

# WhipEye

BOOK ONE

*of*

WhipEye Chronicles



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*For Mom, Dad, Craig, Connie, Kathy, Karin, & Jennifer*



ONE

# Stealing from a Monster

**T**ODAY IS THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL before summer vacation, and my twelfth birthday. So I should be crazy happy. Instead, this is the most messed up day of my life, except for the one I can't remember.

I have to talk to the parrot.

All day long, I sit through boring games and parties while the urge to see Charlie builds until it feels like my whole life depends on it. By the time school's out I'm going nuts. I race through town, park my bike, and enter the Endless Pet Store, hoping it'll be easy.

However, Plan A, walking right back to Charlie, is DOA—dead on arrival.

"Stay away from the parrot, girl." Magnar sounds angrier than usual and he glares at me from behind the front counter.

I lower my head and walk by fast. I don't like him. Mainly because of the way he treats Charlie. I've heard him shout at the parrot. Even his one-word name sounds harsh.

It's weird, but I think he hates me for talking to Charlie. As if it's a crime. I've never seen him show concern for the other pets here, either.

As always, he's rubbing his palms obsessively over his stupid nine gold rings. His left thumb is bare. I'm sure he has a ring fetish. They're probably on his toes too.

"Five minutes, then I want you out of here," he says. "We both know you don't have any money."

*Hey, didn't you hear, Pug-face? I just won the lottery.* I duck behind a horned toad aquarium, waiting for Magnar to return to punching keys in front of his supersized computer monitor.

Five minutes. I try to think of a Plan B, and imagine a moose charging through the front glass and barreling over the creep. It might improve his look. He's bald, short, and thin, and he always wears a dingy black suit and blood-red shirt. Deep wrinkles line his face and neck, which make him look like a pug.

"Sam's here, Sam's here."

*Charlie.* The parrot's voice is unusually soft. Puzzled how the bird saw me over the stacked aquariums, I risk a peek at Magnar. His beady eyes stare back. I flick my shoulder-length brown hair, pretending to be interested in a veiled chameleon. Any other day I would be.

Luckily, Plan B appears. Two customers take the creep's attention.

I crouch, murmuring, "Just do it, Sam," and shuffle awkwardly on my long, klutzy legs to the rear of the store.

Along the back wall, the stench of old cage litter fills my nostrils, and brightly colored Scarlet and Greenwing Macaws sit in large cages—a.k.a. Magnar's jail cells—watching me as I scurry past.

I slip on the dusty floor, my arms whirl, and I nearly nosedive into a pair of startled cockatiels. Regaining my footing, I hurry on.

At the back corner of the small store, I stop in front of a tall, open stand, where a twelve-inch gray parrot perches on a wood bar.

The red sign beneath the perch has four lines in black lettering:

**Congo African Gray Parrot**

*Psittacus erithacus erithacus*

**NOT FOR SALE**

***Don't Touch The Parrot!***

White rings circle the parrot's yellow eyes and he bobs excitedly when he sees me.

A small gold chain attached to the perch ends in a combination lock shackle that's fastened to the parrot's leg. It's a reminder of my life. I feel like I have a chain around me too, and I want to rip Charlie's off. I've always been able to sense what animals feel, and it's obvious the parrot is miserable.

I'm wheezing due to the animal dander, so I pull out my inhaler. Taking a quick puff, I glance over my shoulder to make sure Magnar isn't sneaking up on me. Nope. I turn back to the parrot.

"Look what I brought you, Charlie," I whisper. From my jacket pocket, I dig out a few organic raw almonds. "Fresh off the floor of the food co-op. I cleaned them for you, Charlie. I bet they're better than what Magnar feeds you."

The parrot pecks at the nuts with his black hooked bill, softly hitting my palm. "Nice girl. Nice manners." Bits of nuts fly everywhere.

"Thanks, Charlie. I took an online course." I brush strands of hair off my face. The parrot's presence relaxes me.

Nearly a year ago, after Mom died, I wandered into the Endless Pet Store after school one day, following a deep urge that kept my

feet moving until I stood in front of the parrot. The bird noticed me too, and seemed interested in me. That first day I talked to Charlie for an hour, and after that I kept returning. The parrot seemed to enjoy my visits as much as I did. He was the one bright thing in my life over the last year.

I heave a deep breath, and the words spinning in my head all day long run off the tip of my tongue; “Charlie, Dad still isn’t talking to me. I can’t take it anymore. I miss Mom so much. I want my life back and—”

“Sorry, kid, but we don’t have time for this.” The parrot leans closer. “Make like double-O-seven and bust me out of here.”

“What?” I look at him carefully. I’ve been visiting him four or five times a week over the last year, and he’s never said those lines before. Maybe he watched a James Bond movie with Magnar. “Yeah, Charlie, I’ll stuff you in my jacket pocket and skip out the door.”

“I mean it.” The parrot continues talking softly. “Right now. Let’s fly the coop. Blow this pop stand. Make a jail break.”

“Huh?” African grays are some of the smartest birds alive, but Charlie’s eyes look different, as if he understands what he’s saying. Or maybe Magnar scared the parrot with all his yelling, and Charlie strung together enough words so that he *sounds* smart.

For a moment, I consider running up to the front counter and screaming at the creep. But sanity quickly returns.

“Don’t stare at me like a dumb bunny, Sam. For goodness sakes, let’s go.”

Panic. I can’t be having a real conversation with a parrot, and a small voice in the back of my mind whispers that I’ve lost it. Instead of talking to a parrot over the last year, I should have been talking to the school counselor.

“Hey, kid, wake up already. Yoo-hoo, anyone in there?”

“I can’t take you, Charlie. It’s stealing. Grand theft parrot. Five years hard time.”

“Take this, and don’t lose it.” With his beak, Charlie yanks a bright red feather out of his tail—the only place he has red feathers, and holds it down to me.

“Why?” I carefully slip the soft quill from his beak, worried the parrot hurt himself. Maybe he’s lost it. If birds pull out their feathers, they’re often depressed.

“We both need a change.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You’re as miserable as I am. If you get any unhappier you could sell frowns for a living.”

He’s right. Change. I want it more than anything. “How can a feather change my life?”

He doesn’t answer. My fingers find and rub the compass that’s hanging around my neck on a leather string. I’ve told Charlie my problems all year long, but I never thought he actually understood me. “How did you learn to talk like this, Charlie?”

“We don’t have time for explanations.” His yellow eyes meet mine. “Are you a friend, or is all that sappy stuff you’re always blabbing about freeing the animals in the pet store just nonsense?”

“C’mon, Charlie. Of course I want the animals free, but most of them can’t survive in northern Minnesota.”

The parrot cocks his head at me as if he doesn’t believe me, as if I’m letting him down.

“It’s not nonsense,” I insist.

“Then prove it.” He walks back and forth a few inches on his perch, his head bobbing.

“I don’t know the combination, Charlie.”

“I do. I pretended to be sleeping once.”

“I must be nuts,” I mutter. “Arguing with a parrot.” Then a little

louder, “Charlie, if I take you, Magnar will know it’s me. They’ll catch me and bring you back to him. End of story.”

“Do you know how often I’ve wished I could fly through a real jungle? This pet store is a prison and Magnar’s a monster. He wants me dead tomorrow. Now get me out of here, pronto, or this is the last time we’ll ever talk, Sam.” The parrot glares at me. “End of story.”

*Dead?* Fire burns in my chest. Magnar is creepy scary. I’ve seen him get red-faced when he caught me talking to the parrot. He scares me too. I don’t understand why he’d want the parrot dead, but it doesn’t matter. I believe Charlie. And I can’t risk coming back tomorrow and finding him gone.

Besides, the parrot deserves a life. So do I.

“Okay, Charlie.”

“Seven, two, one,” whispers the parrot.

My fingers tremble as I slide the feather into my blue flannel shirt pocket. With jittery hands, I shift the combination rings and unfasten the gold shackle. Gently, I grab Charlie and slide him under my jacket.

“What are you doing here?”

I lift my shoulders to my ears and turn, expecting Magnar’s hands to curl around my neck like a boa constrictor and end my crappy life. But the creep is standing thirty feet away, his back to me. I have a few more seconds to live.

In front of Magnar, a massive hand slips between the door curtains separating the back supply room from the customer area. I should run, but my curiosity stops me. The fingers, five feet off the floor, are coarse and thick as a gorilla’s.

“I lonely.”

Even crazier, the voice behind the curtain is high-pitched, like a child’s. I can relate to the loneliness, though.

“You have to leave.” Magnar’s tone is acid. “Now.” He pushes the hand back through the curtains.

“But—”

“Go,” snarls Magnar.

Magnar’s fury sends me backpedaling into the nearest aisle, where I bend over and hurry past gerbil and hamster aquariums. I run my free hand along a shelf so I don’t fall and make a parrot pancake. Sweat runs beneath my shirt and jeans, and my pulse pounds as if it’s going to jump out of my skin.

At the end of the cages, I pause. I’m six feet from the front door and becoming a thief. Crouching, I peek sideways.

I’m so dead.

Tom, Magnar’s assistant, stands at the checkout counter. Tall and lean, with spiked red hair and seven earring studs in his right ear, he’s staring directly at me. He always lets me talk to Charlie when Magnar works in back, but I doubt his kindness means he’ll let me steal the parrot.

I hold my breath, waiting for him to call Magnar, or at least ask why I’m crouching with my hand stuffed up my coat. *Just practicing CPR on myself.*

But he remains quiet and his eyes flash gold. *What?*

A deep, agonized groan, which doesn’t sound human, fills the store. I’m in a freak show. I whip around.

Magnar stands at the back of the store, staring at Charlie’s corner. His face darkens like a black cloud ready to spout lightning, while he rubs his right thumb ring with his other thumb.

If he moves his head a few inches, he’ll see me, so I almost cheer when he takes another step toward the corner, out of sight.

Immediately, something gray, like a shadow, enters the far end of my aisle, hovering four feet off the floor. The shadow is so strange that I don’t move. It’s floating like a loop, a thin, scaled tendril that

quickly thickens and lengthens, its two ends hidden by the aisle hiding Magnar. It's too solid to be smoke.

I've never seen anything like it before. On second thought, that isn't entirely true, because one end of the thick shadow slithers into the aisle, looking like the tapered tail of a snake. A very big snake.

Eyes wide, I crane my neck. When I do, the other end of the shadow appears. First, one head, then a second, swings into the aisle, both with flaring upper neck hoods.

Normally, I'd love to see the longest venomous snake in the world, even one with two heads, but this floating king cobra is fifty feet long and thick as a telephone pole. I'm not clear if it's real, my imagination, or some type of trick until its four dark eyes flick open and find mine.

Its eyes are full of hate. For some reason, it feels as if Magnar is staring at me.

I should run. Scream. Do anything. But the cobra's eyes lock on mine and I can't move. As if I'm hypnotized. I forget what I'm doing and just stare, lost in those dark orbs.

Opening both mouths, the snake hisses, showing eight-inch glistening fangs.

As it slithers toward me, its writhing body smashes into shelves on either side of the aisle, sending supplies, aquariums, and cages tumbling to the floor. I watch all the poor squeaking critters falling through the air until the crashing glass snaps me out of my stupor.

For once in my life I take three smooth steps, jerk open the door, and run.