

# 1

## A Crime at the Top of the World

**I**t was a cold morning among the clouds, and Mr Honeywinkle had only minutes to live.

Floating in the sky was a marble building as big as a mountain, propellers sprouting from it like metal sunflowers. Its roof was flat with a trapdoor at one edge, and if you had pressed your ear to it that morning you'd have heard the muffled thunder of footsteps, then brutal war cries, then a name, hurled like a curse:

*'Domino!'*

Sparrows scattered as the trapdoor slammed open and a girl burst out, a sack on her back and a crazed glint in her eye. She had a mane of black hair, wore a tattered grey dress, and was particularly tall for her age. She shivered as

the wind wrapped around her, staring upward. The moon hung red in the sky, like a dollop of molten lava.

Fresh shouts swept up from below, howling for her head on a stake. The girl smiled and ran across the rooftop, swinging the sack down to her side. Overhead the moon had changed colour: from red to a deep emerald green.

Again the trapdoor banged open, and up came a pack of children, bleary-eyed, pyjama-clad, bristling with hate and rage. Their leader was an angelic girl with apple cheeks and golden locks, who looked ready to commit a murder.

‘Give him back to me, Domino!’ she cried, above the wind and the propellers.

Domino’s heart pounded with the force of a sledgehammer, pumping blood as hot as fire. She approached the edge of the roof.

And dangled the sack over the side.

‘Don’t you dare!’ Claudette screamed, taking a step closer.

Domino lowered the sack an inch. ‘Say you’re sorry.’

Claudette’s eyes narrowed, and the other children ground their teeth and cracked their knuckles. Domino counted ten explosive heartbeats, then lowered the sack another inch.

‘I’m sorry!’ Claudette shrieked.

‘For what?’

She turned up her nose. ‘For . . . not being nice to you.’

‘And?’



‘What *else* is there?’

‘I want details.’

Claudette rolled her eyes. ‘I don’t know! For throwing your clothes in the sea. For putting those ants in your bed. For . . . for writing you those letters where I pretended to be your dead parents.’

The other children giggled. ‘Don’t laugh, idiots!’ Claudette spat.

Domino waggled the sack. ‘Now say you’ll never be cruel to me again. Say you’ll treat me nice, and stop making fun of me for being sick and poor and everything else.’

‘Yes, fine, I’ll stop doing all of it. Just give me back Mr Honeywinkle!’

Domino looked down at the sack swaying gently in the wind. Through pink streaks of cloud she saw the sea, and beyond that a city that stretched towards the horizon: a whole country of twisting streets. Her breath caught as the sun flared, revealing colourful doll’s-house buildings and, between them, roving figures smaller than sand grains. It was a city she thought about every moment of the day, a city that haunted her dreams. A city she’d never been to.

‘Fine.’ She stepped away from the edge. ‘Here you go.’

Claudette squealed in relief, striding towards Domino with her head held high, reaching out her hand with the confidence of someone who always gets her way.

‘You mean it?’ said Domino. ‘You promise?’

Claudette smiled – a kindly, tender smile. ‘Of course.’

Domino handed over the sack, and Claudette clutched it adoringly to her chest. She took a deep, satisfied breath, then slapped Domino hard across the face.

Domino fell to her knees, ear ringing, cheek burning hot. Claudette’s smile soured to a sneer, the other children rubbing their hands in malicious expectation.

‘You think I’m going to treat you nicely, after this? You think I’m *ever* going to stop, when you are such an evil, penniless spider?’

Domino held her hand to her cheek, staggering away from the others, who giggled as they spied the tears leaking between her fingers. Claudette tugged irritably at the string holding the sack shut. ‘You can’t even tie a knot right!’

Domino sniffed, now halfway back to the trapdoor. From her sleeve she retrieved a little box, which rattled as she opened it. She rubbed the last of the tears from her cheeks. There was no need to make any more.

At last, Claudette undid the knot. ‘What’s . . . what is this?’

She upturned the sack, and clumps of chicken feathers fell out.

‘What’s going on?’ Claudette said, her voice tight. ‘Where . . . where is Mr Honeywinkle?’

There was a scrape, and the fizz of a new flame. The others all turned, and found Domino holding up a lit match.

Claudette's face paled. 'What are you doing?'

'I didn't steal Mr Honeywinkle just now,' said Domino. 'I only pretended to so you'd follow me up here. I stole him an hour ago, while you were all asleep.'

She pointed to another sack tucked behind the trapdoor, which they'd all run past in their hurry. The sack was upside down, and poking from the bottom was a short string.

Claudette's lip trembled. 'What . . . what's that?'

'I gave you the chance to say sorry. This is your fault.'

Domino whipped off the sack with a flourish, and there he was: Mr Honeywinkle, button eyes and green bow tie, a little tuft of stuffing bursting from one ear. He was strapped to a bright red rocket.

'No,' Claudette whimpered. 'No, please! I take it all back, I'll – no, Domino, don't!'

Domino had already lit the firework. She retreated to a safe distance, and Claudette squealed and ran towards her teddy bear. But it was too late – with a shrieking *whoosh*, the firework shot into the air, taking the bear with it. There was a spray of stuffing as Mr Honeywinkle's leg brushed a propellor, but the rest of him kept going – higher, higher – thundering up towards the moon. Domino felt a warm, happy glow in her heart as the firework exploded, filling the sky with little shards of silver light, and little shards of Mr Honeywinkle.

Claudette dropped to her knees with a scream that split

the air, the other children blinking in shock as stuffing fell about them like snow. Her work finished, Domino snuck back towards the trapdoor.

‘What’s *that*?’ said a boy.

Domino turned in confusion. Claudette’s face was buried in her hands, but the others were gaping at the sky.

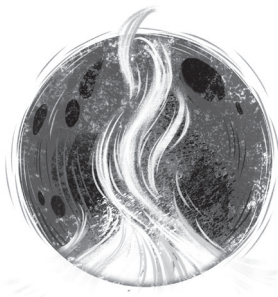
The trails of firework smoke had been washed away by the wind. The moon was red again, but there was something glowing orange, getting larger with each second. It flared so bright that Domino had to cover her eyes.

‘Get downstairs!’ the others yelled, bundling up a weeping Claudette and rushing for the trapdoor. But Domino kept staring, wondering what the light in the sky could be. It only occurred to her too late that she should have been running for shelter as well.

There was a deafening crack then a spray of sandstone that became a dark biting cloud that smothered the roof. For a moment Domino couldn’t see, coughing up mouthfuls of dust. Then the cloud cleared, and she took a wary step forward, gazing in wonder and fear.

It had carved a crater in the rooftop, and it sat at the centre, glowing red. Like a dollop of molten lava.

A piece of the moon.



## 2

### The Inventor of the Television

Domino stood frozen. The piece of the moon was barely larger than she was, but the longer she stared, the larger it seemed to become, growing like a sunrise until the rest of the rooftop vanished from her mind.

It looked to be made from red glass, and she could see something inside it, swirling restlessly, its shape always changing before Domino could decide what it was. She had the strangest sensation that it contained a part of her somehow, like a shifting collection of her own dreams.

The trapdoor opened and a huge man emerged. He saw Domino, saw the moon piece, then shrieked in horror, scooping her up and fleeing down the stairs.

‘Wait!’ she yelled. ‘What’s it doing there?’

‘Shut *up*,’ Garballous growled, tossing her inside a cupboard of yellowed bedsheets. The door slammed, the



lock clicked, and she was left in the dark, the memory of the moon fragment burning through her thoughts like a hot coal.

It could have been five minutes or thirty before the door opened again. Garballous took Domino's face in one hand, inspecting it closely, then grunted and dragged her along the corridor, steering her through a doorway.

'Sit.'

Garballous's office was a narrow room of a hundred shelves and a thousand glass jars. Inside the jars, dead things floated: a mouse here, a human ear there. The preserving liquid gave the room a sickly green light that danced across Garballous's bloated face, making him look like an angry reptile.

'All they could find was the head,' he grumbled, sitting down behind his desk. 'I've just been speaking to poor Claudette – *look!*' He pointed to a puddle beneath Domino's chair. 'Her tears still haven't dried. She says you did it.'

'Was that actually a piece of the moon, sir?'

'Yes. It happens sometimes. Put it from your mind – you're safe now. Or should I say you're in terrible danger, if you don't tell me the truth.'

'Claudette's a filthy liar, sir.'

'She's neither filthy nor a liar, which is more than I can say for you! When was that dress last washed?' He eyed one suspiciously blood-red stain, then glared at her. 'So

why'd you do it? Revenge, obviously. And attention, oh yes. You crave attention: good or bad.'

'Why would a piece of the moon fall?'

'I said put it from your mind!' Garballous pulled a comb from his desk and tugged it through his little moustache. He was a large, bitter man who disliked everything except dreaming up punishments for Domino. He was the closest thing she had to a friend.

'I asked around –' he wagged a scrap of paper – 'and apparently Claudette was calling you all sorts of nasty things yesterday. I wrote some down.' He cleared his throat and began to read. "'Brainless, talentless, poor. Terrible at maths. Belongs in the sewers.'"

Domino dug her fingernails into her knees. 'I never heard her say that last one.'

'No, I added that myself.' He placed the paper on his desk. 'Not Claudette's best work, but I can see why such words might get under your skin.'

'They *didn't* get under my skin.'

Garballous rolled his eyes. 'Might I remind you that last week you swapped poor Humphrey Burt's toothpaste with his rash cream because he called you sickly? He's still refusing to brush his teeth, you know, and – I saw that! I saw that smile, Domino. Don't think I didn't see that!'

'Nuh-uh, I didn't smile, sir.' The corners of her lips twitched again.

‘To *think* of all the things I’d rather be doing than keeping an eye on you. I am a Science Baron of great renown, Domino – I invented the automobile, the television!’

‘You’re right, sir. Someone as brainy as you shouldn’t be wasting his time punishing stupid girls like me. You should let me go so you can get on with your brilliant work.’

Garballous rolled his eyes. ‘That trick might work on the other Science Barons, but I am well practised in dealing with manipulative, ungrateful, unwashed –’

‘I *am* grateful.’

‘Well, you’ve a funny way of showing it! We feed you, clothe you, *educate* you, and still you see fit to torment the other children. Claudette wants to go home now, you realize? She says she hates it here.’

‘She loves it here! Everyone’s afraid of her, or worships her. She’s a bully, she needed taking down a pig or two.’

‘Aha! And I suppose you were the one to do it? And it’s “peg”, not “pig”, you potato-brained child. You admit it then?’

Domino batted her eyelashes. ‘I heard a rumour that you’re the cleverest of *all* the Science Barons. I bet it’s true, sir.’

Garballous slapped one hand on the desk, accidentally bouncing a clay sculpture of his own face nearer to the edge. It was a flattering portrayal of his doughy cheeks and button nose that he’d made on his annual day off.

‘Mr Honeywinkle was dear to Claudette’s heart. A first birthday present from her parents. She *loved* him, not that you could understand such a concept. Called him her “guardian angel”.’

Domino bit her lip, trying not to smile again. ‘Well, maybe she should be happy, sir? Her angel finally got to fly.’

‘That is *it!*’ Garballous pounded his fist so hard on the desk that the clay face wobbled halfway off the edge. ‘Enough, Domino. *Enough.*’

‘If you want me to stop doing things like this in future –’  
He sprang forward. ‘Was that a confession?’

‘I said things like this *in future*. Let me go down to the city, sir. For an afternoon. Then I promise to always behave.’

He drummed his fingers irritably on the desk.

‘I’ll come straight back, sir. I’ll *have* to come back.’

‘You’ll die before you come back.’

‘You don’t know that for sure. The magic –’

‘Do you think this is a negotiation? You are not allowed to leave. You cannot leave, and – until we find a cure – you will *never* leave.’

He glared at Domino, and she glared back, until the force of his gaze made her blink. She noticed the jangle of metal at Garballous’s belt: thirteen keys, her path to anywhere in the Scientarium Celestis, including straight out of it. But where could she go? How long would she last down in the city? The others were right – she *was* sick,

and could never leave. She was trapped here, a thousand feet in the sky with fifty Science Barons and three hundred children, and every one of them hated her.

A hot rage itched all over Domino's body, and she nudged the clay sculpture of Garballous's face. It toppled to the ground, smashing to a million pieces.

Garballous blinked down at his ruined face. He lifted the sheet of paper from his desk. 'Slow-witted, friendless, badly dressed. Belongs in the sewers.'

'Claudette said my parents despised me!' Domino yelled. 'She said that's why they sent me here.'

'Well, that's not true. You're here because of your condition. Your parents didn't despise you.'

'I know that!' Domino struggled to keep her voice steady. 'It still hurts.'

'Not that they were upstanding citizens, either. Trying to rob that bank – what did they think was going to happen? They're lucky their stolen automobile went over that bridge: imagine if they'd lived to discover what a nasty, hate-filled creature you are?'

'You've told me all this before.' Domino stood up. 'Shut up!'

'Would you rather we simply end our experiments? Stop searching for a cure?'

'Yeah.' Domino slumped back into her chair. 'Then I can leave and be done with the whole horrible lot of you. I want to see the world.'

Garballous gave a weary sigh. ‘The world will kill you, Domino. Now listen – I have a deal for you. A Science Baron has returned to the Scientarium after years conducting research abroad. He’s in need of an assistant, and, despite my many warnings, he has requested you.’

‘*Me?* Everyone here hates me. Why would he want my help?’

‘I asked him the same thing, repeatedly. Apparently he wants to keep his work a secret, and given that you can’t leave the Scientarium, and have no friends to tell secrets to, you’re the best fit.’

Domino blinked. Secrets were among her favourite things. She knew, for example, that Baron Barcelina liked to sing lullabies to her lab rats when she thought nobody was listening, and that Emily Pence kept a photograph of Claudette that she threw darts at.

‘What’s he like, this Science Baron?’ said Domino, imagining a wrinkled, warty old man. Most Science Barons were warty old men. The rest were warty old women.

‘It doesn’t matter what he’s like.’

‘Is he young and handsome, sir?’

‘He’s been generous enough to take you on as his responsibility – which means you’re no longer *my* responsibility.’ Garballous ran a pudgy hand through his hair, taking several strands with it. ‘But here’s the catch: you’re only allowed to work with him so long as you behave. I mean it, Domino – your *best* behaviour. No more

mud-filled chocolate cakes, no more locking boys inside spider-infested rooms. Not even a drawing pin on someone's chair. You can start by returning that crystal pendant of Baron Tussock's you stole from his classroom.'

'What? But that wasn't *me*! This is a terrible deal. Why would I want to help some ugly old man with his stupid experiments?'

'He's young and handsome.'

'I agree to this deal.'

Garballous seemed to deflate with relief. 'Good. Hold out your arm.'

Domino rolled up her sleeve, stretched out her palm, and spat on it. Garballous's eyes bulged. 'What are you doing, horrible child?'

'This is how you seal a deal, sir,' she said authoritatively.

Garballous pulled a small glass tube from his desk drawer, with a needle at one end and a handle at the other. 'I'm not shaking your hand – I'm taking your blood. It's been a week since your last leeching. Hold still.'

Domino winced as the needle went into her arm. 'Haven't you got enough by now?' she said, kicking the desk impatiently. The tube filled deep red.

'Blood doesn't keep fresh long – we need a regular supply if we're to find you a cure.' Garballous held the tube to the light, pursing his lips in satisfaction. 'And remember: no misbehaving, whatever the other children do. Now go, get to class.'

Domino shuffled to the door, afraid she'd just agreed to a bad deal. Oh well, she supposed, if this new Science Baron proved to be boring, she could always break it. She reached for the door handle when a thought occurred to her. 'Sir . . . you screamed when you saw that piece of the moon.'

Garballous picked up a book from his desk, appearing to read it. The book was upside down.

'The moon is magical,' said Domino. 'So that piece must have been *full* of magic. How come it didn't hurt me?'

He turned a page aggressively. 'I got you away quickly enough. You were lucky – if it had landed any closer, you'd probably be dead.'

'But you screamed, sir. Why were you so frightened?'

Garballous put down the book, watching her for a long moment. 'Because you were in danger. Because not everyone here hates you, Domino.'

A little smile crept across her lips. Garballous stood up, and she felt that he was about to say something nice.

'Now get out of my sight.'