Growin' Up Mouse

#6 in the Chris Mouse series



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Drama Princess 3

Chapter 2 - Carl's Crush 12

Chapter 3 - Planes, Trains, Pains and Canes 20

Chapter 4 – Franklin, Oh Franklin 32

Chapter 5 - Movin' Movin' Movin' 40

Chapter 6 - A House is Not a Home 46

Chapter 7 - Mouse Surfari! 54

Chapter 8 - Back from the North 62

Chapter 9 - Boats Afloat 70

Chapter 1 - Drama Princess

"Mom, what's it take to be an actress?" asks Candy one morning at breakfast.

"Well, Candy, most actresses are human, but now that I think of it, maybe you could be the first mouse actress."

"What about Mickey Mouse? He's a movie star, right?"

"Yes, but he's a cartoon, not a real mouse. Would you like to be a cartoon?"

"No. I guess I just want to be someone that people look up to and listen to. You know, I just want to have a voice and be heard. And I do like to act."

"There are lots of ways you can get some experience and try out acting, honey. Mouse Academy could possibly start an acting class. Maybe you could sign up for that, of course that's only if we decide to do it."

That ends the conversation, but it's just the beginning of Candy's quest to become an actress.

At Mouse School that morning Candy talks with several friends about her interest in acting.

Crystal Fleer is all for it. "You should go for it, girl! I've never heard of a girl mouse actress, but you could be the first. I bet you'd be good at it, too!"

Fran Meece and Fanny Trickle also think it's a cool idea and give Candy even more encouragement to try her hand at acting.

That afternoon at Mouse Academy Candy talks to Matilda Meece, her instructor that day, and she gets yet another positive response.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Candy," Matilda says. "We've been kicking around the idea of starting an acting class here, but we didn't know if there would be enough interest. I'll put it out to the students and see if we can get enough interest to make it work. If we did start that class we would need to have a play or something at the end of the school year so the students would have a goal to work for.

And you can talk to other students and see if you can build some interest for the idea. The more students are interested, the better the chance that we'll offer a class here."

"I can do that, Mrs. Meece," Candy responds immediately. "I'll talk to friends in Mouse School and here in the Academy. I'm sure we can get enough interested students to make it worthwhile!"

After class, Candy talks to a half dozen other students. All of them seem interested, but most have lots of questions, none of which Candy can answer. Since it's just in the idea stage there is no structure or concept to share. Just the idea.

That night at dinner, Candy tells her family about the conversations today.

Her mom has a great suggestion. "Put together a signup sheet and get commitments from your friends and other students that would participate in an acting class. If there are enough signatures, we would naturally want to do it. Of course, we would have to find a volunteer teacher and at the moment, I don't know of any mice actors that could teach it, but that's not a big problem."

"Would it have to be a mouse teacher, mom?" Candy answers. I think I could find a human that could teach it, if they would be willing. The only issue is we might have to have the class outdoors because humans are too big for our classrooms."

"That wouldn't be a problem, Candy. Humans do open air plays and programs all the time. We can figure that part out if you get enough student interest and you also find an instructor."

The next day at Mouse School, Candy has a signup sheet with her and talks to her friends and other students about the acting class. Some mice are interested, and Candy convinces them to put their names on the signup sheet. Later, at Mouse Academy, she does the same thing.

By the end of the day she has 30 students on the commitment sheet.

That night she gives the sheet to her mom.

"Here are the students that would like to take this class, mom. Do you remember Shurley and her family? They were in the talent show where we competed as Here We Go. They did acting and I think she has an interest and maybe a background. I could talk to her. She had said that the wife of the family in the house they live has an acting background and coached them. I could talk to them and see if I could get them interested in helping teach this class."

"That's great, Candy. After you find an instructor or two, I'll present your proposal to Matilda and we'll see about starting a course."

Candy smiles and that night in her room she can picture herself as an actress on stage, wearing a beautiful gown and speaking impressive lines to an audience.

She walks around her room practicing being dramatic, imagining herself as a heroine in one of the movies she has watched on their tablet TV. For the next hour she makes believe that she is in a movie acting out the part of the female lead.

Then she gets ready for sleep, crawls in her nest and dreams all night about becoming the first female mouse actress.

The next day Candy gets up early, gets ready for school, eats breakfast and heads out the door.

Between Mouse School and Mouse Academy classes, Candy goes by the house where Shurley and her family live. As she walks into the yard she spots Shurley outside and calls to her.

"Hey Shurley, remember me?"

Shurley turns, recognizes Candy and says, "Sure, you're the girl in Here We Go, right? I remember you from the talent competition. You guys were great."

"Thanks. I'm trying to start an acting class at Mouse Academy, and I remembered that you and your family were very entertaining. Would you be interested in helping us all learn how to be more dramatic?"

"I guess so. I watch a lot of drama on tv and I watched some YouTube videos about acting to help our family in the competition. What would you need me to do?"

"I'm not sure, just yet. I need to find the main instructor first. Can I let you know?"

"Sure. I'm usually not busy in the afternoons if that works for the class."

"Perfect. Mouse Academy classes are in the afternoon. I'll let you know what I find out. Thank you so much!"

Candy walks to Mouse Academy classes with a little lighter step, happy that she found one instructor. Now, to find the main one.

After school that afternoon she finds Mrs. Dooty in the kitchen and asks her if she knows anyone with acting experience that could help teach an acting class at Mouse Academy.

"I just might, Candy," says Donna Dooty. "I'll check with our nephew Danny. He seems to know a lot of people in the entertainment business. I'll let you know what I find out."

Two days later Donna spots Candy and gives her good news. Danny has a friend, Carla, that has studied acting for many years and acts in local theatre productions. Danny talked to her and she would be willing to help teach the Mouse Academy class, and she would even put together the curriculum. She would just need to talk to Christine Mouse about how to structure the class for Mouse Academy.

"Wow, that's fantastic, Mrs. Dooty," exclaims Candy. "I am so excited. Thank you, thank you, thank you! I can't wait!"

Candy runs breathlessly into the Home in the Wall and tells her mom the good news. "I have an instructor and an assistant, mom. Isn't that cool?"

Christine smiles at her daughter and says, "That's really excellent, Candy. I'm so proud of you. You handled all of the necessary steps. I just need to meet with Carla and Shurley to set the curriculum and discuss details. Then we'll let all the interested students know when the class will start and some of the other details. Good work, daughter!"

Candy beams and runs upstairs to her room.

Acting Class starts in four weeks with 25 students.

Candy loves the class immediately. Carla is very interesting and very expressive. She begins with some of the basics - using your body as an actor, using your voice, interaction with other actors in a production, and other foundational elements.

Candy and the other students listen intently and watch as Carla and Shurley act to illustrate what they are teaching.

Homework assignments are fun. Carla tells the students to watch videos of specific shows and movies. Most of the other students don't have any way to watch videos, so many of them come to Candy's Home in the Wall to watch them on the tablet TV. Carla brings a tablet to Mouse Academy to show the most important videos during class.

Every class day is interesting. Students are paying close attention and then act out the instructions with scripts that Carla provides. It's fun and serious at the same time. Some of the students are taking the class very seriously and everyone can tell because those students sometimes "act' outside of class. It's fun to walk around Mouse Academy and have a fellow acting student approach another with a line from one of the scripts, embellishing and sometimes expressing themselves with a flourish. There's a buzz around the Academy as other students notice the class members doing public acting and they start talking about how cool this is. No mice have ever seen other mice really act, and do so in dramatic style.

After several months Carla announces that she and Christine have worked out a plan for a Mouse Academy production, to be acted by the students. Carla describes the one-act play that the students will put on, and tells the students they can put their name in for whichever role they would like to play. Two days later, every member of the class has turned in their choices and the hard work begins - selecting who will do what.

Christine has really flashy posters made for the play. It will be produced on a stage in the yard where Mouse Academy is located. Danny is building the stage and will handle the sound and lighting. It's exciting. Everything is coming together.

Carla and Shurley pour over the students' requests, with Shurley sharing her observations and thoughts on various students and parts. They talk about the cast and decide together who will play each part.

Now comes the hard part - practice. There's just five weeks until the play. Each class day now includes additional instruction followed by practice.

Candy is excitedly practicing her role at home. It seems that she is always reciting lines from her part. Carl and her parents are pretty tolerant of Candy's constant role playing, but finally Chris has to ask Candy to practice her lines in other parts of the house out of respect for other members of the family.

"No problem, dad. I can do this upstairs and on the top floor patio. Now, how does this sound?" and then she starts on a line of dialogue.

"It sounds very good, Candy. We'll come listen to you practice a couple of times every week until the day of the play."

Candy smiles, thinking "this is working out perfectly."

Two weeks before the play, Danny shows the students and Carla and Shurley the stage and sets. Carla explains that every class day up to the day of the play will be spent with students practicing their lines and movements on the stage.

One week before the big day, which is scheduled for a Saturday afternoon so most everyone can attend, every mouse in the community is talking about what a great thing it is to have entertainment in the neighborhood. Even more exciting, it's all being acted by local mice students. Parents of the students are the proudest, and brag to their friends and neighbors about the young actors in their family.

Of course, on the morning of the play all the young acting students are nervous. Carla and Shurley calm each student with a little pep talk, and also with encouragement. Danny continues to adjust the lighting and sound. Mr. and Mrs. Dooty have been enlisted to take care of seating and they have placed several huge blankets on the grass in front of the

stage for parents and other mice attendees. Behind the blankets are the chairs for the humans. Everything is coming together quite well.

Danny has arranged for a green room directly behind the stage where the mouse players can wait until it's time to come on. During the play, Carla and Shurley will stand on each side of the stage to help direct players on and off the stage as their roles require.

It's a little after noon and the lawn is filling with mice and people. Everyone is trying to find a good place to sit. There's a low hum of quiet talking and murmuring from the crowd.

Just 30 minutes before the curtain will rise, loud sounds are heard from the sidewalk. They're coming from a large German Shepherd dog that smells the mice and immediately begins growling, snarling and barking, looking for a way to get in to the yard.

Franklin and Danny run to the sidewalk, spot the dog and notice that he is on a leash held by his master. After a few quick comments to the dog owner, the owner leads his dog away and everything is quiet once more.

"Whew, that had me a little anxious," Franklin says to Danny. "I guess we'll have to be watching and listening for trouble until this is over."

Danny nods in agreement and goes back to the sound and light board that he built just for the production.

Carla walks to the green room and signals for the actors in the first scene to stand by the stage, ready to enter when it's time for their part.

The audience is still talking, creating a hum in the yard, mice families with tiny voices and humans with louder and deeper voices. All of the talking creates a low buzz that keeps everyone excited and waiting for the play to start.

Danny is the time keeper and at the exact start time he starts playing the opening music.

The audience goes quiet. All eyes turn to the stage.

Carla begins the production by introducing the play.

"Thank you for coming today. My name is Carla Schumacher. I am an actor in local stage and tv productions here in California. I and my great assistant Shurley Greenstuff have been teaching an extraordinary class of young mice in this community the art of acting. Our wonderful Mouse Academy acting class has been diligently working on today's production. These students have spent many weeks memorizing their lines, practicing their roles and preparing themselves for this day so they can present this production to you. We

ask that you please refrain from talking during the production. Please just sit back and enjoy this fun and entertaining play.

"And now, here are your students and neighbors presenting a one-act play called, "Once Upon a Mouse!" - the curtains separate revealing an empty stage.

Danny plays a short audio track of a ticking clock - "Tick, tock, tick, tock" as a young male actor walks onto the stage looking to one side as though he is thinking.

"I wonder what is going to happen here," he says. "A crowd is watching, the stage is set, so something looks like it will happen but I'm not sure what."

"What are you talking about?" calls a voice from off the stage to the right as another male mouse walks up to the first. "This is the first production of the Mouse Academy Players, my friend, an important moment in the history of our area. Watch what happens, my friend."

And with that, a crowd of costumed mice walk onto the stage from both sides, to the applause from the audience.

The second male mouse then turns to the audience and says, while bowing, "Prepare for a fun hour as we share with you the story of when Mice learned to talk like humans."

Over the next hour the story of Phineas T. Teabottom unfolds. Phineas, as you may recall, was the first mouse to learn how to speak to humans. He is celebrated every year on the holiday, Teabottom Day, but there has never been a play to dramatically depict his actual life. Today the story will be acted out by the class. It's a twist, with some liberties taken on the real story, each added to the play for drama by Carla.

The students are very good, with some of course being better than others. Candy's role is playing Dweezie, the mother of Phineas, telling the story of the train trip from her perspective. It's actually a pretty big role since her part of the real story is very important. When it comes time for Dweezie to give birth to Phineas and his sisters and brothers, Candy has a big cotton ball strapped to her tummy underneath her costume. She looks exactly like she's going to birth baby mice.

Sitting in the audience, Christine turns to Chris and whispers, "It looks like she's really going to have babies," to which he nods with a picture of pregnant Christine in his mind. Christine is lost in thought for a minute as she imagines what it will be like when Candy does give them grandpinkies.

The audience is quiet. They're watching the story intently. Most of the humans have not heard this story, and the live acting brings it to life. They whisper to each other with smiles as they watch the story of how Phineas learned to speak like humans and how that resulted in almost all mice being able to talk today.

The mice in the audience love the play. Every mouse dresses up on Teabottom Day, and they all know the story, but they have never seen it depicted in any form. By tradition, the story is always read aloud so that's all that any mouse has ever known. They watch with mouths open and whiskers twitching. It's an engaging story brought to life right in front of their eyes.

Bobtail Furr plays Phineas and does a very convincing job of acting out the part. As the story unfolds, Candy is looking older and talking to Phineas in a dream. In the dream, Bobtail looks off stage as Candy appears and tells him that he is going to make the entire mouse world proud, and that he will be the reason mice all over the world will soon be able to speak to humans.

The play gives every mouse actor a speaking role, and there are several scene changes, although the stage doesn't have any set. It's just a bare stage, which Carla taught students is a minimalist set.

As the production winds up, Danny cues dramatic music and the curtains close.

The loud, appreciative applause and whistles from the audience is heard backstage as the actors stand waiting to come back for a curtain call.

Carla motions for the actors to come out, as Danny opens the curtains. One-by-one, the actors fill the small stage and once they're all there, they bow as one at a cue from Carla. This brings even louder applause and soon the entire audience, mice and humans, are standing, clapping and whistling.

On stage, Candy is crying tears of joy. This was her dream. She wanted to try acting, and she did the work of getting students interested, finding instructors and getting a class together. This is her first time to actually act out her dream, and now she sees and hears the response from the audience. She is suddenly caught up in a flood of emotions and even more so as the entire cast circle around her as she sobs, tears streaming down her face, face shining with joy.

Carla walks out to the front of the stage and addresses the audience.

"Thank you for being here today. This is a special day, and I hope you always remember this moment. The real story here is about a young mouse that had a dream. She wanted to act. But, instead of just wanting to do this, she did the the hard work necessary to fulfil her dream. She recruited me and my wonderful assistant Shurley. She arranged for the class and she recruited all of the students.

"I can safely say that today would not have happened if Candy Mouse had not done something about her dream. By her example, she has taught a lesson to every one of us.

And this is it. When God gives you a dream, if you're responsible for doing your part, you can make it happen. And magic and beauty can unfold, as it did today.

"Now let's give this young lady the applause that she so richly deserves."

The mouse actors move behind Candy giving her center stage as Donna Dooty brings a mouse-size bouquet of flowers and presents it to the sobbing Candy, beaming with a beautiful smile as she wipes her eyes.

This day is the start of a new tradition in the community. And it started with a dream.

Chapter 2 - Carl's Crush

Growing up in the neighborhood, attending Mouse School and Mouse Academy, and going to Mouse Church, gives young mice an opportunity to meet other mice and make friends.

Carl has a number of mice buddies. They're always playing boy games and doing boy stuff. But, as Carl gets older he finds himself looking at girl mice. They're different then they were last year. For one thing, they're not males. For another they're a lot prettier than males, and getting prettier every month. And for another yet, they think differently and even talk differently than his male friends.

That's just plain interesting, Carl thinks to himself.

Like every young male mouse, he looks at girl mice with both interest and curiosity. Why are they different than boy mice, and what is it about them that he just really likes?

One girl mouse that he's been noticing lately is the sister of one of his friends, Bobtail Furr. Her name is Bickle and she's also one of his sister Candy's friends. At least once every other week, Bickle is at the Mouse Home in the Wall playing with Candy and a few other girl mice.

What puzzles Carl is why he finds her so interesting. Sure, she looks nice. Yes, she has a very pleasing voice. And of course, she seems very fun to be around. But even more puzzling is the reaction he has when she looks at him. She's always smiling. And he finds himself smiling back - not thinking about it, just automatically smiling. Like he can't help it.

One night, he even has a dream about Bickle. In his dream, he and Bickle are sitting in the grass by a small stream. Birds are tweeting, bees are buzzing, the sun is shining, and the stream is burbling. It's a beautiful day and he suddenly realizes in his dream that she is the most beautiful young female mouse he has ever seen. They talk quietly, her voice like music in his ear. He asks if she wants to run and she agrees. Soon, they're running through a field of daisies. She's a wonderful vision, with the sun glistening her fur as they run together.

Then he wakes up.

"What was that about," he thinks as he tries to shake the dream from his mind. "I don't get it." And, slowly the dream fades, but the feeling from it lingers for several days.

He sees Bickle at both Mouse School and Mouse Academy almost every day. She's always with girlfriends and he's with his buddies, but when he has the chance he can't help

sneaking a glance at her. It's irritating because he has no control over his reactions, and he tries to shake her from his thoughts, but he's not very successful at that.

Weeks go by as the school year advances. The rare times when he and Bickle are together with other friends he says a few words to her, and then he thinks to himself, "That was dumb. Why did I say that?" as he replays the brief conversations over and over in his mind. Every ime he thinks about what he said, he comes up with how he could have said it better. Sometimes, he's tongue-tied around her and just stands there looking at her.

Bickle, for her part, is generally surrounded by her friends when these encounters occur. Unlike Carl, she rarely gives a second thought to their few, brief conversations. She's more focused on her other friends. Carl is just an interruption.

One evening when Carl and Candy are doing homework in their rooms, Carl knocks on Candy's door and asks if he can come in.

"Sure, Carl," says Candy. "What's up?"

He is unsure of how or where to start this subject, so he just blurts out, "Do you think Bickle likes me?"

Candy looks up from her homework and says, "I don't know. She never talks about you with me. Why do you want to know?"

"Well, I've been thinking about her lately. I noticed that she smiles when she sees me or the few times she talks to me. I don't know if she likes me or is just like that with everybody."

Candy thinks for a moment. "I guess she's a pretty friendly girl, Carl. But, would you like me to ask her?"

Carl frowns, "I don't know, Candy. I would like to know but I'm kind of nervous about asking her myself. Could you do it in a casual way, so she doesn't think it's a big deal?"

"Sure, Carl. We talk almost every day. I'll see her tomorrow and let you know what she says."

"Thanks, Candy. I would really appreciate it. But please don't let her know that I'm asking. I'm a little nervous about that."

Carl walks back to his room and works on his homework.

The next evening, the Mouse family is sitting down to dinner when Candy says, "Hey Carl, I talked to Bickle today" at which point Carl looks at her and frowns. He uses his hand low to

the table as if to say, "Not now, Candy." He doesn't want to have the whole family know that he's interested in a girl mouse, especially one that's a friend of his sister's.

Later, when they're both upstairs in their rooms doing homework, Carl knocks on Candy's door, opening it when she says, "Come in."

"How was your conversation with Bickle?" Carl stammers, with his digits of one paw crossed.

"I didn't have much time to talk with her," Candy starts. "We were getting ready to go into a class and I said, 'What do you think of my brother, Carl?'" Then Candy paused for a long minute.

"Well, what did she say?" Carl presses.

"She said she thought you were a nice boy. That was about it. Then she started talking about the class we were about to go into."

"Okay, thanks, I guess. If a boy mouse wanted to know if you liked him, how do you imagine they would ask you?"

Candy thinks for a few seconds and then says, "I guess he would just ask me if I liked him. Or maybe he would ask my brother."

"Oh, that's a good idea, sister. I could ask her brother Bobtail. He's a friend of mine. Or you could ask him - he's in your acting class at Mouse Academy, right?"

"Carl?" she asks.

"What?" he answers.

"Why don't you just put on your big mouse pants and talk to Bobtail and stop asking me to do your digging for answers? You know, you could always just talk to Bickle and ask her yourself."

"Okay, you're right. I'll handle it. Thanks." And Carl walks back to his room trying to decide his next move.

The next day at Mouse School, Carl sees Bobtail between classes and blurts out, "So, BT (the nickname he uses for him), do you think Bickle likes me?"

Bobtail looks at him silently for a minute, as if he's thinking of a good answer, and then he says, "Well, she doesn't mention any boy mice to me, Carl. She used to, but now she just

hangs out with her girlfriends and they talk about girl stuff. You know, clothes, how they look, shopping, that kind of thing."

"Well, do you think you could just casually ask her what she thinks of me?"

"Sure, I could do that for you, buddy. Why? Are you interested in her?"

"I think so, but only if she likes me. That's why I would like to find out. I don't want to waste my time if it's a dead end."

That ends their conversation and both mice go to their different classes.

That was on Friday, but they see each other at Mouse Church that Sunday.

Bobtail walks over to Carl and says, "Hey, man. I talked to Bickle about you."

"Oh, what did she say?"

"Well, I asked her if she liked any of my friends and she said she did. She said that she thought I had nice friends. She didn't mention you specifically, but you were included in her comment.

"Because you and I are good friends, later at home I mentioned the name of each of my friends and asked if she liked them. She said 'yes' when I said your name."

"That sounds good, right?"

"I guess so. But you should talk to her yourself."

That afternoon, all Carl can think about is Bickle. She is a recurring dream in his mind, unable to do anything wrong, floating on a beautiful cloud with rays of sunshine streaking her fur. She is a vision of sheer beauty.

He can't sleep that night wondering what he should say to Bickle. He's anxious because he doesn't want to mess it up with her, and he's afraid that if he says the wrong thing that's exactly what will happen. His fears make him want to just keep her in his dream mind to avoid any disappointment.

After spending the next day in almost agony of anxiety and wondering, Carl decides that he simply has to talk to Bickle and find out from her where he sits in her mind.

Tuesday after the last class session at Mouse School he gets his opportunity. Bickle is with a group of other girl mice, and they break up and go different ways leaving her alone. Carl summons up his courage and walks up to Bickle.

"Hey, Bickle" he says to her, "how are you?"

"Oh hi, Carl. I'm fine. What's going on with you?"

"Well, I was just thinking that it might be fun to go for a walk together. Are you going to class at Mouse Academy?"

"Yes, I'm going home for some lunch and then walking to the Academy. I'm up for a walk. Want to walk me home?"

Carl's eyes brighten. This sounds like a great opportunity.

"Sure, are you ready now?"

Bickle nods, Carl grabs his backpack and they walk toward the Furr home.

Carl asks, "So, how's school? Are you enjoying it?"

It seems like a dumb question to him, but it's all he can think of.

"School's okay. Kind of boring in one class. Mouse Academy is better because it feels like it's preparing us for the life we'll live in the future. You know, when we get married and start lives together."

Bickle hears what she just said and quickly corrects her statement, "You know, when all of us get married and start lives as adult mice."

Carl heard what she first said and immediately gets the impression that she likes him when she said, "When we get married and start lives together."

When she corrected herself a second later, he was already lost in what she said first, and didn't quite hear her correction.

"How about you?" she asks.

"Yeah, I agree with you. I feel the same," and he blushes because he feels like he is telling her how he feels about her.

Feeling a little encouraged, he asks her, "So, I heard there are some new mice at school that aren't very nice. I could walk with you to school and Mouse Academy if that would make you feel safer."

"Okay," she replies. "I guess that would be okay. I'm not too worried about the new mice, but that's nice of you to offer. Bobtail doesn't look out for me, so I'm kind of on my own."

"It would be my pleasure," says Carl. "Bobtail is a good friend of mine and the least I can do is help his sister."

Bickle smiles at this comment and both mice are quiet until they get to the Furr home.

At the door, Carl says, "Well, it was a nice walk. I'll come by in the morning to walk with you to school, okay?"

"Sure, that would be fine. Thanks, Carl"

The next day Carl escorts Bickle to Mouse School and then to Mouse Academy and finally to her home. On the walks they talk about all kinds of things, including what they each think about present life, and what they want to see in the future.

Neither young mouse is clear on what they envision for later years. Each shares what goes on in their own family, and a little of what they would ideally dream for their future.

Bickle is very non-specific about anything to do with relationships, except those with other girl mice. Carl tries to use the same general conversation approach, when what he really wants to do is tell her that he's always thinking about her and he thinks she is the most wonderful girl mouse in the world. Of course, he can't bring himself to that level of honesty and that keeps him awake at night, wringing his paws and wishing he could be more direct.

The two mice continue to walk together each day to school and academy, and they smile and wave when they see each other at Mouse Church. To an outside person, this seems like a very innocent friendship, but Carl is constantly struggling with his thoughts and feelings about this particular girl mouse, and he can't break out of his anxiety.

Finally, on the way to school one morning Carl just blurts out, "You know, I really like you, Bickle, and I really like spending time with you. I hope that's okay."

Bickle answers immediately, "Of course. I like you, too, Carl. I think you're a very nice and thoughtful boy mouse and I really appreciate your friendship. I hope we can stay friends."

Carl smiles and responds, "Of course, I'll be your friend forever."

That night at home Carl asks his sister, Candy. "I have been walking with Bickle every day for a couple of weeks. Does she ever say anything about me?"

"Yeah, she says you're a nice boy mouse. She says she really appreciates that you walk with her."

"Do you think she thinks of me as a boyfriend?" Carl persists.

"I can ask her, but I really don't know."

The next night at home, Candy mentions to Carl, "Yeah, I think she does think that you're her boyfriend. When I asked her she told me that she's liking walking and talking with you. I guess that means the same thing, right?"

"I guess so. I wish I could just get the courage to have an honest talk with her. I really like her and it would be great if she liked me, too, you know, in kind of a boyfriend-girlfriend way."

Candy responds, "Well, I know she's not spending time with any other boy mouse but you, so that's a good sign."

After several months, Carl and Bickle have walked to and from school and academy every day. Carl has tried to tell Bickle how he feels about her, but the time never seems right and he can't think of the right way to tell her. So, he's satisfied that they get to spend time together, if only in walks.

School and Mouse Academy are about to end for the summer break. All the mice students are excited because they'll get to do what they want during the day for a few months.

Carl is determined to talk to Bickle about seeing each other for the summer, and he finally gets the courage during their walk home after Mouse Academy one Friday before the summer break.

"Bickle, do you consider me your boyfriend?" Carl blurts out, letting his anxieties finally bring the issue to the front.

"Carl, I like you and I think you're a nice guy. I really have liked having someone to walk to and from school with and I enjoy our conversations. Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't have a boyfriend, and I'm not sure I'm ready to have one. Our family is going to be really busy this summer and I don't think I'll have time to do things other than what my girlfriends and I have planned. Let's just let this summer be what it has been for the last couple of years. Maybe we can start walking again after school starts. Would that be okay?"

Carl hears the words but doesn't know what to do with them. Bickle was nice about it, but she said she doesn't have a boyfriend, which means he isn't one. He's quiet the rest of the walk and says goodbye at her home. On his lonely walk home, he's sure that this will be the last conversation that they will have other than in larger groups, even after summer's over.

That night, Chris sees that his son looks sad, and he goes to Carl's room to find out what's troubling him.

After Carl tells his dad what happened with Bickle and how sad it made him that she didn't want him as her boyfriend, Chris is quiet for a minute. Then he shares his slant on things.

"Son, this is one of life's important lesson that I'm sorry to say that you learned the hard way. We meet many other mice during our lives. Some we like, some we're attracted to, some are just friends. It's part of life."

Carl confesses to his dad that he has lived with his thoughts and imaginations and wondering for months, building a relationship in his mind that was only his dream.

His dad has a slight frown and then says, "Well, I'm sorry son. I wish that you had talked to me about your feelings and what you thought was happening. I've been around for a while, you know, and I can share with you what I've learned that you hopefully don't have to.

"I have an idea. From now on, if you feel any connection with any other girl mouse, have an honest conversation with her that begins with, 'I'm starting to like you and I wonder, do you feel the same?' If she doesn't respond with a positive answer, then that's your clue that you should look elsewhere for a girlfriend. Life is too short to live in wonder in your mind. It's better to be clear and honest with your feelings because that's the basis for any good relationship, anyway.

"You know, son, one of my favorite songs is called "Up," and it's a good lesson for all of us. One of the lyrics in the song is, “When it all falls down, the only way is up.”

"So, Carl, even though things feel like they all fell down between you and Bickle, trust me when I tell you that you will find another girl mouse that shares your feelings. So, the good news is, the only way from here is up."

Chapter 3 - Planes, Trains, Pains and Canes

“Chris, are you in there?”

The voice outside our front door was loud and it sounded like Mr. Dooty. At first I thought it was something else, maybe a voice from our cell phone/tablet tv or something, but this definitely sounded like Mr. Dooty.

Except, Mr. Dooty never has to call my name. He usually just knocks on the front door

I immediately went to open the front door to the Home in the Wall, and as I looked through the window in the door I could see that it was in fact Mr. Dooty.

“Franklin. Yes, I’m here. I’ll open the door.”

I opened the door and there towering above me is Mr. Franklin Dooty. I was still surprised. This was the first time he has ever contacted me this way.

“I have some fun news for you and Christine and your kids,” he says. “Donna and I just signed up to go on the trans-Canada trip by rail. That means you and your family have to go with us. We love traveling with you guys. It makes our trips so much more enjoyable and we all seem to have great adventures together.”

I didn’t quite know what to say, so I just stood thinking about what Franklin just said to me.

It thought he just said that he and Donna are going to take our family with them on a railroad trip across Canada.

I asked him to repeat what he said, and it sounded the same as the last time. We are going to have a chance to ride trains across much of Canada.

“When are you thinking of going, Franklin?” I asked.

“Because these trips are very popular and I knew this offering wouldn’t last I had to book it when I first heard about it. The trip leaves in three weeks.”

“Well, I think we can make that if it’s the middle of summer when both kids are out of school. Within what timeframe would the trip happen?”

“We board the train in Vancouver, BC, Canada on the 9th of July.”

“This is mid-June. How could we possibly get ready in time?”

“Well, I can help with certain arrangements. I’ll get back to you tomorrow with some specifics."

I closed the door and went immediately to find Christine to tell her what Franklin had told me. She replied exactly the way I thought she would.

"Great. Let's go. It'll be a great learning experience for the kids and an adventure for us. We're kind of the 'adventure mouse' family, right?"

At lunch we gave the news to Carl and Candy, both of whom thought it would be a fun adventure. Now all we have to do was get ready!

We have less than three weeks to pack and plan, but fortunately, mice are pretty light packers. We have everything figured out before dinner. Then, it is just waiting until July 9.

The next day Franklin tells us the trip plan. We will fly to Vancouver, BC on July 8, get a hotel for the night before our trip, board the train on July 9, and travel across Canada to Halifax, a total of 19 days, which includes some excursions! After two days in Halifax we will fly back home to California, arriving back home on the 22nd day.

Three weeks of traveling! Wow! That sounds like a lot. Fortunately, the kids are excited and so is Christine. I'm excited, too, but it is definitely going to be a long trip.

The next several weeks are spent looking at the excursions with Franklin and Donna, talking about what to take, and getting mentally ready for the exciting, but long, trip.

Finally, the travel day is here.

Our family doesn't need much to travel. A few different clothing items for the changing weather on the trip, some essentials for grooming (a mouse has to look good when we travel), and some reading material and games for the kids. That's it. Our stuff takes up a tiny portion of the suitcases that the Dootys are taking.

We jump into the Dootys' car and Franklin drives through traffic to a long-term parking lot near the airport. From there, the shuttle to the terminal is quick and we still have plenty of time to check-in and grab a bite to eat.

It's fun traveling with the Dootys. Each of them carries either Christine or I in one of their jacket pockets, and one of our kids in the other. The four of us mice ride very comfortably, and fortunately, the Dootys are conscious of us and don't sit too close to the arms of chairs to keep us from getting crushed.

The wait for our plane is pretty short, and soon we're boarded and safe in our seats. That is, the Dootys are safe in their seats and our family is safe in their pockets.

The flight to Vancouver is pretty short and very quickly we have our luggage and catch an Uber.

We have a nice ride to a small guest house for the night. Franklin asks our driver to give us a quick tour of the city, which is really fun and interesting. It's a beautiful city. We look out the car windows at English Bay, Stanley Park, the Lion's Gate Bridge, the Fraser River and downtown Vancouver, which is not only big, but looks like the pictures of European cities. Our guest house is in a quaint part of the city near English Bay, which will make it easy for us to get to the train station the next morning.

We are all tired, but excited, and the kids really want to see more of Vancouver, but we opt to stay in and relax and eat - all favorite activities, especially after traveling.

The next morning, we call another Uber to take us to the train station and we're soon boarded on our train, the Rocky Mountaineer. It is perfect. Big, lots of seats, great big windows to look out of, and excellent service. After the Dooty's tuck the luggage away, they find nice seats and shortly thereafter the train starts on our journey with a clunk from each car as the train engine pulls us toward our first stop.

Our first day is a great introduction to the trip. The views from our seats in the glass dome coaches are spectacular with each member of our family staring out at incredible vistas of rivers, canyons, mountains, waterfalls and forests.



This beginning to the trip is really quite beautiful. We get tired of saying "ooh" and "aah" as we travel to our first destination, a town called Kamloops where we will be staying at a very comfortable hotel.

Kamloops is a very interesting town. Two rivers come together in Kamloops, and the land and climate feel pretty much like home in California. It is dry and warm, and we all are quite used to that even though it's a little bit cooler than where we live.

We wander around town a little before sitting down for dinner at a nice local restaurant. It should be a little challenging to eat in restaurants, but we figured out how to do this on previous trips with the Dootys. The trick is to peek out of the pocket at the food, tell Franklin or Donna what we would like to eat, and then they put that food in their pocket for us. It gets a little messy, but we're very clean and we try to either eat or otherwise take care of any left overs. Mr and Mrs Dooty shake out their pockets every night over a waste can, so we will have a fresh and clean pocket to start the next day.

Our hotel is okay. Our family doesn't require much, but there sre nice windows that we can look out of to see the city at night.

The next morning, we reboard the Rocky Mountaineer train and we're rolling again. This day is absolutely spectacular and we are glued to the windows for much of the ride. This is what we have been waiting for, the Rocky Mountains, and they definitely do not disappoint. Towering peaks, high snowfields, and more amazing lakes, rivers and forests.

Today's ride is a little longer than the first day, and it is the most beautiful day yet.

The Dootys have purchased the best package available so we sit in an upper car with almost wrap-around windows. This is so great for seeing the scenery from ground to sky. Our noses are pressed to the windows for most of the day, only sinking down into the pockets when servers come through or we walk to the dining area to eat.

Franklin takes photos all day long on his phone. He's nice enough to include us in several of them, us standing on a table or looking out the window with the grandeur of nature displayed outside. We're used to this. We smile and wave for every picture.

Our destination today is Banff, a town just outside the Canadian national park of the same name. We check into our hotel for the night and go exploring. It is so cool. Two mountains in the gorgeous Rocky Mountains stand out and overshadow the town, which is pretty charming by itself. Sunset is until almost 10 pm during July, so we feel comfortable wandering the town after dinner. Mrs. Dooty likes little shops, and so do Christine and I. Candy and Carl get a little bored with the shops, but since everything is different than back home, even they seem alert and interested.

For dinner that night, the Dootys order elk and fish, with lots of veggies. We prefer veggies, but our family all get to taste the elk. It's a little tough but has pretty good flavor. The fish is really good, too.

One note about veggies: we prefer them raw, not cooked. I don't know why, but cooked vegetables seem less tasty to us mice, but we do eat them. If we're hungry we don't really care if they're cooked or raw.

Candy and Carl are different. They both have big appetites, and they aren't very picky about what they eat. Their attitude is, if it smells good or tastes good, eat it.

It was comfortably warm when we arrived but gets cooler during the evening. The mountain air at night is really clear and crisp. At dinner, our wait person tells us that Banff is the highest town in Canada. It does feel like it, I have to say. Today reminds me of our trip to the Andes even though Banff is nowhere near as high in elevation as Cusco, Peru.

The next day the Dootys have us signed up for a tour of Banff National park and two lakes, Moraine Lake and Lake Louise. Our guide is a very nice young woman named, surprisingly, Louise. She is very smart and knows all about the wildlife as well as the natural beauty of the park and lakes. She tells us that both lakes come from glaciers. We all draw in our breath when we get to a view of Lake Louise. The water is a gorgeous turquoise color, which our family has never seen before, even in the Caribbean.

After several hours of seeing elk, moose and other wildlife, Louise asks the Dootys if there's anything special they want to see, and they tell her that they would like to take the gondola ride to the summit.

The gondola is pretty cool. We have taken gondolas before in South America, but this is different. One, it's cooler outside. Two, the mountains are of course different. At the summit of Sulphur Mountain we step off the gondola and our family peeks out of the Dooty pockets to see views on every side. Mr. and Mrs. Dooty turn to look in different directions which gives us pocket mice a remarkable look at the surrounding area, with Banff visible as a tiny town in the distance.

Before the tour the Dootys had been told to bring swimming suits along and so we all go for a relaxing soak in the Upper Hot Springs, just a five minute walk from where we got off of the gondola. Louise joins us all in the hot springs and for a minute I think she notices our family enjoying the warm water but she doesn't say anything, which iss good.

After the soak in the pools, Louise sets out a picnic lunch for us all, well, for the Dootys and the other human couple that went on the tour. Franklin and Donna are very cool in sneaking parts of the lunch to Christine and I in one pocket, and Candy and Carl in the other. We feel a bit tired after the warm soak, but also hungry. It is so peaceful and pretty

where we are eating, with the "scree" of golden eagles catching thermal air currents from the cliffs below us.

The gondola trip back down the mountain is pretty exciting. Louise has been looking out the windows and she suddenly yells out, "Look, down below to the right you can see mountain goats on the rocky slopes."

Of course, we all look. Fortunately, Franklin and Donna's pockets are at a height that we can see out of the windows. They step closer to the windows so we can see down. We mice have pretty sharp vision, so we can easily see the mountain goats, unlike some of the people on the gondola who squint and complain that they can't see anything.

After the tour, we're back down at the base and catch the shuttle back to our hotel where Franklin and Donna thank Louise. That evening we are on our own, and decide to just eat dinner and relax. At least that was the plan. We did eat but then everyone wants to go back downtown in Banff and wander the streets. It's fun, we see some cool shops that Mrs. Dooty and Christine had wanted to go back to, and after a couple of hours we return to the hotel and everyone is soon fast asleep. We have to sleep. There's another day here before we get back on the train.

I am tired the next morning, but after a quick breakfast I feel ready to go again. I am always amazed at my family. Christine never gets tired, and Carl and Candy are the same. I'm usually pretty able to keep up with those three, but sometimes I just need a little time to get my body ready to go.

The plan for this day is really cool. We're going to see the Icefields Parkway, which includes a cool ride over very old ice. After that we walk to the Glacier Skywalk, which is way up in the air. Now this is pretty spectacular! The walk gives us views of a few waterfalls and glaciers and at the end we're up on the Skywalk.

It's unbelievable! It's got a glass floor and it hangs way out from the cliff edge. We look through the glass floor and see the cliffs beside us and the valley below. I feel a little, mouse-sized nervous but Carl just keeps saying, "Wow," "So cool," "Awesome!" Franklin, Donna, Christine, Candy and I are speechless, none of us saying anything and sometimes holding our breath.

I have to say, out of everything we've done so far on this trip, the Glacier Skywalk is my favorite. The picnic lunch isn't bad, either!

The tour ends in Jasper where our luggage is already in a new hotel.

That night we have a quiet dinner in a little restaurant down the street from the hotel, and go back to our room for the night. No sightseeing or shopping. We will be leaving the next morning on the train to continue our travel.

Something wakes Christine up in the middle of the night and she gives me the old elbow in the side, "Honey, are you awake?"

"I am now" is all I can say. "Why? What's happening?"

She says, "Shhh" so I could listen. I can barely hear voices from the next room to ours, but I can't make out what they were saying.

"They're arguing, Chris," from Christine.

"That's okay, humans do that, you know," I reply. But I continue to listen for a few minutes until I fall back asleep.

The next morning, we all get up early, have breakfast and go to the train station. We're going to be on a different rail company today, VIA Rail, for a four-day trip to Toronto.

It's a fun train ride experience. The train is nice, the sights are interesting, and it is fun to adjust to being on a train for that many days.

Mrs. Dooty loves the Canadian plains. She tells us that her family comes from the plains of Alberta and Saskatchewan. She loves seeing the fields of cattle in Alberta, as well as the wheat fields. Looking out at the fields passing by in the province of Saskatchewan, she points out the fields of lentils, which represent 90% of Canada's lentil crop. They just look like row after row of short green plants to me, but she seems pretty excited by them.

Our train stops in Winnipeg, the capital of the Canadian province of Manitoba. Franklin describes the city from his guide book. It's a nice city where two rivers meet, and it was founded in 1873. We thought it was pretty interesting, but we don't stay long, and don't get off before the train starts moving again.

Later, as we look out the windows we see bison herds and one moose, all pretty massive animals. Christine and I are very glad we aren't outside among them. They're so big they would probably never even notice if they stepped on us.

After almost four days on the train, we pull into Toronto, a very large city with a tall tower called the CN Tower, that points way above the city. We'll spend two nights in this city. Franklin says we're going to see some of the downtown area today after we check into our hotel.

We're staying in a hotel near the train station. For a fun evening we all walk to St. Lawrence Market to get a picnic dinner. After a great meal, Mrs. Dooty suggests that we walk to Sugar Beach, which is a pleasant walk although our family is just along for the ride in pockets. It's cool, with a great view of the massive CN Tower.

Franklin whispers to us all, "Hey, you guys. Let's go up in the CN Tower. What do you say?"

Well, we're all pretty game, so we go for it. The ride up is fun looking out at the buildings that are getting smaller as we climb. When we get off on the observation deck, Franklin and Donna take us on a walk around the tower, stopping where two tower beams jut up through the floor. There's glass between the beams which allows visitors to stretch out, hands up, over the glass and look straight down. Franklin sits me on the glass and I do a spread eagle on the glass. My mind thinks that's a long ways down. I get a little dizzy but Franklin scoops me up and I'm back sitting next to Christine in his pocket.

"What did you think of that, honey?" I ask my wife.

"That was scary, Franklin. I almost lost it."

"Me, too. I might have peed in my pants just a little bit," I admitted.

This is our 9th day of traveling and it's been so fun. Tomorrow is a big day for everyone, so after the CN Tower we walk back to our hotel and are soon fast asleep.

The next morning, we catch a coach to Niagara Falls. It's a nice ride through orchards to the Falls peninsula. We get off of the coach and walk to our tour, which takes us for a close look and then we walk behind the falls.

The humans have put on rain slickers, which makes it impossible for us to see, but the Dootys figure out a clever way to give us a vantage point. Mrs. Dooty puts us all in a small cloth bag that she's carrying. It has straps and hard sides so it's pretty comfortable for us, that is, until we get misted on the cruise.

By misted, I mean we all get drenched. I mean REALY wet.

The whole experience is amazing. We can hear Franklin and Donna going "ooh" and "aah" and honestly, our family is doing the same thing. The roar of the falls is really loud.

I'm usually very careful but when we get out to walk. The ground around the falls is really wet and as I step on a slippery rock my left rear leg slides and goes sideways. I can feel that something isn't right, and now I can't put any weight on that leg. I am grimacing and in pain, so I tell Mrs. Dooty what happened. She, of course, tells Franklin who picks me up to talk to me.

I explain what happened and he says, "Well, you can always just stay in one of our pockets. That's generally what we do most of the time anyway."

I frown, "But I really want to experience the trip under my own legs, Mr. Dooty. I just can't put much weight on that leg, but I would still like to feel the ground under me."

Franklin looks around and sees a small shop that sells candy. He goes inside for a minute and comes out carrying a chocolate cherry with a toothpick sticking out of it. The toothpick has a little curlicue on the top end of it. He pulls out the toothpick, eats the chocolate cherry, and hands me the toothpick.

"Try this Chris. Lean on it and it should make a pretty useful cane to take the weight off of your hurting leg."

I try it and it works. I still have some pain, but I can walk, although with a little limp. It looks like this might be a good answer.

We're all tired after our day and we eat early and get to bed. Tomorrow is another day of travel.

The next morning we get up, go to Union Station, and board a VIA Rail train for a six-hour trip to Montreal. It's a city with a great French heritage, in the Canadian province of Quebec. Franklin tells us that we'll be staying three nights here and there are a number of different tourism options for our time here.

I am still limping, but thanks to the cane, I'm able to get around okay and the pain is a little less than yesterday.

After we debark from the train and get checked into the old Queen Elizabeth Hotel, we decide to take a walk through the downtown area and see the architecture and life of the city.

Franklin is our tour guide, using his trusty guide book. The city is old and has a flavor of years ago, with more modern structures sprinkled in various areas. Donna Dooty wants to shop and that means we all "get" to shop. It's interesting. I mean, I'm not much of a shopper but there are things here that I haven't seen before and the language and accents are very fun.

We have a wonderful lunch at Schwartz's, a kosher restaurant famous for its smoked meats. Franklin explains that Montreal has always had a large Jewish population, so it's a perfect place to sample kosher foods. I don't know any Jewish mice, but I love kosher food personally, and so does the rest of my family. We eat like there won't be a tomorrow, and walk back to our hotel stuffed again, which is starting to become a frequent feeling on this trip.

After a good night's sleep, we get up the next morning, have breakfast at the hotel, and get ready for a walking tour of Old Montreal. Our tour guide has an interesting accent, and he

seems to have very good knowledge of this area. We learn a lot about the history of Montreal, and have a great lunch at a Kosher deli, a perfect complement to the day's activities.

I ask Franklin if I can get down from the pocket and walk around a bit after the tour. My leg still has a little pain, but it is much better and my cool cane is really helping.

It's been a full day, but like the day before we end it with an early dinner and a restful night's sleep. Oh, I forgot, we also watch a tv movie in our room. It's pretty funny. It's in English with French subtitles, according to Franklin. We just watch it and get drowsy and fall asleep part way through the show. So much for being party animals, I think.

The next morning, we take a tour of Quebec City. It's French Canada at its best, according to Donna Dooty. We think it is very interesting. The buildings look very old. Donna says that Quebec City is the closest to a European "old world" city in North America.

After that our tour takes us to Montmorency Falls. Our tour guide is French and says we were going to "Parc de la Chute-Montmorency," which I think means the park of Montmorency Falls. It's very cool and much taller than Niagara Falls. Franklin tells us that Montmorency is a region in France, and Montmorency sour cherries, originally from France, are grown in this area, which includes the Great Lakes.

(As a side note, Franklin gave our family some Montmorency cherries a few years ago, and we all puckered up. I'm sure we looked pretty funny. Very sour, is all I remember.)

The next day is also open in Montreal to do whatever we want. We will catch the VIA Rail train to Moncton, New Brunswick tonight and then take a bus to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

After most of the day open, we do a little more sightseeing around Montreal, have some more really great tasting food, and board the train for our overnight trip, eating dinner on the train.

I personally like eating on trains. The service is good, there is fresh white linen on the tables, and you get a moving feast for the eyes while you're feasting on good food. What's not to like about that?

I get to walk around the train a bit during this travel segment. My leg is improving, the pain is still there but just barely, and the cane has been a miracle for me. I thank Franklin again for his good thinking and kind action.

The overnight train is relaxing. There's something about the rhythm of traveling on rails that makes you feel sleepy. Our whole family is out like four little lights almost when our heads hit the sheets.

We get into Moncton in the afternoon the next day and then on to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

We'll spend today and all day tomorrow around Charlottetown. Today is touring in and around the town. Franklin books a bus tour of the North Shore, with little villages, farms, sea and harbors. Our tour guide calls this the Green Gables tour and says it's from a book. We don't know that book, but it looks like a very interesting area.

After dinner and sleep tonight, we wake up the next morning for another tour, this time a lobster cruise. It's interesting but the lobsters are a bit scary. Carl tries to touch one and it clicks it's claws very close to Carl's face. He screams and moves back very fast. I think to myself, I bet he never does that again.

This afternoon we catch a bus to Halifax, check into our hotel, eat dinner and get ready for sleep. Only two more days and our big adventure in Canada will be over. At the start of the trip it seemed like it would last forever. Now, it feels like the trip is ending much quicker than any of us thought.

After breakfast the next morning, we take a tour of Halifax, a wonderful town in Nova Scotia, with alleyways in the Citadel area, and Peggy's Point Lighthouse, originally built in 1868. According to our tour guide, this lighthouse may be disposed of by the government despite its history. That seems a shame. The lighthouse and the area around it is all pretty cool.

I am able to walk pretty well today. My leg's just a teensy bit sore, but the cane has really been helping.

After the tour we gp back to the Citadel area to spend more time there, then we have dinner and gp to bed.

The next day we get up early to catch our flight from Halifax back to California. This is our 19th day, and we are all ready to go back home. It's been a great trip and we all learned a lot, and saw some amazing sights. We're just surprised at how fast the trip went.

On our way to the airport I ask Franklin to roll down the window of the cab. After it's down, I grab my toothpick cane and throw it out the window, shouting "Good bye and thanks for the lift!" with a smile on my face.

The day after we get back home, Franklin and Donna host an evening dinner with a movie, which is a nice slideshow of pictures from the trip, with accompanying music. It's a great memory-building time to lock in some of the best moments of 19 days of wonderful travel with family and good friends.

As I think about this trip, I realize that some mice and some people don't get to see the world we live in. It's a big world, and sometimes it seems very distant, like it's full of other places for others. But our family has discovered that we see the world as a lot smaller and friendlier place because we have traveled.

Of course, we thank Franklin and Donna for their willingness to let our family join them on their travels. We also realize, like with Cousin Clarence and with Thom Mouce, our friend from England, it's possible for mice to travel and make the world smaller, too. That encourages us to see the world, and as your mouse friend, I hope it encourages you to go see it, too.

Chapter 4 – Franklin, Oh Franklin

It’s been a quiet day. Not much happening either way. Just another ordinary day in the house.

Donna Dooty has been running around all day, getting things ready for a party this coming weekend. Franklin is putting in extra hours at work this week because the company he works for is going through a stressful season. The Mouse family has nothing but stress. Christine is managing the Mouse Academy as well as all of the other things she does. Chris is dealing with car and motorcycle issues. The kids are struggling with homework and also juggling their hobbies and other activities .

That’s an ordinary day for us. Everything is happening and all at the same time.

Donna has a pie in the oven for this weekend's party, and a chicken in the Instant Pot for dinner, with timers set to go off for each. Just as the first timer hits zero, Franklin walks in the kitchen door, shakes his head and pulls off his jacket.

“What’s the matter, honey?” asks Donna, having noticed the shaking head movement.

“Oh, Donna, I don’t know how to tell you what happened. But, I guess I just have to say it, “I lost my job today,” and he hangs his head.

“I’m so sorry, Franklin. You’ve done such a good job there. I thought the company being sold would help them pull out of their downward curve?”

“I did, too, but the new company is cutting staff and I was one of the ones to go. I guess it’s because I make more money than a lot of the staff, and my leaving could save two other jobs.

“They’re calling it a layoff, which generally means that they expect to hire us back again, but I’m not real optimistic about that. It looks like they just need to wipe the slate clean and do a do-over.”

“I guess that makes sense, if you think so. What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure. It just happened. I think I need a few days and maybe a week to think through this and figure out what to do next.”

“Take all the time you need, honey. We’re okay financially for a while. Just sit down, use your head, and you’ll find a way forward, just like you always do. And don't worry, we'll be okay just like we always are.”

Franklin walks into the bedroom and sits on the bed. Chris is coming back to the Home in the Wall just then and notices the look on Franklin's face.

He can see that Franklin is troubled, so he has to ask the obvious question, "Why are you sitting on the bed staring at the wall?"

Franklin explains the situation and Chris jumps up on the bed to sit beside him.

"Gee, I'm so sorry to hear this, Franklin. What do you need to do now, and how can I help?"

"That's so nice of you to ask, Chris. I just need time to think about my next steps - what I can do and what I'm willing to do at this point."

"Hey, let me know when you have thought of your next steps, and especially how I can help. Okay?"

Franklin just nods his head. Chris slips under the closet door and through the door into the Home in the Wall.

"Hi Christine, I'm back," yells Chris to his wife. "Are you home?"

Christine comes down the stairs and Chris shares with her what he just learned from Franklin.

The two adult mice do next what they have always done in crisis – they come up with ideas. No idea is bad, all ideas are good. In this process, the best ideas go into the "good" category, and the lesser ideas are ignored.

They have plenty of ideas.

Chris thinks that Franklin should immediately go to the competition and present his resume and application for any opening.

Christine thinks he also should take inventory of his assets – his education, his work track record and his general abilities – and think about what kind of company those would best fit. After that, think about which is the best local company of that kind.

Of course, they both think he should look to see if there are any job openings that he could fill that are being advertised.

Lastly, he could go to comparable businesses. Maybe not even in the industry he's been working in. Just good, growing businesses that can use his exceptional skills in finance.

It's a logical approach, and these are good ideas, most of which are generally going to work in other situations.

Over the next week, Chris sees Franklin a number of times and they talk about how it's going. Franklin shares how he's doing with the job search and other strategies. Chris remains an encourager, reminding Franklin of all the great things he has done already and all the ones that are just ahead. After every conversation Franklin comes away encouraged and energized to keep in the hunt for a new job.

Three weeks later, the severance money is gone by half, and Franklin still has no solid prospects for a new job.

Nightly he thinks hard and prays for a good direction, and the right direction. Daily, he keeps digging and not hitting any paydirt.

Both families decide that the best thing to do is stay positive, do fun things together, keep their chins up and think about good things, while seeking the right direction.

Two more weeks go by, and Franklin has had two interviews. Both are jobs with good companies, but the pay isn't quite what he has been making.

After another two weeks, Franklin has an offer from one of the companies. It's as he had been told in the interview. It's a good job with a good company, but the company works on the seniority system in this position. That means he'll be starting out with less pay than his old job, but over time he can grow into the same salary that he had at his last job.

He hasn't had any other offers. He can't wait any longer. He goes into the offices of the company and accepts their offer. He'll start in three weeks.

Coming home, he feels happy but also exhausted. It's been a journey and not one he wanted to be on. Still, he has a new job, for which he's relieved and grateful. They just have to make it to his starting date three weeks from now, and he'll get his first pay two weeks after that.

Both people know that it'll be tight, but Donna says that they can just squeak through if they watch their spending.

Three weeks later, Franklin starts his new job and within the first week he's already happier and feeling better about himself. It's an adjustment - new people to work with, slightly different job duties, and of course, different travel to and from work.

There are several good things about the new job. Franklin can work at home at least half the time, only coming in to work for meetings and special activities. His new employer also has a bonus system that pays employees for their improvements that make or save money

for the company. Also, the work is closer to home, so the commute to and from work is easier.

As for the work, Franklin is happy. It's work that he is good at so he knows he can make a difference.

The happy part is what is most noticeable around the house. Chris mentioned to Christine just the other day that Franklin seems to be in a better mood these days. Both mice notice the change in his attitude. Donna now also seems to be in a good mood. The other day she was singing in the kitchen.

As for the Mouse family, life goes on without much change. Carl and Candy spend a lot of their time studying and doing homework for Mouse School and Mouse Academy. They still have their regular activities with friends.

Of course, one topic always comes up with friends and neighbors of the Mouse family.

"How's everything going with Franklin's new job?" "Is everything settling down again after Franklin changed jobs?" "Is the stress a little lighter now that he's working again?"

The answers always are "Fine" "Yes" and "Yes." No need to go into details. It's not anybody's business but it's polite to at least answer.

The next Saturday, Franklin is out washing his car when Chris walks out the kitchen door. As he steps down to the ground level Franklin points the hose at him and sprinkles his mouse friend.

"Hey!" Chris shouts. "I don't need a shower, do I?"

Franklin laughs and says, "I'm sorry, Chris. I just couldn't help it. It must have been an accident."

Both males laugh as Chris walks over to Franklin.

"So hey, my friend. How's the new job?"

"It's actually going pretty good, Chris. I got a compliment from my boss yesterday about a project I just finished. That felt pretty good. How are you doing?"

"Pretty good. Better, now that I got my morning shower from you."

They both laugh.

Chris continues, "I've been thinking about how we can help around the house. We know the stress of job changes has not been easy for you or for Mrs. Dooty. We want to help in any way that we can. Candy and Carl have each said that they can help Mrs. Dooty with some house cleaning. Christine and I like to wipe things down, like kitchen counters. Maybe we can also do some dusting or something."

"That's really nice of your family, Chris," replies Franklin. "I think we're going to find a rhythm for doing things even though we're adjusting to a new lifestyle. The biggest challenge is managing our money because of the time that I was off between jobs. Donna and I are actually pretty good at that, so we'll just tighten our belts a bit and everything should work out."

"Good. Well, I'd be happy to help you wash your car but I'm afraid I couldn't reach very much of what needs to be cleaned."

"No problem, Chris. Hey, if you want to help I could dunk you in soapy water and then use you as a wash cloth to clean the inside of the car."

Both males laugh at the idea.

"I think you have everything under control here, Franklin, so I'll leave you to your important work here." And Chris walks over to the garden to check on the Mouse family portion.

It's a good day for taking care of any young weeds that have sprouted in the garden. That'll make a nice morning snack, Chris thinks.

The following week, Franklin has to work some very long hours. He leaves early in the morning and comes home later than usual.

Donna stopped working several years ago when Franklin was making more money. Now, she's thinking about going back to work. Her career has been as a writer in advertising. She has missed the deadlines and collaboration with other team members that go with that job. Over the last few years she has done some freelance writing, which lets her stay at home and work on a few projects. The extra money is very nice and she feels like she is able to do productive and useful work again. With Franklin working longer hours, getting out is good because the house gets a little lonely at times.

On Tuesday, Donna gets a call from her old boss at an agency she used to work full-time for. They have an immediate opening for a copywriter. Would she be interested?

"I'll have to think about it? What are the responsiblities, how many hours a week, and what is the compensation package?" she replies.

Her old boss promises to send her the details in an email by tomorrow. "Could you get back to me with your answer, day after tomorrow?" is the next question.

"Sure, just give me tomorrow night to look things over. I'll have to pray about this, and of course, discuss it with Franklin."

"Of course," says Charmaine, her old boss. "Take a look. I think it's a pretty fair package and we'd love to have you back full-time."

The next day, Donna sees an email from Charmaine. In it are the job description, the proposed work schedule, and the compensation offer.

As Donna reads the email she has two immediate reactions. One, her heart jumps with fond memories of her former worklife. She loved collaborating with other team members, and the delight at having finished good projects.

But the second reaction is she wonders how she might adjust to a regular work schedule and having to come to the office for the occasional team meetings.

That evening she talks it over with Franklin. He's a little surprised, because Donna was so happy to quit work and just do a few freelance projects. Of course, that was two years ago.

"We could use the money, honey," Donna says. "Remember, we had to tighten our belts when I quit working full time? Now, we're in kind of a tight financial season and my salary and bonuses could help dig us out of the hole we're in."

"I know, sweetheart, but this is your decision. We can make it through this if we watch our money. You decide what you want to do and that will be what we do."

"Thanks, Franklin. It's not an easy decision. Part of me misses the work I did and the people I worked with. Part of me doesn't miss some of the pressures and the deadlines. I'll pray about it tonight and make the decision that seems right tomorrow."

The two people clean up the dishes and sit down in the living room to watch a movie on their favorite streaming channel.

Chris and Christine were walking near the kitchen when Donna and Franklin were discussing the job possibility. They overheard every word.

"Chris, how can we help them? Donna is thinking about going back to work. This must be really tough for them."

"I don't know, Christine. I know that Franklin was pretty anxious before he got this new job. I heard them talking yesterday. He's making less money than he did at his old job. It sounds

like Donna has an opportunity to get her old career back, and that would help. She did like working, remember?"

"Oh yeah, she would come home and dance around the living room when they got a big new client, or she finished with a really cool project," replied Christine. "Well, I guess they'll make the best decision they can, and we'll just roll with whatever happens."

The next morning, Donna re-reads the offer, then stops for a minute to pray. "Father, you know we love you and just want to do what you want us to do. Please give me a clear answer so I can be faithful to your plan for my life. Amen."

After her prayer, Donna sits quietly with her hands folded. Time goes by and Donna just stays still. 10 minutes pass, then 20, then 30, and still she just sits there quietly. After 45 minutes she stands up, walks to her computer and taps out an email to her old boss, Charmaine.

"I've been deliberating over your offer and while it would be fun to get back into the working world, I have really enjoyed my freedom to spend time on other pursuits. I do like working for you, but right now I'm enjoying working as a freelance writer. Would you consider just giving me more freelance work? That would help the agency get the work done, and I could come in for occasional meetings. That gives me some time to really consider whether or not I want to come back to a full-time position."

She finishes the email and hits "send."

15 minutes later she sees an email reply from Charmaine.

"You have a deal, my friend. You're a great writer and you have a sharp creative mind. We'll funnel more freelance work to you, and I'll let you know when we need you to collaborate with other team members in person or online. Would you be ready to start with more work now?"

Donna sends a quick response: "Let's do it. Just have the projects sent to me and I'll get them done."

That night at dinner, Donna tells Franklin what she decided.

"I'm glad you got the direction on how to respond, Donna," said Franklin. "What made you decide to go the way you did?"

"After I prayed, I just let myself be quiet. The longer I was quiet the less noise I had in my mind. Finally, I just knew what I should do. I told Charmaine I would try this, but she left out the possibility that I could come back full-time if that's what I decide to do.

"The extra money from the additional freelance work will help our finances. We'll still be tight, but this will definitely help."

Franklin sighs and says, "it's probably a good thing. We're both adjusting. It'll be alright, I'm sure, and the money will help."

Donna adds, "I already told Christine, and she was happy for me. I feel like I'm helping our family with this, and that makes me happy, too."

During the next couple of weeks both Franklin and Donna adjust to their new daily schedules and work environments. Franklin is working longer hours, and Donna is spending more time on the computer. The Mouse family just takes these new realities in stride.

As Christine sometimes says, "The only constant in life is change."

How right she is.

And Chis says, "That is a lesson for everyone. Change happens to us, and sometimes because of us, but change is always going to happen. What we do about change makes all the difference in whether we're happy oe nor. Praying for guidance to see the choices that are right, that's what successful and happy people do. And, here's the good news about praying - God knows best.

Chapter 5 - Movin' Movin' Movin'

The Dooty household has settled into a routine. Franklin is away from home longer, working more hours at work and with a little longer drive. Donna is working on freelance writing projects for part of each day. They have dinners and weekends together, except when Donna has a deadline that makes her have to work a few hours over the weekend.

Generally, it's a routine.

At dinner one Tuesday night Donna tells Franklin that even with both of them working - Franklin full-time, her part time - their finances are low and they're not projected to be back to normal for at least six months.

They talk about options, of which there aren't many. Both end the conversation agreeing that they will think and pray about the situation.

The next morning, Franklin tells Donna, “I know what we need to do.”

With a surprised look of surprise on her face, Donna asks, “What is it? What do we need to do?”

Franklin says with a quite serious expression, “We need to sell the house and move to a cheaper house. We can use the equity we have built in this house to carry us for a year until our incomes catch back up.”

“Well, if that’s what we need to do, then that’s what we need to do. Let's tell our friends, the Mouse family.”

Franklin nods. It’s not a task he wants, but surely one that needs to be done.

That night, Chris is in the kitchen when Franklin is sitting at the table working on some papers.

“Hey Franklin,” says Chris. “What’s up?”

“I’m afraid I have some news that's not the best, Chris,” from Franklin. “We’re going to have to sell this house.”

This news is met by a look of shock on the face of his mouse friend, but just for a moment. Then Chris’s face returns to normal.

“Okay, Christine and I wondered how things were going. I’m sure you’ve considered all the angles. When do you think you need to sell it?”

“I’m going to talk to a real estate agent tomorrow. I’m planning to call that gal that has the signs up at two houses around us. I’ll ask her what she thinks.”

“I’m sorry to hear that you're in this position, my friend. I hope things go well. Please let me know how I can help.”

Franklin nods and smiles at his small, furry friend. Then he goes back to his paperwork.

Both families move into financial management. Chris and Christine realize they will probably have to move, also. They question whether or not they should ask around about other housing. Christine has lots of contacts through Mouse Academy and Mouse Church. Chris has other contacts through his involvement with several business mice, including the builders Frizz and Frak, the owners of the New Mouse Store, and other influential mice that he thinks have good judgment. He decides to make it known to as many mice as he can, so that more eyes and ears can help them find a new place when the time comes.

The conversation around the Dooty dinner table that night is quiet and solemn.

“We need to put the house up for sale, Donna,” Franklin says. “We can find an apartment or smaller house and scrape by until our household income comes up to what we need. But it will be a year before we pull ourselves out of this hole. Honestly, I don’t see any other choice.”

“I understand, honey. We’ll get through this. Are you going to call the real estate agent.”

“Yes, I'll call her tomorrow. But tonight, let’s celebrate that my new job is going well, you're enjoying your new freelance work, and we’ll soon be back on track.”

The next day Franklin calls the real estate person he has chosen and later that day she sends out a crew to put up a FOR SALE sign outside the fenceline.

Over the next two weeks, their realtor has cleaners come in and a stager decides on painting, and changing the furnishings to a configuration more likely to attract buyers.

It's no small job.

The day the cleaners come in, Donna and Franklin are away, Franklin at his job, and Donna at meetings at the agency. Carl and Candy are at school all day, and Chris and Christine decide to take the day and go to the beach to get out of the house.

It's a beautiful day at the beach. Christine turns to Chris and says, "I wonder how it will be to move to a new house. What do you think that will look like, Chris?"

"I'm not sure, but we'll definitely have a transition. I'm guessing we'll have to have Frizz and Frak build us a new Home in the Wall in the new house. That will be our third Home in the Wall. Do you believe that?"

"It sounds like it's going to be confusing for some time while we get things just the way we want them. We'll probably have to live in temporary living conditions in the new house during the construction of our new Home. And, we'll have to get the kids used to that idea before we move, so it's not any harder on them than it should be."

"Good points, Christine. I agree. Let's talk to the kids so it's not a hard change for them."

"Totally."

The sea gulls are flying and squawking, the breeze carries a nice hint of salt with it, and people are everywhere, laying on towels, under umbrellas, and some on mats and chairs. Where they are, in the mouse area of the beach, other mice are sprawled out and enjoying the day.

It's so pleasant, and for a few hours, neither mouse thinks about the upcoming changes in their lives. This is the kind of reset that both of them need to adapt to the new reality coming their way.

Traveling back home is peaceful. Chris and Christine feel settled and ready for change. It's amazing what a little beach time will do.

For the next several weeks on each weekend the realtor holds an open house at the home. The disruption is real. Everyone, humans and mice, have to leave for the day, leaving the house in the hands of the realtor.

There are several prospective buyers that look at the property. The realtor tries to explain the Home in the Wall in the bedroom closet, when it's noticed, and also that it will be removed after the sale.

After three weeks their realtor calls to say she has two offers on the house. And, she has a recommendation, but she sends both to Franklin and Donna to look over the offers. They decide on the one recommended by their agent.

Except... they will counter the offer, requesting one month more for closing so they can find a new place to live.

Two days later their counter-offer is accepted and the real estate wheels start to turn round and round.

Now Franklin and Donna have to start looking at houses in earnest. They bring Chris and Christine along with them to help check out potential homes. After all, the Mouse family is part of their family, so their feelings must be considered.

They visit ten houses in a combined list from their realtor and their own research on real estate websites.

The list includes houses nearby as well as houses farther away. All of the houses would be okay for Franklin's commute and Donna's occasional meetings at her office.

First they visit the three distant houses. They all look very nice. One is quite new, with a big, covered patio in back. The second has a small pool and hot tub. The third house is bigger than their current house and has a three-car garage.

There are things about each that Franklin and Donna like. Chris and Christine are mostly quiet about their feelings because this is a house for the Dootys and they will simply be guests. However, they do like the second house. Chris can see himself on a float in the pool with a nice fruit drink and a visor. Donna likes the hot tub. "That would be so relaxing," she thinks to herself. But both keep their reactions to themselves.

Seven houses are within a few miles of their current house.

Some are too old and need too much work. Others don't have any yard, or the front yard is right on the street with no fence or bushes. One is on a very busy street with lots of traffic, which means there would be lots of car exhaust and noise.

Two houses look promising, but they're a bit smaller. One of them is in the same neighborhood where they have lived for the last 15 years. Both houses have nice side yards that could accommodate a garden. Both have big closets in the master bedroom, which is a nice benefit for housing the new Home in the Wall.

The next weekend they go on another house exploring expedition, using another list of six houses from their realtor.

Most of the houses on the new list are either too far away from Franklin's work, meaning he would have a long drive in traffic each day, or they're in neighborhoods that don't appeal to Donna.

Still, they visit all of the homes to see what else is out there.

Chris and Christine don't like any of them, but like the week before, they keep their opinions to themselves, not wanting to be a part of any decision that rightfully should be made by Donna and Franklin.

At the end of the second weekend, Donna and Franklin invite Chris and Christine for a conversation about potential new houses.

"We've all looked at houses," starts Donna, "and Franklin and I think we've seen enough to know what's available in our price range and also within the other requirements we have for a new house.

"We're going to spend the next couple of days deciding what we'd like to do. What do you guys think about the houses we've seen?

Christine answers quickly, "Donna, Chris and I have discussed this and have decided that this decision should be made by you and Franklin without our involvement. We're simply guests in your house, and we're very grateful for that by the way, but that means that we shouldn't have any say in what you choose. You and Franklin should decide which house you want, and we'll do everything we can to help."

Franklin adds, "Thank you, Christine and Chris. You have been good friends and great housemates. We'll do our best to come up with the best answer, and we'll let you know when we have it. Okay?"

Everyone nods in agreement and the meeting ends with smiles and hugs.

After two days of thinking and praying, Franklin and Donna decide on one of the houses. After that they discuss both houses and their decision, with Chris and Christine who agree with their choice. They have selected the house in their same neighborhood.

Christine likes the trees on the property and the privacy of a wooden fence that encircles the yard. Chris likes the long driveway and good garage. Franklin and Donna like everything about it even though the house and yard are smaller. It'll be easier to keep clean and they really don't need more space. Besides, it has a nice attic over the garage where they can store some of the accumulated stuff that they rarely use. And the house has a second bedroom for when their nephew Danny sleeps over.

They sign the papers and will move in 30 days later.

Now the work begins. Moving means getting everything ready to move. Both families go through their belongings and decide what's going to move and what they will sell or throw away.

For the next two Saturdays they have garage sales with tables in the front yard and all of the "get rid of" stuff displayed. To serve the two communities - people and mice - they use two different sizes of tables and have two different garage sales. For the garage sale for people, everything is human size and they use folding tables sized for people-stuff. The second set of tables is small and low to the ground. Those are for mice-stuff. The two different garage sales are on different days. The people one is on the weekends. The mice garage sales are on weekdays, because mice don't work. It's a good plan.

After two weeks the garage sales are over, the leftovers that didn't sell have been donated, and the move is going to be much lighter.

Moving is always a stressful time. What Franklin and Donna learned over many years is that they should avoid worrying about the small stuff. Focusing on the main thing, listing their needs and wants and looking at available homes that fit both, helped them avoid making a decision that they would regret later. As they realized during the process, the preparation part - list-making and discussion - made everything go easier and with less stress.

Chapter 6 - A House is Not a Home

After weeks of preparation and packing, moving day is here. The house deal closed the day before and now it's time to get everything moved to the new house.

The Mouse family stays out of the way when the movers come to pack and truck everything four blocks away. It's not a big move, but Franklin and Donna are both busy with their careers and don't have time to do much of the actual moving.

Donna is home on packing day. She's a very organized person and already has everything listed by category and on a plan.

There are two men and a woman in the moving crew. Donna shows them her plan and they start right away.

Franklin and Donna have already gathered many of the things in each category and have put them in the center of the room they were in. Thiat makes it easy for the moving crew to do the work, which they do quickly and well.

All the breakable items are packed with cardboard cushions or with clothing or other non-breakable items. This is a big deal in the kitchen, with so many plates, cups, glasses and other items.

Donna moves from room to room, showing and directing the crew on how she wants things packed. As each box is filled, the crew labels it and puts it in the front room. The leader explains that once everything is packed and they can see the boxes, they'll decide on the order to place everything in the truck.

Crash!

A loud sound is heard from the kitchen. Donna rushes to see what happened and looks on the floor at a broken glass. A young mover is standing over it and looks at her sheepishly. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Dooty. It was in my hand and I bumped up against the counter and then it fell on the floor. I'm so sorry."

The leader of the group steps into the kitchen as the worker is explaining. She says to Donna, "Don't worry, we have insurance to cover any damage. And, we'll replace or repair anything that isn't perfect as a result of our work."

"Thank, Delilah," replies Donna. "That was just a plain water glass. I was planning to replace those anyway, but thanks for reminding me of your damage policy."

Danny shows up just after the water glass incident. "Hi Aunt Donna. How can I help?"

"Well, you can look at anything you've left in the room you sometimes sleep in. Make sure it's all bunched together, probably on the bed. Then, when the movers go in that room they'll keep everything together."

"Sure, no problem," Danny says as he walks to the extra bedroom.

Donna follows him to the room and looks around. "We picked up everything that was laying out, when we had the Open Houses. So, some things are in the closet, some in the dresser, and some are under the bed. Make sure you look in all those places so we don't leave anything behind."

"I got it, Aunt Donna. No problem."

Crash!

Donna rushes out of the room to the living room, where a framed photo lays in broken glass on the wood floor.

"Oh, that's a picture of Franklin and I when we were dating. I'm glad the photo wasn't damaged, because that's the only copy we have. We don't even have a digital copy."

Delilah is looking at the photograph. "The photo looks okay. It looks like the glass is the only thing damaged. I'm so sorry. That's a sentimental picture and I know it means a lot to you. We'll replace the glass in the frame and fix any damage to the photo. Fortunately, it doesn't look like there is any."

Donna nods. She knows this is all part of moving. It's a good thing Franklin isn't here, or he'd be going from room to room, directing everyone and getting upset over little things like this broken photo glass.

Possessions in each room are getting quickly packed. Boxes are stacking up in the living room.

The whole day is spent in getting everything boxed and ready to load on the truck.

Next, it's time for the furniture.

Finally, the movers are in the Dootys' bedroom. One of the packers opens the closet door and whistles softly. Wow! That's an amazing doll house, he thinks.

Another mover comes in and the first one points to the closet. "Take a look at that! That's a pretty amazing doll house. I looked through the window and it even has a tablet tv. Those dolls have it made."

Donna is walking by as they're talking and she hears the words "Doll house."

"I'm a collector of miniatures. This is a custom-made house. Don't worry about that because we will disassemble it and move it ourselves. It's very delicate."

"Okay, ma'am. We'll pack everything except for that."

When everything is loaded in the truck, it's time to head to the new house. Donna checks every room, sees that everything but the Home in the Wall is packed and on the truck, and she heads to her car, locking the door behind her.

Chris and Christine are already in the car. Carl and Candy know to come to the new house after Mouse Academy. Both have made arrangements to play over at friends' houses until dinner time, so they'll be out of the way.

Driving to the new house, Donna and the two mice have different feelings and thoughts. There is a bit of sadness in leaving the old house. Lots of memories were made right there. For Donna and Franklin, It was their house. For Chris and Christine, it was their nest. Family events, parties, the garden, adventures to come home from, this was their anchor, their living place. It's going to take time to build new memories, but for now, the old memories come flooding back.

Pulling into the driveway of the new house, Donna sighs. It's not our home of 15 years, she thinks, but we're going to do our best to make it our best new home.

Christine and Chris have similar feelings. That was the best home they've ever had, the one they planned for when they were just living in a nest in bushes. It became a fabulous home, one that everyone loved. After it was rebuilt from the reward money from their Caribbean adventure, they gave tours and their home was the buzz of the mouse community. They had parties, their kids grew up there, they spent many evenings playing games or watching movies, their bedrooms were just the way they wanted them. Now, mostly they wonder if there will ever be another Friday "Bowling Night" party for all the inhabitants of the new house. Those were always so much fun and one of the Mouse family traditions.

Their thoughts also go to everything that happened in the house they're leaving. So many memories, soon maybe to fade but fond thoughts now.

Chris turns to Christine and says, with misty eyes, "It's a new chapter in our lives, sweetheart. The page is turning and now we'll have to make new memories. We'll always

remember the great times from the old house, but now we can write new ones. Let's make beautiful memories together, okay?"

Christine just leans over and kisses him, "That's my mouse!" she says. And then she's lost in her own thoughts and memories. "It is bittersweet," she thinks. "I feel like I'm losing part of me, but I know we have to move. I know that the fun is going to come in making new memories and I will do my part in helping everyone else in our family to see our move that way."

Donna walks from the driveway into the new house with the two mice in her pockets. She unlocks the door and announces loudly to the empty rooms, "This is our new home. We will rejoice and be glad in it." She was echoing the words of a pastor they used to have who always started each church service by spreading his hands and saying, "This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it!"

She lifts Chris and Christine down to the floor and they scamper off to explore each room for the first time since they first toured the house. The living room has a nice, carpeted floor. The hallways are wood, and the floors of the entryway, kitchen and bathroom are tile. It's a perfect California house for mice and humans.

Chris starts running from the living room, and when his paws hit the hallway he stops suddenly and slides for several feet on the wood. "Yahoo!" he cries, "this is really fun."

"Have your fun, honey," says Christine. "We're going to be doing a lot of work after you get done."

"I know, I know, but isn't it cool? I love the wood, and the carpets are nice, too."

The moving truck pulls up outside and Donna walks out to direct the workers.

Every box is labeled with the room it's intended for, and each piece of furniture also has tape with the room written on it.

The move in is smoother than the move out. Donna is relieved to see that nothing is broken, and everything looks in good shape.

Everything gets unloaded and moved into the house, leaving boxes stacked in every room. Donna looks at everything and realizes that she can only do what she can do today. The rest will require some help.

The important things are to make sure the living room furniture is all set up the way she wants it, and the kitchen is ready to use, with table and chairs and appliances. Donna plans to move the food over separately, once Franklin gets home from work.

Donna signs off with the moving crew and watches as the empty truck rolls down the street.

The next several hours are spent opening boxes, putting away whatever is easiest. Just get the easy stuff out of the way, Donna thinks.

Danny walks in the front door, looks around, shakes his head and calls to his aunt, "Hey Aunt Donna, what do you need help with? What can I do?"

Donna directs him to set up the entertainment system and get it working for Chris and Christine. which he does pretty quickly, plugging in wires and adjusting where things sit. In twenty minutes there is a movie playing for Chris and Christine to watch.

The two adult mice are sitting on the couch, just chilling. They can't see any reason to get underfoot, now that Donna is in unpack-and-put-away mode. They're not big enough to help so it's better to stay out of the way. Plus, the Disney movie that Danny turned on looks pretty good. The two mice are big movie lovers, so this is a perfect way for them to be out of the way, plus it gives them something to do to pass the time.

Candy is the first youngster to show up. She knocks softly on the closed front door, since there isn't a cat door in the kitchen door yet. Franklin has already told everyone that putting in a cat door will be one of the first things he does, so the Mouse family can get in and out of the house easily.

Candy looks around at all the boxes and furniture in the rooms and just shakes her head. "This is going to take a lot of work," she thinks.

"Hi mom!" she calls to Christine who she spots sitting on the couch watching tv.

"Oh, Hi Candy! Our Home is coming over later, but for now, why don't you join us and watch the movie. It's pretty good."

"I have some homework to do, mom. I can just do it on the floor in the other room. Enjoy the show!"

Carl arrives a half hour later, knocks on the door, looks at the boxes and furniture and lets out a loud whistle. "Wow, that's a lot of stuff. Where's my stuff?"

Chris answers, "It's coming over later, son. The movers didn't get into our Home in the Wall. Did you leave all of your stuff in the Home, like I asked?"

"Yes, dad. It's all in there. I hope it comes soon because I'm going to have to change clothes. A truck hit a mud puddle near me as I was walking here and I'm all wet and dirty."

"Okay, no worries. Go in the bathroom and get cleaned up. There's a chair by the sink that you can climb up on."

"Got it."

Danny has been moving the smaller furniture around and also helping Donna put away things in closets and the kitchen.

Late that afternoon, Franklin shows up.

"Hi honey, I got off a little early so I could help. What needs to be done?"

Donna directs him to help Danny move the heavier furniture around and then tells him what needs to be done in each room.

He gets to work and within an hour things are starting to shape up, thanks to the three humans working on everything.

Donna orders from Domino's pizza and when the order is delivered everyone sits down to eat. She's ordered a small California Veggie pizza for the Mouse family and a Deluxe Pizza for the humans. It's exactly what the hungry group needs and after working they're all hungry.

While they eat, Donna tells Franklin that they need to go back to the other house to pick up the Home in the Wall for the Mouse family.

Franklin has already checked the Home in the Wall and determined that he can detach it from the closet wall and transport it to the new house, almost totally intact.

"Danny, let's go over to the other house and get our friends' house, okay?"

Danny is out the door first, followed by Franklin. Chris yells out, "Hey you guys, I wanna go, too. That's my house, you know."

The three drive to the old house and walk right into the master bedroom, opening the closet doors to get access to the Home in the Wall.

"Everything's safe to move, right?" asks Franklin.

Chris answers, "Everything except for the tablet tv, which I'm sure needs to be handled with care."

"No problem," says Danny. "I'll handle that. Give me a couple of minutes and I'll have it out and packed carefully."

After the tablet TV is in the car, the next challenge is to get the Home in the Wall out. Danny and Franklin look at it carefully, and then Danny disconnects the Home wiring from the house wiring. Next they need to get the Home disconnected from the back wall of the closet. Danny remembers that the Home is attached to the closet wall with two screws. Finding a screwdriver, he takes the screws out and now the Home is totally detached.

The two male humans lift the Home up and carefully slide it out into the bedroom, then carry it outside to the car, sliding it across the back seat. Danny latches a seat belt around the Home, being careful not to break anything. Now, it's ready to move.

Franklin spots a few more items in the house, which he's able to put in the trunk of his car, and they're ready to go back to the new house and get everything set up.

At the new house, setting up the Home in the Wall is actually pretty easy. The two men slide it into the bedroom closet and Danny uses the screwdriver to attach it to the back wall. Then Danny sets the tablet tv inside the front room, and looks for where he can get power. Amazing. There's an outlet in the closet not far from where they installed the Home. Danny puts a plug on the end of the Home wires, plugs it into the outlet and the Home is powered and ready to move in.

Next, Danny finishes setting up the technology. The network is easy. He had set it up the day before the move, which is why Chris and Christina are able to watch a movie on the big screen during the move-in. Within a short time, the tablet in the Home in the Wall is connected to wi-fi since the network was moved from the old house and the passwords stay the same. Franklin and Donna check their mobile phones and see that everything is working great.

Danny walks around the house and is relieved to see that everything that should connect to the network is working. Whew! That was easy, he thinks!

The Mouse family is inside their Home in the Wall, making sure that everything is put back in place and ready for occupancy after the move. After two hours, everything is done and the exhausted family is ready to call it a night.

So are Franklin and Donna. Danny is going to spend the night in case any of the technology or electrical stuff needs adjusting.

Everyone sighs. They're home!

The next morning is Saturday. Everyone gets up, looks around at the strange new surroundings and finds their way into the kitchen where Donna is making breakfast. She feels that the best thing they can do is start off the first day in their new house with a really good breakfast.

The Mouse family gets up in their usual surroundings. The Home in the Wall is exactly the way it was in the old house, so waking up and looking around is comforting. Everything is just like it was yesterday.

Donna calls from the kitchen, "C'mon everyone. Breakfast is ready."

In a few minutes, everyone is seated at the table, with the Mouse family sitting around the small table on top of the big table.

Donna and Franklin have made a wonderful breakfast. Waffles with butter and syrup, bacon, scrambled eggs, and toasted sourdough English muffins with jam. Plus, glasses of Simply Orange orange juice. It's a morning feast!

Before they eat, Franklin has everyone fold their hands as he says a simple prayer. "Father, thank you for guiding us to find this new house, and for helping yesterday's move go smoothly. Please help us to always remember that you directed our path to this new home. Help us to always be grateful. In Jesus name, Amen."

Chapter 7 - Mouse Surfari!

The new house is a little closer to the beach, which is really terrific in so many ways. The Mouse family has always enjoyed going to the California beach, as have the Dootys, so everyone feels blessed to be closer to it.

Getting all settled after the move has taken some time, but now life is getting back to normal. There are still things to be done, but the routine of each week is now back. Mouse School and Mouse Academy are just a little bit farther from home, but still within an easy walk for Carl and Candy.

Walking to the new home from Mouse Academy takes Carl past an empty lot where some local young mice play. He sees them every day but never stops, and they don't seem to notice him.

After a week of walking by the lot, Carl finally gets up his courage and walks in.

One of the mice sees him and calls out, "Hey dude. What's up?"

Carl replies, "'Sup, dude."

That's shorthand for a whole lot of old language like, "Hi, how are you?" "I'm fine, how are you today?" and stuff like that.

The first mouse walks over and throws a paw out for a fist bump. "Hi, I'm Jake. This is my tribe. That's Blot, Jamis, Fill and Pucker, who we also call 'Puka.' What's your name?

As Carl fist bumps with Jake he says, "Hey, good to know you guys. I'm Carl. We just moved in to the neighborhood last week. I haven't seen you guys at Mouse School or Mouse Academy before."

"That's 'cause we're older than you, dude. Been out of school for a while. Now we just party and surf. Dig?"

"Yeah, that's cool. I was going to try surfing when we were in Hawaii, but I never got around to it."

"Dude, you were in Hawaii? How did you get there?"

Carl tells them the story of their trip to Kauai last year.

"That's phat, man. We'd like to go to Hawaii, but we have California surf here, so that's pretty good, right?"

"Yeah, I get it. I wanted to learn how to surf, but haven't done anything about that. None of my friends surfed, so I never learned."

"No problems, senor. We all surf and we can teach you. Do you have a board?

"Naw, but a friend of my dad's makes them our size and he said he would make one for me if I ever wanted one."

"Awesome, dude. If you have him make you one we'll teach you how to surf."

"Cool, I'll see if I can get a board. Nice meeting you guys. Mind if I come by again?"

"Anytime, dude. We're usually here in the afternoons."

Carl walks home and does his homework.

That night, Danny is visiting his aunt and uncle, and Carl sees him.

"Hey Danny!"

"Yeah?"

"Remember in Kauai you were going to make a surfboard for me? You bought those small, long pieces of wood and you said you could make s board out of them?"

"Sure, the tongue depressors. I still have some at home. My mom is a nut about having stuff like that around. I can make you a pretty cool surfboard if you want one."

Two days later, Danny brings over a hot looking surfboard. It looks just like a professional surfboard, with cool colors and lettering and everything. Danny has coated it with a nice finish that feels like it will provide a little grip for Carl's feet when he stands on it.

"Wow," says Carl. "How did you make that?"

Danny just smiles and says, "Ancient Chinese secret, Carl"

Carl laughs. He doesn't know what that means, but it sounds cool and he's going to tell the surfer dudes that one.

The next day after he gets home from Mouse Academy, Carl grabs his cool new surfboard and walks over to the lot. The surfers are there, just hanging out, or as they told him, "We're hanging ten, man."

The guys spot him with the board and one of them lets out a loud whistle. They all walk over to Carl and stand admiring Danny's great handiwork.

"Dude, that looks really ripe, man. How was that made?"

Carl says, "Ancient Chinese secret, dude" and the surfers all laugh, thinking that was pretty cool, even though they don't know what it means, either.

Carl continues, "I have this board, but I don't know how to surf. Could I hang out with you guys next time you go? Maybe I can learn by watching you."

Jake says, "We're going tomorrow afternoon. Can you make it?"

"Yeah, if you're going after 3:30. That's when I get home from Mouse Academy."

"Cool, man. Bring your board here and we'll teach you some moves."

Carl's so excited, he practically skips home, which is challenging because he's carrying his cool, new surfboard.

He puts the new surfboard in the garage next to his dad's motorcycle, and goes into the house to study.

The next day, it seems like the time at Mouse School and Mouse Academy was never this slow. All Carl can think about are the surfer dudes, his beautiful new surfboard, and learning to surf.

Finally, the class at Mouse Academy is over and he practically runs home, grabs a quick snack, tells his mom that he's going to see some new friends, and runs out the door before she can ask any questions.

Grabbing his surfboard from the garage, he tries to ride his bicycle to the lot. After he falls over twice, he realizes he's going to damage his new board this way, so he parks his bike, grabs it and almost runs to the empty yard.

Jake spots him as he's walking in the yard and yells, "Sup!"

Carl walks up to Jake and tells him he's ready to learn surfing.

"Cool, dude" is the only thing Jake says and then he and two other mice grab their surfboards, and they all start walking.

It's neither quick nor easy to get to the beach, which is only ten blocks away but there are cars and traffic and people. The four mice navigate past all of those possible problems, but the older mice are very experienced at this, and they're at the beach faster than Carl expected.

The other mice stick their boards upright in the sand and walk down to where the surf is crashing on the shoreline. Carl joins them and they all stand looking at the water.

"Pretty good breaks today, man," says the mouse they call "Puka."

"Yeah, good curl and nice break. Should be fun. Let's get it!" says Jake and all the guys run back, grab their boards, and walk toward the surf.

"Now, here's what I want you to do, young dude," Jake says to Carl. "Put your board in the water, hold on to it, and paddle out. Watch us and do what we do, okay?"

Carl nods and the other guys put their boards in the water, which Carl does, too. Then all the guys kneel on their boards and start paddling out into the ocean.

Carl's nervous. This is pretty scary. He can kind of swim, but he never has in the ocean.

When they're out beyond where the surf is breaking, Jake gathers everyone together. They all turn their boards to face the beach.

"Now, watch this, Carl. Puka is going to lay face down on his board and watch the waves forming behind him. When he sees one that looks like it's ridable, he's going to turn back toward the beach and start paddling, trying to match the speed of the wave. So pay close attention and watch this."

Puka sits up on his board, looks at the waves behind him, and then suddenly he turns, lays on his board and starts paddling towards the shore. The wave is forming behind him, but his speed in the water is only a little slower than the wave. When the wave forms and is sloping toward the beach, Puka stands up on the board, steadies himself, and rides the wave. He rides almost to the shore and then he steps off of the board and stands up. The other surfers applaud loudly, with wide-eyed Carl whistling.

That was really cool, he thinks. "Man, I want to do that!" he shouts to Jake and the other guys, all of whom are now looking at him.

"You can do it, young dude," Jake shouts back, "but first you have to practice. Small steps, man. Just lay on your board and then start paddling toward the beach when you see a wave forming behind you. Watch me."

Jake demonstrates by laying on his board and turning to watch behind him. When a nice wave is forming he starts paddling, still lying flat on the board. As that wave gets closer, he paddles faster and then the wave is carrying his board toward the beach with Jake still lying flat on it.

Once the ride is over and Jake is standing on the beach, he yells, "That's the way I want you to do it. Now you try."

Carl is nervous. This looks really difficult, he thinks. But the other guys are waiting and watching him, so he has to try. Just stay calm and do what you saw Jake do, he thinks.

Carl is lying on his board, looking over his shoulder at the water. A few tiny ripples roll past and the other guys shout, "Good eye, dude. Those were nothing. Way to go!"

Encouraged at having made a good decision about the waves he sees a bigger swell coming toward him and he turns and starts paddling. The wave is coming fast and before he knows it the wave has rolled under him and starts breaking to the shore.

"Nice try, Carl," yells Jake. "Just turn around and catch another one, but paddle faster the next time."

Carl is disappointed with his first attempt, but he heard Jake. This time he's going to paddle as hard as he can.

He paddles back to the line with the other surfers.

He turns around. Now there's a nice swell coming at him. He turns toward the shore and starts to paddle.

"Faster," yells Jake.

He's paddling as hard as he can, cupping his hands to propel him forward faster. The board speeds up and now the wave is breaking behind him. As the wave gets bigger, his board is sliding down the face and he's moving faster.

"Woohoo" he yells. This is the best, he thinks.

He rides the wave until his board skeg starts dragging in the sand. He jumps off and stands up. Jake is shouting, the other guys are yelling, and Carl just stands there feeling like he's on top of the world. That was so awesome!

Now, the other guys are riding waves in, twisting and turning, riding every part of the wave to the beach. When each surfer finishes their ride, they jump off of their boards and come over to high-five Carl. They all look like excellent surfers, but all Carl can think is "I did it. I actually surfed."

"Good job, dude." "You rode it like a hog, man." "You stuck it, dude."

Carl feels so good. He really wants to try to stand up, but Jake tells him he should just take it one step at a time. Do another flat board ride first.

Carl and the others paddle out and then turn to watch the waves. Jake is first to catch one and gets a nice ride to the beach.

The other guys signal to Carl that he's next.

He turns to watch the swells behind him, and when he sees a bigger swell he turns back and starts paddling fast. The swell breaks and catches up to him, pushing him forward. He almost lost his balance and went off the side of his board, but he was able to stay on it. Once again he has done a long ride, but didn't stand up.

"Nice prone, dude," yells Blot. "You're getting ready, man!"

Carl is so happy. He just wants to ride a surfboard for the rest of his life. Maybe never actually put his paws on the beach ever again. Just ride!

Jake surfs in next doing some nice, fast turns. "Gnarly, man!" Fill shouts.

Carl wants to do one more ride but this time he wants to stand up. When they were on the beach earlier, Jake had shown him where to stand on the board when surfing. Now it's time to try it himself.

After the last guy rides in, they rest for a minute and then are back in the water and paddling out.

When everyone is out beyond the break, Jake starts it off again so he can watch Carl from the shore.

It's getting a little cooler now, but Jake can't wait to try standing on his board. He turns towards the shore and waits, looking over his shoulder. Two ripples go past, neither of them looks ridable. Finally, a nice swell is building, and Carl starts paddling. He remembers, "paddle strong, dude" and he paddles faster. The swell is building a small wall of water behind him and his board is picking up speed. He stays down and then crouches on his knees, holding each side of the board. Faster he slides, and faster.

He's ready for his big moment. Carl pushes up with his hands and for a moment, he feels like a surfer god, standing on his board as the wave propels him forward, the wind in his fur. He's Super Mouse Surfer King... for five seconds. Then the nose of his board goes into the water and he's flying over the board and into the water, with the board behind him.

"Nice pearl," shouts one of the surfers, indicating that the nose of his board bit into the water.

Carl stays in the water next to his board for several minutes, watching the other surfers ride waves in. Blot wipes out, but the other guys all ride waves to the beach.

Carl slowly paddles into the beach where the other guys are waiting.

"Dude, you have nerves, man." "You gave it a good go." "Sweet."

Jake is waiting for Carl to come up to him. When he does, Jake puts out his paw and says, "Dude you're ready to shred it. That took nerves, man. Wipeouts happen all the time. We all do it. But you have some natural juice. You're gonna pick this stuff up quick, young dude."

Carl just beams. He can't think of anything cool to say, or good surfer slang to use, so he just says, "Thank you."

The day is getting long when the mice grab their boards and head for home. Carl can't stop talking about his experience. He's so stoked that it's all he can do to walk and not skip. But that wouldn't be cool, so he just walks.

When he gets back home he puts his board in the garage and tells his family all about his great surfing skills. Secretly, he hopes the guys will invite him again so he can learn how to get better.



The best at any sport are those that practice. Most of them practice all the time so they can try things, learn, and get better at what they want to do. A slogan among those who are really good at anything is, "Practice doesn't make perfect. Practice makes better!"

Carl is ready to practice and he can't wait for the next beach party.

Chapter 8 - Back from the North

It's been a year since Cousin Clarence returned to Montana after introducing the Mouse family to ice skating. The last time he stayed through the MouseCapades competition and then caught the rails for the ride back home.

But today, he's back.

He first goes to the old Dooty home, which now has a new family living in it. He doesn't recognize anyone and so he looks around for some friendly mice.

Spotting Frak on the sidewalk, he asks if the other mouse knows where his cousin Chris and family live.

"Sure, they moved to another house. It's about five blocks away. I can show you. Follow me."

They walk the blocks and then come to the yard of the new house. Clarence can see Candy and Carl in the yard, so he yells, "Hey, Candy!"

She turns and sees him. She smiles and then shouts, "Hey Cousin Clarence. What are you doing here?"

"I came back for a visit. I missed my cousins and it's also darned hot in Montana. It just seemed like a good time to get away."

“Well, come on in. Let me get mom.”

Candy goes in the house, finds her mom and both come back out.

“Hey, Cousin Clarence,” says Christine. “It’s a surprise to see you here.”

“I know. I didn’t think I was going to come back so soon, but I’m bringing an urgent letter for you.”

“Oh, really? Do you know what it’s about?”

“I don’t. The family just needed someone to deliver it and I volunteered.”

“I see. Well, let me see the letter, please.”

Clarence gives Christine the letter and steps back while she reads it.

The letter is from Cousin Thelma who says she is actually the great aunt, once removed of Christine Mouse. The letter says that Christine Mouse is a direct descendant of Jomes Flickamore, and that since he is now deceased with no other relatives his entire estate is now the property of Christine Mouse. The estate consists of one hundred acres of land in Montana, mostly cleared, some wooded, no buildings on the property.

Christine leans back in shock. Her first reaction is "What?"

She takes the letter into the Home in the Wall where Chris is relaxing after helping Franklin and Donna prepare a garden space in their new yard.

Chris reads the letter and then says, "Well, it looks like you're a landowner in Montana, honey."

"I don't understand, Chris. How can a mouse own land? Is that possible?"

"I'm not sure, but I bet that my old nemesis Grig Pluck can probably figure this out. He's an attorney, you know. We should see what he thinks.

He scratches his head and then says, "I'll send this by MousePost and ask his opinion."

Later that day, the MousePost delivery guy is in the neighborhood and Chris hands him a handwritten note addressed to "Grig Pluck, lawyer," in his old neighborhood.

"No problem, Mr. Mouse," says the delivery person. "I'll see that Mr. Pluck receives this letter."

Chris and Christine walk out to the front yard where Clarence and Candy are talking.

"Hey Clarence, come on in and bring your stuff. We have your favorite room ready; the top floor of our home is all yours while you're here with us.

"How have you been?"

Clarence turns from Candy and replies, "I've been good. Just working on the same old things in Montana, but it's starting to get a little hot up there so I decided to come visit my California cousins."

"Well, you're welcome for as long as you want. Now, what do you know about this land in Montana that the note you brought talked about?"

"I don't know a lot about it, but I do know Thelma. She's a pistol. That doe can rope, ride, holler and wrangle as well as any buck. She also keeps track of all the history in the family. If anyone knows our ancestors, Thelma does.

"As for the land, I think I've seen it. One time when I was young my folks took us to visit an old relative who had known Mr. Flickamore growing up. She said that he was a smooth talker, and he was always doing some deal or another. She also said that he was a very good card player and used to play poker with a bunch of humans. One night when all the humans were drinking hard liquor in a saloon, old Flickamore took the last hand with a pair of 8's. He won over $100 in cash money, and a deed to a parcel of land.

"On the way back from our visit, my pops got directions to find that land, and we went to see it. It was way out aways from everything, up in the hills east of Missoula. As I remember, it was kind of pretty, lots of trees and a couple of grassy plains. But, it wasn't close to water or anything else except other land."

Christine looks at Chris and they both scratch their ears, a sign that they are thinking about what Clarence has just told them.

"I guess we just wait to hear from Grig about the legality of that paper," says Chris to which Christine nods.

That night at dinner with the Dootys, Chris mentions the land in conversation. Clarence is there and he sits up taller at the mention of the land.

Franklin asks, "So, Christine, what do you think you'll do with your land?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Dooty. We have asked an old friend of Chris for his opinion. He's a mouse attorney here in California."

"Mouse attorney? I've never heard of one of those. I suppose you have disputes just like people, so your attorney can help negotiate a settlement, right?"

Chris answers. "That's exactly right. We have judges, too, but mostly we just rely on a mouse attorney. If they say something, then we usually trust them. They know a lot more about legal matters than the average mouse."

Franklin just smiles. Mice are just like people, he thinks. It makes sense that they have their own specialists that have spent more time on a subject than other mice.

The dinner is good, but Clarence seems to only talk to Candy, not really looking at anyone else. It's obvious that she has captured his affections.

The next day, Carl and Candy are off to Mouse School and Mouse Academy. Cousin Clarence is sitting on the front porch when Chris comes outside.

"So, Clarence. We're glad you came back for a visit. You're one of the only family members to visit us."

"I'm kind of a rambling mouse, Chris," replies Clarence. "I can stay in one place for a long time, but after my last visit I got the urge to come visit you folks and spend some time getting to know Cousin Candy. I think she's a very smart and friendly mouse."

That short conversation pretty much exposes Clarence's intentions for traveling all the way from Montana, Chris thinks. "He has his eye on my daughter and he's a little older than she is, so I better keep an eye on those two."

Clarence manages to find a way to spend time with Candy in the evenings and on the weekend, and they do some fun things together, but Carl is also usually with them, so the three mice are becoming good friends.

Carl takes Clarence with him to Mouse Academy the next afternoon so he can see what they teach. Carl is taking a class on entrepreneurship taught by Hairy Sticky, one of the owners of the New Mouse Store with his wife Ophelia.

The class is very interesting. Hairy talks about how he and his wife got started with their store and the first lesson they learned was, "Luck is when preparation meets opportunity."

Hairy describes what that means in their life. Hairy has learned to be industrious, to find things and make use of things he finds. That comes in handy, he says, because friends in their old neighborhood are always saying they need things which is good because Hairy's experience finding things is useful in finding those things. Their business has done well because Hairy and Ophelia used Hairy's abilities to grow a nice business, a store that is now one of the cornerstones of the local mouse community.

Clarence listens intently. Later he tells Carl that he wants to grow something, probably a business, and he plans to think more about what Hairy taught today.

That afternoon, after the young mice return home from Mouse Academy, Clarence sees Candy and asks her if she can show him around the neighborhood.

"Sure, Cousin Clarence. Let's go. This is a little different neighborhood than where we lived before, but it's pretty nice. Let me see if Carl can join us."

"No, that's okay, Candy. I thought maybe you could be the only guide today. I spent time with Carl yesterday."

Candy wrinkles her brow, but nods in agreement and the two mice head out of the yard after Candy tells her parents where they're going.

On the walk, the two mice talk about all kinds of things. Clarence is interested in everything that Candy does, and he asks lots of questions. Candy can talk for hours, so answering Clarence is easy.

At one point as they're walking, there's a deep crack in the sidewalk that has spread, creating a possible tripping hazard. Clarence steps across and then reaches out his paw to help Candy cross it. She smiles, but after she steps across Clarence keeps holding her paw and doesn't let it go.

She thinks to herself, "Hmm, that's different. It feels okay, but why is he holding my paw?"

After another block she pulls her paw loose to point to Mouse School and she doesn't put her paw back toward Clarence afterward.

When they step off of every curb to walk across streets, Clarence puts his paw up to help Candy. She has to pull her paw back after each step, because Clarence keeps holding it tight.

The next day is Saturday, so no school or academy. Carl has a few friends over from Mouse School and Mouse Academy and they're playing games. He calls out to Clarence to join them, and they play for an hour or two.

Later that afternoon, Carl, Candy and Clarence are sitting on the porch talking. Carl and Candy share that this is their last year at both “schools” and they’re having fun looking forward to the future.

"What do you see in your future, Clarence?" asks Carl.

Clarence is quiet for a minute and then says that there aren't any mouse educational programs in Montana, but it’s a good life and he’s doing okay. He's still trying to figure out what he really wants to do with his life.

Over the next three weeks, Clarence keeps wanting to do more things with Candy.

On one Saturday Clarence asks Candy is he can take her to the Mouse Bowling Alley on a date.

She looks at him with a quizzical look on her face like she's wondering about his intentions, but she agrees to go if Carl can go with them.

Clarence agrees. It's the only condition that Candy puts on their "date" so of course he has to agree.

The three mice have a fun time, but Clarence doesn't have much opportunity to be alone with Candy.

That night, Carl, Candy and their mom are in the kitchen of the Home in the Wall, and Carl mentions that Clarence seems to be giving Candy a lot of attention.

Candy agrees and says that she's just trying to be nice to her cousin, but she doesn't want to go on any more dates with him, or any other activity that is just the two of them.

Like a good parent, Christine asks her daughter if she is worried about Clarence or feels uncomfortable around him.

"No, not at all," she answers. "He's a nice enough buck, but I'm not interested in getting serious with any boy mice just yet. Besides, Clarence is just not the type of buck that I'm attracted to."

Christine compliments her daughter on listening to her instincts. "Being friends is easy, but every relationship is about boundaries. For those friends we really like, we can have very relaxed boundaries, meaning there are more things that are okay to do together, or to each other. But, for those mice we don't know very well, or that we don't want to get very close to, the things that are okay to do together are much fewer.

"That's smart, Candy, because that instinct will protect you from getting into trouble, and keep you from getting into situations that you don't want to be in."

"Got it, mom," says Candy. "Thanks for the advice. I want to be friendly and helpful to our cousin, but that's it. He's a nice mouse, but I prefer that we only do things that include other mice."

Carl is feeling protective of Candy, and he asks his sister, "So, has Clarence ever done anything that made you uncomfortable? You know, something that you didn't want him to do?"

"No. He's a country gentleman, a little rough around the edges but generally very nice and well-mannered."

"Good, you'll tell me if that changes, right?" Carl continues.

"Of course, brother. Thanks for being concerned."

Candy decides that she should tell Clarence how she feels about him, so she waits for the right opportunity and asks him if they can talk.

"Sure, Candy, I'd like that," he replies.

Their conversation is short. Candy explains that she feels that Clarence is paying a lot of attention to her, and while she is flattered, she isn't interested in any exclusive relationships with boy mice.

"I hope that doesn't hurt your feelings, Clarence," Candy continues. "I'm glad you're our cousin and I'm sure you have lots of girl mice that are attracted to you. I'm just not ready to be more than your cousin."

Clarence has been listening to Candy, and finally puts his cards on the table. "Candy, I think you're a very special mouse. I like you and I wanted to get to know you better, and maybe a lot better. I'm disappointed that you don't feel the same way about me, but I understand. I will always try to be a good cousin, and that means respecting your wishes."

Candy reaches over and grabs Clarence's paw. "Thank you, cousin. You're a good buck and I know that some girl mouse is going to be really lucky to have you paying attention to her."

A week later, Clarence announces that he's going to head back to Montana. The Mouse family decides to throw a "going away" party for him, and invite the mice that he's met on this visit.

It's a fun party, with lots of young mice and a few older ones. There are a few games and even some prizes. Clarence looks like he's having a good time.

Toward the end of the party, Clarence steps in the middle of the partygoers and raises his front paws to get everyone's attention.

"Thank you for being here, my California friends and family. I came here from Montana to deliver a note and see a few mice, and instead, I made a bunch of new friends. I'm leaving tomorrow but I want you all to know that you're invited to visit me in Montana. Our family is very friendly, and if you come for a visit you will have a place to stay with us. I will even take you around to see some of the beauty of Montana. So, thank you for welcoming me, and please don't be strangers."

The mice all clap their front paws and stamp their hind paws.

The next day, Clarence says his good byes to the Mouse family, and leaves with a small packet of food that Christine prepared for him.

That afternoon, when Carl and Candy get home from Mouse Academy, Christine asks Candy if they can have a talk.

"Sure, mom. What's up?"

"I just wanted to follow up on our conversation about Cousin Clarence. You seemed maybe a little concerned about him," said Christine.

"Not really, mom. I just felt that he was paying a little too much attention to me. I couldn't really tell for sure, but honestly, it felt like he wanted me to be his girlfriend."

"And, that wasn't what you wanted?" asked Christine.

"No. I'm interested in boy mice, but I'm not ready to have one that I spend all my time with. I'm still young and I have lots of interests. I want lots of friends so I can learn from others and also enjoy their company. An exclusive relationship isn't in my plans for the future at this point in my life."

"Good for you for knowing yourself, Christine. You have a lot of life to experience before you settle down, if you ever do. You're in control of your life, and I'm so happy that you're wanting to make the most of it."

Weeks later a note comes from Cousin Clarence thanking the Mouse family for their hospitality and repeating his invitation to come visit him and other relatives in Montana.

Candy thinks about Clarence one evening and concludes that her decision to keep Clarence as a cousin and a friend, and nothing more, was a good one. She realizes that she will have many friends in her life, and it's best to not be quick in her decisions of which will be friends and which will be more. And even better to not let someone else's interests influence her decisions. For now, she's happy to enjoy her life growing up with friends. More can come later.

As for the property inherited by Christine, that's another story.

Chapter 9 - Boats Afloat

"Wouldn't you like to go sailing?" Franklin asks Donna one weekend morning at breakfast.

"Hmm, maybe. What did you have in mind, Franklin?"

"I dunno. Do you remember last weekend when we were at the park and we saw that couple in the small sail boat?"

"I think so. Did they have a small dog with them?"

"Right. They just sailed around for several hours. It looked very relaxing, which is something I would like. My new job is requiring a lot of hours at work, and I could use an activity that helps me to relax and put work behind me for a little while."

"Well, maybe you can check around and see if we can rent one at the park. I'd be okay to go, if we can try it out for a day."

"Great. Thanks, honey. I'll stop by this week after work and see if we can rent a little sailboat for an afternoon."

Three days later Franklin pulls into the parking lot of the park, walks over to a small shed with a sign that says, "Boat House". He knocks on the door and hearing a voice yell, "C'mon in," he steps inside.

Inside the shed there's a young man sitting at a table with a computer who looks up as the door closes.

"How can I help you," the guy asks.

"Do you rent sailboats here, and if so, what do they cost for an afternoon?" Franklin says.

The answer is "yes," and the worker points to a sign on the wall.

It says, "Boats for Rent

- Day sailers - sit on top, easy to sail, self-righting sailboats
- Row boats - sit on top, two oars, very stable
- Kayaks - one-person with oars, flat bottomed
- Canoes - one- or two-persons with oars, vee bottom
- Paddle boards - stand on top or lay down. Paddle included (ask about lessons)

All boats include flotation devices for adults and children.

Next to each type of boat is the price to rent it for two hours, four hours, or all day.

Franklin asks the man, "We're interested in a day sailer. We'd like to rent one for about four hours."

The attendant collects the rental fee, gives him two flotation vests, and explains that he must follow all safety instructions printed on the wall.

Then, he takes Franklin out to the dock and shows him a 16' Puffer, a plastic sailboat with a single mast.

"This is the easiest and most fun sail boat. Do not rent this boat until you have watched videos on how to sail. You'll be wearing life jackets because winds are sometimes tricky here, and you can end up in the water.

"When you rent a boat, we'll show you some basic sailing and safety instructions, but here's a sheet with YouTube videos that will help you feel more comfortable with sailing."

Franklin nods and says, "Thanks. We'll be back this weekend."

That evening he tells Donna what he's learned. She's a little nervous about going on the water in a very small boat, but she agrees to give it a try, at least one time. After dinner, Franklin finds a good YouTube video from the list and turns it on. They watch it for 20 minutes and then talk about what they learned. It seems pretty easy, they both think, but Donna is glad that Franklin is taking an interest because she doesn't want to learn, she's just willing to go for a boat ride.

The next Saturday, Franklin and Donna jump in the car with the Mouse family, and drive to the park. Franklin walks to the boat house and arranges to rent a Puffer for four hours. The attendant gives him some quick instructions and then finds life jackets for Franklin and Donna. The Mouse family are safe in Franklin's big pockets, but they get a little squeezed when he puts on his life jacket.

"Hey!" Chris yells. "We're in here, you know."

"Oh, right, Chris. Sorry, my friend. I'll loosen the buckles on the life jacket."

That helps make a little more pocket room for the family.

After that Franklin holds the boat steady while Donna climbs in and finds a seat. Then he unties the boat from the dock and takes his seat at the tiller.

There's a very light breeze. Franklin adjusts the sail until it starts to fill with air at which point the boat starts to move.

"Wow, this is really fun," Franklin says.

Donna is quiet and seems to be trying to get in touch with her feelings to see if she likes this or doesn't. But, Franklin sees the good sign that she has a tentative smile on her face, which gets bigger as the boat sails forward in a straight line.

The first hour is really fun. Franklin tries turning and adjusting the sail, which works exactly the way he wants it to. They cross the lake and on the other side, Franklin turns the boat around and adjusts the sail for the wind.

Chris and family are looking out above the pockets. The wind is nice, the sun is warm, the boat is going slow and they're with their friends, the Dootys. It's a great day and a fun adventure, they all think.

In the middle of the little lake, Franklin lets go of the tiller for steering, and Donna brings out a light lunch, including some great veggies for the Mouse family. Everyone relaxes and eats as the boat sits in the lake with the sail slightly ruffling in the breeze. Franklin has a big smile on his face. Even Donna seems to be pleased with the experience.

The Mouse family, for their part, are generally enjoying this boating adventure. They're not great water lovers, but today is pretty fun and it seems safe.

After lunch, Franklin adjusts the sail and grabs the tiller. The boat begins to move with the wind and picks up a little speed.

There are several other boats on the lake now, and Franklin keeps an eye on them to make sure he doesn't get too close to them.

They've been out on the water for 2 1/2 hours. Franklin is feeling like he is getting the hang of sailing. "It's not that difficult," he thinks. "Maybe I can try a few more things."

The wind is picking up, but Franklin still feels comfortable and he's ready to try a few new moves with this whole sailing experience.

He turns the boat sideways to the wind and keeps the sail straight, front-to-back. Now the boat starts to lean over, away from the wind, and it picks up speed.

"Wow, this is great," Franklin says. "We're really sailing. Let's see if we can go a little faster."

"Hold on," he says to Donna and the Mouse family. "We're going to pick up more speed. Donna, come over to this side of the boat and sit on the edge."

Donna moves to the uphill side and sits on the edge, as Franklin is doing. The boat is gaining more speed and is now really cutting through the water. Franklin is excited. This is so much fun, he thinks.

The wind slows down and both humans move back to the center of the boat, while Franklin keeps the boat pointed in the same direction.

The slow wind lasts just a minute. Once both humans are in the center of the boat, a strong wind gust hits them on the side and the boat starts to pick up speed again. Before Franklin and Donna can adjust where they're seated, the boat tips over more. Franklin holds the line to the sail tight and keeps the tiller going in the same direction, thrilled to think that now they can really get going fast.

At least that is his thought before the wind suddenly gusts, hitting them harder, and the boat tips over, sail and mast splashing in the water with the boat on its side full of water. Franklin and Donna are in the water, floating in their life preservers.

Franklin can hear the Mouse family yelling in his now, very wet pocket.

"Hey" "We're under water in here" "Help!"

"Now what do I do," Franklin thinks. He can see that Donna is okay, floating beside the mostly submerged boat and holding on to its side. He's okay, but he now has to rescue their mouse friends.

He puts his hand in both pockets and pulls out the sputtering mice, sitting each one on the top of his life vest, up by his neck.

Once his friends are safe, Franklin looks around and decides that the best answer might be to try to right the boat, which is on its side with the sail laying flat on the water.

"Donna, come over here. We're going to stand on the keel and try to pull the boat upright."

Donna swims over to where the keel, a board extending out of the bottom of the boat, is sitting flat on the water.

"Okay, grab a hold and put your feet on the keel. I'll do the same. On the count of three, we'll try to stand up on the keel and lean back, holding onto the rail on the boat."

"Ready? One-two-three!"

Both adults put all of their weight on the keel and pull on the rail. Slowly, the sail lifts off of the surface of the water as the boat rights itself.

Once the boat is upright, both adults crawl inside the boat which is still full of water. Franklin is careful to avoid squeezing their mice friends or submerging them again.

"Whew, Franklin. That worked. Now what do we do?" Donna asks.

"I'm not sure, but I think we should try to bail some of this water out of the boat and then sail back to shore. Today's sailing lesson should probably be over."

Their floating picnic bag is retrieved from the lake and lifted back into the boat. Franklin takes everything out of it and has Donna hold all the contents while he uses the zippered bag to scoop water out of the boat.

Scoop, scoop, scoop.

Initially, it doesn't seem to be making a dent, but Franklin keeps scooping.

20 minutes later the boat is mostly empty of water except for a few inches on the bottom. Now, it's time to get back to the dock.

Franklin grabs the sail rope with one hand and the tiller with the other. He turns the tiller so the sail catches a little of the breeze - not much because he doesn't want to repeat their last experience.

He remembers some of the instructions that he read, and tells Donna, "We just turned turtle, honey."

"Great, I'll be sure to write that in our diary," she says with a little bit of sarcasm. "That's one less experience I won't need to go through again."

Franklin checks on their mouse friends.

"How are you guys doing?" he asks.

"We're okay, Franklin," says Chris, "but we'll have to shake the water off and dry off when we get back to land.

We are going back to land, right?"

"Yessir, Chris. How's everyone else - Christine, Carl, Candy, are you guys okay?"

Voices come back, "We're a little wet here" "We're fine" "That was kind of fun, the part that wasn't scary."

"Well, I'm sorry, friends. I didn't think we might drown you guys. I'm glad everyone is okay. I'm going to get us back to the dock and then we can all relax in the sun in the park and dry off. I'm afraid that the rest of our lunch came out of the lunch bag when we tipped over. Right now, I can see that the ducks in the middle of the lake are enjoying some of the good food that we brought.

"Okay, just hang on for a few minutes while I sail us back to the dock."

The trip to the dock is actually relaxing. The boat can't go very fast because it still has several inches of water in the bottom and Franklin has a death grip on the tiller and the sail.

Once at the dock, getting out of the boat is the next challenge, but the whole crew is anxious to get out of the "dunking machine" and dry off.

After reporting the incident to the attendant at the dock, Franklin and Donna, with Mouse family, walk over to the picnic tables and sit down.

The mice stand up and shake off the water, spraying the table and the two humans with water drops.

"Hey!" Franklin yells as droplets fly everywhere.

"Oh, sorry" says Christine. "We didn't mean to get you wet. Oh, right, you started it." And she laughs and the others join in. In a second, everyone is laughing and celebrating that despite the mishap in the lake, everyone is okay. A little wet, but okay.

After everyone is dry, Donna grabs the now-dry lunch bag, Franklin helps the Mouse family get into his now slightly damp pockets, and they get to the car and drive home.

On the drive, Chris says to Franklin, "So, you have never sailed before, right?"

"That's right, Chris," replies Franklin. "I had never tried it before, but I always thought it would be fun."

"Well, Franklin, it was fun up until the time when we were underwater. I think that qualifies this as a unique adventure."

One thing we've learned about the Dooty and Mouse families, they're usually up for adventures.

From today's experience, Franklin learned that it's best to take lessons and practice before you do something for the first time. The quick instructions he got, and the video he and Donna watched, made him feel confident that he could handle the little sailboat, but he learned that sometimes it's more than quick instructions that are needed to get you out of trouble.

That's, of course, a really good thing for everyone to remember. When you're doing something that you don't really have any experience doing, get advice from others that do have that experience. Ask lots of questions. And then practice in a safe way until you have mastered what you're doing.

Before you take others with you...

© 2025 Ron Wilbur. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of two mice by Belinda Fewings on Unsplash
Photo of train on trestle in Chapter 3 by Yiran Ding on Unsplash
Surfboard photo in Chapter 7 by NICO BHLR on Unsplash