

PROTECT & DEFEND

JACOB ST. CHRISTOPHER ACTION

Alex Ander

Chapter 1: Bit Loafers

June 13th; 10:49 p.m.

New York City

Salvadore's Diner

The door swung open, and a bell chimed overhead. Of the half a dozen patrons, all but one eyed the newcomer. The odd person out, seated at the counter, her back to the door, Amanda maintained a death stare with her phone.

Hearing the 'tap—tap—tap' of leather-soled shoes on hard flooring drawing closer, she positioned her cell, so the black screen could catch a reflection of the latest customer over her shoulder; a blacked out silhouette got bigger and bigger.

Feeling a presence over her left shoulder, she lifted her eyes toward the glass partition that separated the area behind the counter from the darkened kitchen. A second later, she was fixated on her mobile again; however, her mind was elsewhere.

She slid a finger down the screen. *Six-two, two hundred...give or take an inch or ten pounds. Black suit. Gray dress shirt. Banded collar—buttoned to the top. Is he one of them? No. He's too...refined. The men from the alley were dressed like bangers.* Inwardly, she scoffed. *Refined. When was the last time I used that word? Have I ever?*

The man claimed the swivel stool to Amanda's left.

Her head down, the sixteen-year-old stole a peek out of the corner of her eye. *Black slip-ons.* She noticed metal across the tops. *Dad had a pair of those. Bit loafers he called them.*

A server approached and stood across the counter from the man. "We close in ten minutes. Not sure what we can make you at this late hour."

"I understand..." he eyed the woman's name, embroidered on her light blue shirt, and smiled, "Gwen. I'll just have a cup of coffee—cream with two sugars please."

With Gwen occupying the stranger's attention, Amanda risked a longer look at his face; short and straight jet black hair—swept to the side, broad face, and gray eyes that matched his shirt. *Wide shoulders...he must've been a jock in high school.* The mid-thirties man showed the server a full set of straight and white teeth, his black, full beard making them pop even more. Amanda went back to her device.

Putting an elbow on the counter, the man pivoted a few degrees to the right. "Hi."

She heard the greeting above the music playing through her black earbuds. She tapped the screen and found a new song.

"In my day," his second elbow mirroring the first, Jock clasped hands, "when someone said 'hello,' it was customary to answer in kind."

Gwen banged a white mug on the counter, spilling the black liquid. "One cup of coffee with cream." She slid a container of sugar packets closer, which nearly collided with the cup, "Take as many as you like," before going back to tallying her tips for the day.

Picking up two sugars, he tore the paper, emptied them into his coffee and addressed the back of Gwen's head. "Thank you." He leaned closer to the young girl. "I don't know why," he whispered, "they say New Yorkers are rude." He jerked a thumb toward the server. "She's a real *peach.*"

Amanda stifled the urge to giggle. *Nothing good can come from striking up a conversation with a stranger at eleven o'clock at night in New York City.* She saw the time in the upper right corner of the screen. *Twenty minutes more and I'll be on the bus and out of here, away from this effed-up mess I've gotten myself into.*

Stirring the coffee, Jock cranked his head around to the left when chairs scraped across the floor. A young couple left the establishment fifteen seconds later. Facing forward, he noticed two men in a corner booth, fold newspapers and make ready to follow the couple's lead.

Gwen walked by and rapped her knuckles on the surface in front of Amanda. When the girl jumped and looked up, the server made eye contact with her and Jock, "We close in five minutes," before saying the same words to a man at the end of the counter. The man—several seats away from Amanda—stood, withdrew a pocketbook and loitered over his bill.

Stirring his coffee, Jock stared straight ahead at the glass partition, his peripheral vision watching the reflections of the three men. The one on the other side of the girl went back and

forth from his bill to his wallet. *You had a coffee. It doesn't take that long to...* He held up a finger on Gwen's return trip. "Excuse me, but I'd like a fresh cup please."

She pivoted toward him, a scowl on her face. "Didn't you hear me? We close—"

"Yes I heard you...in five minutes." He slid the mug toward the woman. "I want a fresh cup...*now*."

"Listen, buddy—"

"I'm not your buddy. I'm a paying customer. And as such, I'm *always right*. Now be a dear and," he thrust a forefinger toward the out-of-sight kitchen, "get me a fresh cup from the back. I don't want the stale crap you keep in the pot out here."

Amanda faced the disgruntled buyer, eyes wide.

"I'm not—" Gwen paused, shut her mouth and shot daggers at the man before snatching the cup and storming into the kitchen through a swinging door.

"Talk about being rude." Amanda never looked away from her phone. "You didn't have to be so mean to her."

Resuming the staring contest with the partition, Jock unbuttoned his suit coat. "Yes I did."

"She's just tired and probably wants to go home to her kids."

Swiveling to face Amanda, he slipped his right hand inside his jacket. "That's exactly what I want for her...to see her kids tonight. Now get down, Amanda, and cover your head."

The petite, blonde-haired girl yanked out her earbuds and glared at the man. His gentle eyes were now steely slits. "How do you know my—"

Jock leapt to his feet and drew a pistol from under his left armpit. "*Get*," he pushed her under the counter, "*down*," while extending the 1911 handgun over her falling body. He got off two shots. The man at the end of the counter took one in the chest—his gun fell from his hand—before a second bullet fractured his skull.

Jock whirled around, covered the nose of one of the two men from the booth with the 1911's front sight and squeezed the trigger. A deafening boom eclipsed the reports of the other man's nine millimeter.

Assuming a combat grip on his weapon, Jock moved left, away from the counter, away from Amanda, hoping to draw the second man's fire away from her. Advancing down a row of booths near the front windows, he fired the gun's remaining five cartridges. Producing a fresh seven-rounder from under his coat, he slammed the magazine into the beveled magwell. Running the

slide forward, he never lost a step, while watching his adversary take cover at the corner of the counter.

Jock leveled the pistol at where the man's head would appear. He moved his aim to the right and down, and fired three rounds. The crouching man leaned to his right and fell onto his butt, holding his upper chest. The 158-grain jacketed bullets had passed through the counter's wooden panels.

His weapon trained on the fallen man's nose, Jock closed the distance and towered over the would-be killer. "Who do you work for?"

His grip on the Sig Sauer P229 relaxing, the prone man looked at his wound before he slowly lowered his head.

"Who do you work for?"

A second later, the hand covering a sucking chest wound flopped to the floor. A growing pool of blood stained the white tiles under the dead man's torso.

Jock holstered his firearm and looked back at Amanda. She was gone. He whipped his head toward the body. He needed to search him, all of the men. He went back to where the girl should have been. *Amanda's my top priority.* He glanced out the street-facing windows. *She didn't have enough time to make it out the front.* He noticed an 'exit' sign beyond the counter. *Must've gone out the back.* He took off on a dead run toward the red neon sign.

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Chapter 2: Saint Christopher

Her eyes closed, Amanda crawled over the body of the man who had been sitting to her right. Unable to resist the temptation, she lifted an eyelid and saw the bloody remains of a man's face that was not a face anymore. She turned away, *Gross*, and slithered around the last stool. The gunfire behind her had ceased. Her head felt like a balloon ready to burst. Her right ear, the one that had been closest to Jock's gun, had a high-pitched tone, drowning out other noises.

Amanda army crawled out of the dining area and into a short hallway. Rising to her feet, she bent over and put hands on knees. She shook her head, but the ringing remained. After a glance toward the direction from which she had come, she staggered forward a few steps. Throwing out her arms, she steadied her gait. She looked up and saw a rusted door, a horizontal bar bisecting her escape route. *Just need to get to the bus stop.*

Amanda put both hands on the bar and flexed her muscles. Her mind, however, prevented them from acting. Tiny hairs rose on her neck. Sweat beads formed on her forehead. Her face felt flushed. *What are you waiting for? Safety, a new life, is just on the other side of this door. Get out. Now!* She drew in a breath, recoiled slightly and propelled her body forward, only to have something latch on to her collar.

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Jock grabbed Amanda by her shirt collar. "Don't go out there." He pulled her back and stood between her and the door.

The wiry teen lifted a leg and sent a black high-top tennis shoe toward the man's groin.

Jock backed away and crossed his forearms over the attacker's shin. He blocked a hand coming toward his face before he wrapped his meaty paws around the girl's skinny upper arms. "Amanda, I'm here to help. I'm not going to hurt you." She struggled, but he held firm. "You're in a lot of trouble." He pointed his forehead toward the dining area. "Those men were here to kill you."

Amanda squinted at the stranger. His words sounded far away and did not match his moving lips. Wincing, she slammed shut her eyes and put a hand to her right ear. A second later, she covered both ears and shook her head.

“Don’t worry. Your hearing will come back. Just give it some time.” He let go of her arms, but kept his body coiled to fend off another assault. Retrieving his gun, he swapped out the partially spent magazine for a full one.

Noticing the black steel in the man’s hand, her eyes bulging, Amanda retreated, until she hit the wall.

Jock saw the look of terror on the teen’s face. He pumped a hand at her. “I’m not going to hurt you.” He holstered the 1911. “I promise.”

“How do you,” she swallowed, “how do you know who I am?”

“I know a lot about you, Amanda. It’s my job to find out everything I can about the ones I’m protecting.”

The girl cocked her head. *Protecting*. The word had a soothing tone. She gave the man another once-over, stopping at his gray eyes, which were silver in this light. *They’re like...sparkling or something*. After blinking several times, she gaped at him. “How can I trust you?”

He dipped his forehead toward the area beyond her shoulder. “You saw what I did back there.”

The image of the dead man’s half a face flashed across Amanda’s mind. Her stomach churned.

“Trust me. I’m not here to do that to you. I’ll sooner forfeit my life than let anyone lay a finger on you.” A low siren wailed in the distance. “The police are going to be here any minute.”

She regarded the man and heard his words in her mind...*the ones I’m protecting...* “Isn’t that what we want...the police?”

Jock shook his head. “I’m afraid in the long run they won’t be able to save you. If you come with me, I can make sure your problems don’t follow you wherever you go.” He paused. “I can help you start a new life.”

Hearing the sirens—they were growing louder—Amanda gawked at the door. *A new life...is that even possible?* She glanced over her shoulder, toward the noise, the arriving police...*they won’t be able to save you*. She came back to the man and squinted at his handsome face...*I’ll sooner forfeit my life than let anyone lay a finger on you*.

“So how about it?” Jock smiled. “Some say I have the face of an angel.”

Amanda grinned before she could stop herself. “I’ve heard the same thing said about sociopaths.”

Chuckling, Jock glimpsed the floor. “Okay, maybe that was a bad analogy.” A moment later, he went deadpan. “The truth is, when your back’s against the wall, sometimes you just have to have a little faith,” he waited a beat, “and trust someone.”

“And that someone’s supposed to be *you*? I don’t even know your name.”

He held out a hand. “St. Christopher,” he paused, “My name’s Jacob St. Christopher. It’s a pleasure to formally meet you, Amanda Applegate.”

Amanda went back and forth from the outstretched hand to the man’s face. “Saint Christopher,” slowly, she lifted an arm. “Like the Catholic...” the two clasped hands, “the one who’s on the medal?”

He smiled. “The name’s the same, but,” he glanced away, shaking his head, “I’m no saint, Amanda.” He eyed the girl, whose safety rested in his hands, and flashed a smile. “Please call me Jacob.”

She smiled back. “Mandy.”

He nodded and put a hand to the horizontal bar on the door. “Stay here, Mandy. I’m going to make sure it’s safe out there.” He pointed. “Don’t open this door, until I pound on it, okay?”

She stood straight, adjusted the backpack on her shoulders and nodded her head.

Jacob stuck a hand inside his jacket and leaned into the door.

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Chapter 3: Coonan

Arms folded, hands rubbing the backs of her arms, Amanda stood in the silent hallway; the only noise was the police sirens. *They sound like they're at the front door.* She covered her ears. *Maybe my hearing's back.* She shook her head. *Either way, they're close.*

Amanda glanced around the dimly lit area before putting an ear to the door. The alarms in her other ear overshadowed whatever was happening outside.

She walked away from the door, pivoted and came back. *What if something happened to Jock...to Jacob? What if he left me? Don't be silly, Mandy. He just killed to save you. He wouldn't leave—two loud thumps came from the other side of the door. The signal...it's safe.*

She plowed through the door and rushed into the darkness, only to jump back and lunge for the closing door. She wrenched on the handle, but the door stayed shut. She whirled around, put her back to the metal and stared at a crumpled body on the pavement. A crack and a yell broke her trance, and she looked left.

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His back to Amanda and unaware of her presence, Jacob connected with the burly man's nose, shattering the appendage and sending a spray of blood down the man's shirt. Burly yelled before a right knee to the stomach doubled him over. Jacob curled an arm around the man's neck—a reverse headlock—and sent his left foot into a second attacker's chest before twisting Burly's head one hundred and eighty degrees. The man's lifeless body hit the pavement.

The lone adversary charged, a knife in his right hand leading the way.

Sidestepping left, Jacob grabbed the knife-wielding wrist with his right hand, wrapped his free arm around the man's neck and drove the blade into his opponent's gut. The man dropped to his knees, holding his fatal wound.

Jacob took a step, clutched the man's head in his arms and flexed his muscles. Before he could act, he spotted Amanda, back pressed against the door. She had the same horrified look on her face as when he had swapped out the magazines in his gun. He glanced at the top of the head he

hugged, came back to her and let go of his prey. The man fell forward. “I told you to wait until I banged on the door.”

“I—I heard...” she surveyed the killing, “something...and I thought that was you.”

Realizing what she was referring to, Jacob took her by the arm. Twice he had rammed the face of a gold-toothed assailant into the door before throwing the unconscious man to the cement.

“Come on. We have *got* to go.”

The two ran down the alley and slowed at the next street. Jacob shot a look in both directions before tugging Amanda’s arm. “This way. My car’s over here.”

Twenty seconds later, a 1970 Grabber Blue Ford Mustang pulled away from the curb, doing the speed limit, the driver casting glances at the mirrors.

“How did you do that to those men?” Slack-jawed, Amanda sat in the passenger seat, staring at the dashboard. “I didn’t hear a single gunshot. You killed them with your bare hands.” She faced Jacob. “Who the,” she cursed, “are you?”

Jacob adjusted the rearview mirror and glimpsed the sixteen-year-old. “Please don’t use that language.”

She motioned behind her. “You just killed six people back there...and you want to lecture me on swearing? That’s rich.”

“Immature or frustrated people use foul language when they *think* they have no other way to express their feelings.”

Amanda expelled a breath of air. “Well excuse me, but after what I’ve just been through, I’m feeling pretty damn *freaking frustrated* right now.”

Jacob flicked his eyes toward his passenger. *Freaking. Better than the other word she just used.*

“So you never swear?”

He shook his head. “I never said that. I’m not perfect. I curse. But I try to channel my thoughts and feelings toward other things.”

“You some sort of Zen master,” she held out her arms and crossed her forearms, “who hums his way to tranquility?”

Jacob half smiled. “No.” He waited a beat. “And there’s nothing wrong with those who seek peace.”

Driving in silence, Jacob navigated the streets of New York City. He made a couple SDR’s—surveillance detection routes—before pointing the Mustang toward his destination.

“What kind of gun are you carrying anyway?” Amanda glanced at his chest. “That’s not like any 1911 I’ve ever heard. Are you using special rounds or what?”

Jacob eyed her. “You’re familiar with guns?”

She held up her hands, palms up. “If you live in America, sooner or later, *everyone* becomes familiar with guns.”

He bobbed his head. *This is true.*

“I’ve handled and fired a 1911 before. It boomed.” She glanced out her window. “But not like yours.”

“That’s because mine’s not a forty-five.”

She faced him.

“Mine’s a 357 Magnum.”

“Bullsh—” she saw Jacob’s raised finger. “Sorry.”

He put his hand back on the wheel.

“Bullcrap! That’s a revolver cartridge. They don’t make 357 semi autos.”

“Oh, but they do. In fact, a company called Coonan has married the best handgun cartridge ever made with the best handgun ever designed.” He put fingertips to his chest. “At least that’s *my opinion*, anyway.”

“So you’re one of those people in John Browning’s camp.”

Jacob gave Amanda a long look, eyebrows furled downward. *When I took this assignment, I never thought I’d be having a gun conversation with a sixteen-year-old girl.*

“If you ask me,” she turned away, “there are better, lighter guns out there that hold more rounds and are easier to shoot.”

Jacob lifted the corner of his mouth. *And she’s holding her own too.* “You don’t need a bucket of bullets in your hand to get the job done.” He made a single chopping motion toward the windshield. “Aim straight, control your breathing and ease back the trigger.”

She faced him, her mind going back to the action at the diner. “I guess.” She leaned forward and turned on the radio. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere safe...where,” he pushed his foot down on the accelerator, and the Boss 302 V8 engine thundered, “we can talk about the past...and your future.”

Chapter 4: We Have to Talk

June 14th; 12:57 a.m.

Purchase (a hamlet in Harrison, New York)

The Mustang navigated the circular red cobblestone drive, stopping at a white two-story modern home on Sylvanleigh Road. Six dormers of various sizes and more than a dozen windows greeted the new arrivals, along with two brick chimneys, one centered in the middle of the house, the other off to the right. Two rows of three white columns on either side of the front door supported a portico. The portico also served as a second-level patio, accessed by two French doors.

Amanda removed her seat belt. “You live here? This place is ginormous.”

Jacob got out of the muscle car and hurried around to open her door. “No, a friend of mine lets me use it when I’m in town.” He slammed the car door and led the girl up the porch steps before stopping to unlock the door.

Following him, she bobbed her head backward. “Does that ‘Stang’ belong to this friend too?”

Puckering his lips, “Oh no,” he shook his head. “That Mustang’s mine. She’s my pride and joy.”

“I can see why. It’s a sweet ride.”

“I helped my father restore it. I was in high school.” He opened the door for her to go in ahead of him. “In fact, I was your age...fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.” He looked down. “Some of the best times of my life were spent under that hood, hunched over with grease under my nails.”

Amanda drew even with her guardian. “I take it your father gave it to you?” Jacob glanced away, and she noticed his face seemed to age ten years. “He died, didn’t he?”

Jacob nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“It was many years ago.”

She poked a finger at him. “Judging from that look, it seems like it was only yesterday, so,” she put a hand on his arm, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Jacob squinted at the five-foot-nothing, hundred-pound teen. *Perceptive, aren’t you?* He gave her a brief smile, “Thank you,” and swung an arm toward the interior of the home. “We’ll have to make do with this for the time being.”

Entering the structure, Amanda’s head went in every direction. “I can’t believe people live like this. Who needs a house this big?”

Jacob closed and locked the door, “This is just the living room,” before heading up the shag-carpeted stairs. “Follow me. I’ll show you to your room.”

Amanda was equally wide-eyed with the size and amenities of her bedroom. “This is *my* room? I’ve been in *houses* that were smaller.” She shrugged out of her backpack, sat and bounced on the bed, looking around the area.

Antique wooden furniture—two armoires, a roll top desk, Queen Anne chair, five-foot wall-mounted flat-screen television and a beanbag chair in front of a coffee table—nearly filled the room. There was leftover space to add exercise equipment or a small basketball court if one desired.

Jacob pointed. “That’s your private bath,” he pivoted, “and those are the closets, but—”
“My *private* bath?”

He smiled and gestured again. “There’s nothing in the closets that’ll fit you, so,” he put a hand on a plastic shopping bag, setting on the roll top desk, “hopefully something in here will work. I picked up some things someone your age might wear.”

Amanda brought the bag to the bed and rummaged the contents, pulling out jeans, a t-shirt, socks.

“Why don’t you get cleaned up, and we’ll talk when you’re done. I’ll go make us something to eat. Anything special you’d ...”

She retrieved a box of tampons from the bag.

“...like?”

She gaped at him with raised eyebrows.

Cocking his head, Jacob turned up his palms and held a shrug. “I didn’t know how long we’d be together, and I didn’t know where you were in your monthly—”

Amanda bristled.

“...or if you were even having...” *Of course she’s having them, Jake. She’s sixteen.* “Anyway, I hope they fit.” He winced. “I mean I hope they’re the right si—” he shut his eyes, threw up his hands and turned around. “I need a drink.” Shaking his head at the floor, he headed for the door. “I’ll see you downstairs when you’re done showering.”

Covering her face, Amanda muffled a laugh. A second later, she gathered her composure, as he walked through the doorway. “Thank you, Jacob...” she held up the box, “for buying these things,” before throwing the tampons onto the bed. “And thank you for what you did...back there I mean. If it weren’t for you,” she hesitated, thinking of what could have happened to her, “and if those men were really there to kill me...I’d be dead right now.”

His back to her, Jacob put hands on hips and turned his head to see her out of his peripheral vision.

“I don’t know who the hell you are, or why you’re doing what you’re doing for me, but I owe you *big time*.” She sniffed and swiped a hand under an eye. “Well,” she grabbed the flimsy bag, “thanks for everything,” and scurried into the bathroom.

Jacob grinned. *Caught between two people, two realities—a maturing woman and a scared, insecure teenager.* He put a hand on the bannister and walked down the stairs. Recalling a special little girl in his life, his heart sank. *At least you’re safe with me, Mandy. I’m going to make sure you get a shot at adulthood.*

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Thirty minutes later, Amanda strolled into the kitchen, wearing black leggings, short white socks and a gray off the shoulder, loose-fitting t-shirt. Her medium-length hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail.

Jacob brought a skillet to the table, glanced at her and scooped scrambled eggs onto a plate next to buttered toast. “I hope this will do. It’s late, so I thought a light meal would be best.”

Setting her backpack on the floor in the corner, she claimed the closest chair and brought knees to her chest. “It’s fine. Thank you.” She loaded a fork with eggs and downed them.

He rinsed the pan and set the cookware in the sink. “You look nice. Do you approve of my clothing selections?”

Amanda lifted a finger, chewed the big bite of toast she had taken and swallowed and nodded. “Hard to go wrong with leggings.”

Jacob snickered. “That’s what I thought too.”

“I absolutely *love*,” she let go of the fork and tugged on her sleeve, “this shirt. It’s cool and sexy at the same time.”

Bobbing his head, “Sexy wasn’t exactly what I was going for, but,” Jacob pulled out a chair to her right, “I’m glad you like it.” He sat and crossed his legs, ankle on knee, before clasping his fingers around the other knee. “We have to talk, Mandy.”

The girl looked up, while sticking the egg-laden fork into her mouth. “About,” she lifted a hand to keep food particles from shooting back out, “what?”

Picking up his fork, he eyed Amanda, as the girl pinched egg pieces from her shirt. *She looks just like D.D.*

The teen saw him staring at her. She showed him a palm, lifted her brows and tipped her head. “About...what?”

He ran the utensil into his own mound of eggs and brought the fork to his mouth. “About how you and I got to this point.”

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