



THE SCHOOL FOR TALKING PETS

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For Matt, Asha and Dusty.

*And for Dexter, who was not only a pet,
but a member of our family.*





CHAPTER 1

THE TALKING CAT

Rusty Mulligan first heard a cat talk at four-past-seven on a wintry Monday morning, while sitting at his kitchen table, idly watching the morning news as he poured milk over his cereal.

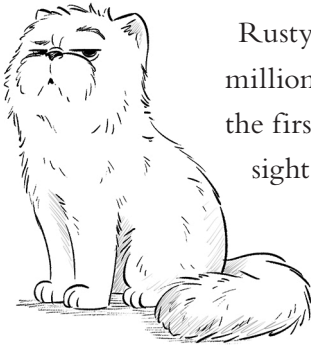
‘Good evening, humans,’ said the talking cat from the other side of the world, purring with satisfaction on the TV screen.

Needless to say, Rusty spilled quite a lot of milk. It dripped from the table to puddle on the floor.

Normally, such behaviour would result in stern words from his father, a gruff man who couldn’t remember what it was like to be a clumsy twelve-year-old boy. But instead, on this occasion, Rusty’s father dropped the knife he’d been using to butter his toast. It clattered to the linoleum to rest in the milk like a silver ship in a shallow milky sea.

‘Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,’ said Mr Mulligan with more expression in his voice than Rusty had heard for a very long time.

It was a white fluffball of a Persian cat with a squished-in, cute-but-also-a-little-bit-ugly face.



Now with the full attention of Rusty and his father and no doubt millions of others watching — for the first time ever — the astounding sight of a real, live, talking animal, the cat continued in a very posh voice. ‘Yes, I am a cat. A talking cat.’

He sounded like the Queen of England’s cat might, but his accent contained a hint of the exotic too. The cat spoke just as Rusty supposed a fancy cat from London might speak. He wondered if Rodney, the cat from next door, would sound the same. Probably not. Sydney was a long way from London.

‘Though we prefer to be known by our Latin name, *Felis catus*. It is more dignified, you see.’

He cleared his throat, as though nervous. Or perhaps he had a fur ball to dislodge. It was hard to tell.

‘I am, as you can see, a *Felis catus* of majestic Persian heritage. My name is Nader Heydar, which

means “Rare Lion” in the language of my ancestors. A most suitable name, I’ve always believed.’

Nader paused and lifted his head, looking slightly up and to one side as though suggesting those watching admire his profile. Which, Rusty had to admit, was rather majestic — despite its squished-inedness.

The camera zoomed out and Rusty could see the cat — sorry, the *Felis catus* — was perched on a tall stool beside a slim woman who had wild black hair sticking out from her head in every direction. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties and wore a rainbow-striped summer dress with yellow hi-top sneakers. Both the cat and the crazy-haired woman faced a female TV host wearing lots of make-up. The made-up woman stared at the cat with her mouth hanging open. Her shocked face mirrored those of Rusty and his father, and probably the millions of others watching too.



The *Felis catus* — that is, Nader Heydar — waved a delicate paw in the direction of the colourfully clothed woman with the untamed hair.

‘This female human beside me is Miss Alice Einstein. You might have heard of her great-grandfather, the brilliant scientist, Mr Albert Einstein. Miss Alice Einstein is, if she doesn’t mind me saying so, every bit as much a genius as her great-grandfather.’

‘It must be a puppet,’ Rusty’s father muttered. ‘No, what’s that thing they use now in the movies, CG-something? You know, the computer fakery stuff?’

‘CGI,’ Rusty whispered.

‘I’m real enough,’ said Nader in an aside, as if hearing Rusty’s father through the TV screen. ‘No special effects. No magic. I am a flesh-and-blood creature, you can be sure of that.’

Rusty could have sworn Nader raised an eyebrow — though, as a cat, he clearly did not have eyebrows.

‘Miss Alice Einstein is the headmistress of a unique and very special educational institution, which, until this moment, has remained a secret known only to a select few.’ Nader paused dramatically. ‘It is my pleasure to introduce *Miss Alice Einstein’s School for Talking Pets*.’

CHAPTER 2

TWENTY-FIVE WORDS OR LESS

Rusty's eyes widened and he stopped breathing for a few seconds.

A secret school for talking pets? It was the most unbelievable thing he had ever heard of! The most ridiculous. The craziest. But also, very definitely, the greatest. *Talking animals*. He would have found it impossible to believe were it not for the cat currently chatting politely on the TV in front of his goggling eyes.

'Miss Einstein, would you like to continue?'

'Thank you, Nader. Yes, I would.' The wild-haired woman turned to face the camera. Her enormous brown eyes seemed to look directly into Rusty's smaller hazel ones. 'As Nader has so beautifully explained, I am the headmistress of Miss Alice Einstein's School for Talking Pets.'



Rusty was surprised to hear Miss Einstein speak with an American accent. Her matter-of-fact tone suggested it was no big deal to have a school for talking pets.

‘We operate on a small, hidden island we named Docens Animalis, which means “Teaching Animals”. This week is our fifth anniversary. It took only two years of hard work and study — which was wonderfully fun and exciting too, of course — before we welcomed our first graduates, and at the top of that very first class of talking pets was Nader Heydar.’

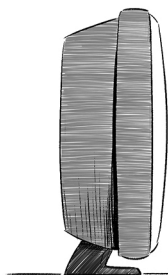
The cat seemed to grow in stature as he heard Miss Einstein’s words. Rusty thought he detected a hint of a self-satisfied smile.

Miss Einstein continued. ‘Now, after another three years and many more talking-pet graduates, we are ready to present our school to the world. With that in mind, and to celebrate our anniversary, I have decided to run a competition.’ She paused, sharing a conspiratorial look with Nader before continuing. ‘I would like to invite five children — and their pets — to spend a week at Miss Alice Einstein’s School for Talking Pets. The children will learn the basics of animal-speaking and meet other graduates. And, perhaps, with a little hard work and a great deal of fun, they may return to their homes with a pet who is able to speak to them, even just a little.’

Rusty’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. ‘Bongo!’ he exclaimed, peering around the room.

Now, in case you were wondering, ‘Bongo!’ wasn’t an expression of surprise. At least not in this case. ‘Bongo’ was Rusty Mulligan’s pet blue-tongued lizard. Rusty spotted him on the kitchen windowsill, his favourite early-morning sunbathing location.

Rusty walked over and scooped Bongo into his arms, bringing him closer to the TV so he could see Nader, who was explaining some of the terms and conditions attached to the competition. ‘Look, Bongo, a talking cat! Can you believe it?’



Bongo's pink mouth opened, and his vivid blue tongue poked out. It seemed as if he too couldn't believe his eyes; though, of course, Rusty couldn't know what Bongo's mysterious reptilian mind was thinking.

'I would love to win that competition, Bongo,' Rusty whispered as he stroked his pet's soft, dry scales. 'Then we could really, properly talk to one another.'

Rusty tuned back in as Miss Einstein continued. '... so, any interested children should to go to the website www.schoolfortalkingpets.com and fill in their details. I would like the most deserving and pet-loving children to win my competition. Therefore, I have asked them to tell me, in twenty-five words or less, why they and their pet should be chosen to come to Docens Animalis. The website will remain live for precisely twenty-four hours from ... now.' Miss Einstein peered at her watch and pressed a button on it. A small beep sounded.

Rusty's heart sank. He wasn't smart or lucky. He'd never win a competition as huge as this one.

Nader spoke again. 'Please, children, enter only once. We look forward to meeting those youngsters

and their pets who submit the best entries. We'll announce the winners one week from today.'

The camera view changed. Now two news reporters appeared on screen, talking over one another in their excitement. Rusty ignored them, his mind picturing a talking dog. No, a talking rabbit. No, best of all, a talking Bongo! He sighed, scratching the top of Bongo's head in that way he knew — well, he *thought* he knew; it wasn't as if Bongo could tell him — his lizard liked.

Mr Mulligan pushed his chair back from the table and scooped up his milk-coated knife.

'Time for school, Rusty. Hurry up and finish your cereal. And clean up that mess before you slip in it.'

'Do you think I should enter the competition, Dad?' Rusty asked in a tentative voice.

Mr Mulligan turned to him and Rusty thought he saw a flash of something in his father's eyes, but then it was gone. 'No. Don't waste your time, boy,' he said bluntly. 'Get ready for school.'

