

THE JULIAN ARK:
A Madison Dawn Adventure

a novel
by David J. Swanson

Swan of Ascent Media
WICHITA, KANSAS

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The Julian Ark: A Madison Dawn Adventure

ISBN: 978-0615703503

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Kaycee Wilson

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Visit the author's website at: www.davidjswanson.com

This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental. With the exception of historical figures, all characters and events in this work are figments of the author's imagination.

Printed in the USA

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for my wife
my lifelong adventuring partner

PROLOGUE

April 4, 1453 - Constantinople

Emperor Constantine XI looked out the window of his palace staring in abject wonder at the fleet amassed against him. The shadows grew long leading from the tower across the sprawling city of Constantinople below him. It would be night soon, and the vast army that this flotilla disgorged onto Roman soil would soon encircle the great capitol city.

It was Constantine who brought us here. A new home for our empire. New Rome, Constantine called it: A new beginning for a dominant empire. That was over 1100 years ago. In 1100 years, the God of this empire, the Christian God had never turned his face from the Romans.

The emperor stood transfixed at his window, thinking through the reigns of Roman emperors after Constantine I, leading this Eastern Roman Empire to world dominance.

What has this empire become? This pittance of an empire. Where has our God gone?

Was it the schism? The great break between the Orthodox and those infernal Catholics? Where did our power go? *What could I have done?*

“Orders, sir?” asked a general standing nearby. The Emperor had momentarily forgotten that he stood inside his council chambers, with the best military minds in Constantinople.

“What orders do I need give you? This is the best defended city in Europe. Those Muslims have landed on their gravesite. We have prepared this city’s defense for the last year. The Theodosian Walls have held invaders at bay for centuries. They have never been in better shape thanks to the efforts of my brother. We will resist these invaders. Now is the time for every man to stand firm and fight.”

“And what news from our allies in Europe?” asked the General. “When can we expect their arrival?”

“I have heard no reply from my messengers. I can only assume that they are readying their armies and will be here with all haste. We must hold out until they arrive.”

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“But sir, the envoy from the Sultan,” said Popolous, his senior advisor. “He offered us peace, did he not?”

“I sent the envoy away. He’s lucky he still has his head.”

“You rejected his terms?” Popolous could not hide his wide-eyed disbelief.

“I did. The bloodthirsty sultan wanted this city. I offered to pay him an increased tribute, but would under no circumstances turn this great city over to his destruction.”

“You have brought war to us.”

“War was brought to us, Popolous.”

“Then you have brought our doom.”

“Enough! General, ready the men. Leave me. All of you. The time for council is over. Make peace with God and pray for our deliverance. For tomorrow, we fight.”

The council left, including the waiting ladies. Only two of his personal guardsmen remained.

Constantine returned his gaze to the sea. The harbor was protected by the simplest of defenses: a large chain draped across the mouth of the harbor. Just beyond that chain, the floating menace waited. The blockade of his harbor meant no help could sail to his aid. The aggressors would soon be at the walls of this city, shouting in languages he did not understand. The heathens, the ones who prayed to Allah, the Ottoman Turks, had come. *Where is our God?*

In the quiet of the chamber, he offered a simple prayer asking that the Roman Empire would not die with him. He did not ask that God spare his own life.

A knock came at the door. The emperor nodded to one of the guardsmen who opened the door.

“Uncle!” said a cheery girl of no more than thirteen years old. “I mean, greetings Emperor.”

“Zoe. What are you doing here? You should be in the Morea. Why are you here?” Constantine gave the little girl a terrifying scowl.

“But uncle, you sent for me.”

“I did? Oh, so I did. Yes, I remember.”

“Yes?”

“You must leave at once.”

“But, I’ve just arrived. I’m weary from my journey. I haven’t eaten since midday.”

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“It’s too dangerous here. By morning this city will be under siege.”

“But this is the best defended city in Europe. Everyone knows it. And we have the walls. Where else would I be safe if not here?”

“Zoe, dear. We barely have half the men to properly defend the walls. We will not hold out for long.”

“What about the armies coming from the east? Our European friends?”

“I have no idea if our allies are coming. I fear that have forsaken us as a relic of the past.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Our moment is dire, Zoe. Our once great empire has shriveled up like an old man’s... like a raisin. It is no longer the virile empire it once was.”

“God will save us. You must have faith.”

Constantine looked at his niece and gave her a patronizing smile. Her confidence was cute, but it did not bring him comfort.

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything, Uncle.”

“Who escorted you here?”

“Just Lucas and four of his squires. We came with all haste.”

“This is good. This is what you must do. You must return to the Morea and take with you the Julian Arc.”

Zoe’s eyes glistened and she froze in place.

“Are you hearing me?”

“The Julian Arc? I cannot take that. It is for you to give to the next emperor and that is all. Do you remember as a little girl my pleading and cajoling, yet you would never let me even see it. Now you want to give it to me?”

“Zoe, I have no alternative. The arc contains our legacy, from Julius Caesar himself to Caligula, Hadrian, Constantine the Great and right up to your Uncle John. The next emperor of Rome will need it to establish his right to rule. You must take it with you.”

Constantine XI went to his private bedchambers. After a few moments of struggle and clatter, he returned carrying a small bundle wrapped in muslin. He set the bundle on the desk and removed the muslin revealing a bronze box no broader than his shoulders and no deeper than the span of his hand. The dull glare of the plain box did not allude to its importance.

“This box travelled here from Rome amidst an army of 100,000 soldiers,” said Zoe with a faltering voice. “How am I to protect it with just my five riders?”

“Secrecy will be your protection. Tell no one that you have this, not even Lucas. Keep it close to you at all times. When the time is right, you will reveal its contents. Marry a king or prince who is able to start a new empire—not new, rather, the next chapter of our Empire. You must find a *third* Rome, Zoe.”

“How- Where-?”

“God will reveal his plan for you in time. You don’t have to figure it out now. What you must do is to depart at once. The siege may be closing as we speak.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You can do this, Zoe. You must do this. I am Constantine XI Palaiologos in Christ, Emperor and Autocrat of the Romans, and I don’t intend to be the last. Now, fly!”

October 2007

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I

AN EXPLOSION OF MIST AND LATHER

“An inconvenience is an adventure wrongly considered.”
G. K. Chesterton

On some mornings — the good mornings — Madison Dawn got up, took a leisurely shower, cooked a healthy breakfast, readied for work with calm efficiency and got into the office ten or fifteen minutes early. This was not one of those mornings.

Madison’s day started off, as most bad days often do, by waking up in a stark panic. It was already light outside and that she most definitely had not woken up to the sound of her alarm. She interrogated the alarm clock, demanding how it could sit there, saying nothing while the workday crept ever closer to the slumbering and slightly hung-over Madison. It glared back at her in plastic-y insolence: 7:24. She scampered through her morning routine realizing that she had seventeen desperate minutes until she absolutely had to be out the door and on her way (assuming she got all green lights, of course).

She showered in an explosion of mist and lather, threw her hair into a pony tail, and jumped into the first clean outfit she came across, not taking the time to put on her shoes or brush her teeth. *Don’t do anything that can be done in the car.* She grabbed her make-up case, a pair of brown flats, her attaché case, a toothbrush and toothpaste, her purse, and her cell phone off of the charger, and in a flurry of wet hair, unkempt clothing, and an armload of necessities she burst through her apartment door twenty-two frenetic minutes after waking up.

She scampered down the front steps of her apartment, dancing on the balls of her bare feet, as the soft light of dawn brought slight definition to some of the more obvious details of her neighborhood. As she slid into the

driver's seat, she tossed her things into the passenger seat of her sedan. She thrust her key into the ignition, waited for the engine to come to life, and then popped it into reverse.

If she had taken a few moments before dashing off to work, she would have noticed that not all was as it should have been in her sleepy corner of Wichita, Kansas. On any other morning, she may have noticed the cable service van parked in the street and thought it odd that it might be on a service call this early in the morning. If she had been concentrating more on her driving than putting on her make-up, she would have noticed the silver Chrysler 300 that lurked behind her, careful to keep its distance, but close enough to make the same turns as her despite her complete disregard for using her turn signal. On a less chaotic morning she may have noticed the ownerless leather case in the back seat of her car.

Yet, such is the case in life that one is often thrust into an adventure while consumed with the overwhelming minutia of everyday life. Madison's adventure started well before she was aware that she was having anything other than just a lousy Monday. Thus, she was taken completely by surprise when, dressed as she was, hair in a distinctly un-sexy ponytail, make-up half applied, shoes floating around the interior of her car, an unfamiliar electronic ringing noise disturbed her morning frenzy.

Perrrrrrrrriiiiiinnnggggg- BEEP – Beep.

Perrrrrrrrriiiiiinnnggggg- BEEP – Beep.

“What on earth is that?” The Perring-Beep-Beep sounded nothing like Journey's “Don't Stop Believing”, her current ringtone of the week.

The ringing was coming from above her head. She reached up, flipped the visor down and let out a yelp as an unfamiliar cell phone clattered off of the steering wheel and landed in her lap. She stared at the ringing device trying to make sense of it for just a second too long. In that extra second her car slammed into the pick-up truck stopped at the red light ahead.

The crumpling steel, the shattering glass, the explosions of the airbags, and the screeching of the tires drove every peaceful thought and every menial detail from her mind. Madison had seen countless car wrecks on TV and in movies. She had even been in a few fender benders. Nothing could have prepared her for the deafening impact. The car spun wildly to the curb

and flattened a vintage scooter. Metal tore along asphalt as its last unassisted journey ended atop a bike rack in front of a hardware store. Her ears rang with an oppressive hum joined by her own muted moan.

After a few moments, she sensed someone wrestling with her seatbelt and trying to free her from the twisted metal box. Madison assumed they were there to rescue her but, between the blurriness in her eyes and being preoccupied with making sure she had feeling to all of her extremities, she was unable to properly identify her rescuer.

Through the numbing fog, she realized that two men were rifling through what was left of her car..

“Stupid. I told you she was useless,” said a gruff Latino voice.

“Did you take care of that truck driver?” said a slightly higher voice that seemed to carry more authority with less Mexican twang.

“Yeah, he’s down.”

“Alright. Help me find it before the cops get here,” said the higher voiced man.

“I don’t think it’s here. Maybe she doesn’t have it.”

“Well, check the trunk.”

With great effort, Madison pried open her eyes and stared at the man leaning in the window, not four inches from her face. A man with a black mustache, yellow-brown skin, and narrow brown eyes stared back.

“Ay, Maria! She’s awake!” He reached into his pocket for what Madison presumed was a weapon.

A persistent sharp pain set into her head and she couldn’t see through her right eye. She wiped a thick coat of her blood away and could make out a shattered windshield and broken plastic. Her strength left her as panic set in. Then she heard a third set of footsteps approach her car.

“Carlos. Ricky. I should have known he’d send bottom-feeders like you,” said the third man.

“Stay out of this, hombre. Or I cut you,” said one of the men.

For a few seconds, Madison heard nothing, followed by the unmistakable sounds of men scuffling. She listened to the smack of fist striking face, a stomach-turning crack of bone being shattered followed by a pitiful yelp. Two thuds signaled the end of the brief melee.

The newcomer, breathing hard, approached the car, poked his head in her window and without the least trace of mirth or patience demanded “Alright, where is it?”

His face was long and thin with short, disheveled hair, brilliant blue eyes and five days worth of irregular stubble. The expression the man wore was intense, hard and not altogether likeable.

“Where is what?” asked Madison. “I don’t... I was in an accident. I can’t even move.” A dull but constant pain developed in her right shoulder as the adrenaline began to wear off.

The man climbed over the car, kicked in the passenger window and climbed into the passenger seat.

“We don’t have time for this. I need to know where the case is. They’ll be here any moment.” After several seconds of Madison’s stunned silence, he grunted and turned his attention to the interior of her car. The man twisted around and sifted through the pile of papers, make-up bags, loose CDs and broken glass that littered the front and rear seat of the car. With a sigh of surprise, he lifted a brown leather case from behind Madison’s seat and brought it onto his lap.

“And you said you didn’t know what I was talking about,” he said. “What the hell do you call this?”

Madison, not understanding why this man was shouting at her, began to cry. The man’s demeanor softened.

“Come on, we gotta move,” His muscular hands gripped her arm. Madison cried out as pain shot through her right shoulder. “I guess we’re not going out the window.” He leaned back in his seat and with several violent, powerful strokes, he kicked out the windshield. In one smooth motion, he unbuckled her seatbelt and lifted her through the opening he had just created. She tried to stifle her cries as he dragged her onto the hood of the wrecked car.

“Looks dislocated,” said the man with all the concern one might show when remarking on an imminent light rain shower.

Madison looked outside the car and for the first time was able to take in the scene. Her car rested at an odd angle, having nearly flattened a bike rack. Shattered glass along with red, green, and black fluids littered the street. The pick-up truck rested in a heap in the middle of the intersection, its driver slumped over the wheel. A few cars crept by the accident but did not stop. They gawked at the scene as if it were a movie set before speeding off to their own important daily tasks. Several bystanders were on their cell phones, possibly calling 911, but no one came to help. A myriad of police and fire truck sirens wailed in the distance.

Madison noticed a white van parked down the street while a silver Chrysler 300 stood with engine running fifty yards up the street. Not ten feet from her car lay two motionless bodies.

“Are they dead?” she asked, wanting to look away but finding it nearly impossible.

Ignoring her question, he asked “Can you walk?”

She wanted to give him a sarcastic don’t-treat-me-like-a-victim look, but instead swayed in an unsteady wobble and fell into him. She left a sticky imprint of her bloody face on his shirt and let out a dull groan. The man reached back into the car, grabbed her cell phone and shoes and then took her in his arms. He lifted her from the car.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to leave the scene of an accident,” she said through slurred speech.

“We need to get you fixed up first.” Still in a fog, Madison clung to him with her left arm, letting her right arm hang limply since it tended to alight with sharp flames of pain every time he jostled her.

Madison and the strange man, who had either saved or endangered her life, got into the car.

“Where are we going?” She felt the strength leaving her, the adrenaline fading at last. “I’ve lost... blood...” She said in a wandering tone. “What’s your name anyway?”

Madison never heard the answer. She succumbed to the cloud that had enveloped her head and lost consciousness. She slumped against the car door and the sedan sped northward out of the city.

II

THE LITTLE INGRATE

“From the cradle to the coffin, underwear comes first.”
Bertolt Brecht

Out of the fog and weightlessness of sleep Madison became aware of an incessant ticking. She passed so slowly from the sleep state to that state just before waking that she had time to hear, detect, and become annoyed with the constant ticking. Her brain sorted through all the possibilities of what that noise could be and then surmised the reasons why no one seemed to be doing anything the annoyance. A brief, though stressful, image of her standing over a bomb where she was the only one who could disarm it entered her foggy mind. She then brought herself to the realization that she was lying down on her back with her eyes closed and that perhaps, with a little effort, she could open her eyes and find the source of the mysterious ticking noise.

She opened her eyes. She was lying down (which she already knew) but it was good to confirm that the ceiling lay just in front of her, or rather, now that she knew her orientation, above her. Her eyes darted from the ceiling to the walls of the room while confusion set in. This was not her room. *Where am I?*

Madison lay in a twin bed that sagged and squeaked whenever she made the slightest movement. Next to her, a frosted window let the cool air of the fall day pass into the room despite its appearance of being closed. Next to the bed was an overturned cardboard box that functioned as a nightstand upon which rested a small lamp, a box of tissues, and a small plastic wind-up clock. She stared at the clock for a moment as its annoying

tick-tick-tick filled the quiet room. The clock read 6:18, although she had no idea if that was morning or evening.

The room was merely a space in the corner of the floor marked off with two free standing Japanese room dividers. Somehow, the room was spacious yet seemed cluttered. To her left she saw a wooden rocking chair and on the floor there was a portable stereo with several hundred CDs scattered around it in disorganized stacks. A wooden spool served as a table with a single metal folding chair sitting next to it. The floor was covered with an irregularly shaped throw rug that looked more like it had been cut from wall-to-wall carpeting than something purposeful and decorative. Resting against the room divider was a sizeable canvas bag with a large red cross emblazoned on it.

Madison tried to sit up, only to realize her right shoulder was heavily bandaged. Her entire right arm was bound to her torso with her forearm running across her stomach. She felt a pressure on her head as well, and careful probing with her left hand revealed that her head was also heavily bandaged.

Madison, what have you gotten yourself into now?

The last two months were perhaps the most stressful period of her life. She recalled that moment seven weeks ago when she'd announced to her family that she was leaving their suburban life along Lake Erie and was moving to Wichita, a thousand miles from home. It came as a shock to everyone. Her mother cried. Her sister couldn't understand. She lied and said it was because she was pursuing her dream, whatever that meant. Since then, she'd been on her own. She took a job as a secretary because the money was good; well, better than that waitressing job in the short orange shorts, and much better than any job she could find with her music degree. Since then, she'd just tried to keep afloat in a new city without any friends. And now, yet again, *life* had happened to her.

She sighed and stared at the ceiling. A new memory came to her, although this one arrived un-conjured. An imagined snow globe, sparkling with glitter, hovered in the air above her head. She saw it spinning slowly, the mushroom domes of the Kremlin entrapped in floating glitter. She recognized it immediately from a story her mother used to tell her when she was young. It was a recurring fairytale that her mom would turn to when Madison demanded a bedtime story.

It was the tale of a princess of a forgotten kingdom. The kingdom was attacked by their sworn enemy, an enemy Madison couldn't remember now.

When her mom told the story they were always hated and evil and bent on destroying the kingdom. The princess was visited by a powerful wizard who, in trying to protect the kingdom from its imminent demise, used a spell to shrink the castle and fit it into a spellbound snow globe. The princess then lived a life of seclusion, hiding out in abandoned buildings and taking menial jobs to get by. In hiding, she kept her kingdom safe inside the magic snow globe until she could restore the lost kingdom to its former glory.

Madison didn't know why her groggy and clouded mind had chosen to refresh this particular childhood memory. Perhaps it was the feeling that everything she had known was falling apart around her. Perhaps it was feeling trapped in this room, not knowing to whom to turn. Perhaps she simply had a concussion.

She turned her head to survey the rest of the room. Hanging on the wall was an ornately framed painting that Madison recognized but couldn't place. It occurred to her that this painting had been in the news lately, though she couldn't remember why. On the floor against the wall under the painting rested several pieces of pottery, an ebony statue that looked strikingly Egyptian, and several bundles wrapped up in tan canvas.

Madison rested her head back on the pillow and tried to make sense of everything. She tried to think of how she'd gotten there, why she wasn't at home, what day it was, and what it would take to physically get out of bed. While she tried to piece together her immediate past, four thoughts materialized in her head almost simultaneously.

I hurt.

I'm starving.

My mouth feels gross.

What's that noise?

It was the noise that drew her attention, for it sounded much like someone hitting an aluminum bleacher seat with a rubber mallet: a thud followed by prolonged ringing. The thuds and the ringing approached the window near her bed.

The thuds stopped and a blurred impression of a man appeared in the frosted window pane. The window swung open and a man with a thin face, disheveled hair, brilliant blue eyes and an irregular beard stepped in from the fire escape. Madison scowled at the man trying to remember why he looked so familiar.

Why am I having such trouble putting the pieces together?

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The man's raised eyebrows were his only show of emotion.

"Good, you're awake. Another half day of this and I was going to have to take more drastic measures." The man was dressed in a beige button down long-sleeved shirt and a pair of well worn jeans. He sported a pair of worn hiking boots and carried two paper bags in his hands. One bag was clearly marked as being from a local coffee shop. The larger bag was unmarked.

"Hungry?" he asked.

Madison recognized the man from the accident the day before... or was it several days ago? *How long have I been unconscious?* She eyed him suspiciously, forgetting the question was even asked.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked with a faltering voice.

He gave her a puzzled look as he removed two paper cups of coffee from the smaller bag along with two muffins, and set them on the wooden spool table.

"Do with you?" he repeated, mildly amused. He settled into the folding chair. "I'm going to find out what you know and see if you can't be useful to me."

"So... then, am I your prisoner?" She slid further under the covers, like a child who is sure her blankets will protect her. The bed squeaked at this slight movement.

"Prisoner? Of course," he chuckled. "That's why you've been watched by the armed guard over there and you're chained to the bed." He motioned to the divider behind him. Madison looked but saw no one. She was pretty sure there was no one behind the divider, and while she couldn't be certain, she didn't think she was chained to anything.

"You're being sarcastic, aren't you?"

"You think? Here, put these on," he said. He took a bite of his muffin and tossed her the unmarked paper bag. It landed next to her with a crinkly thump.

Madison pulled herself up with her mobile left arm. It wasn't until she sensed the sheets of the bed slide against her skin that she realized that the only thing she was wearing was the matching black satin bra and panties that she had so hurriedly put on the morning of the accident.

She let out a yelp, and quickly slid back down under the covers. She glared at him.

“You undressed me!” she said, her voice strengthened by shock and embarrassment. Madison pulled the sheets up to her chin so just her face was visible. “How dare you... undress me!”

“No. I dressed you. Your head was bleeding pretty badly and that shoulder wasn’t going to reset itself. I dressed your wounds.” The man was taken aback by this outburst.

“Where are my clothes?”

“Burned. They were cut up and covered in blood. You were never going to wear them again. Besides, I had to cut them off to get to your wounds,” he answered.

“You cut off my clothes? While I was unconscious? What kind of a pervert are you?” She felt her strength returning to her with each thought of being violated by this stranger.

The man rose, his demeanor sour.

“I am a medical professional, you little ingrate. I saved your damn life. And just so we’re clear; no. I didn’t exactly get off on it. Unconscious broads bleeding all over my car aren’t exactly my type, okay? Now put on those clothes if I embarrass you so much.”

Grabbing his coffee on the way, he stormed out of the room and stood on the other side of the divider.

If what he said was true, then she had acted rudely to someone who had saved her life once, if not twice. If it wasn’t true, well then, the fact remained that he was a powerful man who had beaten two men into a bloody heap in a matter of seconds and she was a woman with just one good arm, laying in bed in her underwear, in a building she didn’t know, quite possibly in a city far from home. It was best not to upset the man.

“So are you a doctor, then?” she asked, trying to atone for her impertinence.

“I’m a medic,” he said. “EMT. Well, I was...” his voice trailed off, implying a story not told. “But it was a good thing I was there. Your cuts were deep. You lost a lot of blood.”

The accident came back to her more clearly. The collision. The two men. They were looking for something. The brawl. The broken glass. The silver sedan. The cell phone ringing. The strange cell phone that caused the accident-

“Was that you on the phone?” she asked.

“What phone?”

“The phone in my car.”

“Is that why you drove into that truck without so much as a swerve or a brake? No. It wasn’t me,” he said, sipping his coffee.

Content that he was going to stay on the other side of the divider until she dressed, she sat up and pulled the bag to her. Inside she found a fuzzy pink sweater, a white cotton T-shirt, a sampler case of off-brand make-up, a pair of soft, pre-washed blue jeans, a package of three pairs of white cotton socks, and, to her surprise, a smaller bag from Victoria’s Secret. This bag contained a purple satin bra with matching panties. She laughed inwardly at the thought processes that would have to go on inside a man’s head in order to walk into such a boutique to select these items for a complete stranger. The make-up assortment was obviously an attempt to find something that might work without any knowledge of what a woman actually needs in cosmetics. What impressed her was that all of the clothes appeared to be her size including the bra. It was a little large, but she appreciated the compliment.

“It looks like they’ll all fit just fine,” she said, trying to show appreciation.

“I had your old clothes, so I just cut the tags out and took them to the mall with me,” he said.

“Why did you go to Victoria’s Secret?”

“Where else do women buy underwear?” he said simply. It was apparent that the purchase of the underwear was possibly the most awkward task he’d tackled in quite a while.

Of course, where else indeed? She chuckled to herself.

Madison sat up and attempted to remove the bandage that held her arm immobile. She turned and twisted but could not find the loose end of the bandage. There was no way she could change in this condition. Sighing, she sat still, brooding for a few seconds and then asked, “Can you help me take this bandage off my arm? I can’t get dressed when I’m half mummy.”

The man said nothing, but walked back into the room, put down his coffee and knelt at the side of her bed. As he reached behind her to loosen the bandage, she noticed that, while it appeared he lived his life much like a homeless man or vagrant, he smelled clean and fresh. His hair was even slightly damp, implying that somewhere recently he had showered. She looked at him through narrowed eyes, trying to figure out exactly with whom she was dealing.

“I’m Madison, by the way.” She held out her left hand in an awkward attempt at a formal greeting. The man backed away from her. He looked her in the eyes and smiled at her.

“James.” They shook left-handed and then he went back to work removing the bandage.

He passed the bandage around her body a few more times and Madison felt her right arm loosen up and become free. She clasped the bandage to her chest, as each wrap around her was slowly exposing her skin.

“Okay! Got it. I can get it from here,” she said. “Now, shoo.” James rose and went back behind the screen without comment or protest. “I’m going to get dressed and when I’m done, you’re going to tell me what the hell is going on.”



Madison felt more like herself in the new clothes James had brought her. Her shoulder felt a sore, but it seemed like it would be all right. She marveled at James’ skill at setting her dislocated shoulder while she was unconscious. The clothes did, in fact, fit just fine. The pink sweater was warm and comfortable, although a little tighter than she would have preferred.

While dressing, James reassured her that she was still in Wichita, and was on the top floor of an old brick warehouse that had long since been converted to trendy, metro lofts. The developer had converted each floor, one by one, intending to make the top floor the penthouse suite for their most well-heeled clients. The developer went bankrupt before the project was completed and the new property owner was content to operate the apartments on the bottom four floors of the five story brick building. The top floor remained a large open, uncared-for shell that was largely forgotten by the buildings tenants.

It wasn’t until she asked James when she could go back to her apartment that his gaze dropped and he tossed her a copy of the Wichita Eagle.

“Here’s yesterday’s paper,” he said.

“So, today’s Thursday,” she remarked, noting that it was Wednesday’s paper. “I was out for three days, then.” Her voice trailed off at the thought of the implications of losing three whole days out of her life.

Madison opened the newspaper and spread it out on the wooden spool table in front of her. She sat in dumbfounded silence, unable to grasp what she was seeing. A large picture occupied most of the space above the fold. She shook her head.

“That’s my apartment,” she said.

At least it looked like her apartment complex, but it was hard to tell. Flames filled the windows on the bottom two floors and smoke obscured the majority of the view. A large headline proclaimed the disaster:

ARSON SUSPECTED IN WESTSIDE FIRE

Madison read through the article which confirmed that the burning building frozen in time on the front page was the building she had called home these past few months. She scoured the articles hoping to find the answer to a question she had yet to formulate. She had wrecked her car, been confronted by two men she didn’t know, saved by another man she didn’t know, and then had her home burnt to the ground. She knew the answer wouldn’t be on the front page of the Eagle, but still had to know *why*.

“Sorry about your home,” said James as he finished his chocolate chip muffin. “But honestly, I’m not surprised.”

“Oh, most of my stuff was still in storage,” she said in a distracted voice. “My apartment was, well, not much more decorated than this place; sans the priceless painting and Egyptian statues, of course.” She meant it lightly, but she noticed that James stiffened when she mentioned these items. “But still, that was my home-. Wait. What do you mean you’re not surprised?”

“Just that this is what they do to people. Now maybe you can tell me how you got involved in it all of this.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked her in the eyes. He didn’t have the hard-eyed look of an interrogator, but the gentle, prodding expression of a close friend sitting down for a friendly chat. At least, that was the way he wanted it to appear.

“All of this? What’s all this? I don’t know what *this* is. I was on my way to work-“ she paused, the realization suddenly hitting her. She turned to James, wide eyed. “Oh God! Work! I’ve missed four days of work. They are so going to fire me. I need to call them,” and she instinctively looked for her purse which typically contained her cell phone.

“Hold on,” he said calmly touching her arm. “You’ve been through a lot right now. You don’t need to call anyone. You need to tell me how you got involved.”

“I told you, I don’t know how I got involved!” she shouted, getting to her feet, her stress level rising uncontrollably. “I was driving to work and that damn cell phone started ringing. It fell into my lap and the next thing I know I’m laying there with blood in my eyes and men were searching my car. Now my place is burnt to ashes and you’re telling me you’re not *surprised*. How am I supposed to know how I got involved?” she yelled. She suddenly felt queasy and a little unsteady. The shouting raised her blood pressure and now her head, still wrapped in a blood stained bandage, throbbed in pain.

She staggered backwards and collapsed onto the bed with a squeaky crash. Madison put her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands, and quietly began to cry. Usually when Madison cried around men, they suddenly found their soft spot and apologized to her. It was a well practiced technique that she used frequently. James’ reaction, however, was a little different.

“Don’t give me that crap, Madison!” James said. Now it felt like an interrogation. “I find your wrecked car with Giovanni’s men crawling all over it. Inside, I find something that clearly doesn’t belong to you. Now, why are you working for Giovanni? Why are you running his errands?” He bent over, his face inches from hers. “How did you get involved?”

“I don’t know! I told you, I don’t know!” Her vision began failing as the throbbing in her head reached a new painful high. She fell back on the bed covering her head with her arms, gasping for breath between sobs.

For a few silent moments, she laid on the bed. James sat quietly on the bed next to her, examining the ruffled mass of hair and arms that covered her head. With a sigh, James relented. He gently put his hand on her stomach.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I believe you,” he said softly. “I had to find out if you were for real.”

Madison pulled herself up and looked at him with puffy eyes; an expression of intense dissatisfaction on her face.

“You had to— find out?” she asked.

“Yeah, I-“ he started, but his sentence was cut short as Madison slapped him across the face leaving a red handprint on his stubble-ridden cheek.

“You bastard,” Madison hissed. “Don’t you ever talk to me like that again,” she said, quiet anger unsteady her voice. “I will not be treated like that.”

James said nothing. He got to his feet and retrieved a leather case from a trunk in a corner of the room. He set it down on the wooden spool and settled into the wooden rocking chair.

“Do you recognize that?” he asked.

“No.”

“You should. I found it in your car when I pulled you out. That’s what they were looking for. That’s what Ricky and Carlos were sent to retrieve and that’s probably what they went looking for when they went to your house the next day. That, my dear, is why your life has been irreversibly altered. So, why was it in your car?”

“I swear I didn’t even know that it was in my car. What’s inside?” she asked.

“Open it.”

The bed made an embarrassing squeak ruining slightly the atmosphere of suspense and intrigue. She grabbed the leather case. The case had latches on it, but she was surprised to find that the case was unlocked.

“You’ve opened this already,” she said.

“It took me three hours to get that open. Those are not ordinary attaché case locks. Someone went to great trouble to keep that case secure. Then for some reason they just stuck it in your car without you even knowing.” His voice trailed off, leaving the possible explanations to a later conversation.

What Madison found inside when she opened the case was remarkable only in its plainness; a folder containing some sort of spreadsheet with columns of unlabeled numbers, assorted pens and pencils, and a blank spiral bound notebook. Madison studied the case until something struck her as odd. The interior of the case seemed shallower than the outside of the case would suggest.

She ran her hand along the bottom of the case and felt it yield to her touch. This case had a false bottom. Prodding, she eventually found a little piece of thread that, when pulled, released a pin that freed the false bottom. With great care, Madison removed the felt covered piece to reveal a thin

sheet of porous grey foam. She peeled the foam back and gasped at what she saw.

Lying in the bottom of the case was a dark red ruby, an inch wide and two inches tall, cut in the shape of an arrowhead. For a few seconds, Madison stopped breathing.

“Now, how do you suppose you got that?” asked James.

Madison picked up the weighty jewel and held it between her thumb and forefinger. The light danced inside of it and shone brilliantly as she held it up to the window.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “It must be worth a fortune.” She spoke in a whisper, careful not to disturb the simply beauty of the bauble.

“It is. Not because of the stone itself, but because of what it opens,” he said with a wild look in his eye. The appearance of the jewel had brought out a passion in James that showed through his rough exterior.

“Because of what it opens?” repeated Madison, not understanding. “What is this?”

“It’s a key,” said James. “And there are a great number of people looking for it.”

