

C.M. PALOV

# STONES OF FIRE

FIND THE **ARK OF THE COVENANT** OR DIE.  
LET THE HUNT BEGIN



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by  
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# I

*Washington DC, 1 December*

His movements slow and deliberate, the curator ran his fingertips over the small bronze coffer, lightly grazing the incised Hebrew letters. A lover's caress.

Holding his breath, he opened the box.

'*Claves regni caelorum,*' he whispered, entranced by the relic nestled within the box. Like Eve gazing upon the forbidden fruit, he stared at the twelve polished gemstones anchored in an ancient gold setting.

The keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Dr Jonathan Padgham, chief curator at the Hopkins Museum of Near Eastern Art, reached into the coffer, carefully removing what had once been a gem-encrusted breastplate. *Once.* Long ago. More than three thousand years ago by his reckoning.

Although bits and pieces of the gold scapular still precariously clung to the setting, the relic was scarcely recognizable as a breastplate, the chains that originally secured the gem-studded shield to the wearer's body having long since vanished. Only the stones, set in four rows of three, gave any indication as to relic's original rectangular shape, the breastplate measuring some five inches by four.

‘That’s some real bling-bling, huh?’

Annoyed by the disruption, Padgham glanced at the curly-haired woman engaged in placing a camera on a tripod. Not for the first time, he wondered what possessed her to pair black leather motorcycle boots with a long tartan skirt.

A cheeky grin on her face, Edie Miller stepped over to his desk, bending her head to peer at the relic. Since immigrating to ‘the land of the free’ he’d come to realize that American females were far more brazen than their English cousins. Ignoring her, Padgham arranged the breastplate upon a square piece of black velvet, readying it to be photographed.

‘Wow. There’s a diamond, an amethyst, and a sapphire.’ As she spoke, the Miller woman pointed to each stone she named. Padgham was tempted to snatch her hand, afraid she might actually touch the precious relic. A freelance photographer hired by the Hopkins to digitally archive the collection, she was not trained to handle rare artefacts.

‘And there’s an emerald! Which, by the by, happens to be my birthstone,’ she continued. ‘What do you think that is, about five carats?’

‘I have no idea,’ he said dismissively, gemology not his strong suit. Hers either, he suspected.

‘How old do you think it is?’

Barely glancing at the plaid-garbed magpie, he again replied, ‘I have no idea.’

‘I’m guessing *really* old.’

To be certain, the age of the breastplate was

punctuated by a very large question mark. So, too, its provenance. Although he had an inkling.

Again, Padgham ran the tip of a manicured finger over the engraved symbols that adorned the bronze coffer in which the breastplate had been housed. He only recognized one word – יהוה – the Hebrew Tetragrammaton. The unspeakable four-letter name of God. It had been placed on the coffer as a talisman to ward off the curious, the covetous, the greedy who gobbled up ancient relics like sugar-coated sweeties.

*How in God's name did an ancient Hebrew relic end up in Iraq?*

Although the museum director Eliot Hopkins had been very hush-hush, he had let slip that the relic originated in Iraq. Padgham had been entrusted by the old man with the initial evaluation of the bejewelled breastplate. He'd also been cautioned to keep mum. Padgham was no fool. Far from it. He knew the relic had been bought on the black market.

Risky business, the purchase of stolen relics. In recent years a curator at the renowned Getty had been brought to trial by Italian prosecutors for having knowingly purchased pinched artefacts. The black-market antiquities trade was a billion-dollar business, particularly with the unabated pilfering of Iraqi relics, Babylonian art popping up all over the place these days. Many in the museum world turned a blind eye, jaded enough to believe that they were preserving, not stealing, ancient culture. Padgham concurred. After all, had it not been for European art thieves, the

world would have been deprived of such treasures as the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles.

‘There’s too much backlight falling on it. Do you mind if I adjust the window shades?’

Padgham drew his gaze away from the relic. ‘Hmm? No, no, of course not. This is your arena, as it were.’ He pasted a smile on his face, needing the woman’s cooperation. He’d been ordered not to show the relic to anyone on the museum staff. It was the reason he was conducting his preliminary evaluation on a Monday – the museum closed to the public, no staff on the premises. Of course, the photographer didn’t count, the woman a freelance contractor who didn’t know a breastplate from a bas-relief. *Who would she tell?* As far as he knew, aside from the two guards in the museum lobby, they were the only two bodies present.

A flash of light momentarily illuminated the dimmed office.

‘Looks good,’ the photographer remarked, reviewing the image on the camera display. She deftly pushed several buttons on the camera. ‘I’ll just snap a back-up copy.’ No sooner did a second flash go off than she gestured to the bronze coffer. ‘Do you want a shot of the metal box as well?’

‘Is Queen Anne dead?’ Then, catching himself, he added in a more congenial tone, ‘If you would be so kind.’

Padgham stood aside as the photographer repositioned the tripod. Contemplating the beautiful

relic, he worriedly bit his lower lip. As curator of Babylonian antiquities, he'd been given custody of the breastplate because it had been found in the deserts of Iraq. The museum director assumed he'd be able to put flesh to bone, to discover the four Ws of provenance – who, where, when and why. To Padgham's consternation, those answers eluded him. The breastplate was most definitely of Hebrew derivation and his knowledge of the ancient Israelites was sketchy at best. Thus, the reason for the digital photograph.

As fate would have it, an old Oxford chum, Cædmon Aisquith, was currently in Washington on a publicity junket for his newly released book *Isis Revealed*, one of those faux histories that purported to expose the arcane secrets of the long-buried past. Never one to gawk at the proverbial gift horse, upon reading the newspaper review Padgham immediately rang up Aisquith's publishers, got the number of his hotel, and called him. Last he'd heard, old Aisquith had inherited some money, absconded to Paris and opened an antiquarian bookshop on the Left Bank. Drinking Beaujolais and banging French tarts, the man should have his head examined. Although they hadn't set eyes on one another in nearly twenty years, Aisquith had agreed to meet him later that evening for drinks. Hoping to pique his interest – and in the process glean some kernel of information about the mysterious Hebrew relic – he intended to email Aisquith the digital photographs. A true Renaissance

man with an encyclopedic knowledge of ancient history, Cædmon Aisquith would hopefully be able to shed some much-needed light. As with the freelance photographer, Padgham did not deem the secrecy stipulated by the museum director applicable to his Oxford chum.

‘All finished,’ the photographer announced. Popping open the digital camera, she removed a tiny rectangle of plastic and handed it to him.

He stared at the miniscule object. ‘And what I am supposed to do with *this*? I asked you to take a photograph.’

‘And I did just that. There’s your photograph. On the memory card.’ She stuffed the camera into her pocket, her outlandish garb topped by a khaki-coloured waistcoat.

*Cheeky cow*, Padgham thought. Although only forty-two years of age, he often felt as though the modern world and all its technical sleights of hand were passing him by at a dizzying speed.

As she dismantled the tripod, Padgham repeated his question. ‘What am I supposed to do with this?’

‘You’re supposed to download it on your computer. Once you do that, you can print it, email it, doctor it up, whatever.’

There being no staff available to assist him, Padgham was forced to grovel. ‘I would be most appreciative if—’

Just as he hoped, she snatched the memory card

out of his hand. Bending at the waist, she inserted it into the computer tower under his desk.

Biting back a pleased smile, he pointed to a notepad inscribed with the museum logo. 'I would like to send the photographs, via email, to that address.'

'Yes, sire. I live to serve.'

Padgham turned a deaf ear on her disgruntled mumblings. 'You're most kind, Miss Miller.'

'You say that only because you don't know me.' She seated herself at his carved mahogany desk. 'All right, let me get this straight. You want me to send the pics to one c.aisquith at lycos.com?' When he nodded, she said, 'Probably best if we send the photos as JPEGs.'

'Yes, well, I'll leave it up to you.'

She quickly and deftly tapped away on the keyboard. Then, getting up from his executive-style chair, she said, 'Okay, I want you to pull up your email account.'

'I would be only too happy to oblige.' Padgham seated himself at the desk. 'What the bloody hell!'

'What's wrong?'

'Are you blind, woman? The screen has gone blank.' He pointed an accusing finger at the monitor.

'Calm down. No need to have a conniption. It's probably just a loose cable.'

'Hmm . . .' He peered under the desk then glanced at his Gieves and Hawkes hand-tailored trousers. The problem had but one solution. 'Since you so easily diagnosed the problem, would you be a dear and . . .?'

‘You do know that this is *not* in my job description,’ Edie Miller griped as she scrambled to her knees. There being no room to pull the computer tower forward, she was forced to wedge herself under the desk in order to check the cables. Padgham glanced at the Waterford dish on the nearby console, thinking he might offer her a cellophane-wrapped sweet. Recompense for a job well done.

As the woman under the desk silently went about her business, Padgham picked up the ancient breastplate, returning it to the incised bronze coffer.

‘Ah, let there be light,’ he murmured a moment later, pleased that a spark of life now emanated from his computer, the monitor flickering the familiar Dell logo. Out of the corner of his eyes Padgham saw a third person enter the office. Surprised to see a man attired in grey overalls, a black balaclava pulled over his head, he imperiously demanded, ‘Who the devil are you?’

The man made no reply. Instead, he raised a gun and pointed it at Padgham’s head, his finger poised on the trigger.

Death almost instantaneous, Padgham experienced a sharp, piercing pain in his right eye socket. Then, like the flickering lights on his computer monitor, he saw an explosion of colour before the world around him turned a deep, impenetrable shade of black.

‘Who the devil are you?’

*Pop.*

*Crash!*

*Thud.*

Those sounds registered on Edie Miller’s brain in such quick succession, it wasn’t until she saw Dr Padgham’s lifeless body sprawled on the Persian carpet three feet from her huddled position under the desk that she realized what had happened.

She stifled a shriek of terror. Like a freight train that had jumped the tracks, her heart slammed against her chest. In a state of shock, her brain sent a series of urgent messages. *Don’t move. Don’t speak. Don’t twitch so much as a finger.*

Terrified, Edie heeded the commands.

And then her fear turned to joy.

Several seconds had passed since Dr Padgham hit the floor and she was still alive. *It was her lucky day.* The killer didn’t know she was crouched in the knee well under the desk. Covered on three sides by antique mahogany, she was hidden from view. In order to see her, the killer would have to bend down and peer under the desk.

From her vantage point, Edie saw a pair of

grey-clad legs come into view. At the end of those legs was a pair of tan military-style boots. Next to those legs hung a large masculine hand wrapped around a pistol that had a silencer attached to it. As though she were looking through the lens of a camera, she focused on that ham-fisted hand, noticing the hairy knuckles and the unusual silver ring made up of interconnected crosses. The notion that she and the killer might actually pray to the same God caused her to bite down on her lip *hard*, a hysterical burst of laughter threatening to escape.

And that's when the killer did the completely unexpected.

Stepping over Dr Padgham's body, he set the gun on top of the desk and began clicking away on the computer keyboard. A few seconds later, Edie heard him softly swear under his breath as he yanked open a drawer.

*He was looking for something.*

Eddie barely had time to wrap her mind around that thought when the killer reached under the desk and removed the digital memory card from the computer.

She held her breath, praying to God, Jesus, anyone who would listen, that the killer didn't see her. It stood to reason that you couldn't plead with a man who sneaked up on his victims and killed in un-pitying silence.

Only able to see the killer from the waist down, she watched as he unclipped a mobile phone from

his belt. Then she listened and was able to hear seven digital beeps. A local phone number. He was calling someone in the Washington DC metropolitan area.

‘Let me speak to the colonel.’ Several moments passed in silence before he again spoke. ‘Sir, I’ve got the breastplate. I’ve also got a problem.’

*The breastplate*, she belatedly realized. *Dr Padgham had been killed because of the jewelled breastplate.*

‘I’m not sure, but I think the little English homo sent digital photos of the relic to someone outside the museum. I found a tripod on the desk, a memory card with photos of the breastplate and an email address.’ Edie heard a sheet of paper being ripped from a pad. ‘C.Aisquith at lycos.com.’ A short pause. The killer carefully spelled out the email address. Another pause ensued. ‘No. I couldn’t find the camera ... Yes, sir, I took care of the guards ... Don’t worry, sir, I’ll cover my tracks.’

Edie heard another beep, the call disconnected. She then heard the metallic *wbhsb* of a zipper. The killer was putting the bronze box with the breastplate inside some sort of carrying case.

And then he was gone, exiting the office as unobtrusively as he had entered.

Edie slowly counted to twenty before she crawled out from under the desk. Forced to straddle Dr Padgham’s corpse, she took one look at his bloody, mutilated eye socket ... and promptly threw up. All over the Persian carpet. Not that it mattered – the

carpet was already stained with blood and brain matter.

Still on all fours, she wiped her mouth on her sweater sleeve. She had never liked Jonathan Padgham. But someone else had liked him even less. Enough to kill him in cold blood. *Correction*. Warm blood. Warm, wet, coppery-smelling blood.

Lurching to her feet, Edie picked up the telephone. *Nothing but dead air*. The killer had disabled the phone line. With a sinking heart she remembered that her BlackBerry was still plugged into the battery charger on her kitchen counter. So much for calling the cops to come to the rescue. Since the killer had ‘taken care’ of the two guards downstairs, Edie knew she was on her own.

Her goal being to get out of the museum as quickly as possible, she left the office and headed for the main corridor. The Hopkins Museum was housed in a four-storey nineteenth-century Beaux Art mansion located in the heart of the Dupont Circle area, a vibrant commercial and residential district. Once out of the museum, help was only a shout away.

Coming to a halt at the end of the hall that led to the main corridor, Edie tentatively peered around the corner.

‘Oh God.’

Stunned to see the killer, Edie caught herself in mid-gasp. A behemoth of a man in grey overalls with a black ski mask pulled over his head, he was standing in front of the wall monitor and security keypad next

to the door leading out of the administration area. In order to gain access to this area, each and every employee, regardless of rank, had to key a personal ID number into the security system, the procedure repeated when one left. The code activated the lock on the intimidating steel door. The computer system enabled museum security to monitor all employees' whereabouts.

It occurred to Edie that in order to enter the office suite, the murderer must have had a valid security code. *How did he get a hold of a code?*

At the moment that didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was stuck on the fourth floor with a murderer. To get to the lift or stairs, she had to pass through the steel door. Meaning she'd have to wait him out. Once he left the premises, she could escape the building.

Wondering what the killer was doing, Edie watched his super-sized hand move across the keypad with surprising dexterity. She knew from experience that it took no more than two seconds to key in a five-digit code and unlock the door, but by her reckoning the killer had been standing in front of the monitor and keypad a good thirty seconds.

*So just leave already.*

'Fucking shit!' she heard the killer mutter as he removed a notepad and pencil from his breast pocket.

As she watched him scribble something onto the notepad, Edie went slack-jawed. Although the monitor was too far away to be sure, she suspected

the killer had accessed the computer security log. If true, that meant 'E. Miller' had just popped up on the monitor. Beside her name would be the exact date – 12/1/08 – and time – 13:38:01 – that she had entered the fourth floor. Even more damning, there would be no date or time indicated in the 'Depart' column.

Eddie had watched enough crime dramas on TV to know she'd been made.

She had to find a hiding place. *Now.* This very instant.

Terrified the Neanderthal in the grey overalls would somehow home in on her, Eddie slowly eased away from the corner. She then ran down the hall grateful for the hideous maroon carpet that muffled her footfalls, past the office with the sprawled corpse on the floor.

Turning right, she headed down another hall, this one dead-ending at a storeroom. Lined with shelving units stacked with boxes, it would make an excellent hiding place.

Or would have made an excellent hiding place had it been open.

She stared at the locked door.

*Now what?*

If she could get downstairs to the exhibition galleries, she could yank an artefact off the wall, instantly triggering the museum alarm system. The DC police would arrive within minutes, maybe even seconds if there happened to be a squad car in the

area. But to do that, she'd have to first sneak past Dr Padgham's killer.

Too faint of heart to give this idea further consideration, Edie spun on her booted heel. As she did, she caught sight of a bright red sign with bold white lettering.

*The fire escape.*

Hope renewed at seeing the word EXIT, Edie rushed down the hall. When she reached the door, she grabbed the bar handle and pushed, bracing herself for what she assumed would be a very loud alarm.

‘I think Isis is like the total embodiment of the wise woman. That’s why my magic circle practises a devotional ritual to invoke the power of Isis at each full moon.’

Cædmon Aisquith glanced at the pierced and tattooed speaker, who clutched an autographed copy of *Isis Revealed* to her breast.

‘Do you by any chance mention the rites of Isis in your book?’

About to answer with a terse negative, Cædmon caught himself. His American readers tended to fall into two categories: the erudite and the asinine. Not that it mattered, as he’d been ordered by his publicist – who looked on with the stern demeanour of an English headmistress – to treat all questions, no matter how inane or idiotic, with due consideration. Particularly if the questioner had already purchased a copy of his book.

Cædmon schooled his features into an attentive expression. ‘Er, no. I am afraid there are no magical rituals detailed in the text. However, you are quite correct in that Isis, like her Greek counterpart Sophia, represents wisdom in all its myriad forms.’

Apple polished, Cædmon thanked the young

woman for her interest in ancient mysteries and cordially took his leave of her. A private man, he was uncomfortable in the role of public author, finding the meet-and-greet segment of book signings a tiresome exercise in the art of chinwagging, an art he'd never quite mastered.

His belly aching from the cheap champagne and his facial muscles aching from the fool's grin he'd been forced to wear since entering the bookshop, he was actually relieved when his mobile began to softly vibrate, the incoming call a perfect excuse to turn his back on the nattering group crowded into the diminutive confines of Dupont Books. To lessen his publicist's displeasure, he made a big to-do of raising his mobile to his left ear, silently signaling that he needed to take the call. This being the last leg of a twelve-city tour, they'd had their fill of one another, Cædmon anxious to return to the quiet monotony of pen and ink.

'Yes, hello,' he said, always feeling like a bit of an ass speaking into, essentially, thin air.

'Cædmon Aisquith?'

Politely correcting the man's butchered pronunciation of his name, he said, 'Who's calling, please?'

The question met with a long silence followed by a *click*, the call abruptly disconnected.

'Bloody hell,' Cædmon muttered, yanking the mobile from his ear. The hairs on the back of his neck suddenly bristled. He didn't give out his number. Hit with the unnerving sensation that he was being

watched by someone who had no interest in discussing ancient lore or swilling free bubbly, he turned on his heel. Slowly. Calmly. A man with nothing to fear.

Only he knew such posturing was an outright lie.

Using the training ingrained from the eleven years he'd spent indentured in Her Majesty's Security Service, he casually glanced about the bookshop, searching for the face that did not belong in the crowd, the telltale flush, the quick, breakaway glance of the guilty. No suspect characters prowling about, he next glanced out the plate-glass windows that opened onto Connecticut Avenue, the city pavement teeming with holiday shoppers.

Nothing appearing out of the ordinary, he quietly released a pent-up breath.

All quiet on the western front.

Like most men with a price on his head, he didn't know how it would end, if the day just lived would be his last. All he knew was that when the thugs of the Real Irish Republican Army did finally catch up with him, they would see to it that he died a barbaric death indeed. An eye for an eye and all that.

Five years ago he had avenged the death of his lover by tracking down an RIRA chieftain and killing the bastard in the streets of Belfast. Such deeds did not go unpunished. Forced to go to ground, he'd spent the last several years living in Paris. A stranger in a strange land. Although he'd spent the time wisely, writing his first book, a treatise on the esoteric

traditions of the ancient world. Lulled into a sense of security, he'd decided against using a pseudonym, thinking he'd fallen off the RIRA radar screen.

Only now did it dawn on him that that bit of arrogance might cost him dearly.

*Ah, the folly of a first-born son still trying to impress the long-dead father.*

He rechecked the digital readout on his mobile. 'Blocked call' was prominently displayed.

'Why am I not surprised?' he murmured. Again he scanned the bookshop, certain he was being stalked.

His gaze fell on a volume of Byron propped on a nearby book shelf.

'For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast ...'

As the long-forgotten line popped into his head, he bit back a caustic laugh, knowing he'd been that same dark angel. Once. A long time ago.

Still holding the mobile in his hand, he strolled over to his publicist. 'My hotel just rang me,' he blithely lied, falling back on lessons learned at MI5. 'A bit of bother with the bill. Something about my credit card being refused.' He pointedly glanced around the bookshop, the shelves littered with abandoned champagne flutes. 'Seeing as how the festivities are winding down, you won't mind if I dash off and take care of it?'

His publicist, a touchy woman with the ironic surname of Huffman, stared at him from behind the

frames of her ruby-red spectacles. ‘Do you need me to call the front desk for you?’

‘No problem,’ he replied with a shake of the head. ‘I’m a big boy. Although perhaps I should fortify myself before battling the dragon.’ He picked up a full champagne flute from a nearby tray, ignoring the fact that had long since gone flat. ‘Cheers.’

Taking his leave of her, the flute still clutched in his right hand, he headed to the back of the bookshop, veering down a hall marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. Blatantly ignoring the admonition, he continued until he came to a room stacked with cardboard boxes, the sole inhabitant a lank-haired young man unpacking a crate with the desultory air of an underpaid cog who didn’t much care if or when the wheel turned.

Cædmon nodded, acting as though he had every right to be there. ‘The exit, if you please.’

The young man jerked his head at the door opposite.

On the other side of the service exit, Cædmon found himself standing on a cigarette-strewn pavement behind the bookshop, the concrete walls covered in ribald graffiti.

No sooner did the exit door close behind him than he smashed his champagne flute against the wall.

Weapon in hand, he waited.

*Come out, come out, wherever you are,* he silently taunted, readying himself to do combat with his unseen nemesis.

A full minute passed in tense silence.

Realizing he'd given in to his fears, he derisively snorted.

'The ghost of Irishmen past,' he murmured, tossing the jagged-edged flute to the pavement.

The moment of lunacy having passed, he flipped up the collar of his jacket, warding off the cold. He recalled seeing a coffee shop several blocks away. In dire need of caffeine, he headed in that direction.

Although he knew he was being paranoid, Cædmon couldn't shake off the unnerving feeling that an Irish militant who refused to accept the peace had tracked him to the far side of the Atlantic. Where he intended to settle a very old, yet still outstanding score.

*Who else would have called him on his mobile? As if to say, we can see you, but you can't see us.*

## 4

To Edie's surprise, no fire alarm sounded. There was only the reverberating *clunk* of the bar handle as she swung open the fire door.

The killer had disabled the alarm system.

Hit by a blast of cold wintry air, she found herself over the precipice between the open door and an external fire escape that zigzagged down the rear of the museum. Completely enclosed in black chain link, the escape was designed so that only those inside the museum had access to it, keeping vagrants and thieves at bay.

No time to worry that it was lightly snowing, that she had no coat or that she was afraid of heights, Edie stepped across the threshold into the caged stairwell, the fire door swinging shut behind her. She kept her gaze on the alley below, knowing that if she looked anywhere else but down, she'd get dizzy, maybe even faint. Like that time she watched the Fourth of July fireworks from a friend's rooftop patio.

A white-knuckled grip on the railing, she made her descent. The sound of her boots hitting the metal steps echoed in the alley below. At the bottom she opened the cage door, emerging into the alleyway. As

with the emergency exit above, the door automatically closed and locked behind her.

Hurriedly she glanced around, disoriented, uncertain in which direction to go. Like a weird nether world, the alley was filled with bins, skips, SUV-sized air conditioning condensers and parked vans. Against an adjacent building there was a tall pile of discarded office furniture, the offices recently remodelled, the old stuff still waiting to be taken away. Given it was December, every window that looked onto the alley was closed. And since no one wanted a bird's eye view of big blue rubbish bins, the blinds were all pulled shut.

From above her, Edie heard a door suddenly swing open.

The killer had found the fire escape.

Not wasting a second, she ducked behind a condenser, praying she hadn't been spotted. If she hurried, she could escape the alley before he reached the bottom. But she couldn't exit the alley without moving into the killer's line of sight. That left only one option – she had to hide.

Keeping to the shadows, she dashed some fifteen feet to the heap of jumbled chairs, their wooden arms and legs jutting into the air at odd angles. Like so many broken bones. As far as hiding places went, it was pretty pathetic. The pile wouldn't stop a bullet. Or prevent a big, meaty fist from grabbing her. But it was the best that she could do at short notice.

Espying a small opening at the bottom of the pile,

she got down on her hands and knees and crawled into the hole. It was no more than twenty inches in height and she had to navigate with care. One wrong move and the heap of furniture could well tumble to the ground. With her underneath. Unable to crawl any farther into the pile, she came to a halt. Tucking her legs beneath her body, she made herself as small as possible. Invisible would have been better. Better because she knew with a sickening sense of certainty that the man on the fire escape wouldn't hesitate to kill her.

Hearing the rattle of a metal door, she peered through the jumble of furniture, watching as the killer exited the fire escape. He had removed his ski mask. Edie could see that he sported a military-style buzz cut. His face mottled with what looked like rage, he seemed on the verge of a steroid-induced rampage.

In hunting mode, the killer swivelled his head from side to side, scanning the alley. Edie saw a large bulge at the back of his waist. *The gun that had killed Dr Padgham.* Methodically, the man's gaze moved from target to target: blue bins, green condenser, white van. And then his gaze zeroed in on the furniture pile.

*These might very well be the last few moments before my death.*

Edie envisioned her bleeding body sprawled beneath a pile of discarded chairs. No doubt that's who would find her, the orange-suited guys from the sanitation department.

Holding her breath, Edie slowly counted backwards from ten.

*Ten, nine, eight, seven—*

The killer's gaze suddenly swung to the other side of the alley, where a group of recycling bins overflowed with cans.

She'd gone undetected.

Surprisingly light-footed for such a large man, the killer walked all the way down the alley towards 21st Street before turning round and heading back to the fire escape. As he did, a police cruiser pulled into the alley from the opposite direction. Relieved beyond words, Edie released a pent-up breath. Opening the door to the fire escape had obviously triggered a silent alarm. The DC police had arrived to investigate.

For some strange reason the killer didn't seem the least bit perturbed by the sudden appearance of the cop car, actually raising his hand to flag down the cruiser. *Why would he do that?* she wondered. *Might as well announce that he set off the alarm.*

A few seconds later she had her answer, A uniformed police officer got out of the cruiser and approached the killer, who removed a bag from his shoulder and handed it to the cop.

The breastplate.

*The cop was in on it.*

The cavalry had come to kill her.

'Looks like the op is a go,' Edie overheard the cop say as he took custody of the stolen relic. 'We fly to London at nineteen hundred hours.'

The killer shook his head. ‘We’ve got loose ends. Someone else was in the museum besides Padgham and the two guards. The little shit escaped down the fire escape.’

A resounding bang ensued as the cop slammed his fist down on the bonnet of the police cruiser. ‘Shit! We’re fucked! The English fag was supposed to have been the only staff person in the building.’

‘It gets even worse,’ the killer said. Reaching into his breast pocket he removed the same notepad that Edie had seen earlier. ‘Padgham may have emailed photos of the breastplate. I notified the tac team at Rosemont. They’re hunting down the person at the other end of Padgham’s email.’

Watching the exchange, Edie took slow, deep breaths, willing her cramped legs to stop quivering, her body protesting the straitjacket confinement.

‘This was supposed to have been a simple snatch and go,’ the cop muttered.

‘And sometimes a mission gets bogged down in the mire. What we need to do is find this fucker – what’s his name – E. Miller and get things tidied up.’

*Thank you, God.* A small break. They thought she was a man. They would be looking for a man, not a woman. They also didn’t know that Padgham never sent the email. But that wasn’t her problem. Her problem was getting free and clear of the alley.

‘So far, there’s been no calls made to 911.’

‘When Miller does call, I want to know ASAP.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m on it,’ the cop said before getting into his cruiser.

The knot in Edie’s stomach tightened painfully. If she contacted the police, the killer would know where to find her. And since one of the killer’s cohorts – maybe more – wore a police uniform, she’d have no way of distinguishing the good guys from the bad.

More scared than ever, Edie watched as the cruiser drove away. The exchange ended, the killer walked over to the service entrance of the museum and punched in a code, the locked door buzzing open. *Like he owned the place.* Padgham’s killer went back inside the museum.

Edie hurriedly backed out of her hidey-hole. Standing upright, she took a big gulp of air. The alley reeked of urine and rotting garbage, the stench so strong her eyes welled with tears.

Hearing a loud mechanical rattle, she spun on her heel.

Across the alleyway a garage door slowly opened. She could exit the alley without having to go past the museum. No sooner did a black BMW emerge from the underground garage than Edie broke into a run towards the door. Or at least tried to. Hobbled on her cramped leg muscles, she lurched forward. The driver turned his head and glanced at her – a wild-haired terrified woman with an ungraceful gait – then just as quickly glanced away.

‘Obviously one of the apathetic multitudes,’ Edie

mumbled under her breath as she dodged into the garage.

Seeing a lift, she headed towards it. Not until she was safe inside the elevator, the doors closing with a melodic chime, did she permit herself a sigh of relief. Although in actuality it was more like a sag of relief, her body going into an old-lady slump, her legs barely able to support her weight.

A few seconds later the elevator doors opened onto what looked like an upmarket apartment building lobby. Straight ahead a pair of plate-glass doors beckoned. Overcome with a sudden burst of giddiness, she limped towards the beautiful doors with their big beautiful brass handles. Yanking the door on the right side wide open, Edie barely restrained herself from hugging a postman in the vestibule, who was busy inserting letters into rows of identical-looking mailboxes. Instead, she smiled at him. A big toothy glad-to-be-alive smile.

Just then a cab pulled up to the kerb in front of the apartment building.

*Free at last. Thank God Almighty, free at last.*