Chris Mouse Family Changes

#7 in the Chris Mouse series



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Chapter 1 - Candy's Bright Star

“Mom, guess what? You’re never going to believe this.”

“What Candy? What won’t I believe?”

“I’m making a demo for the Mouse YouTube channel. I Facebook Messengered them and they said that they would like to see what I can do as a reporter. I mean, I’ve always liked the news, and I have even practiced reporting the news in the mirror. It was really easy, and I had fun doing it.”

“Okay, but what won’t I believe?”

“They asked me to make a video demo to show them what I can do. That means I’ll be considered for a job as a reporter for the Mouse Channel on YouTube. Can you believe that?”

Christine is in the middle of writing a proposal for Mouse Academy to get a playhouse for the Acting Class, so she hears her daughter, but can’t quite break away from her proposal writing to pay total attention.

Candy has talked about reporting the news by video for almost a year now, so it makes sense that she wants to pursue a career in the field. It’s going to be fun watching Candy produce her demo, no matter the outcome.

When Christine comes up to Candy’s room later to check on her, Candy is surprised when her mother asks her about the demo. She wasn’t sure that her mom even heard what she said earlier.

“I have to put together a five-minute video segment on a current topic. I picked the Mouse Academy and the success that students are having in careers after graduating.”

“Well, that’s really nice, honey, but we’ve only had one class that graduated so far,” says Christine.

“I know, and that’s actually a good thing. Out of that class, almost half of them are doing some work in the learning segments that they liked.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“I did the research because I’m a Mouse Academy graduate and I believe that what Mouse Academy is doing is changing the future for lots of mice.

“So, when I got part way through my research on graduates, I read a couple of posts in Facebook and LinkedIn about a job at the YouTube Mouse Channel reporting the news. I sent an email with my resume to the directors and got an email back in two days saying that they would be happy to consider my credentials. They said that the most important part is how I come across on video. So, they’re asking every applicant to do a five-minute video segment on the news of their choice.

“I picked Mouse Academy for its recent graduation. I’m going to report on the back story, which is the success of the first graduates.”

Christina is now very interested in the conversation. Candy is going to use Mouse Academy for her story, and given that her mother is the founder of Mouse Academy, it could be good publicity for the Academy.

“That sounds really nice, Candy. How can I help you?”

“Well, mom,” says Candy. “I could use your help in doing research. I’d like to talk to instructors, If that’s okay with you.”

“Of course, I’ll send an email memo to all the instructors tomorrow. But, they have total freedom to not participate, if they choose not to. It wouldn’t be good for me to pressure anyone, even for my daughter.”

"No problem. Thanks, mom."

Two days later Candy checks her email and finds messages from three of last year's Mouse Academy instructors. All three say that they're in touch with their graduates and confirm that at least half are working in some area that was covered in classes.

Candy asks for contact information for the working students and through email she next sets up times to interview each of them. She also emails the graduates that aren't working in their area of study and arranges times to meet with them also.

Candy asks Carl to help record interviews and after a few sighs and "Really?" reactions he agrees to help.

Over several days Candy and Carl walk to meet with graduates, then record video interviews with Candy.

After 11 recorded interviews, Candy gets a hold of Franklin’s nephew Danny, who agrees to edit the individual recordings into one tight, 5-minute video segment.

Danny is really good at editing and the final video is not only interesting, but impressive.

"Thank you, Danny," says Candy. "You're a genius. I'm so happy with what you did for me. I can't wait to hear from the Mouse Channel after they've watched the video."

"You're welcome, Candy," replies Danny. "You did a really good job of interviewing. Very professional. Let me know when you get the job," he says in a positive note.

Candy emails the final video demo to the producer of the Mouse channel on a Monday.

On Thursday she gets an email reply.

"Dear Miss Mouse. We have reviewed your video demo and everyone liked it. We think you might fit here at the Mouse Channel, but we would like to have an in-person interview with you. Are you available next Monday at 1 pm to come by?"

Candy can't believe her eyes. "Are they really seriously interested in me?" "Do they think I might fit there?" "Do I really have a chance?"

She rushes down from her bedroom where her dad is sitting watching the news on the tablet TV.

When she tells her dad the great news he silently motions for her to watch the news with him.

During each news segment Candy thinks to herself, "I can do a better job than that."

At the end of the news program, Chris turns to his daughter and says, "I'm so happy for you, Candy. You're growing up to be a really smart and capable mouse. We'll be cheering for you when you go for your interview."

"Aren't you going to go with me, dad?" Candy asks.

"No. You're almost a grownup doe so we know that you can handle the interview. Maybe Danny will be willing to go with you to verify how you conducted the interviews."

That was a good idea. Candy contacts Danny and he agrees to go with her, and to drive her there in his car.

On Monday, Candy is ready. She will carry a small leather notebook with her notes in it. She gives Danny the address and he drives her to the channel offices. The old building has lettering over one door that says, "M YouTube Channel." Danny says, "I guess 'M' stands for Mouse, huh?"

Candy nods her head and they walk in the front door. Inside is a very small reception area. Just a single desk. When they open the door, a light flashes over another door and in a minute a very handsome male mouse walks out.

"You must be Candy," he says. "And who are you?" turning to Danny.

"I'm a friend of Candy's. I did the video recording and editing of her demo."

"Great, let's take a look, shall we?" and he pushes a button by the interior door, and when the door buzzes he walks through with Danny and Candy following.

Inside, there's a small soundstage with bright lights shining on it. There's a big desk on one side, and a screen on the other.

"My name's Jens," the male mouse says. "Let's sit down here and watch your demo," motioning to some seats facing the soundstage. "I've asked two of my colleagues to join us and we'll all watch the demo together."

He sends a text on his cell phone and within a minute another male and a female mouse come walking in and introduce themselves, then they sit next to Jens.

Danny had already sent the video to the email Jens gave him. Now Jens taps his phone and the video screen on the set brightens to the first image in the video. It's Candy, standing facing the camera. In a second, her image starts talking.

"Mouse Academy is a rather unique institution of higher learning for young mice here in Southern California. Like every school, the value of learning is measured by how well it is applied. Mouse Academy has an impressive track record of graduating students that are actually working in their fields.

"We came here to talk to instructors and former students. Let's see what unfolds."

The video shows several students working, as Candy’s voiceover describes the context and then interviews them. The video is very professional and so is Candy, who speaks confidently and expertly. The video ends with Candy interviewing Mouse Academy instructors and finally interviewing Christine, as the founder of the Academy.

"With 25 graduating students from last year now working in the fields they studied at Mouse Academy this story is about a stunning success ratio, one that could be replicated in every city. And that gives hope to young mice that aspire to have useful and enjoyable careers."

As the video fades to black, the female member of the Mouse Channel team starts slowly clapping, followed by her male colleague and then by Jens.

Jens turns to Candy and says, "Very nice work, young lady. We have already interviewed the other candidates and I think we need a few minutes to discuss our thoughts. Can you and your colleague wait in the waiting area for a few minutes?"

"Of course," says Candy confidently. "I think you can see that I am a good fit here."

After four and a half minutes, Jens comes out the door to the waiting room.

He has a solemn look on his face as he says, "We like what we see, Candy, but as you know there are other candidates for this position. We had to weigh all the pluses and minuses. My colleagues and I take this decision very seriously. Like all major decisions, we have to make sure that we make the right move because the future of Mouse Channel is at stake.

"All of the candidates provided very strong demos. Some, of course, were better than others. Some candidates were more photogenic than others. Some had better voices than others. We had to weigh all of these factors in our decision.

"We have decided..." and he pauses as if he's thinking of a deep subject, "to offer the position to one candidate." He pauses again.

The suspense is starting to get to Candy. She wants to yell out, "Well, spill it, Jens. Who is the winning candidate?" but she wisely just sits there with her front paws folded in her lap and a slight smile on her face.

Jens continues, "The candidate we are offering this position to… is you."

Candy sits there for a second, stunned by the answer and drained from the suspense.

Danny yells, "YES!!" and turns to high five Candy who has to pull herself out of her shock for a second to high five back.

Then she says very calmly, "That's wonderful, Jens. I'm looking forward to making a difference here. Let's get the details worked out - hours, pay, duties, and so forth, so we can conclude a deal."

The three Mouse Channel mice shake paws with Candy and Danny, and Jens escorts the other two Channel workers out.

He sits back down with Candy and describes everything that Candy can expect and everything the Mouse Channel expects. The job is part-time and the pay is in Mouse Dollars. At the end, he has Candy sign a paper agreement, gives her a copy, and says, "We'll start tomorrow. We have an interview set up for you with a local family that lost their home in a fire. You'll be reporting on the impact on them, and their hopes for a future. The interview will be at 10 am at an animal shelter close to where you live."

"Great. Will I meet a video crew there?"

"Yes, our on-site director will meet you there along with a camera operator and another mouse handling the audio. I'll email you the particulars so you can do an informed interview."

The next morning at 10, Candy is at the animal shelter. She's using a script that follows the guidelines set by Jens. The interview goes well, she thinks, and she makes a few, on-the-spot changes to the interview questions and comes up with her own wrap-up.

The next night she and her family watch the Mouse YouTube Channel and click on the news. Candy's is the second segment, after a report on mouse poverty in the city.

Everyone gets quiet as they watch Candy on video. She's relaxed, friendly, caring and a good interviewer. Her interviewees were nervous at first, but she calmed them with her voice, and they gave good responses to her questions. Her wrap up was sharp, short and pointed, ending on a positive note.

Her family breaks out in applause as the segment ends. It is so good, they can't believe that their own Candy did it. She's smart and capable, but this segment was more than that. This was professional.

That night Candy gets a congratulatory email from Jens. The feedback to the channel has been very positive. Mice are posting effusive comments in the "Comments" under the video.

"This is the best feedback for any news segment that we have ever had, Candy. I would say that you came out of the gate running. We can't wait to see what you do next. By the way, it's good form for you to acknowledge the fan comments and to thank them for watching."

Candy thinks to herself, "I already did that" and thinks silently to Jens, "Do you think I'm new here?"

Her next two interviews are more challenging.

One is about an accident that took the life of a young mouse and Candy has to interview the parents.

The second interview is a boring subject. She has to interview a mouse working on a ship in the Port of Long Beach. His job is to keep the ship mice from doing any damage or eating any of the food being transported.

She does her homework, and both interviews turn out well. She looks polished and professional, but also caring. Both segments also get amazing reviews on the Channel.

The next day after the second interview airs, Candy gets two emails. One is from a reporter with the New York Times who wants to do an article on her. The second is closer to home - it's

the streaming channel for an LA television channel. They want to report on the phenomenal young female mouse that is getting everyone's attention reporting the news.

After the Times article and the streaming news report, Candy is practically a celebrity. She starts getting invitations to all kinds of events - fashion shows, political rallies, celebrity parties, entertainment awards. It's dizzying, but she focuses on doing good work first. If there's time and it won't interfere with her work, then she accepts the invitations. Some, however, she turns down because she's very busy and can't do everything.

Jens calls Candy as her popularity literally explodes. He has very good news.

First, the Channel wants her for full-time, and she'll have no more than four segments a week to produce.

Second, the Mouse Channel will start promoting her in online ads for the Channel. Jens has a photoshoot scheduled for later this week.

And third, the owner of the Mouse Channel wants her to sign a binding two-year agreement to keep her at the Channel.

Candy calls all of her friends and breathlessly tells them the latest. She’s having trouble staying cool and calm. She never expected this kind of result. It's all too exciting and also a little frightening.

At home, Candy becomes a blur. She comes and goes, usually moving very quickly because she's on deadline.

Candy is also blossoming as a female mouse, and quickly gets a lot of male mouse admirers that post about her on Facebook. Soon, she’s recognized when she goes on assignment. Male mice whistle and wink at her and young female mice adore her and study her clothes and everything about her so they can look like her.

Christine is very pleased with how well her daughter is doing. She comes up to Candy's room one evening for a talk.

"Would you be willing to speak to the Mouse Academy students about taking their studies seriously? Everyone knows how well you're doing and the students talk about you every day. Now that you're practically a celebrity, it would be so helpful if you could encourage our students to do well in their studies and pursue their dreams intentionally."

"Of course, mom. Mouse Academy is one of the reasons I got my opportunity. Just set it up and I'll be there. I will be the number one encourager."

"You already are, sweetheart, but now you can take it to another level. Thanks!"

After six months of working as a news correspondent for the Mouse YouTube Channel, Candy is promoted to co-news anchor. She sits behind the big news deck with Jens, as they banter back and forth introducing and commenting on various news segments.

To salute and celebrate her achievements, billboards go up in Los Angeles and New York's Times Square touting her as a news anchor and announcing, "No one does it better than Candy Mouse!"

The photo of her is very attractive and the fan emails continue to grow. Candy doesn't have time to read them all, so the Mouse Channel hires a young assistant to read and answer them all, only forwarding those that seem to require a personal answer. Many of those in that category are from important and influential humans, or from mice that appear to be Candy's personal friends.

During her weekly meetings with Jens, who is not only her co-anchor but also the producer of the News Channel, she learns that the Mouse Channel is making serious money from advertisers because of the rapidly growing views on the Channel.

Quietly, Candy can't believe her good fortune. She has become a celebrity and is getting recognized everywhere she goes. She can't go any place where there are lots of mice or humans without having to dress down and walk quickly to avoid the crush of fans around her. In a way, it's embarrassing, but in another way it's confirmation that she is doing a good job.

As her work settles into a routine, Candy gets lots of offers, some to hire her for modeling, others for entertainment, shows and movies, and still others are from male mice that want to date her.

She smiles and chuckles at all of the offers, with no intention of taking any of them. She wants to focus on doing her job well at the Mouse Channel, and she doesn't think that any of these other opportunities will help her do that. They all seem like distractions, which she knows she has to avoid.

One thing Candy does manage to fit into her busy life is outside of her career. Thanks to her popularity, her family's "Here We Go" group starts performing and posting again on their YouTube Channel. Candy is now one of two lead singers for the group along with her dad. Her voice has matured, and she is able to hit high notes that she never could before. Fan emails to her as a member of Here We Go are so numerous that she has to ask her mom to answer them. Christine is happy to help, and she has also been acting as a chaperone with Candy at the many events she is invited to. In addition to leading Mouse Academy, Christine has joined her daughter in being way too busy.

The Here We Go YouTube channel is also blowing up. Their latest video has now had over 1 million views and the money is pouring in from advertising.

It's hard to imagine how things quickly change. One minute, Candy is just out of school. The next, she is not only one of the most popular female mice in the world, but also one of the lead singers of a group that continues to grow an increasingly large, international fan base.

At night, she sits in her nest and thinks back over this crazy, wild, exciting ride.

"I didn't do anything to get this far," she thinks, "except to stay focused on my dream and keep thinking of ways I can get better. Thanks to that one big break with the Mouse YouTube Channel I now have a wonderful future."

And, that's the lesson for all of us. Candy got a fair assessment of her abilities in feedback from teachers and friends. She didn't attempt anything without confirmation that she could do it well. Her preparation for each opportunity took a lot of time, and she put in more time than she thought she would need to. But she was willing to sacrifice her time and personal interests to get herself ready. And when preparation meets opportunity, luck isn't surprising.

Chapter 2 - Movin' On Up

Candy is a star, but now she has to deal with fans. They're everywhere and when she goes out on the rare assignment for the Mouse Channel News team, more fans show up than the last time.

She still is co-anchor of the nightly news. Her favorite thing is to go out and report on newsworthy mice and the events that affect them.

Coming home at night is getting tiring because it’s a lot of time wasted riding back and forth to work. Candy wishes she could live a little closer to the studio. She's making great money - both in Mouse bucks and human dollars. The amount of her pay is a little bit scary because she's still young and has never had much money before. Now she has a lot.

Her dad drives her to work and brings her back each day. It’s a convenience afforded them because of the Mouse Wagon, the family's mouse-sized car that runs on electricity.

Every workday requires a commute, there and back. Sure, she’s making good pay, and she likes, just a little bit, that more and more mice recognize her. But the commute takes time, and that part of her life should be dedicated to her job. She was given a chance with this job, she is working hard at it, and she knows she has to give it everything she has. Right now she’s possibly the most famous female mouse in all of California, maybe the country. It’s really exciting, but so tiring and there never seems to be enough time.

In the last few months, Candy has learned a lot about the area that she works in. It’s full of big buildings, cars, sidewalks and did I say, big buildings? The hum of people, mice, cars and buses is exciting. One day she stood for a minute on a street corner and watched all the people coming and going, walking the streets and into and out of the buildings.

One of those buildings is where Mouse Channel studios and offices are located. The Channel has grown in popularity by leaps and bounds since she has been on the News staff. Thanks to their increased profitability the Mouse Channel has expanded, adding staff and offices. The people that work in their building are amused watching the myriad of mice staff members ride the elevators and walk in and out of their offices on the 14th floor. At the ground floor of the building is a deli, a bakery, a flower shop and a FedEx office, which makes it very convenient for the people and mice working in the building.

In the same neighborhood are some of the best restaurants, all of whom throw their leftover food in the garbage cans in the alleys. It’s like a cafeteria. There’s always a lot of discarded food, so one entrepreneurial mouse started a business to collect the best of it and deliver it to other mice since mice really like food that's a little "used."

The food delivery business is called MouseGrub. It’s so convenient and makes eating very easy. No hunt for food. Just pay for it and it’s delivered to you. MouseGrub has its office on the 3rd floor, so it's convenient for team members of the Mouse Channel to order lunch from them, or on long days, dinner.

While the building has almost everything needed for life, it doesn't have any living units. No apartments, condos or suites. Just offices.

One of the other female mice on the team has a nearby apartment inside a human apartment. The mouse apartment was built by a female human who just wanted to help girl mice and who now leases it out.

On Friday of this week, the girl mouse named Gentle has just leased the mouse apartment and comes up to Candy on the set after the last stream of the day. Candy's co-anchor has already left the anchor desk, and the production team is busy turning off lights and shutting down equipment.

Gentle says, “Hi Candy. Hey, do you know any girl mice that might want to share an apartment with me and split the costs?”

It’s like the clouds parted and the sun came beaming in the window. Candy blinks and says, “What?”

Gentle repeats her question and tells her a little about the apartment. It's one block away and is perfect for two single mice.

“I might. I’ve been thinking about moving closer to work, and your apartment is practically right next door. I mean, I would have to check, of course.”

Gentle smiles, “Okay, I guess. I just took a chance that you might be interested, since you come into the city from the neighborhoods. I mean, I get it. The city might just be too much for you to handle right now.”

“Well, I have been thinking about it. No commitments, but I am seriously interested.”

The set is now dark, and both mice are the last to leave the room.

Driving home with her dad that day, Candy looks at her beautiful new watch and notes how long the drive is taking. Traffic is thick on the streets and the sidewalks, making it very slow going. Chris generally drives on the street right next to the curb, but today he has to drive up on the sidewalk for several blocks. It's not only inconvenient, it isn't easy because he has to find low driveways from the street to the sidewalk. All of this adds time to the commute.

That night, Candy walks in the Home in the Wall and her mom is sitting at the table.

“Hey, mom.”

“Oh, hi sweetheart.

“Mom, It's getting harder for me to get to and from work. Dad's great, and I really appreciate that he drives me each way, but I think I need to move closer to work. I could really use the hour each way that it now takes to get to and from my job. Can you help me explain that to dad so he’s okay with it?”

"I could, but I would need some specifics. Are you serious? Do you have a place picked out and do you know what it will cost?

“Yes, mom. I'm serious, I do have a place picked out. I would be sharing it with a co-worker and we would split the cost. She's a nice girl named Gentle and she works in our research department. She's from the city, so she also knows her way around.

"My share of the rent will cost me about one-fourth of my income, not counting bonuses. I’ll use another 15% for food, and the rest for transportation, fun and savings.”

“It sounds like you have done good thinking. When would you want to move?”

“I'm thinking it would be best to move within the next two weeks. Until then I could just keep commuting.”

Christine smiles, "Well, I'll talk to your father. I know he's pretty protective of you and your brother, but we both realize that you are growing up and working in your careers. We should consider that you're both young adults and need to start living your own lives."

Candy goes up to her room with a smile on her face. "That went about as well as I could have hoped for," she thinks.

That night at the family dinner Christine brings the subject up. Carl raises his eyebrows and Chris asks the same questions that Christine asked earlier.

When Candy details her situation and her challenges, he grabs his chin with one paw, leans back and thinks.

Then, he looks straight at Candy and says, “Well, if that’s what you want to do, Candy, I don’t have any objections. Your mother and I just want you to have a great start in life as an adult mouse. It sounds like you have a very responsible plan. And, if for some reason you decide to move back, or even visit for a night or two, your old room will always be just the way you left it.”

“Thanks, Daddy. You’re the best,” Candy says with a big grin, giving him a hug.

The next day she finds Gentle and gives her the news. “It's all set. I’d like to share the apartment with you.”

“That’s good, Candy. I was hoping you would be my roommate. You always seem to be in a good mood, and you're really calm with all the stress we have in our work. By the way, I’ll need your half of the first month’s rent by tomorrow so I can finalize the deal.”

“Got it. No problem. Just email me the exact amount and I’ll have the cash for you tomorrow."

It's settled. She will soon have an apartment to live in, which is a big relief. Even better, it's just one block from her work That makes the commute to her job a really quick walk. With the time saved, she can stop at MouseGrub on her way up to her office and order lunch for the day.

It's all coming together for her, she thinks.

The next day she brings her half of the rent and hands it to Gentle, saying, “I’d like to go see the apartment tomorrow. Can you arrange that?”

“Sure, let’s do it. We can go during lunch. It’s just a block over and we can order lunch from MouseGrub to be delivered to our apartment. We can sit on the floor and eat after we’ve looked at the apartment.”

The next day the two mice walk to the apartment, which has a small, separate entrance into the mouse apartment from the hallway. The entrance is so well designed that it’s impossible to see that's it's really a door. To open it, you use a mouse paw to touch it in just the right place, and then it swings open. Once on the inside, you push it once again and the door snaps closed, once more invisible from the hallway. Candy makes a mental note to try the door several times when she's alone, so she can get confidence that she knows how to open and close it.

Before seeing the apartment in person Candy didn't know what to expect. She has never lived on her own. Gentle had showed her pictures of the apartment, but then it was just a potential living place for her. But now, it’s half hers. It’s a nice small place with two bedrooms, a small living space, a kitchen, and a bathroom.

Gentle already has furniture and can provide everything except Candy’s bed. That gets solved when Candy’s dad brings her nest from the Home in the Wall. It doesn’t quite fit in the Mouse Wagon so he has to bring it in two pieces and put it together again in the apartment.

"Thanks, dad. You're the best," Candy tells him as he's about to leave.

Over the next week, the two enterprising young mice scrounge more furniture.

Danny offers to connect a tablet tv in their apartment, using the wi-fi from the human apartment surrounding the mouse apartment. He gets the details from the lady in the big apartment and soon has everything all connected. Now, the two girl mice even have tv!

The first night in her nest in her own apartment is wonderful for Candy. She sighs and giggles and then laughs that she has now really become an independent adult mouse on her own. It’s a big adventure, and she is beyond excited.

The way things have gone during the last six months has been unbelievable. She’s won am award for reporting, the news team defers to her on some decisions, and the Mouse Channel even gave her a full-time assistant to handle her fan mail, book her appointments and make sure she has everything she needs to keep doing the work that she is excelling at.

After a few weeks, the apartment is just the apartment. She loves the one block commute, her dad doesn’t have to drive her to and from work every day, and she enjoys her new freedom. There's also a big time-saving in going to and from her work.

The neighborhood is really a hive of activity during the day, with humans and mice coming and going, walking the sidewalks, and driving the streets. On her walk to work Candy notices more mouse cars. She had never heard of any other mice with cars, but there they are, driving on the sidewalks and the streets next to the curbs. Now, she's walking and everything is visible.

She loves the morning walk to work. The restaurants, delis and pastry shops are open, with delightful smells escaping to the street as customers go in and out of the doors. She has a happy energy at the start of each day. Everything is perfect, and attitudes are great in the morning.

On the Tuesday of her second week in the apartment, Candy is walking to her office when she almost runs into the legs of a man sitting on the sidewalk. She swerves just in time, but as she's walking by she notices that the man is old. His hair is white, he has a white beard, and his clothes look like he's been wearing them for the last couple of years.

"Hey, little mouse," the man calls to her.

"Oh, hello," Candy replies, looking straight up to the craggy face.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, my friend?" he asks.

"I work in this building," she replies.

"Well, have a good day. I hope to see you again." as he waves goodbye to her.

Candy thinks about this encounter for the first hour of the day, and then she's in the middle of making decisions and working to put together today's news segment. The news team tells her and her colleague the latest breaking news as it comes in, and she and Harvold, her co-anchor, talk about each item and work on a sequence for today, along with the director.

Harvold is older than Candy. He has been a news anchor for over a year, earning his spot after working as an assistant for the previous year. He's very professional, with careful grooming and business attire.

He smiles when he sees her, but it's a very professional smile. He doesn't ever say anything personal to Candy, or share any details about his life. All she knows is that he has a nice smile and a voice for YouTube.

Like most days, today is a blur. Candy goes from one room to another gathering information, talking to colleagues, writing at her desk, and then meeting up with Harvold and the news director before they record today's news.

After recording, she sits at her desk and writes a few notes for tomorrow and for upcoming segments. Something always clicks when she's at the news desk. She sees something in the script, or hears something in one of the video segments that makes her think about future segments. Today, she's interested in a segment about how the homeless problem is affecting the mice community. She makes a note to look for the man that she met sitting on the street that morning.

Leaving the building that night, Candy looks for him, but he's not sitting on the street. She thinks about her conversation with him during the short walk to the next block and up to her apartment.

Gentle is singing in the kitchen when she walks in.

"Hey, Gentle. That sounds nice. What song is that?" she asks.

Gentle replies ,"'I Found It In The Trash Can.' It's an old R&B song, sung by the Four Blind Mice."

"Catchy tune!" Candy says. "Hey, did you see that guy sitting on the sidewalk this morning on your way to work? He was right in front of our office building."

"Yeah, I saw him. It's very sad. He looks pretty old. He was there in the morning but he was gone in the afternoon when I ran out on an errand for the news director."

Candy puts her backpack away, hangs her coat up, and starts looking around the kitchen for food. Her singing roommate is making something that smells really good and Candy hears her stomach growl.

Gentle hears it, too, and says, "I'm making something called 'slumgullion' that was taught to me by my mom. She would take all kinds of things that were in our kitchen too long, put them all together, heat them, and somehow make a mysterious but wonderful meal out of it all."

"Mmm. I sure like the smell."

"I'm making plenty. Throw in one of your tomatoes and I'll share this with you."

"Deal."

When the meal is ready the two girl mice sit down to eat.

"Gentle, I'm so glad we're sharing this apartment. It's fun to have a roommate that I work with and that is such a cool girl."

"Thanks, Candy. I also like our arrangement. I never thought I'd be sharing an apartment with a celebrity. I've notice that sometimes when you walk home there are mice following you. That's pretty cool, right?"

"I guess so," says Candy, "but it's sometimes not that fun. Sometimes I just want to be a normal mouse that no one knows. And sometimes it's kind of creepy."

Gentle smiles and thinks to herself, "I wouldn't mind that problem."

After the dishes are washed and put away, Candy is tired after the long day and sits down in the living room in front of the tablet tv.

She mentions to Gentle who joins her on the couch, "That guy on the sidewalk this morning was very friendly, but he is also pretty old. I hope he's okay. I'm going to look for him tomorrow."

That night Candy is sleeping, tossing and turning. She dreams about the man on the sidewalk. In her dream, they're having a long conversation about life.

In the middle of the dream, she wakes up suddenly. She looks up at the ceiling in her room and realizes that she doesn't really know much about the man, but as a news person she has a

responsibility to share what the humans call "human interest" stories. The Mouse Channel calls them "Mouse interest" stories, but it's all the same.

The next morning, Candy crawls out of her nest, walks out of her bedroom and makes a nice bowl of nuts and leafy greens for breakfast. Then she puts on one of the new business outfits that her mom made for her, and she leaves the apartment.

She likes the elevator, although she can't reach the buttons for the floor she wants. Fortunately, almost every morning there are humans getting into the elevator to go down to the ground floor.

She walks out of the building and crosses the street to the block where her office is located. There sprawled out on the sidewalk is the same older man, legs extending out into the sidewalk from where he's sitting with his back against the building.

"Hey, how are you this morning?" she says cheerfully. "I dreamed about you last night."

"Well, little friend, I hope it was a good dream. I'm doing okay. I was hoping I would see you today. I don't have many folks to talk to. Most people don't even look at me. But, you talked to me yesterday and that made my day. Thank you!"

"You're welcome. I'm interested in your story. Where do you live?"

"I'm what humans call a street person, little mouse. I sleep where I can, and I eat when I can. It's not easy, but sometimes I sleep at the mission two blocks over. They have a lot of rules so every few days I sleep in an alley or find a box somewhere."

"That's an interesting story. I'm a journalist, actually. I work for the Mouse Channel. We're on YouTube. I'd be very interested in doing a story about you. Would you be willing to come up to our offices and talk to our news director?"

"Sure. I haven't ever been on the news, but I'd be happy to. I have always liked mice and many of the neighborhood mice around here are my friends."

When Candy goes up to her office she finds the news director and tells her about the story idea she has. She wants to spotlight the older man that sits on the sidewalk and has mice friends.

The news director, Linker Utten, listens to Candy's pitch and then says, "It sounds interesting, Candy. It's not our typical story. We don't highlight humans in our reporting. Usually they're just a secondary mention while we concentrate on our stories about real mice living real lives."

"I know, Linker, but if I have him come up here, would you talk to him? Then you can decide if there's a story there or not."

Linker agrees and Candy goes down to the sidewalk where the man is still sitting. She walks over to him and, seeing that he's sleep, she shakes his pants leg.

"What..." he says as he wakes up and looks around.

"Hey, friend. My news director would like to meet you. Could you come up to our offices with me and talk to her?"

"Sure."

They walk in to the lobby, he pushes the button for the floor Candy tells him to, and they ride up to the floor, get off and walk into the Mouse Channel offices.

He opens the human door to the office while Candy goes in the mouse door.

She calls to him on the inside of the offices, "Hey, I don't even know your name, sir."

"It's Walter, young lady. Walter Shilzhorn. Where are we going?"

She leads him into the news offices and introduces him to Linker who leads him to a human size chair and table for a conversation.

After the conversation and Walter's return to the sidewalk, Linker tells Candy that she thinks tha this might make a quick segment. She'll send a camera crew to the sidewalk in a few hours and Candy can interview him on-camera. Candy just needs to put together a list of questions for the interview.

The shoot goes very well. Candy's interview with the "Friend of Mice" is short and very interesting. Walter has a sense of humor and cracks jokes, smiling all the time.

After editing, the story is part of the day's newscast with Candy doing an anchor desk intro to the video segment.

In two days, there are humans and mice surrounding Walter, again sitting on the sidewalk. He's a celebrity and all of his new visitors want to know him better, humans even handing him money. One human is from a social services agency and promises to get him a living space and enough money to support himself.

It's a happy ending to a good human-interest and mouse-interest story. And, it's a great way for Candy to celebrate her new life in the city.

"This is going to work out well," she says to herself.

Chapter 3 - Tinklet

It's summer time and the livin' is easy.

The weather is nice, the sun is warm, and the new garden at the new house where the Dootys and Mouse families live is producing lots of produce.

Life has settled down at the Home in the Wall, since Candy moved out and Carl is busy at his new part-time job at the New Mouse Store.

Chris and Christine are out in the garden, weeding and collecting a few things to eat.

Weeding has two really good purposes. One, it gets rid of the weeds that are crowding out the garden veggies that they love. Two, the weeds are good tasting, and the two mice snack on dandelions as they do their weeding.

The afternoon is heating up. It's going to be pretty warm in a few hours, so Chris and Christine pick up the pace so they can get more done before they have to go inside and cool off.

"Hey!" comes a voice from the front gate. It's a mouse with a funny looking cap, standing on the sidewalk.

"Hello," yells Chris. "Can I help you?"

"Sure can. I'm looking for Chris and Christine Mouse. I'm their cousin Bardle from Montana."

"You came to the right place, Bardle. I'm Chris and this is my wife Christine. Let me show you how to get in here. There's a secret way around the gate."

Chris walks to the gate, takes a sharp right, and pops through a small hole in the bushes and feince to stand next to this new cousin from afar.

"That's pretty tricky, cousin." says Bardle. "We don't have stuff like that where I live. Of course, we live kind of in the country, so the only fences we have are barbed wire and we can run right under them."

Chris replies, "Cousin Clarence told us about that. Come on in. Can you stay for a while?"

"Sure, I rode the trains to get here. Clarence has been telling all the family members about you guys and about Christine inheriting the plot of land near where we live. He also mentioned that you have a pretty young daughter and a handsome son. Where are they today?"

"They're both working," Christine says. Carl works at a local mouse store and Candy is a news anchor for the Mouse Channel on YouTube."

"That's your daughter?" Bardle asks with wide eyes. "She's famous. I didn't know we were related to her. I can see why Clarence likes her so much."

"Let me show you to your room, Bardle," says Christine, side stepping his comment about Candy.

They walk in through the new mouse door to the house, into the bedroom and into the closet.

The visiting mouse looks up at the five-story Home in the Wall and lets out a long, low whistle.

"Mouse, oh my," he says. "That's some mansion you have there, cousins."

Chris tells him the story about finding the pirates' treasure and the gift from the Dootys. Then Christine offers water and food to their new guest.

They sit and talk as Bardle eats. He tells them about his journey on the rails and a truck, and about everything going on in Montana.

"It wasn't that hard. Clarence told me exactly how to do it. 'Catch any train going south,' he said. 'Then if that train stops going south, find one that's going to Southern California. Once you're in Southern California, find one that's going anywhere near where the Mouse family lives.'

"It sounds easier than it was, but I'm a pretty resourceful mouse so I got here. I had some really nice rides on the rails, saw some very interesting country, and only took a day to find you after I got in Southern California.

"All your Montana family have been talking about you all down here since Clarence came back from his second visit. Several other family members have talked about coming for a visit, and everyone wants you to come visit us in Montana. We're your family, you know.

"You could see your land, Christine," Bardle says. "It's a really pretty parcel, with nice, sun-dappled meadows and a slow, freshwater stream that flows from the mountains. I've heard that the stream has some nice fish in it, but I wouldn't know. I don't eat fish, myself."

"We'd like to come visit sometime, Bardle," responds Christine, "but I don't know if we could make that kind of a trip. We've heard that lots of mice travel the rails, and we even had a visit a year or two ago from a mouse that sailed across the ocean on big cargo ships. He wasn't a relative, by the way. That kind of travel does sound like a bit more adventurous than we are, though."

"The last trip we went on was riding trains across Canada," said Christine. "That was one of only two train rides we've ever had, the other one in the Andes of South America. But, we didn't travel alone. Our human friends that own this house, Franklin and Donna, took us and our kids with them as they traveled. We didn't have to do anything but be good friends and enjoy the trips."

Cousin Bardle is really impressed at the stories of travel. His eyes open wide at several points as he tries to imagine what they saw, especially the Caribbean and South America.

"I haven't ever dreamed of seeing the places you have traveled to," he says. "I'll certainly have to hear more stories from you while I'm here."

Chris and Christine take Bardle up to Candy's old room, which is now a guest room with a fresh nest. All of Candy's decorations have moved to her new apartment, so it's no longer a girl's room, which works out good for their guest.

Next, they give Bardle a tour of the house and explain more about their progression in houses, and also in homes with the Dootys.

Bardle is fascinated by the five floors to the Home, and particularly with the rooftop patio and the tablet TV.

After dinner that night, Carl comes home from work and the four mice talk about traveling and about adventures in life.

Bardle is a very interesting mouse. He is very influential in his community in Montana because he has been very clever about money and possessions. He's managed to parlay the Mouse Money he's earned into a very comfortable life on a big ranch, owned by nice humans. He now has enough money that he can travel where and when he wants, and the mice in his area have elected him as their spokesperson to humans. He's a very articulate mouse, which helps him in his responsibilities, and that ability has also helped him gain more wealth and influence.

Carl listens intently to Bardle. As a young mouse, he's looking for male mice that he can learn from. He talks to his mom and dad all the time, and he soaks up everything they say. Christine is a good leader, and he's learned a lot from her about starting and growing an organization from her Mouse Academy experience. His dad is very smart about many things, which has taught him about being adaptable and thinking things through. When Candy comes home to visit on the occasional weekend, he asks her lots of questions about her job and life. He's like a sponge, soaking up wisdom from his family. But this cousin is very smart, and has lots of connections and money.

Carl listens and gets more excited because now he has a very important cousin visiting their home and he's full of questions. He really wants to know what Bardle does and how he does it.

Bardle spends the next couple of evenings talking with Carl, telling Carl his story and giving him advice from his experience. Carl soaks up everything like a sponge. That night he spends an hour just remembering all Cousin Bardle told him, and trying to see how that information could be useful in his own future.

Candy comes home for the weekend, and Bardle has to move to the rooftop patio for one night. He actually prefers the rooftop patio because he's from the wide-open spaces of Montana and while the Mouse Home is nice, rooms in a house in a closet seem a little small to him.

Bardle is very interested in Candy. He repeats some of his story at dinner on Friday night, and Candy seems to be listening closely. She asks him several questions, using the skill she has honed as a news co-anchor. His answers are interesting and different. He's from Montana. California mice don't live like the mice in Montana, and Bardle seems like a very powerful mouse. He tells stories about his involvement with important humans, as well as his financial dealings. He is modest and doesn't brag, but he doesn't need to, either. The facts of his life speak for themselves.

Candy watns to set up an on-camera interview with Bardle, but he explains that he has to leave on Monday because he has important business with a state representative back in Montana and he needs to return for that.

On Sunday, the Mouse family takes Bardle along with them to Mouse Church. He's a faith-filled mouse, and he seems to enjoy the music as well as the message from Rev. Souris. After they return from church, they all talk about the service and the message over lunch, and Bardle shares his thoughts and insights with his relatives. He's obviously a very good listener, and his slant on the message is interesting, which leads to a great discussion.

On Monday morning, Bardle thanks his hosts and packs his small bag to return to Montana.

Chris drives this newly discovered relative to the train station in the Mouse Wagon and waves goodbye to him as he boards the train. It was a good visit and Chris is left wondering what kind of important matter this cousin has to return for.

Life returns to normal after their house guest is gone. Christine is busy organizing the next new courses at Mouse Academy for the fall. Chris has big plans for the garden, and for a slight remodel of the Home in the Wall.

Two months later, two strange mice are at the gate, yelling "Helloooo!"

Chris hears them and walks out to the gate to find out what they want.

It's a male and a female mouse, The female asks Chris if his name is Chris Mouse, to which he nods his head and says, "That's me."

Their names are Mano and Tinklet and Tinklet tells Chris she is related of Christine. They're not married, they're just friends that decided to travel together for safety and to see the California that Clarence and Bardle have told everyone about.

Chris invites them in, and they're soon sitting in the kitchen talking with Chris while Christine is at her office at Mouse Academy.

Chris asks Tinklet how she's related to Christine.

"My mother is a cousin to Clarence, who is a cousin of your wife," she answers. "Clarence and Bardle both have been talking about you guys since their visits to see you. I wanted to come visit and we were all talking one night. Mano said he would like to see California, too. We just up and headed your way so here we are."

Chris asks the obvious question, "So, are you two a couple or are you just friends?"

"We actually just met before leaving Montana," says Tinklet. "Mano wanted to go, and I thought it would be a good idea to have some company. Clarence and Bardle told us how to catch the right trains and how to change to the final trains that would get us close enough o your house. So, here we are."

That evening at dinner, Carl asks Tinklet more questions. "What did you like about the train trip?" and "What do you do when you're home in Montana?"

Tinklet is quick to answer.

"The train ride was fun. It's actually pretty exciting because sometimes we rode in a train car, and sometimes we got daring and sat on top of the train. That part was great. We could see everything all around the train, smell the air, and feel the wind. It was a real rush, you know? I'm kind of adventurous and Mano humored me. I don't think he is quite as daring as I am, but he went along with what I wanted to do, so I appreciate that.

"When I'm home, I work in the fields with my parents. We have a small patch of land. It's on a much larger acreage that a human friend of our family shares with us. We raise crops to sell, mainly to other mice, and we give part of them to our human friend for the use of the land. My dad is a very ambitious mouse, and my mom is very smart. They work together and I do whatever is needed to help them. It's interesting and it gets me outside, which I love, but it's not all that great in the wintertime when it's cold and snowy. That's when we stay inside or go out for ice skating. Clarence told us that Candy and Carl are pretty good at skating and that they competed in a MiceCapades competition here. That's pretty cool!"

Mano is quiet during much of the conversation that evening. It's obvious that Tinklet is the one that planned this trip, and it's her trip that he's simply helping with.

Carl is very interested in Tinklet and asks if she would be interested in seeing the New Mouse Store where he works.

She agrees, but Mano just says that he's tired from the trip so he'd rather rest up if that's okay.

The next morning, Carl is leaving for work at the New Mouse Store. Tinklet sees him getting ready to leave and touches him gently on the paw. "You said you would show me your job. Could I come along with you?"

Carl feels electricity in his paw where she touched him.

"Uh, sure, Tinklet. That would be great. Let's go when you're ready."

"I'm ready right now, Carl. You can take me anywhere."

Those words made Carl's eyes open wide. This girl mouse from Montana seems friendly and she's certainly pretty. He grabs her paw and they walk out the mouse door to the house and down the street to the New Mouse Store.

After breakfast, Chris sees Mano and asks him about his life and friends. "So, are you interested in Tinklet or are you just two fellow travelers?" he asks, since he's still not satisfied that their relationship is just two fellow travelers.

"Actually, I have a girlfriend in Montana. She's a very nice girl and she is okay with me coming here with Tinklet because we both told her that we have no interest in each other. We said several times that we're just going to travel together for convenience and safety."

Oh, that's good, thinks Chris, because he can see that his son seems very interested in the charming Tinklet.

Carl and Tinklet walk into the New Mouse Store and Tinklet looks around with wide eyes. "This is amazing, Carl. Look at all the stuff they have here. I bet you like working here."

"It's kind of fun," he says, "but I'm really just making some money so I can apprentice with Frizz and Frak."

"I don't understand. What is an apprentice?"

"That's when you work for someone to learn from them. Frizz and Frak are local builders. They built our last two houses and they have built a lot of homes or other buildings in the local mouse community. They built this New Mouse Store building, as one example, so they don't just build houses. They are very capable and respected builders here."

"Wow, that's pretty cool. So you want to be a builder?" she asks.

"I do. I have some ideas of my own. I've finished my schooling , but I want to find out what's it like in the real world. Then I think I'll have a good foundation for setting out on my own for the future."

They walk around the New Mouse Store. Carl shows Tinklet all of the departments and introduces her to Hairy Sticky. "This is Hairy. He and his wife Ophelia started the New Mouse Store a few years ago, and they have grown it to the large store you've just seen. Mr. Sticky, this is a relative visiting us from Montana. Meet Tinklet."

The two mice shake paws.

"Glad to meet you Tinklet," Hairy says. "Please say hello to my wife when you see her. I know she would like to meet you, too."

Tinklet smiles and nods, then asks a few questions of Hairy which he answers before apologizing and excusing himself saying he has to take care of a very important business matter.

"Carl, you know some very interesting mice," says Tinklet. "Do you have a few minutes to show me the outside of the store?"

"Sure, and then I have to get to work because my shift starts in 20 minutes."

They walk outside and barely round the corner to see the side of the store, when Tinklet puts her paw on Carl's shoulder, turns him towards her, and kisses him slowly on the lips. She holds him close for several seconds while they kiss, and then she steps back.

"I'm sorry, Carl. I hope that was okay. I think you're a very nice young buck and I have wanted to do that since I first met you."

"Oh, that was more than okay, Tinklet. I really liked that a lot. I just thought you and Mano were more than friends."

"We're just traveling companions, is all," answers Tinklet. "I'll see you at home tonight," she says with a smile and a wink before walking away.

Carl is left wondering what just happened. He's never kissed a girl and definitely never had a girl mouse kiss him. This is all new and confusing o him, and he doesn't quite know what to do about how he feels.

When he enters the yard after work that afternoon, Carl sees his dad in the garage working on his motorcycle.

He walks into the garage and asks Chris, "Dad, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure son, what's on your mind?"

Carl explains what happened at the New Mouse Store earlier that day, when Tinklet turned him around and kissed him.

"Dad, I don't even know what to do about that. What should I do? She's a very nice girl and I like her but that really surprised me and I'm a little scared that I might do the wrong thing. This is all new territory for me."

"Carl, it looks like she likes you and wants to know you better. That's really nice, but how do you feel about her?"

"She's a girl, dad. I like my buddies, but she's a girl! I don't know what to do with girls but I sure like them. I could use your advice."

"First, you have to decide if you're interested in her. Then, you have to get to know her better. Some mice seem great when we first meet them, but are less great when we get to know them. You can find out a lot more about her by just asking lots of questions. She will be flattered that you are interested, and you can find out if you're still interested after she has shared who she is. That will be a great start."

"Thanks, dad. I'm so glad you're my dad. I don't know who else I could turn to. You're always there to help me figure things out."

"That makes me happy, Carl. I love you, son, and I'll always be here for you," Chris responds thinking how glad he is that his son asked him and not some other buddy his own age.

That evening at dinner, Carl keeps looking over at Tinklet. She sees him looking and smiles at him. Carl thinks that there is defnitely a twinkle in her eyes.

After dinner, everyone goes in different directions. Chris and Christine clean up the kitchen, Mano goes for a walk, and Carl is left alone with Tinklet.

The two young mice sit on the front porch and look out over the yard to the street. Cars are buzzing by, two kids walk past the yard, and a neighbor dog starts barking. It's a typical day in the neighborhood.

"So, Tinklet, what do you see yourself doing in the future," Carl asks.

"I don't know exactly, Carl. I know I want to meet a lot of mice, do some more traveling, and have a bunch of adventures before I settle down.

"You seem really outgoing. I bet you have had a lot of boyfriends," says Carl, hoping for a good answer.

"You're right. I have had a few boyfriends. I like boys. They taste good when I kiss them, and they're different than girl mice."

"When do you think you'll settle down and stop traveling?" Carl continues.

"I'm young and I don't think I'll be ready to stop traveling, now that I've seen what I've seen on this trip. There are a lot of places I'd like to see, and a lot of boys I'd like to kiss," she says.

Carl is quiet. He's one of many on her list and that certainly isn't what he was hoping to hear. He frowns slightly and slowly realizes that Tinklet will be just a passing fancy. She'll be leaving with Mano to go back to Montana or wherever she decides to go, and he'll be just one of many male mice that she'll kiss. At least that settles the biggest question in his mind.

He turns to Tinklet and says, "That sounds like a fun plan, Tinklet. I'm sure that you'll have many adventures and I hope you'll remember me as one of them."

He reaches over, grabs her neck and pulls her face close to his. Then he kisses her very softly, before saying, "Well, I have to get up early tomorrow for work, so I'll say goodnight now. It's been fun getting to know you." In his mind, he adds, "and adding to your kiss collection."

Tinklet looks at Carl as he stands up, and thinks, "What a nice mouse he is. Maybe I'll come back for a visit on one of my trips and we can get to know each other better. He kisses pretty good, too, and he is a nice-looking mouse."

Tinklet and Mano stay for another three days and then get ready to leave. They don't have much to pack because it's not easy for mice to carry things like luggage. Mano has a very small bag with some warm clothes for the cooler part of their travels. Tinklet has some makeup and a small bag with a fancy top and some jewelry.

He said his goodbyes to both mice at breakfast before he left.

Mano was an easy one to say goodbye to. Just a "Hey, nice meeting you. Glad you came. If you get by this way again, I'll take you around and show you more of our area. And, we play mice games every week. It's a lot of fun and I think you would really enjoy it. I know my buddies are always looking for new players."

Carl then looks in Tinklet's eyes, hoping to find a glint of hope and promise, but instead she looks like she's dreaming of faraway place, more adventures, and more male mice to meet and kiss.

Even though he's not sure she'll remember him, he'll remember Tinklet and that first kiss for a long time.

Carl is working when Chris drives them to the station. The car ride to station is quiet. Chris points out various things of interest. Mano is very interested and asks lots of questions. Tinklet is quiet and seems to be thinking about something.

When Chris stops at the station he says goodbye to both and turns to walk back to the Mouse Wagon.

Tinklet turns back and says, "Wait. Can you give Carl a message for me?"

"Sure, what do you want me to tell him?"

"Please tell him that he's a very special mouse and I will think about him during my travels. Tell him that I'd like to see him again and get to know him better.

"I hope you will all come visit us in Montana. Tell Carl if he can't get time off of work for the trip, to just quit his job. I'll be worth it."

Chapter 4 - "Achoo!"

A late-night visit from grandpa and grandma's neighborhood brings news that Grandma Mouse is sick. She has come down with a bad cold, and it's been lingering for a week. Grandpa is taking care of her, but she doesn't seem to be getting better.

Chris and Christine decide they better go visit to see if they can help. Unfortunately, tomorrow is one of three days this week that Carl has to go to work at the New Mouse Store, so he won't be able to go with his parents.

The next morning, Chris has the Mouse Wagon in the driveway and he's ready to go first thing. But, Christine reminds him that they should wait until a little bit later to avoid the commute traffic. Otherwise, it will take longer and it will be more frustrating if they join the tens of thousands of humans traveling to jobs around the city.

While they wait for traffic to settle down, Chris and Christine check everything in their Home, picking up papers and clothes, washing the breakfast dishes, just so they won't come back home to a dirty house.

The drive to Grandpa and Grandma's house is never easy. To get there you have to take a series of turns and straight stretches, with almost year-round road work and construction causing detours. The traffic is very busy for the first two-thirds of the trip, although it finally gets easier as you get closer to their house.

They leave in mid-morning and get to Grandma and Grandpa's house in mid-afternoon after the usual delays and a potty stop at a park.

After parking the Mouse Wagon in the driveway, but out of the way, Chris and Christine make their way inside the house and to the downstairs box that is Grandma and Grandpa's home.

"Achoo!" The sound echoes through the walls of the home as they stand outside, ready to knock. And then "Achoo!" again followed by a string of coughs.

The two mice look at each other. Grandma doesn't sound too good. They knock and in a minute Grandpa opens the door, with a surprised look on his face.

"What have we here?" he asks. "Did you two get lost on your way to see Candy at her work?"

"No, dad," says Christine. "We got the news that Grandma has been sick for a while, so we came to see how we can help."

"Well, that's really nice of you both.

"She's had this really bad cold for a week. Sometimes I think she's getting better, but then she coughs and sneezes all night. I've tried all the usual remedies. I made her dandelion tea, got some fresh berries and fruit, washed her face, and everything else that I could think of."

"Well, let's take a look," says Christine. "I taught a class in first aid and disease care at the Mouse Academy, and I remember most of the information on respiratory illness, which it sounds like she has."

Grandpa walks with Christine to the bedroom where Grandma is sitting up in the nest.

"Hey, mom. How are you feeling today?" asks Christine cheerfully.

"I've been better, Christine, and whatever I've got keeps holding on."

"Let me take your temperature," Christine says as she puts a paw on Grandma's forehead.

"It's kind of warm, but not too bad. Are you drinking lots of water? You need to flush this out of your system and water is a pretty good way to do it."

"I guess maybe I haven't had much water," Grandma replies. "When I get sick I just don't think about anything but laying down and resting. Grandpa's been really good at taking care of me, but he's not very knowledgeable about dealing with sickness."

"No problem. I'll get you some water," Christine says as she is walking out of the room.

A minute later she comes back with a small plastic glass of water and hands it to Grandma.

"Tell me about your symptoms, mom."

"Well, I'm sneezing all the time, I feel tired, don't have much energy, and my forehead got pretty warm two days ago. Grandpa has been fussing over me like a little kid. I'm grateful but sometimes he just hovers over me and doesn't seem to know what to do."

"How are you feeling after drinking the water just now?"

"I feel okay. Why?"

"Water is like a coolant. It is used in your body to help regulate several things, including your temperature. You need to be drinking water several times a day to flush this cold out of your body."

Grandma just smiles and nods her head.

Meanwhile, Chris is talking to Grandpa. "Good job, dad, for taking care of mom. Have you seen any difference in her since she started getting sick?"

"Oh yes. She started sneezing at first, and then she tossed and turned in her sleep. Then her forehead got pretty hot, but now it seems that she just sneezes. She slept pretty good last night."

"That's good, but I'm going to call the local Mouse Doctor to come check her out. When was the last time she went to the doctor?"

Grandpa scratches his head. "I think it was last year sometime. She's never sick so there's not really any reason to go to the doctor."

"That's good that she's rarely sick, but going to the doctor every so often is a good way to get checked out, and also to get health tips. Let's see if we can get her an appointment."

Chris calls the number that Grandpa gives him. After a brief conversation with the doctor's office, Chris turns to his dad and asks, "Can we take her to the doctor tomorrow, dad?"

"Oh sure. We don't have anything else to do then."

"Good. I just set the appointment for ten in the morning. So, today, Christine can take care of Grandma and you and I can fix up anything that you need done around your home. Okay?"

"That's a good idea, son. I have a list of things to work on here, but I haven't had time since Grandma got sick."

The two bucks start with the easy things.

A couple of pictures need to be re-hung. The wallpaper is coming off of the bathroom wall. One light is burned out. And, the front door is sticking when it's closing.

Four hours later, the work is finished and the mice examine their handiwork, deciding that it's all good.

The list of harder repairs is next.

One wall has a gap in it. That's letting in some cool air at night, since the first floor where they live isn't occupied by humans, so it’s not heated. Chris looks around for patching materials and finally finds a tube of expanding foam, which does the job very well. It's not pretty, and really should be shaped and painted, but it fills the gap and stops cold air from coming into the home.

The front door needs to be replaced. They're able to fix it from sticking, but Grandpa is pretty sure that it will just go back to sticking next week. Chris calls around and finds that the only place he can get a replacement door is the New Mouse Store where Carl works. He calls Carl and orders the door, which he'll bring with him and replace on his next trip to Grandpa and Grandma's.

While Chris and Grandpa do repairs, Christine asks about their nutrition. The answer isn't good. Grandma and Grandpa are eating, but their diet isn't good. Christine works on a meal plan and calls around to find a good local food source for them. Then she sends Chris to go out and pick up a list of nutritious foods that she made.

Next, they take Grandma to a Mouse Doctor who diagnoses her with a virus that should clear up but she'll have to drink a really bad tasting medicine for a week. Grandma hates it but in a few days she is already feeling better.

With that improvement Chris and Christine return home, pick up the new door and a few tools, and head back to Grandma and Grandpa's place. On this trip there's a bad car accident. Traffic is snarled for miles even near the curb where the Mouse Wagon usually travels.

They stop to see if there's any need for help and find out that there's a child trapped in the back seat of one of the cars. Chris looks frantically for help but humans are standing around just looking. Chris runs to the car, jumps through an open door, and sees that the child is strapped in the back seat of the car which now has flames coming out of the underside. He runs to the seat belt, jumps on the release and the seat belt unsnaps and rolls back into the car side. Free from the seat belt, the child crawls across the seat to the door and manages to slide out of the door. The onlookers are astonished. They were frozen and did nothing, but this little mouse rescued the child. Everyone applauds as Chris walks back to the Mouse Wagon and turns it to move past the wreckage, with flames now engulfing the child's car while his parents hold him and cry in relief. Sirens sound in the distance as emergency vehicles wind through the traffic to get to the wreck. Later, Christine tells Candy about her father being a hero and she features the story from the news desk on the Mouse YouTube Channel.

The wreck and traffic caused an hour delay in the trip, but they finally get to Grandpa and Grandma's house where Chris carries the door in, and Christine explains their delay.

The pastor of the neighborhood Mouse Church comes by to visit Grandpa and Grandma and has a nice talk with Chris about Rev. Souris and their Mouse Church. It turns out that he went to Mouse Seminary with Rev. Souris and they started their churches at the same time. The pastor also spends time with Grandma and prays for her recovery, which is very comforting to Grandpa.

Over the next couple of days, Christine meets several mouse neighbors of Grandma and Grandpa and after she talks about Mouse Academy, they want one in their neighborhood. The principal of the local Mouse School comes by to talk to Christine and learn about how they

started Mouse Academy. Christine beams to think that something she thought would be helpful will turn out to be of great benefit to other mouse neighborhoods.

While Grandma gradually gets better, Grandpa and Chris replace the door, testing it over the next few days to make sure it doesn't stick. It doesn't, and all of the stacked up chores are now completed to Grandpa's great relief.

With Grandma quickly improving, the two younger mice ask lots of questions about Grandpa and Grandma's life. Grandpa has a hobby. He makes animal figurines from nuts, carving them with his teeth. He's really good at it and his figurines are quite life-like.

Grandma makes quilts. She's somewhat new to it, but she sits up in the nest and shows off one quilt that became the talk of the local mouse community because it tells the story of Phineas T. Teabottom. Christine is very impressed and tells Grandma about the play where Candy played Dweezie, the mother of Phineas.

"Here, honey," Grandma says. "I want to send the quilt home with you to give to Candy. Tell her I love her and I'm proud of her."

With Grandma's recovery making great progress, Chris and Christine get their things together and prepare for their return trip home. Early the next morning, they get in the Mouse Wagon and start the drive.

This trip is perfect. Traffic is light, there are no delays, the weather cooperates and all of that makes the drive nice as well as quick.

Grandma and Grandpa spend several hours that day talking about what a wonderful couple of mice their son and daughter-in-law are.

Grandma's appetite is back, Grandpa is happy that all of the honey-do's got done with Chris' help, and life is ready to get back to normal.

Chris and Christine demonstrated the love and care that family members should always have for one another. It's easy to take each other for granted, and even not do anything when another member of the family is not doing well. But, the truth is, family life changes with time and everyone gets older. What we do for each other to show that we care, creates an example for others to do what we hope they will do for us when we need help.

END OF 1ST EDIT - 8/28/25

Chapter 5 - Carl Breaks Out

Carl has had a few jobs since he graduated from Mouse School and Mouse Academy, like working part-time at the New Mouse Store, but after Candy moved out he has become more focused on finding his own way. An important part of that is getting a full-time job that pays well so he can also move out and be his own mouse.

His initial plan after graduating is to be an apprentice for Frizz and Frak in home building, but they are having a slow season and can't really afford to teach him, so he takes a part-time job at a local Mouse restaurant. He can fit this job in, because his shifts at the restaurant are on his days off at the New Mouse Store.

He starts out as a bus boy, working in the evenings. The job isn't hard, and he learns about the restaurant business by just paying attention and watching. It's kind of fun when he recognizes customers, which is much of the time. With all the things he and his family have been involved in, he's met most of the mice his age or older that live in the community.

He is interested in all the aspects of a restaurant and is learning about them by simply paying observing as he works.

Bussing tables isn't the most glamorous job, but the pay is okay for a part-time job. And, it isn't a bad job. He sees lots of mice, including girl mice, and he gets to smile and act gracious. It's really good training for life, he realizes.

Mastering the interaction with customers, between the restaurant and the New Mouse Store, gives Carl a feeling of accomplishment. Even more interesting, he can see the importance the dining room staff plays in the success of the restaurant.

As he's working he now is growing interested in the restaurant business. He wants to know more about it. He's anxious to learn.

He sees the function of seating guests, of greeting them and taking their orders, of presenting their food to them, wishing them well when they leave, and then ensuring that tables are cleared, cleaned and ready for the next guests. After many months of observing and working in various areas of the dining room he's got the dining room dynamic figured out.

He's thinking of trying to be a server, but after watching servers he feels like he's learned as much as he needs to about that aspect of the dining room.

Next, is the kitchen. Hmm. He thinks maybe he should see if he could apprentice as a cook.

The owner is walking through the restaurant one evening. Carl summons up his courage and walks up to him.

“Excuse me, Mr. Zeedrop. I’ve really enjoyed working here, but I really want to learn how to cook. Would it be possible to be an apprentice to your cook? I can work fast and I know that working with him we could really put out food fast, which for you means more turns and earns, in other words more customers and more money.

Zeedrop looks at him, thinks for a minute about what this young mouse just said, and then turns to Carl and says, “Young man, I like your style. You can start next week. As an apprentice you must be here 15 minutes early to get the kitchen prepared. Then, when the cook comes in, he will direct what he wants to have done. He will be your boss. Are you willing to do that?”

Carl just nods his head, thinking about what he’s just signed up for. “I’ll just do whatever the cook asks me to do,” he thinks.

On Monday morning, Carl goes to the restaurant. He gets cleaned up, and then organizes the kitchen for the day, something he learned by observing when he was a bus boy.

The cook shows up exactly 15 minutes later. The cook’s name is Lank Whomper. He’s a pretty big mouse, a little overweight, and a very good cook.

After Carl greets him and shows him the cleanliness of the kitchen, Lank says, “Hey Carl, glad to have you here. I just have two rules. Number One, do whatever I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it, the way I tell you to do it. Number two, repeat Number One.

“I’m going to start out by teaching you the fundamentals. The importance of equipment that is adequate to do the work, reliable to last, and that works for a long time before needing to be replaced.

“You’ll learn more by watching me, assisting me, and asking questions about why we do what we do the way we do it.

“So, let’s start this morning by chopping onions. It’s an important job, even though it seems pretty insignificant. So, let me just tell you that chopped onions are an important ingredient in many of the dishes we serve. Having enough of them, and having them the right size and shape, is learning to chop them well is an important job.

“I’ll show you by doing. You watch, then it’s your turn.”

Lank slices and chops. “There are machines that do this, but we want to have authentic home cooking here, so chopping by hand actually becomes a craft,” he explains.

Carl grabs a knife, picks up an onion, and does a half reasonable job of chopping. Lank gives him a couple of pointers and then Carl continues chopping until there are enough for the day’s meals.

In his two weeks as an apprentice cook, Carl observes, eats, learns and cooks almost every dish in the restaurant.

It’s fun and he’s getting good compliments from Lank. Better yet, the meals are getting great reviews and business is picking up as a result.

In another four weeks, Carl is named the second cook of the restaurant.

He’s delighted. He invites his parents to come try the restaurant and Lank lets him cook their meals. They both love the food and give him very nice compliments.

This is turning into all that he hoped for, Carl thinks. He’s getting a specialty, and now he knows how to do something commercially. He is still growing in his knowledge of the restaurant business as he masters the second of the three legs for success in the business.

As second cook, Carl learns how to prepare the entire menu. The part he really likes is learning seasoning and what things make food taste a certain way. People think that mice are not particularly finicky about what they eat, as long as it fills their tummies. But, the truth is that many mice don't have choices. They are what are called opportunistic eaters. If the food is there, they'll eat it. The restaurant helps mice have more variety in their diet, and that makes them happier.

Carl is the second cook for three months. The owner of the restaurant likes Carl. He's seen the way Carl does his work, and it's obvious that Carl is not only smart, but also very customer savvy. He's been thinking about building up the business to sell it, and one step in that direction would be to train him and make him the manager. The current manager just quit which sets the timing for either bringing Carl up to the role, or hiring from the outside. Mr.

"That's a very nice opportunity," says Carl to the owner when he's told he's considering training Carl in management. He thinks to himself, "third leg of the stool," meaning it's the last part of running a successful restaurant.

Training starts the next day. Carl works as second cook for half of each day, and the owner teaches him about management the other half of the day. It's an interesting mix of different parts of the business, but he already knows how the dining room works, and he's rapidly picking up the kitchen routines and requirements. Management includes customer service and all of the other aspects of the restaurant - promotion, financial management, purchasing, selecting vendors, and personnel hiring, firing, training and team building.

For the next six months, Carl gets immersed in every aspect of the restaurant business, and he's loving it. He is learning so much, and he's like a sponge soaking up everything. At home he talks to his mom and dad about some of what he's learning, and they both look at him with pride. Their boy is growing up and becoming a responsible member of mouse society.

On a Wednesday, the owner asks Carl to come into his office. He points to a chair, Carl sits, and then the owner explains why he wants to talk to Carl.

"I've been doing this business for two years, Carl. During that time I've put my heart into making this a good place to eat, a good place to bring your family, a good place for our community. We've done well, and I'd say we're getting to the place I wanted the restaurant to be.

"To be honest, I'm just an entrepreneur. I like starting businesses and helping them grow, but I'm not what you would call a maintainer. That's someone that has their heart and soul into the day-after-day work needed for a business as it matures.

"I've been watching you. You have a good eye, you see things that need to be done. And, even better, you have the ambition and energy to do those things. Those are qualities I've been looking for to pass the business on for greater growth.

"My wife and I have talked about this, and we have decided to sell the restaurant so we can focus on some other business opportunities. I wanted you to know, so you won't wonder why we're doing certain things.

"I hope you'll be a contributor to the process, and that you'll help a new owner to continue building a good business."

Carl is listening, but his mind locks onto the part where the owner says they're going to sell the restaurant. His head is spinning. What will this mean for my job? What could happen to the restaurant if they sell it to the wrong mouse? What is this restaurant worth, anyway?

That night at dinner at Home he shares the news with his mom and dad. They listen and nod and smile, but his mom finally asks the big question - "Carl, maybe you're ready to own the restaurant."

Carl freezes as he's about to chew on some celery. "What?" he blurts.

Christine looks right in Carl's eyes and repeats what she said, "Maybe you're ready to own the restaurant."

Chris smiles at the suggestion and adds, "Son, we've been watching you learn about the business. You have a good head on your shoulders. You see things that should be done and you have the energy to do them. You also have learned all of the aspects of running the business, and we think you'd make an excellent owner."

"But, I don't have any money, dad."

Christine answers that with, "Well, your sister is doing very well in her career and she's very solid financially. Maybe she will loan you the money, or come in as a silent partner."

"What's a silent partner, mom?"

"That's someone that puts in the money but doesn't want to or can't help run the business. They just have a financial interest."

Carl is silent. He's thinking about this as he finishes his dinner and excuses himself from the table. He's deep in thought because he doesn't even say anything more to his parents. He just walks up the stairs to his room to think.

That night, Carl doesn't get much sleep. He tosses and turns like he would if he were wrestling a very strong mouse. He is wrestling, but not with someone else. He's trying to grasp what it would be like to own the restaurant and what it would take to buy it.

The next morning he wakes up early and calls Candy on his phone.

"Hello," says his sister. "Somehow I knew you were going to call me today. What's going on, brother?"

Carl has shared with Candy about the restaurant and his progression from busboy to second cook. She smiles when he tells her that the owner has been teaching him management, and even given him several opportunities to run things. "That's my brother," she thinks.

"Well," Carl continues, "I was thinking. The owner wants to sell the restaurant and I think I can make it really successful. But, I don't have the money. Would you be able to help?"

"Oh, gosh Carl, that sounds very good for you. I just happen to have a bunch of money and I could help. What do you have in mind?"

"Well, if you could loan me the money, we could set up a repayment schedule and I could pay you every month out of profits, with interest of course.

"Or, you could be a silent partner and just put the money in to bankroll the purchase. I could run the business and if we ever decided to sell you would get your money back, plus interest."

Christine frowns. She has so many things going on right now that she doesn't really want to monitor loan payments.

"How much money do you need, brother?"

"I'm not sure but I'll ask and then let you know, okay?"

"Sure, just let me know."

Carl goes into work with a little bounce in his step. His sister might be his money source for buying the restaurant.

He looks for Mr. Rignore, the owner, when he comes into work. Unfortunately, Mr. Rignore doesn't come into the restaurant that day.

Or the next day. Or the day after that.

Carl is getting a little nervous. "Is he already negotiating with another prospective owner?" he wonders.

"Is he sick, or maybe worse?"

"Did he change his mind about selling the restaurant?"

All these thoughts swirl through Carl's head for three whole days, and his nights are pretty sleepless as he tosses and turns.

The fourth morning, Carl shows up at work and notices that the owner is in the office. Carl puts on his cook's uniform and gets ready for what Lank wants him to do today.

As he's chopping onions, Mr. Rignore walks up to him and says, "Carl, I have a couple of potential buyers visiting the restaurant today. I'll introduce you to them. Could you show them around, please?"

"Sure, sir. I'd be happy to," Carl says with a sick feeling in his stomach.

The tours are okay. Carl is pleasant but he notices that both buyers don't seem very interested. They don't ask any questions, and they seem to be thinking of more important issues while they tour.

Carl is encouraged by the lack of interest and calls Candy that afternoon to tell her what happened.

"I still have to wait and see, sister. But, at least they didn't ask about anything. One of them kept getting phone calls and having long conversations. We'll see. I'm not going to talk to Mr. Rignore until I hear about if either of them will make an offer."

Later that week, the restaurant owner finds Carl and gives him the news. Neither party is prepared to make an offer.

Carl summons up his courage and says, "Mr. Rignore. I might be interested in buying the restaurant. What are you asking for it?"

"Well, Carl, I'm asking more than you probably can afford, but I admire your courage."

"Thank you, sir. Just give me a number and I'll see what I can do."

The owner writes a number on a piece of paper and hands it to Carl. Carl looks at it. He's seen the books. He knows what the restaurant is generating in income every month. The number on the paper doesn't make sense.

Carl talks to his mom and dad, and Candy that night. They all suggest that he make a low counter-offer. That will leave some room for negotiation.

The next day he gives a paper to the owner that offers about 15% below what the business is probably worth. Mr. Rignore looks at the paper, wrinkles his nose, and says, "I'll get back to you, Carl. Thanks for your interest."

That last sentence doesn't sound very promising, but Candy and his mom both tell Carl to be patient and not jump to any conclusions. Just think logically and take the next step.

So, Carl waits until the next week. Mr. Rignore comes in the restaurant mid-week for the first time that week. He's busy in the office when Carl walks in.

"Well, Mr. Rignore. I know you've had time to review my offer and think about it. Where do we go from here?"

"Carl, your number is too low but I like you. Tell you what I'm willing to do. You bring your number up about 5% and we can strike a deal. But you'll need to have the money. It won't work if you want to buy on my credit."

Carl stands there, not sure if he should respond immediately, or jump up and down, or hug the owner.

So, Carl says, "Okay, draw up the papers and I'll take a look at it. If it seems fair we might have a deal."

"I'll have everything prepared tomorrow, Carl. Let's see if you can swing this."

The next day, the sales papers are waiting when Carl comes to work. They require 10% in earnest money now, with the rest of the money when the sale closes.

Carl signs the papers and then leaves a voice message for Candy, explaining everything when she calls him back.

"Okay, brother, do this deal. I'll have the 10% waiting for you and the rest when the deal closes.

"I have to get back to writing now. Call me if there's any snag."

Carl calls his dad and asks him if he can go to the Mouse Channel offices for him and pick up the money from Candy.

Three hours later, Chris walks into the restaurant and hands the money to Carl, who goes into the office, signs the papers and hands the money to Mr. Rignore, getting a copy of the paperwork and a receipt.

Carl has trouble keeping his mind on his work as manager. He's excited and looking forward to making his new restaurant work even better.

The sale is completed, Carl is the new owner. Mr. Rignore puts a big sign on the door, "Under new Management - come on in!"

Several weeks later, Carl has a new sign on the side of the building. He has renamed the restaurant "Munch" and along with that he makes several changes to the menu.

The staff at the restaurant give him encouragement. They have seen Carl work since he started, and that gives them confidence that he will be a good boss.

Within six months, "Munch" is so busy that Carl has to add more mice to the serving team, plus a new assistant cook for Lank. There's a great vibe in the place now and everyone seems energized.

Carl has arrived.

Of course, that's not the end of his worries. Now that he's the big boss everything is on his shoulders and being new to ownership, every problem seems big.

There is an employee issue that prompts three mice to quit. They set up a picket line to march and protest. Carl solves that by sitting down with the former employees and having a quiet, but firm conversation with them. Their grievances are small, and Carl offers to fix them all if the employees will come back to work. Otherwise, they can continue to picket. Carl figures that's a good approach. Business is still really good, and mice walk right by the picket line, some of them telling the picketers, "I love Munch. You guys should stop harassing the new owner. He's doing a great job."

Disappointed in the public response to their picket line, the three mice decide to end the picketing and talk to Carl about coming back to work. They report for work the next day and all the picket signs are gone.

A new problem comes up a few weeks later. Food delivery is poor and getting worse. The Mouse Produce Company is having problems with their suppliers and suddenly are unable to deliver any produce.

When Carl finds out what the problem is, he works to source produce locally, including from his parent's own garden as well as the Dootys. Chris and Christine have a bumper crop in their new garden and all they have to do is harvest it and get it to Carl. Franklin also has a nice garden this year with more produce than he and Donna can eat so he'll also provide produce to Munch. Carl sends over three employees to help with the harvests, and the Mouse Produce Company agrees to provide transportation for the to get it to the restaurant. Problem solved.

Carl is having fun and handling problems very well. He's happy and he's energized by all of the new clientele coming into eat at Munch. The restaurant is profitable, employees are happy, more customers come in every week, and Carl works hard to keep everything going in the right direction.

One of the changes that Carl makes - he wants to give back to the community for supporting Munch. So, once a week he has free food for the elderly and infirm mice in the community. They can come in and eat for free, and for those that are unable to travel Carl sends runners to deliver the food to their nest.

His mom talks to him about his success and how he can help young mice in the community, so Carl starts a training class through Mouse Academy teaching mice how to work in the restaurant trade. As mice finish the course Carl has a source of new employees, and hires several.

After two years he's becoming an important mouse in the community because of his good business instincts and his contributions to local mice.

He's learned that when good things happen for you, even if you work hard to get them, they are still a gift and we're required to give back. It's the right thing to do, and Carl has learned to try very hard to always do the right thing. In Carl’s words, “This is a lesson everyone should learn.”

Chapter 6 - Grandma and Grandpa Move In

Chris is walking around the Home in the Wall and it feels empty. Candy has moved out, Carl is working around the clock at his new business and Christine is spending a lot of time at Mouse Academy. That leaves him to wander around, and do things from his "to do" list, which never seems to grow shorter.

He walks out to the garden and looks everything over. Carl has bought almost everything that his parents are growing this year, plus all the produce that Franklin and Donna are willing to sell.

Chris looks at the garden and sees money growing on the remaining plants. Carl has mentioned the produce that he would like to buy, so Chris is going to plant much more in the Mouse family part of the garden.

The garden in the latest house is a bit smaller than the one they had before, Chris thinks.

Franklin is out tending to the Dooty part of the garden when Chris decides to talk to him about a bigger plot.

"Hey Franklin," Chris calls over to his friend, "what would you say about making our gardens bigger? Carl says he will buy everything we're willing to sell."

"I was thinking the same thing, Chris," Franklin replies. "The extra money from selling from our garden is coming in handy and we certainly have room to expand. We could almost double the garden size, and that would let us sell a little more to Carl, and have the rest for our own use."

"That sounds good, Franklin. I'm sure Carl would be happy with that. I don’t know if you and Donna have a similar issue but Christine and I have missed having fresh veggies to eat since Carl bought all of ours."

The two friends walk around the yard, and Franklin pulls a string around new stakes that they just pounded in. It's going to take some work, with Franklin renting a rototiller, and Chris and Christine helping to turn the soil over after they add more planting soil.

Later that day, Franklin brings the tiller home and Chris gets ready to walk behind him to pull out grass and try to break up dirt clods.

It's getting warm out and they're about to stop for a break when a voice calls from the gate, "Is this the Chris Mouse family house?"

Chris yells back, "Yes, it is. How can I help you?"

"I have a message for Chris Mouse. Want me to read it to you?"

Chris lets the mouse in the gate and he walks over to the garden area.

"Say, that's a nice garden plot you have there."

"Thanks," says Chris. "Now, did you say you have a message for me?"

"Oh, sorry, yes, here's what it says. 'From Van Mouse, a neighbor of your parents. Dear Mr. Mouse. I think you should know that your parents are having kind of a struggle here. Your father never leaves the house, and your mother is worried about him. She's also staying close to home and that makes it difficult for them to get food to eat. I think you should come here and check them out and see if their living situation needs to change."

Chris reads the note, wrinkles his nose, and walks to his Home where he finds Christine has just come home and is sitting at the kitchen table.

Chris walks over and reads the message to her. Both mice look at each other. They've always been good to Grandma and Grandpa and now it sounds like there may be a need for a major change in their living situation.

"Honey, we should just go over to their house and pack them up," Christine suggests. "They can live with us and have Candy's old room. She never spends the night when she comes to visit, which isn't that often anyway."

Chris nods his head. That's what he's been thinking, too. It will take a little adjustment on all their parts, but it's the right thing to do.

Chris and Christine make plans to go move Grandma and Grandpa. They'll do it two days from now, and it will probably take a couple of trips to get their stuff moved over. They won't need a lot - some pictures, their clothes, some small furnishings and maybe some other items, like Grandma's quiilter and some of Grandpa's tools. The rest can be sold by Grandma and Grandpa to their friends and neighbors.

When the day comes, Chris backs out the Mouse Wagon, Christine climbs inside, and they take off for the typical 2-plus hour drive. They're leaving in the morning so they'll have time to move some items before it gets late.

When they arrive, Grandpa is out sitting on the porch.

"Hi dad," Chris calls out. "Is mom home?"

"Sure is, son," Grandpa replies. "C'mon in."

They walk into Grandpa and Grandma's house and look around. No grandma. Finally, Grandpa starts looking around and calls out from the bedroom, "She's in here. She was just taking a nap."

When both older mice come out of the bedroom, Chris and Christine tell them why they came.

"We know that it's getting harder to get around and take care of things. We would love to have you come live with us. The four of us, plus Carl, can take care of each other, and you guys will have family with you. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"Sure," says Grandma, "but this is our home. How could we possibly leave here?"

Christine suggests, "You must be tired of taking care of a house and everything else. You've been doing that for so many years. Do you like the idea of being with family? We have a big Home and we would love to have you live with us. Plus, you could see your grandkids occasionally. You know they're getting older and both are working. Pretty soon, they won't come around much anymore, and you won't see them."

Grandpa says, "We know. We hear that Candy is a big star now. I guess she's on the tv, but we don't have one so we've never seen her. What's Carl up to now?"

Christine tells them about Carl's restaurant and the latest on Candy. "Candy has an apartment near her work, so we only see her maybe one time on the weekend when she comes for dinner, but she never stays overnight. Her room feels empty without her, and you two could have that room and make our place feel like a home again."

Grandma looks at Grandpa, and says, "What do you think? I've been having a hard time taking care of the house and finding food for us. Maybe this isn't such a bad idea."

Grandpa smiles and winks at her, "Darlin', anywhere with you will be perfect. I don't want you to have to work so hard to take care of us. If our son and daughter-in-law are willing to put up with us, I'm sure I could do a few things to help earn our keep."

Chris jumps in, "You know, Dad. For all the things you have taken care of for me in my life, the least I can do is help take care of you and mom. It makes sense, we'd love to have you here, and we can get started moving you today."

The two older mice look at each other. Grandpa shrugs and says, "I guess we can give it a try. If it doesn't work out just kick us to the curb and we'll find a nice bush to live in."

Chris and Christine laugh. Grandpa always jokes like that.

Christine shows Grandma and Grandpa up to their new room. The replacement nest for Candy's is nice, replaced so Chris and Christine could have a place for guests to sleep after Candy moved her old nest to her apartment.

Grandma looks tired, so Christine tells her, "Mom, just lay down in the nest and take a nap. You look tired. The boys can start moving your stuff over and we'll just stay out of their way."

Grandma lays down in the nest, sighs, and closes her eyes. This is pretty good, she thinks before she falls fast asleep.

Chris and Grandpa go out to the Mouse Wagon, unplug it from the wall outlet, climb into the car and drive off.

Arriving a few hours later, they do a quick survey of their house within a house.

They don't need the bed, but Grandma can't live without her chair, and Grandpa feels the same about his chair.

They load up the Mouse Wagon with clothes and both chairs. There is still some other furniture, the quilter, and some tools. Chris calls up the local Mouse Moving and Storage and makes arrangements for them to bring a truck to the house next week to pick up the last things that are moving.

Grandpa packs up the little food that's left in their house, and carries it to the car. Chris looks at it and thinks, "it's a good thing we're moving them in with us. They don't have much to eat."

Returning to the Home in the Wall, the two mice move everything from car to Home in the Wall. Moving is never easy, and carrying boxes and furniture isn't that much fun, but they get everything inside, plug in the Mouse Wagon, and sit down with a cold glass of water to relax.

That night, Carl comes home with food from Munch for dinner. The food is good and he's delighted to see his grandparents, and not surprised that they're moving in.

Carl's not home that much anyway. He's been working double time to help out at the restaurant, which always seems to be short on staff. The business is making good money, and that makes him happy, but he has no time for anything other than work work except to sleep and go to and from work.

That Sunday, Grandpa and Grandma go to MouseChurch with Chris, Christine and Carl. Candy has shifted to a Mouse Church near where she lives.

Before they walk inside Mouse Church, several older mice and couples come up to Grandma and Grandpa and introduce themselves.

An older female mouse named Nadelin says, "You two look great. Your kids say you've just moved into the community. Would you be willing to come over on Thursday nights to play Bunco? There are four other couples and a few singles, but we have room for two more."

Grandpa and Grandma look at each other. That sounds fun, they both think. They didn't have any older friends in their old neighborhood and it would be fun to have friends they could hang out with.

"Sure, we'd like to do that. Just write your address down and the time you meet. We'll be there," says Grandma. She looks at Chris who silently mouths the words, "I'll drive you there and back on Thursdays."

After church, another older couple comes up to them and introduces themselves. "Hi, we're fairly new here and we don't know many other mice, kind of like you two. Maybe we could hang around. Would you be able to come over to dinner a week from tomorrow? We'll ask another couple that want to get connected, too, and we can eat dinner, play some games and get acquainted."

"That would be lovely," Grandma says. "We just moved in with our kids. Where do you live?"

The other couple says an address and Chris whispers to his dad, "They live right next door, Dad. You can walk through an opening in our fence and be right at their house."

Grandpa nods and then says, "Sure. We'll be there. Thank you. We'll see you a week from tomorrow. Let us know what we can bring to share."

After church the extended Mouse family sits together at the table in the Home in the Wall, having lunch.

Carl is quiet. He's been thinking a lot about the commitment he has with his restaurant. He's been leaving Home early in the morning and coming back late most evenings. It feels like he's being disruptive coming and going at those hours. He has been thinking that it's time he moved out on his own.

After lunch Grandma and Grandpa go up to their new room to lay down for a little while.

Carl walks over to his dad. “Dad, I’ve decided to move out and find a place to live that is closer to the restaurant. I’m a bachelor and I’m working late and coming into work early. It's just easier for everyone if I don’t have to disturb anyone with my comings and goings.”

Chris listens, nods his head, “Son, you need to go to your mom and give her the news.” Carl does what his dad has suggested and Christine gives him her blessing.

“You’re an adult mouse now, Carl, and your father and I are very proud of you. Adult mice move out when they’re ready to start out on their own. We know that and we support you in this.”

That’s settled and that’s terrific news.

In three days, Carl finds a new place to live, and he has friends come help him move. His new place is just a block from Munch, which will make it very easy to get to and from work. Plus, living by himself, he can come and go early and late without disturbing anyone.

After Carl is gone, it's quiet in the Mouse house. The two generations, the only occupants in the Home are settling in. It's going to take time to establish a rhythm, but it looks like it's going to work.

Grandpa and Grandma are busy with new friends. Chris drives them to and from Bunco on Thursday nights, and they have dinner or go visit other new friends at least one day a week.

That gives Chris and Christine some quiet in their Home, and also gives them comfort knowing that the two older mice are making good social connections.

It's all working out just as they hoped it would.

Understanding the stages of life, and working with them, is important in developing a good person or a good mouse. The growth that leads to independence is often a challenging thing to earn. But persistence is a very powerful force. Keep striving, keep growing, and when the situation changes, be looking at the opportunities for a good life with the changes. Be looking at every challenge and every positive change with an eye for spotting the opportunities buried inside.

Chapter 7 - Mouse Cruise

"Chris, your garden looks great," says Franklin one afternoon in the yard. "Carl is going to be very happy to get the produce you're growing."

"I'm sure he will, Franklin. He said his customers really like what you've been selling him, too.

"It's kind of interesting that we started gardens for our own families but now we're gentlemen farmers, selling our garden produce and making a little extra income."

"It is, for sure," Franklin replies. "We have plenty left over to eat, and Carl gets a bunch from both of us. I hear his restaurant is doing very well."

"Yeah, Munch is a hit among the mouse community. It's hard to get a table now on most nights of the week. It's probably because of our exceptional garden produce," Chris says with a smile and a wink.

"Oh, hey Chris. I forgot to tell you. Donna and I got an invitation to go on a cruise to three ports of call in Mexico. It sounds like a wonderful trip. Can you and Christine join us?"

"I'm not sure about that Franklin. My parents are living with us now. I'd have to see if Carl could stay at our Home while we were gone. How long is the trip?"

"It's only eight days," Franklin answers. "I was able to get vacation time at my job. It wouldn't be the same without you two. It would be great if you are able to make arrangements so you don't worry about your parents."

"Yeah, there are some things to consider. Mom and dad lived in a single floor house, but their bedroom is on the second floor at our house. We'll have to see. I'll talk to Christine about it tonight."

After dinner and a movie that night, the two mice say goodnight to Grandpa and Grandma and the two couples go up to their respective bedrooms for the night. Chris brings up the earlier cruise conversation with Franklin as he and Christine are getting ready for bed. He explains the timing and also his concerns about his parents.

"Let's just see, Chris. Carl and Candy owe us for all the times we've sacrificed for them," Christine answers. "Maybe they can trade off staying at our house while we travel. Every other day shouldn't be a problem for either of them. Candy might not like the commute, but it wouldn't affect Carl too much."

Chris calls Carl the next day and Christine calls Candy. They each tell their kids that this is optional, they don't have to go, but it would be nice to get a little break from the house and watching the grandparents.

Carl agrees during the phone call. He'll stay over on the odd calendar days. Candy is not too sure. She has to check with her producer, but she tells her mom that she can let her know after that conversation.

Candy calls her mom the next day. She has arranged it so she can get to their house by dinner time on the even days, and she'll spend the night those nights. The Mouse Channel has agreed to have a driver take her home those nights and pick her up for work each next day. She says, "Mom, you won't believe this. They say that I deserve to have a driver and if my apartment wasn't one block from the studio, they would have already assigned a driver. Pretty cool, huh?"

That sets things up. Chris gives Franklin the good news that they're able to go, and Franklin replies that he will get the tickets booked and let Chris know the timing. He calls Chris in two hours and tells him that the ship will leave in 5 days, and they'll be back on the eighth day, or maybe the ninth.

That night, Chris tells Christine at bedtime. They agree to break the news gently to his parents over the next several days. Then they call their kids and let them know the timing. Everything has fallen into place and everyone's ready.

Now to tell the parents.

The opportunity comes up the next day when they're all watching an adventure show on the tablet tv. Grandpa sees the scene from the deck of a cruise ship and says, "We always wanted to see what the ocean was like, but Grandma gets sick looking at water in a glass. That just isn't for us.

"How about you two? You've traveled by plane and train. Have you ever wanted to take a cruise?"

Chris responds instantly, "Oh sure. In fact, we have an invitation to go with our friends on an 8-day Mexican cruise."

"I hope you accepted, son," says Grandma. "We're fine here. We've made it all of these years together, so eight days is nothing."

"Thanks, mom. I think the trip would leave pretty soon - like in four days. Do you think that might work? Carl and Candy could trade off sleeping here at night. They always tell us how they miss this Home, and they sure love you."

"Well, make your plans, pack your bags, and get ready to cruise, honey. We're fine here in your wonderful Home, and it will be great to see Carl and Candy more."

Chris calls Franklin and gives him the good news. They're all set and tomorrow they'll start getting their stuff together for the trip.

Franklin and Donna are delighted. They talk that night about how good it will be to travel with their mouse friends again. The Canadian rail trip was their last adventure together, and that was so much fun. The cruise should be a blast.

The days pass quickly. Chris and Christine gather their few things to go, confirm the timing with Carl and Candy, and in a flash it's the day of departure.

They say "goodbye" to mom and dad at the door as they carry their stuff out of their Home to put in the Dooty's car.

For Chris and Christine and the Dootys, the adventures will begin on the giant cruise ship.

Boarding is time-consuming. There are a lot of passengers getting on the ship and everyone has to line up to board. Franklin puts Chris and Christine in his jacket pockets for boarding and keeps them there while they look for their cabin. It's on an upper deck, which is a nice ride in a glass-enclosed elevator. They all look down at the lower decks as the elevator ascends, finally stopping at their deck which is a great relief because both Chris and Christine are a little dizzy from looking out of the glass as the elevator ascended.

After getting their luggage and things situated in their room, Franklin says, "Let's go for a tour around the ship. It's really big so let's get familiar with where everything is."

Before leaving the room they walk over to the big windows of their cabin and look out over the harbor. What a grand view!

They walk around the deck they're on first and then visit other decks. It's a good orientation tour. As they return to their cabin, Donna says, "Now, we have a good idea where things are. Do you have the graphic that shows all the decks, Franklin?"

"I have it, sweetheart. Let's put on our swimsuits and try out some of the decks now."

The rest of the first day is great. There's so much to do. Chris tries the giant water slide, which scares a little girl when he splashes out right beside her. She screams but Franklin comes to the rescue and tells her that this is his pet mouse, he's trained and a great pet. Chris spoils the story by piping up and telling the girl a fabrication that he's actually a mousetronaut, and he's circled the moon. Franklin grabs Chris and they leave the pool before Chris can spin any more tales that aren't true.

The cruise has adventures at every stop. After docking at their first stop, Puerto Vallarta, they all disembark to explore the town.

The first place they wander is the walk along the Rio Cuale. It's a meandering trail beside a small river that leads through artisan and craft markets on the way to the beach. It is all fun, colorful and interesting. Donna buys a doll holding a maraca, gives Christine the maraca and then saves the doll to give away to a girl when they get back on the ship later. Christine is delighted and tucks the maraca away for future use.

They also walk the Malecon, the promenade along the beach leading back into town from the Rio Cuale. The views are great. Chris and Christine watch from their pocket in Franklin's jacket and sniff the smells in the air coming from the ocean. It's exhilarating.

Franklin got a great tip on food in Puerto Vallarta from a friend, and he takes everyone for great food at a second floor restaurant in an old building on a hill. It's not easy to find, but a taxi driver knows right where to go and quickly takes them there.

After a delightful dinner of seafood prepared with delightful Mexican spices, they decide to walk through some of the town near the pier. There explore shops and a marina that offers fresh seafood and other items from vendors. Then they catch a taxi back to the pier.

Full, tired and back on board, they change clothes and get ready for more fun. The cruise has entertainment every night. On the third night out the theme is Mexican and Caribbean. Christine grabs the maraca and a straw hat and she and Chris join Franklin and Donna to go down to the entertainment deck.

Guitars are strumming, snare drums are snaring, violins are violining, and the beat is infectious. After the second song, Christine crawls out of Franklin’s jacket pocket and stands on the table, shaking the maraca to the beat, while cocking her head to one side. It’s quite a sight to see. Two people in the tables around them shoot videos of her on their phones. It’s a party and Christine has become one of the highlights.

At sea, the wildlife stands out because there’s no landscape or agriculture to compete visually. The only competition is the ocean. Lines of pelicans swoop and climb in a roller coaster move with every bird following the leader by flying exactly where the bird in front of them is flying. It seems orchestrated because they do it so perfectly. Sea birds circle above the water and then dive straight down to capture the bait fish that are swimming near the surface. Other birds just float on the ocean as though they are resting or taking a nap. It's a wonderful sight to behold and the four friends spend several hours each day at the big windows.

Seals and flying fish are aquatic entertainment. The seals dive and surface so gracefully. The flying fish defy gravity. Somehow they’re able to fly on wings, but it’s more of a fast water start and a glide through the air back to the water. One night the crew turn on lights on the side of the decks pointing toward the water in order to attract the large Humboldt squid that frequent

these waters. Some of the crew hang down lines with three layers of hooks on the end. First, the lines get tight, then relax, then start pulling like crazy. Crew members pull them up to the surface and there, hanging on to the hooks, are giant squids. As a joke, one of the crew grabs his squid and points it at another crew member. Spoosh! A spray of black liquid douses the other crew member. The wet crew member doesn't look very happy, but another crew member explains that it's all part of the show, and it is fun to watch.

Chris can't get enough of the waterpark on Deck 12 where water fun and relaxation are all around him. That's also where he enjoyed the water slide on their first day at sea.

He also likes the pool deck where there are two main pools, each with a different vibe. He tries out both of them, stretching out on the decks and swimming in both. His favorite thing is to float on his back, take a drink, and spray the water up in the air like a fountain. Franklin is always close by in case any other human passengers are afraid of his mouse friend.

Chris also likes the sun deck. It's for adults only, so he knows it's his kind of place. He can wander among the sun worshipers that are slowly trying to turn bronze. It's fascinating to him to see so much skin because he's never actually seen his own skin. Paws, yes. But not skin. The truth is, he's proud of his fur and doesn't want to see what his skin looks like.

The next port of call is the Mexican city of Mazatlan.

Mazatlan is an old city and another shore excursion for the four friends. After they disembark they first find the usual tourist areas that sell the stuff tourists want. Then they go explaoring There are parks with fountains in the historical town center where people old and young sit and people-watch or play board games. It's a very charming town. Franklin and Donna carry Chris and Christine around town as they look at all there is to see, eventually coming back to the central park to sit, relax and watch the locals enjoying the day.

Later, as they walk, they stop at old buildings and churches to look at the architecture and the detailed builing exteriors. Chris says it reminds him of Cusco, Peru when they went to the Andes in South America. Everyone's favorite thing to do is to visit cathedrals, of which there are two very notable ones in Mazatlan, the Catedral Basilica de Mazatlan and the Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, the latter Cathedral in Old Mazatlan. They're old and look as though they have seen lots of history.

They see other people from the ship and ask what they've seen that is interesting. Several people tell them that a great place to watch people and animals is the Plaza Machado. It's a short walk from where they are, so they relax here with some food and later check out the crafts for sale as well as the street musicians. They learn that this is considered the historic center of Mazatlan.

Mazatlan has galleries of art for sale and for public education. They walk through 9 galleries. 9! That's a lot! But, according to the ship's crew, if you mix galleries in with the other parts of the

city, you get the flavor of the real Mazatlan. Donna is into art, so she spots art everywhere and points it out. She impresses Franklin and the mice by identifying the artists in about half of the paintings and sculptures they see.

Christine says she wishes she could bring home some of the colors because she would like to paint one room in the Home with one color that she finds really beautiful. There's no way to do what she wishes, but Donna takes a photo with her camera and promises to help her find the color at the local paint store back home.

Franklin comments on the antiquity of everything around them. He bought a guide book in the ship's store and that has helped identify much of what they are able to see.

When it's time to get back to the ship, they walk back to the piers, tired but happy. Chris has taken so many photos with his phone, he suspects it will take three days of sorting just to go through his Mazatlan photos.

That night after dinner, they go to the night's musical entertainment. They get seats fairly close to the stage and enjoy music, dancing and jokes. Christine brought her maraca just in case there was an opportunity to use it, but none of the music seems like maraca music, so it just sits in her lap.

After the show they visit the ship's shopping areas so Franklin can get a tee shirt and a cool hat.

Cabo San Lucas is another highlight of the trip. A water taxi ferries them ashore from their moorage in the harbor. During their walk through the harbor area they admire the very expensive yachts at the harbor docks, the vendors with tee shirts and other things to buy, and the restaurants and bars looking out at the water. Donna and Christine want to go into a very expensive store that has armed guards with large weapons outside. The windows have very tasteful graphics of the world-famous designers and luxury goods displayed inside. Franklin and Chris wisely wait outside, sitting on the steps and watching the parade of tourists walking by.

One highlight of their Cabo visit - they go to Cabo Wabo and look for Sammy Hagar, who just happens to be there that day. They're disappointed because they don't get to talk to him but they take photos and that's enough to tell their friends back home that they saw him.

After that they tour more shops, go to more fancy stores, and gape at the expensive yachts tied up at the dock while they eat lunch at a harbor-side restaurant.

As the ship is leaving, they ask a crew member to take pictures of themselves with the famous arch behind them. The crew member tells them that the name of the arch is El Arco, which prompts Franklin to ask, "Is there a gas station there?" It's a joke, because El Arco means "The Arch" but the crew member just smiles and hands Franklin's phone back to him.

The daylong trip back to Long Beach is uneventful. Just more cruising and fun. The ocean swells going in this direction cause the ship to move rhythmically and slowly up and down. Christine gets a little sea sick but a friendly mouse on board sees her and shares some medicine that makes her feel okay again.

She sees the mouse later and thanks him for his help. He's very polite but he reaches to hold her paw, looking in her eyes, which makes her a little uncomfortable. After all, she's a married mouse.

She quickly spots Chris walking by, and calls him over. "Hey, Chris. This nice mouse gave me some medicine for sea sickness. I'm feeling a lot better now."

Chris extends his paw to shake the other mouse's paw. "Thanks, my friend. I hope you have a good rest of the trip."

The other mouse looks around and spots a nice looking young female mouse nearby. "You're welcome. Excuse me, I think I see a future friend. Take care." And that's the last they see of him.

Back in Long Beach, the giant cruise ship is guided into the dock and the unloading begins. It seems to take hours, but the Dootys and the Mouse couple aren't in any hurry. They watch from their balcony for a while as passengers unload and then make their way down to the disembark level and walk off of the ship.

After they collect their luggage, the drive home is quiet. Everyone is filled with thoughts and lots of memories.

Back at the house, Chris and Christine put their stuff back in their Home in the Wall, greet Grandma and Grandpa, and sit down to relax.

That night, everyone shares their experiences over the last eight days. Grandma and Grandpa have had a nice time with Carl and Candy. They sat and talked and played games and watched movies on the tv.

Grandma says, "It's a good thing you two got home when you did. Grandpa and I are about tuckered out with those young kids of yours. They were really wonderful, and we had a fun time with them, but they sure have a lot of energy. We're going to have to rest up for a few days after this."

Christine shares stories about their 8 days on a ship. "It was fun, and there were lots of things to do, but we're tired, too. We were busy almost every minute, except when Chris fell asleep on the pool deck and one of the attendants tried to grab him to throw him overboard. Good thing Mr. Dooty stepped in and saved him or he would have had a long swim home.

"Well, let's all get a good night's sleep tonight. Tomorrow we can get things back to normal and share more stories."

"Great idea, Christine. Good night, dear," says Grandpa, and without another word he grabs Grandma's paw and they head up to bed.

END OF EDIT - 9/2/25

Chapter 8 - Maybe We Should Have Stayed Home

Four months after the cruise, the rhythm in the Home in the Wall has returned to normal. Grandpa and Grandma have their routine. Chris and Christine also have their own routine. Both couples come together for meals and entertainment time every night. It's a wonderful two-generation family.

After the Mexican Riveria cruise, Chris and Christine have the travel bug, and have been talking about taking a several-day car trip on their own, without the Dootys.

Their dream car trip is to drive south along the Southern California beaches, visiting different beach cities for a few days each.

Over the last several years Chris has kept track of all the mice moving from their neighborhood and he contacts every mouse that he has information on.

His first call is to a local mouse that moved to Dana Point. Lickety is a little younger than Chris and Christina. He and his wife have two older pinkies and live right on the beach. The main house is small, but Lickety and Felicity have a quiet place in the garage for their home, and would love to have a visit from old neighbors.

"Thanks, Lickety, we'd love to come visit you guys. Uh, are there fumes in the garage from the cars?" Chris asks.

"Not at all. Our homeowner friends have electric cars, so they just plug in. They don't burn gas or give off any fumes."

That's a relief for Chris. He was worried that they'd be gassed by fumes at night when the homeowners return from work.

Now, he'll feel right at home because the Mouse Wagon is also an electric vehicle.

"Great. We're planning to start out in two months. Is there a plug-in wall outlet in the garage that I can plug my car into?"

"Oh sure, and there's more than one. The best plug-in is down by the floorboard and it's just a few feet from our home. Your car will be safe there and fully charged each day."

That's a relief, and a good start, Chris thinks.

Over the next two weeks he is able to get a hold of mice in almost every beach town they want to visit. Almost every mouse is encouraging, offering a place to stay for a day or two, eating

with their families, and suggestions on sightseeing near their house. Even better, they all live in homes that have outlets where he can charge the Mouse Wagon overnight.

The plan slowly comes together to visit seven beach cities.

There is so much to do around their Home that there is no rush to go on a trip. Chris and Christine talk about it in their bedroom one night, and decide to take the trip in two months.

Chris contacts the host mice families and sets up the dates for their visit. The plan that he and Christine come up with has them traveling every other day, which gives them a day to rest between the stress of driving days.

As they get closer, Carl and Candy are enlisted once again, to look in on Grandma and Grandpa. Just like their cruise, both young mice offer to alternate spending the evening and night at the Home in the Wall every other day. That's a big relief for their parents because they won't have to worry about Grandma and Grandpa.

Carl, of course, is quietly jealous because he would love to go surfing with them. "My board is all shiny and waxed, but the restaurant is so busy, I don't think I could get away, even if I wanted to."

Chris also talks to Franklin while Christina talks to Donna. They describe their trip, explaining where they're going to, and how long they'll be gone. They also let them know that Carl and Candy will be spending nights at their Home with Grandma and Grandpa.

As the day of departure comes close, both adult mice get busy gathering the stuff that they'll take, stacking it up in their living room. It's a little cluttered, but not a terrible problem and it helps them see and check off everything.

Finally, the morning they leave, Chris pulls the Mouse Wagon out of the garage and parks it near the kitchen door with the cat door. That makes it easier to load their stuff in the car, and in short order everything is packed, and they're ready to go.

Franklin already said his goodbyes as he left for work. Donna stands by the back door and waves to the Mouse Wagon as the two friends drive off.

It's a beautiful day in Southern California. The sun is bright, the day is warm but not hot, and traffic seems light.

Today is a full day's drive down to a town called Dana Point in the next county. Chris drives to the beach and then turns left. The car is running great. What a great day to start on our trip, both mice think.

After several hours, a large dog comes running out between parked human automobiles and chases after the Mouse Wagon, barking. Chris tries to outrun it, but the dog is too fast. Chris pulls the Mouse Wagon under a parked car to hide but the dog is able to get under the parked car and is about to get to the Mouse Wagon. Chris accelerates the Wagon, but the dog catches them and bites the top of their car and lifts it off the ground. Christine screams, which confuses the dog for a minute, but then he starts shaking the car in his mouth, with the two mice in it. They're getting tossed around, back and forth, until Chris takes matters into his own hands. He opens his door and sticks a long toothpick in the dog's tongue as hard as he can.

"Yowwwwllllll," yells the dog and he drops the car, which fortunately lands on its wheels. Chris speeds off while watching the dog howl in his rear view mirror.

"Whew, that was a close call," he says to Christine, who is pretty shook up and just sits in her seat staring ahead and not saying a word.

After 15 minutes of driving on down the beach sidewalk, Christine finally says, "That was so scary, Chris. Thank you for saving us. I didn't know what to do. All I could think about was what will Grandpa and Grandma do if we die."

"Honey, don't worry. I'm pretty good at getting us out of trouble. You won't ever have to worry, as sure as my name is Chris Mouse."

Christine smiles at her husband. He is pretty smart, she thinks. And then her thoughts continue, "not as smart as me, but still pretty smart."

It's a long day's drive and just as the sun is going down over the Pacific Ocean they arrive in Dana Point. Chris checks the directions to their first host home.

After two turns they pull up to a townhouse across from the beach. Standing outside are Lickety and Felicity waving and smiling.

"Come on in, friends," calls Lickety. "Our humans left the garage door open for you. Pull right in and unload. Then you can plug in your car to recharge."

Felicity adds, "We have a bonfire dinner at the beach planned for you. How does that sound?"

Christine's eyes light up. "That sounds fantastic, Felicity" as Lickety helps Chris unload the Mouse Wagon. "What can I help with?"

The answer is "nothing." The two host mice have planned the dinner, packed a basket, and have their pinkies all set to go.

Chris grabs a small box, Lickety and Felicity get the food, and they walk across the street to the beach. The waves are splashing ashore, sea gulls are fighting over a small dead fish in the water, and the beach is practically empty.

They walk to a secluded spot, set everything down, Felicity spreads out a small blanket, and Lickety starts a fire with match sticks and kindling.

It's not a big fire, but the heat feels nice and the warm light of the flames makes the beach feel like a party scene.

The adult mice are talking and soon everyone is eating and talking. The two pinkies had been noisily playing in the sand, making mounds and digging caves, but now they're eating and adding occasional comments to the conversation.

It's a wonderful start to their trip, Chris and Christine think. Even with the dog incident earlier, this is a perfect day.

The next day, Chris checks the Mouse Wagon. It's fully charged and as he inspects the exterior he sees that there is no damage from the dog's bite and shaking. The car looks just like it did before they left. "Whew! That's good," he says to himself.

Today is their open day in Dana Point, and their hosts take them for a walk around the area. The beaches are certainly the main attraction, but there are also shops and other things to see. It's challenging because the shops are sized for people so the mice, being a lot smaller, have trouble getting into and out of them.

Fortunately, there are lots of tourists walking in and out of the shops and not looking down. It takes good timing, but all four mice are able to duck in while a door is open, and wait to duck out when people leave. That lets them look at all kinds of shops and enjoy all kinds of smells.

Inside a bakery, Lickety tells Chris and Christine to look on the floor. There are pieces of pastry in several places near the counter, which means they all get treats. They have to be fast to avoid human feet, but it's worth it. "Isn't it great that people are messy," says Lickety. "We come here all the time and always get full of some of the best pastry treats."

Chris agrees. The pastries are delicious, and as a bonus, the extra calories will help them because they're walking a lot today.

After walking and checking out shops for two blocks, Christine is tired and wants to go back to the house. They walk back, looking out at the ocean and the beach. It's a beautiful day.

That night, their host family serves a nice meal, and the four adult mice and two pinkies go for a walk on the beach. The stars are bright and out on the ocean they can see the lights of ships

that are either moored or are moving through the area. It's a beautiful night. Christine finds Chris's paw and they walk together, paw in paw.

Later, as they get ready to go to sleep in the guest nest, Chris turns to Christine and says, "Honey, this is about the best that it gets. What a beautiful day. We'll say goodbye to Dana Point tomorrow, but I'm sure we'll never forget it."

Christine just smiles, nods her head, and gives her husband a kiss.

The next morning after a quick breakfast, the two visiting mice say thank you and goodbye to their host family, pack the freshly charged Mouse Wagon and drive north along the beach. As they said their goodbyes, they invited their hosts to come visit their old neighborhood, and they hope they'll see them again.

Their next stop is Laguna Beach. It's another long drive but a lot shorter than their first day. To get to their destination they have to leave the beach and drive inland a ways to cross over hills that drop to the ocean. They arrive in Laguna Beach in early afternoon, dropping down from a hill into the little town nestled around a small cove. They saw Laguna on their way south to Dana Point, but didn't have time to stop or look around. Now, they'll have the rest of today and all of tomorrow to explore the town.

Their hosts here are Alphat and Ulla, a couple a little older than Chris and Christine. Their abode is in the middle of town. Like Chris and Christine, they're empty nesters. Their kiddos live nearby and will be coming over later to meet the visitors and eat dinner at home.

Their son Arty is a fast-talking young mouse and seems nervous, nose whiskers twitching and blinking a lot. His sister, Ultra, is much more relaxed and comfortable. Ulla explains that Arty was a troubled delivery and the mouse doctor said that he would probably always be a little on the nervous side. He seems very nice, though, and the visiting Mouse pair have a nice time visiting with their hosts and kids.

It's very relaxed in this home. Nothing is planned, just sitting around and getting acquainted. Their host couple have lots of questions about the old neighborhood. When Chris or Christine describe things, Arty and Ultra sit quietly and listen to every word. They tell the visitors that they have never been to their parent's home neighborhood, and have often wondered what it was like.

"Why did you guys move?" Christine asks.

Ulla explains, "We wanted to be at the beach, and Alphat is an artist. He wanted to be around other artists and so we found Laguna Beach. It's where art and the ocean meet."

"That sounds very smart," says Christine. "What kind of art things are here?"

Alphat jumps in, "It's a very vibrant artist community. Many well-known artists live here. There are galleries all over town, showing some of the coolest sculptures and canvases to be seen. Every year they have an art festival and people in costume stand in front of backdrops to recreate famous paintings. It's pretty amazing. You can look at the art, and then look at the picture in their scene, and you almost can't tell the difference. They call it the "Pageant of the Masters." You guys should plan to come back when it's on. It's really popular and crowded, but that makes it easy for us to sneak in. We do it every year."

"Pretty neat," Chris says. "I've never heard of anything like that. That would be fun to see. Maybe we can come back when it's on."

Ulla smiles and nods. "Alphat is always promoting our town. We love it here and we'll show you around tomorrow."

In the guest nest that night, Chris and Christine talk about what they want to do tomorrow. They want to let Alphat do the tour he wants to do, but they also want to spend some time at the beach. Chris has decided that he's going to do a write up for mice about visiting beach towns that maybe Candy can use in one of her news casts.

The next morning, they go to the kitchen where Ulla is watching the kids eat.

"Do your kids go to school, Ulla?" Christine asks.

"Yes, they'll be leaving in a few minutes after they clean up and grab their backpacks. Then we'll have peace and quiet until they get home this afternoon.

"Please sit down. Alphat likes to cook and he's prepared a special breakfast for you two."

Both sit down and glance at each other. This is pretty cool, they both think. We're treated like house guests instead of strangers.

"This is really nice, Ultra," they say. "We'll just go home and grab our stuff. We'll move in tomorrow!" they say with a laugh.

Ulla smiles. "We like visitors and you two are from our old neighborhood. We want to hear all about the changes there when we eat dinner tonight."

"Deal," Chris says. "We'll fill you in."

Alphat brings a warm dish of eggs and vegetables, all mixed together. Then he sits down and all four mice dish food on to their plates.

"Oh, yeah!" Chris says. "You have a gift, my friend. This is delicious."

Christine nods, too busy eating to even comment, but smiling toward Alphat while she chews.

After breakfast, the four adults clean up and leave for Alphat's tour.

They start at the beach. Humans are playing volleyball on the beach while waves crash in, glistening in the morning sun. Two human surfers are testing the waves. The gentle salt air feels so nice. What a perfect day!

From the beach, Alphat takes them up one street, checking out galleries, clothing and beachwear shops and a small drug store. The galleries are really interesting. The first gallery is on the corner. The four mice stare at the art in the big windows while Alphat talks about the style of each and the techniques the artist used. A customer walks out of the gallery door and all four mice rush and make it inside before the door closes.

"What a great gallery this is," remarks Chris as he looks from painting to painting, and then at different sculptures.

They wander through the gallery being careful not to get seen by the few humans that are there.

Many of the themes are of the ocean, with seascapes, fish or other aquatic elements. The colors are vibrant and some of the paintings have brush strokes that almost lift off of the canvas.

Christine is looking close at a sculpture of a dolphin. Alphat comes over and points out that the sculptor managed to add water splashes and drops in a very creative way, giving the sculpture not only a 3 dimensional appearance, but also making it look like the dolphin just came jumping up out of the water, bringing water with it.

"That's so realistic, Chris," Christine remarks, thinking to herself that she has never seen a sculpture look that real.

They leave that gallery and walk down the tree-lined street. There are clothing stores, ice cream parlors, a surf shop, and even a small mall with different shops selling all kinds of tourist-related items including food. The mall is built to resemble a small village, which gives it charm and makes it inviting.

The town has a cornucopia of interesting shopping experiences. Christine lingers at a pottery shop, Chris likes the swimwear stores and also some of the different and unusual offerings, but they keep coming back to the art. Because Alphat is an artist he continues to share insights that make the tour so much more interesting.

Several galleries later, everyone is getting tired and thinking about just relaxing. Alphat can sense the mood, and suggests that they all go back to the beach to relax. Chris and Christine sigh and relax. Whew! This guy knows how to tell what we want, they both think.

On the way to the beach, an ice cream cone is laying on the sidewalk, dropped by a human and just left there. The four mice scurry over to eat and use their paws to scoop out big, delicious spoonful's of the tasty ice cream.

"What is that flavor?" Christine asks.

"It's a tropical mix, a real favorite here," Alphat explains.

"I could eat this every day," sighs Chris.

"Yeah, me too," agrees Ula. It's delicious, cool and delightful.

The four mice check out one more block and then they're ready to go back to the house for an afternoon siesta.

Dinner that night is nice, another feast from Alphat. Chris is thinking, "I'm definitely going to have to go on a diet when we get back home."

Which happens sooner than expected.

The next day is Saturday, and as they're traveling to their next destination, the Mouse Wagon quits, just stops and won't run.

Chris isn't sure what to do, but he and Christine get out of the car, go one block to a park where Chris calls Franklin, who is off work for the weekend.

Franklin asks where the car is and promises to drive there right away.

The two mice go back to their car, and it's gone. Just disappeared. They walk up and down the street. No car. And no clothes or other things they packed inside.

They walk around several blocks and do not see the Mouse Wagon. Christine is getting upset. She left the gift given to them by their Dana Point hosts in the car and now it's gone, too.

Franklin calls Carl to find out exactly where they are. Carl tells him the names of two cross streets and in 15 minutes, Franklin pulls up, gets out, and opens the door for his mouse friends.

For the next hour they drive up one street and down another. Christine is upset. Chris is trying to stay calm, and Franklin is looking back and forth, trying to spot the Mouse Wagon, without luck.

Finally, Chris says, "Let's just go home. It's gone and we'll probably never find it. I don't know what else we can do. We can't keep driving around staring in yards and down streets."

Franklin doesn't know what to do. His friends got stranded. He came to help them. And he's not any more successful in locating their car than they were.

The drive back home is quiet. Chris and Christine are going over in their minds where they were when they left the car, what they remember about that location and anything that was going on around it, and then trying to guess what might have happened to it. It's a fruitless exercise. The car is gone and so is everything inside of it.

When Franklin pulls the car into the driveway, there's a quiet gloom inside. He tried his best, but all he could do is pick up his mouse friends, he couldn't rescue them from their dilemma. Chris is mad at himself for leaving the car out in the open. And, Christine wishes she had not brought some of her favorite things on the trip.

The mice get out of the car after Franklin parks it.

He says, "I'm so sorry, friends. I know we can get another car, but it won't be the same, and it's terrible that all the things you had in it are gone. I wish I could have helped more."

Chris says glumly, "It's okay, Franklin. Thank you for picking us up. We lost our car but we are still healthy and have a nice home to come home to. That's something to be thankful for."

Two days later Chris gets a call on his cell phone. He doesn't recognize the number, but it looks local.

"Hello," he says.

"Hi, I found a toy car and it had your phone number in it. Are you missing a toy?"

"Yes, we lost it in Laguna Beach. It was there one minute and gone the next."

"I'm sorry, but the car is smashed flat. It looks like a car ran over it. I'm sure your kid will be unhappy because it looks like there were things in it, but everything got destroyed. My wife found your phone number hanging out one door. The rest was wet, smashed, and totally unsalvageable. She threw it in the garbage and I'm calling you to let you know."

"Thank you for the call." and Chris hung up.

Later he tells a very sad Christine about the total loss of their car and contents.

Both mice are bummed. The car was Chris' pride and joy. That night they're getting ready for bed and Christine comes over and tells Chris, "Maybe we should have just stayed home."

Of course, accidents and mishaps can happen at any time and anywhere.

Franklin reminds his mouse friends, "It's not a good strategy to try to avoid things that are random and rarely happen. An accident is just that, an accident. If it were planned to happen or you make a big mistake, then it's not an accident, it's a learning opportunity. The thing to avoid is to repeat the same learning opportunity. Learn from it and move on."

Three days later, Franklin opens the closet door to the Home in the Wall and knocks on the door.

Chris opens the door, sees Franklin and says, "Hey, Franklin. What's up?"

Franklin says, "Chris, quick get your wife and follow me."

Chris has a quizzical look on his face, but turns back into his Home, calls Christine and a minute later they both walk out of the closet.

"Okay, where should we follow you to?" asks Chris.

Franklin stays silent but walks to the back door of the house. He opens the door and holds it open for his two mice friends.

They step out onto the back porch and look around.

Wait, what's that, they both think.

There's something in the driveway. What is it?

They walk toward the object and as they get close they see that it's an electric car, just their size.

"Oh my goodness, Franklin," Christine says. "Is that a car?"

"Yes it is, Christine. It's brand new, has all the latest technology in it, and it's all yours. I just bought it."

"Oh my goodness," says Chris. "That's an amazing car. Thank you, Franklin. You didn't need to do that for us."

"Well, we wanted you both to know how much Donna and I like you both. And I wanted you to know that it's time to travel again. When life knocks you down, you just get back up and keep going. That's what winners do, and you both are winners!"

Christine starts softly crying and Chris dabs his moist eyes. This is a surprise, and an amazing gift from their friends.

That evening, the two mice are sitting in the living room with Grandma and Grandpa, and they tell the story of Franklin bringing a new car to replace their old one.

Christine says, "The memories we made in that car with traveling all over can never be replaced. But, our human friends told us about a cartoon named Ziggy. Ziggy said one time that life is a series of boings and splats. The objective is to have one more boing than splat."

And that's the way it is in life. The good and the bad are all mixed in. Some people and mice get things backwards - they dwell on the bad and quickly forget all the good that happens in their lives. But the real key to a happy life is to enjoy the boings as long as you can, and quickly forget the splats, of course after learning the lessons from each.

Chapter 9 - Christopher A Stargazer

Franklin gets a telescope and offers to share it with Chris and Christine. It's a really cool telescope. Christine is too busy and doesn't want to learn how to use it, but Chris has always wanted to know more about the stars.

Franklin mounts the telescope on the back patio. For his mice friends he adds an optional small spiral staircase with a control-and-observation deck. Controls are pushbutton and the view through the telescope is displayed on a 9” video screen. It’s like living in a planetarium. Franklin has designed a cover for the telescope that lowers with cords, so Chris can uncover it easily to use the instrument.

Chris tries the staircase. He runs up and down the stairs and it feels fine. Not too cramped or tight. Mice are very good runners, fleet of feet, so anything that lets them run at full speed is considered good.

The telescope takes some time to learn. Chris tries to learn from the manual, but it's a little confusing and he thinks he really needs to spend time with both manual and instrument. It’s a nice summer night, he’s been thinking about the telescope all day, and tonight is the night. The first night with the new telescope.

Chris climbs the staircase, pulls the cords that lower the cover and that later will also raise it to re-cover the telescope.

“Let’s see,” he mumbles as he fumbles through the pages of the small manual. “Hmm. Operating instructions,” while thinking to himself, “well, that doesn’t look that hard.”

Oh good, it seems to be very simple. Answer a few questions and it takes you right to where you’d like to go and what you’d like to do. "Well, let's give it a try," he thinks.

With the answers to three questions, the video screen now shows a huge moon, with more detail than Chris has ever seen.

“Amazing,” he says to himself. “I wish Christine was here to see this.”

Next, the video screen asks him for his username and password.

Chris types in, “I don’t have one. This is my friend’s telescope.”

The video screen replies, “Then get the username and password from your friend.”

Chris types, “Look, I don’t have all day. Can’t you just give me a free trial? I’ll sign up for that. Or, maybe just give me a pass this time. I promise on a stack of Mouse Times that I will get this straightened out the next time.”

The screen is blank for a minute. And then it comes back with this message, “Look, you seem like a decent mouse. Because of that, I’ll let you have access and control. Just remember what you promised, to get this straightened out.”

The screen comes back with several choices:

“What do you want to see?

- Brightest stars?
- Coolest constellations?
- Closest planets in our solar system?
- All planets in our solar system?”

Chris selects “Closest planets in our solar system.”

The telescope whirs and starts moving.

It stops on one planet and a box in the corner of the screen offers the options: “Pause, skip, back.”

Chris stares at the planet. It looks fantastic. He has never seen anything like this. It has different colors and shapes and it kind of shimmers.

Later that day he starts watching YouTube videos about how to use this model telescope. There are all kinds of options that this model offers, and now he's anxious to try them all. The video is very detailed and also pretty easy to understand. This experience opens up a whole new set of opportunities to explore beyond planet earth.

Soon, Chris is spending most evenings outside, staring at stars, taking notes and writing about what he sees. His journal starts with just a paragraph or two, but after two weeks it's filling up with all of his observations and notes.

Some nights, Franklin uses the telescope, but most nights it's just available for Chris.

Franklin adds a camera to the telescope so he and Chris can take photos of what they see and send them to their cell phones.

Chris is fascinated by the planets and stars. They're just tiny spots of light when he looks at the sky with his eyes, but through the telescope they come to life, bigger and more detailed than he could imagine. It's almost like traveling through space.

A few months after Franklin got the telescope, Chris is tired after staring at the stars for several hours, gazing from one to another. He crawls into the nest being careful not to wake Christine. He's restless after spending hours looking at worlds and stars in space, and he tosses and turns. Just when he feels like he's going to fall asleep he hears a noise and it sounds like it's outside in the yard so he gets out of bed to see what is making the loud sound.

He walks downstairs very quietly so as not to wake Grandma and Grandpa. Then he walks out of the front door of the Home in the Wall, scrunches under the closet door, and tiptoes across the Dooty's bedroom and out to the living room.

It's dark so he can't see anything except for a blue light shining through the window. It seems to be coming from the yard.

"That's strange," he thinks.

He walks to the cat door, pops out the other side and looks at the driveway. No light there.

He walks around to the side of the house, looks toward the garden, and there in the middle of the grassy lawn is something very strange, and it's casting a bright blue light. It's so bright that when Chris looks at it from the side of his eyes it's blue, but when he looks at it straight on it's too bright to look at.

Now he's confused. He's never seen anything like this before. The light is coming from what looks like a metal cylinder that is standing straight up in the yard. The light seems to be coming from the entire object. In fact, it's pulsing. The glow changes - brighter, dimmer, brighter, dimmer.

Chris stands looking at the object and as he looks, on one part of the blue side facing the house a black rectangle suddenly appears. As he watches, a portion of the rectangle separates at the top and the top angles out and then lowers until it forms a ramp of stairs leading from what it now appears to be an opening.

After the ramp touches the ground, a blue mouse with a clear bubble on his head walks down the stairs. As the other mouse gets closer to him, Chris can see that the blue isn't actually the color of the mouse, it's the color of the metallic suit the mouse is wearing, covering his entire body except for the clear bubble.

Chris is dumbfounded. What is this and who is that? he thinks to himself.

He must be sleepwalking he thinks, so he pinches himself to check.

"Ouch." Well, that hurt so this must be real. He thinks he should go back inside and get Franklin or Christine or someone else but then the mouse starts talking.

"Hello. You must be Chris Mouse. I was sent here from the Space Agency. We need your help. Can you come with me, please?"

"NO! I cannot come with you. What are you doing here in the middle of the night, wearing a blue suit with your head in a bubble?"

"Sorry. I can't give you any more information. I was just told to fly here and pick you up. I am not authorized to do anything else."

"Well, that's a fine how do you do," says Chris. "My wife and parents are asleep in there and so are our homeowners. I can't just leave. What will they think if they wake up and I'm gone? That wouldn't be right."

The blue mouse just motions for Chris to follow him, and he walks up the ramp stairs and stands in the opening, waiting.

Chris stands there for a full minute. The blue mouse starts tapping his foot, waiting. Chris makes a sudden decision and walks up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs he says, "Okay, Mr. Blue Mouse. I'm here. What do I do now?"

"Follow me" and the blue mouse leads Chris into what can best be described as a control room. On the walls are big video screens with all kinds of information on them. One shows a map with a dot on one side, which Chris guesses is where they are now. On the opposite side of the map is a large, pulsing dot. The blue mouse points to the dot and says, "That's where we're going."

Blue Mouse motions for Chris to sit in the seat next to him, and then shows him how to buckle a harness around his body. After doing that, Chris feels strapped in and even though he feels totally comfortable, he can't move.

Blue Mouse touches a panel under his right paw and the whole cylinder starts shaking. One of the screens on the wall shows the side yard outside the house. Chris can see the garden at the far right of the screen.

Suddenly, the shaking gets stronger and then the vibrations get less as the noise outside increases to a roar. The garden is shrinking smaller on the screen on the right, and then in several minutes, it's gone and the screen displays what looks like a round globe. The globe is light blue, with lights of various size and intensity scattered around on the surface. With each minute that passes, the globe continues to shrink.

Chris feels faint and closes his eyes. When he opens them again, it feels like many hours have gone by. The round globe is now a lot smaller. It's almost a dark blue, but it's getting brighter on one side and Chris can make out the outline of a continent.

"Wait a minute," he shouts to Blue Mouse. "Are we on a spaceship? And, is that the earth that I see on that screen?"

"I am not authorized to explain anything to you. In two days, I will brief you on why you are here and what we need to do."

Chris sits silently thinking about what he was just told. "This mouse can't explain anything to me and it looks like we're going somewhere in a spaceship," he thinks.

As the day wears on, Blue Mouse brings food for them both and shows Chris how to eat in a no-gravity environment.

Two days later, after Chris is totally bored, Blue Mouse disappears for a whole day, leaving Chris to wonder where he went, as well as what he's supposed to be doing. With no answers to either question Chris just sits and stares, watching the screens and occasionally taking a nap.

The next day Blue Mouse is back and Chris has plenty of questions for him. Yesterday was the day Blue Mouse was supposed to brief him. But, unfortunately, he had disappeared for a whole day.

"Where are we going and why am I here?" Chris asks.

"I will now brief you," says Blue Mouse. "You are here to assist me because you are a mouse that has been studying the stars. We are on a mission to reach a moon circling Saturn. It has been determined to have large quantities of essential foods that can feed starving mice. No one has been able to reach this moon yet. We will be the first. If we are successful, we will be welcomed back to earth with ceremonies and great honors. But, in order to be successful, you will need to do everything I ask you to do, without question. Do you understand?"

Chris just stares at Blue Mouse. "This is ridiculous," he thinks. "I'm just an ordinary mouse living an ordinary life. I don't have any special skills or instincts that I know of. Why would they pick me, of all mice?"

Having thought that, he still has to answer Blue Mouse, and so he says, "Sure."

That ends the conversation on why Chris is on this mission. Now, it's just a matter of waiting to see what he'll have to do and then doing his best to do it. It's pretty clear that he can't undo what has been done and then land back in his yard.

Chris begins to look at all of the screens. They're everywhere – up on the far wall, in smaller size on the console in front of where he and Blue Mouse are seated, even next to the doors to other compartments.

Nothing Chris can see tells him how many compartments there are in this ship, or what their purpose might be.

Suddenly, a loud beeping alarm emits from one of the consoles, and a screen on the far wall begins flashing. Something must be very wrong for these sounds and lights to be going off, but what?

Blue Mouse is suddenly very energetic, moving quickly around the room, checking consoles and flicking switches. Whatever the problem is, it appears to be more than minor. Blue Mouse is actively looking for the problem and trying various ways of fixing it.

“What’s going on and how can I help?” Chris asks.

“The alarm is indicating that our simulated gravity is diminishing. If I don’t fix it soon, we’ll be floating around here like helium balloons,” Blue Mouse answers. “Help me try to locate the source of the problem.”

Chris stands up and starts moving around the room. Only problem is, every other step reaches the floor. The other steps are a foot off of the ground. Chris is floating one minute and then he’s back with paws on the floor. There’s no indication of why this is, and Chris has no inkling, but it’s very irritating and concerning.

“I can’t see what’s causing the alarm, and I have no idea what any of the switches do. Just tell me how you want me to help you, and I’ll try,” Chris says to Blue Mouse.

Blue Mouse pushes several buttons under the screens on the far wall, and just as suddenly as it started, the beeping alarm sounds stop. Chris takes a big step and his feet no longer float off of the floor.

Whatever was causing the problem seems to be fixed.

The two travelers had spent hours trying to locate and fix the problem, and now Chris is feeling really tired. His eyes are getting heavy and he really just wants to go to sleep.

Blue Mouse sees Chris acting drowsy, and helps him back to his seat where he has spent most of this flight.

Chris gets strapped in and falls immediately to sleep, waking up after a short nap.

“Where are we now, and where are we headed,” he asks Blue Mouse.

“I can now brief you more on this trip,” Blue Mouse answers. “The moon we are heading toward and that we will hopefully land on, is actually inhabited by a single species. Our long-

range telescopes observed these creatures and that is what prompted this mission. We have determined that the single species is actually a type of mouse. There are millions of them on this moon, but we have no understanding of how they got there and why they inhabit this moon instead of zillions of others."

"Okay, that's pretty weird, but interesting," Chris replies. "Why would anyone want to send a spaceship to a moon populated by millions of mice?"

"That information is classified and is above your clearance, I'm afraid," answers Blue Mouse.

"Wait. Clearance, what clearance? I've never been to any training, I have no official standing with any agency of any government. Why was I even picked for this?"

"I guess I should give you the whole picture," says Blue Mouse. "The truth is, we are going to discover a food source that sustains this moon's mice population. Our long-range sensors have identified the source as a mine that has huge layers of food that has the same taste, nutrition value and consistency of peanut butter, but with none of the harmful byproducts."

"Okay, that's pretty amazing that they can identify a mine, and the food layers within it, and the taste, nutrition and consistency of a food that we eat on earth. That doesn't sound possible."

"We have two more days in this capsule and then we'll land on that moon and will explore for ourselves. We have a rover that will safely carry us wherever we want to go. We will ride the rover to the mine, extract a sample, test it in the ship, and if it proves to be what I have described earlier, we'll use machinery to extract as much as we can safely transport back to earth."

"Okay, I understand. I'm still pretty confused by all of this, but we've come this far, so we might as well follow through on the mission," Chris says with finality.

Chris drifts back to sleep, but doesn't sleep well. He is agitated and his body just will not relax. He turns and twists, but can't stay sleeping long. He keeps waking up and looking around to confirm his surroundings. It's all so confusing.

"Chris!" he hears with his eyes closed. Wait a minute, that sounds like Christine. How did she get on this spaceship?

"Chris, are you okay?" That for sure is Christine.

Now Chris has to open his eyes and look around. Christine is standing over him and he's lying in the nest in their bedroom.

"Christine, what are you doing here?" he asks.

“What do you mean? This is our home. You were sleeping and dreaming and talking in your sleep.”

Chris sits up in the nest, looks around and checks himself to see if he’s still wearing a space suit.

“Where’s Blue Mouse,” he asks.

“Who is Blue Mouse, honey? There’s no one in our room but us. Grandma and Grandpa are asleep in their room. You went to bed early and you’ve been making sounds in your sleep. You must have had a pretty good dream to not be able to shake it off yet.”

Chris is confused, but gradually he’s starting to get his senses around him again.

He gets out of the nest, walks out of the bedroom, downstairs, out into the Dooty's house and checks every room. Everything is fine. No blue lights, no sounds, nothing out of the ordinary. Well okay, Franklin was snoring when he walked through the bedroom, but that’s pretty normal.

Chris walks back into the Home in the Wall, climbs the stairs back to their bedroom where Christine is standing waiting for him.

“Did you see anyone else in our house, honey?”

“No, it’s just been you, me and grandpa and grandma. They went to bed early and we weren’t that far behind them.

“Before coming to bed you did eat some different kinds of weeds that you found growing in our garden. You said you just wanted to taste them. I tried to talk you out of eating them, because I've never seen them before, but you were insistent.”

Chris looks around. “Well, whatever it was sure gave me a weird experience. I was on a spaceship heading to a moon where the population was all mice, and they had a food source that our government was very interested in, so they picked me to help.”

Christine has a funny look on her face. “That’s pretty strange, dear. Whatever you ate must have given you this dream. That and your telescope.”

“Well, at least I don’t have to dig up any strange substance to bring back to earth.”

Chris sees Franklin the next morning and tells him that he will not be using the telescope any longer.

“Why not, Chris,” asked Franklin.

“I’m not ready to explore space just yet, I guess,” is all Chris could think to answer.

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