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THE BAD GUY

Chapter 16

Amanda woke up with surprisingly little apprehension about it being Thursday. She made herself a nice smoothie and texted James: *Are we still investigating Alain Proctor this afternoon?*

Radio silence. She didn't have much else to do, so she pulled out her iPad and browsed some online shopping sites. In the end, she didn't feel like buying anything.

James finally texted mid-morning, and they agreed to meet in the parking lot of Alain Proctor's apartment building. Amanda's GPS led her to a luxury condominium building in downtown Boston, not unlike her own. She and James arrived almost simultaneously. She appreciated that he was never late, unlike Lydia.

Thanks to her mind control, the concierge let them pass to the elevator bank, and they rode to the third floor in silence. At unit 320, James lifted his hand, preparing to open the door with a power surge, but she stopped him. "Wait. It seems wrong to break down his door and just burst in on him like that."



James stared at her. "Yeah, normally it would be wrong, but he's run away twice already. We don't want him to escape again, do we? This time, the surprise is on him."

Amanda caught her breath, still unsure.

James sighed. "The next time he runs, you go after him by yourself, okay? I'm done chasing this guy."

"Okay, okay," she agreed. "You're right, go for it."

His power surge blew back the heavy door. "This is custom made, heavily reinforced," he said.

She simply nodded. The blast was sure to have alerted Alain of their presence. She opened her receiving functions, and they stepped into a sparsely decorated yet chic space. Before they had a chance to look around, the young man with bleached hair and a longish face stepped into the room, impeccably dressed in a well-fitting charcoal suit and a dark red shirt.

Up close he was attractive, though his looks couldn't hold a candle to James's. But there was something devious about his features. He emanated a sort of hidden, sensual depravity. His hooded eyes were the most remarkable thing about him: intense, yet dead at the same time. Pale and empty, like a well-dressed storefront with nothing but bare shelves inside.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Alain Proctor." His voice was pleasant enough, with husky undertones. He was obviously expecting them.

He first looked at James, as if sizing him up, then turned his gaze to Amanda, locking onto her. Something twitched in his features. He gasped and abruptly moved forward.

"Hey, man, stop right there." James demanded, stepping forward to block Proctor from getting too close to Amanda. He was taller and much bulkier than the gray-suited stranger.

He keeps forgetting I'm twice as powerful, thought Amanda. Nevertheless, she was quite pleased about his instinct to protect her.

Proctor stopped, his gaze still locked on Amanda's. His expression showed a curious mixture of awe and confused wonder. James stood his ground, frowning.

Suddenly something sparked in Proctor's eyes, and to her considerable amazement, Amanda saw that they were, in fact, blue. She could have sworn they were pale gray, almost colorless. They had looked so empty just a minute ago.

At the same moment, something unusual started happening to her, too. She felt like her consciousness was splitting. Time itself seemed to stall, slowly spreading and ebbing around her. She looked up at James, and he responded with a tiny reassuring smile, appearing unaffected by whatever was making her feel this way. It was as if her consciousness was slowly detaching from her body and floating upward like a balloon. Hovering near the ceiling, she was looking down on them now, zooming in on the man in the gray suit.

"*Amanda . . .*" She heard Alain's voice as if he were right by her side. A ghostly whisper, soft and strangely pleasant.

She forced herself to think of her physical form, her fingers, her arms, her legs. She zoomed back into her own body, then out again for a split second, then back in for good. After chasing the sensation away, she looked at James, still in the same position. And she realized that this uncanny, surreal standoff must have lasted only a few seconds.

Proctor stepped back, still staring at her.

Still dizzy, Amanda touched James's sleeve, then leaned on his arm to help ground herself.

"Are you okay?" James asked, supporting her weight with ease.

Warmed by his concern, Amanda nodded that she was fine. "Just a little dizzy," she whispered. She didn't want to tell him what she'd just experienced. Especially not in front of the other guy.

James wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. She breathed him in, feeling stronger under the pressure of his warm, muscular arm.

James looked sternly at Alain Proctor. "Okay, man," he demanded. "Tell us why you keep following us."

"I'm following *you*?" the man repeated slowly, mocking him. "Aren't you the ones who just broke into *my* apartment?"

James made no reply. Amanda followed the direction of his gaze and noticed that it was trained on the desk by the wall. His face twitched, and his fingers tightened around her shoulder. She moved in front of him to get a better look.

Displayed across the desk were pictures of people who had been shot to death. She gasped in horror and whipped around to face the stranger. "What are *those*?"

Smirking, he unabashedly looked her over. She crossed her arms. First Prague, then Florence, now here. She'd had just about enough of the way he looked at her, especially now that she'd seen those photos. What kind of a monster was he?

"What are these horrible photos?" she insisted. "Why do you have them?"

He slid his hands into his pockets, shrugged, and averted his gaze. "Proof for my clients. Proof of a job done."

"Oh my God," she gasped. A killer for hire. *Following them!*

Worse, he wasn't shy about it. In fact, he seemed to have known they were coming, and if that were true, he must have left the photos out for them to find. This was borne out by the way he seemed to enjoy their shock and revulsion.

"I see." James stepped in front of Amanda again. "You're coming with us." He grabbed Proctor's arm to escort him to the door, and predictably, the man resisted. Amanda rolled her eyes. James was a Sentinel 9, so what macho nonsense was this? Pushing and shoving—completely pointless.

She decided to knock Proctor out with an energy pulse and wrap things up quickly. To her astonishment, the pulse had an unexpected effect on the man. His body tensed up, and he began gasping and moaning,

but not in agony. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying it.

She hit him again, even stronger. Alarmingly, he seemed to derive an intensely sensual pleasure from her hits. There was no mistaking it. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he tossed his head up, panting and biting his lip.

"Hit me up, I love it," he said, looking at her, leaning against the wall and opening his body up to the sensation.

James and Amanda exchanged dismayed glances, and James obliged—this time with his fist. Proctor sagged to the floor.

"What is *wrong* with you?" James demanded.

"I absorb your energy," Proctor explained, catching his breath. "Feel free . . . such power . . . it's wonderful." He licked his lips again, catching his breath, looking directly at Amanda now. "Give me more. Hit me hard, my pretty. You're so strong, maybe I'll die, but I don't care. I want more of you. I love what it does to me."

"Pervert," she said, looking down at her shoes.

"He's a tricky little prick," James added, then addressed Proctor directly. "Now get up, or I *will* hit you again. But not how you like it."

"Okay, Purple Heart."

James was startled. "How do you know us?"

Sitting on the floor, the blond man ignored the question. In fact, he mostly ignored James altogether. He seemed to have eyes only for Amanda.

She was fresh out of patience with his lecherous looks.

"Okay, that's enough," she said. "Now that we know what you are, tell us, what do you want? Why are you following us? Did someone hire you to kill us?"

"Don't worry, beautiful. I'm not going to hurt you. To me, you're like a beautiful little rose. So pretty. So deliciously pretty. You want me to come with you? Sure. That's fine. I need to make one phone call first."

James clenched his fists. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, I am not kidding you, Purple Heart." He chuckled again. "Where do you propose to take me, anyway? Basil Blake? The Committee? Ha ha. My dear Sentinels, I have them on speed dial."

James and Amanda just stared at him. He narrowed his eyes. "Go ahead. Call Basil. Ask him about Alain Proctor. Ask him what you should do with me."

"Oh, I'm about to," muttered Amanda. Her heart pounding, she dialed Basil's number. To her relief, he answered on the first ring. "It's Amanda. James is here too. Listen, Alain Proctor is with us. We're in his apartment." To her surprise, there was only silence on the other end. "Hello? Are you there?"

"Go on," Basil said.

"We have him right here. He's been following us, and we just learned he's a killer for hire. What should we do?"

She began to think the call had been dropped, but Basil finally spoke, his voice grave and compelling. "Let him go. Try not to engage. He can be dangerous."

Let him go? She must have misheard him. "Too late!" she said. "And by the way, he was immune to our energy pulses. Now, where do you want us to bring him?"

"I know he's immune. Let him go, Amanda. He's an informant. We have an agreement: we won't touch him, and he won't hurt any of us."

She couldn't believe her ears. "He's not going to hurt *us*? Do you know that he kills people? He's a hired assassin!" Proctor's invulnerability to their energy pulses was troubling enough. She hadn't even known

such a thing was possible. But Basil had barely reacted.

"We know everything about Alain," her adviser said. "Let him be. The people he kills . . . They aren't nice—for the most part."

"You can't be serious!"

"I'm sorry."

"No, I don't accept that," she snapped. She bit her lip as the man in the suit got to his feet, an *I told you so* smirk on his face. James had taken the opportunity to take a quick walk around the living room, as if trying to glean all the information he could about this dangerous individual.

There must be some explanation for Basil's behavior. She turned away and lowered her voice. "Tell me, Basil. Who is this man? Why are you on his speed dial?"

"I'm sorry, Amanda. Pass the phone to James," Basil ordered. When she didn't move he added, "Right now, please."

She handed the phone to James, who listened for a while then hung up. Without looking at Proctor, he handed the phone back to Amanda and said, "Come on. We're leaving."

Proctor was leaning against the wall, a lazy smile on his face.

"You can't be serious!" Amanda burst out. "Wait, what did he say?"

James took her by the elbow and directed her gently but firmly out into the hallway, shutting the door behind them. As they walked to the elevator, he said, "I'm a military man, and I was given a direct order." He pushed the button for the lobby. "And I trust Basil. Don't you?"

Amanda had never been the kind of person to blindly obey orders. She glared at James and pressed redial on her phone as the elevator descended. It went to voice mail. So, Basil was ignoring her! No, she would not accept that. Not when her insides were churning with anxiety. "Give me your phone, James."

"Give it a rest, will you?"

"No."

He darted her an amused glance, but she stubbornly held out her hand.

"Fine. But it won't do you any good."

She growled under her breath as he dialed their adviser and handed her the phone. It was ringing.

"We need to meet immediately," she said to Basil as he picked up.

His voice was cautious. "All right, Amanda. You're terribly stubborn. Meet me at my house in Vermont next week. I do have an important matter to discuss with you. I haven't forgotten about my call the other day. It's about something you need to be aware of as a Sentinel 10. And then Alain will make more sense to you, I promise."

"I don't want to wait a week," she complained. "I need to see you now."

"I'm sorry for the delay, but it can't be helped. I am out of the country on official business."

She glanced at James and lowered her voice. "God, what's going on, Basil?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. At least, not for now. I will explain all when I see you."

He was freaking her out. "Does this have to do with the dream you told me about?"

His tone turned decidedly stern. "What's important is for you to stay away from Alain Proctor. Under no circumstances are you to interact with him. Do you understand?"

As if she was about to stalk a hit man immune to her powers. "Sure, Basil. But what do I do when he's following *me*?"

"Just stay away from him." Basil hung up.

They were out of the elevator, and she handed the phone back to James as they exited the building.

"I'm exhausted," she said flatly. "I've no idea what's going on. See if you can find out something more about this guy? See you later, James."

She didn't have the energy to say anything else. They parted and walked to their cars.

As she unlocked her driver's side door, she glanced up at the building and saw Alain standing at his front window. He pressed his forehead into the glass. Even from this distance, she could see that his eyes were pale and empty once again. She thought she saw him mouth these words: "My diamond rose."

She shuddered, locked herself into the car, and sped away.

Chapter 17

For the next several days, Amanda obeyed Basil and stayed away from Alain Proctor, but her questions about him grew unchecked, like a cancer. She wanted to know about the pull she felt toward him—a man she'd never met; a man who murdered other men. An assassin. A killer. Why wasn't she terrified of him?

Her mind kept returning to the confrontation in his condo. His demeanor, so unaffected. Her own out-of-body experience, if that's what it was. Something had occurred between them, something undefinable. *Supernatural*. She remembered his eyes, and how the shade of them changed. His lonely form at the window when she drove away.

My diamond rose. Whatever did that mean?

Amanda arranged to meet Lydia for dinner that evening to talk the situation over and clear her head. As she exited her apartment building, distant flashes of lightning punctuated the sky. It was going to rain. She thrust her hands into the pockets of her black velvet jacket and quickened her pace, carefully stepping around puddles, her pumps clattering sharply on the wet pavement.

As she approached her Jaguar, her train of thoughts was abruptly interrupted. A flower was clipped under the windshield wiper. *What on earth?* She immediately cast a look around, but saw no one.

She got closer and saw that the object was a large lavender rose. She lifted it gently, its delicate petals stirring in the wind. A note had been clipped to it. She unfolded the paper and read: *Hello, beautiful. I know this is strange, but can we talk? I need you. Only you can save me.*

She dropped the note and it fell into a puddle, the water obscuring the message. Seriously concerned, she raised her eyes again. There, in the gray of the twilight, she spotted him only ten feet away: Alain Proctor. Light-gray suit, blond hair, standing completely still. She couldn't make out his expression, but she could almost physically feel the weight of his gaze. How long had he been there? And why?

The thought that he was trying to trap her crossed her mind, yet she felt no panic. Instead, she felt angry.

"No, we can't talk," she snapped, then beeped her car fob and opened the door. "You make me sick! Keep away from me!" She jumped into the driver's seat, threw the rose in his direction, and slammed the door.

He didn't move. He didn't speak. He just stood there. Silent. Still. He had the most intense way of standing still. Her heart pounding, her cheeks pink with excitement, she started the car and began to drive away.

What a creep. No, not a creep. A disgusting murderer! Leaving me a rose and a note? This is all insane.

She glanced into her rearview mirror as she slowed down. The psychopath was still standing there. He knew where she lived. How long had he known? How long had he been stalking her? Was Florence the first time he'd followed her, or simply the first time he had shown himself? It would be sane to feel afraid. Yet she didn't.

She watched him step over the crushed rose and move into the shadow of the building.

She couldn't shake the image of the rose from her mind. Frowning, she used the voice activation technology in her car, "Hey Siri, what is the significance of a lavender rose?"

"Parker Posey is an American actress . . ."

"Gah! No!" she shouted at the dashboard. She couldn't wait. As she drove, she dug into her purse to retrieve her cell phone, opened her Google app, and tapped in "meaning of lavender rose." Recklessly

darting quick glances between the road and her phone, she read, "The lavender rose is often a sign of enchantment and love at first sight. Those who have been enraptured by feelings of love and adoration have used lavender roses to express their feelings and intentions."

"Love and adoration?" She rolled her eyes and made a gagging noise.

When she and Lydia met, she said nothing about the incident. Lydia would freak. But before the evening was over, her flustered annoyance had turned to deep concern. After all, this was a man who killed people for a living. He might still be at her apartment when she went home. Why wasn't she more afraid?

It would be several days before she could speak to Basil. Why was he avoiding her like this, just when she needed him most?

After she left, the man in the alley stood still for a few minutes. The effect of her presence lingered for a little longer this time, but he knew it was about to dissipate again, leaving only his psychopathic self standing there, indifferent and devoid of emotion, except for his longing for her. This desire for her was one of the few things he had in common with his shadow self.

"I need you, my little diamond," he whispered, a dreamy look in his eyes. "Only you can save me. Pull me out. I've been drowning for so long now. So close to the bottom."

In the gathering darkness, his eyes soon paled again. Turning around, he walked by the rose in a dirty puddle, and disappeared behind a corner.

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