EDDIE ALBERT

AND THE AMAZING ANIMAL GANG



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Paul O'Grady and Sue Hellard assert the moral right to be identified
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Aunt Budge


Eddie


Butch

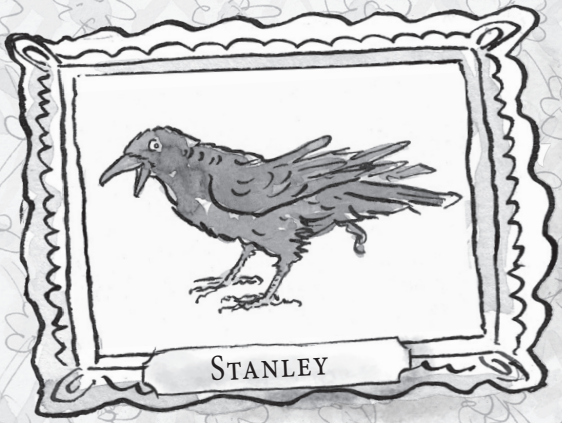

Dad


Vera


Casey


Dan and Jake


Bunty


Stanley

PROLOGUE

Do you have a secret? Is there anything about you that you'd much rather keep to yourself? Maybe you've done something in the past that you're ashamed of? You might have told a big fat lie, or invented wild stories about yourself and your family, when really you don't live in a mansion or own a pony but actually live in a perfectly ordinary house or flat.

You might have an unusual hobby or interest that you don't talk about in case people who don't understand these things think you're weird. Then, of course, there's that nasty habit you might have that you'd rather no one knew about, like nose-picking, eating belly-button fluff or not wiping your bum. Ugh.

This story is about a young boy called Eddie Albert who had an amazing secret. If you sat next to him on a bus or walked past him in the street you'd be forgiven for thinking

he was just an ordinary ten-year-old boy. A bit scruffy, perhaps, not very tall and with an unruly mop of blond hair, but nothing in the least bit remarkable about him.

Well, you'd be wrong, for Eddie Albert possessed a truly extraordinary talent, a unique skill that he really should have been very proud of. Only he wasn't. He was extremely secretive about his hidden talent, determined that nobody should ever find out about this awesome gift that he saw as more of a curse. It had got him into trouble at school several times, and today was one of those days. It all started because of a mouse . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Eddie wasn't really what you'd call naughty. He wasn't a bad kid at all – in fact, he was quite the opposite. But trouble seemed to have a nasty habit of following him around, and it usually involved animals.

Once, Mr Broad, the PE teacher, had gone ballistic when he found Eddie on the school roof. But Eddie hadn't shinned up the drainpipe and on to the flat roof for a dare or to show off. In fact, he'd wanted to rescue a seagull that was trapped between two planks left there by the builders who were repairing the roof.



Nevertheless, Eddie had been hauled off to the headmaster's office and given a long lecture on health and safety and the stupidity of little boys who liked to impress their friends by climbing on roofs.

He'd been late for school on a number of occasions as he was always stopping to help lost or injured animals when he took a short cut through the park. One winter's morning he came across a grass snake that was half frozen from the cold, so he popped it into his rucksack to get warm. Once it was nice and toasty, the snake woke up and decided to go for a little slither around – which of course happened during English class. Eventually, it settled on Miss Pike's foot. The English teacher fainted and once again Eddie found himself standing before the headmaster's desk. The man couldn't understand how it was possible for such a quiet little boy to get into so much trouble.

Eddie loved all animals, and people thought he had a special way with them.

'It's as if he can understand them,' Mr Ali, who ran the local shop, would say. 'My cat likes to sit on the step and Eddie always stops to talk to her on his way to school. Now, my cat is very fussy and doesn't take to strangers, but she loves Eddie.

She meows and purrs and wriggles about and he answers her. Quite a conversation they have! As I said, it's as if he can understand her . . .'

The thing was: Eddie could understand animals.

Highly improbable as it sounds, Eddie Albert could converse with mammals, birds, fish and even snails (although snails do tend to have a limited vocabulary that involves a lot of slurping and hissing) just as well as with humans. It was an incredible gift, but Eddie didn't see it that way. He was the kind of boy who didn't like to draw attention to himself, preferring to get on with his work rather than mess about, which made him a frequent target for bullies.

Eddie was determined to keep his special talent firmly under wraps. He was scared that if it was discovered he'd be seen as an oddity, a freak. He'd be ridiculed by the tabloid newspapers and people would point at him in the street. He'd be all over social media and made to go on daytime television and have to prove his talents weren't just a trick. He'd be world-famous, unable to go anywhere without people wanting selfies and demanding that he speak to their dogs.

No, no, no! That wasn't going to happen. A bit of fun with Mr Ali's cat could be taken for a young boy play-acting, but

apart from that he kept his amazing capabilities to himself and only used them when no one was around.

Now, where was I? Oh yes, I was telling you about a mouse, the one that caused all the trouble. It appeared from underneath the radiator in Eddie's classroom during a maths lesson one afternoon and, for something so small, it caused a lot of problems.

