

Snowize & Snitch

Highly Effective
Defective Detectives

KAREN BRINER

Holiday House / New York

**For my mother, who read to me;
For my father, whose word inventions inspired me;
And Jim, this is for you.**



Text copyright © 2016 by Karen Briner
Illustrations copyright © 2016 by Holiday House, Inc.
Illustrations by Victor Rivas
All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
Printed and Bound in March 2016 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.
www.holidayhouse.com
First Edition
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Briner, K. H. (Karen Hilarye), 1969-
Title: Snowize & Snitch : highly effective defective
detectives / by Karen Briner.
Other titles: Snowize and Snitch
Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2016] |
Summary: A once-intrepid spy, a dignified rodent, and a girl with a
perplexing past team up to find out who is draining the minds of great
scientists of their knowledge.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015027759 | ISBN 9780823435678 (hardcover)
Subjects: | CYAC: Mystery and detective stories. | Scientists-
Fiction. | Foundlings—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.B777 Sn 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015027759>



Contents

1:	A Message from the Future	1
2:	The Scientist Vanishes	10
3:	The Fear of Fear Itself	17
4:	Hurling Through Darkness	24
5:	Highly Effective Defective Detectives	28
6:	The Treacherous Telegram	39
7:	Venom	47
8:	Dances with Lions	50
9:	Curiouser and Curiouser	64
10:	The Sock and the Snowman	76
11:	Secret Thoughts of a Secret Secretary	86
12:	Avalanche	91
13:	Yoshinobu, Noshiyobu and the Man Who Melted	99
14:	The Name of the Rose	106
15:	The Strangest Lunch	113
16:	Secrets, Lies and Vitmo	125
17:	The Not-so-Great Escape	134
18:	A Begubbled Mind	144
19:	A Love Story, a Terrible Cook and Compound 37d	150
20:	The Deliciousness of Deliciousness	164
21:	A Meeting Underground	170
22:	The Disappearing Detective	178
23:	The MindHarvester™ 005XL	184
24:	The Maliciousness of Maliciousness	195
25:	Something Wicked This Way Comes	203
26:	The Dream Before They Came	212
27:	A Fiendish Fridge	221
28:	A Double Negative	230
29:	The Beginning of the End	240
30:	Into the Fire	249
31:	A Voracious Virus	257
32:	Confessions of a Dangerous Mind	266
33:	The Missing Piece	270
34:	A Message from the Past	277



1

A Message from the Future

The voice came from a wobbly branch at the very top of a eucalyptus tree. It floated down on the summer breeze and said things to Ever that she would rather not have heard on an afternoon like this, when her thoughts had been drifting happily toward the invisible ice cream and freshly picked strawberries that awaited her at home.

“A mind is a terrible thing to lose.” This was the first thing the voice said, and while it was an odd thing to say, it was perfectly true. But even though Ever could not agree more, she didn’t say so. She was too astonished to say anything because the voice, it turned out, belonged to a big, black crow who glided down from the eucalyptus tree and sidled up to her.

“Ever Indigo Nikita Stein, I presume?” the bird asked, quite formally.

Ever was used to being teased about her name. It was always the first point of attack, so she waited for the punch line, for the bird to say something mean and then laugh.

“Are you, or are you not, Ever Indigo Nikita Stein?” asked the crow, sounding a little bit impatient.

“What does it matter?” said Ever, half under her breath and crossing her arms tightly across her chest.

“Is that a rhetorical question?” asked the bird, tilting his head to one side and observing her with his deep black eyes. “Because if it’s not, then permit me to say that you matter to far more people than you can imagine.”

Clearly, this was no ordinary crow. Ever felt unsettled by its penetrating gaze. She had seen plenty of unusual things in her life, and it took a lot to surprise her; but this was absurd. As far as she knew, crows didn’t talk—at least, not like this. According to *The Encyclopedia Britannicus*, which Ever had once read from cover to cover, crows, of the genus *Corvus*, are curious by nature and skilled at imitating a few words here and there. *Individuals in captivity have been taught to count up to seven, with some able to recite in excess of forty sentences*, she recalled. Even so, this bird was off the charts for linguistic skills. It struck her that this talking animal might be a trick, something dreamed up by her clever classmates at the School for Gifted Children of Genius Parents. As she contemplated this possibility, she tugged on the end of a braid and whistled through the slight gap between her teeth. If she fell for it and was spotted talking to a large bird, there’d be no end to the teasing. She stepped up her pace and concentrated on outdistancing the inquisitive creature who was, she noted, slightly clumsy for a bird. He hobbled along with a strange gait, tilting slightly to the right in the most peculiar, lopsided way.

“Wait!” called the crow, trying desperately to keep up with her. “What if I told you that your mother and father are alive and well?” At this, Ever paused. But as much as she wanted to believe the crow’s words, they couldn’t possibly be true.



“I don’t talk to birds,” she retorted. “Especially not to ones that lie. My parents are missing and presumed dead, and I don’t care to hear anything else you have to say.” As she resumed walking, she kicked an empty can into the gutter, trying to hide how deeply shaken she was by the crow’s suggestion.

The whereabouts of her parents was a painful topic, one that she thought about constantly. In fact, she had promised herself she’d quit obsessing about them as soon as she turned thirteen, which would be in ten months, eleven days and twelve hours. She was sure that by then she’d no longer need to wonder what had really happened to them. She’d be able to get on with her life and not dwell on the idea that she was all alone in the world.

“Well,” said the crow, finally catching up to Ever, “you *should* care about what I have to say. Especially concerning your parents.”

Ever came to an abrupt halt. Her green eyes filled with the sadness she’d carried within her for so long—sadness she often covered up with anger. “Why?” she demanded furiously. “Why should I care? What did they ever do for me but saddle me with a humiliating name and then abandon me to the care of a lunatic genius?”

“He’s not a lunatic,” insisted the crow, fixing Ever with a beady black eye.

She gave the bird a sidelong glance. He was a particularly large crow with an intimidating, sharp beak and an even sharper intelligence glittering in his dark, watchful eyes. His sleek feathers shimmered a deep blue-black in the sunlight.

“At least,” added the crow after a moment, “he’s not a *total* lunatic.”

Ever managed a half smile, but it flickered for only a moment and then died.

“Besides, there’s nothing wrong with your name,” the crow said. “It’s a perfectly lovely name.”

“It’s a hard name to live up to,” said Ever.

The crow tilted his head once more. “Let’s see. Ever Indigo Nikita Stein. Miss E.I.N. Stein.” Ever lowered her head in embarrassment as the crow made the connection. “Ah. I see. Miss Einstein. Yes. That could be problematic, being named after such a famous and brilliant scientist. Your parents obviously had high hopes for you.”

“Well, if they saw me now, I’m sure they’d be disappointed,” said Ever. “All I am is a magnet for bad luck.”

Ever suspected the only reason she’d been accepted to the elite School for Gifted Children of Genius Parents was because of the Doc, her guardian. He was the genius—a little crazy perhaps, but still a genius—and she was certainly not his child. It was clear to Ever and all of her teachers that she didn’t belong there. The school accepted only the most brilliant children from around the world who then relocated to its exclusive address in the city of Cape Town, South Africa, at the very bottom of the very tip of Africa. Ever felt she couldn’t compete with so much brilliance. Her classmates all scored a hundred and ten percent on their tests—they never even missed bonus questions—while she lagged way behind in the eighties.

She was certain it was only a matter of time before the school threw her out, but the Doc always assured her that they would never have the gall to do that. “They’d have to get past me,” he’d say with a wink and a smile, “and no one gets past the legendary Doctor Professor David Ezratty.”

Ever used to find those words comforting, but lately she’d started to cringe when he said them. This was because she’d recently discovered that the Doc was considered

more of a joke than a legend at the school. Both teachers and classmates called him “Scatty Batty Ezratty” behind her back.

The crow interrupted her thoughts. “Take it from me,” he said, seeming to read her mind. “Your Batty Ezratty is actually a remarkable genius and inventor.”

“Well, everyone else thinks he’s a weirdo and a loser, and I’m tired of defending him,” said Ever. “I’m tired of being stuck with him.” She immediately felt bad for saying that. After all, if she didn’t have the kindly inventor to look after her, she really *would* be quite alone in the world. The Doc had taken her in without hesitation when he’d found her, at age three, abandoned on his doorstep with a note saying “Help!” pinned to her coat.

“Wait a minute!” said Ever, suddenly aware that against her best intentions she’d struck up a conversation with the odd bird. “Why am I having this conversation with a complete stranger?” She stared hard at the crow.

“I’m not so complete,” said the crow sheepishly. “If you look carefully, you’ll see that I have a toe missing.” Ever noticed that this was true. The crow’s middle toe on his right foot was indeed missing. Regardless, Ever was growing impatient.

“Shouldn’t you be collecting shiny objects or picking at something dead on the side of the road?” she asked.

The bird looked slightly insulted. “Well!” he huffed. “It seems I ought to get straight to the point. I’ve come from the future to bring you a message.”

Ever laughed in disbelief. “A message? From the future? That’s a good one.” Now she couldn’t stop smiling. It was suddenly obvious that the Doc had sent the bird as a joke. Her smile broadened, and she automatically raised her hand to her mouth to hide the gap between her teeth. The Doc had tried everything in his power to convince her

that her smile was charming and gave her character, but the kids at Ever's school weren't so kind.

"Mind the gap, Einstein," they'd say whenever she grinned. Ever wished they'd never taken that school trip to London, where her classmates mimicked the underground train system's famous refrain until she vowed to never show her teeth again.

The crow stretched his wings behind his back and cracked his neck, and Ever suddenly grew uneasy. "Listen up and listen well, Ever," the crow said. "When you get home, things will have changed. The Doc will not be there, and it's imperative that you do not panic."

"Something's happened?" asked Ever, her unease turning into dread. The crow nodded solemnly. "What?" she asked cautiously.

"Things," replied the crow. "I cannot say exactly what things have happened. But one thing is for certain: For all intents and purposes, the Doc has disappeared, and you are essentially on your own. That is the first part of the message that I was sent to deliver forthwith."

Now Ever was genuinely alarmed. The Doc was always using the word *forthwith*. His sentences were generously sprinkled with it and Ever often found the word popping out of her own mouth when she least expected it. Like now.

"You will tell me what you have done to Doctor Professor *forthwith*!" Ever cried.

The crow looked confused. "But I don't know any Doctor Professor Forthwith."

"Don't twist my words or play games!" Ever shouted, surprised by her rising anger and the deep concern she felt at the thought of her guardian in danger.

"Easy now," said the crow. "I'm on your side. It's my task to provide you with information that will enable you

to make the right choices. Already it's too late for some poor souls, but you might be able to save the rest. Like the detectives, for instance. You need their help, but ultimately you have to save them."

A stream of questions tumbled out of Ever's mouth, colliding with each other. "But I don't know any detectives. And what must I save them from? How am I supposed to—"

The crow shook his head, silencing her. "Sorry, no questions. I'm running out of time."

It was then that she noticed the bird appeared to be sweating. Great beads of moisture were slowly rolling off his back and wings. It was all too much for Ever to absorb. Her head started to hurt.

"I know it's confusing. I would be confused, too, if I were you," said the crow, "but I'm afraid I have to go before I perish." He flapped his wings once and a shower of droplets fell to the ground, collecting in a puddle.

"Wait," said Ever, still staring at the drops on the ground. "Are you sweating?" Curiosity always got the better of her, often landing her in trouble. "I didn't know that birds sweat."

The crow shook his head. "I can't stay to explain. It's a side effect of traveling through time. I have to leave. Before I fall apart."

Ever felt butterflies in her stomach, and her heart began to race.

"There's more," said the crow, starting to look a little panicky himself as he tried to recall the rest of the message. "Now that the Doc has disappeared, the only three humans you can trust are Harry Snowize, Deodora Miffingpin and . . . yourself."

Besides herself, Ever had never heard of these people.

The crow added gravely, "And I almost forgot: the

growling box. Remember the box won't bite you. It will save your life. Guard it with your soul. Protect it with your heart. Do not, I repeat, do not, not let it fall into the wrong hands."

"A box?" asked Ever. "What box? What growl? What wrong hands?"

"Sorry," said the crow with a voice that sounded like he was speaking underwater. "Gotta go."

Ever gasped as the crow disappeared in a melting sort of way, until all that remained was a puddle of clear liquid.

Then she started running.



2

The Scientist Vanishes

Ever pumped her arms and legs harder and sprinted faster and faster. The crow's words echoed and bumped around inside her head, making her feel sick and dizzy, until the inevitable happened and her sandal caught itself on the uneven paving. She came crashing down with a sickening smack.

Both her knees were scraped and bruised. Despite the burning pain, she pulled herself up. When she tried to sprint again, her legs felt like jelly and buckled beneath her. Still, she persevered, fueled by a desire to protect the Doc from an unnamed danger.

As she ran, her head spun with the confusing words she'd just heard: Her parents might be alive; her guardian had disappeared; something about a growling box and saving detectives. Could she trust a highly articulate bird with a message from the future who had melted before her eyes? Could she even trust her own eyes?

By the time she arrived home, she was wondering whether she'd imagined the whole thing. Completely out of breath and close to tears, she pushed the front door open and stumbled inside.

“Doc? Doctor Professor!” she called, trying to catch her breath as she scanned the entrance hall. “Doc? Are you here?”

There was no response. The house was unusually silent. Ever fought back the tears that had started to well up in her eyes. She never cried, that was her rule. Tears were a sign of weakness, and signs of weakness could give your enemy the upper hand. Usually, her enemies were a group of spiteful classmates who enjoyed making her life miserable. But right now she wasn’t sure whom or what she was up against.

She tried to recall the bird’s message, but it had been so jumbled she could hardly remember it. It felt like exam time at school when, as soon as the questions were handed out, she froze. Her mind went blank and even though she’d studied hard, she couldn’t remember a thing. All she could do was watch as her genius classmates scribbled down perfect answers in record time and took home evidence of their brilliance to their delighted parents.

Ever had only two memories of her parents. One was a warm and fuzzy memory of the three of them laughing together at something she’d done. She couldn’t remember their faces. There was just a sense of a man with a delightful smile and a woman who smelled of cinnamon and roses, both of whom loved her very much.

The other memory she tried to push from her mind whenever it crept up on her. It was one of fear and panic: her parents speaking in hushed tones as she was bundled into a coat and then kissed good-bye. Her mother fighting tears as she hastily pinned a note on Ever’s coat. Then her mother and father embracing as if they might never see each other again.

“Go,” her mother had whispered. “Go before we change our minds. Go now, so at least she’ll be spared.”

Tears were still streaming down her mother’s face and her father moved away reluctantly, his eyes deeply troubled. He buckled Ever into their old-fashioned car, a blue VW beetle painted with daisies, and after a rushed journey through the night, they stopped outside a peculiar house. Her father hugged her tightly and promised that they would come back for her when it was safe. She was left standing on a doorstep.

That was all Ever remembered, and now her only remaining guardian might be gone, too.

“Doctor Professor?” Ever called out again, and her voice started to tremble. He was nowhere to be seen.

A dull, monotonous voice interrupted her panicked thoughts. “Good afternoon, Einstein,” said Melschman, sounding incredibly bored. “Would you care for a three-day-old sandwich? Or perhaps a bowl of invisible ice cream of indeterminate flavor?”

Melschman was one of the Doc’s more unfortunate inventions, a computerized fridge with robotic arms and legs, and a severe attitude problem.

“Oh, Melschman,” said Ever. “Not now. I don’t have time for you. I need to find the Doc.”

“Perhaps,” droned Melschman, “I could interest you in some pickled fish that has been in my freezer section for over a year and has turned a lovely shade of malachite.” Melschman swung his freezer door open, reached inside with his robot arm and pulled out the fish in question.

“No thanks. Not hungry,” said Ever, ducking just in time as the greenish fish flew over her head and hit the wall with a loud crack.

Ever sighed as she crawled under the table for cover. This was not the first time Melschman had reacted vio-

lently when she'd refused one of his offerings. Ducking and diving out of his way was something she now did quite reflexively. She often complained to the Doc that Melschman was dangerous and might, accidentally-on-purpose, fatally injure them one day. But the Doc had a soft spot for Melschman and always defended his wayward invention.

Moving ever so slowly, she reached up to pull a white napkin from the table and waved it in surrender.

"Okay, Einstein," said Melschman in a sulky voice. "You can come out now."

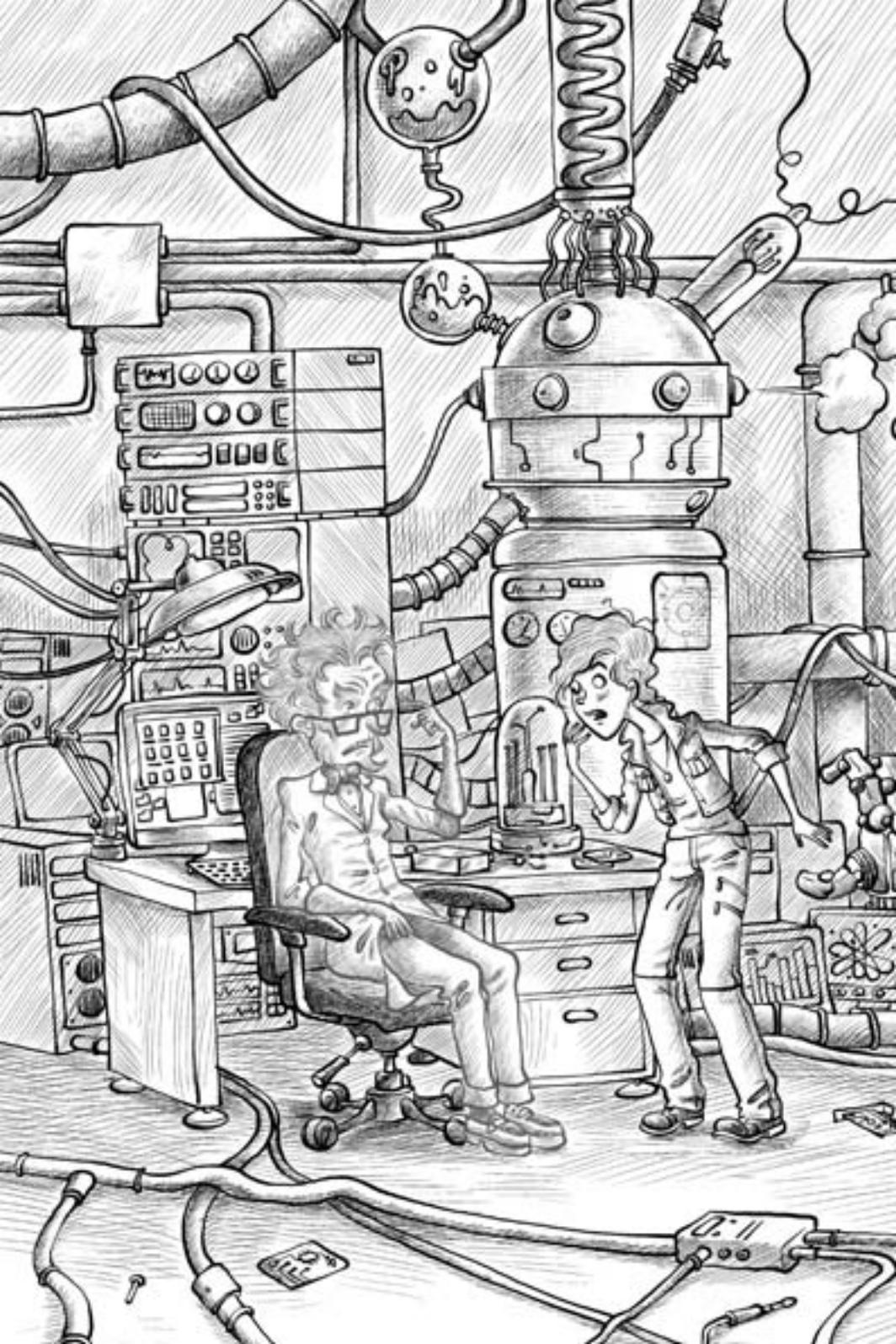
"I need to know where the Doc is. I think he's in danger. Have you seen him, Melschman?" She cautiously emerged from her hiding place.

"The Doc was last seen in his laboratory working on Project VOV, his ingenious plan for world peace, where I served him a plate of frozen boiled cabbage, which he ate with surprising gusto. . . ." She didn't stay to hear the rest.

The laboratory was where the Doc went to think and invent. It was fifty feet underground, accessible by either a wobbly spiral staircase or an elevator. Ever preferred the staircase. She was down three dizzying twists of it when Melschman called after her.

"And then the Doc disappeared. Just like that. In the middle of a mouthful of frozen cabbage." Ever stopped dead in her tracks. Melschman was a big pain in the aorta, as the Doc liked to say, but he never lied. With increasing dread she made her way downstairs.

The laboratory door was sealed, so she placed her thumb on the fingerprint recognition pad and waited as several locks automatically unlatched themselves. The heavy wooden door swung open with an eerie creak. Her heart danced wildly. The crow was wrong!



There sat the Doc, as plain as day, behind his desk. He was staring down at a small silver box. His shock of wild, white hair stuck out in numerous directions, making him look a lot like Albert Einstein, the scientist he so admired. The Doc had Einstein's unruly eyebrows, and he ran a hand over his forehead to smooth them out.

"Doctor Professor!" shouted Ever with delight.

The Doc turned toward her and smiled sadly. "I'm so sorry, Ever," he said. "Sorry that things had to happen this way. I was trying to protect *you*. Now it's I who needs your help. They're after me. They want what is most precious to me." At this he nervously tapped his temple with his fingertip. Ever raced up to her guardian and flung her arms around him, only to discover that her hands went right through him.

"This is just a prerecorded holographic message," said the hologram of the Doc. "If you are watching this, then you have already received a message from a big, black crow. There is one more piece of information you need, one that the crow couldn't tell you because I knew you would never believe it unless you heard it from my lips."

"What is it?" asked Ever, forgetting that the hologram could neither hear nor see her. It was as if the Doc had anticipated this question, for his hologram paused and took in a deep breath.

"You have to go, Ever. You must depart forthwith! Remember the tunnel? You have to go through it! You *must* go through it. It's up to you entirely to save the detectives. And listen to everything the crow told you. It's important. Especially the bit about the growling box. You'll need it. It will save you. It may save us all."

Ever vaguely noted that he was pointing to a small silver object on his desk. "But you told me never to go near

the tunnel door. You made me promise!” cried Ever, feeling that familiar sense of panic rising.

The hologram didn’t respond. The image of the professor flickered for an instant and then was gone. Never had Ever felt more lost or alone in her life.



3

The Fear of Fear Itself

DANGER!
NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER
TOUCH OR OPEN THIS DOOR!
(EVER!)

Ever stared at the big red letters engraved on the door to the Doc's secret escape tunnel. He'd warned her repeatedly not to go near it. Ever, who was generally frightened of the unknown, had obeyed without question. Now as she reached out to touch it, every bone in her body told her not to open the door.

"What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?" she wondered out loud, pulling her hand back as if she'd touched a searing hot plate.

"Take me with you," came the reply. Ever whirled around, startled to see Melschman standing behind her. He'd unplugged himself from his wall socket and had taken the elevator down.

"I can't," said Ever. "You're a fridge. You can only last a few hours on your battery. And you're big and bulky, and I never know when you're going to attack me next."

"I could feed you," said Melschman in a plaintive tone.

“You’d have a great supply of invisible ice cream. Besides, I’m the only family you’ve got left now.”

Ever paused for a moment. She’d never thought of it like that before. She’d always been so fixated on her missing parents that she never considered that she, the Doc, and Melschman were, in the strangest of ways, a family. Even if Melschman regularly threw food at her and was a great big pain in the aorta, she knew that she would miss him if he weren’t around.

“Please, take me with you,” Melschman begged. A drop of water dripped from his water dispenser and splashed to the floor.

“You’re . . . crying,” said Ever, surprised. This had happened only once before, when the Doc had threatened to dismantle Melschman and reprogram him with a better attitude.

“No, I’m not,” Melschman replied, a little too quickly. “It’s just a leak. I’ve sprung a leak.” And more drops of water began to fall. “I don’t want to be left alone,” he added.

“Don’t worry,” said Ever. “I’ll come back for you. I promise.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Those were the last words she’d heard her father say. And he’d never come back for her.

Every year, on her birthday, she would pack a small suitcase and sit outside on the pavement, convinced this was the year her parents would return. She would wait until the sun sank behind the great oak tree and the moon rose above the small hill. Then the Doc, who had been keeping an eye on her all day, would come out, take her by the hand and gently lead her back inside.

On the table, there would be a birthday cake with candles and her name on it. There were also numerous wrapped presents. But Ever didn’t want cake or presents. She wanted her parents. The Doc seemed to know this, so

he, Melschman and Ever would sit in silence, staring at the cake.

“It’s unnatural,” Melschman would eventually say. “No child should be able to resist cake.”

On her ninth birthday, while they all sat there, staring once again at the cake, the Doc cleared his throat and spoke solemnly. “Ever, they’re not coming back.”

“Never ever, Ever,” added Melschman.

“They are!” she insisted. The Doc shook his head. He pulled at his unruly eyebrows. This was difficult news he had to share.

“I’ve had word. They were . . . their sailboat was—was sucked down by a whirlpool off the coast of Sicily. Your parents are officially missing, presumed dead.”

Ever could not move. She found it hard to breathe. It was as if all her energy had been drained right out of her, all in one go.

“According to my built-in dictionary, a whirlpool is like a tornado in water,” said Melschman in his robotic monotone, trying to be helpful.

Ever and the Doc ignored him as a horrible silence filled the room. Melschman cleared his throat. He didn’t like awkward silences, so he filled them by making ice cubes as noisily as he could. Ever barely noticed. It was as if her world had just been split in two. There was her life before hearing this terrible news, and there would be her life after it. It was a defining moment, one that would haunt her forever.

“Your father would have wanted you to have this,” the Doc said, once her silence became too hard to bear. “He gave it to me in case things didn’t work out. It belonged to your mother.”

In his palm the Doc held a small locket on a silver chain. He handed it to Ever and she carefully opened it. On one side was a grainy black-and-white picture of her

parents on their wedding day; on the other was a picture of Ever, age two. She wordlessly allowed the Doc to place the locket around her neck. Then he picked her up and hugged her for the longest time, while she cried until she could cry no more and finally fell asleep in his arms.

That was the last time she had allowed herself to cry. She had worn the locket ever since that day and reached for it whenever she felt nervous. It offered her comfort, to be able to touch something that had once been close to her mother's skin. When she pressed it against her cheek, she could smell just the slightest hint of cinnamon and roses.

Ever clutched the locket now as she stared from the escape-tunnel door to Melschman, and back again. "The Doc needs my help," she said. "I have to do this. And I have to do it alone."

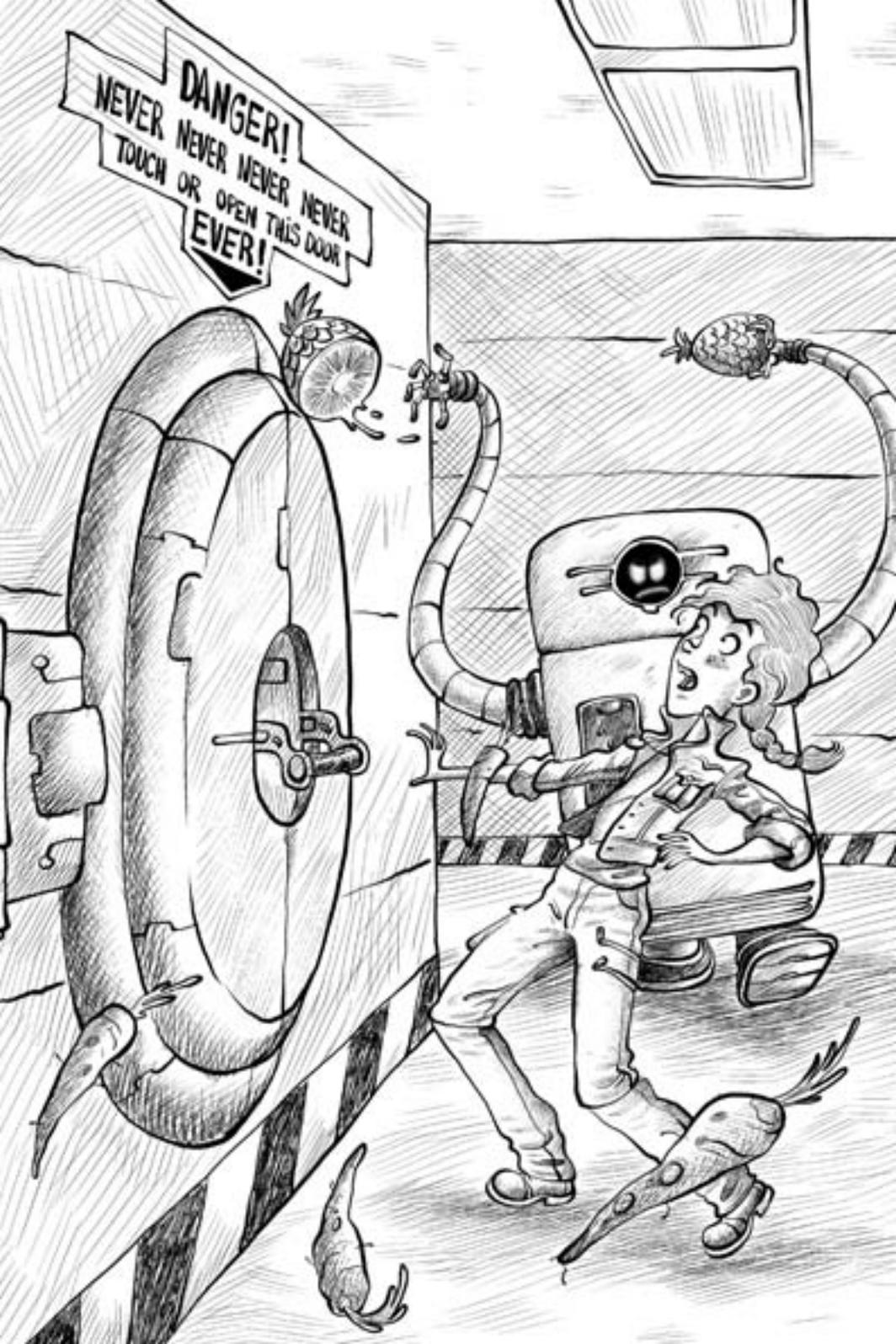
"So, this is the thanks I get," snapped Melschman, folding his arms and stomping his feet in a clunking way befitting an indignant robot fridge.

Ever took a deep breath and held the silver locket briefly against her cheek, hoping it might give her courage. Then she took an even deeper breath, but still she couldn't do it. She could not open the door. Her legs trembled with fear, and a sense of terrible foreboding paralyzed her entire body.

Just then a packet of moldy carrots whizzed past her ear and slammed against the forbidden door, followed by an eggplant and a prickly pineapple at extremely high speed.

"I knew you couldn't do it," said Melschman. "You don't have it in you, Ever. They should have called you 'Never.' Because there are so many things you'll never have the guts to do."

"That's not true," said Ever, knowing deep down inside how painfully true it was. She was afraid of a growing list of things, from heights and depths to small, dark



spaces. She was also deeply afraid that somehow everything was all her fault. This was her darkest fear, that she was a magnet for bad luck. First her parents had met with misfortune, and now, her guardian.

“Luckily for the Doc,” said Melschman, “I’m giving you no choice in this matter. Here’s your passport,” he said, flinging a pocket-sized booklet toward her like a Frisbee so that Ever could catch it. “I was storing it next to the Limburger cheese. Hope it doesn’t smell too bad.”

“Why would I need a passport?” asked Ever, wrinkling her nose in disgust as the smell of fetid socks filled her nostrils. Limburger cheese was the Doc’s favorite. He’d once explained how it’s fermented with the same bacterium that causes foot odor.

“What if you land up in Ouagadougou? Or on the moon? Travel these days is prohibitive without the correct documents, Ever,” Melschman said loftily. “I don’t know how that magic wormhole works, but I never once saw the Doc go through that door without his passport. He told me it takes you there, but it cannot bring you back.”

This new information made Ever queasy and even more reluctant to turn the door handle. But Melschman, true to his word, was not going to let her disobey the Doc’s instructions.

In each of his robot hands he held up four eggs, one between each of his metal fingers. When it came to egg throwing, Melschman could turn an egg into a lethal weapon, and he never missed.

The first one hit her on the back of her head and leaked cold, slimy egg white down the back of her neck. Ever shivered. Then, without further hesitation, she flung open the door to the forbidden tunnel and took a terrified leap of faith.

She was sucked into a dark void where she hovered

in the air, as if suspended in a strong magnetic field. Her body felt both weightless and heavy at the same time.

“Force field initiating,” said a computerized voice. “Prepare for hurtling.”

The last thing she heard, before her body was propelled headlong at incredible velocity, was the sound of eggs smashing against the closed door. Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. By the time the rest hit, she was already several miles away, traveling at a dizzying speed.