One

Pray for Me, Father

May 16, 1895

San Francisco, California

Mission Dolores Basilica

Randall—­

I’ve not forgotten our quarrel, but I’m asking you to put that aside for the sake of scholarship and the friendship we once shared. You were right, I fear. I meddled in something beyond my understanding.  The time-­travel conduit works—­I’ve shaped it as a door—­but not, I suspect, by science or my own hand. You are the only person who won’t think me paranoid should I put words to my suspicion. Something slumbers within it. Something with designs of its own.

Words have power. You know that better than anyone. And I am beginning to suspect the ones the shaman spoke—­and which I foolishly copied into my journal’s companion piece, my codex—­were an invocation.

Please come soon, I beg you. Or don’t come at all. And if you don’t come, then pray for me, Father. Matters are coming to a head, and my instincts say this will not end well.

David Abbott

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ap’n—­adolescent con artist extraordinaire, picker of any lock, leader of Kansas City’s notorious sandlot gang, and unofficial mayor to all its throwaways—­plucked a wilted lettuce leaf from her hair as she peered through a break in the pile of rubbish where she was hiding.

Fabian didn’t look so good, she thought, but there wasn’t much she could do about it. He was lying in the mud, his legs bent at odd angles, and was staring down the length of his outspread arm, his mouth opening and closing in a creepy imitation of a fish on the chopping block. She couldn’t make out the words, but it was clear Fabian was telling her to flee.

He wasn’t going anywhere. Danyer had made sure of that. Whether it was a first or last name, Cap’n didn’t know. He just went by Danyer. He was Mr. Culler’s hatchet man, and he didn’t fight fair. Danyer wasn’t interested in fair, though; he was interested in results, and Fabian had failed. Cap’n knew it was a bad idea to let failure go unanswered in their line of business, but she never imagined it would come to this. Fabian was a moneymaker for Mr. Culler, after all.

Danyer towered over him, a granite block with meat-­hook arms, his legs straddling Fabian’s belly. As his boots rocked in the muck, Danyer’s duster swept back and forth across Fabian’s chest. His voice reminded Cap’n of a humming turbine—­deep and dangerous—­as he read from the letter they’d filched. “‘Please come soon, I beg you—­’” Danyer crumpled the paper, lobbing it into the air. It bounced off Fabian’s cheek and into the mud. “Where’s the journal?” He squatted, grabbing Fabian’s chin with his sausage fingers before slapping him lightly across the cheek. “Hmm?”

Cap’n said a quick prayer for her friend and started backing up. But it was too late. She stepped on a stick that lifted a crate at the base of the rubbish heap just a fraction of an inch, and she could only grit her teeth as a tin can toppled from its perch, tinkling down the pile of debris while making a sound like a scale played on a badly tuned piano.

She froze as Danyer pivoted to stare at the pile of rubbish. He turned back to Fabian, speaking warily. “And where’s Cap’n?” he asked. “Where’s your pet pickpocket?” She watched him slap Fabian’s cheek one more time, the muscles in her legs tensing as he turned and started to walk toward her hiding place. Five feet out, Danyer lunged, but all he got hold of was the remaining head of lettuce as she bolted from the mound, racing down the alleyway in a flurry of muslin, freckles, and carrot-­colored pigtails.

Three blocks later, she rounded a corner, waiting. When the crack of the gun echoed down the street, she ducked into a drainage pipe to collect herself. A cockroach crawled over her foot, its antennae waving. Fabian admired cockroaches, she remembered. He said they were survivors. Suddenly, a whimper broke from her throat, and she ground the bug into a mosaic of chitinous shards before huddling in on herself, sobbing. And just as suddenly, she sat upright, her mouth set in a grim line while she ran the back of her hand across her nose.

Tears were for kids, and she needed to make a plan. When Fabian turned up dead, and there was no doubt he would, Danyer would want to tie up some loose ends—­namely her. She wasn’t too worried about that. She knew every hidey-­hole in Kansas City, and the gang would watch her back. She regarded what was left of the cockroach, one of its severed legs agitating as though not realizing the body it belonged to was already dead, and nodded to herself. It was time to put the shoe on the other foot, she decided. Something had to be done about Danyer and his boss.