

Prologue

September 1879

Sally Louisa Tomkins stood her ground. She jerked her elbow free from the congressman's hand and refused to take even one small step toward the door. Instead, she planted her feet on the speaker's stand and turned on him, pointing a finger between his eyes. "I came here at your behest, Mr. Caperton, but I will not stand for your disrespect."

"Captain Sally," he tried, reaching for her elbow again, but missing, as the tiny dark-haired woman ducked out of his reach.

"Nor your condescension, thank you very much. I came to say my piece. I was *invited* to say my piece—"

From the second row on the left, Herschel Cobb interjected. "You were invited to discuss your hospital."

"And so I *am*," she fired back. "If you don't like my report, that's well and good. It's a terrible report, one that I hate to make—but my facts and figures are true! Gentlemen, we have an *epidemic* on our hands. One that the Robertson Hospital is neither equipped nor prepared to fight."

"Don't sell yourself short, Captain. We have great faith in you," assured Francis Pugh, in the third row on the right. He smiled indulgently, his muttonchops stretching across the wide expanse of his fleshy pink cheeks. "Your rank is testament to that."

She sneered, and took one measured step away from Boyd Caperton, who opened his arms as if he might ask her to dance.

“Apparently my rank is meaningless here.” And before the gentle hems and haws of protest could rise loud enough to drown her out, she declared, “For nineteen years I’ve served the Confederacy. Nineteen years, I’ve made this work my life—taking no husband, bearing no children, and bankrupting myself in the bargain. I’d do it again in a moment, because it’s *good* work. I’ve saved thousands of men. Tens of thousands, and still counting. I keep them clean; I feed them and bathe them and stitch their wounds, hold their heads while they bleed and cry. And most relevant to this testimony, *I watch them*. And I know what I’ve seen! You can’t make this go away by pretending I’m a madwoman!”

Senator Landon Barksdale rose from his seat. “Miss Tompkins, no one is accusing you of being a madwoman.”

“Yet you treat me like a liar or a scoundrel. And a fine irony that is, as I stand here before your *Congress*.” She spit out the word, and eyed Mr. Caperton, who hovered about her now as if he wasn’t entirely sure how to proceed.

Praying that he wouldn’t make another, more aggressive grab, Captain Sally turned her back and addressed the assembled men. “You sit there behind your little desks in your fine suits and act like you understand this war and these soldiers more fully than I do . . . but every last one of you knows better than that. Josiah Snead, I see you creeping toward the door like you’re trying to escape me—*you*, sir. It was your son who picked up three bullets in Henegar; and everyone said he’d die, didn’t they? But they got him to me, and where is he now? Home with your new grandson, unless I’m mistaken. And Wellers Chrisman, don’t you hide your head. Your brother would’ve died without the attention he received at the Robertson. Morgan Cluskey, your father wouldn’t be here without me. Charlie Hartridge, your nephew. Robert Batson, your sons—both of them!—still walk this earth because of *me*.”

She glowered at them, her gaze darting from face to face.

She knew them all, in some fashion or another. She’d received

letters from many of them, begging, accompanied by money, all of them essentially the same: “They say this man is done for, but at the Robertson he may have a chance.”

When they prayed to God, they prayed for *her*.

And still they treated her like a fondly regarded pet, a reliable watchdog, or a steadfast mule.

While she still had them stunned into uncomfortable silence, she lowered her voice, steadied it, and continued. “Out on the western coast, in the Washington Territory, a substance seeps from the ground—a toxic gas, which kills anyone who breathes it. But the people it kills don’t lie down and rot. They walk, they hunt, and they feed. The gas is largely confined to a walled, partially abandoned city called Seattle, but its ill effects have scaled the walls and headed east in the form of a drug—sometimes called *sap*, sometimes *saffron*—which has become terribly popular with fighting men on both sides of the Mason-Dixon.”

“Conjecture!” cried Morgan Cluskey, who sat back in his chair with an impatient sigh.

His sigh gave Boyd Caperton the nudge he needed. Caperton caught Sally’s arm again, and this time, she could not shake him loose.

As he determinedly, carefully ushered her off the speaker’s stand, she called out over her shoulder, “Men are dying—more men than I ever saved at the Robertson! And if you think”—she tripped over Caperton’s foot, and recovered—“if you think it’ll stop with the soldiers, with the poor men from the Southern fields and the Northern factories, you’re idiots, every last one of you! The problem grows bigger every day.”

“We’re aware of this drug, Captain Sally,” said Wellers Chrisman. “But it’s a *Union* problem. Who cares if the illiterate Italians blast themselves senseless?”

Frantic now, she grabbed the edge of a table. That bought her another few seconds while her escort tried to figure out how to

more forcibly accost a lady without being too ungallant in front of God and everybody.

“Exactly how many *Union* soldiers do you think I treat at the Robertson, Mr. Chrisman? It’s *our boys, too*, and we’ve got fewer of them to lose. Take off your blinders and take action while there’s still time. Gentlemen, the world will judge us by the steps we take right now. The whole globe is in danger!”

Her grasp on the table edge failed. She lost a few steps, then caught herself on the door frame. But before Caperton pushed her out with absolute finality, he bowed his head so that his lips came close to her ear, and his breath lightly tousled the stray curl that dangled there. “Captain Sally, you put us in a difficult position.”

She turned her head so fast that it cracked his face. “More difficult than mine?”

He let go of her, then, so he could hold his nose, waiting for it to start bleeding. It didn’t, so he removed his hand. “This isn’t a problem of war. It’s a social issue.”

“It’s a disease!” She tried another angle, pleading now. “A disease spread by soldiers, not so different from cholera or typhoid. That makes it an issue of war, does it not?”

“Not on the word of one nurse.”

“One nurse, fine. What about two? What about a dozen? A thousand? How many nurses will it take, Mr. Caperton?”

“You’re missing the point. Bring me a doctor, and let him testify. In the meantime, the Confederacy thanks you for your service, but you must return to your duties and let the men run the war.”

“Which you’ve done a bang-up job of thus far.”

He didn’t answer. He only shepherded her through the last great door and shut her out of the proceedings with heavy, slow calmness.

He leaned against the door then, holding it shut even though

she no longer pushed or knocked. All eyes were on him. He wiped at his nose once more, in case it'd begun to bleed after all. But no. He was not injured, just unsettled. He cleared his throat. "Gentlemen. Now that the matter is resolved, let us return to business."

The room sighed its relief with a rustle of papers and the creaks of men shifting in their seats, suddenly more at ease. The fifteenth Congress of the Confederacy was in session still, in its enormous hall with gilt ceiling, leaded and colored glass windows, and polished wood trim—all designed to advertise and reassure that Danville was not finished, and certainly not broke.

In the far corner, a young man still in his teens wrote feverishly, recording the minutes in his cleanest Pitman shorthand. He captured every word faithfully, scrawling like a phonography racehorse, noting the last bits of the tense exchange between Captain Sally and Congressman Caperton. He even dutifully included the muttered gripe of Robert Welch, who'd complained, "Shouldn't have let a woman address the floor in the first place, rank or no rank. Let her take her pride in it, but give her no privileges apart from cashing checks."

Above and behind the stenographer, on the second-story balcony that ran around the congressional hall, a board creaked under a finely heeled boot, and a spindly white cobweb was swept aside by the long hem of a cotton skirt.

This woman did not approach the floor, but withdrew from it, leaning back among the shadows that had hidden her thus far. She did not want to talk to the men. She'd come to see Captain Sally, though the captain did not know it. Now that the fireworks were finished, this woman took her leave exactly as she'd arrived: in silence and darkness, with a widow's veil to hide the smile that spread coldly across her face.

But she had not gone unnoticed or unrecognized.

In the back row, seated beside the stenographer, a man collected his belongings, sorting his papers and straightening them

Cherie Priest

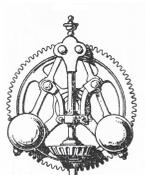
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before slipping them into a satchel, as if he were any other clerk wrapping up his business.

He was no clerk. Nor was he a congressman, senator, or any other party to the CSA.

As he retreated from the seat he'd borrowed from an absent legislator, he mentally composed the telegram he'd send within the hour.

KATHARINE HAYMES IN DANVILLE STOP PLEASE
ADVISE



One

Gideon Bardsley was working in the basement of the former Jefferson Hospital, which had been converted into the science center that housed his laboratory, when the first window broke. He heard the brittle sound of glass being strategically shattered, but he did not turn off the machine. Instead, he glanced at the dial beside his hand. Its tiny needle leaned hard past the yellow warning threshold, and tapped against the red zone.

A second window broke upstairs.

He rejected the reflex to look up at the basement door. Looking at the basement door would not tell him anything he did not already know—nothing he could not discern from the sounds of motion upstairs. Two intruders, at least. Entering from the western side of the building. Not close yet; not even in the correct wing of the disused hospital space. But coming.

He had time, but not much.

Gideon reached for a large glass knob and turned it carefully, but as quickly as he dared. He checked the dial again. Its needle careened farther to the right, fully in the red, but fairly stable. The lever on the left would activate the printing apparatus upstairs. He pulled it.

He needed an answer, and he needed it *now*.

The mighty computational engine strained and hummed, its gears and chains struggling against the request. At the rear a fuse

fizzled and popped, but did not blow; a circuit objected with a fit of sparks, but held steady; a row of lights flickered, but did not go out.

Now Gideon looked up at the basement door. He stared at it. Hard. And he willed the system to work the way he told it to—please, just this once, if never again.

Three seconds passed. He knew because he counted.

Click.

Whir.

A blue-green glow sparked to life on the machine as a thin line of watery light pooled through the crack where the bottom of the door met the top stair.

“Yes,” Gideon breathed, but he did not smile. Turning on the apparatus was not the hard part. It was the first hard part.

The printer was far too large to share the basement with its companion device, which occupied two-thirds of the downstairs floor space. Ordinarily this was a source of great irritation for Gideon, who would’ve been much happier to have everything in one room, or at least on one level, preferably at a quarter of the present size. But just this once, it was a good thing.

So long as everything worked. And sometimes, it didn’t.

The lines, wires, tubes, and lumpily soldered joints that connected the two machines were strung through holes in the ceiling and floor, carrying more information at a greater speed than any such wires were ever expected to bear. They twitched, sparked, and jerked as electricity surged from the master device, depositing Gideon’s answer into the printer’s circuits, where the information sorted and arranged itself.

And then the printing apparatus began to translate the electric and magnetic impulses from the mechanical brain in the basement onto paper.

The nimble, spindly lead keys clacked slowly at first as rows upon rows of them rallied for the task, pressed themselves against

ribbons of ink, and banged down on the paper receipt with sticky gravitas. Then the rhythm rose in volume, the noise soaring into something loud and rumbling, like the gravelly grunt of a diesel engine.

A tremendous roll of paper, bought from the *Washington Star-News*, unspooled within the printer's belly. The apparatus dutifully pressed its message on the newsprint, and through a slot that emptied into a basket it spit out paper covered with whatever the brain downstairs commanded.

He grabbed his grandfather's coat off the back of a chair he never had time to sit in, and donned it with a fast hitch of his shoulders. He also seized a cast bronze plaque created as a gift by former president Abraham Lincoln—not for sentimental reasons or because the plaque was as valuable as the coat, but because it praised and identified Gideon's greatest creation.

A series of heavy blows battered the door to the laboratory upstairs, but Gideon was finally smiling. He already had a plan—plans were never the problem. Time to execute them was more often the difficulty.

He dashed up the stairs in a hurried tiptoe that muffled his steps, opening the basement door with care to keep it from squeaking.

Whoever was trying to get inside through the reinforced main door had discovered his folly, or so the scientist assumed. That particular portal was lined with lead, and fastened to the wall with hinges made to hold a firehouse door.

Gideon checked the paper basket and said, "Excellent!" Before his eyes, the basket filled and then overflowed with a billowing flutter as the paper kept coming, covered with facts and figures of such outstanding volume that it surprised even the man who'd demanded them, knowing the answer would not be brief. And knowing it would not be good.

Apart from the printer's clatter, he heard only silence.

The intruders had given up on the door, but it wouldn't take them long to come around the side and realize there was another way into the office.

Crash.

Not long at all.

The breaking glass of his office window was followed by the scrape of an arm, cleaning out the frame and pushing the shards to the floor. After this came the crush of feet on the scattered fragments, and the grinding sound of heels turning the glass to dust.

Gideon picked up an armful of paper and scanned it. His eyes widened.

A man called out, "This way! I see him!"

Without lifting his attention from the printout, Gideon kicked the office door shut, then twisted the lock. It wouldn't hold forever—not nearly as long as the main entrance. But he needed more time. The printing apparatus wasn't finished. It spewed its contents without pause, flinging more and more and more still into the basket, faster than Gideon could empty it.

The heavy thump of a big man's body shoved hard against the side door. Then three shots—something high-caliber, something that could punch holes in a body or blow away a lock. The fastener held through the fourth round. Gideon was not dealing with the world's greatest sharpshooter.

A booted foot kicked the door open with a bang.

The printing apparatus wasn't finished yet, but Gideon told himself that this much would suffice—it was enough to give him his answer, and, if he was very lucky, it might even be enough to make his case.

The stacks of numbers were so fresh they smeared ink across his palms as he hurriedly seized them and bundled them together. In the office doorway, a man with a red bandana over his face and a gun in his hand shouted, "Get away from that machine!"

Irritated at the interruption, Gideon tore off the printed paper and gave its dangling, still-growing edge a rueful look before hefting the bulk of the printout. He crushed it in his arms, holding it between himself and the gunman.

In the brief pause that followed, he let Lincoln's plaque slip quietly from his grasp, hidden by the crinkled, fluffy mass of wadded paper.

It fell.

And at the moment the plaque landed atop the printer's console, Gideon flung himself behind a table and used his hip to knock it over. He dropped down for cover as the gunman opened fire. Two shots plunked into the heavy oak, which banged against the scientist's elbows as he twisted, rolled, and folded the paper into a more manageable mass. Meanwhile, someone fired another shot, maybe more. It was hard to tell them apart over the rattling industrial clank of the printer's keystrokes.

A second set of footsteps joined the gunman, and two more bullets went wild. Maybe both of them were terrible shots. Something to keep in mind, but it didn't mean he could disregard them. They only needed one lucky shot between them.

"Back there!" The first man pointed. The upended table rocked again as another volley dug a row of deep, splintering holes.

Behind the incessant clatter of the still-pounding printer keys, he thought he could hear the intruders reloading. Even if it was his imagination, it was only a matter of time before they fired again. He needed a way out.

Several plans presented themselves from his vantage point. He sorted and prioritized them according to likely cost versus success rates.

The men stood between him and the stairwell door, but that was fine. He didn't want to lead them down there anyway.

No. Behind him. The trapdoor to a storage cellar. That'd be a better option. It had once been part of the basement, before the

basement had been finished out for Gideon's work. The old hospital was a rabbit warren of such places, and he knew them all, having studied the blueprints before establishing his professional headquarters.

Of course, the cellar's exterior door may or may not have been barred from outside, closed up fast against storms or burglars. There was always the chance that choosing this escape route would render him a fish in a barrel, but he ran the odds in his head and was reassured. Despite the risk, this was his best chance, both for preserving his equipment and for escaping the facility unseen.

Gideon jammed the unwieldy bundle of paper under his arm and glanced about for something to tie it with. Nothing obvious presented itself, so he dropped that idea. He'd have to carry it unsecured. A little noisy, and a little inconvenient, but not impossible.

"Is this the Fiddlehead?" one of the men shouted to the other over the cacophony of pounding keys.

"I don't know! What does it look like?" came the uncertain reply, meaning they hadn't yet seen the strategically relocated plaque.

Behind a counter over to his right, Gideon spied a jar of aluminum powder. His eyes narrowed, swiftly scanning the room until he remembered that the potassium chlorate was in the cabinet behind it.

"Science to the rescue," he mumbled as he scooted on his knees and one hand—the other clasping the wadded sheaf of paper against his chest—across the floor and toward the aluminum.

The intruders must have heard him . . . maybe only a rustle of his old coat and the fast scrape of his boots as he scrambled out of the way, but they fired in that direction anyway, aiming wherever they guessed he might be heading.

They didn't hit too close. The noise from the printing appara-

tus disoriented them. Sometimes Gideon forgot how unsettling it could be to people who weren't accustomed to it.

He ignored it, fully and happily embracing the sound as cover as he knocked over a chemistry set on a repurposed tea tray. More confusion. More gunshots. But here was the aluminum. He'd have to stand for just a second to get the chlorate.

He put the printout down by his leg. He'd need both hands for this.

He closed his eyes and mentally checked the layout of the cabinet; he knew everything in it, every bottle on every row. Positioning himself as close to the right spot as possible, he counted back from three . . . two . . . one . . . and reached up to pop open the small door, hoping like hell that the morons with the guns wouldn't shoot up the contents and blow them all to Maryland.

He nicked the bottom edge with a fingernail and the metal door flipped open. With a turn of his wrist, he seized the potassium chlorate without looking, simply trusting his memory.

To his casual delight, his palm was not aerated by bullets.

Over by the printer, his visitors had finally stumbled upon the plaque he'd left behind, which stole their attention at a convenient moment.

"Look at this!"

"What is it?"

"It's a sign, see? This goddamn piece of junk . . . it *is* the Fiddlehead!"

Gideon objected to the "junk" part, but not *too* strongly, given that these people couldn't tell a sophisticated calculating device from a relatively mundane printing apparatus. "Idiots," he mumbled softly as he unscrewed the powder's lid.

"It's huge," one gunman correctly observed.

"Sure is making a lot of noise."

While they talked over the printer's racket, Gideon found an

empty measuring glass and filled it with the aluminum powder. Then, with exceptional care, he added the chlorate.

“Don’t worry about it: It’s only noise, not a weapon or nothing. Now where’d that nigger get off to?”

Gideon paused, lifting an eyebrow. “Just for *that* . . .” He reached over his head, jabbing his fingers into the cabinet again, this time nabbing a vial of sulfur. With a gentle tap, he dumped the yellow substance into his mix, jostled it oh-so-gently, and turned once more to the map in his mind.

Now he needed a spark.

He considered the printing apparatus. He mentally examined the console and dismissed it, knowing it was too well sealed. The most obvious target was across the room where the wires emerged from the basement. They were hot now, their uninsulated ends casting small fizzes of light all along the switch box.

The printer slowed. Its keys pounded down with less regularity, coming to the end of its instructions, to the very end of the answer Gideon needed . . . and the room fell quiet.

Even Gideon’s ears were ringing, so he knew how strange the silence must feel to the men who weren’t accustomed to the outstanding drone of the metal keys. Still, he’d have only a few seconds while they shook their heads and found their bearings and a few seconds more than that before their ears calmed down enough to hear the hum of the big machine downstairs.

He couldn’t let them notice.

“You got the dynamite?”

Gideon’s back straightened when he heard that word. He didn’t like it. Should’ve expected it. But would have to work around it now, and analyze the meaning of it later. His brain needed to stay on track, just the *one* track, which he’d narrowed down from many.

He retrieved the paper, bundling it up under his arm and clamping it against his ribs. He tore off a blank strip from the

edge, wadded it into a ball, and used it to stopper the small glass cup.

The sound of tearing paper got the gunmen's attention again. One of them shouted, "He's over there!"

But before the words were out of the man's mouth, Gideon was on his feet. He flung the glass across the room and immediately turned his back, dropping back down behind the table.

His aim was better than the gunmen's, and his concoction was true. The glass shattered against the fuse panel and the powdered mixture exploded—and the room went blank with fire, a blinding chemical light, and a terrible smell.

It threw a shadow so strong that Gideon squinted, even though he was crouched down on the floor and facing the other direction.

"My eyes! Jesus Christ, my eyes!"

"He had a bomb!"

"Give me your dynamite!"

"I can't see! I can't see anything!"

"I can, a little bit—give me your sticks!"

The idea of two half-blind fools playing with dynamite was not the sort of thing to make a man dally, so while the gunmen struggled with their explosives, Gideon seized the trapdoor ladder and withdrew into the unfinished cellar. At the bottom he kicked the final rung, bringing the ladder down with him. If the gunmen wanted to follow him, they could jump and break a leg.

He climbed the steps to the exterior door and unlocked it, shoving it with his upper back. It was heavy, but it wasn't barricaded from the other side. He knocked it open and stepped out into the crisp November night.

His breath clotted in the air, and the stars looked like ice. He was free, and his unwelcome guests didn't know it yet.

But had the unwelcome guests brought company?

Gideon gently let the door fall shut behind him.

He stayed close to the building for now, sticking to the shadow of the eaves and hustling toward the front of the old facility, ducking down away from the windows and putting as much distance between himself and the laboratory as possible.

The men had brought dynamite. Their mission was sabotage—and possibly espionage as well, but he didn't think so. Only seven people had ever seen the Fiddlehead, and none of them could've used it if their lives depended on it. Only Gideon could coax it into its calculations. Only Gideon understood it, and there were days when even he was stunned by what it could do. No, even if someone, somewhere knew precisely what the device was for . . . there wasn't another scientist in the world who could operate it. He would've bet his life on it.

Therefore, whoever sent the men didn't want to use the Fiddlehead. They wanted to destroy it.

Behind him, a blast shook the night—a terrible percussion that rocked the building and made the earth beneath his feet rumble unsteadily, like the ground might open up and swallow him. He staggered forward, adjusting for the quake and hunkering as he moved, bracing himself against the shingles and other bits of small debris that followed him.

When the last of it had settled, he heard nothing. Not the two men talking, not anyone chasing after him. Not even his own feet as he started to run.

Eventually his hearing caught up to him, and his head echoed with a high-pitched hum. He shook it, trying to cast the buzz out of his ears like so much water after a swim. The hum wavered but stayed, keeping him company as he cut across the lawn, past an old fountain that had been dry for decades. He turned through an overgrown gate, pushing past the vines that knitted the old garden exit shut, stumbling briefly as his boots tangled in a brittle patch of rose briars.

Past the garden and into the woods he went, though the woods

were almost too swampy to call them that. His feet splashed through puddles left by the recent rains, and the half-frozen water soaked between his toes. He held the papers up high, sometimes over his head if he was afraid of falling.

The woods thinned quickly and gave way to a road with two wide lanes and intermittent traffic. Some of the carriages and carts boasted those new combustion engines that were all the rage. Gideon liked the noise of engines more than he liked the chatter of people or the whinnies of horses, even though it all meant the same thing: civilization. Some element of safety, he supposed, assuming that no one intended to murder him in front of witnesses. And how likely was that? He couldn't say.

He crossed the road, letting the traffic flow between him and the hospital. Here and there, over the dull ringing in his ears, he heard people asking one another what that loud sound might have been—Was it an explosion, do you think? Was it artillery?—for the D.C. population always had a good reason to be nervous. Now more than ever, he supposed, when Southern spies with dynamite were running about, blowing up advanced technology willy-nilly.

With a bit of distance from the hospital, Gideon played the scene over in his head one second at a time, examining every detail as he walked a road he usually traversed in a horseless carriage belonging to Mary Todd Lincoln and driven by his old friend Harrison.

As he hiked, he reviewed his information. He assessed the details and considered the motives.

The intruders had absolutely planned to kill him. Why destroy the Fiddlehead only to let its creator survive to build another one? Men who didn't know what such a machine could do probably wouldn't know how preposterous the idea was: Gideon could build another Fiddlehead, yes, but not without a vast sum of money and several years at his disposal. His life's work could not be conjured back into existence with the blink of an eye, but it could be conjured eventually.

So, yes, his life was in danger—that much was certain. But in danger from whom? He had assumed that the saboteurs were Southerners, but upon reflection that may not be correct. Regional accents were dead giveaways, in Gideon's experience, and although one of the men might have come from the South, the other one was definitely a northeastern coastal resident.

Mind you, a Northerner still could've been hired by the CSA. Allegiances shifted across state lines every day, and mercenary loyalties came with price tags, not regional fidelity.

He couldn't be sure. This made him unhappy, because he liked to be sure at all times, of as many things as possible. It made for better plans.

That having been said, he *was* sure that it was well over two miles back to the Lincoln house. His feet were cold and wet and he didn't want to walk, but there wasn't much choice. He had no immediate means of contacting anyone, and he carried no money for the purposes of flagging down a carriage and buying a ride.

He disliked money on general principle. It had its uses, but it seemed insubstantial—entirely too false. Little more than a promise on a piece of paper, written by dead men, miles and years away. Paper could burn, and paper could lie.

But the paper under his arm did not lie. It crinkled and crackled, urging him onward. Reminding him of what was at stake.

One foot in front of the other, he trudged along the road's edge, every step leaving his toes a bit more numb. It wasn't late, and the night still had room to get much colder; everything might freeze, he thought. If there was one single, solitary thing he missed about southern Alabama, it was the unimpressive winter weather.

(He missed it only fleetingly, and with some private disgust.)

There was never any question of where he might go now.

Home? Certainly not. It was even farther away than the Lincolns' house at the edge of Capitol Hill. Besides, what would

he do there? Sleep? Wait for morning, for a more reasonable hour to demand an audience?

He wished he had a bag or a satchel to hold the papers. Every few yards he adjusted them, squishing the unspooled document tighter and making sure nothing trailed on the ground behind him. He didn't know how much he'd lost to the intruders' interruption. Every surviving line was more precious than diamonds, but the cumbersome bundle drew stares from drivers and passengers, and from the men and women on their own trips home from a factory shift or an evening's meal on the town.

A line of shiny black vehicles came roaring up toward him, brightly lit from within and spewing odd-smelling diesel fumes. All of them built with technology stolen—or, more likely, purchased—from the Texians, and spreading across the continent with speed that couldn't bode well for the Confederacy. Texas tech was one of their last remaining advantages, and it, too, was slipping from their grasp.

This thought made him smile glumly as he plodded forward. His feet had become blocks of ice, and his hands gone likewise numb. His gloves were back at the old hospital in the basement somewhere, lying atop the Fiddlehead. Had the roof held, or had the dynamite brought the whole wing crashing down upon the calculation engine?

Gideon's pace slowed, then picked up again. Worrying wouldn't change whatever facts awaited him back there, and he couldn't return to find out. Not until morning, he suspected, and maybe not even then.

If the Fiddlehead survived, then it must survive as a secret.

He squinted against brilliant pairs of front-facing lamps. As one of the cars passed him, he heard laughter within. And music. Someone had brought a violin, and someone else was playing a fife. Despite the cold, some of the carriages had left their windows

down, and as they rolled past, Gideon smelled expensive food and perfume, and alcohol and tobacco.

Somewhere in the city, a ball or some other gala event had just ended, and a beautiful room filled with finely presented tables was emptying, which meant that Mrs. Lincoln might not be home yet. She often lingered at these things, partly by her own preference and partly because she served as her husband's social eyes and ears, for the former president rarely left the house since his near-fatal injury at Ford's Theatre. It was too trying, he said; too much trouble for other people to accommodate him. So he kept to his own home and his own grounds, which had been altered to better suit his needs.

Gideon kept his eyes open on the off chance Mrs. Lincoln's buggy might pass by and he could flag her down, but it was not his lucky night. He walked the full distance, and by the time he reached the Lincoln estate his legs were heavier than lead.

So far as estates went, it was a surprisingly modest one—at least from the exterior; the inside was filled with expensive gifts collected over the years from dignitaries near and far. The house itself was a simple two-story home with two wings, and a lift inside, for the president could not ascend stairs without immense assistance. Also due to Lincoln's mechanized chair, all the outdoor paths were paved.

Gideon almost tripped over the first walkway he passed. He might have cursed except that he was so relieved to have arrived. Lights burned up the hill at the homestead, giving him more than the nighttime sky or traffic to navigate by. He homed in on these electric torches, drawn like the moths and mosquitoes that hovered around the devices in a buzzing cloud. Up the half-dozen stairs he climbed, bypassing the ramp because it was less direct. Even after his long, cold hike, he was more impatient than tired.

The front door opened before he could knock, and there stood a confused-looking Nelson Wellers.

Mr. Lincoln's personal physician was a gaunt young man with a cadaverous complexion. He was quick and capable, but he always wore the expression of someone carrying the weight of the world. Friendly enough despite his nervous disposition, he was well liked and trusted, even by Gideon, who had worked with him before. Together they had designed and perfected the ex-president's wheeled chair, as well as some of the other tools that made life easier for the badly crippled politician.

"Gideon!" Nelson cried. "There you are—thank God!"

"Not a greeting I get every day."

The doctor reached out and grabbed the scientist by the coat lapels, drawing him bodily inside and shutting the door behind them both. "We just heard about the explosion, and Ephraim said there was no sign of you out at the Jefferson building. I was on my way to . . . to . . . to see if I could find you, I suppose. Did you *walk* all the way back?"

"Yes."

"Dear God, it's *freezing* out there."

"No, not quite."

From the parlor doorway, a woman gasped. "Oh, Mr. Bardsley!"

Gideon threw her a nod, but did not make eye contact. "Polly," he greeted the household lady-in-waiting, as Mrs. Lincoln often called her. One part maid, one part nurse, Polly Lockhart was a girl of mixed and indeterminate race—more white than otherwise. She was stout and small, much like the former first lady herself. She wrung her hands together, so they'd have something to do besides flutter.

"Dr. Wellers was just about to go looking for you."

"So he says."

The doctor went to the nearby liquor cabinet and poured himself a stiff draught of very good bourbon, then offered one to Gideon, too. He shifted his bundle of paper and accepted the glass,

knowing better than to hope it'd warm his feet, but appreciating the gesture. The beverage and the crystal service set beside it were a gift from a French ambassador, and easily worth more than his niece. He knew, because ten years ago he'd bought her freedom when he couldn't steal it. The cost of the furnishings could have brought many more families across the line. The math filled his head but did not make it spin. Very few things could accomplish such a feat, least of all numbers.

Gideon downed the drink and watched the new electric lights sparkle through the damp crystal.

One of Polly's fluttering, fretful hands touched his arm. "What happened out there?" she asked. "Can I help you with your . . . with this . . . package?"

"No, Polly. I've got it under control. Two men broke in," he answered her first question, handing the glass back to Nelson and glancing at his feet. He still couldn't feel them, but he watched as they dripped and oozed a large damp spot on a very expensive rug from somewhere in the Ottoman empire.

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?" the doctor tried again, scrutinizing Gideon with a professional appraisal that was already telling him that all was well. "Can Polly take your coat?" he asked, his dubious tone suggesting he already knew the answer to that, too.

"No," Gideon replied, a little too quickly. "No, I'll just sit a minute by the fire, if you don't mind. I need to see Mr. Lincoln." He squeezed the printout. It felt strange, like it had shrunk on the way from the hospital. But it'd only become crushed as he'd kneaded it down, over and over again, making sure he didn't drop it. "He needs to see this. *This* is what they came for."

He barely heard the faint motor hum of the president's chair approaching, but he did hear it because he expected it, and he listened for it.

Nelson Wellers stood aside, and Polly withdrew to the edge of the room. Gideon stayed where he was, and the sixteenth president of the United States rolled into their midst.

His chair was a marvel of science, the only one of its kind. Propelled by an electric motor, it was manipulated with small levers and buttons, customized for the old man's long, slender hands. Those fingers, which had once signed laws into being, were crumpled now, bending and unbending only with great effort; but they were firm on the steering paddle as he brought himself forward.

This was the man who would've freed Gideon's family, if he'd had the chance. If the bullet hadn't blown his head almost in two, leaving him a stiff, twisted figure made of scars and odd angles. He was a hero. That made Gideon a hero by proxy, so far as his mother and brothers were concerned. His mother told everyone about it: how her boy worked hand in hand with the great leader, coming into his house through the front door like a proper gentleman. Her gushing pride embarrassed him for complicated reasons—reasons he never shared, because they would've only confused her.

Abraham Lincoln gazed levelly at the scientist with his one good eye. "Gideon, you did it."

Not a question, but a statement of certainty. Abraham Lincoln liked to be certain, almost as much as Gideon did.

"Yes sir, but this is all I could save. I needed more time."

"We always do." The former president nodded solemnly, his thin frame bobbing softly in the narrow black suit he so often wore. "It will have to be enough." He gestured toward the library, and turned the chair to face it. "Polly," he called over his shoulder. "Could you bring Dr. Bardsley a pair of slippers? Something from my closet, to wear until his boots are dry."

"Yes, sir. I will, sir."

To Gideon, he said, "You can take those off, and we'll put them by the fire. Your feet must be miserable."

“Yes, they are. Thank you, sir.” He followed the chair he’d helped build, and Nelson Wellers fell into step beside him.

Speaking over his shoulder again, for he could not easily turn his head, Mr. Lincoln said, “I’m glad to see you escaped unscathed, Gideon. When we got word of the blast, I feared the worst. But Ephraim said he didn’t see any sign of you, not in the rubble—or in the basement either, when he dropped a lantern down there. You barely missed one another. He rode out on horseback and only just returned. You made awfully good time on those frozen feet of yours.”

Gideon didn’t hear any of it after the part about the lantern. “The basement? So the floor held? Is the Fiddlehead intact?”

“The floor held. Your printing apparatus is so much scrap metal, I’m afraid, but as for the Fiddlehead, I do not know. Ephraim couldn’t say. There was a great deal of debris, and dust, and smoke too, I think. There was a small fire, but it was quickly brought under control.”

“But there’s a chance . . . ?”

“There’s always a chance.” He reached the library and maneuvered the chair through its doorway. “But we won’t know anything until morning, so let’s not worry about what we cannot change. For now, I want you to show me what you were able to save. And then, of course, you must tell me what it *means*.”