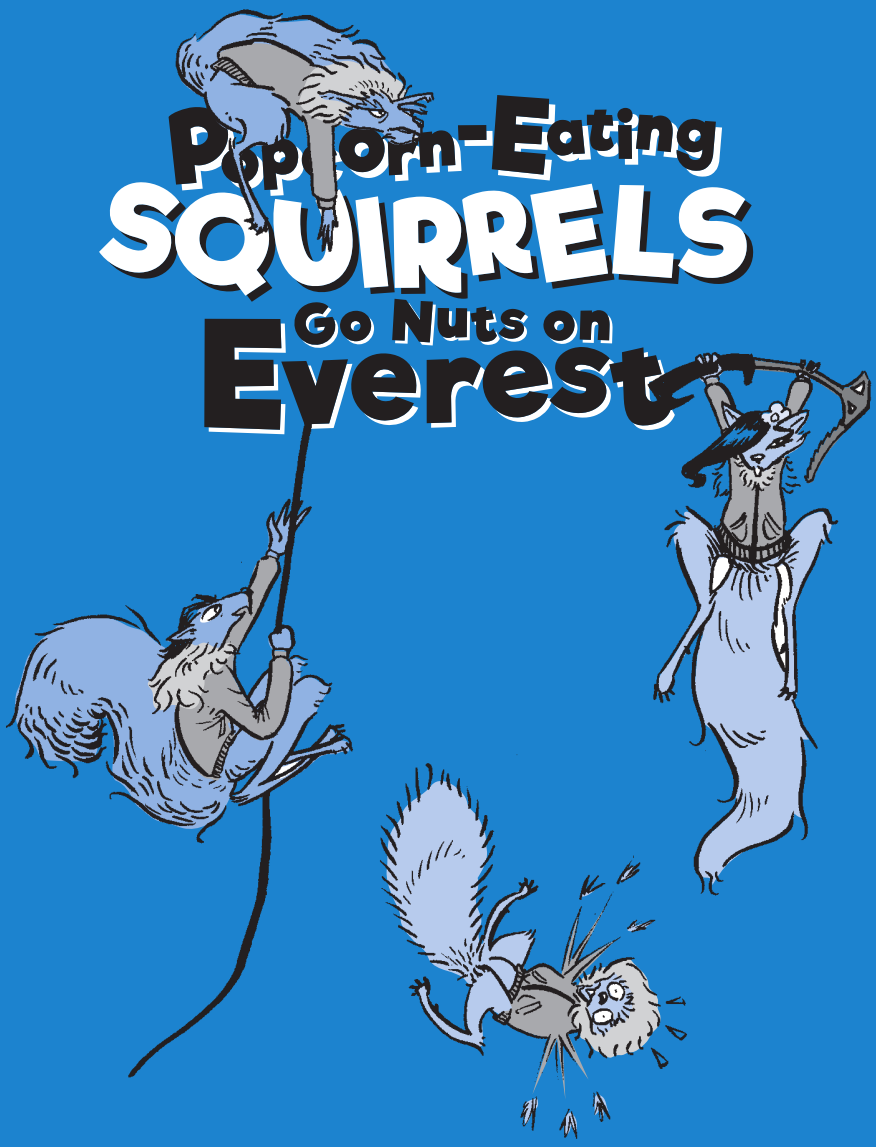
Popcorn-Eating SQUIRRELS Go Nuts on Everest



PUBLISHER'S NOTE
No squirrels were harmed in the course of writing this book. Several did, however, get quite cold.

Popcorn-Eating Squirrels Go Nuts on Everest
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First published in 2019 by Shrine Bell, an imprint of Vertebrate Publishing.

shrine bell Shrine Bell
Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.shrinebell.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-911342-42-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Design and production by Jane Beagley, Vertebrate Publishing.
Illustration colour work by Ewen Kirkpatrick.
www.v-publishing.co.uk

Shrine Bell and Vertebrate Publishing are committed to printing on paper from sustainable sources.

Printed and bound in Europe by Latitude Press.

CHAPTER 1

'I NAME THIS SHIP ...'

It was a helter-skelter journey across town. Four squirrels in a race against time:

BEN

CASSIE

ALFIE

SALTY

Four *hungry* squirrels with one thing on their minds.

POPCORN!

'Get a move on!' Ben cried. 'The boat's about to launch!'

Ben was the route finder. The others followed, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, scampering from tree to tree.

Salty trailed behind, puffing and panting, his tufty ears dripping with sweat.

'Not so fast, pals,' he moaned. 'Your old

pal Salty is running out of steam! My poor wee paws are getting awful sore!'

'Keep up!' Cassie said sternly. 'We're almost there.'

In the distance they could see the glittering outline of the shiny new cruise ship.

The cruise ship with a six-screen cinema on board.

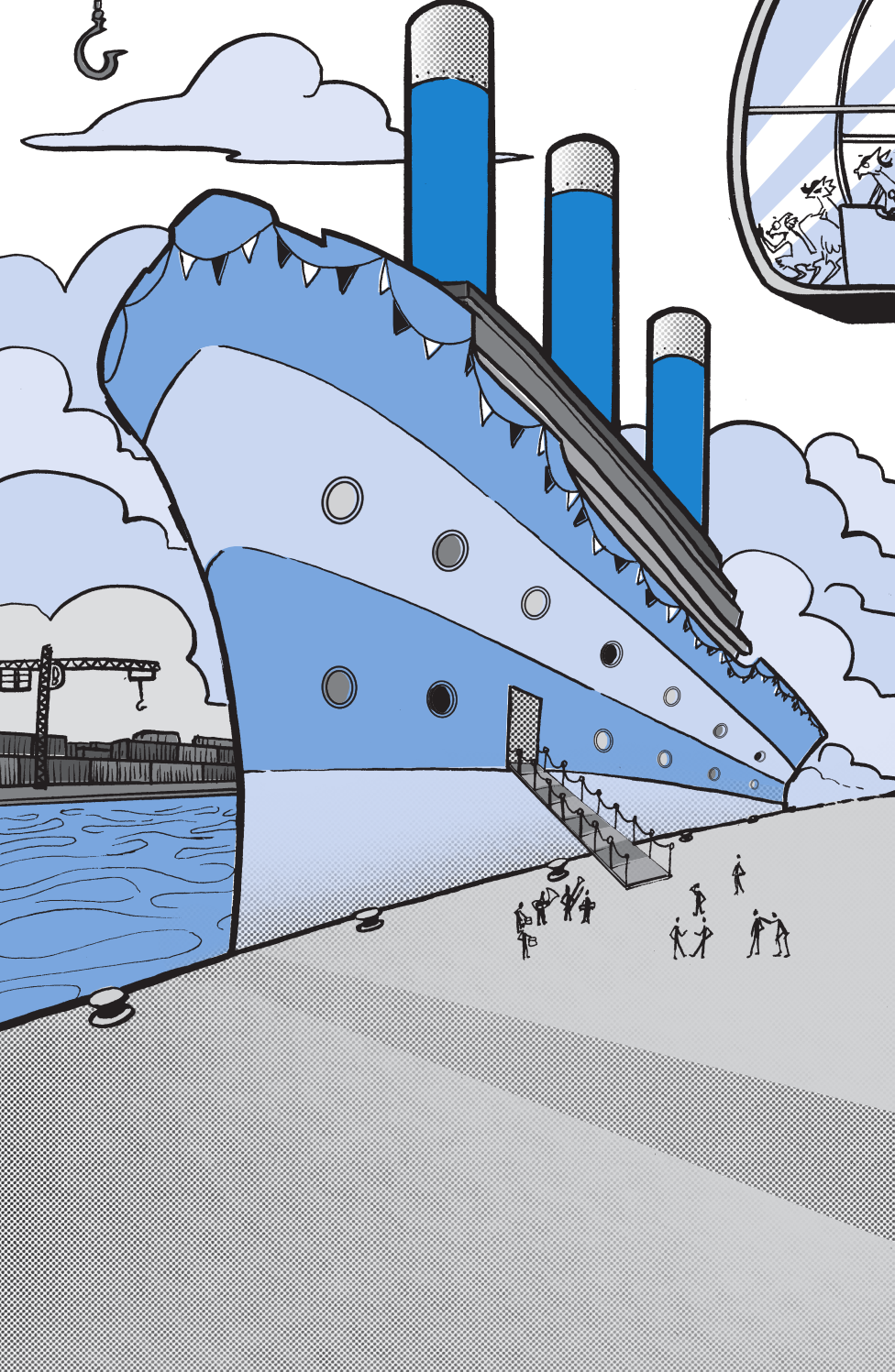
The cruise ship that would be a floating paradise for popcorn-addicted squirrels.

The cruise ship with the biggest popping machine on the PLANET!

'All we have to do is smuggle ourselves on board,' Ben puffed, 'hide away in the cinema and wait for the messy humans to leave us our favourite treat. Day after day.'

'Popcorn of our dreams, yay!' yelled Alfie, the youngest of the squirrels. 'Alfie wants caramel!'

Finally they made it to the docks, climbing into the cabin of a crane where



they could spy on the scene.

'Wow!' Alfie gasped. 'It's the bestest ship in the whole wiggly world.'

The squirrels gaped at the sleek lines of the huge cruise ship, fresh paint gleaming brilliantly, the rows of cabins stretching as high as a skyscraper, the scarlet funnels splendid in the early morning sun.

The *Esmerelda Exotica*. The height of luxury, flagship of the Esmerelda fleet.

Cassie frowned, her shiny nose wrinkling. 'There's something odd about this. Where are the passengers? Why isn't the party starting?'

'It's true,' Ben said. 'There's something wrong.'

The squirrels stared at the strangely quiet dockside.

Only a handful of people were there, the Lord Mayor among them, decked in chains of glittering gold. He was cracking his knuckles, glancing frequently at his watch. Strings of gaily coloured bunting

fluttered mockingly above his head. Next to him was a journalist with a camera. From time to time she yawned and scratched her neck.

A brass band was standing nearby, shuffling their feet and unsure what to do, their trumpets and trombones glimmering in the sunlight but silent as the grave.

Food stall chefs were busy cooking, but no one was buying the treats. Because no one was there.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime event to celebrate the maiden voyage of a brand new cruise ship. And hardly a soul had turned up. Hardly a soul but four hungry squirrels and the distinguished-looking gentleman who was climbing out of a silver Rolls-Royce car at that very moment – the owner of the vessel, Sir Archibald Kevino Rapscallion Buck.

CHAPTER 2

PARTY POOPERS

'My dear S-S-S-Sir Archibald,' the mayor stuttered as he approached the vehicle, 'I can only apologise for the—'

'Out of my way, you clown,' Sir Archibald snapped.

He prodded the mayor in the chest with his silver-tipped cane, smoothing back his greying locks with a hand that glimmered with gem-laden rings.

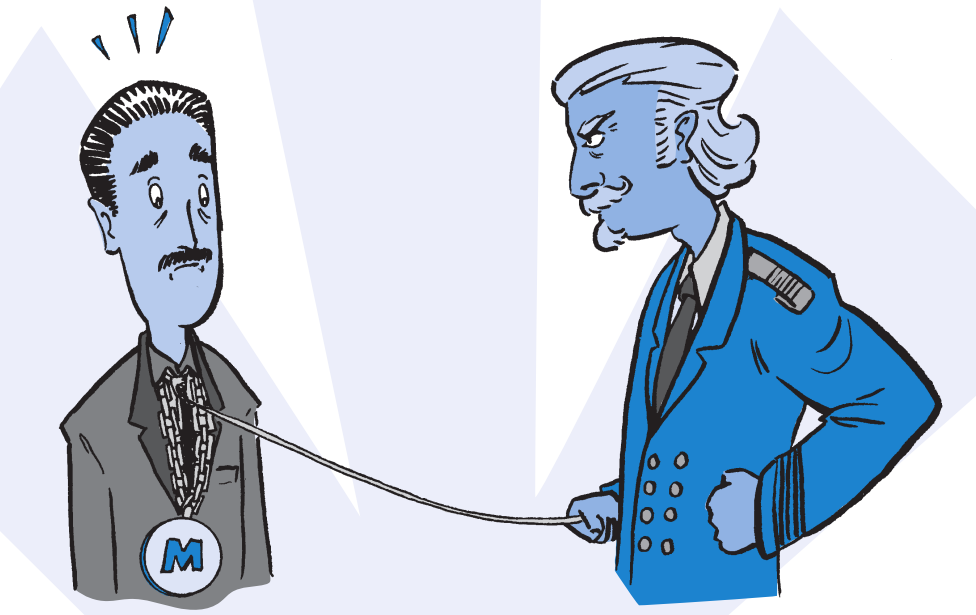
'I'm ruined,' he cried. 'Ruined, I tell you! I've spent millions on this boat and not a single passenger has turned up.'

The mayor nodded, his face a picture of grim misery.

'The town's been down on its luck,' he said. 'The people haven't got a lot of spare cash for luxury holidays.'

'The *Exotica* is a wonder,' Sir Archibald continued. 'Why can't they see that? Four swimming pools, a shopping arcade, a six-screen cinema with its very own Pop-O-Matic 3000 – the most advanced popcorn-making machine in the universe. It's irresistible!'

Up in the cabin of the crane, Alfie breathed in deeply, closing his eyes dreamily as an unmistakeable aroma drifted across from the ship.



‘Alfie smells the sweetness,’ he said in awe. ‘The best smell in the whole wide world.’

Alfie’s friends sniffed at the air, their moist little noses trembling.

‘Popcorn!’ Salty muttered, drool running down the side of his mouth.



‘Caramel. Butterscotch. Salty. Plain,’ Ben whispered. ‘Popcorn is the nectar of the gods!’

Nearby they heard a vehicle backfire. A rickety old van pulled into the docks.

‘I think there are some passengers after all,’ Ben nodded towards the van.

The decrepit old banger pulled up next to the mayor and Sir Archibald. Dark blue smoke spewed out of the exhaust as the engine rattled and died.

Painted shakily on the side of the van the squirrels read the following:

EVEREST OR BUST
POPPING ALL THE WAY
TO BASE CAMP

The doors of the van crashed open and two characters – a man and a woman – jumped out.

‘Oh no!’ Cassie exclaimed, her ears folding back.

Salty gasped. Alfie gulped. Ben just stared, his eyes wide as saucers.

An elderly woman in a faded ballgown. An orange-tanned man in a cheap and nasty grey suit.

'Rosalba and Fandango,' Cassie whispered, her voice dripping with dread.

It was true. Two enemies of the squirrels from an epic battle that had been fought not long ago. A battle that had seen a cinema destroyed. A battle that had seen popcorn falling from the skies across the entire land. A battle in which our friends



had survived only by becoming temporary squirrel superheroes.

'I hope we're not too late for the sailing,' Rosalba trilled. 'We need a lift to Mumbai. We're on our way to Everest Base Camp.'

'You don't look like climbing types … ' Sir Archibald said with a suspicious frown. 'What's the big idea?'

Rosalba gave Sir Archibald her sweetest look, her false eyelashes fluttering like tango-dancing spiders.

'Just a few hours ago I was cast adrift on the seven seas,' she cried, 'condemned by a cruel crew of evil squirrels to a watery grave. Only by the strangest twists of fate did my saviour—'

'Evil squirrels?' Sir Archibald snapped impatiently. 'What the blazes are you talking about, woman?'

'I know,' Rosalba said, 'it doesn't sound terribly likely, does it? But it's true, I tell you!'

She patted aggressively at her nose with a powder puff for a few seconds, then continued.

'Anyway, Fandango here was a total *star*! He hired a boat and came out to rescue me and my associates.'

'I recognise you,' Sir Archibald said, staring at Fandango. 'You're the inventor of the Pop-O-Matic 3000, aren't you? The one we've got on board?'

Fandango took a bow. 'I am indeed,' he muttered, ' … not that I like to mention it.'

'As a thank you for saving my life, I promised Fandango I would make his most cherished wish come true,' Rosalba continued.

The bored journalist stepped forward, her interest spiked. She pulled out her notepad and pencil.

'What is the wish?' she asked.

Up in the cabin, the squirrels leaned forward, their ears pricked up.