

MEG CABOT

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Insatiable

“THE MASTER OF HER GENRE.” —Publishers Weekly



Chapter One

9:15 A.M. EST, Tuesday, April 13

Downtown 6 platform

East Seventy-seventh Street and Lexington Avenue

New York, New York

It was a miracle.

Meena hurried onto the subway car and grabbed hold of one of the gleaming silver poles, hardly daring to believe her good fortune.

It was morning rush hour, and she was running late.

She'd expected to have to cram herself into a car packed with hundreds of other commuters who were also running late.

But here she was, still panting a little from having run all the way to the station, stepping into a car that was practically empty.

Maybe, she thought, things are going to go my way for a change.

Meena didn't look around. She kept her gaze fastened on the ad above her head, which declared that she could have beautiful, clear skin if she called a certain Dr. Zizmor right away.

Don't look, Meena told herself. Whatever you do, don't look, don't look, don't look. . . .

With luck, she thought, she might make it all the way to her stop at Fifty-first Street without making eye contact or having any interaction at all with another human being. . . .

It was the butterflies—life-size—that caught Meena's attention at first. No city girl would wear white pumps with huge plastic insects on

the toes. The romance novel (Meena assumed it was a romance, based on the helpless-looking, doe-eyed young woman on the cover) the girl was reading had Cyrillic writing on it. The giant roller suitcase parked in front of her was an additional clue that the girl was from out of town.

Though none of that—including the fact that she'd pinned her long blond braids onto the top of her head, *The Sound of Music* style, and had paired her cheap yellow polyester dress with purple leggings—was as dead a giveaway to her new-in-town status as what the girl did next.

“Oh, I sorry,” she said, looking up at Meena with a smile that changed her whole face and made her go from merely pretty to almost beautiful. “Please, you want sit?”

The girl moved her purse, which she'd left on the seat next to her, so that Meena could sit down beside her. No New Yorker would ever have done such a thing. Not when there were a dozen other empty seats on the train.

Meena's heart sank.

Because now she knew two things with absolute certainty:

One was that, despite the miracle of the nearly empty subway car, things definitely weren't going to go her way that day.

The other was that the girl with the plastic butterflies on her shoes was going to be dead before the end of the week.



Chapter Two

9:30 A.M. EST, Tuesday, April 13

6 Train

New York, New York

Meena hoped she was wrong about Miss Butterfly.

Except that Meena was never wrong. Not about death.

Giving in to the inevitable, Meena let go of the gleaming metal pole and slid into the seat the girl had offered.

“So, is this your first time visiting the city?” Meena asked Miss Butterfly even though she already knew the answer.

The girl, still smiling, cocked her head.

“Yes. New York City!” she cried enthusiastically.

Great. Her English was basically nonexistent.

Miss Butterfly had pulled out a cell phone and was scrolling through some photos on it. She stopped on one and held it up for Meena to see.

“See?” Miss Butterfly said proudly. “Boyfriend. My American boyfriend, Gerald.”

Meena looked at the grainy picture. *Oh, brother*, she thought.

Why? Meena asked herself. *Why* today, *of all days*? She didn’t have time for this. She had a meeting. And a story to pitch. There was that head writing position, vacant now that Ned had had that very public nervous breakdown in the network dining room during spring sweeps.

Head writer was really where the money was on a show like *Insatiable*.

Meena needed money. And she was sure the pressure wouldn’t

cause *her* to have a nervous breakdown. She hadn't had one so far, and she had plenty of things to worry about besides *Insatiable's* ratings.

The announcement came on that the doors were closing. The next stop, the announcement said, would be Forty-second Street, Grand Central Station.

Meena, having missed her own stop, stayed where she was.

God, Meena thought. *When will my life stop sucking?*

"He looks very nice," she lied to Miss Butterfly about Gerald. "You're here to visit him?"

Miss Butterfly nodded energetically.

"He help me get visa," she said. "And—" She used the cell phone to mimic taking photos of herself.

"Headshots," Meena said. She worked in the business. She understood exactly what Miss Butterfly was talking about. And her heart sank even more. "So you want to be a model. Or an actress?"

Miss Butterfly beamed and nodded. "Yes, yes. Actress."

Of course. Of *course* this pretty girl wanted to be an actress.

Fantastic, Meena thought cynically. So Gerald was her manager, too. That explained a lot about the baseball cap—pulled down so low that Meena couldn't see his eyes—and the number of gold chains around his neck in the photo.

"What's your name?" Meena asked.

Miss Butterfly pointed at herself, as if surprised Meena cared to discuss *her* as opposed to the ultra-fantastic Gerald.

"I? I am Yalena."

"Great," Meena said. She opened her bag, dug around the mess inside it, and came up with a business card. She always had one handy for exactly this kind of situation, which unfortunately came up all too often . . . especially when Meena rode the subway. "Yalena, if you need anything—anything at all—I want you to call me. My cell phone number is on there. See it?" She pointed to the number. "You can call me anytime. My name is Meena. If things don't work out with your boyfriend—if he turns out to be mean to you, or hurts you in any way—I want you to know you can call me. I'll come get you, wherever you are. Day or night. And listen . . ." she added. "Don't show this card to your

boyfriend. This is a *secret* card. For emergencies. Between girlfriends. Do you understand?”

Yalena just gazed at her, smiling happily.

She didn't understand. She didn't understand at all that Meena's number might literally mean the difference between life and death for her.

They never understood.

The train pulled up to Forty-second Street station. Yalena jumped up.

“Grand Central?” she asked, looking panicky.

“Yes,” Meena said. “This is Grand Central.”

“I meet my boyfriend here,” Yalena said excitedly, grabbing her huge roller bag and giving it a yank. She took Meena's card in her other hand, beaming. “Thank you! I call.”

She meant she'd call to get together for coffee sometime.

But Meena knew Yalena would call her for something totally different. If she didn't lose the card . . . or if Gerald didn't find it and take it away. Then give her a fist sandwich.

“Remember,” Meena repeated, following her off the train. “Don't tell your boyfriend you have that. Hide it somewhere.”

“I do,” Yalena said, and scrambled toward the nearest flight of stairs, lugging her suitcase behind her. It was so huge, and Yalena was so small, she could barely drag it. Meena, giving in to the inevitable, picked up the bottom of the girl's incredibly heavy suitcase and helped her carry it up the steep and crowded staircase. Then she pointed Yalena in the direction the girl needed to go—the boyfriend was meeting her “under the clock” in the “big station.”

Then, with a sigh, Meena turned around and headed for a train back uptown, so she could get to Madison and Fifty-third Street, where her office building was located.

Meena knew Yalena hadn't understood a word she'd said. Well, maybe one in five.

And even if she had, there wouldn't have been any point in telling Yalena the truth. She wouldn't have believed Meena, anyway.

Just like there was no point in following her now, seeing the boy-

friend for herself, and then saying something to him like, “I know what you really are and what you do for a living. And I’m going to call the police.”

Because you can’t call the cops on someone for something they’re *going* to do. Any more than you can tell someone that they’re going to die.

Meena had learned this the hard way.

She sighed again. She was going to have to run now if she wanted to catch the next train uptown. . . .

She just prayed there wouldn’t be too many people on it.



Chapter Three

6:00 P.M. EET, Tuesday, April 13

History Department

University of Bucharest

Bucharest, Romania

“Professor?”

Lucien Antonescu smiled up at her from the enormous antique desk behind which he sat, grading papers. “Yes?”

“So is it true,” Natalia asked, grasping at the first question she could think of, since she’d completely forgotten what she’d meant to ask him the moment his dark-eyed gaze fell upon her, “that the oldest human remains ever found were discovered in Romania?”

Oh, no! Human remains? How disgusting! How could she ask something so stupid?

“The oldest human remains found in *Europe*,” Professor Antonescu said, correcting her gently. “The oldest human remains ever found were discovered in Ethiopia. And they’re roughly a hundred and fifty thousand years older than the remains found in what we consider modern-day Romania, in the Cave with Bones.”

The girl was only half listening. He was the sexiest of all her instructors, and that included teaching assistants. On the University of Bucharest’s equivalent of Rateyourprof.com, Professor Lucien Antonescu had been given all 10s in the looks category.

And justifiably so, since he was over six feet tall, lean and broad

shouldered, with thick dark hair that he wore brushed back from his temples and smooth, gorgeous forehead.

As if all that weren't enough, he had dark brown eyes that, in certain lights, when he was lecturing and grew excited about his subject matter—which happened frequently, because he was impassioned about Eastern European history—flashed red.

Surely the posts on the message boards were exaggerated . . . especially the ones hinting that he was related to the Romanian royal family and was a duke or a prince or something.

But since taking Professor Antonescu's class, Natalia could see why he—and his course—was so popular. And why the line of girls—and some boys, though when he showed pictures of ancient Romanian art, Professor Antonescu spoke so appreciatively of the lush lines of the female form that there was no possible way he could be gay—at his office hours was so long. He was a gifted orator, with a regal yet very engaging presence. . . .

And he was so very, very hot.

"So," Natalia said hesitantly, taking in the way his perfectly tailored black cashmere blazer molded those shoulders. She wondered why she couldn't see his eyes—those dark, flashing eyes—better and realized it was because he had the shades to his office windows pulled down. She hoped he'd still notice that she'd worn a new shirt, one that showed off her cleavage to its best advantage. She'd bought it at a steep discount at H&M, but it still made her look irresistible. "It would be correct to say that Romania is the cradle of civilization in Europe." This, Natalia thought, sounded very intelligent.

"It would be a lovely idea, of course," Professor Antonescu said, looking thoughtful. "Certainly there have been human beings living here for over two millennia, and this land has been the site of many bloody invasions, from the Romans to the Huns, until finally we had what today makes up modern-day Romania . . . Moldavia and Wallachia, and of course Transylvania. But the cradle of civilization . . . I don't know that we can say that." He was even better looking when he smiled, if such a thing were possible.

"Professor."

The smile caused her to come undone. She knew she was not the first. His bachelor status was legendary, the intrigue heightening whenever he was spotted with a woman—never the same one twice—in the posher restaurants downtown. How many had he asked back to his castle—he owned a castle!—outside of Sighisoara, or to his enormous loft apartment in the trendiest district of Bucharest?

No one knew. Maybe hundreds. Maybe none. He didn't seem to care to marry and start a family.

Well, all that would change when he tasted her cooking. Iliana, behind her in line to see him just now, had teased her for saying she was going to invite him over. So old-fashioned! She said Natalia should just offer to sleep with him right there, in his office, like Iliana was going to, and get it over with.

But Natalia's mother had always told her she made the best *sarmale* of anyone in the family. One taste, her mother said, and any man would be hers.

"Yes?" Professor Antonescu asked, one of those thick dark eyebrows raising.

Natalia wished he hadn't done this. It only made him look more attractive and made her feel more foolish for what she was about to do.

"Would you like to come to my place for a home-cooked meal sometime?" she asked, all in a rush. Her heart was beating wildly. She was sure he could see it thrumming behind her breast, considering how low-cut her new blouse was.

Something in the dimly lit office made a chirping sound.

"I beg your pardon," Professor Antonescu said. He reached into the inside pocket of his expensive coat and produced a slim cell phone . . . top of the line, of course. "I thought I'd turned this off."

Natalia stood there, wondering if she ought to say something about the *sarmale* or perhaps undo another button of her blouse, as Iliana would have done. . .

. . . but she hesitated when she saw Professor Antonescu's expression change as his gaze fell on the name on the caller identification.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. "This is an important call. I have to take it. Could we discuss this at another time?"

Natalia felt her cheeks growing red. It was merely because he was looking at her . . . and yet had never once lowered his gaze below her neck.

“Of course,” she said shamefacedly.

“And please tell the others,” Professor Antonescu said as he accepted the call, “that unfortunately I’ll have to end office hours early this afternoon. A family emergency.”

Family emergency. He had family?

“I’ll let them know,” the girl said, pleased. He trusted her! That would put Iliana in her place!

“Thank you,” Professor Antonescu said politely as she slunk from the dark, lushly decorated room, all in richly appointed leather-trimmed furniture and filled with manuscripts that were many centuries older than she was. Even Professor Antonescu’s office was different from the offices of her other instructors, which were as barren as a politburo’s and just as grim.

She opened the door, slipped through it, and turned to close it. . . .

But not before she heard him say, in a voice she had never heard him use before, and in English, “What? When?” Then, “Not again.”

Natalia turned then to see a look on his face that made her heart turn over in her chest.

But not in the joyful way it did when she spied him coming down the corridor toward the lecture hall.

Now she was afraid.

Deathly afraid.

Because those beautiful eyes of his had gone vermilion . . . the same color her shower water ran when she accidentally cut her leg while shaving.

Only this wasn’t a trickle of water. It was a man’s eyes. His *eyes*.

And they’d gone the color of blood.

His gaze was boring into her as if he could see straight through her blouse, past her bra, and into the most intimate places of her heart.

“*Get out*,” he said in a voice that she would swear later, when she told her mother about it, didn’t even sound human.

Natalia turned, threw open the door, and flung herself through it,

flying with a face as white as death past the other students waiting to see their professor.

“Well, that obviously went well,” Iliana said with a sneer.

But when Iliana tried Professor Antonescu’s office door, she found it locked. She knocked and knocked, finally cupping both hands around her eyes and pressing them to the door’s frosted glass.

“The lights are out. I don’t see him in there. I think . . . I think he’s gone.”

But how could the professor have left a locked a room from which there was no other exit?