Chris Mouse Family Adventures

#2 in the Chris Mouse series



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Chapter 1 - PawdCast



After Chris Mouse becomes a TikTok sensation, Franklin's nephew Danny tries to talk Chris into expanding his social media presence with a video podcast.

"Everyone wants to know more about you, Chris," Danny tells him. "So, you just need to be yourself and share your thoughts. Just talk about what you think. The TikTok and YouTube videos have created lots of interest in you and your family. I know you're a pretty level-headed mouse, and I think we can do something that will counter a lot of bad thinking about mice. So relax and let's just have a conversation. The good news is all you have to do is be yourself."

"I'm not so sure I want to do this, Chris replies. Dancing is one thing; talking and trying to be somewhat entertaining, is another."

"Would it help if I interviewed you?" Chris asks "Would that make it any easier?

"Probably. Are you willing to do that?" Danny answers.

Chris made him promise that if he didn't like it, they would stop and pull any videos down. To Chris's surprise, Danny agrees.

Chris seems to need a bit more information to be able to do this, so he asks Danny, "Give me an example of what you might think I could talk on."

Danny replies, "Okay, what kind of topics would you like to talk about, get off your chest, clear the air on?"

“Well,” after Chris ponders, “I’d like to talk about responsibility. I know – boring! But, it’s a very important part of feeling fulfilled, and if you handle it right, you’ll have a pretty wonderful life. If you don’t, well, that doesn’t always end so well. Odds are the first will be good, the second, not so much.”

Danny pauses and then asks Chris, “What’s your take on people? I mean you’re a mouse, not a person. How do you see me, for example? What do you notice and what do you think about me and other people?”

“Thanks for that question, Danny. I like that,” Chris answers quickly. “The biggest thing I notice is that every human, all people, think a lot about things. I mean, you guys sometimes overthink stuff. Do you know that?

"Not so with mice. We are mostly react to the world around us. We can be very fast, and we’re really quick to sense thingsm but we don’t overthink anything. We just do it. We’re guided by an inner sense of right and wrong. And here’s what I mean by that. 'Right' means we’ll probably be okay if we do it. 'Wrong' means we may harm ourselves or cause harm to other mice if we do that.

“The second thing I notice is that some humans are just not nice. They don’t treat other humans kindly, they don’t think highly of other humans, and they are even angry about so many things. Angry. Angry and mean. But it’s not the majority of humans, I think.

“How do you think that sounds,” Chris askes, turning to Danny.

“It was interesting,” Danny replies. “I recorded all that.”

Then he throws a zinger at Chris. “Chris, do you wish that you could do some of the things that humans can do?”

“Oh sure, I’d like to be able to walk down the street and not worry about a bird diving at me with sharp talons ready to sink into me so it can fly away and eat me. It seems that humans are the top of their species because they learned how to survive against a myriad of enemies. The only threat to their existence is not other species, it’s their own kind.

“Mice don’t have weapons that we can use to kill lots of our own kind. We have more animal capabilities and instincts. Self-preservation plays a big part in that.

"Humans seem to be interested in self-preservation, too, but I think that’s more as a species and not as individuals. Humans seem to be more concerned about their stature compared to others and their desire for distractions. They claim that they like distractions just so they can relax and, while that may be true, it’s not an inter-species trait. It’s hard to relax doing anything when you could be some other critters next meal.”

“Wow, that’s really good,” says Danny. “Let’s see what we can do with those gems.”

Danny later takes the video of the interview and edits it to make it more interesting and lively. He adds a little music in places for mood. And he publishes it with the podcast name, “Mousedom.”

The first week is slow. A few hits, some time spent on it, and a little interaction.

For the second week Danny wants to have a different setting. The first one has been fairly dry, just the inside of the house with Chris standing away from a wall, and one camera. And the sound is kind of spotty. This next one, Danny envisions, will use three cameras and two lights, including a ring light, and a great boom mic. He sees it being filmed out on the deck, on a calm, sunny day.

Again, the two are host and guest, interviewer and interviewee. Danny pitches, Chris hits.

It is a coolish day, with a hint of warmth but an occasional cool breeze. Danny wants to start with a scene looking at the fence, Chris on a beach lounge chair, he on a folding beach chair. Danny sets one of the cameras low on one side of the little lounge chair where Chris sits facing Danny. So, visually, Chris doesn’t look that much smaller than Danny. It's all optics, of course.

Danny, “So, Chris. We had a good conversation last week. This week I want to expand on the question I asked last, ‘What’s your take on people? How do you see us? What sticks out to you?’ After that conversation what are your latest thoughts?”

“After the physical differences,” Chris responds, “all I can describe are our characteristics. But to look at physical differences, one obvious thing is that humans are a lot taller than us. For another, you live in big houses. I mean, we live on anything soft we can find, a big wad of string or even dead leaves or dirt, it’s all good. But people have to have the furniture, the car, the house, the hobbies, the toys, the work, the vacations, the recreation – that’s a pretty complex life to balance. I’m not saying that it's impossible – it just has a lot of overhead. That means, it takes a lot of time and money to pull it off and maintain some kind of balance between all of those aspects of life. Mouse life is so much simpler. We just want to cover the basics – you know, food, water, sleep, safety – and after that, it’s all fun, play time. Like I said, it’s so much simpler… and it’s healthier too, of that I’m sure.

“Humans seem to be obsessed with making money so they can pay for all those things they buy. Then they stack them up in their house, or their garage, or their attic, or even in a storage unit, and they rarely ever use them. They have the stuff, and they chase their tails, so to speak, to get more stuff that they won’t use. I’ve seen humans get some kind of thrill when they get things. Mice do, too, but most of what we get are necessities, things like food or bedding or shelter. Those are essential for survival. If we spend time on other things, it’s for fun and play. We like to do those things and it really takes almost nothing to do them.”

“Very interesting, Chris,” says Danny. “What do you wish humans would do that they don’t do right now?”

“Well, from a mouse’s perspective,” Chris answers, “I wish they would just look at the bigger picture and stop nitpicking about the little stuff. If humans would recognize that they all would be a lot happier if they just got along, that the main thing is to live a better life and that means not to get so mad about stuff that doesn’t really matter, I think that would be really good. Mice rarely fight. Rat’s do, but those are bigger, nastier creatures. Mice are close to the bottom of the food chain and that means we have a lot of enemies. Lots of creatures want to eat us, kill us for sport, or eradicate us because they think we’re a nuisance. But mice are really peace loving and fun. We concentrate on our families and our friends. That means we don’t make enemies, we make friends. If humans would do that, they would not only be happier, I think they would probably live longer, too.”

Danny responds “Well, mice don’t live very long, do they? I mean, you guys have shorter lives than humans. So, what do you say about that?”

“You know that it isn’t the length of the life that makes the life,” Chris replies. “It’s what we do with the time we have. Mice want to enjoy life. We want to have friends and have fun. As best we can, we try to get along with other mice. Sure, there are some mice that are kind of weird, have crazy ideas and do stupid things. But what I know about life as a mouse is that those mice won’t be around long. They’ll either do something dumb like run across the street without looking and they’ll end up dead, or they’ll eat the wrong stuff like rat poison and it’s hasta la vista, baby. We have watched some tv shows about human cowboys. They call the result of stupid activities that kill people, 'culling the herd.' It’s essentially self-selection. My mama and daddy taught me how to survive and be happy. A few mice don’t have that luck, and if their mama and daddy don’t live long enough to teach them, hopefully another mouse or more will show them the way to a good life and happiness.”

Danny next asks, “Okay so we’ll talk about how you survive another time, but how do you stay so happy?”

“That’s the important part, isn’t it Danny?” answers Chris. “I’m gonna go out on a limb here, but I bet that almost every human wants to be happy, too. What mice do is focus on the stuff that makes us happy and stay away from the stuff that makes us unhappy. That sounds simple, but most humans don’t do that. They seem to focus on the things they don’t like, they get mad, they blame everyone else other than themselves, and then they try to get even. They argue and yell and stomp and shout and drive their cars like idiots and say nasty things to each other. No wonder being a human is hard and not so happy. I think we mice live way longer than we would have if we acted like humans. And, I know we’re way happier than humans. Have you ever seen mice play?

“I really don’t understand most humans. Some of them treat other humans bad and that just doesn't make sense. Don’t you all have to live together?”

There is a click as Danny shuts off the lights and other equipment.

“That’s a wrap, Chris,” says Danny, like he’s a big shot movie director. "I’ll edit this and post it. I'm going to call it a 'PawdCast.'"

Over the next week, Danny puts links on the other YouTube and TikTok videos he’s made so that viewers can select the new videos.

The PawdCast is born and in the first few weeks the clicks are pretty light until a reporter for USA Today watches one episode and includes it in a list of fun and interesting podcasts.

The day after the article hits, PawdCast clicks take a big jump and then keep on climbing. Soon, the buzz is everywhere about mouse wisdom and Danny and Chris have to think up more topics for future episodes.

Later, Chris confides to his friend Franklin about the whole business, "I don’t want to be a media personality. I’m just a mouse. I want to have fun and enjoy life with my family, but Danny has other ideas.

"It makes sense. He’s a teenager."

Chapter 2 - Mouse Contestant

It's a rainy weekend morning. In fact, it's been raining for almost an entire week, which means that the Mouse family is all cooped up inside all day on this Saturday.

Candy is looking at social media on the tablet TV that Mr. Dooty bought for the Mouse family. She laughs as she watches her dad in his latest PawdCast and then she checks out MouseKeTok, watching a video of him dancing to a rock song.

On a whim she turns to Facebook and the first thing she sees in her feed is a promotional ad for a contest put on by a local pet store. The winner will get a year's supply of mice treats, as well as a plastic tunnel, a tube tunnel, chew toys like fruit flavored wood chews, and two small hideouts, one that's shaped like a big ball and another like a tiny house, plus a fun looking exercise wheel and several other toys. Wow, those are great prizes, she says to herself.

Reading the directions she decides to enter the contest. There's only one problem, she's not a human and the entry form requires all kinds of information about the entrant. Thinking quickly, she fills out the form and identifies herself as Donna Dooty, at their address. She has to ask her dad if he knows Mrs. Dooty's phone number and then enters it after he tells her. When he asks her why she wants to know the phone number she replies, "Just curious, Dad," and that seems to satisfy him.

It's a gamble and Candy has never gambled before. The best part of this particular gamble is it doesn't cost anything to enter the contest. She knows what a gamble is because Mr. Dooty has talked about the lottery and Las Vegas and playing poker with his friends, and he almost always says he lost money afterwards.

After she clicks on "Enter" on the promotional page she shuts off Facebook and decides to do her homework for the weekend. If she does it today, she won't have to do it tomorrow, is what she's thinking. Carl always puts his homework off until the last minute on Sunday afternoon, and he's always sweating trying to get it done, but Candy just doesn't like stress.

The next week is a busy week with school and chores and homework and hobbies. One of Candy's hobbies is to draw pictures, a talent that she keeps improving on by drawing a lot. Her bedroom wall is covered with her drawings, some of which are really good, or so her mother says.

The week passes quickly and the next time she has to check Facebook is on Saturday when she gets to use the tablet tv again. On a whim, she looks up the page for Corner Pet Emporium, the store that is running the promotion.

There on the page is a big announcement - "The winner of the great pet mice merchandise contest is... Mrs. Donna Dooty."

Oh, my goodness, Candy almost falls over after she reads the announcement. Good thing she is standing on all four legs, right? Now, she has a problem. How can she possibly claim the prize since she isn't Mrs. Dooty? And, how can she explain to Mrs. Dooty that she used her name without permission to enter the context?

She runs into the kitchen where her mom is cleaning.

"Mom, I have a problem," she starts.

"Okey, Candy," answers her mom thinking to herself, what has our daughter done now? "What's the problem, honey?"

"Well, mom, how can I explain this. I entered a contest and I won." Candy replies.

"That doesn't sound like much of a problem, Candy. Why is that an issue?" answers her mom.

Words spill out of Candy's mouse like water in the Dootys' shower. "Uh, because I entered the contest as Mrs. Dooty. I didn't think I would win. I was just playing around and it sounded like a great prize and I knew I could fill out the entry form with her name and I didn't mean to cheat, I mean I guess I was cheating wasn't I, but I didn't mean to, I just wanted to enter the contest and it looked like fun, and I'm sorry mom, I hope I didn't let you down, what do I do now, and can you and dad possibly forgive me?"

"Oh, sweetie, don't be too hard on yourself. Yes, you shouldn't have used Mrs. Dooty's name without her permission. You'll need to go talk to her and ask for forgiveness. Why don't you do that now so you can relax and not be so hard on yourself?"

"Okay, mom, thank you!"

And with that, Candy walks out of the front door, crawls under the closet door and walks through the Dootys' bedroom to the kitchen where Donna Dooty is baking a pie.

Oh, the smell of that pie is so good. It smells like cherry, which is one of the Mouse family's favorite fruits.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Dooty," Candy calls up to Donna who is making so much noise with pans that she doesn't hear her voice.

"HELLO, MRS. DOOTY," yells Candy after climbing up a chair leg to get higher.

"Oh, hello Candy," comes the reply. "How are you today? What's on your mind?"

"I"m so sorry, Mrs Dooty, I have to tell you something that I'm ashamed of. I used your name to enter an online contest for the Corner Pet Emporium. I'm so sorry. The prize was lots of mice toys and treats, and I won. I mean, you won!"

"Well, that's okay that you used my name and I'm glad that we won. Just remember that if you want to use my name in the future you have to ask permission first. It's the polite and honest thing to do. But, let's figure out how to get the prizes, okay?"

"Thank you for being so understanding, Mrs. Dooty. I will not use your name ever again without getting your permission first. I promise!"

"Good, so give me all the details so I can call the store and claim the prizes. Can you show me the announcement of the winner?"

"Yes, and I'm so relieved that you aren't mad at me. I would never want to do anything that didn't please you."

"Okay, Candy. Let's go to my computer and you can show me how to find the announcement."

Candy scampers off of the chair and Mrs. Dooty puts her hand down for Candy to climb on to her palm. Then she carries Candy into the den where her laptop is sitting on a table. Candy tells her how to find the Facebook page for the store. Within a few seconds the two of them are looking at the Facebook page announcing Mrs. Dooty as the winner.

As Donna reads the instructions on how to claim the prizes, Candy can hardly contain her excitement. She has never won anything before and now it looks like her family is going to get some pretty neat prizes.

"That doesn't look too difficult," said Mrs. Dooty, and in a moment, she is calling the store.

"Hello," she says after the voice on the other end says, "Corner Pet Emporium. How may I help you?"

"My name is Donna Dooty and I see that I have won your mouse supplies contest. How can I get them, please?"

After giving her name, address and so forth to prove she is Mrs. Dooty, the pet store employee says, "Well, congratulations, Mrs. Dooty. Just come into the store, show your ID to one of our staff and we'll give you the prizes you have won."

"Thank you. We will come in tomorrow to get them," she says before hanging up.

And then she turns to Candy, "Okay, Candy, so Mr. Dooty and I will go get your prizes tomorrow after he gets home from work. Now, how about taking a little cherry pie to your family?"

"Ooh," says Candy. "That would be so nice. We all love cherries. Thank you so much. We are so lucky to live in your house. You and Mr. Dooty are so nice to us."

"Candy, we love having your family in our house. Ever since Mr. Dooty first met your dad on that nght during Christmas season a few years ago we have enjoyed sharing our house with you."

Donna carries Candy in one hand and a plate with a slice of cherry pie in the other into the bedroom where she places both by the closet door which she opens.

"Now, tell your family that you won the prize and you were not only rewarded with the prizes, but also with this cherry pie, okay?"

"Okay, Mrs. Dooty. And thank you again!" Candy calls as she walks through the open closet door and into the Home in the Wall.

In less than an hour, the whole Mouse family is outside the closet eating the slice of cherry pie. It is a feast and after they are done there are four very happy and very fat little mice in the Home in the Wall, laying on their backs with tummies up in the air, burping and smiling.

The next day, Franklin and Donna drive to the pet store and collect the prizes. When they got home, Franklin shouts from the front door, "Mouse family, your fun has arrived!"

The whole mouse family scampers out to the front room where Franklin is setting up all the winnings.

"Alright!" says Carl. "These are great."

"Yes, they are," responds Candy. "I won them so I get to choose who gets what. We'll split the treats and chew toys, but I get any of them if there's more than four. We have to find a place that Mr. and Mrs. Dooty will let us set up the tunnels, hideouts, and exercise wheel. The other toys go in my room, but if you're nice to me, Carl, I'll share them with you."

A week later all the prizes that need to be set up are in place in an upstairs room in the Dooty house, except for one small one that Chris manages to fit up on the rooftop patio in the Home in the Wall.

It is grand! The year's worth of treats just barely fit in the eating area and living room of the Home in the Wall, with some stacked high against the walls. The chew toys are so tasty, and each family member gets one and keeps it in their bedroom. The hideouts, bigger tunnel and exercise wheel in the Dootys' upstairs room are used by the Mouse family and their guests, every time with the permission of Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, and Candy is the Mouse family hero for a long time.

It is so exciting and fun to win the contest, but it is the last time Candy ever enters one.

Chapter 3 - Tour d’ Mouse House

The Mouse family has had many guests visit their Home in the Wall. It's one of those memorable places, hand rebuilt by Frizz and Frak, the best mouse home builders in the area.

After Mr. Dooty decided to fund a complete remodel of the Home in the Wall into a "Mansion" in the Wall, the Dootys sit down with the Mouse family and asked them what they would like done in the remodel.

Christine, of course, has some great ideas, and the Dootys have a catalog of doll house furniture, so the whole family has a lot of fun picking out furniture and furnishings. Carl and Candy each select furniture for their rooms and can hardly contain their excitement. Actually, everyone is so excited because they are getting actual doll beds with fluff on them instead of the nests made of rolled up papers and bits of fabric that they have slept on for all their lives. Carl blurts out, "That sounds like we'll be living like royalty!"

The most popular part of the conversation? Using some of the reward money from the Treasure of the Caribbean trip, Mr. Dooty is buying a small tablet and wiring it into the house. It will use the Dootys' house wi-fi to get internet, and for the computer the Dootys will pay for entertainment channels so the family can watch movies, sports and other shows on their own "big screen" tv.

But, that's not all. Franklin saves the biggest surprise for last. He points to another catalog, this one showing beautiful dollhouses. The Mouse family looks at them and oohs and aahs over all of the amazing rooms and the great architecture of each. There's one particular house that the whole family loves immediately.

Mr. Dooty explains that he will cut a hole in the wall of the closet and pay for all of the materials as well as compensation for Frizz and Frak to build a replica of the family's favorite doll house right into the wall. The front half of the house and porch will extend out from the back wall of the closet, and the back half will be inside the wall. The mice will be able to run from the house out of the front door into the interior of the closet, or out of side doors into the walls, which is what mice love to do. Mrs Dooty adds that she will get whatever paint in any colors the Mouse family wants their builders to use in each room, which puts a big smile on Christine's face.

Frizz and Frak are invited over and they sit down with Chris and Christine to learn what they want, and then the four of them sit down with Mr. and Mrs. Dooty to discuss the potential plans to make sure they were okay with it.

Both meetings are fun, as everyone is excited about how great this grand new Home in the Wall will be.

The construction takes eight long weeks, including two weeks for tearing down the old Home in the Wall, and six weeks for constructing the new structure. The result is a stunning three-story structure, built right inside the wall as they planned.

The home is built between the 2x4s that the sides of the closet wall are nailed to. This particular section of the wall was originally selected by Frizz and Frak for the original Home in the Wall because it has just one electrical wire stapled to one 2x4 and there is no plumbing in the wall to take up space, just empty space straight up and down and side to side.

Frizz and Frak give a materials list to Mr. Dooty and he is able to get most everything at a hardware store and a home goods store. Painting seems like it might be a challenge, but Chris fashions some brushes from mouse hairs tied together and Mrs. Dooty offers some very small plastic containers that they brought home from a restaurant with leftover condiments in them. Voila! Painting supplies.

Christine and Candy select the paint colors for much of the home, with Carl selecting the color for his room and Chris generously agreeing to every choice the family makes.

The front door is an interesting creation. It swings out, not in, to prevent an unwanted guest from just pushing on it to gain entry. A small gate latch on the inside slides out to lock the door from opening when the family is home.

The front door is on one side of the first floor with the living room and adjoining family kitchen/eating area on the other side. Donna Dooty is a garage sale shopper and has been on the lookout for miniature dollhouse furniture, scoring a table for food in the eating area, four mouse-sized cushions for relaxing on, small mounting hardware that Frizz and Frak can use to mount the tablet video screen on the wall. Christine hangs small pictures on the living room and eating area walls, courtesy of Donna Dooty, who showed her pictures in magazines from which to select.

A small stairway leads upstairs to a large family room and parlor. The family room also has lounging cushions for the family to relax on, and the parlor has some for guests. Both rooms have more framed pictures out of magazines.

The stairway continues up to three bedrooms, for Chris and Christine, Carl, and Candy. Christine has made a great nest in their bedroom and has a few pictures on the wall. Candy has some photos on her bedroom wall, mostly of young female mice. Carl asks Franklin Dooty if he can shrink down some rock posters with his computer and printer, and now he has perfect "cool" artwork on his bedroom wall.

Continuing up the stairs, at the very top of the house is a patio for sitting, relaxing and just enjoying privacy and quiet from a typical family home. This is also where Chris practices his guitar, which is nice because it doesn't interfere with the rest of the family down below.

The house has some great utilities for living. Frizz and Frak are able to tap into the electrical cables running up one of the 2x4 wall, and with the help of “Lightbulb,” the mouse electrician, they are able to provide lighting throughout the house. Mr. Dooty found some small LED lamps and switches, which Lightbulb rigs up to provide individual lighting for each room and also for the rooftop patio. It’s really ingenious and no other mouse family has a home with such elaborate features.

After construction and decorations are complete and the Mouse family has settled in, they begin to have friends and neighboring mice families over to just hang out and spend time together.

Word gets out through the neighboring mouse community about the wonderful "new: Home in the Wall and before long Chris and Christine get requests to see their home. This gives Chris an idea.

"Hey Christine, maybe we should have a fundraiser for Teeny after she was attacked. She's having trouble getting around and Tatt is doing his best to help her but I know they could use a little help."

"Okay, honey. That sounds really nice but what kind of fundraiser are you thinking we could do?"

"Well, so many friends and neighbors have wanted to tour our house, let's do a tour and raise money for Teeny and their family. What do you think?"

"That sounds really nice, honey. You put it together and I'll organize the kids to help clean the house up for the tour."

Teeny and Tatt Thimble are two of Chris and Christine's close friends. They live nearby making it easy for the two families to visit each other. The Thimbles have two young ones, Tanter and Teaser, that are about the same ages as Carl and Candy, the Mouse family's young ones.

Two weeks ago, Teeny was outside gathering some small fallen fruit from the yard in their host house when she was attacked by a cat. It was a tough fight because Teeny didn't want to let go of the plum she had in her paws. The cat bit Teeny on the back leg and would have killed her but Tatt ran up with a small sharp stick and poked the cat right in the butt. The cat howled and ran away, leaving Tatt to help Teeny back into the basement where they lived.

Teeny's leg is seriously injured and she is now able to barely get around, which limits not only her movement but her role in the family.

Neighboring mice families have been helping the Thimble family with food gathering and other household chores, since those are what Teeny did for their home. Tanter and Teaser have pitched in also, but they don't know all the places where Teeny gathered food, and they aren't

good at the housekeeping that she always did. That puts the full burden for everything both adults did onto Tatt.

Like most communities, the neighborhood mice want to help the Thimble family and so Chris' idea for an open house seems like a good one.

For the next several weeks Chris and Christine work on the plan. They'll have the tour on a weekend. Every guest can make a donation of their choice and then groups will get the grand tour. They decide to have a practice open house two weeks before the big event so they can test out everything with a few guests.

Three families from the neighborhood accept the invitation to take the practice tour. It generally goes well, with a couple of exceptions. Carl and Candy did not have their rooms clean - Carl had stuff strewn all over his room and Candy had not cleaned up her nest. That was an embarrassment for Christine, who apologized profusely for the clutter.

Despite that, the consensus from the practice visitors is positive and so it is decided to move forward with the Open House.

Word spreads around the neighborhood about the upcoming event. and at Mouse Church the next Sunday, Chris and Christine invite everyone they see to the Open House. The Open House will be on an upcoming Sunday afternoon. Everyone thinks it is a great idea, and the word spreads to show up and bring something for Teeny and her family.

At the Mouse family home, Christine is like a little field general, ordering everyone to a task to get their home perfectly spotless.

It's always great to welcome friends to your home, but sometimes unwelcome ones show up and that's exactly what happened.

On the Saturday one week before the event, Franklin and Donna Dooty leave their front door open to air out the house as part of their spring cleaning. Not thinking, they go in the backyard to work in the garden leaving the door open, which turns out to be a huge error.

That simple mistake allows an unwanted guest to enter the house and things take a turn for the worse.

The guest is a rat that instantly sees this as a great place to live. He scampers in the front door and casually wanders through the house to survey his prospects there.

When the rat goes into the master bedroom, he discovers the entrance to the Mouse family's Home in the Wall and peeking in he is instantly sure that this will be a perfect home for him. He continues around the Dooty home and returns to the bedroom just as Chris has returned home.

Chris spots the rat and prepares for the worst. It's a tense moment. The rat tries to bully his way into the Home in the Wall with Chris standing on the other side of the closet door with a large toothpick. Chris holds the toothpick up like a sword and when the rat pokes his nose into the opening to the closet, Chris thrusts the toothpick into the rat's nose as hard as he can. The squeal from the rat as he retreats is reassurance to Chris that his home defense just might work. He has two more toothpicks that he gives to Christine and Carl to use. Now armed with three sharp weapons they are ready to keep the rat from entering.

Their defense works this time, and the rat retreats to another part of the house to plan his attack.

It’s a tough week as the Mouse family tries several ways to get the creature they now call "rat nose" to leave their home. Every few days Rat Nose tries again to enter the closet wall where the Home in the Wall is situated. Fortunately, the Mouse family stays on alert and even though Rat Nose is successful in getting into the closet while the Mouse family is sleeping, he makes enough noise that the family is able to get to their front door and inflict a little toothpick pain on him to deter his entry.

Chris is at his wit's end and the other members of the family are exhausted. They decide to post one family member at the front door each night. If the rat attempts to get in, the posted family member calls to the others to come help defend the door, which works well except it's very tiring for the sentry and wearing on the entire family.

After several days, Chris finally must call on Franklin and Donna to affect the eviction and bring a return to normalcy. They get a rat trap from the local hardware store and in just two days, Rat Nose has a new home inside the trap. Mr. Dooty picks up the trap and drives with it several miles away before releasing Rat Nose at a large garbage dump.

"There, that ought to give him a nice place to live so he won't be bothering us anymore," exclaims Franklin as he gets back in his car and drives home.

The update from Mr. Dooty about the relocation of Rat Nose is the best news the Mouse family has heard in a long time, and they not only breathe a collective sigh of relief, they also sleep well that night.

Looking around their Home in the Wall, Chris spots damage that needs to be fixed. Rat Nose was able to get into the Home in the Wall one time before being deterred by the Mouse family. Their unwelcome guest damaged some of the home walls. Frizz and Frak do quick repairs, and all is well again structurally. The Home in the Wall is restored with some shifting of walls, some ornamental flourishes, and new paint and lighting in the downstairs rooms.

With Chris and Christine, the lingering effects of what happened have to be dealt with. Structural issues are only part of the real problem. Rat Nose has also left a huge mess in the closet, bringing in string and dried vegetation from outside, necessitating a big cleanup effort.

The whole family pitches in on the Friday before the Open House, along with help from the Dootys and two neighboring mouse couples.

The Mouse Home in the Wall is now ready for the big event.

Sunday afternoon comes and the Dootys sit in chairs on the front porch, while the Open House guests walk through the open front door. Chris greets each guest and directs them to the back bedroom where the Home in the Wall is located. There, Carl points the way to the open closet door where they can enter and get to the Home in the Wall on the inside back wall.

Like most gatherings, it's a slow start with just two mice and one mouse family arriving at first, carrying gifts for Teeny which they lay on the floor of the bedroom before going through the closet door where Christine is waiting in the open front door of the Home in the Wall.

As she welcomes them, Candy invites them to follow her for a tour. As they enter the living room she introduces Frizz and Frak, as the home builders, and explains that they can answer any questions about the construction and describe some of the building details. The visitors have never seen a mouse house like this, with all the floors, activity areas and bedrooms. They "ooh" and "aah" as they enter each room. Some female mice are heard telling their male mice companions that this is what they want in a house. As Candy hears those remarks, she reminds them that Frizz and Frak are available to build other mouse houses, too.

It's a wonderful day and the pile of supplies gathered for Teeny and her family is impressive. Frizz and Frak also brought a few gifts for the Thimble family, and they are as happy as anyone because they got two home building jobs from the Open House and Rev. Souris hired them to do some remodeling of Mouse Church. As the two young builders leave, they thank Chris for showcasing their work and offer to come over any time mice have questions about the construction.

After the Open House is over later Sunday afternoon, Tatt and Teeny and their kids come over to gather up the small mountain of supplies to take to their home. Teeny is so grateful and while she still is not able to get around very well, she is so happy that she says she would dance around if she could. Tatt has a tear in one corner of one eye as he sees his wife so happy. Tanter and Teaser just look at the pile with big smiles as Tatt directs them to start carrying the goods back home. Along with Tatt and Chris, Carl and Candy pitch in to help and the transporting of gifts is done in three trips.

Sunday night, the Mouse family relaxes in their living room, everyone breathing a sigh of relief that the event is over. All the preparation for the event paid off, the Thimble family has been given a wonderful gift, and the enthusiasm and praise for the beautiful new Home in the Wall has the whole family smiling.

"It's been a great day, family," says Chris. "We did something good for our friends and we had fun doing it. This is what we do for each other when there is a need. Let's not ever forget that when others are in trouble, good friends and neighbors pitch in to help."

Chapter 4 - The Secret of the Andes
as told by Chris Mouse



I always imagined what the mountains were like. I mean, we live in a house about 10 blocks from the beach in Southern California. That's pretty nice, but yet, I have seen pictures of mountains and was naturally curious. I wanted to see them up close.

There were days, generally toward the end of December when the Christmas tree is still up, that it smells a little bit like a forest in the house with the fragrance of pine, just like in the mountains…

(Oh, come on, you've smelled it before.)

I like to look through Mr. Dooty's trash. Sure, there are edible treasures there, but I really like reading the printed material that he throws away. One thing that caught my eye the other day was a printout of an email from a travel agent.

> “Dear Franklin Dooty,
>
> We have made reservations for you and your wife, Donna, for air travel to and from Quito, Ecuador, with ground transportation through the lower region of Chile, and back to Quito for your return flight.
>
> Your departure date will be September 15 and your return date will be September 31. This is spring in this part of the world and the weather should be lovely.
>
> Have a nice trip and please let your friends know if you are happy with the work we do for you.
>
> Sharlotte Bingham
> Travel Agent
> A Whole Big World of Travel

That was a surprise, since Franklin had never mentioned any future travels.

I had a lot going on this week and I just didn’t have time to follow up on this juicy bit of information. I wanted to follow up, but I was just too dang pressed with more “pressing” things.

Still, I was way too curious to let this go, so when I finally saw Franklin in the kitchen one night, which seems to be our usual meeting place and time, I asked him. “Franklin, I saw an email that said something about a trip to Quito. Where is that and what are you planning, if you don’t mind my asking?” I began.

“Oh, Chris, you caught me, you little rascal,” Franklin replied. “This was supposed to be a surprise. Donna and I are going on a trip to South America. We have always wanted to see the impressive Andes Mountains, and we thought you and Christine and the kids might really enjoy that, too. What do you think? Would you like to go?”

I was stopped dead in my mouse tracks. “What?” I blurted out.

Franklin explained, “The Andes are really big and really high. These mountains reach through seven countries and are the longest continental mountain range on this planet. There is so much history and so many old relics from early civilizations – it’s a really special place to visit.”

“Oh my,” I replied. “That sounds scary, in a way. Mice are a little afraid of heights, you know.”

“Not to worry, my little friend,” Franklin continued. “You and your family will be securely in our pockets, safe and warm, while we travel through this area. We’ll be staying mainly in

the towns and looking at the mountains as they spread across the horizon. We might make one or two little trips to some of the villages, but mainly we'll be in larger towns, and you shouldn't have to worry about any extreme heights."

Well, that was encouraging and the idea of traveling always gets me excited. I like to see new things and enjoy new smells and food. It's just one of the pleasures of being a mouse.

I couldn't wait to tell Christine and the kids.

Carl was the first one to ask the obvious question. "Dad, that sounds very exciting, but how are we going to get there?"

I shared what little I knew. "Remember when we went to the Bahamas with Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, how they kept us in their pockets while we went through security and flew to the islands and back?"

"Sure, but that was a while ago. Can they still do that?" asked Carl.

"I guess we're going to find out, Carl. We're going to have a dinner tonight with the Dootys to talk about the trip and how we'll do it."

And that evening, that was the entire topic of conversation.

We really like the dinners that we occasionally have with our housemates, the Dootys. They set up a little doll table and chairs in the middle of their kitchen table, put some table scraps and cheese and a little bread on the table, then they lift us all up to the table where their meal is already sitting, too. The six of us sit and eat and talk and laugh. Carl and Candy really love Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, and I have to say that Christine and I feel the same way. Franklin and Donna have been the best non-mouse friends we have ever had.

Dinner was quite fun. Mrs. Dooty had made something she called "Bolon de Verde" which has some kind of dough on the outside and meat and cheese on the inside. Mrs. Dooty said it's the national dish of Ecuador, the first country we will visit on our trip to the Andes. She spread it around to all the plates and we ate like we were starved. It was soo good! The fragrance was divine, and the taste, Oooh! Carl and Candy couldn't stop licking their paws after they finished. I even snuck a couple of licks on my own paws, trying to be discreet. Apparently, humans don't have this habit.

During the dinner we talked about the upcoming trip, how long we would be gone, the places we would go, and what we could hope to see. It all sounded so exciting. The mouse family was all a twitter, except we don't twitter. But our whiskers were quivering, that's for sure.

In just a short three weeks later, everyone was packed and we were carried out to Franklin's car for the trip to the airport. It was quick. We live pretty close to the airport and you can even sometimes hear the planes taking off near our house.

We made it from the parking garage inside the terminal and then through security. Franklin has asked me not to share the details of how we get through security, but I'll just say that with a little bit of preparation it's almost a breeze.

The hardest part is in the waiting lounge, sitting with nothing to do, just waiting to board the plane.

Finally, we got to get on the plane. It's a little nerve wracking because Franklin and Mrs. Dooty had to carry on some roller bags with lots of people in line trying to get to their seats. Once or twice, someone bumped up against Franklin and just missed squishing me. Christine was okay but I worried about Carl and Candy and hoped they were okay.

The Dootys sat together on the side of the plane that has only two seats per row. That makes it a little more accommodating for us to stretch out and relax during the flight because Franklin carried on a little box with a handle that has large holes for air, out of which we can actually pop our heads to look around. It's our own special seating arrangement on the plane and it makes it very comfortable for our family to travel.

The most exciting parts of traveling by airplane for our family are the takeoff and landing. We all brace ourselves when the plane picks up speed to take off so we don't get thrown back too much. Franklin held the box up to the window so we all got to watch as we rolled down the runway and then lifted into the air. I held my breath. This is always pretty exciting.

The rest of the trip, though, was boring. Nine and a half hours! Whew! Carl and Candy slept, Christine and I talked some, and the Dootys were quiet most of the time. Every now and then I would hear the rustle of paper, while Mr. or Mrs. Dooty turned the pages of a magazine.

Finally, we could feel things change as the plane decreased speed and came down to land. After a long descent with our ears popping, we held our breath as we felt the plane float in the air and then heard the "screech" as the tires touched the ground and the plane settled onto the runway.

We were tired, but excited to be in a new country and on a new continent. South America! It just sounded great! When we got off the plane and the Dootys got their luggage Franklin found a taxi and we went from the airport to a hotel. Honestly, we couldn't see anything during the ride because Mrs. Dooty kept us hidden in the box, so it was just a car ride like any other car ride.

After we checked into the hotel and luggage was unpacked, we all rushed to the windows to get a look at the city. It was grand. The windows were the height of the room, two huge window doors that opened to a small balcony with a wrought iron railing where we could stand and look out over Quito. It was dark by now, and the lights of the city were sparkling like stars in the sky. It was so beautiful. Christine and I held hands and sighed. Carl and Candy just stood there staring at the amazing sight. It was breathtaking. I saw Franklin sneak a kiss from Mrs. Dooty.

Did I tell you that we were tired? Fortunately, it was a quiet night and we all went to sleep early, excited to be in a very different place but needing to rest up so we would be ready to enjoy the two weeks to come.

The next few days we traveled around Quito, looking at the sights, peeking out of the pockets of Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, with better views when they held us up to the windows. It was fascinating. Parts of the city were old and very different than what we were used to seeing. There were parks and cathedrals and other old buildings of all kinds.

In one of the squares, dancers in colorful costumes were swirling and twirling while people watched. There was a small band with guitars and some horns. It was magical. We had never seen anything like it.

Three days after arrival in Quito we were back on a plane and traveling to Cusco, a city in Peru, which was a completely different country than the one we were leaving. This would be our second country in South America.

When we got to our hotel room in Cusco we looked out the windows and in the distance we could see mountains. As we stared at them, Franklin told us, “We’re going to take a bus trip tomorrow to get closer and see what those mountains really look like.”

We were so excited, we could hardly sleep that night. This is all pretty cool for a mouse, to see the second highest mountain range outside of Asia? That’s something.

The next day, riding in the bus, I looked out the window straight at the tallest, most impressive mountains I have ever seen. It was really special! They were majestic and I whispered to Christine and the kids to look as closely as they could. The sheer grandeur of those peaks made you happy just to be alive and experiencing that view.

The bus was taking us up into the lower elevation of the mountain range to spend the night and get an early start at seeing some of the major sights of the region.

We stopped at a hostel in the foothills. It was set in a small area, honestly, with no real towns around. Just countryside and the one open hostel where singles or families could spend a night.

We checked into the hostel. By the way, when I say “we” from time-to-time I mean to say that Mr. and Mrs. Dooty checked in and we were in their pockets. So, I guess you could say, “we” checked in. But anyway.

Our accommodations in the hostel were in the general bunkbed area. We were in the middle of a long room with eight sets of three bunkbeds - bottom, middle, top. That’s 24 beds and we only needed two because Mrs. Dooty always let our family sleep with her when we travel. She’s very soft and not angular like Mr. Dooty, and she doesn't toss and turn in her sleep like her husband. Mrs. Dooty most often just lays there peacefully, with the very occasional sigh as she lets out a breath.

Laying in bed with Mrs. Dooty after washing our faces and preparing for bed, it was quiet except for distant cowbells that rang during the early evening and night. The cowbells stopped about 10 o'clock or so and soon after we were fast asleep.

We all slept soundly that night, tired from our travels and enjoying a nice full night’s sleep to recharge our batteries.

The next day we woke up just as the sun was peeking through the windows. The smell of eggs and bacon were wafting through the hostel. It was intoxicating, and we immediately got up and followed the smell, our noses stopping frequently to sniff the air and decide which way to go. Mr. and Mrs. Dooty had also been aroused by the smell and caught up with us as we were next to the last stack of bunkbeds. We all went to the breakfast area, us in the Dootys' pockets.

The breakfast room doubled as a storage area and bar, probably at different times. There were eight tables that could sit four people at each. Two tables were full, leaving four with two people each and two more empty. Mr and Mrs Dooty thankfully chose one of the two empty tables and left their coats, with our family in the pockets, hanging off the back of the chair.

Our faithful friends brought back some great food which they shared with us by dropping pieces of food in their pockets where we were waiting. I was in one pocket with Carl, and Christine was in the other pocket with Candy. The Dootys intentionally made equal breakfast contributions to their respective pockets and we, as responsible mice, ate every bit. It was a good start to the day.

After breakfast we boarded a small tour bus a block from the hostel, where we had locked our luggage in hostel lockers. It was a trip the Dootys had told us about the night before. We were going to a legendary place of an ancient people. “It is a very old town that has been abandoned for over 100 years,” Mrs. Dooty said, almost reverently.

Full of energy and enthusiasm, we rode the bouncing two-hour trip in high spirits and almost before we knew it, we were there. After arrival, we were lifted out of pockets.

Franklin had printed a map from the Internet for us that showed all the sights to see. I thought I could figure it out, anyway. It's not a big place and only so many people can visit at a time. Of course, they didn't count mice. We just snuck in.

Christine and I and the kids went one way, the Dootys went another. For us, it was a private, self-guided tour while the Dootys went on the "official tour."

"Candy, Carl, take a look at this," I called in their direction. I was pointing at a narrow street that led away from where the group of humans were going.

The kids were beside us in a snap. Looking straight down the street where I pointed, we could see three green arrows pointing into a small-ish former building that was now just an outline of half walls.

"What is that, dad?" from Candy.

"I'm not sure, Candy. I'll go look and let you guys know after I check it out," I replied.

With that I ran to the green arrows and not seeing anything but wall, I reached out to touch it. The wall wasn't there. I just put my hand through what I thought was the wall and the next thing I knew I was inside the building.

Candy and Carl, I would find out later, ran to the wall and tried to go through it but didn't know where to push and they couldn't get inside.

Meanwhile, I was looking around the small building outline. I could see above the half wall, but because I'm short all I could see was blue sky with some clouds. There was nothing else to see but short adobe walls. No roof, no windows, just little walls outlining what I guessed were rooms at one time.

I yelled out, "Christine, Candy, Carl!" but no answer. Nothing. No sound.

After a frantic half a minute, I decided to look around, to see if I could spot an exit or something that would identify where I was. I wandered the floor, which was mostly just hard-packed clay and dirt with occasional bricks.

Bump! I ran into a wall that I didn't even see. How is that possible? I have the nose and eyesight of a mouse, both pretty much above many other critters. But somehow I didn't remember that wall being there and yet it was.

I began to look more closely at the floor. I don't know why, but I was just looking for any clue. And that's where I saw it - a rectangular piece of wood-looking metal embedded into

the floor near the far wall. It really looked like wood until you got close to it. Then you could see that it was a brown metal.

There was a hook and a twist grab on one side of it. I twisted the grab and pulled on the hook and to my surprise the metal door lifted up by itself. I was surprised because I'm a mouse and this was a human-sized door. "What do you do now?" I asked myself.

It was all I could do to keep from jumping into the stairwell that extended down into the ground but I lifted a leg over the side and slowly began to jump down each of the creaky stairs which seemed like they had been there forever. They also appeared to have not been used for a long time because each step brought up a tiny cloud of dust.

At the bottom of the stairs was a chair. Sitting on it was a man, looking pretty much hungry or starved or something. This thin old man looked up at me with sockets for eyes and he said, "Well, you've found the greatest secret you will ever find, my little friend. The Andes hides history, but inside its heart are beautiful secrets."

That didn't make sense to me. I couldn't understand anything about what the man said. I turned away to think for a second and then turned back to ask the man a question… but he was no longer there.

"Sir, sir!" I yelled hoping that my mouse voice would carry to where ever the man had gone.

No answer.

I shouted my question two more times and when there was no response to either entreaty I gave up and began to climb the stairs, no better off than when I descended. I had been awake but felt like what just happened was a dream.

As I climbed out of the stairwell at the top, I tried to pull the door back down, but to my amazement it lowered itself and then instantly blended into the floor again.

it was light outside. Much lighter than when I had gone down the stairs.

The sun was shining, I could see an opening from the building outline to the main avenue of the ancient, excavated city.

I walked out into the dirt street and there was my family, and the Dootys.

Franklin shouted to me, "Hey, Chris, where have you been? You'll never guess what we found. We have some exciting news."

I couldn't wait. After the puzzlement of the encounter with the man on the chair I was ready for anything that was a little more concrete. Something I could understand.

I caught up to them and Mr. Dooty immediately said, “Chris, we met a man that is amazing. You have to come with us. We’re going to go see him again.” And with that, he scooped me up, put me in his pocket with Carl and we left., walking past the outskirts of the ruins to the countryside. Mrs. Dooty had Christine and Candy in her pocket.

We all bounced around until suddenly we were standing in front of a small building. It wasn’t really a building. It was a front to a building, alright, but it was attached to a wall and the rest of the building was carved into the hillside, several hundred yards outside of the ancient city.

I saw a man out of the corner of my eye, walking in front of the building facade. He was wearing bright red pants, white sneakers, and a dark blue tropical shirt. It was a striking combination.

Apparently, no one else saw him. So, I slipped away and ran after him. As I got close to him it sounded like he was babbling some kind of nonsensical language, something like what a baby might sound like between blowing bubbles. I leaned in closer to hear what he was saying.

It was babble alright. He was talking about the sun orbiting the moon, water being the government, people, animals and earth all lacking influence. It was a class-A rant, except he kept repeating, “I have to find her. Where is she? I have to find her.”

Mice are intuitive, did you know that? We have a sixth sense. We smell, we feel, we can detect thermal changes, we see, we hear. Sixth sense? We know things before people do. It’s not that we’re all that brilliant. We just “know” things.

I was curious. I listened to the man talk for a few minutes and then he just got up, walked away, and I had to run to catch up to him.

I yelled, “Hey,” and he slowed down for just a moment before continuing his lanky walk.

I jumped on his pant legs and yelled, “Stop!” at the top of my lungs. He stopped.

I said, “Okay, now it’s safe to go but you need to walk slowly. Just walk and I’ll walk with you. Would that be okay?”

He looked at me like I was a hallucination. “Whatever you are, little creature, just go home. This is not your problem, and I don’t need you holding me back. Please go away.”

I was stunned. I thought we could come to some kind of understanding or agreement or something. That not being the case I offered one parting question, “So, what’s the problem and what don’t you need my help for?”

He pulled out a photograph of a woman from his pocket.

“This is my wife. We came here this morning and somehow she just wandered off. I turned to look at something and when I turned back she was gone. I have been searching for her since then but haven’t found her. I’m going out of my mind with worry.”

“Okay,” I said and began a barrage of questions of him as though I was a great detective. “What is her name, how old is she, what color is her hair, would you say her face is more angular, oblong or square, where and when did you last see her, have you heard from her since she disappeared, do you have any ideas of where we might find her?”

All of these seemed like reasonable questions to narrow down the possibilities from thousands to hundreds to a dozen to maybe a couple. Getting to the bottom of the funnel is where you want to end up, I have always felt.

Armed with answers from the man, I sat for several minutes and just thought. And then, I got up and left.

My first plan was to go find my family and the Dootys. But, of course, I wasn’t exactly sure where I was and where they were. Resigned to that reality, my next priority was to deal with the issue at hand, while also looking for my family and the Dootys.

I have a propensity for action. So, I immediately walked to where the man said he last saw his wife and I just hung out and watched. I was small. No one would even see me, really.

I waited for an hour. Saw nothing, bored, hating my life for signing up for this, just nothing. I wondered how my family and the Dootys were doing, but I was honestly caught up in this adventure and hoped that they were fine and not worried about me.

Finally, after a few more quiet minutes something caught my eye. It was a woman that looked exactly like the woman in the photo, except with slightly longer hair – same color, just slightly longer. She was wandering around picking up small flowers in a meadow. She didn’t seem to be lost or concerned, just focused on selecting certain flowers.

I got close to her and in my loudest mouse voice called, “Hey!”

She had been bent over picking a flower and stood up suddenly, looking around her.

I yelled again, “Hey!” and then she looked straight at me and knelt down next to me.

“What do you want, little mouse?” she asked.

“My name isn’t ‘little mouse,’” I answered. “It’s Chris Mouse and I’ve been looking for you.”

“Why, whatever for?” came her reply. “Who sent you?”

“Your husband did. He’s been searching for you. He said you’ve been missing since this morning.”

With that, she had a surprised look on her face as though she just woke up from a dream and found herself in a strange place.

And then she told me what happened. “We were picking flowers when I saw something in the distance. It was a rock wall with an unusual looking dark area on it, and I walked over to take a closer look. What I discovered was a small cave and inside was what I think was a tomb. There was a stone sitting next to it with writing on it in Spanish. It said, ‘He encontrado el secreto de los Andes,’ which in English means ‘I have found the secret of the Andes.’” Next to the tomb and the stone was a small wooden box, which I opened to find a parchment document. My Spanish isn’t that good, but it looked like a map with different markings on it. I followed the map to the meadow where you found me. I was picking more flowers to see if there were any stones or markings on the ground under them. I didn’t find anything except these beautiful flowers.

“So, I went back to the cave. Underneath the small wooden box was a second parchment document. It was written by the person in the tomb before he died. He said that a lost race of people lived in these mountains for hundreds of yearbut they were all wiped out in a massive avalanche one winter.”

The person in the tomb had been exploring the mountains looking for minerals when he came across bones of the people killed in the avalanche. One of the avalanche victims had lived for a while after the avalanche and before he died he scrawled out a brief story of the people, their lives, where they came from, and what they had discovered. The story was brief, but beautiful. Many of the people that lived there were over 100 years old. They were a peaceful people. They lived together and took care of each other. The food they ate was healthy, and everyone did physical work to maintain their lifestyle and community. They raised a rare plant that brought beauty and color into their lives and from which they brewed a medicinal tea that they drank every day. They lived very long and very healthy lives until the day of the avalanche.

The explorer that discovered all this had been noticing signs of his own serious illness and knew that he would probably not make it back to civilization before his demise, so he fashioned his final resting place, scrawled the writing on a rock, wrote on parchment what he had discovered, and prepared for his ending, which is where the lady had found his body.

I knew in an instant that I had seen that explorer or at least his ghost. He was the man that talked to me in the cellar and then disappeared earlier in the day.

It was a fascinating story, and as the lady was finishing her tale, they heard voices as the Dootys and our family came running up to them. Christine was crying with relief, the Dootys looked distressed, but I just smiled as I introduced the lady to them. She retold the story and as she finished the retelling, her husband found them and embraced his wife. He suddenly looked younger, like a big weight had been lifted off of him.

Having learned a secret that had been undiscovered for many years, we left the couple, found our tour group and bus, and returned to our hotel.

Two weeks later, we all flew home with lots of stories and one very special picture of flowers from the high mountain meadow. I framed the photograph which now proudly hangs in our Home in the Wall with an inscription underneath it – The Secret of the Andes.

It is a constant reminder of an amazing trip and an even more amazing discovery.



Actual high mountain flowers in the Andes

Chapter 5 - Here We Go!

It's another quiet Saturday morning in the Mouse home with each family member busy doing their own thing. Carl is working on his homework in the middle of the living room floor, something he sometimes waits until Sunday night to do. Candy is watching a popular mouse girl podcast, hosted by two mouse girl actresses. As a really good student her homework was done the night before while Carl watched a movie on their big screen tablet TV. Of course, you remember that was a gift from the Dootys after the amazing reward that Chris got for discovering the buried Caribbean treasure. The big screen is such a bonus because every Saturday night Chris and Christine and their kids watch movies on their new entertainment center.

Chris is busy practicing his guitar, a unique musical instrument that Frizz made for him a few months ago out of a tiny cardboard box with mouse whiskers for strings. It has taken quite a bit of practice to make anything that sounds like music, but Chris is getting better, and his wife encourages him to keep going. If nothing else, it gets him out of the way while Christine relaxes in their Home in the Wall.

Every other Saturday is cleaning day at the Mouse house.

The Mouse home is generally a mess by Saturday. Every day of the week is busy and with the family coming and going, often outside in the yard and back, dirt gets tracked in. After rainy days the house is even more challenging to clean because moist dirt gets tracked in, sticks to the floor and has to be scrubbed with water. Fortunately, the Dootys put a small dog bowl down in the bathroom with fresh water in it. As a good dad, Chris uses scraps of paper and cloth to absorb some water for cleaning and then uses it to scrub up dirt. During the summer dust comes in from under the closet door and then into the door to their house. By cleaning day, their cozy home needs serious cleaning, at least according to Chris and Christine.

Every other cleaning day, Christine marshals the family into helping clean, which generally means that Carl and Candy have to clean their own rooms while Chris and Christine clean the common areas. The two kids are also responsible for sweeping the three-story home with a broom made from pieces broken off from the Dootys' broom that Mrs. Dooty has saved. During the Home in the Wall rebuild, the very handy Frizz tied the broom pieces together extending out of a small stick thus making a very useful cleaning tool.

Lunch on those cleaning days is eaten together, unlike the alternate Saturdays when everyone fixes their own food at midday.

On this Saturday, it's every mouse for themselves, which makes it less stressful for the whole family.

By mid-afternoon, Chris has mastered a new song and after dinner the family listens as he performs it for them. It's a pleasant song of his own creation that he calls "Rock the Mouse house" with a nice melody and a simple beat. Christine finds herself tapping one of her bottom paws to the beat and Candy sways a bit in tempo.

Carl stops the performance and asks his dad to start all over. As the first notes begin Carl stands and does a couple of moves to the beat, swiveling on one hind leg before bending down to touch his front paws to the ground and lifting his back paws in the air, swiveling and twisting to the beat, then dropping back on all four paws. Chris is watching with amazement. He's never seen his son dance and that's really what Carl seems to be doing, but he's doing it to the song and it looks really fun and entertaining.

As Chris stops at the end of the song, the others applaud with delight. It is really quite a performance from the two male mice and Carl's animated movements really tied it all together.

"Carl, that was great," says Chris.

"You two were really pretty good together," adds Candy.

Christine just sits there for a moment before saying, "I think that we might have something fun here. Would you guys consider letting Candy and I join in?"

"Sure, honey," replies Chris. "But what would you two do?"

"I don't know but both Candy and I love to dance. Maybe we could all move to the music with some synchronized steps, or something."

"Hmm," from Chris. "I guess we could try that. It could be a fun family activity," and under his breath he mutters softly, "and it would sure beat cleaning the house!"

For a half hour, Chris plays his instrument as Christine and Candy move to the music. It looks very synchronized. In reality, it doesn't really seem that either of them are in synch with the other. But, it looks fun and a form of exercise, so it seems like a worthwhile thing to do.

Carl has been watching his mom and sister as they move and after the last song has finished he says, "I have an idea," which catches the curiosity of the other family members.

"When you two move," he says, "watch what the other is doing and try to do the same moves. Keep doing the same move for a while so you can both get the beat and the movement. Mom, you make the moves and Candy, you try to match what mom is doing."

That seems like a good idea, and it is still early, so Chris begins playing the last song again. Christine starts moving and Candy tries to do the same steps as her mom.

It isn't even close. Christine makes her moves, but Candy is just a beat or two off in trying to mimic what her mom is doing.

For another hour, the three practice on the one song with Carl watching and directing. When they are all tired and decide to quit, Carl gives his critique. "You're doing much better, but it looks like you're just exercising and not dancing. Let's get some videos on our tv and watch some of the music acts as they perform."

Chris says, "That's a great idea. Let's see how the professionals do it," and they sit down and watch music videos of boy bands doing synchronized dancing.

"That was good," says Christine. "How about we have some fun and try another routine again after church tomorrow afternoon?"

It's agreed. No one in the family thinks they are doing anything but just getting exercise. Little do they know that Carl has an idea that will change everything.

After Mouse Church the next day, the four family members gather in the living room. Carl tells his sister to try her dance steps to their father's music, which she does. Then the young male mouse asks his mother to match Candy's movements.

It's amazing. Christine watches Candy and then joins in with every step, every hand movement, following every body twist exactly as Candy is doing.

Chris stops playing and lets out a huge whistle. "Wow! That was great. You two really have it together. But Carl, what will you do?"

Carl grabs a small piece of paper, holds it up with one front paw, and taps it with the other making a sharp sound. "This!" he says. "Now let's try it again and I'll join in."

Chris strums the song, Candy and Christine begin dancing with Christine matching Candy's moves, and Carl joins in, matching them both step for step, turn for turn, while snapping the paper beside his head. It is really cool, to be sure. After going through the song twice, the four mice sit down laughing, each one happy at what has just happened.

"How did we do that?" asks Candy. "I don't know," answers Chris, "but you three look like you're having a lot of fun, and it is really entertaining."

This begins a new family evening practice.

Soon, the four mice are having fun every other night. After the kids are done with their homework the family gathers to dance to music videos on their tablet tv. Within a month, they can perform tightly choreographed moves to seven songs, which is pretty impressive given how this all started.

After one Friday night's fun, Chris gathers the family together and says, "I've been practicing my guitar, and I think I can play at least four songs that you are dancing to. Would you like to try that?"

To which, the other three quickly nod and Candy claps her front paws happily.

The next night after the evening meal Chris gathers everyone in the front room and then begins to tap his guitar box to set the beat. The others listen and then Chris starts to play one of his four songs. It sounds okay, not great, but okay. But, what makes it good is that Candy, Christine and Carl are moving together to the music. They tap, they twirl, they raise their hands and turn, they stomp their back paws on the floor, and all to the beat of the song Chris is playing. It is almost as if they are in a trance as they move together while time seems to stand still.

When it is over, they all exhale and Carl says, "Now that's what I'm talking about. That was a blast. You guys are really good, you know?"

To which Chris agrees, "That was totally good," as his family members nod in agreement with astonished looks on their faces.

After that, each week on a Thursday night the Mouse family gathers after dinner to learn new moves to new songs or practice the songs they have learned.

After a couple of weeks of this, they're sitting at dinner when Carl suddenly blurts out, "I think we should practice at least three times a week. We have the weekend when we could do a song or two on Saturday and Sunday, and then just have Thursday night during the school week. What do you think?"

Chris and Christine promise to talk it over and answer him in a day or two.

That night as the two parents get ready for sleep Christine starts the conversation, "Maybe we could try it for one week and see how it goes."

Chris replies, "That sounds like a good idea. I just don't want to commit to something and then find out that their schoolwork is suffering."

"Okay, we're agreed then. Let's tell them tomorrow." And the next night at dinner they share the good news. They will try it out. Thursday night will be a good weeknight for practice, followed by Saturday and Sunday night, providing homework has been done and checked by both parents.

So starts a new weekly routine. Each week the four family members practice one or more of the songs, spreading them out over the three practice days.

Two months later they have a polished repertoire of the four songs and on one of the practice nights Christine suggests, “We should form a real musical group and give our group a name. We’re getting really good and if it’s time to perform for other mice we should at least look like we have our act together.”

The next practice night they settle on calling their musical group "Here We Go!"

Now that they look official, they polish their moves to look like the boy or girl bands where every member sings and does synchronized moves to the music.

Now it’s time to show the world outside their family what they’ve been doing. They decide to put on a little show for the Dootys and Franklin's nephew Danny, the result of which is cheers, laughter and wild applause from their small audience.

That feels pretty good. The test outside their family emboldens Chris so, with the permission from Franklin he starts telling the other mice at Mouse Church and their other friends that there will be a short family show this coming Saturday at the Dooty home.

Danny has some ideas about lighting and staging, and some of the other "residents" of the Dooty household offer ideas. With the Conga line and other party activities that they often do in the kitchen when the Dootys are bowling some are really talented performers in their own right,.

Danny works up a couple of really strong, focused lights with round masks around the lights and spring connectors to mount them on furniture. All the lights are controlled by a small master board that he has built to run them.

The night comes and it’s time for the show. About twenty mice guests gather and are seated on the kitchen floor, the table, chairs and counters.

When it’s time, Danny shuts off the kitchen lights and turns on the “stage” lighting. Mr and Mrs. Dooty walk into the light dressed “to the nines.” Franklin is wearing a suit and Donna dazzles with her gown and tossed up hair.

Franklin announces, “Good evening and welcome to the first public performance of ‘Here We Go!.’ This talented ensemble will delight you with their music and their amazing footwork, so sit back and relax and get ready to be entertained.”

With that, Danny shuts the stage lights off plunging the room into darkness. A minute later he turns them back on to reveal the Mouse family, dressed formally and standing in the middle of the floor.

Chris begins to play his guitar slowly and softly as his family stands quietly at his side. After a few bars he begins to tap on the guitar “box” setting the rhythm. Still the family stands quietly.

Less than a minute later, Chris raps the box hard and the family shifts quickly to a new position, followed by the notes of the first song as Chris strums and pops the box. With each beat Christine, Carl and Candy make a quick move until finally the song becomes melodic and their footwork and body movement synchronize in time. It's mesmerizing and so professional. As the lights once again go out, Christine's soft voice begins singing the words to the song, followed by the lights slowly coming up brighter and illuminating the dancing, singing family. It's a stellar show and at the end of the song the assembled guests stand up as one to cheer and applaud.

Three more songs, with the same excited response and the show is over. The lights once more go out and then come up to show the Mouse family standing quietly in the light with front paws crossed in front of them. Cheers go up from the audience, followed by several minutes of loud applause. They're a hit!

After the show the guests surround the four performers and share their enthusiasm for the night's performance.

Franklin thanks everyone for coming as Mrs. Dooty serves snacks.

This is the beginning of what will be a great experience for the Mouse family.

In a month, it's announced that there will be a mouse talent show nearby and word travels through the mouse community to solicit performers. The promotion is done by "word of mouse", and the show soon becomes a topic in every conversation in the local mouse community.

There will be many acts of all kinds and the most exciting part is that the best act will get to play in the city-wide mouse talent show in just six months. There's a buzz in the neighborhoods with every mouse thinking about what they could do to get on stage. Flyers go out, mice start signing up, and before long there are 10 acts. Now, it's going to be a big deal.

The Chris Mouse family is in full rehearsal mode. They only get to do one number so it will have to be really good. Of the four songs that the family has mastered, it's hard to pick just one so they audition for the Dootys and the answer is unanimous. The song they like the best is "The Fluff I Lost" which is kind of a ballad from the Four Blind Mice, but with a kicky chorus. Carl works out some neat, synchronized dance moves and he, Candy and Christine practice as Chris plays the tune. For the first time, they add vocals, a duet between Candy and Christine. It's not bad. It just needs some work and there might be hope.

Frizz has been working on a new guitar made from a small metal breath mint container, a frozen ice cream stick, and strings that Mr. Dooty managed to get from an actual guitar store, cut down to size. Tuning is a problem that Frizz works hard on, but it's finally solved with little turn screws that tighten or loosen each string to give each a different pitch.

Dinner each night becomes a time when the family relaxes and talks over their act. The last part is important – their outfits. Fortunately, Mrs. Dooty is a very good seamstress, and she designs and then makes matching outfits for each of the four. Things are really starting to come together, but there's certainly a lot of nervousness in the Mouse house. None of them have done anything like this other than the show for their neighborhood friends but this time they'll be competing against some really talented mice.

The competition will be tough.

Jeromen lives two doors from the Dootys and he's always been known as a really acrobatic mouse. He can jump and twist in mid-air, landing on one leg. He's been practicing some new moves and the whisker whispers around the neighborhood are that he is going to be really fun to watch.

Kathliin has a pretty good voice. She is always singing wherever she goes and everyone agrees that she sounds very nice. She doesn't move when she sings, but she's very pleasant and that counts for something.

Dinty is a ventriloquist. His mom has made a small mouse puppet that sits next to him. When he is really showing off you can't see his mouse mouth move when the puppet talks. He's not very funny, but it's still pretty entertaining.

Jimny and Johnpy are comedians. They're natural jokesters and when they get in a mood, they can make everyone laugh.

Shurley's family has a very silly act. They each play the part of a different animal in the house they live in. As they act out their parts it's funny to watch them play a mouse dog, a mouse cat and a mouse parakeet and they have some humorous dialogue.

Several other mice in the surrounding neighborhood are coming up with other acts. The competition is beginning to get very serious.

The day before the show, Franklin's nephew Danny helps set up the stage and the lights. He will control the stage lights so it's important that everything is prepared well. The organizer of the show, Felix T. Mousapan, asks Danny to help out in that department and Mrs. Dooty agrees to be one of the stagehands, directing acts on and off stage during the show.

The morning of the show it rains cats and dogs. Okay, not actual cats and dogs, but the human expression type of raining cats and dogs (no one ever heard of it raining mice). It's a downpour for two hours. Fortunately, Franklin, Danny and the other humans cover the stage and lighting, but the lawn where the show will be held is soaking wet. The only hope is that the sun will come out and dry out everything before the 6 pm show start.

It's nervous time after the downpour as clouds slowly thin out and the sun finally comes out. Time is critical. The audience will start showing up in just four hours and Felix is wringing his paws with anxiety.

One hour before the show, the stage hands check the seating area and find that there are only a few spots that are still damp, and even those are not damp enough to be a problem. The show will go on!

Mice start to arrive and find places to sit in front of the stage. Three enterprising mice have brought tasty mouse snacks which they sell for peanuts. Soon, it's dark and the lights are on. Curtains cover the stage.

The audience has been waiting for 15 minutes. It's time.

All the lights go off for a minute and then one flashlight turns on illuminating the middle of the curtain. The curtain separates and Felix T. Mousapan walks out proudly and announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, the 6th Street neighborhood is proud to present your best and most talented neighbors in a revue that has taken months to produce. Please keep your applause until each performance has ended and I remind you to be on your best behavior. No shouting, no throwing anything on the stage and no lights of any kind – only the stage lights. And with that, I am delighted to introduce to you our first act."

It's Dinty the ventriloquist. He is surprisingly good. His mouse puppet says some very funny things and you almost can't see Dinty move his mouth at all. Even his whiskers don't move. It's a very convincing act and when he's done the audience applauds generously. It's a good start to the show to the delight of the small crowd.

Next up is Kathliin. She seems pretty nervous and has to take a moment to stand quietly and compose herself. She begins to sing, and it's a very nice a capella song about rainbows and butterflies. Her voice cracks just once, but she gamely continues on, and the audience kindly thanks her with polite applause. Most of the mice can imagine themselves in her position and they salute her courage for performing publicly.

Felix has been on a roll, introducing each act with a flourish, sweeping his right paw in front of them as he loudly announces each contestant. He shows no favorites and each performer gets exactly the same type of introduction.

Two more acts follow and then it's time for the Mouse family.

"Bucks and Does, our next act is a family act. They've been rehearsing so they can please you with their performance. They call themselves 'Here We Go!.' Please give them a warm welcome!"

Carl, Candy, Christine and Chris have been behind the curtain and they have requested that the lights go out as Felix announces them. At the end of his introduction, the curtain opens to the darkened stage and then a single light cuts through the dark to illuminate the four Mouse family members standing on stage. The audience quietly waits for their act to begin.

The only sound coming from the stage is of Chris' guitar as he plays the opening notes. The other three family members stand silently, not moving until the music hits a certain note. Then they move, each one synchronized exactly with the others. The music is punctuated by rhythmic clapping from Candy, Christine and Carl. And then the clapping stops, and Christine and Candy's voices begin to sing the words to the song. The three begin to move from side to side, Chris joins in as he plays. As the song reaches the chorus the tempo picks up, the two blended voices get louder as all four twirl on stage, Chris being careful to avoid hitting the others with his guitar. The rest of the song is synchronized movements, great guitar accompaniment, and the two female mice singing until the last stanza when Carl suddenly joins them with his voice ending the performance with a wonderful flourish. As the song finishes, the lights go out, and the curtain closes. It's suddenly silent, as though no one can believe what they have just seen, and then the audience explodes with excitement and applause. The Mouse family has performed flawlessly, and their friends and neighbors are rewarding them with cheers as the four family members listen behind the still-closed curtains. Then the curtains open and the four Mouse family members step out to the front of the stage as lights come up and the applause reaches a crescendo.

Five more acts share their talents, each met with nice applause and smiling nods from the gathered audience.

After the applause dies down for the last contestant, Felix, the master of ceremonies, gathers all the contestants on stage for the moment of reckoning - the vote.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he starts, "we have all enjoyed the entertainment this evening, but now it's time for us to send one winning act on to the next and bigger stage.

All the contestants come on stage and voting is done by a show of paws. It's not even close. The Mouse family wins handily.

The four family members let it sink in and then they begin to jump up and down together as the other contestants congratulate them.

It's a night to remember, for sure.

When Chris and family get back to their Home in the Wall they change out of their costumes and put on more relaxing attire, and then go out to sit in the Dooty living room with Danny and Mr. and Mrs. Dooty to relive the evening.

Franklin says, "That was really a great show. Felix was the perfect MC and all the acts were good, but your family took it to a whole new level of greatness. It was fun to watch the faces on the audience and just see them light up when you guys were performing.

Mrs. Dooty adds, "Oh boy, and your finale was the icing on the cake. So professional and perfectly done."

Danny just sits quietly for a moment as the others look at him. Then he says, "You guys are the real deal. I watch a lot of music videos, and you put on a show as good as any I've seen. That was pure magic!"

The Mouse family thanks Danny and the Dootys for their help. "Those costumes were so perfect, Mrs. Dooty," says Candy. "I thought maybe they would be a little too old for mice my age but they were great. I was so proud to wear mine and I think we all looked very professional. Thank you!"

Christine chimes in with more compliments for the stage help, costumes and lighting. "It was all so perfect. You gave a great gift to the mouse community tonight."

Carl adds, "And the lighting! That was so cool! It felt like we were on stage at one of those fancy theatres that we see in movies on our tablet tv. Way cool!"

Finally from Chris, "You know, we couldn't have done this without your encouragement, help and support. The stage and lighting you put together, Danny, was so good and so professional, I don't know how you did it but it was the best!"

Danny, Franklin and Mrs. Dooty respond to each compliment with a smile and nod, knowing that they helped their Mouse family friends achieve something really special this night.

From Franklin, "We were so happy to be a part of your family's great night tonight. It was our pleasure. It's going to be fun to see where this takes you."

After tiny high fives the Mouse family return to their Home in the Wall, with animated conversations all the way inside. Each mouse thinks back on the night as they retire to their rooms and crawl into their bed nests for the night. Who knows what the future could bring?

Within two weeks that question is answered when Franklin and Donna Dooty invite the Mouse family to lunch. As they all sit in the dining room, Franklin and Donna in chairs and the Mouse family in a little doll house kitchen table and chairs on top of the big table, Franklin shares some surprising news.

Franklin had secretly captured part of their big performance on his cell phone which Danny sent to a talent show. As they eat lunch he tells the family that he didn't expect to hear back, but he

just received an email from the show producer inviting the family to perform on the "Big and Small Show" on one of the cable channels.

The show will be recorded in front of a live audience at a studio and after it is included in an upcoming broadcast it will be copied onto their YouTube channel. "It will be a good opportunity for the Mouse family to showcase their talents," says the email. "The show will be in a month, on Thursday afternoon. If they agree, we need to have the family here for rehearsal the week before."

Franklin is excited and can't keep his phone from shaking as he reads the email to the family.

"Isn't that terrific news, Chris?" he says after he's read all the details in the email.

Chris gulps. The offer is very intimidating. For a moment the doubts creep into his mind and he thinks "What if we don't perform very well? What if something happens and we mess up? We would be so embarrassed."

But Carl jumps out of his chair and screams, "That's fire, dad! Of course we're going to do it, right?"

"Well, I don't know, Carl. Honey, what do you think?"

"I think it's really great, Chris," replies Christine. "I think we should do it. How about you Candy, shall we do it?"

Candy replies, "For sure, mom. I got high key just thinking about it! My friends are going to think I'm so dope."

Chris turns to Franklin and says, "I'm not sure what Carl and Candy just said, but it sounds like we're in. Can you accept for us, Franklin?"

After a nod from Mr. Dooty, they eat lunch and talk about how to pull off this big opportunity. The Mouse family needs to rehearse at home once a week for the next three weeks before going to rehearsal at the studio. They decide to go with what they performed at the local show. No reason to change costumes or performance since it was met with such a great response by the audience.

Three weeks later Franklin, Mrs. Dooty and Danny load the entertainers into their big car and they drive to the rehearsal.

There are a few nervous jitters before the rehearsal, but everything goes great, the Mouse family has polished their performance, and it shows.

The show director gives a big thumbs up after they do their performance twice and they are told to return in a week for the live show.

The day of the show, the Mouse family stops what they're doing that morning to gather their thoughts together, hold hands and prepare for the show. Reverand Souris from Mouse Church comes by to pray for them to have a good show. It's a perfect sendoff and they get in the Dootys' car excited and happy.

The live show is really fun. They watch all the acts and then get ready backstage for the announcement that brings them on. As they're introduced, they are brought out on a small platter and set on a table that will be their stage.

"Wow, what a production," whispers Christine.

It's a great performance. The four family members move as one to the music, the guitar licks from Chris never sounded so good, and they finish with a flourish to applause from the small studio audience.

They're brought back off-stage while the applause continues, and they talk happily about the whole experience. They all agree, it was definitely a stellar performance, one that they are all happy with.

As they drive back home that afternoon, the chatter in the backseat of Franklin's car between Danny and the Mouse family is equaled by the happy talk in the front seat between Franklin and Donna. Everyone wonders where this is going, and no one has any idea of what will happen next.

It doesn't take long.

The show gets tons of online comments, all of them sharing how awesome the act was. Even more exciting, a month later the YouTube video of the show goes viral and instantly, Here We Go is famous on social media.

Chris shakes his head and grooms his tail in wonder. Christine is matter of fact about it. Carl is dreaming of what they can do next. And Candy is given the task to learn from Danny how to manage all of the exposure and their interaction with fans.

"Here We Go!" is going to be the next big thing!

Chapter 6 - Mouse Church

Sunday mornings many of the mouse families in the community get cleaned up and go to church. The Mouse family walks three blocks up the street, turns the corner to the left and walks two more blocks to an empty lot with a small shed at the back. The yard is fenced, which makes it secure from dogs and some cats, but of course mice can easily crawl under the fence boards or in some places just squeeze between them. In fact, mice can squeeze through many very tight openings, which is how so many of them are able to live inside the walls of houses in neighborhoods all over the world.

On church day about 40 mice make their way to this very shed, which on those mornings becomes Mouse Church. Most people don't know it, but mice are very faith oriented and to them, going to church on Sunday is almost as practical as eating dinner every day.

Now, in case you were wondering, the shed wasn't always a church for mice. At one time it was an outbuilding for a small house that used to stand on the lot. After the house was torn down by the new owner many years ago the lot just sat empty and the shed was so far back in the yard, next to a back fence, that it wouldn't be in the way if anyone ever wanted to construct another house on the lot. So, it was just left standing.

Once a week, a young man comes and mows down the weeds that grow, well, like weeds, all over the yard. For the rest of the week the shed just sits empty except for the old, rusty push mower that waits for the teenage boy to come use it.

All of that works out very well for the congregation of Mouse Church because the shed is their church building.

The Reverend Alphonse P. Souris (who's last name is French for "mouse") leads the church, offering hope and life wisdom to the local mice community.

Just like most churches, Mouse Church is a vibrant social and faith-filled place where the good pastor teaches lessons about life and faith and love. Mrs. Souris teaches Sunday School to the gathered young ones, telling them all about how God created every living thing and his son Jesus brought hope to the world. It's a time of refreshment and renewal, which in mouse world is very important.

Christine and Candy sing in the church choir, which weekly fills the church with comforting and inspiring music. On every fourth Sunday Christine sings a solo, a fact of which Chris is very proud as are Candy and Carl. Christine likes old hymns because as a young doe she grew up in the basement of a human church and heard wonderful music every Sunday morning and night, and every Wednesday night. For her, it doesn't matter if she is singing in the choir or singing solo. When she sings, her face lights up, she has a

beaming smile, and her sweet voice makes her very happy. Of course, all the other mice in the church feel the same way because Christine's singing gives everyone joy.

Chris started coming to Mouse Church where he first met Christine, and they were eventually married by the Rev. Souris. Each of the kids has gone to Sunday School since they were old enough to leave the Home in the Wall with their parents. Sunday is a family day, and it makes the week start off so much better.

Once Carl was old enough, he joined two other mice in collecting the offering every week. It is now a source of pride for him because it signifies that he is trusted to keep the offering safe and secure before passing it to Rev. Souris at the end of the morning service.

Candy loves going to church. She is very proud of her other family members for their roles there, but she just hasn't quite found her calling, other than singing in the choir with her mom. Mrs. Souris has been talking to her about teaching Sunday School to the younger mice, and she's thinking about it, but she just isn't ready yet to make that commitment. Chris and Christine aren't pushing her to do that, but they're confident that their daughter will eventually see that it's a special way that she can help the younger mice. She grew up while going to Mouse Church Sunday School, and she's a good student, so everyone knows it's inevitable that she will become one of the teachers. Besides, Mrs. Souris has been teaching all ages of mice pinkies for many years and she needs help with the younger ones, a perfect responsibility for Christine.

The church has been growing for the last several years. As a deacon, Chris and several other bucks have been discussing how the church can handle the recent growth. After weeks of meetings and discussions, including the Rev. Souris, they have come up with a three-year plan to ensure that the church will always be able to meet the needs of the local mouse community. Fortunately, the shed is large enough that it's not likely that growth will exceed its capacity.

This particular Sunday is the day of the Spring Church Picnic, a festive affair that not only brings all members to the church for food, fun and games, but also attracts non-member mice from the nearby neighborhoods. It's a great way to show other mice a better way of living while also socializing and having fun. Every year it's like a very large family picnic and this year it promises to be even larger.

The Mouse family knew it was going to be an extra special day when the Four Blind Mice arrived for church that Sunday unannounced. They are a favorite of Mouse Church because they sing old hymns with perfect, old-time harmony. They have to travel over a mile to get there, which is difficult because, as was said, they're blind. That brings an extra level of possible danger in traveling so far. They're accompanied by two young mice that protect them and help them navigate the busy streets. No matter the effort to get there, they're always happy to be invited to sing and this morning they lead the

church in some good ole gospel music. Standing in front of the church with their dark glasses and canes they make for a dramatic scene, and when they sing they're as cool as iced cucumbers. They're just so downright cool. Their voices blend together perfectly, and the gospel music soon has dozens of hind paws in the audience tapping to the rhythm.

After Carl and the other ushers have collected the offering plates the Rev. Souris begins to talk. He was born to be a preacher. His loud, booming voice is not like any other mouse and that keeps everyone's attention. This morning he's teaching about "do unto others." That's a kind of sensitive message for mice because generally others are always trying to do unto them, and not in a nice way. But this morning's teaching is about how to treat others well even when you don't like them or they don't like you. Every eye is open and not a single older mouse is napping. (If caught snoozing, they always say they are praying, but we know better, don't we?). Rev. Souris describes several situations where it would be very difficult to respond with kindness and grace. Then he goes to the Bible and quotes many sayings of Jesus that illustrate the underlying point - we're supposed to be good to others even when they aren't good to us.

In his Sunday teachings the pastor uses as examples the lives of individual mice, what they're dealing with, and how church impacts them.

And this morning he shares the story of the Billy Meece family that lost two little ones to a neighborhood cat. It is a sad story and he describes the heartache of the family afterwards. He invites Billy to come up and share his story, which is so moving that Mrs. Murine the choir director begins to cry, which causes many of the congregation to sniffle.

Billy describes their feelings when they found out what had happened. It was a hard day for everyone in their family and their block, he shares, and they struggled to understand why bad things happen to good mice. As he talks, Rev. Souris stands next to Billy with his arm on his shoulder.

After Billy finishes, Rev. Souris continues with the lesson. "Hard times visit us, good friends, but we are still here and life requires us to find ways to continue on. Thank you to all of you that visited the Meece family afterwards bringing food and offering comfort in a situation in which comfort is not found. That is what we do as a congregation, as the larger family of mice and as believers in Jesus."

Several heads nod in agreement while eyes are wiped.

He continues. "We don't just go to church, we are the church. And, you can count on the fact that when the unexplainable visits us we will be surrounded by those who care about us, reminding us of how much we care for each other."

In every service the younger mice are wide-eyed because some of Rev. Souris' stories are pretty scary. Others make clucking noises at the tough parts. Old Mr. Snozzle sucks his teeth and nods his head as the Reverand hits his main points. And, as the reverend makes a particularly good point, Mr. Snozzle calls out "Yessir!"

In several messages, Rev. Souris talks about the beauty of community and how important it is to be there for each other, but his favorite sermon is on the "one anothers," which because of a speech impediment he calls "one anuzzers."

After every service, several members thank Rev. Souris for the teaching and share that they have learned something today that they will try to practice in the coming week.

During the nice months of the year, Mouse Church has picnics and campouts. Today is a great example. It's the day of the Spring Church Picnic.

Church picnics are a big affair. The congregation decorates the vacant lot where the church is located with flower blossoms and strings and ribbons. Everything is ready just in time and the lot is soon filled with neighborhood mice, many of them church members and many of them invited to join in the fun even though they don't attend the church. It's a real community affair sponsored by the church.

Games for all ages are played. The tug of war for teenagers is especially fun to watch. One end of a popped balloon is tied to one youngster's tail with the other end tied to another youngster's tail. The two are in the middle of a short distance marked by sticks at each end. When the whistle blows each mouse races toward the stick at their end, trying to pull the other to the "finish line." It's fun, the crowd cheers for their favorites and each winner gets to dance around the loser to the applause of those watching. Today, there are twelve contestants. This creates six winners who then pair off for second tugs of war. This continues until there are just two contestants left for the final contest. This match is cheered the loudest with mice on either side yelling and jumping for their favorite. It's all good fun with winners and losers all laughing and enjoying the fun.

Food? Oh my goodness, the food is never ending. Each family and every individual have brought food to share and there is plenty to go around. So much food, in fact, that many of the older mice have to sit with backs against trees and bushes to watch the games because their bellies are too full. No question about it, mice love to eat.

For music, the choir usually sings a few songs. This year, Here We Go also performs a new number for the picnic-goers to great applause and whistles. The church is very proud of their members, the Mouse family, for their new fame as an entertaining group.

There is one scary moment when three cats try to invade the church yard during the picnic. Thanks to some quick thinking by the deacons and older bucks, disaster is

averted but not before there is a few minutes of panic from the picnic crowd. Fortunately, the incident ends well and the merriment continues without any further incident with the cats retreating and not coming back.

The picnic ends with an old-fashioned sing along, led by the choir and Here We Go. All the mice are standing and swaying to the beat, singing at the top of their lungs. It's a great finish to a wonderful afternoon.

Everyone helps clean up the lot and then with hugs and smiles, they return to their respective home, satisfied and happy.

Every August Mouse Church holds their annual campout. Singles and families spend the month prior getting ready for the fun, and then, the week before, they're planning, packing, making lists and gathering everything they'll need. Teams are organized for activities like games, excursions, night time star gazing and campfire singing (although there is never a campfire, for fear of attracting predators).

Chris and Christine always lead the location planning committee because they have traveled for many miles around the church and have found all the best spots. When they take their own family on excursions, they always note vacant lots, particularly those that are fenced, safe parks where there are lots of open spaces and a few hidden spots that could easily be defended, and vacant houses. This year's campout they have selected a vacant house with a large, fenced yard that can easily accessed by mice, but will prove difficult for larger creatures. There are no trees in the yard and tall trees nearby are not close enough to provide visibility into the yard for predatory birds. It's a perfect spot and just ½ mile from the church.

Their friends, Bill and Sandy Fun, and their two young ones, Billy and Shirley, are in charge of games. They're a perfect fit because they are always playing games as a family. They have a ring toss game competition, an eating contest, and a hole digging game that have proven to be a blast in years past. This year will be the best ever, according to Bill and no one in the church doubts him.

The campfire singalong is always a favorite activity as mice gather small rocks to sit on. Frizz brings a small work light that he borrowed from the building business that he and Frak own. It's got a red filter on it, so when it is set up in the center of a circle it almost looks like a fire. Mrs. Soulis handles the music for the singalong. This year's campfire night is a starry one, with the dark sky alight with thousands of brilliant stars. Even more exciting, a shooting star lights up the sky for a quick moment just as everyone is sitting down on their rock. The "oohs and ahhs" has everyone laughing afterward.

As the campfire time continues there is a tense moment when a cat starts howling on the other side of the fence line. Rev. Souris quickly cautions everyone to "shush" so they don't attract the attention of the cat. The screeching is loud and frightening, gaining in

intensity with every minute. Frizz turns off the “campfire” light and everyone sits silently for several minutes until the cat’s loud sounds gradually get quieter.

Carl and several of the other adult males sneak silently over to the fence. They listen and peek through the brush on this side of the fence but can see nothing. After several minutes of quiet they return to the campfire and report that all seems to be clear. The campfire light gets turned back on and after another 15 minutes of quiet conversation the singing starts up again.

As the campout ends, mice and their families and friends say goodbye to each other with hugs and handshakes. The young ones also say goodbye to their friends and then smile and wave as they go their separate ways.

The walk to their respective homes is always quiet, so as not to attract the attention of predators. Once home, all of the stuff they carried to the campout and brought back gets put away, and mice relax and talk about the great time they had.

The campout has been a great success, just as every year. Oh, except for the one year when it rained during the entire time making everyone look like drowned, uh, mice!

A month later the whole church is shocked to hear that the Beans family has lost two of their members to a hawk. It's a tragedy, for sure, and the church is determined to help. Several members go to the Beans home to help console Mrs. Beans and their other young one, Bobby, for the loss of Bart Beans and the young daughter Bonita. The female adults bring food and the male adults bring warm handshakes and quiet hugs. The young ones sit quietly and respectfully with Bobby with sad smiles and soft conversation. After the mourning and the service at Mouse Church four days later, Chris and several of the other adult males bring tools over to help fix anything that may need fixing at the Beans home.

It is a sad time, but an event that happens in so many lives. The important thing is to mourn the loss, honor the memory of those that are now gone, and serve the surviving family members with love and willing hands to help out. The Beans family has been devastated at the loss of two family members, but with the help of their friends and neighbors they will continue on, while always remembering the loved ones that are now gone but not forgotten.

As you can see, Mouse Church is an important part of the local mouse community. This vital institution gives mice a sense of belonging and purpose. They get solace when times are tough, and they celebrate with friends when times are good. It is the embodiment of doing life together. For mice, Mouse Church is an essential foundation in providing feelings of well-being and contentment.

As such, the Rev. Souris and his wife are pillars of the community. Every week they visit members of the church and are generally the first mice to arrive when tough times happen. They just have that giving, caring spirit. It doesn't matter if the affected mouse or mouse family attend Mouse Church or not, Alphonse and Mandy Souris will just show up with flower petals to support, console, and comfort everyone touched by a sad event. And, when there's something to celebrate you can count on them showing up to applaud, with high fours, smiles and laughter.

That's the beauty of Mouse Church and its leaders. It is the glue that keeps everything together, forging a crowd into a community.

Chapter 7 - Roar!

On Chris' birthday, Mr. Dooty has a surprise gift for him. It's a toy, rechargeable battery-powered motorcycle. It’s just the perfect size for Chris and it even makes a loud roar sound when it's running.

Chris really likes the whole idea of a motorcycle, but of course he first has to learn how to ride it. Since this is a first he's a bit nervous and excited at the same time.

Franklin suggests that Chris learn how to ride in the driveway, and gives him a brand new helmet and leather jacket for protection. Learning to ride is an adventure and not without some potential danger. Chris must learn how to start out, change speeds and keep his balance, all at the same time.

For the first few days of practice, Franklin runs alongside his mouse friend to keep him from falling. There are a few close calls, but Chris is exhilarated and after two or three practices he is riding without Mr. Dooty alongside him.

After a few weeks of practice Chris feels that he has the hang of it, so he asks Franklin to take him to a playground where he can ride on the basketball courts. They load the motorcycle into the Dootys' car and drive the short distance to the park.

The first ride on the basketball court goes pretty well. There are no players on the court, which is a relief as they don't have to worry about conflicts or obstacles.

On the drive home their car is suddenly surrounded by a group of motorcycle riders that swoop by on both sides of the car before roaring off into the distance. It's a moment that Chris will remember with exhilaration because it's his first look at real bikers. This gets his imagination fired up just picturing what it would feel like to ride with them.

After that encounter Chris soon decides that he wants to be a real biker. He shares his secret with Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, and Franklin and Donna surprise him with a gift of really cool sunglasses and leather gloves. When Chris tries them on and looks in the mirror he sees that he is now starting to look the part. Christine is not so sure and she warns Chris to be very careful because they have young children to raise and an accident could be really hard on their family. Chris understands her concerns and he assures her that he will be careful and won't jeopardize his health or their future.

A few days later he talks to Franklin about what's next.

"Mr. Dooty, would you be able to take me and the motorcycle occasionally so I can get better at riding? Christine is kind of worried about my safety and I think that if I get more practice, I'll be a safer rider."

"Sure, Chris. How about we go to the playground once a week on a morning that the playground isn't crowded with people? You can practice and I can watch you and give you some tips on what I see?"

"That would be really great. Thank you. Just let me know when you think it's the best time to go and I'll be ready," replies Chris.

Conversations in the Mouse family home are lively over the next several weeks as Chris is animated by his new experience. He likes riding and during dinner he shares his excitement with his wife and kids, none of whom share his enthusiasm.

"Dad, are you sure this isn't a dangerous time of life that you're going through," asks Candy. "I mean, two wheels don't seem to be as safe as four, you know."

"I know it looks that way, Candy," answers her dad, "but Mr. Dooty told me that the wheels of a motorcycle act like a gyroscope to keep the bike upright. It's really surprisingly easy and it's so much fun. Of course, it's not something that you kids should do until you're older, so don't get any ideas."

Christine adds, "Yes, we are a one motorcycle family. Your father is going through a time of life where he needs more excitement, I guess, and he tells me that he is being very safe. So we'll just hope for the best, but there will just be one of us riding and that's your dad," she adds emphatically.

Chris certainly does look the part. With his motorcycle outfit he looks just like a miniature biker. His motorcycle is small, but it works fine and when it makes the rumbling noise, Chris gets even more excited. The only issue is keeping it charged, but Mr. Dooty shows him how to plug it in to an outlet in the garage. It's a bit hard to push the plug in but with a grunt and a shove he's able to get it done. When the light turns on in the motorcycle, he can see that it's charging, which is always a relief.

After several months of practice at the playground, Chris sneaks out and takes his motorcycle out on the street, traveling close to the curb and watching carefully to make sure there are no cars and trucks on the street. He’s very nervous at first and only goes one block, just to try it out. But he is persistent and soon he’s traveling alongside of traffic - for one block.

All’s good with riding and posing and so Chris rides the six blocks from the Dootys' house to a biker hangout that Franklin has pointed out one day on their way to the playground for practice. The hangout is a burger joint that always has a dozen or so bikes out front, usually in the late afternoon. Sometimes when they drive by there are a few real bikers out front and Chris thinks to himself, "I look like that when I have my jacket and sunglasses on. I'm a real biker."

Like the rest of his motorcycle experience, Chris is nervous the first time he rides to the hangout.

When the bikers first see Chris roll up they all laugh, but Chris keeps coming back. He plays tough and before long they think of him as a mascot. They put him up on the counter in the burger joint so he can be on their level, which is a great thrill for Chris.

After a few times of Chris going to the hangout several of the men let him ride on the back of their big, rumbling motorcycles as they roll through the streets. They don't go far and he holds on very tight because it's a new experience and kind of scary.

One really tough looking biker asks Chris, "Hey, little dude. Do you want to get a real ride and see what that's like?"

Chris gulps and answers with false courage, "Oh yeah. I'm ready for that. Let's go."

The biker puts Chris on the back of his loud motorcycle and they roar off for a ride in the countryside. Chris can't believe it when the biker leans back and says they're going 100 miles per hour. He's riding on the back of a motorcycle going very very fast, trees are flying by, the wind is blowing him around, and he holds on to the back of the biker's jacket as though his life depends on it, which he firmly believes it does. It's thrilling and scary at the same time.

Over the next two months Chris becomes a favorite of the bikers and all of them like him. At times they talk in the burger joint hangout about some of their adventures and it sounds like some of them are not just dangerous, but wrong. Chris has the feeling that they're up to no good.

On one trip five of the guys take off, with Chris riding on the back of the lead bike. They pull into a really tough neighborhood and Chris watches as it looks like they are selling illegal stuff. His eyes are open now and he can see that even though the bikers have brought him in to their gang, he would be better off if he wasn't part of it.

Now, Chris has to figure out how to keep out of trouble real quick without losing the fun that he's been having.

That afternoon he talks to Franklin, telling him what he's been doing and what he's seen.

"I'm scared, Mr. Dooty. I think they're going to get into trouble and I'll be in trouble with them. What they're doing is wrong and I really don't want to be part of it."

Franklin gives him some great advice. "Chris, life is like that. Some humans do wrong things and many of them not only get into trouble, but get caught and get sent to a place we call 'jail.' It's not a great place. They're locked up inside. Some of them spend years in a small room with bars around it and not much else. You definitely don't want to get into that kind of trouble, but it sounds like that's where you might be headed if you keep hanging around those guys.

"Choose your friends wisely. Make sure they're the kind of friends that you would like to be like. If they don't have the same values that you have - especially honesty and family values - stay away from them. Otherwise, you may find yourself in trouble and having to pay the price for it. Oh, and your family may have to pay the price, too.

"My suggestion is that you stop going to the hangout. Just ride your motorcycle at the playground. I can take you there once a week, if you want. And, if you want to ride on the street again, look to see where the bikers ride and don't go there."

Chris has been listening intently. "Thank you, Mr. Dooty. You have been a great friend to me and my family and I'm thankful for your advice. I don't want to put my family in danger. I'm going to do exactly what you say."

And from that moment on, that's what Chris does.

Riding his motorcycle is fun and sometimes it feels like he's even taking a risk, but he isn't willing to risk his reputation, his life, or his family.

And that's one of the best decisions he can make.

A few weeks later he sees his old biker buddies riding by on the street. They spot him and pull over to the side of the street.

"Hey, little biker, where have you been lately?" asks one biker who goes by the name of Bad Boy.

"Hey Bad Boy, I'm keeping close to home. My wife is scared I'm going to go to get into trouble, so I've been laying low. How's everyone been?"

"Well, Jangles got busted by the cops and he and two other guys are in jail now. Three Fingers got in an accident trying to outrun some cops and he's in the hospital. You remember that chick, Jilly?"

"Yeah, sure. She's the one with the long hair, right?" answers Chris.

"Well, Jilly ain't with us no more. She and her old man got into it one night and she ran off with his bike and crashed into a truck."

"Oh, man, that's too bad. How bad is she?" asks Chris.

The biker just shrugs and says, "She ain't with us no more."

That doesn't sound too good, but Chris just smiles and waves as the bikers fire up their loud machines and roar off down the street.

His friend Rags sees Chris riding on the sidewalk for the first time one day and stops him to talk.

"Hey, Chris, what's with the two wheels, buddy?"

Chris explains how he got the bike as a gift from Mr. Dooty and he's learned how to ride. He also mentions that he was almost a member of a biker gang, but he thought better of it. It was a good thing, too, because he saw his old friends a few days ago and some were dead, others were in jail and the rest of them looked like they could end up in one or the other places themselves.

Rags had wide eyes and then said, "Looks like you got out of that one just in time. But you're still riding so things must be okay."

"Yeah," replied Chris. "I learned how to ride, then I learned how to ride safely and live a lot longer and without lots of problems. I think that last part was the best thing I learned."

Later Chris confides to his wife, "Life is sure interesting, isn't it honey? You get to choose which things you want to do, but somewhere along the way you need to decide which things are best for you. I think I like learning the easy way, and not the hard way."

Chapter 8 - MouseWagon

Two months after Chris gets his motorcycle Franklin Dooty calls the Mouse family together for a special surprise.

"What do you think it is, Christine?" asks Chris as he turns to his wife.

"I'm not sure, but I heard them whispering in their kitchen yesterday and whatever it is they're very excited about it," answers Christine.

"C'mon kids," yells Chris up the stairs. "Let's get a move on! Mr. and Mrs. Dooty are waiting for us."

Carl and Candy scamper down the stairs from their bedrooms. They're excited, too, because surprises are always fun.

"Let's go, let's go!" yells Chris as he hustles the family out the front door of the Home in the Wall and under the closet door.

As both families gather in the Dooty living room the suspense is thick.

Franklin clears his throat and begins. "My friends, Donna and I have watched as you go from place to place and I have to tell you, you move really fast. But, we have talked about it and, after we gave Chris a motorcycle, we want to give your family a present that will make your travel together more fun. So, here it is!"

And with that, he pulls a large box out from behind his back. It's wrapped so no one can see what's inside as he pushes it toward Chris.

"Hmm," says Chris. "I guess the present is not the wrapping, right? Well kids, help me take the wrapping off so we can see this wonderful present?"

Carl and Candy jump on top of the box and start ripping at the wrapping with the claws on their front paws. As each piece gets torn off, more of the box inside comes into view. There's a picture of some kind of car on the glossy box, but who knows if that's just a box or it's describing what's inside?

When the wrapping is all off, Franklin picks up the box and says, "Let me take it over now. This next part will take a couple of human hands to open it."

He grabs the top of the box and pulls it open, revealing something inside, but the Mouse family can't quite make out what it is.

Franklin reaches into the box and pulls out a beautiful, gleaming, mouse-size Volkswagen car.

"It's battery-powered," says Franklin. "We can plug it in to the electric outlet inside the garage right next to Chris' motorcycle. I've already charged the battery, so you can try it out here in the house and see what you think."

Chris and Christine exchange excited grins as Franklin opens all four doors and invites the family to climb inside.

After the four mice are inside, parents in front, kids in back, Franklin shows them how to operate the car. "It's almost just like a human car," he explains. "You turn the steering wheel to turn the car. To go forward you put your right bottom paw on the pedal underneath the dash. The harder you push on the pedal the faster it goes. If you pull your foot off of the pedal the car will slow quickly and stop. With a little practice you'll see how easy it is to operate."

While he describes the process, Chris tries out each technique. He pushes down on the pedal a little too hard and the car shoots forward, scaring the rest of the family until he takes his foot off of the pedal and the car comes to a sudden stop.

The smile on Chris' face says it all. "This is amazing, Mr. Dooty. It's so fun." And then to his family, "We're going to really enjoy this, guys. I can't wait for us to take it for a spin outside."

Franklin offers a suggestion. "You should practice this in the driveway like you did with your motorcycle, Chris. And, you might want to practice it without the family inside until you get the hang of it."

"Good suggestion, Mr. Dooty. When do you think we could take it outside?" Chris responds.

Franklin quickly answers, "Well, there's no time like the present. Let's go to the driveway and give it a whirl."

The Mouse family piles out of the car with Christine shaking her head in disbelief. Whoever heard of mice having their own car?

As the Dootys and Mouse family go out to the front yard and driveway, Mr. Dooty brings the car and Chris shakes his head in disbelief at the wonderful present they have just been given.

Franklin sets the car down at the garage end of the driveway and Chris gets into the driver's seat while his family watches.

"Oh boy," he says. "This is so much fun." And with that he puts his paw down on the pedal and the car accelerates down the driveway with Mr. Dooty yelling, "Not too fast, at first, Chris!"

After three runs, Chris is learning how to drive more sensibly. After stopping the car he steps out and opens the doors for his family to get in.

"Oh boy," says Carl. "This is so cool. Dad, let's go!"

After everyone is in and the doors are closed Chris pushes on the pedal gently and the car begins slowly down the driveway and then gains a little more speed by the halfway point.

Chris is handling the car very well and it no longer snaps the family's heads back when he takes off or jerks them forward when he stops. He's getting the hang of it and the smiles on the faces inside the car signal that this is going to be a wonderful addition to the Mouse family.

After they have taken several trips down the driveway and back, Chris pulls the car over by Franklin, the doors open, and the family climbs out with happy smiles and chatter.

Chris turns to Franklin and Donna Dooty and says, "Thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs. Dooty. I thought the motorcycle was the best present anyone had ever given me, but this is even better. My whole family can ride in this car, and we can all have fun together."

"You're very welcome, Chris," says Donna. "We hoped that you would like it, and we hope you have many miles of enjoyment in it."

Franklin adds, "I'm going to cut a little door in the front of the garage with a push switch at your height so you can just push it to open to get the car out, and push it to close it when you bring the car back. Until then, you'll need me to open the garage door for you to take it out, but that shouldn't be a problem, right? "

"You bet, Mr. Dooty. No problem at all," Chris says with a big grin on his face.

Over the next few weeks, the Mouse family takes the car on short trips around the block on the sidewalk. It's fun and exciting. The kids can't contain their excitement and after each trip they get out of the car with big smiles on their faces. Christine smiles too, but she wonders how this shiny new part of their world is going to change their lives.

It turns out that she ends up driving it more and more with Carl and Candy inside because Chris wants to ride his motorcycle while they ride in the car.

Carl and Candy argue over who gets to sit in the front seat next to mom, and eventually they decide to simply switch each time so that one sits in the front and the other sits in the back.

Chris has a real interest in keeping their two vehicles clean and shiny. He has been washing and polishing his motorcycle since the day he got it, and now that they have a car he adds that to his list.

At breakfast one morning he brings up the subject to his son and daughter. "Kids, you're getting older and you may want to drive the family car at some point. Before you learn how to drive, I think you should learn about the responsibility that goes with having a car. So, on Saturday mornings, you and I will get some water and some paper towels from Mr. Dooty and the three of us will wash the car. If you're good at helping to keep up the car I will teach you to drive sometime in the future. How does that sound?"

"Wow, fantastic, Dad," says Carl as Christine nods up and down in agreement.

Saturday mornings turn out to be car mornings. The three family members clean the car inside and out, and Chris checks out all of the workings of the car to make sure everything is operating correctly. It's a great lesson in responsibility for the kids and they look forward to the time when they'll get to learn to drive. Until then, they have pride in their shiny, clean car because they helped keep it that way.

Christine comes out on most Saturdays after each morning cleaning process and does a quick inspection. It's fun because she walks around the car with a frown, inspecting this and opening that and then smiling as she sees that everything she looks at is clean.

"Great job, Carl and Candy," she says and then winks at Chris who stands beside them smiling with pride.

The new car is a source of great fun and happiness for the Mouse family, and they are all excited to take it to the church campout during the summer so they can show it off to their friends.

Ah, but that's a different story.

Chapter 9 - A Visit from Afar

Thom Mouce is an adventurous mouse, young and wanting to see much more of the world than he can at home. He has already traveled around his home country England, hitching rides on cars, busses and even a horse-drawn hay wagon, but this inquisitive young chap is anxious to see more and different places.

"I'm off to see the world," he exclaims to himself one day, with bright shining eyes and a faraway look.

The first ship he stows away on is traveling from London Gateway port to Brazil and Buenos Aires, then rounding the Horn before sailing up the Pacific coast, stopping in several cities including Lima, Peru, and finally Los Angeles.

He learns how to deboard ships in Santos, Brazil, the first port that the ship stops at. It is pretty easy. He simply got on top of a container being moved from the container ship and is soon on the dock after having scrambled down the side of the truck now holding the container. He uses this new skill twice more, taking side trips to see the sights in Buenos Aires and Lima.

Now in the port of Los Angeles Thom has no idea where he is, but he is very curious about the world and he's also a pretty resourceful little critter, so just like he did in the other ports he soon finds lots of food and then scrambles aboard busses to see the area.

This city has a nice climate, he thinks. It's a lot warmer than England or the months he had spent at sea. And, the air is dry. How pleasant, he thinks. At home its sticky if it's hot, just as it was in some of the ports in South America. In London, if it's not sticky it's because it's cold outside.

Laying back on the top deck of one sightseeing bus, and resting with his paws behind his head, Thom thinks that he likes this climate. A lot. Plus, he has just consumed what was left of a hot dog, that he found discarded on the floor of the bus so he's in a really pleasant mood.

His sighteseeing continues as he rides several different buses for a few days. He finally settles on one area where he'd like to spend more time. It is a sandy beach by the ocean. Lots of people, some in pretty unusual costumes, he thinks, and some with hardly any clothing at all.

He jumps off of the bus at the beach that he likes best and decides to check it out for a few days. The next day he is relaxing at the beach, having eaten part of a cheeseburger that someone threw away. With a full tummy he is laying on his back by some rocks on the beach when Chris Mouse and his family happen to walk by and see him.

It is a chance encounter, but not really by chance that Chris spots him. Mice have a way of seeing other mice even when people don't. Thom just happens to be at a beach close to where

Chris and his family live, and this is a day of one of the Mouse family's excursions to that very beach.

As Chris sees Thom as the family walks by he yells out, "Hey, friend!" Thom, seeing an opportunity to learn more from local mice, calls back. “Hey, mate.” It sounds like a strange greeting, for sure, thinks Chris, but Thom is smiling and waving his hand in a friendly gesture and Chris takes that to be a safe sign of greeting.

That is the beginning of a quick back-and-forth conversation. After a few minutes of chatting the Chris Mouse family carry their picnic supplies over to where Thom is sitting and thus begins the visit with someone from another country.

Thom tells the family that he has been travelling over the last nine months and is interested in learning about new places and new friends. Chris shares some of their family adventures, like having parties in the house where they live, beach safaris, their garden and house hosts, and even discovering Caribbean treasure, and traveling to South America. Christine adds some of the fun parts like their motorcycle and car, with Carl and Candy chiming in with their own stories about their family singing/dancing group and their father's fame on TikTok and a pod cast.

“Boy, you have some smashing times, mates,” Thom says after listening to the family’s stories.

“Well, you have more adventures than we do, Thom,” replies Candy, thinking how exotic it is to be talking to a mouse from another country that has traveled to so many places. "What is the most exciting place that you visited?" she asked.

"Hmm, probably Buenos Aires, Lass. It's a big city and the port is really large. When we pulled in to the docks there were people everywhere, loading ships, unloading ships, driving little machines that carried boxes. Our ship was a container ship that holds several hundred containers on deck. We were in that port for two weeks.

"My favorite part of Argentina was the food smells. Oh, my goodness! There were food carts that come right down on the docks near the ships with all kinds of fried food, meats, vegetables, so the workers aboard the ship come down and get fresh local food. I learned that I could wait right under the food trucks which is like being in food heaven because the people eating there will sometimes drop food on the ground. All you have to do is scurry out and grab what they drop before it gets stepped on or thrown away. It is a feast, for sure.

"There is a hustle on the docks. Everything is in motion all the time. Cranes lift containers, crewmembers on deck secure the lifting chains and hooks, trucks pull up beside the ship to have containers lowered and attached to their trailers. It is non-stop until early in the morning when things slow, and activities quiet down a bit.

"I heard some of the crew talking about how long we were going to be in the first port, I jumped on top of a container and rode it as it swung to a truck. Then I scampered down the side and set out to see some of the area for meself, I did.

"Buenos Aires is pretty industrial. Lots of manufacturing plants with tall smoke stacks in places, beautiful old buildings in others. The older part of the city is very impressive. Tall buildings, ornate sculpture, lots of parks, and a big river. I jumped onto an open top bus and climbed the stairs to the top where people were sitting in rows of chairs looking over the side. I found a safe spot on the floor in a corner where I could see between the panels on the side. Wow! I liked that! It was definitely the right way to travel.

"I rode these buses for two days and they were mostly crowded with people. I ate really good, I tell you, especially when I was smart enough to sit near kids. They're so messy with their food, which is very good for a mouse like me that likes to eat.

"Always the food - meats and breads. My very favorite is something I heard people call an empenada. It's meat and other ingredients with dough folded over it to make it like a pocket, and then it's fried. Ooh, it's delicious. The carts are everywhere in the city, so it is very easy to get lots to eat. Thank goodness people are so sloppy.

"After several days of touring the city, I stayed close to the ship. You can tell when it's fully loaded, but you can never tell when it's going to leave the port. It's fine to be on the ship in port. People are coming and going, the crew is busy loading and unloading, and no one is paying attention to me. Except for Rafael. He's one of the younger guys working aboard the ship. I heard him telling the other workers that this was his first trip on a ship. I'm not sure that he was bragging or what, but he sure worked hard. And he had a way of spotting me when no one else saw me. After the first leg of the voyage when he first saw me, he would leave little pieces of food where only I would see them. It was the beginning of our friendship.

"When we reached the next port, Santiago, Chile, and the crew had unloaded the containers, Rafael left his jacket on the chair as he was getting ready to go for a little look around the port. I jumped up on the chair and slipped into his jacket pocket. Minutes later, I was riding to wherever Rafael was going. I got the impression that he knew I was in his pocket right away because he slipped part of a cookie next to me as he walked off the ship. It was a good cookie. Rafael has pretty good taste. He walked quite a bit, maybe because he didn't have money for a bus, I don't know. But at one place I heard him talking to a street vendor and within a minute or two he was slipping part of a pastel de choclo into my pocket. At least, that's what the other guy called it. I called it "heaven." It had meat, spices and corn. Oh yeah! And then there was the "completo," a hot dog with avocado, mayonnaise and mustard in a bun. I smelled it so many times when Rafael and I were out that I almost passed out from the sheer pleasure of the rich aroma. It tasted even better than it smelled.

"After leaving Santiago we sailed up the coast and eventually were in Lima, Peru. I got off there when I heard the crew saying we would have three days in port. The port is actually in Callao,

which is part of the big city of Lima. It's an old city with ruins that I heard are over 2,000 years old. A lot of the buildings remind me of England, because they're old. It's a pretty green city with lots of flowers, trees and bushes, which gave me plenty of hiding spots to avoid people. I was lucky because I was resting under a bench when I heard people talking about all the cats at the Parque Kennedy. I certainly avoided that place even though I heard that the street vendors have the best food there.

"You know I'm a food mouse, right? I love to eat and other mice tell me that I live to eat.

"Anyway, after I got back on our ship we had one more stop and then we were here. By the way, where are we?"

Chris quickly answers, "This is Los Angeles. And actually, this area has so many people it's really a lot of cities all bunched together.

"So, Thom," Chris ventures, "Why did you decide to go to so many places?"

"Well, chap, I was just bored. London is a big city and there's lots to do and plenty of food, but the people were getting a little testy about trash. All my favorite places were getting fixed up, picked up, painted, cleaned and basically made uninhabitable for a mouse. I suppose it was good for people, but it was a barren wasteland for a mouse that lives on throwaway stuff. So, one day I saw a truck with bright lettering on it, managed to hitch a ride on top of the container it was carrying, and the next thing I knew I was waking up on a ship. The first couple of days were a little challenging. I had to find food, safe places to stay and sleep, and some places where I could go potty that wouldn't be found. That last part turned out to be easy. I noticed where the crew hoses down part of the deck every morning and that's where I do my potty stuff. Not to be offensive or anything. It's a normal part of life, isn't it?

"I met so many other travelers on the ship. Most are just plain field mice, like me. But there are some rats that think they rule the ship. We mice have to watch out to keep from being outnumbered by them, but generally we all just get along. There is plenty of food and water for all of us."

Christine tells Thom about their life and home, the Dooty family that they live with, the routine parts of life, as well as holiday celebrations, parties, travels and family outings.

"We're very fortunate, Thom. We have nearby friends and family, we have a safe home, the Dootys are super nice and we almost feel like they're kin to us. Oh, and we have big parties on bowling night."

"What's bowling night?" Thom asks with a quizzical look on his face.

"Every week the Dootys go play a game somewhere. It's called bowling. It seems a little scary. They take these big black balls and throw them on the floor very fast and they roll until they hit

a bunch of white sticks that fall over. It's a little confusing, Chris and I went one time with Franklin and it was noisy and kind of scary. We never went again."

"Hmm," says Thom. "That sounds a little like some games I have seen people play back home. They play one game with clubs and little balls that roll across the grass. I don't understand how it works but they seem to take it very seriously. One time, I saw people riding horses swinging long sticks and hitting a ball on the ground. Another time a man threw a ball to another man but that man tried to hit the ball with a stick. I'm not very smart about people games. I just think that any game that doesn't include food isn't very interesting."

"Wait, I didn't get to tell you about the party we have on bowling night," adds Christine quickly. "Every critter in our house comes to the kitchen and we put on a PAR-TEE! There's music and dancing and food. We even have a conga line. It's so much fun that after we're done, it takes us a couple of hours to pick everything up and put it back where it belongs."

"Why do you have to do that? Don't the people help you clean up?"

Chris answers, "We don't want to make a mess or upset our host family. The Dootys have been so good to us, and we would never want to be a bother to them.

"Hey, we're getting ready to head back home. You're welcome to be a house guest for a few days."

"That's top notch of you," said Thom. "I'd like that very much."

After packing up their picnic supplies, the family with Thom in tow, head back to the Home in the Wall. He finds it very interesting to travel as a group, and he watches carefully to do exactly what the family does to follow Chris. Entering the front yard, Thom looks up at the property, "This is a corker, it is," is all he says.

The tour inside is short. Of course there is the main house - the Dooty domicile. Carl shows Thom the secret to getting into the closet to enter the Mouse family abode. "Just turn sideways, wiggle a bit and 'pop' you'll be in."

"Holy barnacles," exclaims Thom as he looks at the amazing Mouse mansion inside the closet wall. He cranes his neck to look up at the three stories, and is fascinated by the ornate door and small windows in the downstairs walls. In many ways the Mouse house looks like a gingerbread house, but since few mice have ever seen one of those they can't make that comparison.

Carl and Candy are the first ones in the house, as usual, followed by Chris and Christine leading Thom.

Inside the front door, they point to the large sitting room off to the right with a big screen tablet tv, the dining room to the left, and right in the middle are stairs leading up to the second

floor. The sitting room has nice comfy chairs, a coffee table (although mice never drink coffee), and even a small toy piano.

Chris leads the brief tour. "This is where we eat, that over there is where we sit and relax and play games and talk. Christine is pretty good at the piano and we might be able to talk her into playing a tune a little later. On Friday night we usually watch a movie on our tv."

"Blimey," says Thom. "You have a TV? Cor!"

"Yes," answers Chris. "It was a gift from our host family and friends, Mr. and Mrs. Dooty. We're very grateful to have it. Now let's go upstairs and I'll show you where you can sleep."

Thom scratches his head. "What do you mean? I just sleep on the ground." he exclaims.

"It's a place for you to sleep," explains Candy as they're climbing the stairs. "Guests sleep on the rooftop patio and no one else sleeps there. You'll have your own straw and string and fluff to make your bed, and it's quiet and private. When we don't have guests we use the rooftop patio to get away from noise and get some peace and quiet."

As they look out on the rooftop patio, Thom walks over to the bedding on the floor and sits down on it gingerly.

"Woo hoo!" yell Carl and Candy as the two young ones run and then leap onto the makeshift bedding.

"Kids! Get off of Thom's bedding," yells Chris. "There's no playing on our guest's bed, you know."

"Oh, dad," from both kids, "It's fun. Besides Thom seems like a pretty nice mouse. He wouldn't mind."

To which Thom nods his head. "I like kids," he says. "Never had any young ones or siblings. I like them."

"Yay," said both Carl and Candy at the same time, as they both try to wrestle with Thom.

"Ha ha," Thom exclaims, tousling their fur and tickling their ears. He is clearly having a great time.

The games continue with Thom and the kids playing hide and seek. Carl and Candy have the supreme advantage because they live in this house and know all the hiding places but it is all new to Thom. As they play, Thom seems to revert to his childhood, yelling and running and tagging the other two.

After a few hours, both kids go to their rooms and Thom goes to the rooftop patio and lays down, paws intertwined behind his head.

"Wow," he says to himself, "this is really fun. I wish there was some way I could repay this family for the great time they're showing me."

His mind works on lots of ideas and then he suddenly sits straight up. He has an idea. He will tell stories of his life in England, a place this family will likely never see. He has lots of tales from his travels around England and he can give them a little taste of his home country.

That night, after dinner, everyone goes into the family room to relax and visit. It is a Friday night and that is the night that the Mouse family gathers around the tv in the living room to watch a show. After the movie is over and everyone is yawning, stretching and thinking about sleep, Thom gets their attention.

"I'd like to repay you in a small way for your wonderful hospitality. First, I'll take you on a trip to England, my home country. We won't have to travel very far. We'll just travel in our minds - I'll describe what you're seeing and you can imagine those places. And, if you ever get to England I'll show you some of the things I'm going to describe. You'll get my preview now, and then hopefully, you'll get to see the real places later. Is that okay?"

"Yay." "Awesome." "Cool." This is going to be a fun night, with all thoughts of going to bed early long gone. A trip to another country through the eyes and experiences of someone that lived there sounds very exciting.

"Okay, everyone close your eyes," Thom starts. "You're standing on one side of a very big street. There are cars going in every direction, all around you. There are three-story buildings, white stucco with wood framed windows around the square. You're on the sidewalk as a crowd of humans are standing around looking at another human who is playing an instrument and singing. He sings really well and the humans are smiling and clapping. We're in a place called Piccadilly Circus and the singing human is entertaining the others with music. It's late in the afternoon and the shadows are getting long, but the humans seem to be having a great time. Look! See that human child? She just dropped part of a baloney sandwich. Run over and grab it before anyone else sees it. Yummm! it has mustard on it. The air is warm, the smells are great, the man's singing is very good, and the other humans look very happy. You have just experienced a typical street scene in London on a weekend.

"Next, we're standing on a bridge over a river called the Thames. It's an old concrete bridge with gargoyles, which are statues of creatures, spaced along the rail every so often, and there are humans walking on both sides with cars traveling the middle of the bridge. Above the main roadbed, above the middle portion of the bridge, is a taller metal framework structure.

"The cars are making a lot of racket and throwing exhaust into the air. Below, there's a boat traveling under the bridge with people standing along the rails, the boat creating a wake that

stretches behind it creating a "V" in the water. If you look in the distance, you'll see what looks like a giant egg on one side of the river. And just over there is a giant wheel with glass gondolas hanging from it. It's slowly going around. And that tower that you see from the bridge? That's the tower of Big Ben. It's a clock tower that tells the world, well okay, maybe just Londoners, what time it is.

"And there, that's the reconstruction of an original theater created by a human named William Shakespeare. It's called the Globe. In the original theater, humans would come in large crowds to watch other humans tell or act out stories.

"There's a building shaped like an onion, and another one called the Gherkin, which is named after a type of food called a pickle. The weather is often cloudy. It rains often. And it's a pretty mild place with so many sights and things to do. I used to go to the Theatre ala' Mouse. There would be hundreds of mice there, everyone would bring their own food, and there would be a show, usually a play with sometimes a cast of 20 or 30 mice.

"That's very interesting, Thom. Why did you leave London? It sounds like a great place to live," asks Carl.

"I was looking for more," replies Thom. "I needed to see more than what I was seeing. London is a nice place and it is very interesting, Carl, but it's where I have lived all of my life. I wanted to see places I would never get to see. When I woke up on that ship, it was my chance to see where life might take me.

"Now I've seen parts of South and Central America, and here I am in California," quickly adding "So, is California a separate country?"

Chris explained, "Well, it seems different than a lot of other places in this country, but it isn't a country. It's what we call a state. In our country we have 50 states and California is the very most southwestern state. Besides, it's a pretty nice place to live and now you have friends here."

The evening winds down with Thom wishing all a good night, and then making his way up to his bed on the rooftop patio as the Mouse family retires to their bedrooms.

Over the next two weeks, Chris and Christine, Carl and Candy share stories of their adventures including the trips to the Caribbean and the Andes, Chris' PawdCast, and all the details about the mouse community around their Home in the Wall. The Mouse family introduces Thom to Franklin and Donna and they give him a tour of the house and garden.

The Home in the Wall becomes a center for a revolving door visit from mice in the community, with food shared, stories told and laughter laughed.

One night, the Mouse family hosts a talent show. Mice literally come out of the woodwork to watch, laugh, sing or show off during the show. Franklin and Donna provide the food, an assortment of delectables for critters of all types. A low box is turned upside down to form a stage, and two smaller boxes are on one side to scramble up and down from the stage. A small table light on one side provides a spot light. Mice are sprawled out in 9 rows to watch the show.

First up, the ever-popular "Here We Go" band, which is the entire Mouse family doing their song and dance routine. Cheers erupt at the end of "I Heard it in the Cheese Line," a very popular song that includes some really great dance moves. The four Mouse family members sing, dance and wave their arms to the music.

Next, Frizz and Frak dance to "A Hole is Not A House," a great lamenting song about loneliness.

One of the young mice, Jeremy, tells a few jokes, which keeps the show going with laughter.

"So, I'm walking down the street and I bump into this dog. I mean, I literally walked straight into the dog's front leg. He looks at me and then says, 'Hey, shrimpboat, watch where you're walking.' I said, Hey, I just stopped to "paws" for a minute." The punchline is greeted with polite laughter.

"Have you ever seen the brown and white cat? That cat is so ugly it could turn a funeral down an alley." A few more polite chuckles.

"I went to get my hair cut the other day. The guy asks me if I want my whiskers trimmed. I said, 'No, but you could scratch my butt if you want to.'" This brings on a lot of laughs as Jeremy sits back down to applause.

Several of the other pinkies yell, "Turn on some dance music!" to which Chris and Franklin play some songs on YouTube on the tv in the Home in the Wall, windows open, and sound turned up loud. It sounds pretty good, and while the "kids" are dancing the rest of the crowd helps themselves to more food.

It's a great night and a late night. Everyone is finally asleep at a little after midnight.

The next day, Thom announces that he is going to continue on his journey. He has heard about a place called Alaska and he plans to find a ship that will take him there. Franklin suggests that Thom look for a yacht harbor and listen to hear if anyone is talking about sailing to Alaska. The other option is to go back to the Port of Los Angeles and see if he can find any ship that might be headed north.

After several hours of goodbyes, especially tearful ones for Carl and Candy, Thom leaves behind hugs and not a few moist eyes. This has been a wonderful time to learn about other cultures and critters, and there are hopes shared that they will see each other again.

Unfortunately, that never happens, but the Mouse family's other adventures more than fill the void after Thom's departure.



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