

Chapter One
PLOTting A TERRIBLE TRAJECTORY
AUGUST 1886

MORE OUT OF HABIT than from any need to be furtive, Paisley DeLoup slunk down the broad, poorly-lit marble staircase with the silent stealth of a hungry cat. In the downstairs hall, a gaslamp flame was jumping inside its glass globe, painting the hall in twitching pulses of light that brought the walls alive with motion. The gas mantles cast a green, unnatural glow instead of a warm yellow light. When she reached the one outside her father's study, she tapped it a few times with a finger, failing to fix it. The lamp continued to bubble, pop, and flare like a dragon with indigestion, so she gave up and went on into the study.

It was a large room, dark and lined with bookshelves except where oil paintings hung in gaps in the library, but it seemed almost to burst in the effort to contain the improbably large desk at its centre. Like a ship in a bottle, the desk was never meant to be moveable. Paisley remembered the day, a few years before — she'd been twelve then — when the carpenter had arrived to construct it, *in situ*. He'd been somewhat sceptical of the plans Paisley's father had presented. "It'll never leave this room, you understand, not without a saw," the craftsman had warned, before commencing work. The house, and the land around it, had once been a fort, and as she advanced on the desk now Paisley had the feeling that this monumental block of furniture was a kind of fort within a fort, just for her father. His keep.

She peered across the battlements of stacked books to where Mr DeLoup was engrossed with charts and tables of numbers, beside a tall brass oil lamp that gave his face a healthier tone than the sickly gaslights. Instruments were strewn atop the layer of papers, and over them all her father hunched, fiddling with a complicated slide covered in tiny gradations and mathematical symbols. He continued to alternate between scribbling calculations and drawing cannon trajectories without noticing Paisley at all, until she grew tired of waiting.

"They're doing it again," she said, startling Mr DeLoup so much that he snapped the lead in his pencil and dropped the slide rule.

"Paisley," said Mr DeLoup, "what did you say? Have you finished with those pies? Shouldn't you all be in bed by now?"

"The people, down in the town. They're doing it again."

Mr DeLoup seemed to chew indecisively on several words as he tried to think of how to respond to this ominous news. Before he replied he dug under some papers to find a knife, which he used to sharpen his pencil. "I'm sure it's none of our affair whatever they do down in Spohrville at night," he said vaguely, a quarter of his pencil now rendered into shavings. "After all, if it doesn't disturb us, they have a right to carry on any way they see fit in their own town."

Paisley frowned. Her father was always like this. Fighting old battles in his head and wishing only to be left alone by the world, no matter how bizarre that world became.

"Do you know," he said, pointing the stub of pencil at the figures and parabolas on his notes, "I don't think Bonaparte's army in Italy had the firepower to bombard Venice from the mainland. It was all a bluff."

Paisley took a deep breath. "Don't you think it's peculiar, Papa, that every night, while we're perched up here on this ridge, everyone in Spohrville wanders about the streets in the dark." Or rather, she thought, didn't wander. They all walked with silent, solitary purpose towards the lighthouse in the bay. All except the occasional lost soul ... "One was heading up this way, up the ridge road."

"What?"

"It's true."

Mr DeLoup began whittling another pencil, having reduced the first to ruin. "How can you see anything in this rain and fog, and — and — mist?" he asked, glancing towards the streaming window.

From her bedroom, there was generally a good view of the town below, as her father well knew. Even on a such a night, the mist cleared from time to time, and when the Moon shone through the clouds it was easy to see they were up to something down there.

"I'm sure you're aware, Papa, that *you and I* can see *peculiarly well* at night."

"Yes," Mr DeLoup agreed, lowering his voice. "Yes." He stopped fiddling at last and set down the knife and pencil. "You've put your finger on the crux of the matter, my dear." He leant towards her, as if to avoid being overheard. "You and I, Paisley, for our own sakes as much as that of your mother and little Alice, should avoid being

conspicuous, or drawing attention to ourselves. Whatever those poor people are, as you say, 'up to', let us mind our own business so long as they don't involve us in their ... nocturnal perambulations. Please," he added, a little imploringly, "don't upset things. We have a good, quiet life here. Let that be enough."

Paisley grimaced, but nodded. She picked a spyglass up from the desktop and expanded it. "May I borrow this?" she asked. "I only want to watch," she added, when her father's brow wrinkled.

"All right," he said, "but nothing more, mind you."

She nodded again and turned to go back upstairs.

"And, ah, lock all the doors and windows, would you, Paisley?" her father said as she was leaving, attempting to sound casual.

Once she'd thrown the bolts and latches, Paisley made her way quickly up to her bedroom where she shut the door to keep out any distracting light from the hall gas jets. The sill was slick with drizzle that had blown in through the windows, still swung open from when she'd been watching earlier. Paisley wiped away the water with a fistful of curtain before planting her elbows on the sill to steady the spyglass. She aimed it downhill towards the village and the empty house of the now-dead doctor. With a little focusing, the blurry image cleared into a confusing jumble of rooftops, tree branches, and motion. Ignoring the distraction of the lighthouse in the distance, she panned the instrument back and forth to find anyone abroad in the night. In a few seconds a figure bobbed into view. With a shock, she saw it was a woman walking upside down. A moment later Paisley realized it was the telescope that was inverting everything, and felt a little foolish. Before long, though, she got the measure of the device and was able to make some sense of the magnified images. There were more people in the streets, all of them heading for the lighthouse. All walked alone, neither speaking to the others nor making any signs of recognition. They simply walked. Slowly, steadily, inexorably.

Paisley ignored the *frisson* that ran up her back and began counting people. It wasn't easy, with the Moon coming and going behind clouds. Wisps of fog closer to earth obscured the town sometimes, and it was hard to tell one person from another at this distance, but one thing was clear enough: it was a rare person who was staying home that night.

Whatever her father had convinced himself of, Paisley didn't believe that they could remain aloof from Spohrville forever. Unless they simply left, sooner or later events down there would draw them in as well, and Paisley didn't like what she saw, not one jot. As surely as one of her father's imaginary cannon shots sailed back to earth, in an arc shaped by the relentless laws of gravity, so would Spohrville bend the DeLoups' fate around to follow the town's. She cleaned the mist off the spyglass lens and aimed it for the lighthouse now, since that, or something near it, was where everyone was going. Its bright beam, moving through the haze, reminded Paisley of a verse from the poem she'd been reading earlier.

*No rays from the holy heaven come down
On the long night-time of that town;
But light from out the lurid sea
Streams up the turrets silently...*

But just as she had the tower in her sights and was waiting for a clear view, from somewhere downstairs a shrill scream rose.

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