





For John and Joan
J.B.

For my little Arvo, at three months,
three weeks and one day old
A.L.

A special thanks to design whizz Jamie Hammond

First published 2021 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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This book has been typeset in Arapey

Printed and bound in China

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-8847-3

www.walker.co.uk





AGENTS OF THE WILD

OPERATION SANDWHISKERS

JENNIFER BELL & ALICE LICKENS



PROLOGUE



Walking through the park, Agnes Gamble slipped her trusty “Field Notes” journal out of her pocket, making sure to keep it hidden from her uncle Douglas. If he ever read it, she would have some serious explaining to do. The journal contained her observations about the natural world, as well as reports of her top-secret missions for **SPEARS** – the Society for the Protection of Endangered and Awesomely Rare Species.

Working for an undercover organization was tricky when you were eight years old. Agnes still had to attend school,



do her homework and keep her uncle happy by helping with the chores around their flat. What Douglas *didn't* know, was that Agnes spent the rest of her time fighting to protect the planet's wildlife as a highly skilled **SPEARS** agent.



Now, I know what you're thinking:

"An eight-year-old secret agent?

That's preposterous!"

But it's true. In fact, evidence of Agnes's adventures could be found all over the pages of her journal. There were crumbs of dried mud remaining from the time she'd crash-landed in the Atlantic

Forest in search of a lost bee; there were water stains picked up during an Antarctic blizzard while trying to save a colony of brainwashed penguins; *and* there were squid-ink splatters, panda-drool marks, feathers



from a turkey and hairs from a hare, all left over from her training.

On the back cover there was even a sticky fried-banana paw print belonging to Agnes's partner, Agent Attenborough – the bravest and most sensible elephant shrew she'd ever met. (Truthfully, Attie was the *only* elephant shrew Agnes had ever met, but she was fairly confident he was the bravest and most sensible of all.)

“Hurry up, Agnes,” Douglas called, ahead. “I can see the exit.”

Agnes gazed across the park. In the sunshine, the grass was a dazzling green. “Can't we stay a little longer? It's perfect weather for birdwatching. I've already spotted two hawfinches and I heard a nightingale a moment ago.”



Douglas snorted. “A nightingale? That’s all I need! Birdsong gives me a headache – you know that.”

With a sigh, Agnes returned her journal to her pocket and trudged on. It was hard to believe she was even distantly related to Douglas, especially since her late parents, the famous botanists Ranulph and Azalea Gamble, had been secret **SPEARS** agents too.

Agnes wondered whether they’d also kept “Field Notes” journals. She imagined her father’s would have been as neat and carefully labelled as the drawers of his rare-seed collection; her mother’s would probably have been filled with colourful botanical drawings similar to the tapioca-leaf wallpaper she’d designed for Agnes’s bedroom.

Agnes treasured her memories of them and wished she knew more about their time as **SPEARS** agents. If she could only learn what missions they'd been sent on or who their animal partners had been, it might make them feel closer.



CHAPTER ONE



With a watering-can gripped tightly in one hand, Agnes opened her bedroom window and braced herself against the wind. Living twenty-six floors up meant that tending to the plants in her window box was often a blustery affair. She inspected the buds on her scarlet geraniums, which all seemed healthy, and then poked a finger into the soil to check



how moist it was. Over-watering could be as harmful as under-watering, her parents had taught her.

In the distance, she spotted a bird flying strangely. It seemed to be circling the other skyscrapers in the city and peering through their windows like it was searching for something inside. The bird was bigger

than a heron, but too far away to see clearly. Curious, Agnes put her watering-can down and ran to the hidden compartment at the back of her wardrobe, where she stored any equipment she had on loan from **SPEARS**. She fetched a small wooden case with brass hinges and opened it up. Inside was a long cylindrical instrument accompanied by a set of lenses. Some of them were black and shiny; others had a strange yellow glow around the rims.



The device was called an aviascope and, like all **SPEARS** technology, it was inspired by the science of nature – in this case, the extraordinary eyesight of birds.

Each lens allowed Agnes to view the world in a different way. She equipped the aviascope with the “eagle” lens and lifted it to her eye.

Eagles could see four to five times as far as humans, so Agnes could use the device to inspect something like a starling’s nest on a roof ten streets away. She shifted the aviascope slowly across the skyline and caught sight of the mystery bird whizzing past another tower block. It had a long neck, pinkish-white feathers and a curved black bill.

Agnes frowned. Based on the bird’s size and colouring, there was only one species it could possibly be: a lesser flamingo.



But that didn't make sense. Lesser flamingos lived in Africa and India, so what was the bird doing *here*?

Before she could investigate further, she felt her trouser pocket vibrating and remembered she'd stuffed her chromaphone in there. Another piece of **SPEARS** technology, it looked like a small pebble with an undulating rainbow-coloured surface, like the skin of a Caribbean reef squid – its animal inspiration. Using a chromaphone was the securest way for **SPEARS** agents to communicate long-distance. Agnes returned the aviascope to its case and flicked a switch on the chromaphone. The surface colours transformed into a live video image.




A small beady-eyed mammal with an extraordinarily long nose was squeaking at

Agnes. Its velvety fur went from flame-orange on its head to midnight-black on the rest of its body, with small white circles around the eyes.




“Attie?” Agnes tapped on the **SPEARS** communication pin hidden under the neck of her T-shirt, in order to understand what her partner was saying. “Are you OK? I thought you were visiting relatives in Cairo.”



Attie shuffled closer to the screen. He was wearing a surprisingly vibrant Hawaiian



shirt patterned with bananas. “I am. They’re a family of Flower’s shrews, a different species to me.” In the background, several small brown shrews with shorter noses than Attie were scurrying back and forth inside an earthy burrow. “I just wanted to call to check how you’re doing. Have you logged our daily butterfly count yet?”



“First thing this morning,” Agnes replied. “I saw two painted ladies, four common blues and a beautiful red admiral.”



“Excellent,” Attie remarked. “What about our other **SPEARS** duties? Have you practised Agent Shadowbelly’s new technique for subterranean stealth? We’re meant to have it mastered by the end of next month.”



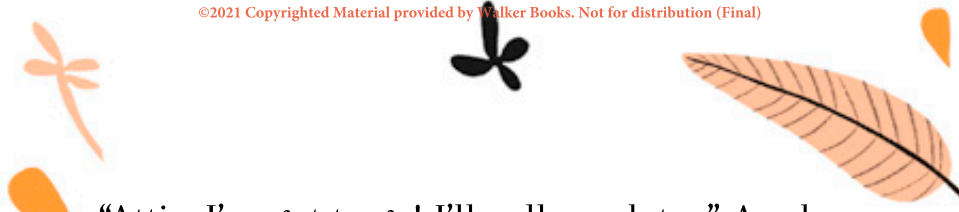
“Yes, several times already.” Agnes

offered her partner a reassuring smile. He was an extremely responsible shrew (it was one of the qualities she most admired about him) but it also meant that he found it difficult to relax. “I promise you, Attie, there’s nothing to worry about. Everything here is absolutely—”

But before she could finish her sentence, a whirlwind of pale-pink feathers and spindly fuchsia legs came crashing into her geraniums, showering her with scarlet petals.


The lesser flamingo?!
Agnes spat a petal out of her mouth and fumbled with her chromaphone.





“Attie, I’ve got to go! I’ll call you later.” As she switched off the device, the flamingo gave a shrill squawk.


“Help!” it screeched, frantically flapping its wings. “I’m stuck!”



Agnes spied the problem immediately: one of the flamingo’s webbed feet had got wedged in the gap behind the window box. Thinking quickly, she ran to the other side of her bedroom and snapped off a tall, pointy leaf from her aloe vera plant. “If I rub this on your foot, it should slide out,” she explained, returning with the leaf, which was oozing a translucent yellow gel. As she applied the goo to the accessible parts of the flamingo’s foot, she noticed a small scroll fastened around the bird’s ankle.

“It’s not working!” the flamingo shrieked.





Agnes tried to push the window box forward. “Just ... a little ... further..”

Suddenly, there was a resounding *POP!* and the flamingo’s foot shot free. The bird immediately lost its balance, tumbled in through Agnes’s bedroom window and landed in a feathery heap in the middle of her carpet.



“Thank you, thank you!” it squawked, scrambling upright.

“Slow down,” Agnes urged, as the flamingo hobbled towards the window. “You look injured.”



The flamingo shook its head. “Can’t stop now. Must deliver urgent message.”

The scroll.

Agnes wondered how long the flamingo had been flying for. There were deep wrinkles around its orange-red eyes – a sign of dehydration. “If the message is

so important, perhaps I could deliver it for you?” she offered. “That way you can rest and have some water.”

The flamingo’s feathers ruffled. “You ... understand me?”

Agnes was about to explain that she worked for **SPEARS** and was using one of their communication pins when the flamingo gabbled on, “Then you must help me find the Fluffy-Face Cat Food Tower! I’ve been looking for it everywhere. I’m meant to deliver my message to a turkey named Phil.”

“Phil?” Agnes tensed. The Fluffy-Face Cat Food Tower was actually the secret headquarters of **SPEARS** and Phil was no ordinary turkey – he was the fearless Commander of **SPEARS**!

Whatever the flamingo's message was, it had to be important. Agnes held out her hand. "You can give it to me. I know where to go."

