what was this, two purple and one white bracelet?—and two bus tickets, neither of which had a name written on them. Anyone could use these tickets to get on that bus.

Two minutes...

She was crazy.

Grabbing her purse, the contents of the manila envelope and her toiletries sack from the backseat, Chelsea locked her car and ran across the parking lot to the bus depot. She missed the first bus and barely caught the second before it pulled away from the curb.

“My ticket,” she said breathlessly, flushing furiously because she was just certain the bus driver was going to take one look at her or the ticket, shout “fraud” at the top of his lungs and maybe even call the cops.

But, he didn't. He let her on the bus with a smile and a wave, and as the bus rumbled away from the curb, she quickly dropped into one of only two available seats. What was she doing? She felt giddy, almost sick to her stomach as she clutched her purse and that sad plastic sack to her middle. Her hands kept crinkling the edges of the manila envelope.

“First time?”

Chelsea jumped a little as a smiling blonde woman plopped down to sit beside her. “Yeah.” She hugged her few belongings a little tighter.

“All alone?” When Chelsea nodded, the blonde wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged. “That’s all right. I’ve been here before. They take such good care of you at the Castle.” She gave a soft squeal of excitement as the bus turned out of the parking lot and headed out of town. “We’re going to have so much fun!” Catching one of Chelsea’s hands, the blonde woman gave it a friendly squeeze. “I’m Selena, by the way.”

“Chelsea,” she replied, relaxing a little. “Are you here for ten days, too?”

“Nope.” Biting her bottom lip, Selena flashed a quick grin. “I’m moving in, actually. My Daddy lives here.” Bubbly excitement spilling over in giggles and bounces, Selena suddenly threw her arms around Chelsea’s shoulders and squealed, “I’m getting married! Wanna come?”