



Chapter Four

9:45 A.M. EST, Tuesday, April 13
Outside the ABN Building
East Fifty-third Street and Madison Avenue
New York, New York

“Good morning, Miss Meena. The usual?” Abdullah, the guy in the glassed-in coffee stand outside her office building, asked her when it was finally her turn to order.

“Good morning, Abdullah,” Meena said. “Better make it a large. I’ve got a big meeting. Light, please. And don’t bother toasting the bagel today, I’m running really, really late.”

Abdullah nodded and went to work as Meena narrowed her gaze at him. She could tell he still hadn’t seen a doctor about his out-of-control blood pressure, despite the talk she’d had with him about it last week.

Seriously, *she* was the one who was going to stroke out one day if people didn’t start listening to her. She knew taking time out to go to the doctor was a pain.

But when the alternative was *dying*?

Precognition.

Extrasensory perception.

Witchcraft.

It didn’t matter what anyone called it: In Meena’s opinion, as a skill, it was totally useless.

Had it been particularly helpful when she’d finally managed to con-

vince her longtime boyfriend, David, about the tumor that she could sense was growing in his brain?

Sure, she'd saved David's life (had they found the tumor any later, it would have been inoperable, the doctors said).

But David had left Meena immediately after his recovery for one of his perky radiology nurses. Brianna healed people who were sick, he'd said. She wasn't a "freak" who told them they were going to die.

What had Meena gotten out of saving David? Nothing but a lot of heartache.

And she'd lost half the down payment on the apartment that they'd bought together. Which she still owed him. And which he was being a total jerk about her paying back on her pittance of a salary.

David and Brianna were buying their first house together. And expecting their first baby.

Of course.

Meena had learned from that experience—and all the ones before it—that no one was interested in finding out how they were going to die.

Except her best friend, Leisha, of course, who always listened to Meena . . . ever since that time in the ninth grade when Rob Pace asked her to that Aerosmith concert, and Meena told her not to go, and Rob took Angie Harwood instead.

That's how Angie Harwood, and not Leisha, ended up getting decapitated when the wheel of a semi tractor-trailer came spinning off and landed on top of Rob's Camaro as it was cruising down I-95 on the way home from the concert.

Meena, upon learning of the accident the morning after it occurred (Rob had miraculously escaped with only a broken collarbone), had promptly thrown up her breakfast.

Why hadn't she realized that by saving her best friend from certain death, she'd all but guaranteed another girl's? She ought to have warned Angie, too, and done anything—*everything*—to stop Rob from going that night.

She swore then that she would never allow what had happened to Angie Harwood to happen to another human being. Not if she could help it.

It was no wonder then that high school, torturous for many, had been even worse for Meena.

Which was how she got into television writing as a career. Real kids may not have enjoyed the company of the “You’re Gonna Die Girl” so much. But the people Meena discovered on the soap operas her mom liked to watch—*Insatiable* had been a favorite—were always happy to see her.

And when the story lines on the soaps she liked didn’t go the way she thought they should, Meena started writing her own.

Surprisingly, this hobby had paid off.

Well, if you call being a dialogue writer for the second-highest-rated soap opera in America a payoff.

Which Meena did. Sort of. She knew she’d landed what millions would kill for . . . a dream job.

And given her “gift,” she knew her life could have been a thousand times worse. Look what had happened to Joan of Arc.

Then there was Cassandra, daughter of the Trojan king Priam. She too had been given the gift of prophecy. Because she hadn’t returned a god’s love, that gift was turned by that god into a curse, so that Cassandra’s prophecies, though true, would never be believed.

Hardly anyone ever believed Meena either. But that didn’t mean she was going to give up trying. Not on girls like the one she’d met on the subway, and not on Abdullah. She’d get him to go to the doctor, eventually.

It was just too bad, really, that the one person whose future Meena had never been able to see was her own.

Until now, anyway.

If she was much later to work, she was going to lose any chance whatsoever she had at convincing Sy to take her pitch seriously.

And forget about that promotion to head writer.

She didn’t need to be psychic to figure *that* out.



Chapter Five

7:00 P.M. EET, Tuesday, April 13

The hills outside of Sighisoara

Mures County, Romania

Lucien Antonescu was furious, and when he was furious, he sometimes lost control.

He'd frightened that young girl in his office nearly to death, and he hadn't wanted to do that. He'd felt her fear . . . it had been sharp and as tightly wound as a garrote. She was a good person, longing, like most girls her age, only for love.

And he'd terrified her.

But he didn't have time to worry about that now. Now he had a very serious situation that was going to require all of his attention for the immediate future.

And so he was doing what he could in an attempt to calm himself. His favorite classical piece—by Tchaikovsky—played over the hall's speakers (which he'd purchased and had shipped from the U.S. at enormous expense; quality sound was important).

And he'd opened one of the truly exquisite bottles of Bordeaux in his collection and was letting it breathe on the sideboard. He could smell the tannins even from halfway across the room. The scent was soothing. . . .

Still, he couldn't help pacing the length of the great hall, an enormous fire roaring in the stone hearth at one end of the room and the

stuffed heads of various animals his ancestors had killed leering down at him from the walls above.

“Three,” he growled at the laptop sitting on the long, elaborately carved wooden table in the center of the room. “Three dead girls? All within the past few weeks? Why wasn’t I told this before now?”

“I didn’t realize that there was a connection between them, my lord,” the slightly anxious voice from the computer’s speakers said in English.

“Three exsanguinated corpses, all left nude in various city parks?” Lucien didn’t attempt to keep the sarcasm from his tone. “Covered in bite marks? And you didn’t realize there was a connection. I see.”

“Obviously the authorities don’t want to start a citywide panic,” the voice said fretfully. “My sources didn’t know anything about the bite marks until a photo was leaked this morning. . . .”

“And what attempts,” Lucien asked, ignoring this last remark, “have been made to discover who is committing these atrocities?”

“Everyone I’ve spoken to denies any knowledge whatsoever—”

Lucien cut him off. “Then obviously you’re not speaking to the appropriate people. Or someone is lying.”

“I . . . I can’t imagine anyone would dare,” the voice said hesitantly. “They know I’m speaking on your authority, sire. I feel . . . if I may, sire . . . that it isn’t . . . well, one of us. Someone we know.”

Lucien paused in his circuit around the room.

“That’s impossible,” he said flatly. “There’s no one we don’t know.”

He turned and approached the wine decanter, which was filled with rich ruby liquid. He could see the reflection of the firelight against one side of the perfect crystal globe.

“It’s one of us,” Lucien said, inhaling the earthy fragrance of the Bordeaux. “Someone who has forgotten himself. And his vows.”

“Surely not,” the voice said nervously. “No one would dare. Everyone knows the repercussions of committing such a crime under your rule. That your retribution will be swift . . . and severe.”

“Nevertheless.” Lucien picked up the decanter and watched as the liquid inside left a deep red film against the far side of the crystal bulb. “Someone’s savagely killing human women and leaving their bodies out in the open to be discovered.”

“He *is* putting all of us at risk,” the voice from the laptop agreed hesitantly.

“Yes,” Lucien said. “Needlessly so. He must be discovered, punished, and stopped. Permanently.”

“Yes, my lord,” the voice said. “Only . . . how? How are we to discover him? The police . . . my informants tell me that the police haven’t a single lead.”

Lucien’s perfectly formed lips curved into a bitter smile. “The police,” he said. “Ah, yes. The police.” He glanced away from the decanter he held, toward the face on the computer screen a few yards away. “Emil, find me a place to stay. I’m coming to town.”

“Sire?” Emil looked startled. “*You?* Are you certain? Surely that won’t be—”

“I’m certain. I will find our murdering friend. And then . . .”

Lucien opened his fingers and let the decanter fall to the flagstones beneath his feet. The crystal bell smashed into a thousand pieces, the wine it contained making a deep red smear across the floor, where, centuries before, Lucien had watched his father dash the brains of so many of their servants.

“I will show him myself what happens when anyone dares to break a vow to me.”



Chapter Six

10:30 A.M. EST, Tuesday, April 13

ABN Building

520 Madison Avenue

New York, New York

Meena was wolfing down her bagel when Paul, one of the break-down writers, poked his balding head into her office.

“I don’t have time to help you update your Facebook page right now, Paul,” Meena said. “I’ve only got a minute before I have to meet with Sy.”

“I take it you didn’t hear, then,” Paul said morosely.

“Hear what?” Meena asked with her mouth full.

“About Shoshona.”

Meena’s blood went cold.

So it had finally happened. And it was all her fault for not saying anything.

But how did you warn someone that her advanced state of gymorexia was going to kill her? Treadmills were not widely known to be fatal, and Shoshona was so proud to have gotten down to size 00.

The truth was, Shoshona had never been one of Meena’s favorite people.

“She . . . *died*?”

“No.” Paul looked at Meena strangely. “She got the head writer position. I guess it happened last night.”

Meena choked.

“Wh-what?” She blinked back tears. She told herself they were tears from a chunk of bagel going down the wrong tube.

But they weren’t.

“Didn’t you see the e-mail?” Paul asked. “They sent it around this morning.”

“No,” Meena croaked. “I was on the subway.”

“Oh,” Paul said. “Well, I’m updating my résumé. I figure she’ll be firing me soon anyway, so she can hire one of her club-hopping friends. Would you mind looking it over later?”

“Sure,” Meena said numbly.

But she was only half listening to him. They’d passed her over for *Shoshona*? After all the hard work she’d done this year? Much of it *Shoshona*’s work, because Shoshona was forever leaving the office early to go work out?

No. Just no.

Meena was standing in the door to Sy’s office exactly two minutes before their appointed meeting, anger bubbling over.

“Sy,” she said. “I’d like to speak to you about—”

That was when she noticed Shoshona was already sitting in one of the chairs in front of his desk, wearing, as usual, something from Crewcuts, the J.Crew children’s section; she was *that* skinny.

“Oh, Meena,” Shoshona Metzenbaum said, tossing some of her long, silky dark hair. “There you are. I was just telling Sy how much I love the little treatment you gave him. The one about Tabby being in love with that bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks? So sweet.”

Sweet? Up until today, Shoshona’s only job responsibility at *Insatiable* had been, like Meena’s, to write the dialogue for story breakdowns, especially those featuring the show’s biggest and longest-running star, Cheryl Trent, who played Victoria Worthington Stone, and now her teenage daughter on the show, Tabitha.

Except that Shoshona had rarely been able to handle even that, always leaving early to go to the gym or calling to say she’d be late because her convertible had broken down on the way back into the city from the Metzenbaum family weekend home in the Hamptons.

Or the decorator who was redoing her downtown loft hadn’t shown up on time.

Or she'd missed the last flight out of St. Croix and was going to have to stay another night.

Not that anyone who mattered ever got upset about these things, considering who Shoshona's aunt and uncle were: Fran and Stan Metzenbaum, *Insatiable's* executive producers and cocreators.

It would have been different, Meena thought, if Shoshona had actually *deserved* this promotion. If it had been Paul or any of the other writers who actually showed up to the office once in a while, Meena wouldn't have minded.

But Shoshona? Meena had once overheard her bragging on the phone to a friend that she'd never even watched the show until her aunt and uncle had hired her to come work for them . . . unlike Meena, who'd never missed a single episode—not since she turned twelve. Shoshona didn't know the names of every single one of Victoria's ex-husbands, the way Meena did, or why they'd broken up (Victoria was insatiable, it was true, but not terribly lucky in love). Or that Victoria's beloved teenage daughter, Tabitha, was following in her mom's footsteps. (So far they'd managed to kill off every single one of Tabby's love interests. The latest had just been blown up in a Jet Ski accident intended for Tabby by a spurned stalker.)

"I'm glad you like it," Meena said with forced patience. "I thought throwing in a bad boy for Tabby might attract a younger demographic—"

"That's exactly what we're hearing from corporate," Shoshona said, flinging Sy an astonished glance. "We were just sitting here discussing that. Weren't we, Sy?"

"We were," Sy said, beaming at Meena. "Come on in, kid, and take a seat. You heard the great news about Shoshona?"

Meena couldn't bring herself to look at Shoshona, she was so furious. She kept her gaze on Sy as she sank into the other Aeron chair in front of his desk.

"I did," she said. "And I was really hoping to have a word with you in private this morning, Sy."

"Nothing you can't say to me in front of Shoshona," Sy said jovially, waving a hand. "Frankly, I think this is just fantastic. We're going to have some real estrogen power going on here!"

Meena stared at him. Had Sy really just said the words *estrogen power?*

And could he actually not know that Meena had been the one doing all of Shoshona's work for the past twelve months?

"Right," Shoshona said. "So I think Meena should be one of the first to know about the new direction the network would like to see us start heading in."

"The network?" Meena echoed bewilderedly.

"Well, our sponsor, really," Shoshona said, correcting herself.

To Meena's knowledge, Consumer Dynamics Inc.—*Insatiable's* sponsor, a multinational technology and services conglomerate, which also happened to own Affiliated Broadcast Network—had never once lowered itself to bother with the show.

Until now, apparently.

"In a word," Shoshona said, "they want us to go vampire. All vampire, all the time."

Meena immediately felt the bagel and coffee she'd had for breakfast come back up.

"No," she said after swallowing hard. "We can't do that."

Sy blinked confusedly at Meena. "Why the hell not?"

She ought to have known. Her day, which had already started off so badly, could only get worse. Lately her whole life had been headed in a steady downward trajectory.

"Well, for one thing, because there's already a soap opera on a rival network with a vampire story line that's killing us in the ratings," Meena said. "A little show called *Lust*. Remember? I mean, we have to have *some* pride. We can't just outright copy *Lust*."

Shoshona pretended to be busy straightening her patterned hose as Meena spoke. Sy, peering over his desk, couldn't take his eyes off her long, coltish legs.

Meena wished she had a mini-Butterfinger for sustenance. Or to smash into Shoshona's flat-ironed hair.

Flat-ironing! Who even bothered anymore?

Certainly not Meena, who had hacked off most of her dark hair at Leisha's command—Leisha's "gift" was that she could look at anyone and immediately tell them exactly the most flattering way they ought

to be wearing their hair—and who had enough problems making it to work on time without having to worry about flat-ironing, even when she wasn't busy trying to save young girls on the subway from certain death by white slavery.

"We'll look like total fools," Meena finished.

"I don't think so," Shoshona said coolly. "*Lust* is obviously doing something right. It's one of the few soaps right now that hasn't been canceled and isn't being forced to move to L.A. to shoot to save money. It's actually going *up* in the ratings. And like you said, if we're going to survive, we need to pull in a younger demographic. Kids don't care about soaps. It's all about reality shows to them."

"And what's so real," Meena demanded, "about *vampires*?"

"Oh, I assure you, they're real," Shoshona said with a catlike smile. "You've read about those girls they keep finding, drained of all their blood, in parks all over New York City, haven't you?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Meena said sourly. "They weren't drained of all their blood. They were just strangled."

"Um, excuse me," Shoshona said. "But I have an inside source who says all three of those girls were bitten everywhere and drained of every drop of their blood. There's a real-life vampire here in Manhattan, and he's feeding on innocent girls."

Meena rolled her eyes. Okay. It was true some girls had turned up dead lately in a few city parks.

But drained of their blood? Shoshona was taking vampire fever—which, yes, gripped the country, there was no denying that; it was obvious enough that even Consumer Dynamics Inc. was aware of it, and they were so oblivious to trends that they still thought having a MySpace page was cutting-edge—too far.

"So let's give the show a pulled-from-the-headlines feel," Shoshona went on, "and have a vampire feed on the girls in *Insatiable*. Tabby's friends. And let him brainwash Tabby, and let Tabby be his vampire bride."

Sy pointed at Shoshona. "Vampire bride," he yelled. "I love it. Even better, CDI loves it!"

Meena contemplated getting up, walking over to Sy's office window, opening it, and jumping.

“And you haven’t heard the *pièce de résistance*,” Shoshona said. “I can get Gregory Bane—”

Sy gasped and leaned forward. “*Yes?*”

Meena moaned and dropped her head into her hands. Gregory Bane played the vampire on *Lust*. There wasn’t a single person on earth who was sicker of Gregory Bane than Meena.

And she’d never even met him.

—to get Stefan Dominic to read for the part of the vampire,” Shoshona went on.

Sy, looking disappointed, sank back into his chair. “Who the hell is Stefan Dominic?” he barked.

Shoshona smirked.

“Only Gregory Bane’s *best friend*,” she said. “I mean, they go clubbing together practically every weekend. I know you’ve seen his picture with Gregory in *Us Weekly*, Sy. The press we’ll get from hiring him will be huge. I can’t believe no one’s snatched him up already. And the best thing? He has his SAG card, and he can come in this Friday to read with Taylor.” Shoshona looked like the cat who’d swallowed the canary. “I already talked to him about it. He goes to my gym.”

Suddenly, Meena knew exactly why Shoshona was spending so much time on that treadmill. And it didn’t have anything to do with fitting into those Crewcuts.

“There is no way,” Meena said, fighting for inner patience, “that Taylor”—Taylor Mackenzie was the actress who played Tabby—“is going to agree to play a vampire bride.”

Taylor had recently gone on a macrobiotic diet and hired a personal trainer, shrinking herself down to Shoshona’s size. Although Taylor was delighted about this—and the attention the tabloids were paying to her because of it—she needed to watch out if she too didn’t want to end up in a coffin . . . something Meena had been trying to warn her about by leaving large deli sandwiches in her dressing room. Not exactly subtle, but the best Meena could do.

“Tabby will like it if the network tells her to,” Shoshona said. “This is what ABN wants.”

Meena was trying very hard not to grit her teeth. Her dentist had already chastised her for doing this in her sleep and prescribed her a

mouth guard. Meena dreaded wearing it, because it wasn't exactly the most romantic thing to show up wearing to bed. She looked like a hockey goalie.

But it was that, the dentist said, or a new, less stressful job.

And there were none of those to be found. At least not in television writing.

And since Meena was currently sleeping alone, she guessed it didn't matter what she looked like anyway.

"Cheryl isn't going to like it," Meena warned them. Cheryl was the veteran actress who'd played Victoria Worthington Stone for the past thirty years. "You know she's been hoping this is the year she'll finally get that Emmy."

Thirty years, ten marriages, four miscarriages, one abortion, two murders, six kidnappings, and an evil twin, and Cheryl Trent still had never won a single Daytime Emmy.

It was a crime, in Meena's opinion. Not just because Meena was one of Cheryl's biggest fans and getting to write for her was the thrill of a lifetime, but because Cheryl was one of the nicest ladies Meena had ever met.

And part of Meena's plan, in the story line she'd submitted to Sy—but which he'd just passed over for Shoshona's vampire plot—had been for Victoria Worthington Stone to fall for Tabby's new boyfriend's father, a bitter police chief Victoria was going to help reunite with his wayward son . . . giving Cheryl a sure shot at that golden statuette for which she so longed.

But a *vampire* story line? No one was going to be handing out Emmies for that.

"Yeah, well," Shoshona said, narrowing her eyes at Meena, "Cheryl can cry me a river."

Meena's jaw dropped. *This* was the thanks she got for having saved Shoshona's butt so many times with her late scripts?

Why had she even bothered?

"I love it," Sy said, snapping his fingers. "Run it past your aunt and uncle. I gotta go, I've got a lunch." He stood up.

"Sy," Meena said. Her mouth felt dry.

"What?" He looked annoyed.

“Don’t . . .”

There were so many things she wanted to say. Felt as if she *had* to say. For the good of her soul. For the good of the show. For the good of the country as a whole.

Instead, she just said, “Don’t take Fifth. There’s congestion. I heard it on IOIO Wins. Have the cabbie take Park.”

Sy’s face relaxed. “Thanks, Harper,” he said. “Finally, something useful out of you.” Then he turned and left the room.

Meena swiveled her head to stare daggers at Shoshona.

Not because she was irritated that she’d just saved Sy’s life—if he took Fifth, his cab would, indeed, meet with congestion that would so irritate him, he’d get out and walk, causing him to jaywalk injudiciously at Forty-seventh and be struck by a Fresh Direct truck—and he wasn’t the least bit grateful, but because she knew what “Run it past it your aunt and uncle” meant.

It meant Shoshona had won.

“*Vampires*,” Meena said. “Real original, Metzenbaum.”

Shoshona stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “Get over it, Harper. They’re everywhere. You can’t escape them.”

She turned and walked out.

And for the first time, Meena noticed the gem-encrusted dragon on the side of Shoshona’s tote.

No. It couldn’t be.

But it was.

The Marc Jacobs tote Meena had secretly been lusting after for half a year but denying herself because it cost \$5,000.

And no way could Meena afford—or justify spending—that much money on a bag.

And, all right, Shoshona had it in aquamarine, not the ruby red that would perfectly round out Meena’s wardrobe.

But still.

Meena stared after her, grinding her teeth.

Now she was going to have no choice but to make an emergency run at lunch to CVS in order to restock her secret candy drawer.