



**AGENTS
OF THE WILD**

OPERATION HONEYHUNT

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PROLOGUE



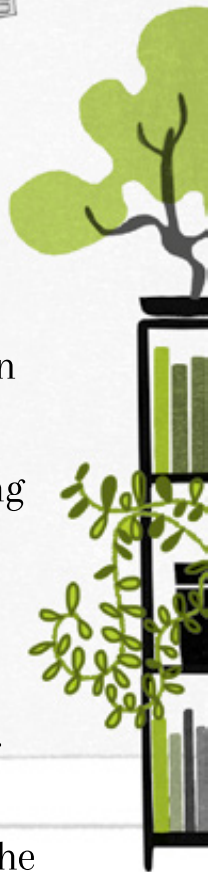


Agnes Gamble could wait no longer. Eight years was time enough to live without a pet, especially for someone who loved animals as much as her. She didn't mind what kind of animal it was – furry or scaly, winged or eight-legged – she just wanted an animal to care for, a companion that she could call her own.

For her birthday this year she was going to ask – no, wait, DEMAND – that her wishes be met. She wouldn't accept any more excuses from her uncle Douglas.

“Pets devalue property,” he always said. “It's a simple fact.”

“It's a simple fact that nothing else in the world would make me happier!” Agnes would tell him, before running up to her bedroom.





Douglas didn't understand her. How could he? He was an estate agent; all he knew about were property taxes, housing bubbles, off-street parking and something called stamp duty. Agnes's father had once told her that Douglas Brick wasn't even her proper uncle, but actually just her great-second-cousin-once-removed-and-two-put-back-again. Agnes liked to think of him simply as: all she had. It was easier that way.

In her bedroom, beside the scarce green-winged orchid she'd been trying to rehabilitate after a recent frost, there was a photo of Agnes's parents: Ranulph and Azalea Gamble.

"Not the famous botanists?!" I hear you cry.
Well, yes, actually. Those exact ones.
"The ones who were fatally crushed by



falling Bunya pine cones during a rare-flower-collecting trip to Australia?"

Indeed.

(Agnes was always surprised how many of the horrible details everyone seemed to know.)

Every time she looked at the photo of her parents, Agnes longed to be near them again; to hear the sound of her dad practising his rare-bird calls around the house; to smell the scent of her mum's orchid-and-frogspawn perfume in the hallway or to feel the press of their four arms around her, hugging her tight...

...But the wild had taken them; and now Agnes had been left in a big, grey city with nothing but a flourishing window box to remind her of who she really was.

CHAPTER ONE



It was on a sunny afternoon, on her way home from school, that Agnes took a detour through her favourite place in the city: the park. She'd been keeping an eye on a new

family of squirrels who'd moved into the third sycamore along from the pond, and was becoming quite concerned.

“Maybe you should draw a map,” she muttered, squatting down beneath an oak tree to gather fallen acorns. “Then you wouldn't forget where you'd stashed them.”

A skinny little squirrel with cinnamon-coloured fur came scurrying down the trunk. Its eyes were wide and it was looking rather flustered. It stared at Agnes for a long moment before making a chirpy-squeak sound. Agnes knew it couldn't understand her, but she imagined it might be saying, “I'm a squirrel. I can't draw.”

It was a good point. She sighed and placed the acorns in a bright green handkerchief, which she tied in a bow at the

top. Then she pulled her small “Field Notes” journal – in which she recorded her observations about the natural world – out of her top pocket and jotted down: *pencils for squirrels*. She’d add it to her list of “things to invent to make the world a better place”.

“I’m leaving these here,” she told the squirrel anyway, stretching up to the lowest branch of the tree and placing the handkerchief package on top. She fished a bicycle reflector out of her school bag (Uncle Douglas didn’t ride his bike; he wouldn’t miss it) and fastened it around the bark. “Just look out for the light; it should be easy to spot.”

The squirrel flicked its tail and dashed up the tree. Agnes hoped that it would be curious enough to investigate her handkerchief and find the acorns inside.

As she turned back to the path, a pair of blacker-than-night eyes peeped out at her from the darkness of a nearby bush. They had been observing her very closely...

Blissfully unaware that someone was watching her, Agnes stopped by the pond and shielded the sun from her eyes as she looked out over the water. The resident Brecon Buff geese were swimming under the bridge, ruffling their pale brown feathers as they scooped leafy pondweed into their pink bills.

Agnes looked for the smallest goose in the flock. She usually found him sitting on his own on the bankside, nesting in a huff.

“Kenneth,” Agnes called, cupping her hands around her mouth, “I’ve got your favourite!”







Suddenly, there was a splash and a loud honk and a small goose came charging across the water towards Agnes. The other geese noticed her too, and came swimming closer.

“There you are,” Agnes said as Kenneth waddled up to her. He shut his deep brown eyes as Agnes stroked his soft head. She’d named him Kenneth because on the day she’d met him, he’d tried to eat her copy of *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. Agnes hadn’t been able to understand why he was so hungry at first – after all, there was plenty of bread around for all the geese to eat.

Determined to find out what was wrong, Agnes had searched through one of her parents' very large and very dusty books on common waterfowl and learned that bread wasn't really good for geese at all. It was like fast food; it filled geese up without giving them the nutrients they needed.

So now, Agnes reached into her pocket and retrieved a paper bag filled with her own special blend of oats, seeds, lentils and greens. She'd spent weeks perfecting the recipe to make sure it was extra tasty. "There's sunflower seeds in this batch," she said. "Here you go."

The blacker-than-night eyes watching Agnes blinked. *Incredible*. This little girl – with no proper training – had identified the dietary needs of a flock of geese and designed a feed mix to suit them.

Well, with those parents of course, was it any wonder? *What pedigree!* The girl obviously had special skills, skills that up until now had gone unnoticed by the rest of the world.

“I’m home!” Agnes shouted, returning to her twenty-sixth-floor flat.

“That’s nice, Agnes,” Uncle Douglas called to her from the kitchen. Agnes peered through the doorway at him. He was sitting at their dining table, hunched over his laptop, all attention focused on the screen. Behind him, Agnes noticed a pot of pasta about to over-boil on the stove, like always.

She shook her head and left Douglas to it, then trudged across the hall to her room. When she opened her door, she froze.

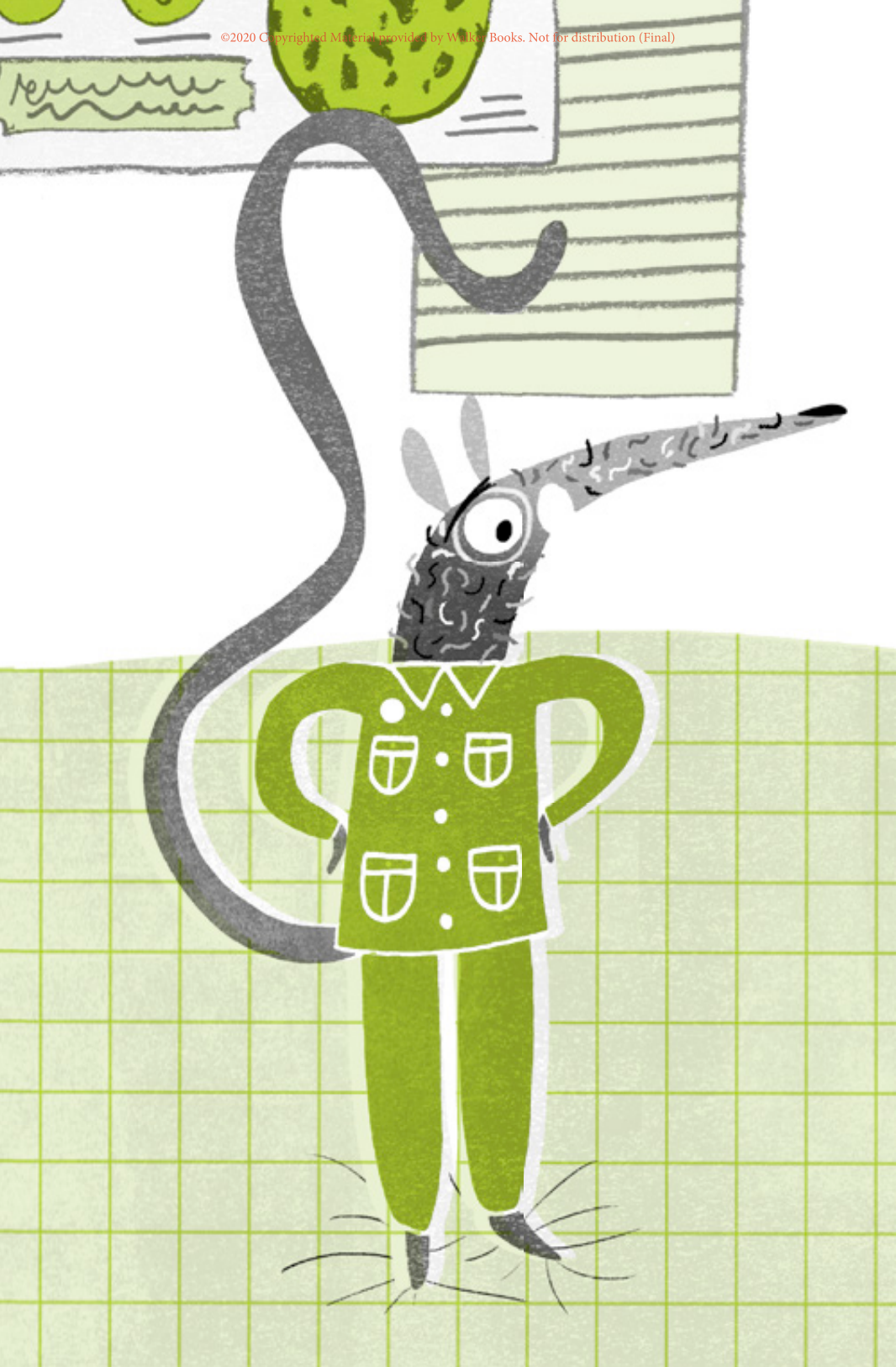
There was a *something* on her bed.



It was about the size of a large hamster, but it had a long tail and small ears and its body was covered in shiny fur that changed colour from fire-orange on its head, to jet black everywhere else. Its two blacker-than-night eyes were ringed in snow-white hair.

It blinked at Agnes and rolled onto its hind legs; and that's when Agnes noticed the most curious thing about it – it was wearing a tiny safari uniform: sand-beige, perfectly ironed and festooned with pockets.

“Er ... hello,” Agnes managed, venturing slowly in and shutting the door quietly behind her. If Douglas saw she had an animal in her room, he'd go crazy. She took a deep breath, trying to control her shock. Studying the animal's features, she made an educated guess. “Are you a possum?”



The creature's arms flew to its hips as it puffed out its chest. "A POSSUM?" it exclaimed.

Agnes fell back against her bedroom door. The furry not-a-possum creature could speak? She didn't understand how it was possible... Was it some kind of trick? She stepped closer, her heart thudding like a train.

"I, *uneducated one*, am an ELEPHANT shrew, species *Rhynchocyon petersi*."

Agnes stumbled to repeat the phrase. "*Rin-cho-sion...*"

"Never mind, girl. Never mind," the elephant shrew said. "There's no time for introductions." He pointed to a badge pinned to the lapel of his safari shirt. "I'm a field agent for **SPEARS**, and I need you to come with me, now."