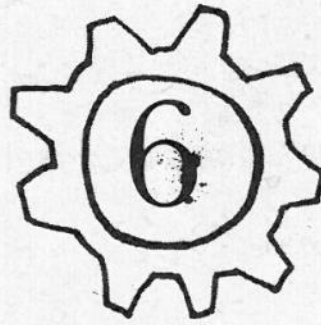


CHAPTER



Suddenly she had a very funny feeling. It was one of those times when you feel half excited and half discombobulated, and you're not quite sure if you're happy or sad, or about to be sick.

Something was different!

What was it?

Tilly stared into the dark, trying to think. It was the photo! There was something different about the photo!

She turned on the bedside light and looked at it. The photo showed her, her mummy and her dad all sitting in the kitchen. It had been taken on the morning of her sixth birthday, before her



friends arrived for the party. It wasn't the best photo in the world – most of it was taken up by the huge white fridge behind them – but she liked it because they all looked so happy, and because it was the last photo that had been taken of her mummy before she died.

What was different?

And then she saw it. **It was the fridge!**

The fridge normally had lots of things on it: magnetic letters she used for spelling practice, paintings she'd brought back from school, a magnet of a ladybird playing tennis, another of the Eiffel Tower, her star chart and the shopping-list thingy that had a pencil on a string hanging down from it.

But, looking at it now, Tilly saw that those things had been cleared away, and there was just a message written in magnetic letters across the whole fridge.

The message read:



tilly help

stuck in time

check machine

reset passcode

mydar lingju lia

look out for spies

love dad x

Tilly studied the message. The first thing she thought was that if Miss Scarborough saw this, she'd give her dad a telling-off because his punctuation was terrible.

Then she remembered that there weren't any commas or full stops or capitals in the set of magnetic letters, so she let him off.



She quickly put on her slippers and went downstairs. She took the framed photograph with her so that she could see what her dad had written. She thought this was quite a clever thing to do, and wondered whether she should give herself another star there and then, but decided there wasn't enough time to stop and do that.

She went out into the yard, and she was just walking down the short path when she heard gruff whispering voices coming from behind the wall – the wall that was behind the shed. She could hear two distinct voices. The first one sounded very stupid and the second one sounded just slightly stupid.

‘This is the house, is it?’ said the very stupid-sounding voice.

‘Yeah, he says the machine’s in a shed just behind this wall,’ said the only slightly stupid-sounding voice.

‘And we just got to smash it up, right?’

‘No, no, no! The bloke with the moustache

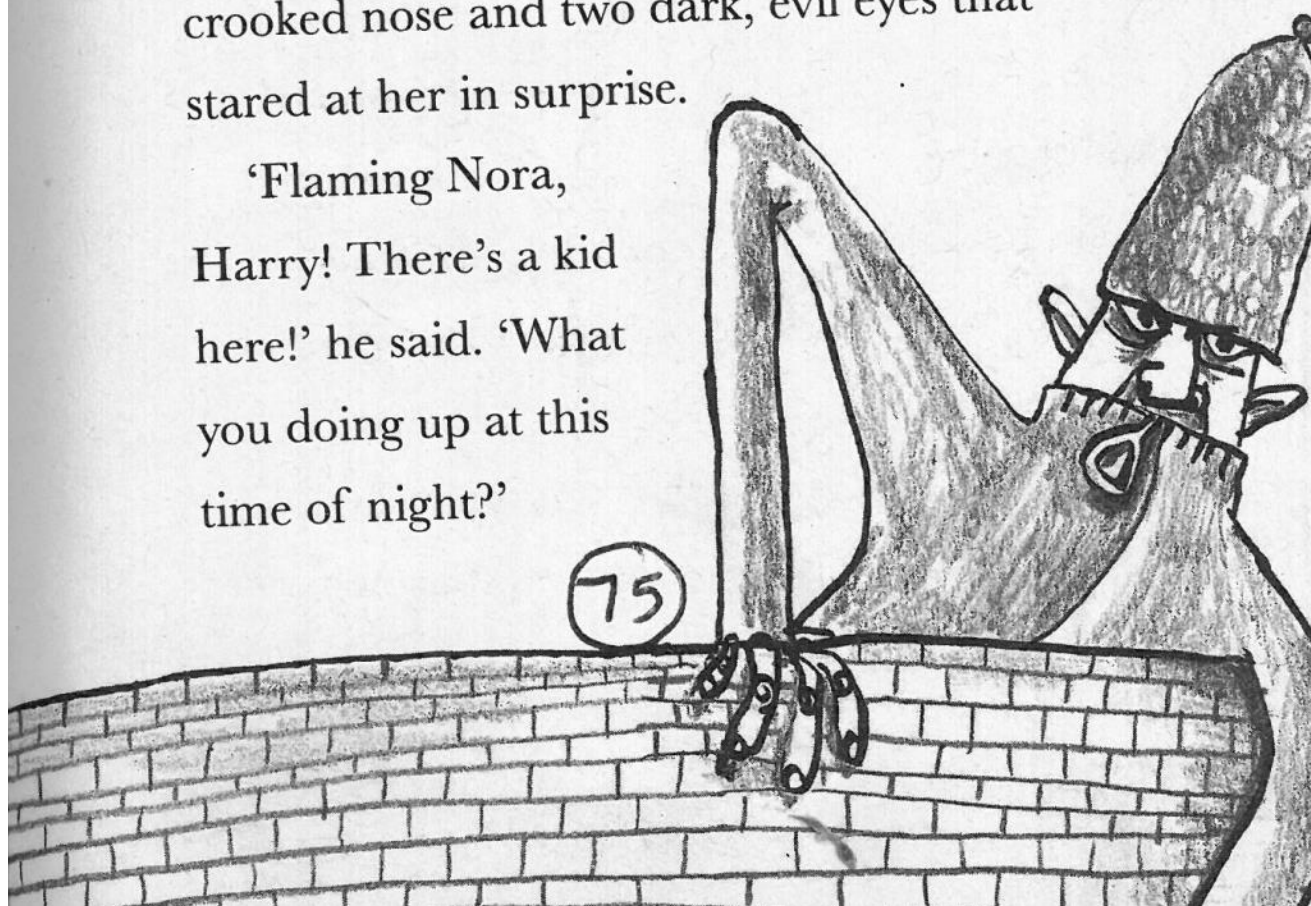


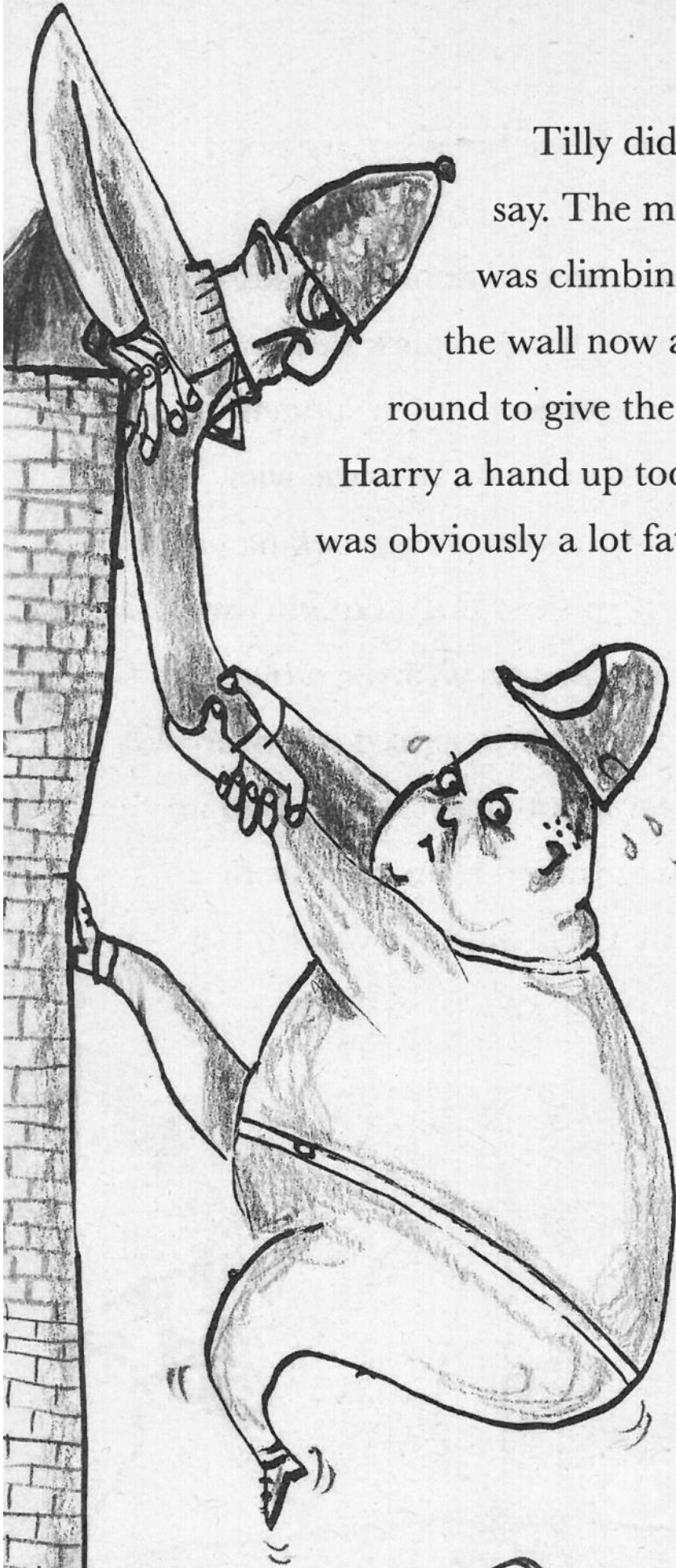
wants it in one piece! If we breaks it, we don't get paid!

'All right, all right, keep your hair on! Right, give us a leg up and I'll have a quick shufti.'

Tilly heard some grunting – then suddenly a rough pair of hands came up over the wall, followed by the face of a very mean-looking man. Although, to be honest, Tilly couldn't see very much of his face: he was wearing a black bobble hat, which he'd pulled right down over his eyebrows, and his black jacket, which had an elasticated collar, was zipped right up over his chin and mouth. All Tilly could see was his big crooked nose and two dark, evil eyes that stared at her in surprise.

'Flaming Nora, Harry! There's a kid here!' he said. 'What you doing up at this time of night?'



A black and white illustration. At the top, a man with a very large, bulbous nose and a grumpy expression is climbing a brick wall. He is wearing a hat and a jacket. Below him, a woman is lifting him up by his arms. She has a surprised or concerned expression, with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth. She is wearing a long-sleeved top and pants. The brick wall is on the left side of the page.

Tilly didn't know what to say. The mean-looking man was climbing right up on to the wall now and was turning round to give the one called Harry a hand up too. But Harry was obviously a lot fatter and heavier

than the mean-looking man because it was proving quite a struggle to lift him up.

Tilly seized her moment. She ran into the shed, shut the door behind her and sat down at the computer.

She knew her dad wanted her to reset a code or something, but she had no idea how to do it.

She looked at the photo in the frame and at the message written on the fridge – and the message had changed!

Everything else was exactly the same: she was still smiling her funny smile with two teeth missing, her mummy was holding her tight and laughing, and her dad was pulling his funny squinty-eyed face – the one he always pulled for photos – *but* the message on the fridge now said:

press f9

screen says reset

press y for yes

type password

mydar lingju lia

Tilly could hear the men on the roof of the shed now. They were clomping about like a pair of elephants.

She pressed F9 on the computer keyboard; it was one of the keys at the top. The screen came up with a message that read RESET PROGRAM? Tilly pressed Y for yes, and the screen came up with a box marked PASSWORD.

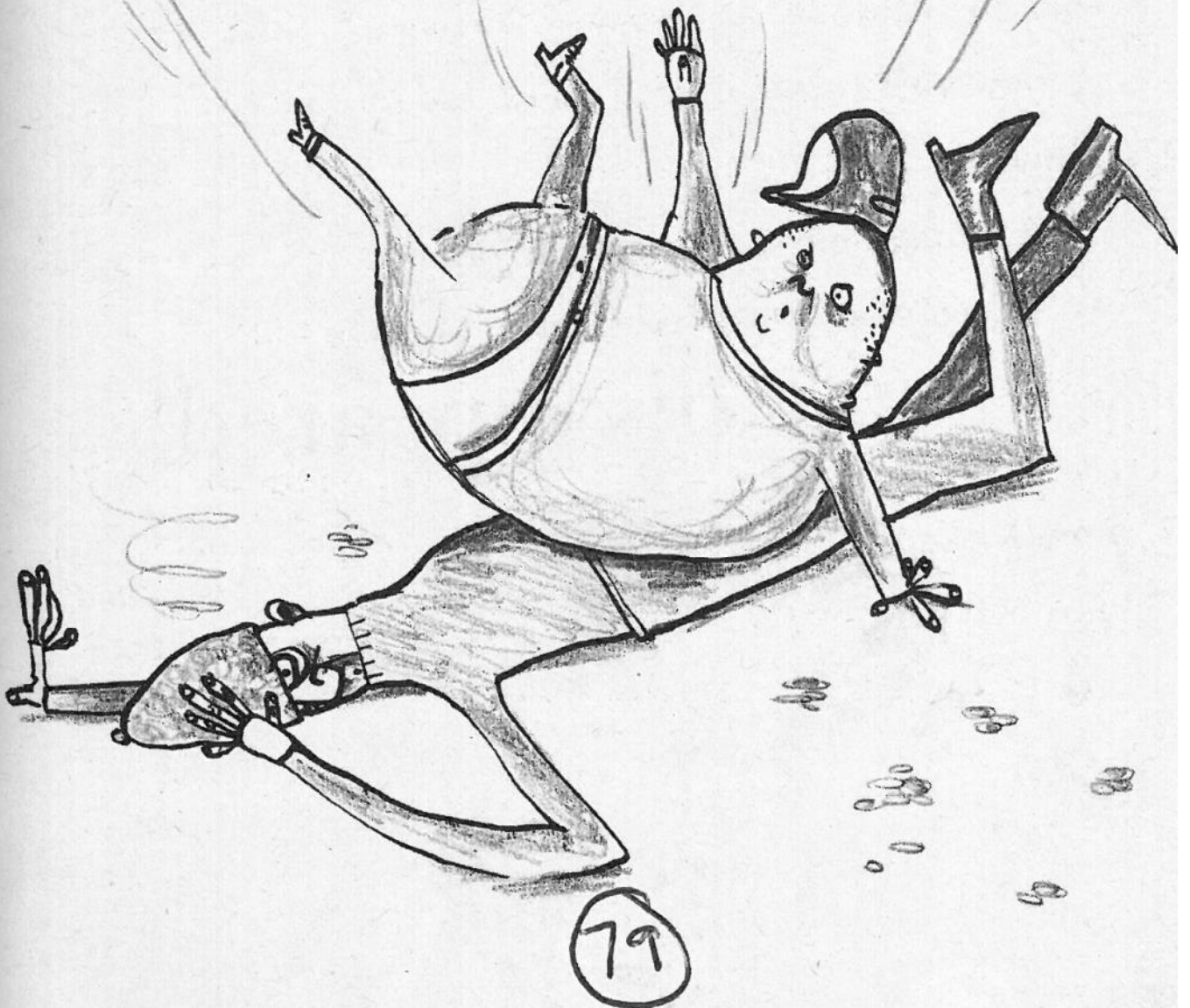
Out of the window she could see one of the men's legs dangling down from the roof.

She typed in the password as carefully as she could: mydar lingju lia. As soon as she put it in, the time machine began to come back to life. Everything started spinning and whirring, lights were flashing and there was a very satisfying electric hum.

Tilly heard a sharp tapping on the window and looked round. The mean-looking man had jumped down from the shed roof and was now staring at her through the glass.



‘What you doing? Leave that alone!’ he shouted through the window, but, unluckily for him, just at that moment Harry, who really was very large indeed, fell off the roof and knocked him to the ground.



Tilly turned back to the computer. Her only escape was to disappear into the past. But where should she go? Somehow she had to stop these two men from stealing the time machine, otherwise her dad might never get home.

Quick as a flash she typed in today's date and her home address, then she set the time for exactly two hours ago.

As she pressed the big green button marked GO she could see the men getting to their feet and heading towards the door of the shed.

She ran into the small metal booth and sat down.

The men burst through the door . . .

But, just as they tried to grab her, she

disappeared!

