



TWO

## The Man with the Metal Bra

THE FAMILY MANSION SUCKED.

Oh, sure, *you* wouldn't think so. You'd see the massive six-story brownstone with gargoyles on the corners of the roof, stained glass transom windows, marble front steps, and all the other blah, blah, blah, rich-people-live-here details, and you'd wonder why I'm sleeping on the streets.

Two words: *Uncle Randolph*.

It was *his* house. As the oldest son, he'd inherited it from my grandparents, who died before I was born. I never knew much about the family soap opera, but there was a lot of bad blood between the three kids: Randolph, Frederick, and my mom. After the Great Thanksgiving Schism, we never visited the ancestral homestead again. Our apartment was, like, half a mile away, but Randolph might as well have lived on Mars.

My mom only mentioned him if we happened to be driving past the brownstone. Then she would point it out the way you might point out a dangerous cliff. *See? There it is. Avoid it.*

After I started living on the streets, I would sometimes walk by at night. I'd peer in the windows and see glowing display cases of antique swords and axes, creepy helmets with facemasks staring at me from the walls, statues silhouetted in the upstairs windows like petrified ghosts.

Several times I considered breaking in to poke around, but I'd never been tempted to knock on the door. *Please, Uncle Randolph, I know you hated my mother and haven't seen me in ten years; I know you care more about your rusty old collectibles than you do about your family; but may I live in your fine house and eat your leftover crusts of bread?*

No thanks. I'd rather be on the street, eating day-old falafel from the food court.

Still . . . I figured it would be simple enough to break in, look around, and see if I could find answers about what was going on. While I was there, maybe I could grab some stuff to pawn.

Sorry if that offends your sense of right and wrong.

Oh, wait. No, I'm not.

I don't steal from just anybody. I choose obnoxious jerks who have too much already. If you're driving a new BMW and you park it in a handicapped spot without a disabled placard, then yeah, I've got no problem jimmying your window and taking some change from your cup holder. If you're coming out of Barneys with your bag of silk handkerchiefs, so busy talking on your phone and pushing people out of your way that you're not paying attention, I am there for you, ready to pickpocket your wallet. If you can afford five thousand dollars to blow your nose, you can afford to buy me dinner.

I am judge, jury, and thief. And as far as obnoxious jerks went, I figured I couldn't do better than Uncle Randolph.

The house fronted Commonwealth Avenue. I headed around back to the poetically named Public Alley 429. Randolph's parking spot was empty. Stairs led down to the basement entrance. If there was a security system, I couldn't

spot it. The door was a simple latch lock without even a dead-bolt. *Come on, Randolph. At least make it a challenge.*

Two minutes later I was inside.

In the kitchen, I helped myself to some sliced turkey, crackers, and milk from the carton. No falafel. Dammit. Now I was really in the mood for some, but I found a chocolate bar and stuffed it in my coat pocket for later. (Chocolate must be savored, not rushed.) Then I headed upstairs into a mausoleum of mahogany furniture, oriental rugs, oil paintings, marble tiled floors, and crystal chandeliers. . . . It was just embarrassing. Who lives like this?

At age six, I couldn't appreciate how expensive all this stuff was, but my general impression of the mansion was the same: dark, oppressive, creepy. It was hard to imagine my mom growing up here. It was easy to understand why she'd become a fan of the great outdoors.

Our apartment over the Korean BBQ joint in Allston had been cozy enough, but Mom never liked being inside. She always said her real home was the Blue Hills. We used to go hiking and camping there in all kinds of weather—fresh air, no walls or ceilings, no company but the ducks, geese, and squirrels.

This brownstone, by comparison, felt like a prison. As I stood alone in the foyer, my skin crawled with invisible beetles.

I climbed to the second floor. The library smelled of lemon polish and leather, just like I remembered. Along one wall was a lit glass case full of Randolph's rusty Viking helmets and corroded ax blades. My mom once told me that Randolph taught history at Harvard before some big disgrace got him fired. She wouldn't go into details, but clearly the guy was still an artifact nut.

*You're smarter than either of your uncles, Magnus, my mom once told me. With your grades, you could easily get into Harvard.*

That had been back when she was still alive, I was still in school, and I might have had a future that extended past finding my next meal.

In one corner of Randolph's office sat a big slab of rock like a tombstone, the front chiseled and painted with elaborate red swirly designs. In the center was a crude drawing of a snarling beast—maybe a lion or a wolf.

I shuddered. Let's not think about *wolves*.