

Chasing Amanda

“So now we’re going to attack a nation of innocent civilians.” The long-haired English professor on the opposite side of the booth leaned forward and slapped his hand against the table.

Lieutenant Mark Johnson shot a look at Justin, who sat at the end of the table to his right. His friend shrugged and poured another swig of beer down his throat. If Mark were going to endure this, he would definitely need another drink.

The English professor continued the lecture, focusing most of his attention on the other two men at the table, sycophants with wide eyes and slack jaws. Maybe their slack jaws could be attributed to the professor’s *brilliant* discourse. More likely they were shocked he’d spew his beliefs in front of a Marine just two months after September eleventh. The professor had started out sounding almost intelligent, but the more the squirmy little guy drank, the less sense he made. Great. A liquored up anti-American on a soapbox.

Mark scanned the room. Where was that waitress? The bar had filled since he and Justin arrived an hour before, and he couldn’t find the girl who’d brought their first round of drinks anywhere. He wouldn’t miss her—her face was pierced with more metal than a suicide bomber’s vest.

“This whole thing is our fault to begin with,” Professor Lightweight continued. “Those so-called terrorists are only responding to American imperialism.”

Every muscle in Mark's body tensed. He turned his attention back to the professor and folded his arms on the table. He leaned slightly forward and stopped. Why did he care what the guy thought? He shook his head and sat back again.

The man's eyes darted from Mark's face to the others around the table.

On his left, the chubby redhead leaned forward. "I'm not sure about that, Professor..." And he was off, chasing the American imperialism rabbit trail.

The professor nodded his agreement, then downed the last drop of his frou-frou drink. An appletini, Mark thought.

The apron strings hanging along the waitress's backside caught Mark's eye as she scooted behind his chair. "Excuse me."

The woman startled and turned. Not the metal-infested face he'd expected, but a blond-haired, blue-eyed stunner.

"You need something?" Her gaze met his, then darted across the room. Tears hovered in her eyes and made them sparkle.

He cocked his head to the side. "You okay?"

He followed her gaze. Two men at a bar-height table near the door were staring at her. One seemed to be laughing, the other's mouth hung open. When he caught her gaze, he licked his lips.

Mark wanted to stand, but she was right behind his chair, and he didn't want to ram into her. "They bothering you?"

She looked at him again, then at the others at the table. "You guys need another round?"

Mark heard their chorus of yeses. He kept his eyes on the men. They kept their eyes on her.

“Did you want another one?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She walked away, keeping at least two tables between her and those men as she made her way toward the bar. She stopped near the front door and whispered in the ear of a tall, bald man wearing a black, button-down shirt. The bouncer. She pointed to the two yahoos, then continued to the waitress’s station.

The bouncer elbowed his way to the guys and escorted them outside.

She hadn’t needed his help after all.

“...to Iraq, which was his plan all along,” the professor said. “That’s why they didn’t stop it. Any excuse to get Saddam.”

Mark glared at Justin. “Seriously? I come all the way to visit you, and you make me endure this guy?”

His friend shrugged. “He’s not usually like this.”

“Meaning he’s usually a sober anti-American conspiracy theorist?”

Justin laughed, poured the last of his beer down his throat, and belched. “Ignore him.” When the professor opened his mouth, Justin jabbed him in the ribs and lowered his voice. “Knock it off. Mark’s had enough.”

The professor hiccuped. “Have I offended the bellicose combatant?” He slurred his insult. “Ought I to be afraid?”

Mark squeezed his fists, took a deep breath, and tipped his chair back. Something else

to look at. Any distraction would work.

“Hey,” Justin said. “He’s my friend. Knock it off.”

“Don’t worry.” The professor patted Justin on the back of his hand. “He probably doesn’t even understand what I said.”

Mark lowered the legs of his chair and set his elbows on table. “I’m a Marine, so I must be an idiot, right?”

The professor shrugged, not bothering to hide his smile.

“What do you teach, professor?”

“Literature. I prefer British, but I dabble in French and American, when I must.”

“So you think understanding Shakespeare makes you qualified to discuss Middle Eastern politics?”

The professor opened his mouth to speak, but Justin interrupted. “Mark studied...” He looked at Mark for confirmation. “Middle Eastern history, right?”

The professor’s eyebrows rose. “Community College?”

“Arabic language and culture. The Naval Academy.”

“I see. Easier to kill them when you understand them.”

Mark leaned toward the little man.

The professor’s eyes widened, his mouth opened in a little O.

“‘A peace is of the nature of a conquest; for then both parties nobly are subdued, and neither party loser.’” Shakespeare. That ought to shut him up.

The professor straightened, blinked.

The pierced waitress returned, the dim lights reflecting off the bolt in her nose.

“Amanda said you needed another round.” She handed out the drinks, careful to balance the professor’s appletini as she lifted it across the table. He didn’t take it from her. Instead, he looked down her shirt when she leaned over to set it in front of him. Drunk, conspiracy theorist, leech. The list grew.

The waitress straightened, handed Mark his beer, and met his eyes. She laid her hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can get you.”

Mark thanked her, sipped his beer, and sat back again. Easier to ignore the professor that way. He scanned the bar. Where was that blond? Amanda, the waitress had called her. There, handing out longnecks to a bunch of college kids crowded around a table with too few chairs. She was smiling.

He looked beyond her, took in the room. Most people were younger than he. His friend, the eternal student, had dragged him here tonight, and it might’ve been fun if not for the arrival of Professor Lightweight and his fan club. The bar had that hopeful attitude you find in college towns. People standing, drinking, flirting. A group of five girls—women, he supposed—threw back test tubes full of green liquid. They’d regret that in the morning. A couple was locked in an embrace against the far wall. Students sat on every stool and stood lining the bar three or four deep.

Then the hair on the back of Mark’s neck stood up. He scanned the room again, more slowly. There, by the window at a table for two sat a young man, alone. Hoodie pulled up over his head, yellow-blond hair sticking out underneath. Mark followed the man’s gaze. Saw the blond waitress. The man watched her as she took drink orders from a table a few feet away. He could hear her voice above the din. Carefree now that those two jerks had been kicked out.

Mark's gaze returned to the hooded guy by the windows. Still watching.

Mark rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn't rub away the feeling. Something was wrong.

Justin's voice rose above the crowd. "You should see this guy in action," he said, tilting his amber-colored bottle in Mark's direction. "The women this guy gets. We should've all been Marines, eh?"

Mark raised his eyebrows, shook his head. "That's why I joined."

The professor looked like he might lose his liquor. The chubby redhead's eyes widened, the other guy looked from the professor to Mark.

"It's true, isn't it? Since September eleventh?" Justin elbowed his forearm, splashed his beer on Mark's T-shirt.

Mark grabbed a cocktail napkin and soaked up the liquid. "I'll admit women have been a bit more . . . grateful in the last couple of months."

Justin raised his glass. "See? Perfect for Mark. Still never getting married, right?"

Mark nodded, half smiled. "Unlike you. Does your fiancée know she's going to have to forever support your addiction to school?"

Justin shook his head. "Nah. I'll finish my Master's this fall and hopefully..." He nodded to the professor, "be hired full-time next summer."

The professor picked up the conversation, and the other guys joined in. Mark ignored them, scanning the bar again. Hoodie kept his eyes on the waitress. She didn't seem to realize she was being watched. Then, just like that, she disappeared out the front door. End of her shift? He glanced at his watch—just after eleven. He looked up in time to see the creepy guy in

the hoodie follow her.

The hair on the back of his neck rose again, and this time, Mark rose with it. He tossed a twenty on the table. "I'll meet you back at your condo."

Justin started to stand, but Mark dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Stay. Have fun. I'll see you later."

Amanda zipped her sweatshirt and hurried up the sidewalk toward the bus stop. She'd recovered pretty quickly after Vince had tossed out those two perverts. She'd worked in that bar since the fall term began, so she was used to drunks. But those guys...she shuddered in the late fall breeze, remembering the one guy's words, the other's hands. Once they'd been tossed, she'd been fine. But now, walking the dark streets of Providence, Rhode Island, all alone, she wasn't so sure.

Why'd she take this job, anyway? She'd planned to get a job cooking somewhere, something that might help her land a real job after graduation next year. The money she made waitressing was much better than she'd make flipping burgers. But tonight, she wasn't sure the extra couple of bucks were worth it, having to walk home after dark.

Behind her, the door to the bar opened, letting the noise inside escape for a few seconds. It filled the empty street before it closed again. She expected to hear voices, laughter or something, but no. Maybe whoever it was had gone in the other direction.

Maybe not.

Amanda walked faster, covering a block before the bar door opened again, interrupting the stifling silence for a second time before it swung closed. Again, no voices.

Just footsteps.

She reached the bus stop, glanced to her left. No bus headed her way. Few cars were on the street at this hour. No other walkers, either, except for the person behind her. She wasn't about to stop and let him catch up. She turned right and angled toward her apartment.

The footsteps followed. She broke into a run.

"Hey."

A friend, maybe? She stopped and turned to see two men behind her. One wore a black sweatshirt, the hood pulled over his head. She knew who he was. She'd seen him around campus. The other was taller, built. She remembered him—he'd offered to help her earlier. And now he was following her?

The two men faced each other. The one in the hoodie took a swing at the other, who blocked his punch and landed a solid blow across the smaller one's jaw. Then the big guy turned to her.

"Run." He didn't sound nervous or scared, just irritated.

She stood still, watching, while the guy in the hoodie barreled into the larger man's torso, and both men tumbled to the ground.

That shook her out of her paralysis. She turned and bolted.

Mark fell into the tackle and used his momentum to roll on top of the guy. For good measure, he kned him in the ribs hard before he climbed to his feet.

Hoodie grunted. Apparently, the kid wasn't prepared for a fight—not one with a man, anyway.

At least the waitress had run. What kind of brainless . . . ?

The guy straightened, pulled a blade from his sweatshirt pocket, and lunged. Seriously? He grabbed his right wrist and twisted until the knife clattered to the ground. Then he smashed his elbow into his face.

Guy screamed like a girl.

Mark swept the man's legs out from under him, and the guy fell onto his upper back. His scream ended with a whoosh of breath. While he struggled to inhale, Mark knelt beside him, yanked the hood off his head, and studied him. He was older than Mark had thought. He might've been dressed like a college student, but he guessed the guy was about his age, late twenties at least. White-blond hair, hazel eyes, pointy nose and straight, white teeth.

He grabbed a fistful of his sweatshirt and lifted his head from the sidewalk. "If you want to live," he said, "I suggest you run." He stepped back and pointed in the opposite the direction the waitress had gone. "That way."

The man sucked in a breath, stood slowly, and scurried across the street, disappearing into an alley like an injured rat.

A few spectators stood twenty yards away, mouths agape. Mark grabbed the man's knife off the sidewalk, turned, and jogged away. Much as he hated to let the little rat go, he couldn't take the chance of getting arrested tonight. He didn't have time for the legal issues. He

was shipping out in a week.

The war officially began in October, so he'd be a little late to the fight. One week of leave before he shipped out. He'd wanted to go right away, but the military didn't really care what he wanted. This stop in Providence had been a mistake. Justin, his friend since grade school, had changed in his years at Brown, and Mark had changed, too. The Academy, the Marines, they'd changed him. Life had changed him.

He and Justin had nothing in common now, and after one day with the guy, he was tired of talking about ex-girlfriends and long-forgotten high school football games. That chapter of his life was over. Coming here was a pathetic attempt to avoid his mother. Now that he was going to Afghanistan, she'd never forgive him for joining the Marines. Some mothers were proud to see their sons in uniform. His mother was embarrassed. Sure, he'd visit his parents before he shipped out—his father was proud of him, at least. But he couldn't handle a whole week of his mother's cold stares and heavy sighs.

And that's where Justin had come in. And the idiot English professor with the girlie drinks.

He slowed to a walk, studied his surroundings, and turned in the direction of Justin's condo. At least he had a key, so he wouldn't have to wait outside for his friend to return. He definitely wasn't going back to that bar tonight.

He studied the knife, still gripped in his right fist. The blade was open, the handle locked. He thought back. The man hadn't flipped it open during the fight, which meant it had been open already, in the pocket of his sweatshirt.

He unlatched it, closed it, and turned it over in his hands. Why would he have it opened,

unless...?

He stopped, felt his blood pressure rise. The waitress. Would she have survived if he hadn't interfered with the little rat's plans?

The guy had been watching her all night. She wasn't a random target. He'd chosen her, followed her. Did they know each other? Were they ex-lovers? Or was something more sinister going on? A man dressing like a student, hanging out in college bars, passing himself off as one of them. Following a girl. Carrying a knife.

The hair on the back of Mark's neck stood up again as he reached Justin's condo and let himself in. He had more questions than answers. But that waitress had been a target, so the biggest question was this: Would the rat look for a new target, or would he find the waitress again?