SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Second Coming of Joan

Sample Chapter — Chapter 2

by Ray Lopez

They had been in the basement for weeks, living off dry goods and canned food. It was cold, dark, and smelled of mold, oil, and ashes. The shelling had destroyed the upper floors of the building and there were a few other families hiding as well, each in their own space. There was a sink in the laundry room with running water, but they had run out of food and were very hungry. Nadja's stomach was a big knot, and she couldn't sleep. The sirens were constant and the pounding was getting louder. Her mom was cooking something over the fire, under an open window, a small animal. Danir was warming himself near the fire and Irma just stared into the flames.

Nadja hadn't seen Whiskers all day and decided to search for him before they ate. She moved around the dark basement, the familiar hallways, storage rooms and open spaces. The other families were all gone. They had gone out looking for food and not returned.

It was dirty and she could see the dust stirring in the air as she searched. There were only a few small windows letting in the dimming light of the fall dusk and the sound of sirens and the pounding bombs getting louder and closer.

"Whiskers, where are you?!"

A bomb exploded a little closer; the building shook and dirt fell from the ceiling. Irma called from the distance,

"Nadja, what are you doing?"

"Majka, I have to find Whiskers."

"Forget about that dog and come and eat!"

Nadja continued to search for Whiskers, ignoring her mother. She passed by storage rooms she was familiar with then stopped in front of the room, with the Caution/Furnace sign on the door, that she had never entered. She saw that the door was open. She could still hear her mother calling in the background.

"Nadja! Where are you girl!"

She heard her mother’s voice getting closer.

“Nadja!”

She entered the room and strained to see in the dying light. There was a small light bulb hanging down. Nadja pulled the cord, the bulb flickered, then stayed lit, offering a small amount of light for her to see. Her mother’s voice was growing louder and angrier.

“Nadija! Answer me right now!”

Nadja whispered for her dog, “Whiskers?”

“Nadja! Where are you!”

The room was cold. It was hard to see. She looked in the shadows, behind the dark furnace.

Her mother’s voice was closer.

“Nadja! Answer me!”

She found a square door in the wall behind the furnace, about 2’by2’, with a small wooden handle. She slowly opened it and reached her hand into the darkness. She felt the cold brick and pulled back from the spiderwebs. She wiped the webs from her hand, took a deep breath and reached in again, a little further this time, and touched, what felt like, a wooden box. Her mother’s voice faded away as she reached in with both hands and retrieved the box. It was difficult to see in the small light, but Nadja brushed away the dust to see the box was made of reddish wood with a golden clasp in front. She opened it to find four books inside. She pulled out a Quran and a Bible. They were large, and leatherbound. She had never seen them before and had no idea what they were about. The third book she found was a bound manuscript titled, The Islamic Declaration. Nadja remembered hearing people talking about this book, and the author, on the news. But she was deeply drawn to the last book. The title was Joan of Arc, by Mark Twain and there was an illustration on the cover of a beautiful young woman atop a white stallion, wearing silver armor and holding a sword. She placed the other books back in the box, picked up the book of Joan, and held it up, towards the light, with both hands, captivated by the image when her mother charged into the room.

“Nadja!”

Irma grabbed her by the arm.

“What are you doing in here!? Why didn’t you answer me?!”

She saw the book Nadja was holding, then saw the books in the box.

“Oh my god! How did you find these!?”

Nadja saw that her mother was frightened and started crying.

“I’m sorry mama. I was looking for Whiskers. I know I’m not supposed to come into this room, but the door was open.”

Irma quickly grabbed the box, pulled Nadja to her feet and dragged her from the room. She clutched the Joan of Arc book to her chest as her mother pulled her to the other end of the basement.

“We must eat! And then we must burn these books; and go to sleep. Your brother is already sleeping. He is very tired so stop that crying!”

“But I have to find Whiskers, mama.”

“Be quiet about that dog! Be quiet! Not another word!”

They arrived at the far corner of the basement where the fire still burned under a spit with the small headless animal, still roasting. Danir was sound asleep near the fire.

“Don’t wake up your brother. We must eat quickly.”

Nadja suddenly remembered how hungry she was and sat down near the fire, still clutching the book to her chest. She watched her mother pull small pieces of flesh from the animal and place them on a plate for her. She took the plate and began to eat, ravenously. It tasted strange to her, and had a dark, greasy texture.

“Slow down. Don’t eat so fast. Remember to chew your food. Here, have some water.”

Irma gave Nadja a jar of water and removed the rest of the animal from the spit. She placed the books on the fire, then looked at her daughter who finished the portion of meat on her plate, eating with one hand, still holding the book.

They stared at each other with their “listening eyes” and time stood still.

“You can have the book my love, but you must keep it hidden, always.”

Nadja started to breathe again. Irma placed a few more small pieces of meat on Nadja’s plate and began pulling off the rest and placing it on a sheet of aluminum foil.

“Eat slowly and have some more water.”

“What about Whiskers mama?”

“Eat the rest of your meat.”

Nadja placed a piece of meat in her mouth and savored the warmth and taste before she swallowed.

“Mama. What happened to Whiskers? Where is he?”

“I’m sorry my love. Whiskers is gone.”