

It's A Mouse Life

#4 in the Chris Mouse series

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Chapter 1 - Wheels Down, Bottoms Up

It's an early Saturday morning when Chris goes to his young kids' bedrooms and gently wakes them up.

"Hey Carl, time to get up, son. There's a new day ahead of you and you just never know what surprise might be waiting for you."

Carl rubs his eyes and thinks about what his dad just said. I got the new day part of what he just said, but what is he talking about, "a surprise," he thinks. "Better get up and find out," he mumbles to himself and crawls out of his cozy nest. Sleep was really good but the thought of a surprise sounds kind of exciting.

Chris opens the door to Candy's room and says almost the same thing he said to Carl. She's more awake than Carl and she jumps out of her nest to get ready for the day, starting by combing her hair and washing her face.

Candy is ahead of Carl on the stairs but he's always in a hurry and rushes right by her with a little bump.

"Hey!" Candy yells. "Watch it, Carl. You almost knocked me over."

"Yeah, right" says Carl as he continues racing down to the living room and kitchen.

Candy is also fast and both kids get downstairs at about the same time.

Their dad is waiting for them in the kitchen and says, "Okay, kids. Eat your breakfast. Take your time and chew your food. Your surprises will be there when you're through, but no rushing. I'm watching and you don't want to lose a surprise because you didn't listen to dad, right?

Both young mice nod and sit down to their breakfast. Neither of them rushes, both chew their food well, and both finish about the same time.

"Okay, dad, what's the surprise you've been talking about?" says Carl.

"Let's go outside and I'll show you," answers Chris. "I think you'll like them."

Hmm. Both mice are curious because dad said "them." That means that there will be more than one, whatever it is. That sounds good. Now, they're really curious.

Chris and kids walk out of the Home in the Wall, under the closet door, through the Dootys' bedroom and out of the kitchen cat door to the driveway and backyard. There on the pavement

of the driveway are two brand new bicycles, just mouse size. One is pink and the other is yellow.

Carl runs to the pink one and says, "This one is mine!"

Candy doesn't move, but just looks at her brother with her front paws on her hips and a frown on her face. "Right! I can see you having a pink bicycle smarty-pants. I'm sure your friends will think you're a strong male mouse riding on that!"



"Well, I guess you have a point there. I guess I was just kidding," says Carl with a sheepish look on his face. "I'll take the yellow one."

"No dice, brother," replies Candy. "Too late, that's the one I want now. So, too bad for you!"

"No way."

"Way"

“Uh uh!"

“Uh huh!"

"Okay, you win, Candy. You can have the yellow one."

"I changed my mind, Carl. I'll take the pink one so you can have your silly ol’ yellow one."

That argument is so normal for this brother and sister. They often argue back and forth over things that they know the other one wants.

Chris is watching and now he steps in. "Okay, I'm going to have Mr. Dooty take both bicycles back to the toy store so you don't argue anymore."

"No, dad," both Carl and Candy say with their front paws up in surrender. Carl says, "We're good. We picked the right ones," and Candy nods.

"Okay, well, let's start learning," says their dad. "Have either of you seen anyone ride a bicycle?"

"Oh sure, dad," says Carl. "We see them all the time on videos on YouTube and we see kids riding them on the sidewalk."

"Great. Then let’s get started learning,” Chris says as he walks to the bikes. “The first thing you need to do is sit on the bike. We'll go one at a time. I'll hold the bike up for Candy first. Candy, stand on the bike pedals while I hold it up and then I when I tell you to, I want you to sit on the seat keeping your back paws on the pedals. Okay?"

Candy nods and Chris uses one back leg to kick the kickstand up while he holds the bike upright with his front paws. Christine puts one leg through the bike frame which is lower on her bike than on Carl's. Then she puts her front paws on the handlebars and her back paws on the pedals and slides up onto the seat. Now, she's seated on the bike and ready for the next step. Carl watches all of this very closely.

"Okay, good job, Candy," says Chris. "Now I'm going to push you slowly while you keep your feet on the pedals. Don't steer the handlebars yet, just keep them pointed straight ahead. We'll learn how to turn the handlebars soon."

And with that Chris pushes the bike so it's moving forward, keeping his paws on the bike to keep it from falling over. Candy keeps the handlebars straight and her feet on the pedals that are now going round and round. She feels a little unsteady, but her dad keeps the bike upright, preventing it from tipping one way or the other.

"That's pretty fun, Dad. When can I try riding myself?" she asks.

"In just a little while. Now I'm going to push you again but this time I want you to turn the handlebars very gently to the right. Not very much, just a little. And keep your back paws on the pedals."

Chris pushes the bike again and now it's moving and going in a slight circle. Candy can feel the pedals turning under her back paws. She's nervous but the bike is moving and still upright and she feels a little more confident.

"Okay, Candy, this time I want you to push down on the pedals with your paws. Push first on one pedal and then after that on the other pedal. You'll see how it moves the bike forward. I'll run along side you and make sure you don't fall."

"Okay, dad, I'm ready. Don't let me fall." Candy exclaims nervously.

"Okay, start pedaling, Candy," says Chris.

Candy pushes on one pedal and then the other pedal and she can feel the bike moving as a result. She's trying to keep her balance on the bike so it stays upright but when one back paw misses the pedal she almost falls over. Fortunately, her dad is running alongside and reaches out to hold her bike upright as she keeps moving. Once it’s steady he takes his paws off of the bike so Candy can ride without assistance.

"Woo hoo," shouts Candy. "Look at me, I'm riding a bike!" she says with a big grin on her face.

Chris runs up to her after a few feet and holds on to the bike, slowing it to a stop.

"Good job, daughter," he says. "Now practice doing that from a stop. Just push down on a pedal and when the bike starts moving put your paw on the other pedal and keep pedaling. The bike wheels will act like a gyroscope to help you keep it upright."

"What's a gyroscope, dad," asks Carl, who has been watching his sister's lesson all this time.

"It's what happens when you spin a wheel, son," explains Chris. "A spinning wheel will try to stay in the same angle as long as it's spinning. That makes it easier to keep your bike from falling over once you get it moving."

"When do I get to try, dad?"

"You're next, Carl. Bring your bike over here and I'll give you the same lesson. If you've been watching you have an advantage that Candy didn't have, so it should be easier for you."

Candy continues practicing riding on one end of the driveway while her brother wheels his bike to the other end where their dad is standing.

Chris gives Carl the same instructions and after few nervous minutes Carl is also riding, at first shakily and then with more confidence.

"Okay, kids. Stop your bikes and look at me for a minute. Candy, bring your bike over to me."

Candy rides over to Chris who reaches out and stops her bike. When she was practicing, she stopped her bike by slowing down on the pedals and then dragging her feet.

"Now, I'm giong to show you how to stop your bike. Candy, jump off of your bike for a minute so I can demonstrate."

Candy jumps down and Chris steps on the bike while talking, "Okay, I'm going to ride for a little distance and then I'm going to stop. Watch this."

And he rides to one end of the driveway, turns in a half circle and rides back and then stops.

"Did you see how I stopped the bike," he asks.

Both young mice shake their heads from side to side. "No," says Candy.

"What I did was step on the back pedal with a back paw. That applies something called the 'brake' and it stops the bike. Now, watch again."

Again, he rides to the end of the driveway, and turns back riding at them and then says, "I'm going to step on the back pedal. Watch!" He steps on the back pedal and the bike comes to a stop.

"Now, you kids try that, okay?" says Chris.

Candy and Carl wheel their bikes to the far end of the driveway, get on them and then ride back toward their dad. When they get close, they both step on the back pedal and come to a stop. Carl steps hard on his back pedal and the bike stops instantly, almost throwing him over the handlebars.

Chris gives both kids some praise and then instructs Carl, "When you step on the back pedal, push down as though you don't want to stop the bike and when you feel the bike slow you can tell if that is going to stop the bike or if you need to push down harder on the pedal. Slowing first will keep you from braking too fast."

"Now, I'm going to relax on the back porch and watch. Practice riding and turning and stopping. I'll give you suggestions if you need them, but you're both doing very well, so I don't expect you'll need much coaching from me. You're both naturals!"

That night at dinner both young ones can’t stop talking excitedly about their new bicycles. They had fun riding around the driveway, but this is an exciting new adventure for both of them and they can’t wait to learn more

"Dad, when can we ride on the sidewalk?" asks Carl.

"Well, you need a lot more practice," says Chris, "and we want to see you practice turning quickly and stopping quickly. Those are very important things to do well, so you can avoid danger in front of you. Also, mom or I will want to watch how quickly you can go from just starting out to moving at faster speed, again so you can ride out of any trouble. We don't expect problems, but it's important to be able to handle any problems safely if they happen."

"Oh," responds Candy. "What kind of problems do you think we might have on our bikes, Dad?"

"It's hard to count them all, honey," replies Chris. "But here are a few. Animals that suddenly run out from side yards after you. People on the sidewalk that see you and are scared and might do something unexpected. Kids that might chase you for fun. That and a whole lot more that we can't imagine. All of those will probably require you to react quickly and speed away safely."

Carl jumps in, "Okay, so when do you think we can ride on the sidewalk?"

Chris sighs. "Let's have a week of practice with mom and I watching and coaching you. When you look ready, we'll go out to the sidewalk."

Over the next six days Carl and Candy practice all kinds of important safety moves on their bicycles. Every morning, Chris and Christine tell them about another situation and coach them to work on it.

The first morning, Christine puts small sticks across the driveway before the kids come out to ride. Carl and Candy are excited and anxious to ride their bikes and they don't notice the sticks. Both jump on their bikes and pedal. When they get close to the sticks, Candy sees them, steps on the pedals to brake and stop before she hits the sticks. Carl is going too fast and he hits the sticks at full speed. His front tire starts wobbling and he yells, "Woaaaahhhh" as he fights to get control of the bike before finally getting control and coming to a safe stop.

Christine runs up to him and first checks to make sure he's okay before asking the obvious question, "Okay, that was rough. What do you think you should have done differently?"

Carl shakes his head and says, "I guess I was going too fast and I wasn't looking at the driveway ahead. I should have gone slower and looked to see what might be ahead of me."

"Good answer, Carl," says Christine. "Always look ahead of you. First look to see what's right in front of your bike and then to what is farther ahead. Keep looking at both, one after the other. That way you can spot the danger in time to take the safe approach."

Carl nods his head in understanding.

The next day, Chris stands farther down the driveway, out of sight behind a small bush alongside the driveway. Candy is riding her bike, with Carl riding his bike a little slower behind her. As she gets closer to the bush, Chris suddenly steps out from behind the bush and starts walking across the driveway right in front of her. Candy pushes down on the back pedal to slow down and points her bike to the place on the driveway where Chris had just walked from, missing him by several feet.

"Great job, Candy!" calls Christine. "You slowed down when you saw something crossing in front of you, and you steered your bike behind them instead of in front of them. If they had seen you and turned around to walk back from the direction they came, you had already slowed down so that made it possible for you to stop without hitting them. Very good!"

The next several days are spent practicing other situations with both young mice learning by doing, and with mom and dad there to guide them. At the end of the week, they have practiced dodging obstacles in the driveway ahead of them, prevented hitting things that ran in front of them, had things chase them from behind, heard loud noises, and experienced other distractions. Christine even used a piece of mirror to point the sun's reflection right at them as

a distraction. Both Carl and Candy have now experienced so many dangers that their parents announce that they are ready for riding on the sidewalk next week.

Over the next several weeks, both kids ride their bikes on the sidewalk outside the Dootys' home every day with mom and dad watching. There are a couple of surprises, like the cat that ran in front of Carl, and a piece of wood on the sidewalk one day, but because of their practice that first week, there are no accidents. Candy and Carl ride safely and got themselves through some very dangerous situations.

Now they're ready for more adventures.

At dinner the next night Candy asks her dad, "Would it be okay to take my bicycle on a solo ride, Dad? I would like to try riding around the block on the sidewalk. I've been practicing and I'm feeling more confident. This would be a good step toward learning new skills and experiencing real life problems."

Chris wrinkles his forehead and then looks at his wife. She smiles and says, "Yeah, Chris. She has been riding pretty well for several weeks. Maybe the next step is for her to ride out of our eyesight. What do you think?"

"Okay, I agree," says Chris. "Go ahead and try it tomorrow while we wait here at the house. You're doing really well, and I think you can do this without problems."

"How about me, Dad," asks Carl. "I've been doing good, too. I'd like to try that myself."

"Okay, both of you can ride around the block, but not at the same time. But make sure you both tell mom and I when you're ready to do it, so we can be waiting for you at the house."

Both kids say, "Deal!"

The next day Carl and Candy take their solo rides around the block at different times, with Chris and Christine waiting for them. They don't have any problems, and both are now given the okay to ride their bikes alone, as long as they get approval from Chris or Christine ahead of time.

At dinner that night Christine talks to both young mice about their bicycle training.

"I know you both were nervous at first, but did you see how we started by having you practice things that were easy, while we could help guide you? That was to help build your confidence. It's better to try new things very slowly with as much control as you can, until you master them. Often we want to just jump in and go gangbusters with something new. But kids, in order to be successful in the world you have to get confidence by learning slowly and mastering small steps.

“Did you see how we ran beside you, helping hold your bikes while you took your first ride? That was so you had confidence to take another step. That’s a great life lesson. Master any new thing with small steps to build your confidence and you’ll be able to handle challenges while they’re small. That’s a good approach to learning anything. Then once you’re successful with the small step take it several times to make it a habit. You can learn how to do almost anything new this way and you’ll be surprised at what you’ll be able to.”

Carl and Candy think about this while their mother talks. At first both kids think that this is just more stuff that parents say, but later they realize that they want to always remember this. It feels like a life lesson that may be really important in their future.

Chapter 2 - Sweet Like Candy

Every day in Mouse Life is filled with interesting things. Some are good, some are very good, and some are not so good.

Today is like that.

Candy gets up early this morning because she is too excited to sleep. Today is Monday and that means she gets to go to Mouse School in the morning and Mouse Academy in the afternoon. It's just fun to learn new things and Candy can't wait to get started today, because it's getting close to summer vacation time, which means that the other kids are in good moods.

On her way downstairs from her room she can hear Carl sleeping loudly. He has a funny way of breathing, especially in the morning when she's awake and he's still asleep. He sounds a little like a whistle and a little like a snort. It's kind of odd because he's not that big, but ever since he started exercising he's made more noise in the morning.

She steps down the stairs with a bounce in her step. It's going to be a good day, of that she is sure.

Her mom is downstairs in the kitchen and that's the first place Candy goes.

"Good morning, Mom" Candy says, just a second before her mother says, "Good morning, Candy."

Breakfast is quick today. And it's easy because her mom has set out some nuts and a couple pieces of fruit, plus some of the tasty cheese that her dad made the day before with Mr. Dooty.

Candy eats slowly, knowing that her mother will tell her to slow down if she eats any faster. Christine has told her daughter several times that it is not healthy to eat fast, and Candy has learned how to avoid hearing the same lesson over and over.

Chris walks into the kitchen to greetings from his daughter. "Hi dad, how are you this morning?

Chris scratches his head for a moment and then says, "How am I? I think I'm doing okay today, Candy, how are you?"

Candy smiles and nods a bit and then finishes her breakfast. She has a little time, but she has never been late for school in her entire life, and this won't be the day that she breaks her record.

After breakfast she runs upstairs to her room, checks her hair and then walks back down, just as Carl comes out of his room with a sleepy look on his face.

"Hey brother, you look like you're still asleep. Did you sneak down and watch something on the video tablet last night after we all went to bed?"

Carl looks at her and then puts one paw to his mouth and says, "Shhh!" That answers his sister's question.

Candy continues through the house, out the front door, under the closet door and then out the cat door in the kitchen. Waiting outside on the porch is her good friend, Shirley Fun.

"Hey, Candy! You look nice today. Are you ready for the first day of school?"

"You know it, Shirley. I've been waiting for today. I'm excited to see what we're going to learn this school year."

"It's going to be a good year. I just know it," responds Shirley. "My brother is sad because he wants to just keep goofing off, but I'm happy to see all my friends and get into a new class this year. Has your mom told you anything about what we'll be learning at Mouse Academy?"

"Nope," answers Candy. "She never talks about that at home. We'll just have to wait until this afternoon to find out."

The two young females jump off of the porch and begin the walk to Mouse School. It's a nice day with high fluffy clouds and deep blue sky. Mouse School is close, so the walk doesn't take long, but like any travel on a public sidewalk, the two girls have to keep a lookout for birds of prey, cats and other possible dangers. After all, they're small mice and that means they could be an unfortunate meal for other larger critters.

When they get to the school they walk in and wait for directions for their class. Mr. Peepers is waiting as the young mice file in and he has the class assignments in his hands.

"Okay, listen up. I need you to follow my directions. First grade - welcome to School. We're happy to see you make this first big step to learn about life. You will be going with Ms. Fernstickle. Ms. Fernstickle, please raise your hand so your class can see you."

Ms. Fernstickle is a very nice teacher. Candy and Shirley really liked her class, but they're beyond that now.

Young mice follow Ms. Fernstickle as she leads them to her classroom.

Mr. Peepers continues, "Okay, now Second grade, congratulations, you have moved up, you will be in Mr. Greatcheeks class. He is holding his hand up, so follow him to your class."

The next announcement is what Candy and Shirley have been waiting for. Mr. Peepers raises his voice a little and says, "Third graders, follow Mrs. Wand. She'll take you to where you'll be studying."

Both girls join seven other mice to follow Mrs. Wand. The classroom is in a far corner of the school and they're soon sitting with kids their own age.

Now, just so you know, Mouse School grade levels are not the same as in people school. Mouse School only has three grades because mice grow up faster than human kids. Third Grade is the last school they will have except for Mouse Academy.

Mrs. Wand welcomes them all to Third Grade. "Hi kids, I'm very excited to be your teacher for third grade. My job is to help you get ready for life as mice in the big mouse world. So, the first thing we're going to do is cover some very important rules.

"Oh wait, I forgot to mention that one of our classmates will not be with us today, and perhaps for several weeks. Fanny Trackle was hurt during the summer break and after going to the Mouse Hospital she is now at home. We hope she will heal quickly, but please keep her in your thoughts and prayers."

This news is a shock to Candy and Shirley. They haven't seen Fanny since the first week of the summer break and they hadn't heard about her accident until now. Both girls are very sad with this news and can't wait to talk about how they can help.

The rest of the morning at Mouse School passes quickly with Mrs. Wand teaching about numbers and writing. She is an expert on human English, so the entire class is anxious to get farther along on those subjects.

After school, the girls go to Mouse Academy where it is also the first day after the summer break. Matilda Meece will be their leader this year.

Mouse Academy doesn't have teachers, they have leaders. Leaders bring in instructors to teach on the important topics of living in the real world. Leaders are older and wiser mice that guide and help their students for the entire year as their students learn about life from the instructors.

Today and this week, their group will be learning about how to grow more and better garden produce. The instructor is a local mouse named Mr. Greenwhistle and he has what is called a green thumb. His gardens are always the best producing, with the biggest and healthiest produce. He is going to teach them in the yard outside of Mouse Church, where Mouse Academy classes are taught.

Candy is having trouble paying attention. She can't stop thinking about Fanny Trackle and her injury. She's not sure what she can do to help, but she makes up her mind to visit Fanny right after Mouse Academy today.
The afternoon passes slowly. It's not that Mr. Greenwhistle isn't interesting. He actually is very interesting and what he shows the class today looks like it will be so helpful in every mouse's garden. But, Candy's mind is somewhere else. She's struggling to pay attention and has to ask Mr. Greenwhistle to repeat himself several times.

That's a little embarrassing because Candy is an excellent student with a very quick mind. Usually, she is one of the first in her class to understand what is being taught. Today, however, is different and Mr. Greenwhistle asks her why she seems distracted.

Candy tells her instructor about her friend Fanny and promises to pay more attention in class.

At the end of the afternoon, Candy sees Shirley and explains that she wants to go see Fanny.

"That's great, Candy," says Shirley. "I wish I could join you, but I promised my mom I would be home right after Mouse Academy because she wants me to help her with a project."

"That's fine, Shirley," replies Candy. "I'll see you in the morning to walk to school."

The two friends part with a wave and Candy walks to Fanny's house.

Fanny's brother Trot is in the yard near where their family's hole is.

"Hey Trot, can I come in and see your sister?" Candy asks.

"Sure, she's not feeling very good but I'm sure she'd be happy to see you," replies Trot.

He leads Candy into the home which is actually a large burrow in the ground with leaves and branches covering the entry. They walk down tunnels until they come to a room near the surface that has a few holes in the ceiling that let in light and fresh air. There on a nest is Candy's friend Fanny.

"Hey Fanny, how are you feeling girl?" asks Candy. "I was hoping to see you at school, but Mrs. Wand explained that you were hurt and would miss school for a while."

Fanny looks up and smiles at Candy. "I'm doing okay. I just hurt, but I feel much better than I did a few weeks ago. I got hit by a wagon on the sidewalk. My leg got broken and my side, the ribs I think, got really banged up. I just layed on the sidewalk for quite a while until my brother Trifle found me. If he hadn't found me, I probably would have been eaten by a large bird or a cat. I'm pretty lucky that didn't happen."

"Oh my gosh, Fanny," says Candy. "I'm so glad that didn't happen, too. So, are you able to walk now? And how is your side? Does it still hurt bad?"

"I can walk a little ways," answers Fanny. "I'm not very fast but I can at least move around some. My side hurts pretty bad but not like it did. It's slowly getting better. That's the part that is holding me back from going to school. I just feel like I have to stay laying down all day," she finishes with a frown.

"I'm so sorry. I'll come visit you every day and bring school work so you don't miss anything. Would that be okay?"

Fanny's eyes opened wide and brightened. "You would do that for me? That's the best. Could we do homework together?"

"Sure, Fanny. Let's do that. I would like that, too."

After talking some more, Candy says, "Well, I have to go home now. My mom and dad don't know where I am. But I'll bring school work tomorrow and we can study together."

That brings a big smile to Fanny's face and a little tear forms in the corner of one eye, which she wipes away with a paw. "I'm so lucky to have a friend like you. Thank you for being so nice!"

Candy just smiles and then leaves to go home. She skips all the way home, happy that she is able to cheer up Fanny.

When Candy gets home she explains to her mom why she is late, and asks if it would be okay to do homework with Fanny every day until Fanny is able to go back to school.

"Of course, honey," says Christine. "That's so nice of you to think of Fanny right now when she's hurt. Just don't ignore your own homework and your chores here in our home, okay?"

"No problem, mom, I can keep up with everything. I know that if I was Fanny and I was hurt that I would be happy to have a friend come and spend time with me. That thought makes me happy, too."

Chris is listening to his daughter, and he walks up to her and grabs her for a big hug. "I'm so proud of you, Candy. You are learning one of the best lessons in life - that we're all in this together. When one of us is down, the others can lift them up. When we're up, we can help up those that are down. You're growing into a wonderful mouse, daughter!"

Candy just beams with a big smile on her face. Her mom and dad have given her really good advice and their smiles and encouragement are just an extra bonus that rewards her for reaching out to help Fanny.

The next day at school, Candy talks to Mrs. Wand before class starts and explains what she wants to do with Fanny. Mrs. Wand agrees to give Candy the homework assignment every day and encourages her to take good notes from the class so she can "teach" Fanny what was discussed.

The morning passes quickly as Candy listens closely so she can take careful notes. After Mouse School class is over, Candy goes home for lunch and then walks to Mouse Academy for her class there. She gets to class early and explains to Mr. Greenwhistle what she plans to do with Fanny.

"Would that be okay, Mr. Greenwhistle? I know she won't be able to see what you are demonstrating, but I can explain it and I think she will understand. She's pretty smart, you know."

Mr Greenwhistle strokes his whiskers and then says, "I'm sure that will be fine, Candy. Just take very good notes and describe what I have taught each day. If Fanny can pass each test, then I will pass her for this class. You are responsible for her, so this is your chance to do a very good job of note taking and explaining."

"Thank you! I'll be responsible for Fanny, and make sure that my notes are complete and that I explain your points as best as I can."

The class time passes quickly. Candy is the only mouse in the class taking notes as Mr. Greenwhistle teaches on the finer part of weeding. An interesting part of today's class is when he shows the class that certain weeds are actually good to eat, not only tasty but nutritious. Candy likes him because he's very practical and is a very patient instructor, making sure everyone in the class understands before he moves on.

After her Mouse Academy class is over, Candy rides her bicycle to Fanny's burrow and spends the next two hours sharing everything shat was covered in Mouse School and Mouse Academy. Fanny asks lots of questions and seems interested, but her side is bothering her and it's obvious that she has some pain. When Candy asks her how she's doing Fanny says, "I'm a little better. I can walk better, and my side doesn't hurt as much. I hope I'll be able to go to school next week or the week after that."

"Me, too," says Candy. "I like bringing the lessons over to you, but I feel bad that you don't get to come to class."

"You're just so kind to me, Candy. Thank you. I was feeling so lonely and sad and then you decided to help me. That made my attitude so much better. I don't know how to thank you."

"No thanks necessary," Candy replies. "It's what we do for each other, isn't it? I'm sure if I was hurt like you are, that you or another mouse would do just what I've been doing."

In fact, Shirley joins her to visit and help Fanny. The three girl mice laugh and talk about boys and class and all the other things that they would normally talk about if Fanny was totally healthy.

Every afternoon when Candy and Shirley come over Fanny looks sad at first, but when she sees her friends she breaks into a smile and seems as happy as ever.

"You two are the best medicine," says Fanny. "I never really had close friends, but you both have been the very best.

"I was sad, and now I'm happy. I was hurt, and now I'm better. I know that it would have been very hard for me to recover if you two hadn't been there for me. Thank you, friends."

The three mice share big smiles because the three are now besties.

Candy thinks to herself that she might not have become friends with Fanny if the accident hadn't hurt her. Now, she can't imagine not wanting to spend time with her.

Another week goes by and Fanny is finally able to get around. She doesn't tell Candy or Shirley but the next Monday she's at Mouse School and Mrs. Want makes a special point of having the class clap for her return.

It's one of the best days of Fanny's life, she thinks, and it's all because two girls decided to be her friend when she needed one the most.

Chapter 3 - The New Mouse Store

"Oh, I wish we could just go to the store and buy what we need, like humans can," lamented Christine to her husband. "It would be so much easier and besides, I wouldn't have to bother Mr. and Mrs. Dooty when we need things."

"I agree, honey. I sometimes need a few things, too. Some of those, they don't even have in human stores," adds Chris.

Candy responds quickly. "Hey, I have an idea. You know how that new couple at Mouse Church talked about how they'd like to have their own business? They said they had a market in their old neighborhood. Maybe they would want to start the same thing here."

Chris also thinks that's a good idea, and says he will talk to them this Sunday at Mouse Church. After that, both mice quickly forget the conversation until the weekend.

The Mouse family is walking into church the next weekend just as the new couple, Hairy and Ophelia Sticky, are also approaching the door to the church.

"Hi," says Hairy. "It's nice to see you guys again. We're sure enjoying our new neighborhood and all the nice families here at Mouse Church. How is your family?"

"We're doing well," replies Christine. "It's funny, we were just talking about how much we like you guys. Chris and I are always interested in mice doing business. I think you said you had a market in your old neighborhood. What happened to it and why did you move?"

"Good questions," Ophelia answers. "It's not a short story. Maybe after church we can eat together, and we'll swap life stories."

Chris immediately replies, "That sounds like fun. Come over to our place and we can show you around our home, have some lunch, and share our life adventures."

Hairy smiles "That's really nice of you, Chris. It is Chris, right?"

"Yes, it is. So, can you come over after church?"

"Sure. We'd like that," says Hairy, "We really want to get to know other mice in the neighborhood. We had so many friends in our old neighborhood, and we miss having those connections."

They hear music signaling that the church service is about to start. The conversation ends as everyone finds their seats.

After the service, Chris and Christine find Hairy and Ophelia and give them directions on how to find the Dootys' house. "We'll meet you at the kitchen porch, which is just off of the driveway."

The Mouse family heads home in their MouseWagon and rushes through the cat door and into their Home in the Wall. Chris quickly changes clothes and goes back out through the kitchen cat door to wait for the Sticky's, who arrive just a few minutes later.

"Hey, new friends, come in and see our place," greets Chris, before ushering them in through the cat door.

The Sticky's both laugh a little when they enter the Dootys' kitchen, having never gone through a cat door before.

As they go into the Dootys' bedroom Chris says, "Here's the secret entrance to our home. Just slide under this closet door and you'll see our house that we call 'Home in the Wall.'"

It is always a bit tricky for newcomers to get under the closet door and into the closet, but once done the couple stands staring at the outside of the Home in the Wall.

"Wow," says Ophelia. "That's a terrific house. How did you get that?"

Chris gives a brief explanation of their first Home in the Wall and then explains about finding the buried treasure in the Caribbean, that the Dootys got a reward for it, and how their human friends then paid to have this new Home in the Wall built for them.

Chris opens their door, where Christine is waiting inside the entrance.

"Welcome," she says. "Come on in. I'm putting together a light lunch for us to eat while we get acquainted. You've met our son Carl and our daughter, Candy, right? The six of us can enjoy lunch and conversations."

After entering, Chris offers to take their new friends for a quick tour of their home, an invitation that the other couple quickly accepts. This is perfect because it gives Christine and the kids enough time to gather some food for lunch.

After the tour is over, the six mice sit down to eat, and they share stories about their lives. The Mouse family's life is like an open book. They tell about their life together and a few of their stories.

The Sticky's talk about life before this neighborhood. They had a growing business, a nice nest in the wall of a house, and all was good... until the day that fire burned their home and their business. The fire was part of a large wildfire that burned several neighborhoods, and forced them to move to find a new place to live.

"I think I heard about that fire," said Chris. "That sounds horrible. We're so sorry for the loss of your home, but we're so glad you chose to move into our community.

"It must have been devastating for you, especially since you also lost your business. I can only imagine how lost that must feel after having a business for a long time.

"I'm curious, what kind of business did you have and how did you start it?"

"Well, we started our business just after we got married. I had always wanted my own business," said Hairy.

"Friends in our neighborhood were always needing things, and I'm pretty good at finding what mice need, so we decided to help out by finding what mice asked about and then selling those things to them. It was just a service for mice in our community. It started out small and we liked that. We knew everyone and soon had a good idea of what they liked and what they wanted.

"That was the start and our business began to grow because our customers soon told other mice and then they bought from us and told other mice and so on. Before too long, Ophelia and I made a list of the common things that mice were asking for, and we got those things and put them in our home. Then, when mice asked for them, we could sell them the items right then. After a while, we made notes of the most common things that mice wanted and we started buying more of those items and having them available for mice to buy right when they asked for them.

"That was very popular, and our business continued to grow. We liked that. We had good relationships with all of our customers, and they must have liked us, too, because they kept coming back. Our little house was full of popular items, and we were out of space so we found an old garage next door in an abandoned house and we started putting our sales items there. That was when things really took off!

"In our first year we had to hire employees. We started out by hiring one assistant, and quickly had to hire another. Then mice started coming from farther away, and we had to get more and different inventory, and we also had to hire more employees.

"Right before the fires hit, we had 16 employees and hundreds of items in the store. We called it the Mouse Emporium. As far as we know it was the biggest mouse store anywhere. We were interviewed by several Mouse News reporters and last year we were named the Mouse Store of the Year, by Mouse Times. Everything was going great. We were in our 6th year, and our business had grown large and very popular.

"Then, the fires hit without warning. One week everything was great. The next week, it was all gone. Several of our employees died in the fires, either at home or at the store. Ophelia

and I have been crushed ever since. We loved our employees, and we enjoyed the store. To lose them both was a terrible blow. We spent two months hiding in bushes in an unburned area nearby. Lots of animals and bad birds were hunting then and we had to stay out of sight. It was a very dark time."

Hairy's voice was shaking as he said this last information. It was pretty obvious that even though the couple had survived they were still deeply troubled by all they had gone through.

"Oh my," says Christine. "We are so sorry for you two. That's terrible. We're so glad that you decided to move here. We promise that we will make you feel at home here. This is your new home."

"I'm just curious, Hairy" Chris says. "I can imagine how hard that whole tragedy must have been for you two. Please forgive me for asking this, but do you ever think about starting another business? We have been hoping for a market here that could provide many of the items that everyone of us needs."

Hairy gets a distant look on his face and says, "We were just talking about that yesterday. We feel kind of lost without the business that we used to do. Having our market was a dream. Losing our market was a nightmare. We would love to start a new one, but we really don't know where to start."

Chris jumps in quickly, "I know where you can start. You talked about how you started your last business. You could do that again, here. We and our neighbors are always trying to find certain things we need. If we put the word out to our friends and neighbors that you are really good at finding those things I'm sure they would be grateful to be able to come to you for them. Like you did before, you could start out small and see if there is enough demand. I know that Mouse School, Mouse Academy and Mouse Church are always looking for all kinds of things.

"Christine is one of the partners in Mouse Academy and we're friends with Mr. Peepers, the principal of Mouse School. Of course, you know Rev. and Mandy Souris at Mouse Church because we all go there. We could also help spread the word with our friends and neighbors."

"That's so kind of you," says Ophelia. "We don't know what to say. That would be a dream come true. After the fire we thought we would never be able to recover from the loss. But, you've given us some hope."

The rest of the afternoon is spent coming up with ideas of needed products and services.

Chris is excited because this is something he's wanted for the local mouse community for quite some time, and specifically for his home and family.

During a break in the conversation, he asks, "What would you call this business?" hoping that will stimulate their new friends to continue taking steps toward the new venture.

Hairy and Ophelia look at each other and then Hairy says, "We'd call it 'The New Mouse Store.' We're new mice again, after our great loss, and this would be a new store and the beginning of a new life for us."

"I like it," says Chris, and Christine also nods, "It's a great name, you guys. Whet would be the next step?"

"Well," says Ophelia, "we'd need to get the word out. Eventually we would need some financing to be able to buy the common things that mice are asking for."

Christine answers, "No problem getting the word out. Chris and I know everyone here and we can start talking to people tomorrow. For financing, you can go to The Mouse Bank. It's owned by friends of ours and I'm sure they can help you with that. Mouse Academy needs several things. I'll talk to my partners tomorrow and we'll make up a list. So, what do you think?"

Ophelia and Hairy are already smiling and nodding. "We think we're starting a new business! You've given us hope for a new life and a new vision. We'll get started tomorrow."

Over the next several weeks, The New Mouse Store takes shape. Mice are ordering things they need, and as find and sell each item, Hairy and Ophelia share their ideas for how the store will take shape with every new customer. It's an exciting time for everyone. The mouse community has needed a store, and the Sticky's have needed a new life. It's almost perfect.

Over the next year, The New Mouse Store grows, opens a real store in an old building that used to be a store, but has been empty for many years. The New Mouse Store is in a back room. It has lots of room, and Frizz and Frak build shelves for common items, and a counter in front where Hairy and Ophelia can greet customers and take orders.

As the business grows, they add some mice to help and that gives several members of the community an opportunity for work. Chris becomes a part-time consultant to Hairy and Ophelia.

Out of the ashes of a tragic fire comes a vibrant new business for the mouse community.

Chris thinks to himself, "Maybe we should have suggested that the business be called 'The Phoenix Store,'" for the mythical bird that was reborn out of the ashes of a fire.

Then he realizes, "Naah, New Mouse Store fits just fine."

And what Chris Mouse would tell you is to look at every negative thing that happens to you as an opportunity. You may have to think about it for a while, but it's possible to turn every bad thing into a positive.

That's true for mice and also for people. There's an old saying, "When live gives you lemons, make lemonade." That attitude will help you get through life with hope and not fear or discouragement. Yes, life will have some disappointments mixed in with triumphs. But, if you force yourself to look for the way you can turn disappointment into hope, life will be good all the way through.

Chapter 4 - I Wanna' Buy Something

"Mom, I want to go to the Mouse Store and buy a hat," Candy calls to her mother from her bedroom early one evening.

Christine heard her daughter, but doesn't quite understand what she said, so she replies with the typical mother response, "What?"

In another minute, Candy appears at her mother's side and repeats her question.

"Mom, I really want one of the cool hats that other girls at school are wearing, and I also need to get some sunglasses. Can I go to the New Mouse Store, please?"

"I suppose, Candy," responds her mom, "but how are you going to pay for those things?"

"The new family at church has asked me if I would watch their pinkies while they have a date. They said they would pay me with credits at the New Mouse Store. That sounds pretty good, right?

"Well, I'm proud of you for being willing to work so you can buy things you want, Candy. I guess it will be okay. When will you do the sitting job and who are the people you will be sitting for? Are you asking me if it's okay for you to do that, also?"

"Of course, mom. They want me to sit for them this Friday night? Would that be okay? They're the Pillpots and they live in the next block over. So, could I go to the Mouse Store and buy the hat and sunglasses?"

"Oh right, we met the Pillpots last Sunday. Well, dad and I will talk it over and let you know what we decide tomorrow. Now, if you haven't finished your homework do that. I'll discuss your request with your dad in the morning."

The next day, Christine and Chris are having breakfast after both kids have gone off to Mouse School. Christine brings up the subject of Candy taking a sitting job and then using her pay to purchase a few personal items.

Being a good husband, Chris asks Christine what she thinks. Christine says she has mixed feelings, but this might be a good opportunity for Candy to take on more responsibility and learn a very good life lesson. Chris very wisely agrees with his wife and that settles the issue. Christine will tell Candy tomorrow after her Mouse Academy class.

The next afternoon Christine is already home when Candy walks in after class.

“Your dad and I talked it over,” Christine says to Candy as her daughter walks in the kitchen. “We think it will be a good opportunity for you to do pinkie sitting and we also agree with your request on where you’ll spend what you earn.”

“Oh, that’s amazing. Thank you, Mom. I will be really responsible, and I promise to show you what I buy.”

The following afternoon after Mouse Academy, Candy goes to the Pillpot home, a tucked-away, but spacious nest in a large shrub two blocks from Mouse Church. Byll Pillpot greets Candy at the entrance and is soon joined by his wife Garment.

"Hi Candy, we're so glad you're able to sit for our little ones. We've been looking forward to a date since we moved into the community, and you are a God-send. Could you sit for us tomorrow night?"

Candy nods her head in agreement. "I can come by right after Mouse Academy, if that's okay?"

Garment says, "Perfect, Candy. We will be gone for about three hours after you get here, and it will be dark when we get back home. The kids will have been fed and it's okay if they stay up until we get home. Now, let's show you around our home so you can be comfortable."

The nest is quite large. with five separate areas for various purposes. The living area includes three different places for sitting and gathering, the food area includes a space for storing food and another for eating, and the three bedrooms are for Byll and Garment, their daughter Frann, and the two young boys. The kids are triplets, but of course their daughter has a separate room from the sons.

Byll calls the kids from their room to meet Candy.

"We know they're young and full of energy," says Garment, "but we have tried to teach them good manners.

Kid's say hello to Candy Mouse. You should address her as Ms. Mouse."

"Hi, Ms. Mouse," the three say in very small voices, almost in unison. "We are very happy to meet you."

Candy smiles because she is immediately impressed by the pinkies' good manners.

"Hi kids, if it's okay with your mom and dad, you can just call me Candy. I'll be like your big sister when I stay with you while your parents go out tomorrow. Won't that be fun?"

The three young mice all nod their heads.

Turning to the Pillpots, Candy says, "Well, I had better get going. I have homework to do. I'll see you tomorrow after Academy."

Candy leaves and walks home, thinking to herself that this will be fun. It's her first sitting job, and the three little ones seem like very well-mannered pinkies.

The next day Candy walks straight to the Pillpot's home after Mouse Academy. She plans to do her homework for a while during the evening before Byll and Garment return home.

Knocking on the door, she's greeted by Garment and welcomed into the home.

Byll and Garment are both ready and after exchanging a few pleasant words with Candy, Garment turns to the pinkies, "You kids be good and mind Candy. Dad and I are going to go out for a few hours, so behave yourselves and we'll see you soon. We love you."

And with that, the two parents leave Candy smiling at the three young mice, certain that all will go well.

Candy hasn't had much experience with younger mice except at Mouse Church, and for a minute she is a little bit nervous about how the evening will go. However, she made a commitment and she really wants to get the hat and sunglasses that tonight's sitting will provide so that calms her down a bit.

The minute their parents leave the nest the three young mice start arguing and fighting.

"I get to go outside and you can't," says Marphin to Vansome.

"Oh yeah, well I can go out, too," replies Vansome.

"No you can't."

"Can, too!"

Frann jumps in, "You boys better behave or I'll tell mom and dad when they get home. You know what they'll do, right?"

Candy is wondering what to do and finally decides to take over. "Okay, kids, settle down. Marphin and Vansome, neither one of you can go outside. It's going to be dark soon and it's not safe. So just be good and play here at home."

"Told you," says Frann, to the frowns of her two brothers.

That starts what can only be called a game. Vansome yells, "I'm the cat and you're the mouse, Marphin" and starts running at his brother with his front paws above his head yelling, "Rowrrrr!"

Vansome starts running through the home, tearing around corners, tipping over things, yelling and making a mess while his brother chases him.

Frann is watching this and when Marphin runs by her she stretches out one of her back paws and trips him, causing him to tumble end over end into a corner of the room.

"Heyyy!!! That hurt! Why'd you do that? That's not fair!" and Marphin gets up and runs straight at his sister with Vansome running behind him also yelling, "Yeah! You bully! We were just playing. We're going to get you!"

When Marphin catches Frann he jumps up and the two of them roll over on the ground in a ball. Vansome catches up and joins the two-mouse ball with all three now rolling on the floor and yelling.

Candy doesn't know what to do, but she knows she has to do something. The three tussling pinkies are making a mess of the home and she's positive that their parents would not be happy about that, especially if they knock over any furniture. A couple of times the three have come very close to tipping over a small lamp on a table, which could easily break if it fell.

Candy raises her voice and shouts, "Stop it! Stop right now!

"Vansome, get up!

"Marphin! Stop wrestling with your sister and stand over here!

"Frann! You come over beside me!"

Seeing that the three are continuing to wrestle, Candy yells, "NOWWWW!" at the top of her lungs.

All three young mice stop wrestling and stand by Candy.

"Now, you three listen to me," Candy says. "No more running, no more wrestling, and no more yelling! If you start this up again, you will each go to a separate part of the house until your mom and dad get home, and I'll tell them what you have been doing. I don't think you're going to want to answer to them for misbehaving, right?"

The three young mice hang their heads as Candy is talking to them. Frann is the first to leave and she goes to her room. Marphin goes to the boys' room and Vansome stays in the living room with Candy.

It's quiet for 15 minutes and then Marphin yells at Vansome, "You little chicken. I bet you're crying to Candy about how smart I am and how that's not fair!"

Vansome yells back, "Oh yeah? I'll show you who's smart, you punky pinkie. Anything you can do I can do better!"

That starts the yelling all over again. Frann runs out of her room and grabs Vansome by the nose while he's sitting across the living area from Candy. "Here's who is smart, brother. I bet you can't blow your nose now without popping out your eyeballs!"

"Hey! That hurts! Candy! Help me, she's hurting me!"

Candy has been working on her homework but now she's rattled by the disruption. She tries to ignore Vansome and Frann, and the thought goes through her head that maybe she shouldn't ever do sitting again. This is too hard, they're out of control and they don't mind!

"Frann, let go of your brother and go back to your room, RIGHT NOW!" Candy yells.

Frann does as Candy has told her, and as Frann walks past the boy's room, Marphin runs out and grabs her, they wrestle for a minute and then fall to the floor yelling and wrestling. Vansome runs out from the living area and jumps into the pile of yelling mice, grabbing Marphin by one ear. It's a screaming mess again.

Candy throws down her studies and runs to the three young mice that are each struggling to get control of the other two.

"STOP IT!!!" She yells and then grabs each mouse by their ears and pulls them off of the pile.

"That does it! I told you to mind but you keep doing the opposite. So, here's what you're going to do now. Frann, you started this so your job now is to clean up the mess you three have made. Get started! Get everything put back exactly how it was before you guys began tussling!"

Frann looks at Candy and says, "You're not my mom. I don't have to do what you tell me to do."

"Oh, is that right?" Candy replies. "Well, I can guarantee that I will tell your mom and dad what you did while they were gone. I'm sure they will have an idea of what to do about it for the next several weeks. Now get this living room cleaned up and then go back to your room."

"Now, young lady!" she adds.

Frann lets go of her brothers and walks away, mumbling, "Well, they started it" under her breath.

Candy turns to the two boys. "Marphin. Go back to your room. This time I want you to clean everything in the room. I'm going to come in there in 30 minutes and if I see even one bug or stick or anything out of place, I will make you go to bed. Go NOW!"

Marphin slinks off to the room with his head down. He doesn't like getting scolded and he guesses that Candy means business, so he starts cleaning the room.

Candy still has one more young mouse to talk to.

"Vansome, shame on you. I thought you were a better pinkie than this. There's a time and place for fun and running and rough housing, but this isn't it. If you want your parents to ever leave you alone again, you will be quiet for the next hour before bedtime.

"If I hear one word or one squeak from you, I will make a mess in this room that you will have to clean up. I'm good at making messes so don't even think about making a sound. Got it?"

Vansome shakes his head. He got off easy. His brother and sister have to clean things. All he has to do is keep quiet. He's sure that's proof that he's the smart one.

In an hour, Candy goes to Frann's room and tells her it's time for bed. The young mouse starts cleaning up and crawls into her nest for sleep. That's the end of that.

Next, Candy leads Vansome into the boys room where Marphin has been sulking after cleaning it up.

"Okay, boys. Now it's your turn. Get cleaned up and get into bed. If you do what I say I won't tell your parents about your misbehaving tonight. But if you do anything else, I'll spill the beans about what you guys did tonight and you'll end up with whatever your parents decide."

Both mice grumble but do as they are told. Their parents are good to them, but they don't like it when their kids misbehave. When it does happen it usually means that the young mice will have to do chores they don't really like to do, and they won't get to do the things they do like to do. That's not worth the little bit of fun from misbehaving.

Finally! Whew! Candy is able to relax and finish her homework in peace and quiet.

An hour later, the Pillpots arrive back home.

"How were the kids, Candy," asks Garment.

"They're typical kids, Mrs. Pillpot," replies Candy. "They like to play and have fun. They played some games, I had them do a little cleaning up around the nest, and then they went to bed."

While Candy has been explaining how the evening went, Garment gets a big smile on her face which also makes Byll happy.

"That's so good to hear, Candy," says Garment. "We were worried that they might be a lot to handle. They're have a lot of energy at this age, you know."

"Well, it was no problem, and we all got along really well together. Thanks for letting me watch them. I hope you had a good evening out."

Garment motions to Byll who says, "Thank you, Candy. I hope you enjoy shopping and getting some nice things for yourself," and he hands Candy a paper with credits at the New Mouse Store.

Candy pushes the paper into her pocket. "You're welcome. Please let me know if you need me to watch the kids again."

Candy shakes paws with both parents, picks up her homework, and leaves, walking quickly home in the dark.

When she gets home, she tells her mom and dad about the experience.

"Oh my goodness, they were so full of energy. I had to stop them several times before they tore their house apart. But, everything ended well and Mr. and Mrs. Pillpot gave me a very generous credit at the New Mouse Store. Now I can get my sunglasses and hat. Thanks, mom and dad!"

Candy goes off to bed while her parents stay up thinking about what has just happened. Their little girl got her first sitting job, and she did okay! Both parents are happy with the outcome.

The next day, Byll and Garment talk to their three kids at breakfast.

"How was it with your sitter Candy last night?" asks Garment.

Frann answered right away, "It was good. She was really nice to us. We were pretty noisy and we were having fun, but she was very good about making sure we were good, and that we cleaned up after ourselves. We like her!"

Marphin and Vansome nod their heads at their sister's comments. Marphin adds, "Yeah, she was just like a mom. It was almost like you were here, mom. We liked her."

Vansome said, "Yeah, we liked her."

Byll and Garment are relieved. They had a good time last night, too, and it is so good to come home and find out that their kids liked the sitter they put in charge of them.

They exchange glances and smiles at each other. They will have Candy sit for them again.

Garment says, "I'm going to talk to some of our new neighbors with young kids and tell them about our good experience with Candy. They might like to use her, too, and I always want to reward good work with recommendations."

"Good idea," Byll adds. "Let's hope they don't schedule her so much that we can't use her again" he says with a smile.

That weekend, Candy goes to the New Mouse Store. She's been there once before when she first saw the hat and sunglasses. It's fun to try them on, knowing that she can buy them, take them home and wear them with her family and friends.

She spends almost an hour trying on various sunglasses, before finally settling on the pair that she liked the last time. Same thing with the hat. The store has lots of hats, so it’s fun trying on other ones, but she's really in love with the hat she wanted after her last visit.

Stopping at the checkout stand she hands over the credit and the store clerk tells her, "That's a very nice credit. You didn't even use half of it for this purchase. I'll mark off what you spent, and you can bring your remaining credit back for more stuff later."

Candy's heart flips a little. What a great deal. She had to put up with a little bit of noise and anxiety during her sitting job, but she got a very generous payment and now she can have fun buying more things in the future.

She thinks to herself, "I like this. I do some work and I get to buy things. I'm going to like doing more of this."

And with a smile on her face, she carries her new possessions home to show her mom and dad.

Carl and Candy each want to buy things at the New Mouse Store and so they have to learn how to get money by babysitting and doing house-garden work, good lessons for life. Candy learned from her first sitting job that work is not always pleasant, and sometimes even demanding and uncomfortable, but it is practice in being responsible. And the bonus is, you get paid. She's able to go to the New Mouse Store two more times and get more fun things with her remaining credit.

Carl has heard her story of sitting, and sees her bringing in packages of her purchases, and he thinks to himself, "Boy, I can't wait until I can earn some credits for doing work for other families. That's going to be cool," and he imagines all the great things he will be able to buy.

Both young mice have learned a valuable lesson in life. When you get older, you have to earn everything because almost nothing you need or want gets handed to you. The more responsible

you are, and the better attitude you have about doing work, the easier it is. And the better you feel about yourself.

Chapter 5 - Summer Breeze

The days are getting longer and the weather is getting warmer. That's the signal that summer is coming, and who doesn't like that?

Mouse School and Mouse Academy adjust to the change in seasons with new studies, and both have outdoor activities. Mouse School has playtime with games and outdoor recreation. Mouse Academy has classes about gardening and nature. Frizz and Frak teach a course for both male and female students on renovating empty sheds to create mice apartments. Lightbulb shows students how to use exterior lighting, a course that is very interesting because it uses existing wiring and existing lighting, just moving both to suit new purposes.

For Candy and Carl, the upcoming summer means no school and lots of time for fun with friends and family. It also means plenty of opportunities to ride their bicycles.

Carl is hoping to go camping out with his friends Billy Fun, Bobby Beans, and Tanter Thimble in the yard of the Fun family home. Billy has already checked with the humans that own the house and property, and they say it's okay, so now the mice need to collect enough camping gear to make it work. The kids get together and discuss what they'll need. They agree that they need a tarp to serve as a tent, and probably some warm clothes that they can sleep in. As for sleeping, they're pretty sure they can gather the necessary nesting materials from the yard.

Carl sees Mr. Dooty in the kitchen and asks, "Mr. Dooty, my friends and I are going camping at my friend Billy's house. None of us have ever gone camping on our own. What would you suggest that we bring? Any ideas on how we could make a tent, maybe using some plastic or something?"

Franklin answers, "That sounds like fun, Carl. I have an idea. Why don't I talk to Mr and Mrs. Lim where the Fun's live? If it's okay with them I can set up our camping tent in their yard, somewhere out of the way, for you guys to sleep in. Do you think that would work as a sleeping place?

Carl's eyes widen. "Oh, wow! That would be the absolute best, Mr. Dooty. But I don't know if my parents would be happy that I asked you for advice. We really love you and Mrs. Dooty and we try to make our family as easy to live with as possible."

"Don't worry, Carl. I'll talk to them and explain that you didn't ask me to do anything; but that I offered."

"That would be really nice. Thank you!"

When Carl goes back to his Home in the Wall, he's excited to see his friends and tell them about the possibility of getting a tent. He's pretty sure he's going to be a hero among his buddies.

Candy has been thinking about what she wants to do over the summer break. Her first ideas are that she could stay home and work in the house and garden, or she could try to get some summer work like pinkie-sitting or writing. (She's a very good writer and always gets great grades in her classes for that skill.)

Shirley Fun comes over to see Candy and the two of them talk about what they could do while their brothers are camping.

"I've got an idea," says Shirley. "We could sneak in our yard after dark and scare the boys while they're camping. That would be a blast, wouldn't it?"

Candy starts laughing. "That would be so much fun! We should definitely do that!"

The boys' plan is to go camping during the second week of summer break. Mr. Dooty talks to Kai and Amy Lin and they agree to let the boys camp in their backyard. Their only concern is a mean dog that has come into their yard at night sometimes, but Kai says that he can turn the backyard flood light on and that should keep the dog away.

The three boys start the countdown to camping week, and so does Mr. Dooty, and though the boys and Mr. Dooty don't know it, so do the girls.

School is out for Summer break on a Friday at Mouse School, and the following Wednesday at Mouse Academy. The happy mice kids run home on Wednesday with dreams of doing nothing, or doing something really fun. Who knows what kind of stuff you can do when you have all day every day to do it, right?

Most mice parents have a few ideas for how their vacationing kids can help around their house during the summer break. The next week after both schools finish classes for the summer won't mean laying around for Carl because his mom and dad have chores for him to do on Monday and Tuesday. They also have volunteered him to help Mr. Dooty on Wednesday and Thursday. So, he'll only have one weekday off on his first full week of summer vacation. But, with the weekend that still gives him three days to get ready for the camping trip. "Plenty of time," he thinks.

Christine has several things she would like Candy's help with on the first week of summer break. After Mouse Academy ends on Wednesday, both instructors and students are off for the summer. On Monday and Tuesday of the next week, Candy will help her mom clean up the Mouse Academy areas at Mouse Church so they can be left clean and neat for the summer.

Two days before Carl's camping trip with his friends, Carl's laying in the nest in his bedroom that night, thinking about what he packed the day before, and trying to figure out what he might be missing. He and his friends plan a trip to a nearby park on one of their camping days

and there's a lot to think about. Carl is pretty sure he has everything he's going to need, and he finally drops off to sleep dreaming of camping.

Finally, the day arrives for the camping trip. After breakfast that his mother insists that he eats first, Carl grabs all of his stuff for camping and puts it on the porch outside the kitchen door. Mr. Dooty is all ready, and grabs Carl's things to add to the tent, a tarp and some blankets that he's already put in the car. Carl is so excited that it seems that the ride to the Lim's house will take forever, but then they're at the house where Billy, Bobby and Tanter are standing outside waiting for him.

Mr. Dooty unloads the car and when Mr. Lim shows him where the young mice will be camping, Franklin and Kai Lim lay down the tarp and put up the tent on top of it. The kids help with what they're able to do, which is deciding where in the tent that each of them will sleep and then putting their things in that area. Soon the camp is all ready for camping.

Franklin asks Mr. Lim. "Is there anything else that you think we need to do for these guys? Can I help with anything?"

Kai replies, "No, Amy and I have it handled. We're delighted to have these young fellows here for a few days. They're all such polite youngsters. But thanks for bringing the tarp and tent. That makes our backyard look like an official campground."

Franklin gets in his car and after a smile and a wave, he drives home, leaving the four mice to do the final setup of their campsite.

There isn't much to set up; just a continuation of their argument about who gets to sleep in which part of the tent. After that's settled, the afternoon and early evening are fun. The young mice talk about everything - girls, school, their upcoming adventures, which of course includes their trip to the park.

Bobby Beans has an idea for how they can try sailing on the small lake in the park. It's a pretty wild idea, but it gets Carl and their two other friends thinking about how they could do that, too. Carl has some ideas, and he knows that Bobby and Tanter are pretty resourceful so they should have three or four ideas. One of those is bound to work!

The kids stay up late talking about the lake and all the other plans for their camping adventure. Finally, when they're all yawning, they decide to call it a night and all four crawl into the tent and curl up for sleep.

Candy, Teaser Thimble and Shirley Fun have spent that day together at Shirley's home in the garage wall of the Lim's house, and they're ready to execute their plan to scare the young camping males. Their plan is to sneak over to the boy's campsite and make loud animal noises outside their tent. "We have to roar like a bear, or growl like a large dog," says Shirley.

The girls have practiced making scary sounds all day and they walk to the boy's campsite with big smiles as they think about what they're about to do.

The girls stand just outside the tent. The night is pitch-black dark, there's no wind and no moon in the cloudy night sky. It's so dark the girls have trouble finding their way to the tent because they're afraid of tripping on things in the yard.

Candy, Shirley and Teaser creep very close to the tent and listen. There's not a sound coming from inside the tent. The boys must be sound asleep.

With the deepest voice she can muster, Candy makes a low growling sound. "Grrrrr!" No response from inside the tent, so she makes a louder growl, "GRRRRR!"

Inside the tent, the boys hear the sound and wake up, then start whispering to each other. "That doesn't sound like an animal," says Bobby. "It sounds like a mouse trying to sound like an animal."

"Yeah," says Tanter, "I think it's some other mice trying to scare us."

Carl jumps into the conversation, "I have an idea. Mr. Dooty let me borrow his bright flashlight. Let's wait for another sound outside and then let's do my idea." He whispers a plan to them.

The girls are now convinced that they're growling too softly, so they decide to growl together and they do it very loudly.

"GRRRROOOOWWWWLLLLL!"

Carl whispers to Tanter to stand a few feet away from him and point the flashlight at him, casting his shadow on the tent wall. The shadow makes it look like he's a very big mouse in the tent. As Tanter turns the flashlight on all four boys yell "RAAARRRRHHHH!" at the same time.

To the girls standing outside it sounds like a huge ferocious mouse is going to attack them and they run away yelling at the top of their lungs. So much for their trick.

The boys are laughing and rolling around on the floor of the tent! What a great way to start a camping trip!

The next day is the day of the park. The young mice get up early, walk outside the tent, eat and plan the day. They'll walk to the park, look around for a while, then see if there's any way they can get out on the lake on a boat or a raft, or maybe they'll just swim.

Walking to the park is like every other outing for mice. Everyone has to be very cautious, watch for danger (which for mice is everywhere), and be as quiet, and stay as hidden, as possible. Oh, and also move quickly because their parents have taught them the safety rule - the longer

you’re in one place the better chance you’ll be seen, which generally means the more likely you could be in danger.

The four friends get to the park and immediately start to check it out. What buildings are there? Where are the best trees? Are there any tall grasses or bushes? In other words, where are the good hiding places where they won’t be seen?

After the first look around the park, they have a pretty good idea of how to stay safely hidden from potential danger.

Tanter suggests that they check out the lake. It’s perfect. There are tall grasses by some of the shoreline, a small wooden dock, and two small sailboats that are being operated by remote controls held by two young human boys. As the mice watch, the boys bring the sailboats back to the dock and tie them to one of the dock's low railings. Then, they walk away talking and laughing.

The young mice watch and wait, thinking the boys will come back soon. Instead, the mice wait for 15 minutes and there is no sign of the human boys.

Tanter motions for the other mice to follow him and they all scamper to the dock, walk out on it, and now they’re right beside where the sailboats are tied up. Pretty cool! The boats look really nice and they're just big enough for two mice on each.

Tanter motions for Billy to get in one boat with him, and Carl and Bobby to get in the other boat. Carl isn’t sure about doing this. These aren’t their boats. What if the human boys come back and find them on them? They could be in a lot of trouble. Not one to be left behind, Carl swallows his anxiety, and he climbs into the second boat with his friend Bobby Beans.

Tanter shows Bobby how to untie the boat with Carl, and then he unties the boat he’s sharing with Billy. In just a few minutes the two boats are slowly drifting away from the dock. Tanter grabs the small wood tiller at the back of the boat that steers the boat, and with a light wind hitting their sails the boat moves away from the dock and out into the lake. Carl has been watching Tanter and he grabs the tiller on the other boat, and soon their boat is also sailing away from the dock. Carl pushes the tiller to turn the boat to where Tanter and Billy’s boat is sailing. The wind is gentle, and both boats seem very easy to steer.

It's a beautiful day and the four young mice are sailing on a wonderful lake in two nice sailboats. Carl looks at Bobby and sees that he is smiling so big his nose should be hurting. His own nose is also hurting from doing the same thing. This is so much fun!

It can’t get much better than this, Carl thinks, and for the next fifteen minutes it’s all fun and happiness. The wind is picking up a little which makes the sails on both boats start to tip the boats a little on their sides. Carl tries to steer the rudder to make the boat more upright, but the boat acts like it has a mind of its own. It’s getting even more on one side and both he and

Bobby are getting nervous. He looks for Tanter's boat and when he spots it, he sees that their boat is also more on its side. Both boats are now sailing together, and they're headed very quickly toward the shoreline.

Carl and Tanter are both trying to adjust the tillers on their boats, but neither mouse can budge them. The boats are now moving very fast straight toward the shore where Carl can see two boys standing holding some kind of boxes in their hands.

As they get closer, one of the boys on the shore yells, "Look Benji, we're getting the boats back. But it looks like there's something on them. What is that?" He's looking right at the mice on the boats!

When the sailboats almost touch the shore, Carl yells to Tanter's boat that they need to jump off and into the water. All four mice jump off of their boats, the two sailboats reach shore and the two boys grab them with one of them shouting, "There's nothing on board. How could they have gotten loose and out in the middle of the lake?" The other boy replies, "I don't know, but we got the boats back. My dad would be really mad if we lost them."

The four shivering mice swim to shore, crawl out of the lake into some tall grass and wait until the boys are gone. Then they scramble out from behind the grass and, shake themselves off. Once they're dry, they leave the lake and make their way back to Billy's house. They all talk and laugh all the way back. This was a great adventure. Okay, it was a little scary, but they made it back safely. And it will make a great story to tell everyone at school when their summer vacation is over.

The rest of their camping time is fun, but with nothing out of the ordinary. The boys had planned to go on an excursion to the beach, but after the sailboat incident they decide not to take any more risks, because there is no sense in pushing their luck. They'll just relax and enjoy the camping experience.

Candy, Shirley, and Teaser also have plans while the boys are camping, having failed at scaring their brothers that night in the tent. Beside that attempt, the girls also want to go exploring. Shirley has asked Amy Lim if it would be possible to go on a little shopping trip with her. Amy thinks that's a great idea and suggests they also go to a local gallery to look at some art. The gallery is having an exhibition of animal art, which really interests Teaser because she likes to draw and paint.

The shopping trip sounds fun and very interesting. Mrs. Lim is taking them to a large, nearby mall. She's going to wear a large, loose jacket with big pockets which will make it easy for the three girls to ride and look. The jacket is pretty cool because it has mouse designs on it, so the peeking mice girls will almost seem invisible.

Parking at the mall is a challenge and Mrs. Lim has to park all the way across a big parking lot. The walk to the first door of the mall isn’t very short, but it's a very nice day and it's pleasant to be outside.

They walk into the mall and suddenly it's much cooler. The mall has really great air conditioning, and almost too cool, so the girls stay low in the pockets to keep from getting cold.

Directly inside the mall is the gallery. Teaser can't stop staring at the art in the window displays, and she is very excited to go inside and look closer. The sculptures are amazing. Some are realistic, like human or animal figures, and some are abstract, which means you really can't tell what they are supposed to represent so you can let your imagination come up with your own answers. Teaser is very excited and stands in front of each painting and sculpture of animals staring and thinking. It's a small gallery, but the three girls and Amy spend 20 minutes just looking. Teaser has a small sketch book with her and draws a few ideas in it as she looks at several pieces. It's nice, but Shirley and Candy aren't really all that excited about art so Mrs. Lim takes them outside the gallery to see what other stores are close by.

The first store they walk in has "Hello Kitty" products, which is kind of scary for the mice girls. They're not very comfortable around kitties, even toy ones, but they like the colors and the looks of the kitties are very cute, almost safe. Mrs. Lim walks around the store and down every aisle, which gives the three mice a good look at lots of colorful products. That part is fun!

After that store they walk into a cosmetics store. It's a little confusing for the mice girls because they all have fur and whiskers on their faces, which makes it very challenging to even think about using makeup. It is interesting though, like the other store, because they can see the kinds of things that humans like.

Candy tells the other girls, that are now all in one pocket, "Don't you think I would look good with big red lips like that picture?" as she points to the picture of a model. All three laugh as Shirley says, "Sure, Candy, but you need lips to do that!"

Mrs. Lim wanders in and out of several more stores, but one is particularly interesting to the mice girls. It's a toy store. Almost everything in the store is their size! That means they can try different toys, secretly of course so they aren't seen. All three girls climb on a fire truck while Candy tells the story of the fire in their house, describing the fire truck and the fire people that came to put out the fire.

One store displays lots of toy animals and there, right in the middle, in plain sight, are toy, stuffed mice. Mrs. Lim sets them down in the display and Candy bats her eyes, puts her front paws on her hips and walks up to one stuffed mouse saying, "Well, hello, big boy! Got any plans for later?" The other girls laugh, and they all check out the whiskers on the toy mouse. Whiskers is one of the attractions between male and female mice, but the whiskers on this mouse aren't that great, so they move on.

They spend the longest time with a doll house and a toy kitchen. Shirley really likes those displays and wants to check everything out. Mrs. Lim makes a note about the doll house because she and Mr. Lim have talked about getting a house for the Fun family, like the house the Frizz and Frak built for the Mouse family. She plans to bring Mr. Lim and the Fun family back to this store on another day to make a decision on buying the house.

After they leave the toy store Mrs. Lim takes them to a science store with all kinds of really cool scientific products, like telescopes and computers and gadgets. Candy really likes this store. "It's so interesting, Mrs. Lim. I'm curious about everything and this store has some very interesting stuff. I didn't know that there are these kind of products."

They stop at a few more stores, but nothing really is all that interesting. The clothing stores have lots of things for people, but nothing for mice. The treats and food places look and smell great, but no one is really all that hungry, so they don't even stop at those.

The shopping trip has been fun, and after four hours the three mice girls are tired and are glad when it’s time to go home.

Chris and Christine Mouse are also having a good time while their kids are away having fun. It's nice with to have some peace and quiet in their Home in the Wall.

This summer is starting out to be a really great one!

Chapter 6 - A Trip to Nowhere

Grandma's and Grandpa's are family treasures. They have decades of experience in life, they have raised children from infants to adults. And, for grandkids, they have patience, unending love, and wisdom to help each child grow into a responsible adult.

Some grandparents say that the best thing about grandkids is they give each grandparent another chance to correct the mistakes they made in their own children.

Grandpa and Grandma Mouse are exactly what was just described.

They raised Chris and his brother and two sisters to be responsible mice, to be caring and loving toward one another and respectful of others, and to grow into examples for their children to follow.

After Chris and his siblings grew up and left the nest, Grandpa and Grandma settled into a nice, comfortable life many miles from where Chris now lives. All their other kids live close to them, but Chris was an adventurous young mouse. He was always seeking new things to learn and do, and that eventually caused him to move closer to the ocean.

You can read stories of Chris and his young life and moving away from home in the upcoming Book 10, *Early Days and Good Friends*. But for now, let's read about this adventure.

Grandma and Grandpa Mouse, like grandparents of both humans and animals, are older. They live a simpler life, not needing to work hard so they can build a nest egg for the future. At this point in their life, they're enjoying what humans call "the fruits of their labor," which simply means that what they did in life up to now is giving them the opportunity and the ability to take it easier, and enjoy life more. No more hard work.

Chris and Christine have visited Grandpa and Grandma Mouse several times since they got married and moved a distance away from the homes that they grew up in. But, it's been some time since they returned to the old Mouse family home, and never with Carl and Candy.

Two weeks ago at dinner, Chris says, "We should go see Grandma and Grandpa Mouse, and let our kids know who they came from."

Christine responds, "That's a good idea, Chris. I have been thinking the same thing. When should we go?"

"Maybe next month, when the kids get their school break," answers Chris. "Is Mouse Academy also taking the same break?"

"Yes, we are," says Christine. "We'll be off for one week, exactly the same as Mouse School."

"Great, let's plan a trip. We can take MouseWagon, although I hope there will be some place we can plug in at the house by where they live."

Carl and Candy have been listening to their parents. They're interested but not yet excited. They have never met Grandpa and Grandma Mouse, and they're a little curious about them. What they are more excited about, however, is that the fall break from school is coming and they'll have a one week break in their routine. Change for young mice is always more fun and more interesting than doing the same things every week.

They both think, "Hmm. This could be pretty fun. And, we've never met either of our grandparents."

Chris begins to make a list of what they will need to do to prepare for the trip. The actual travel will take at least four hours, and they will have to go through some areas that are, shall we say, challenging. They will need to be ready for animals, big birds, cars, human kids, human adults, obstacles and other things that will have pass safely by. It's a long list of potentially dangerous encounters, and it's even longer than what they will need to take with them.

Christine is also making a list. She pland to bring food for the combined family to eat and share, since Grandma and Grandpa have less than they do. They don't want to be a burden on the older folks by visiting and needing everything. Fortunately, the Mouse family portion of the garden has been producing lots of great produce that they can pack in the MouseWagon and take on the short journey. That's going to be fun to share.

Carl and Candy also make their list. By the way, list making is a Mouse family tradition. Every major event, trip or challenge is met first by writing down what they might face and then what they can do to prepare for it. This smart planning has been the best tool they could ever have developed, and it has been very useful for trips like the ones to the Caribbean and to the Andes, as well as camping and other travels.

They have also used list making when they planned their garden, rebuilt their Home in the Wall, and when Christine built Mouse Academy. As a bonus, their friends have also had the benefit of seeing what the Mouse family does as they have built businesses, changed their lifestyles and experienced new things.

But, that's extra information. The point is, Carl and Candy's lists are pretty simple. Carl includes his favorite ball cap and sneakers, Candy has a few clothes, plus her hair and other grooming items.

List making done, the family continues with school and other activities.

Chris tells Mr. Dooty about their upcoming trip which is very good, because Franklin tells him how he can charge the MouseWagon at their destination.

"Most houses have power outlets outside, Chris," he says. "Just bring the charging cord with you and then when you get there, plug the car end into your MouseWagon and the power end into the outlet. You'll be good to go."

The Mouse family talks about the trip every week, including even at the weekly dinner they have with Franklin and Donna. As they get closer to the start of their trip the can feel the excitement building.

The day before their departure, Chris and the kids load the MouseWagon with everything they will be taking.

The next day it's time to leave. MouseWagon is fully charged. ust before leaving Christine puts the food in the back of the car and that's the last thing before they all jump in the car to leave.

Chris has the family hold paws while they pray for a safe trip and a nice visit. Then, it's time to leave.

Franklin and Donna Dooty stand at the edge of the driveway while the mice get in the car. Then, Chris pushes down on the "go" pedal and the car moves forward with the Mouse family and the Dootys waving goodbye to each other. There's excitement in the car. It's the beginning of a great trip.

Leaving the driveway, Chris is careful to look both ways on the sidewalk before driving into the street. They will be driving right beside the curb to avoid having to find a way to cross the street at the end of each block.

The first block is easy and Chris can see that it will be smooth sailing at the end. Crossing the first few streets is no problem. They are all four-way stops and there are very few cars on this day. At each intersection Chris pushes down on the "go" pedal and the car zips across each side street easily.

Chris has drawn a Mouse Map with the directions for the trip. It's a pretty good map, but of course it doesn't always include all the obstacles they will face. He's learned that there are just some things that can happen that you can't know about in advance.

The first major challenge is a street that is flooded. A fire hydrant has burst and is sending a tall spray of water in the air. The water is now flowing down the street and into a gutter, but

the edge of the side street is flooded and the MouseWagon will have to cross to the other side of the street to avoid floating down the little river next to the curb.

Chris waits for a break in the traffic on the cross street and then turns sharply to the left and drives to the other side of the street. Once there, he turns the car to point in the direction they had been traveling. As they continue down the street they all look across it street to see the fast moving "river" from the broken fire hydrant.

"Whew," says Chris. "That would have been a real problem. We could have been swept into the river. We were lucky we were able to get on the other side of the street!"

Christine and the kids all breathe a sigh of relief. The rushing water was a problem they couldn't have expected. But, thanks to the smart moves of Chris in driving around it, they were able to avoid a very dangerous situation.

The next traveling distance is much easier. There is very little traffic on the streets and the MouseWagon is running fine. Everyone relaxes. It's just going to be a few more hours and then they'll be at Grandpa and Grandma's house.

The relaxed feeling is good for a little while until they run into road construction. Big equipment is rumbling along the road, there are barricades across the streets, and Chris is forced to find a way around the construction.

He turns on a side street and travels two more blocks until there are no more barricades across the street in the direction they need to travel. Then he turns back in the right direction and the MouseWagon is able to continue on their jouney without road hazards.

After three blocks the street they're on starts a gradual turn to the left. It's a curve that they didn't expect. Chris stops the car and looks at the Mouse Map he drew. Unfortunately, this street is not on the map, because he didn't know about the road construction, so he didn't draw the street that they're on. All he can think to do is continue driving and hope the street turns back in the direction they need to go.

It doesn't. The street just continues to go in the new direction, taking them farther and farther from the street they were supposed to be traveling on.

Christine suggests to Chris that they take the next side street to the right so they will at least be going in the right general direction again. Chris nods his head and at the next intersection he turns right.

This street is pretty busy. There are lots of cars and two times Chris has to stop the car to avoid bicycles that are being ridden by kids right where they are traveling. Another obstacle, at intersections there are people standing on the corners and then walking across.

Every three or four blocks, the intersection has a traffic light. This is something that Chris has never seen before but he watches the cars beside him and when they cross the street he does, too.

At one street crossing, though, there's a near miss because the car next to him on the street is turning right, directly in front of Chris. He pushed hard on the brakes just in time as the family watches a huge car drive right where they would have been if Chris hadn't stopped the car in a hurry.

Chris is starting to sweat. This is very scary and he's beginning to worry about the safety of his family. The near miss with the car was way too close. He has to pay close attention and think carefully of a safer way to get to Grandpa and Grandma's house.

The Mouse Map is now useless, and Chris is feeling very anxious. He sees a park in the next block and is able to take a driveway to get up on the sidewalk and then into the park where he stops the car.

"Let's get out and get some fresh air," he says to his family. "I need a few minutes to relax, and figure out where we are and which direction to go next."

The kids jump out of the car and run through the grass. This is nice, Chris and Christine think. Everyone was getting too nervous inside the car, but this helps calm things down.

Chris and Christine try to figure out how to get back on the original trip plan.

Christine says, "I counted, and we drove six blocks to the left before you turned right again. If we just go six blocks to the right, we can turn left and be back on the way that you had on your map."

Chris thinks for a minute and then says, "You're right. That's good thinking. Sometimes I get so wrapped up in the problem that it's hard to see the solution. Let's let the kids relax and play for a few more minutes and then we'll do what you suggested."

Carl and Candy are playing tag in the grass. It's a pretty day, not too hot and not too cold. There's no wind and there are almost no people in the park. In other words, it's a great day for mice to play.

Candy catches Carl and wraps her front paws around him, which makes him fall to the ground with her on top of him. Both kids are laughing. It's a fun break and just what they all needed after the nervous last bit of travel.

Finally Chris calls out, "Okay, kids. We're ready to go again. Jump in the car."

Everyone climbs back into the MouseWagon. Carl pushes on the "go" button and turns the car around to the street they just crossed.

Then, he turns to the left. They drive through five intersections and as they get to the sixth one they see barricades on the right, which was the way they would have had to drive before they took their detour. The street construction is over.

That's great, thinks Chris, as he turns left away from the construction zone. Christine has the best sense of direction in the family, and she says, "This is it. We're on the right street again."

Everyone relaxes. Now, they just need to keep going and follow the Mouse Map.

The rest of the trip is much easier. They see a cat on one street but it doesn't see them, so there's no danger there. A few cars get close to them, but Chris is good at steering and using the brakes to stay clear of that danger. They have to cross a few streets with street lights, but Chris mastered that challenge earlier in their trip so that's no problem.

Two hours later Chris stops the MouseWagon to look at his Mouse Map. "I think we're very close, guys," he says. "It should be just two more blocks ahead and then one block to the left."

That's the easiest part of the trip so far. In several minutes they're in front of the house where Grandpa and Grandma live.

Chris pulls into the driveway and honks the horn. In just a minute or two, Grandpa and Grandma walk out to meet them, and are standing beside their car.

The family gets out of the car and there are hugs with everyone. Grandpa and Grandma Mouse have big smiles, as does every member of the Chris Mouse family.

"Well, come on in," says Grandpa, and he leads them into a slight opening to where they live.

The big house where their host family lives has stairs leading to the first floor, which is actually the second floor. The first floor is actually concrete in the exact dimensions of the wood house above it. In other parts of the country, this would be a basement, and it would be in the ground. But here, in California, there are earthquakes and that means that you can't build into the ground or your house might not survive one of the "shakers" that happen every so often.

So, in this house humans live on the second floor, and the concrete floor below them is where they store lots of stuff. It's a place to keep things out of sight, but still needed. Down in the bottom floor is where the heater and air conditioner, the hot water heater, and a

laundry area with sink and washer and dryer are kept. The concrete floor is also where Chris' parents live.

Grandpa and Grandma's home is modest compared to the Home in the Wall, but it's comfortable. From the outside it looks like a wooden box. There's a hole on the backside that is the entrance. Going inside, Grandma has decorated the three rooms with lots of cozy, comfortable things. It feels kind of old, think the kids, but it has a very restful feeling.

"Sit down and rest after your journey," says Grandpa. "How was the trip?"

Chris and Christine share some of the details of their day's jouney, with Carl and Candy adding a few things that they thought of.

"Well," says Grandma, "you've had quite the adventure. You must be tired after all of that. Let me make something for us to eat and we can just relax for a while."

"Thank you, Grandma," says Christine. "We brought a bunch of food, and we don't want to be a burden to you. Let me make some food from what we brought. You know we have a nice garden at our place, right? Well, we have some great vegetables that Chris and I and the kids grew, and we brought them to share with you."

Grandma nods her head and Christine has the kids help her unload the food from the car while Chris carries in their clothes and other trip stuff.

The meal is what everyone needs. Grandma and Grandpa had waited for them to arrive before eating so they were hungry. Chris and family had only eaten breakfast and their long journey took lots of energy, so they were hungry. Everyone ate well.

Afterwards, Chris and Christine set up where they would sleep, and the kids did the same. Then the adults talk while the kids go back outside to look around.

Grandpa tells Carl and Candy what to look out for, and what might be interesting to see. "Our human home owners are gone this week, so they won't be around while you're here. There is also another mouse family living next door," says Grandpa. "They have kids about your age. If they're outside they might be fun to play with."

Candy and Carl run outside and check out the yard. It's a nice yard with lots of grass and trees. As they walk around the yard they hear the sound of other mice next door. They peak through the bushes and see a young male and female running around the yard.

Carl yells out, "Hey!" and the other kids stop running. They look at the bushes and spot Carl and Candy.

"Hi, who are you guys?" says the girl.

Candy and Carl introduce themselves and after a quick greeting they are invited over to the other yard to play.

It's a fun afternoon for the kids, with new friends. Later that afternoon they go back to Grandpa and Grandma's house where their parents have been having a wonderful time visiting with Chris' parents.

Grandpa is in the middle of telling stories about when Chris was a young pinkie.

"He was a pretty smart young mouse, but he kept trying lots of things. He never seemed to settle down to one thing. After he did one thing, boom, he was off to the next. We always wondered what he would do when he got older and had a family. He turned out pretty good."

Chris jumped into the conversation, "Well, you guys gave me the freedom to try things. I was interested in so many different parts of life. I guess my curiosity was what gave me so many lessons in life. But you both taught me the most important lessons. You taught me how to be a good mouse, how to get along with others, how to respect everyone else and treat them with dignity.

"I'll never forget the time when that bully at school tried to beat me up and you told me that he probably hadn't had the loving family that I had. You gave me the idea to become his friend and show him that he didn't need to use force or strength to be valued. After I did that, he started changing. It was slow and he was still kind of mean at times, but eventually he was comfortable with himself and other mice and he became a pretty good mouse.

"I wonder what ever happened to him. I think his name was Grig Pluck."

Grandma's eyes brighten. "Oh, that kid. He's now a mouse lawyer. He helps mice that get in trouble, and he helps settle arguments between mice. He's married to a wonderful mouse names Chellsee. They go to our church and she's a deacon."

Candy asks, "What's a deacon, Grandma? We don't have them in our church."

"Well, sweety, a deacon is just a leader in the church that is trusted and can take on bigger responsibilities to help the church and the pastor."

"Oh, I understand. We have leaders in our church, too, but I don't think they have a title like that."

Chris says, "I'm happy to hear about Grig. He was such a jerk when I first met him. He tried to bully all the other kids and most of us were afraid of him. He wouldn't have ended up very well if Grandpa hadn't told me how to handle the situation."

"You were good to listen and try my advice, son," says Grandpa. "You were smart to pay attention to older people that have had a lot more experience. That's how you keep from making the mistakes that someone else has made."

The other three adults all nod. Carl and Candy don't nod, but it's obvious that they're thinking about all of this.

Dinner that night is delicious. Grandma has picked some berries from a wild berry bush a few doors down and serves them with pride. Everyone "oohs and aahs" as they chew on the sweet berries and swallow the delicious berry juice.

The next several days are mixed with different things.

The kids play with Lank and Limmy, their new friends next door. They're good kids and since they're very close to the age of Candy and Carl, they have a lot in common with them.

Lank likes to play PawBall, which Carl likes, too. He gets a few of the other mice to come over for a game and they end up playing for several hours.

When Carl tells Lank about his bicycle, Lank's eyes open wide. "You have one of those?" he asks. "I've seen humans ride those and they look really fun. How did you get that?"

Carl shares the story about Mr. and Mrs. Dooty and all they have done. He tells him about the MouseWagon and Chris' motorcycle. Lank immediately asks if Carl can show him the MouseWagon to which Carl quickly agrees.

They walk next door where the MouseWagon is parked. Chris had found the outside outlet and plugged the car into it to charge up the battery.

The car is a thing of beauty because one of the first things Chris did after they settled in at Grandpa and Grandma's place was to have Carl help him clean it. It is now spotless and gleaming in the sunshine.

"Wow! That's so cool," says Lank. "That would be fun to ride in. Maybe your dad would take us for a ride while you're here."

"I'll ask hm," answers Carl. "He loves driving it and this would be a good excuse for him to take us out in it."

The boys have more games to play, with Lank showing Carl around the neighborhood and introducing him to other mice in addition to the ones that come over to play PawBall. Carl is having fun with this new friend and Lank is also enjoying a new buddy.

Limmy is into fashion. She likes to make clothes. Her mother is a very good seamstress, which is a person that makes clothes. Limmy is able to get the human woman upstairs, a widow named Jenny, to get fabrics and buttons and thread and other sewing things for her.

Limmy shows Candy some of the clothes she has made. Candy is really interested in the patterns that Limmy uses to make her garments.

"Where do you get those, Limmy?" Candy asks.

"Jenny helps me make them, Candy," Limmy replies. "She teaches me everything. I want to be able to make them myself eventually, but for now she shows me a pattern, and I try to make it. I'm getting better at it."

"That's so cool," says Candy. "I'd like to learn more about this. Could you teach me a little while we're visiting?"

"Of course, my friend. And I'll introduce you to some of the other girls here that also make clothes. We get together every week to compare patterns and try new things that Jenny has shown us."

The kids have spent almost every day of their visit with the friends next door, while their mom and dad visit with Grandma and Grandpa. Every morning and night they all sit down to eat, and in the evenings they all talk together and play games before going to sleep. Carl and Candy are learning so much about their grandparents that they never knew, and they also learn a few things about their dad from his childhood. It's been fun and very interesting.

Carl and Candy are beginning to love their grandma and grandpa, two people from their family that they had never met before. This is part of their history, a big thread of their life that has helped to shape them into the kids that they are, and hopefully into the adults they will become.

The values they learn, the stories of life and adventure and challenge and victory, these are essential ingredients that Carl and Candy don't totally understand the benefit of yet, but they like them. They give them a feeling that they have a strong and solid foundation. And that foundation is what will carry them forward in life and shape them into good mice and, some day, good parents.

The day arrives when it's time to return back home. Their time is up, they have talked all they can, they have played and laughed and had a wonderful time. But now it's time to return to their lives and their Home in the Wall.

Candy and Carl go over to Lank and Limmy's house and say their goodbyes. Both sets of kids are sad at losing their friends, but Carl and Candy agree to come visit again, and they

invite Lank and Limmy to come visit them if it's ever possible. They all silently think that they probably will not see each other again, but at least they had fun and made good friends this time. That might have to do.

Returning back to Grandpa and Grandm's house, Carl halps his dad get the MouseWagon ready for the trip. They wash and polish the outside and clean the inside. Chris crawls under the car to inspect all the visible parts. Then, he climbs inside and checks all the controls - steering wheel, "go" button, brakes. Everything is in good operating condition and ready to go.

Christine and Candy have everything packed. Now it's just a matter of carrying it out to the MouseWagon and loading it in.

Chris, Carl and Candy load the car with everything, then they return to where Christine and Grandpa and Grandma are standing. Chris unplugs the car and stows the charging wire in the back of the car.

Both families exchange hugs and kisses.

The Mouse family climb in their car, settle in, and Chris pushes on the "go" button, turns the car around in the driveway, and with waving out of each window, the Mouse family takes off for home.

It's a much easier trip this way because Chris has written on his Mouse Map where the problems were, like the road construction.

Going back, they see the "Road Closed" signs meaning that the street is still closed. Chris retraces the steps they took before, and they're soon past the construction and back on the straight street leading home.

There are a few moments of caution as big cars get close, cars turn in front of them, and a dog runs across the street right in front of their car. But, except for those minor issues it's a pretty easy drive back.

After about four hours they can see their block. The sidewalk, bushes, fences and trees are all still there. It feels good to see such familiar sights.

They pull into their driveway and up to the kitchen porch.

For the next half hour the whole family unloads the car, taking everything back into their Home in the Wall. Then Candy, Carl and Chris come back out and clean the car while Christine puts away some of the trip stuff.

It's been a great trip and a fun and warm visit. That night they have dinner with the Dootys and share stories from their visit to Grandma and Grandpa's house.

This is the kind of trip that no one imagined. They thought it was going to be fun, but what they got from the trip was magic. This was the stepping stone that every one of the Chris Mouse family needed to be happier and better mice. And, it was a trip that Carl and Candy will talk about for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 7 - MouseOhWeen

October is generally not a favorite month in the Mouse family home. The weather can be iffy – maybe still hot, maybe cooler, maybe windy, maybe some rain. It just depends on a lot of conditions. So, the problem is that mice just can't plan anything that might be outside until the day they want to do it.

But, one day in October is very popular among young mice in the local community and they're ready for it, rain or shine, hot or cold. It's the last day of the month. That is the day that young mice dress up in costumes and go from mouse house to mouse house, asking for treats.

The history of this event in the mouse community has been lost to time.

The many ideas about its origin include stories of mouse actors in the movie industry, as well as tales of events of over 100 years ago. Of course, mouse historical information isn't as easy to trace as human history which is why opinions about certain details vary among mice, most actual facts now unfortunately lost to obscurity.

What is undeniable is that mice do follow certain, shall we call them, traditions, handed down from generation to generation. Factual details of this history are sometimes obscure given the total disinterest of mice in things of the past. Humans have it so much better because they keep information that goes back thousands of years.

Now that Chris is being asked by Carl and Candy for the mouse history of this last day of October, he is up against a brick wall. No information from history, and no clues. Christine is no help, either, because all she knows is what she experienced as a young mouse, and no more.

Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, on the other hand, love the traditions of human Halloween. Kids from all over communities spread out over the neighborhoods in costumes, carrying sacks, knocking on doors and presenting the people who answer with a simple question, "Would you like to give us a treat, or would you like us to pull a trick on you?" Of course, that's been shortened over years and generations to saying simply, "Trick or treat?"

For the Dootys, it's fun to see all the kid's costumes, from ghosts to pirates and all manner of other dress-up disguises. For the kids, it's a chance to get lots of candy and other treats. In the Dooty household, that's considered a fair deal. They're always very generous with their treats, and they love to see each kid and their costume.

Mice, however, also have their traditions, and as it so happens, on the very same day. Again, no mouse can tell you how this started, but every October 31st young mice dress up, put masks on, and go to other mouse houses to ask for treats. The treats are different because while mice really like sugar, mouse parents are very strict about limiting the amount of sweet treats that

their kids eat. And, mouse parents don't often give out those kind of treats on MouseOhWeen, either.

In mid-October this year, Carl and Candy started planning their costumes. Carl wants to be a gaucho, something he saw when the Mouse family went on a trip to the Andes. Candy is dressing up as a Caribbean Quadrille dancer.

Both young mice start scrounging for materials. Christine decides to sew make both costumes a class project in Mouse Academy, which is a great relief for her two young mice. They'll have help making great costumes.

Carl asks Mrs. Dooty if she has any material that might work for his gaucho outfit. Christine has already asked her the same thing for Candy's Quadrille costume. Candy's costume requires very colorful fabric, which is something that Donna Dooty doesn't have much of. Fortunately she does have a few small pieces, and it doesn't take much material for a costume that fits a mouse, so she's able to give Candy enough fabric to work with. Carl's costume mainly needs black fabric, which Donna has plenty of.

Franklin Dooty also gets involved, because both young mice need pictures of typical costumes to take to Mouse Academy. After a quick Internet search he's able to print photos of each costume on his color printer and give them to Candy and Carl.

When the two young mice take their fabric and pictures to Mouse Academy the following day, their instructor in Clothing Class is Famous Trackle. She's a master seamstress and is not only very skilled at making garments, but also in teaching how to make them. Mice don't wear clothing very often, but when the occasion calls for it, Famous is who everyone turns to.

"Very good, kids," Famous says approvingly to both Mouse family kids. "This is going to be a good class project to make your costumers. Since you are going in two costumes from very distant cultures I'm sure the class will learn a lot from making them and learning a little about where they come from."

Clothing Class at Mouse Academy includes boy and girl mice students because one of Mouse Academy's philosophies is that every mouse should know how to create clothing in a pinch. It's a life skill that even Tricky, the husband of Famous, has learned.

For the next two weeks the class works on costumes. Three other young mice have brought fabric and pictures for their MouseOhWeen costumes, so this gives the class plenty of fun projects to work on.

The first step is to make a pattern for each costume. Famous shows the young classmates how to make patterns from the photos. It takes a little work, because each piece of fabric that connects to another piece of fabric needs to be larger than is visible. That's so there is enough for each piece to be sewn to another piece at a seam, which is where the two pieces overlap.

Pattern making is not so easy and most of the class try several times before they see how it works and finally make a solid pattern.

Famous helps by showing them a pattern, and then the final garment. Then she describes each step of the process from pattern to pieces to final garment, including sewing different stitches for different parts of the costume.

After the class makes their patterns it's time to cut each piece. That's not too easy either because mice can't use scissors. Fortunately, several humans have donated supplies and tools to Mouse Academy and among them are sharp blade cutters. Mice can hold these and drag them across the fabric making the cut.

After all the pieces are cut out, the class gets to sew them together. Three mice are on each team and each team is making one garment. It helps to have more minds working on the projects because they can argue different ways to take each step and then agree on how they will finally take the next step. That helps them consider different ways to do the step and then come to an agreement on which the majority think will be the best way.

The final costumes look okay. Not professional like the garments that Famous makes, but they're certainly recognizable as costumes. It's a victory for the class and a bonus for the five mice that will wear the final costumes. The entire class has learned a valuable skill, and every classmate is proud of their creation.

When the pants and top for the gauco costume are finished, the hard part for Carl's costume now is the gaucho hat, but Mrs. Dooty offered to make that for him and she does a great job using stiff black paper. He tries on his costume at home and his parents watch with big grins because he really looks the part.

Candy also looks great in her colorful Quadrille costume. Mrs. Dooty has helped her by making a pattern for the final piece – a tall hat with tiny pieces of colorful plastic fruit on it. The classmates working on Candy’s costume have a lot of fun putting everything together and seeing how it all turns out. Of course, Candy has to model it for the classmates that made her costume.

When both kids bring their costumes home, and try them on and model them for Mr. and Mrs. Dooty, the humans yell "Ole" for Carl and clap for Candy while both kids turn and show off all sides of their outfits.

Now they're ready for MouseOhWeen night.

They only have to wait two more weeks, but it seems like forever. Each day they both check the date impatiently, and at every dinner they complain, "MouseOhWeen is never going to come."

Several times during the two weeks they each try on their costume and look at themselves in the mirror. “Oh, will MouseOhWeen ever come,” Candy wonders.

This year the big night is on a Friday, so every student wears their costume to Mouse School and then on to Mouse Academy. Some of the costumes are very good, others are pretty plain, but almost all students also wear masks.

It's fun trying to guess who is behind the masks while admiring the many different and creative costumes. Of course, the students in Mrs. Trackle's class recognized the five uniforms of their classmates because they helped to make them.

Mouse School has a parade with all of the students lining up and walking past their teachers. Some of the students are dancing in line, others strut or act like the characters of their costumes. Still others try to scare their teachers with a loud "BOO!" One mouse has a ghost costume that looks very realistic. As he walks past Mrs. Wand he shouts "BOO!" and she passes out, right there. She just drops to the floor and several teachers rush over to her side and fan her face with pieces of paper. In a few seconds she opens her eyes, looks up, sees the "ghost" student looking at her with a very concerned look, and she shouts "Gotcha!" Everyone laughs because Mrs. Wand fooled them all with her fainting act.

After school and Mouse Academy, all the kids go home wearing their costumes and wait until after dinner because mouse parents are very strict and insist that their children get good food before going outside at night. Then the kiew make sure their costumes look good, and they run out of their houses to visit other mouse houses and get treats.

Carl and Candy both have small fabric sacks that Mrs. Dooty made for them. Each sack ties on to their backs so they can walk on their four legs. When they get to each mouse home they stand up on their hind legs as they knock on the door. When the door opens and mice come to the opening, the two young mice go into their routine. Carl says "Ole!" and Candy does a little dance. Then they stop and put their front paws out to collect a treat.

It's really fun because they love to hear the mice greet them at the opening and say, "Oh my, you look very good." "That's a very interesting costume." "Hmm, you must be a gaucho and you look like a dancer."

Some mice that greet them don't really know what their costumes are, and have to ask, "What are you?"

Of course, both mice are happy to tell them the type of people their costumes represent and how they go their ideas.

Carl and Candy have an entire block with hundreds of mice and dozens of mouse homes to visit. Before they're even halfway through with their one side of their block their sacks are full of goodies and they have to run back home to empty their treats. Then, they go back out and start

where they left off. It's a couple of hours of going to mouse houses, and they get to see lots of other young mice in costume. Candy makes a note of the costumes that she would like to wear next year.

In previous years both young mice have gone out with their friends on MouseOhWeen to collect treats. This year they're going with each other, which means they're growing closer as brother and sister.

Carl sees some of his friends while he and Candy are visiting mouse homes and he always stops to compare notes with them on who has the best treats. That's kind of funny, if you think of it, because most mouse families don't have even two of the same kind of treat, so every visiting mouse gets something different.

When Candy sees her friends they compare costumes and treats. Then they compare notes on the best mouse houses to visit.

This year it's been a great night and after two hours both kids are tired and ready to go home to try some of their treats. What's funny is that they have each been nibbling on treats as they walk from house to house, so they're full of treats. Of course, they're not so full that they won't nibble some more at home.

As the two young mice get close to their home, they decide to stop at the porch of the Dootys' house to watch the human kids as they do "trick or treat." Their costumes are like mice costumes. Some are pretty creative, and some kids just wear normal clothes. The creative ones are fun to see and both mice kids make mental notes of the best costumes for next year.

When there's a break in the kids coming to the Dooty door, Candy and Carl stand at the door and try to knock on it. That doesn't work. They can't really make much noise and they can't reach the doorbell. Finally, Carl sees a stick in the flower bed next to the porch and he grabs it and reaches up and touches the doorbell, which rings "Bing, Bong."

Mr. Dooty comes to the door and looks straight out for human kids. He can't see any and doesn't look down where he would spot Carl and Candy so he starts to close the door.

Carl yells out, "Hey Mr. Dooty!" It's soft compared to human kids, but Franklin hears something and looks down, spotting Carl and Candy on the porch.

"Well, well, if it isn't our house mates! Donna, come see the kids!"

Donna joins Franklin at the door and they admire their two young mice friends. And being proud of them, they say, "You guys look great. Those are very good costumes!"

Franklin reaches into a bag and pulls out two small pieces of wrapped candy, dropping one in each of the two mice's sacks. "Here you go. Happy Halloween!"

To which Carl and Candy yell back. "Thank you! Happy MouseOhWeen, Mr. Dooty!" Then they run past Mr. Dooty into the bedroom and remove their sacks before crawling under the closet door and going in their Home in the Wall. Later, after Mr. Dooty opens the closet door they grab their sacks and bring them into their home. Then they can finally try more of the goodies in their sacks. But their favorite are the candies from the Dootys. Sweet treats are the best!

The most special memories from this year's MouseOhWeen are the costumes that each young mouse picked out and helped make. In future years they may not remember much about the different years of this holiday but they will always remember the gauco and Quadrille dancer costumes, because they didn't just pick them, they had a hand in making them.

Chapter 8 - Schuss!

"Hey, Chris," Danny says to Chris after recording a recent PawdCast, "I'm going up skiing this weekend. Would your family like to go with me? I have a condo for one night. We could spend the night Saturday and ski both days. What do you think?"

"Thank you! As for going, it depends. You said, "Going up. Is that to the mountains? We've never been snow skiing, but it sounds like fun. And an overnight trip sounds really cool. Let me check with the family and see what they want to do. When do you need to know?"

"It's Monday now. Can you let me know by Wednesday? If it's easier you can tell my uncle Franklin and he can call me."

"Sure, and thanks for the invitation. That's nice of you and I appreciate it."

"No problem. I hope you guys can go. I think you'll have fun!"

The theme of the PawdCast they recorded today was mouse recreation. Danny asked Chris to describe the various things mice do for fun and recreation and Chris talked about ice skating, hiking, camping, fishing, gardening, beach parties, sports, cooking, traveling, dancing, singing, motorcycle riding, and of course the Friday night parties with conga line. Snow skiing wasn't in the list of things Chris mentioned.

When Chris gets home he totally forgets the conversation with Danny. It was a long PawdCast and afterwards, Chris just wanted to chill and take a nap.

The next day, Franklin sees Chris in the garden and says he just talked to Danny. He asks Chris if he got back to Danny about the ski trip.

"Oh shoot," replies Chris. " Thanks for reminding me! I forgot to ask my family. I promise, we'll talk tonight and I'll tell Danny tomorrow."

That night at dinner the Mouse family sits down to a nice evening meal with lots of goodies from the garden when Chris remembers the ski trip invitation.

"Hey guys," Chris starts, "Danny is going skiing this weekend up in the mountains. Here's the exciting part - he's invited us to go with him. We could ski both days and spend the first night in a cabin on the mountain. What do you guys think?"

Christine is first to respond. "I don't think I can go, Chris. I've got a big week at Mouse Academy next week and I need to spend a lot of the weekend planning it all out. Sorry. But, you and the kids could go."

"I'm in, dad," says Carl. 'I've always wanted to go up in the snow. Do you think I could try snowboarding?"

"Oh yeah," adds Candy, "That sounds fun. I want to go snowboarding, too."

Chris responds, "Well, guys, I can ask Danny. You know they don't make mouse-sized snowboards, but Danny is pretty clever, and maybe he can figure that part out. For me, I'd like to try skiing.

"I'll have Mr. Dooty call Danny to work out the details."

After dinner, Chris is walking through the house when Franklin spots him. "Hey, Chris, what did you decide about Danny's offer?"

"Three of us are in. Christine has to work on her class at Mouse Academy but Carl, Candy and I would love to go. The only question is, the kids want to snowboard, and I'd like to learn to ski. But I don't think they make any equipment our size, do they?"

"Well, no," replies Franklin, "but I think I could fashion both out of tongue depressors. I would just have to figure out how to strap them on. Maybe Danny and I can make that work. If we can fix that part, are you guys up for going?"

"You bet, Franklin. It sounds like fun. Could you call Danny and talk it over with him?"

"Sure," says Franklin, "I'll call him in a couple of minutes, and we'll talk about all the details. Tomorrow, I'll let you know what we figure out."

Franklin calls Danny later and they discuss the equipment issue. Franklin suggests they can make both skis and snowboards from tongue depressors. Cutting them and bending up the tips of the skis is easy. Bindings is the hard part.

Danny comes up with the winning idea. "Let's cut two snowboards for each one, and two skis for each ski. After we bend up the tips on the skis we'll wrap straps around the top ski and the top snowboard, then glue the bottom one to the underside of the top one. That leaves the bottom smooth, and a solid grip on the bindings."

"That's a great idea, nephew," says Franklin, "but what do we use for the findings?"

"I would use small diameter rubber tubing. It'll stretch but also hold tight, plus it won't cut into their paws if they crash; it'll just stretch. Then we'll put a small clamp on one end to grip and clip the other end.

That should work, right?"

"I like it. Let's give it a try. Can you come over tomorrow and we can work on these?" asked Franklin.

"Sure, it sounds like it'll be kind of fun. Let's do this!"

Wednesday morning, Danny shows up at the Dooty home. He and Franklin drive to a craft store to pick up the necessary supplies. They have to stop at two places because the craft store doesn't have what they need. Fortunately, a medical supply store has almost everything. Returning home later, both men carry the supplies into Franklin's office-workshop where he has crafts tools.

The tricky part is glueing the top and bottom of each ski and board so that there is no gap because of the tubing. The answer comes after both men do lots of thinking.

Finally, Danny says, "Let's just use epoxy to cement the top and bottom together and then fill the gap along each side and both ends with epoxy."

"I bet that will work," says Franklin. And, that's exactly what they do.

After making the skis and two snowboards, Franklin and Danny set them aside to let the epoxy set up.

Thursday afternoon Chris sees Franklin in the kitchen and asks how everything is going for the ski trip.

"Great, do you want to see the equipment Danny and I made?"

"Sure," says Chris. "Can I ask Carl to join us? He's home from school and I know he'd like to see what you two came up with."

"Yes, that'a a good idea. We had to figure out how to make these instead of using human-size ski and snowboard parts. I think we did okay, but it's good for you two to take a look before you use them on Saturday."

Chris runs into the Home in the Wall and finds Carl. Both mice then run back to Franklin's workshop/office to take a look. Carl is very curious, but Chris is confident that they came up with good equipment.

Franklin has the snowboard and two pairs of skis on top of a table. He reaches down and picks up both mice, raising them up to the table top.

"Well, what do you think?" he asks as they stare at the shiny new snow equipment..

"They're beautiful, Mr. Dooty," Carl answers first. "How did you get them so smooth on the bottoms?"

"Well, I used a little trick, Carl," Franklin answers. "Humans wax their skis and snowboards to make them smooth and glide and slide easily on the snow. I had some of that wax in the garage that Danny left here. We took it and just waxed the bottom of each ski and snowboard until they were as smooth as we could get them. I think they're going to work just fine."

"Can we try them on?" asks Chris. "I'd like to see how to do it here, so it will be easier on the mountain."

"Good idea, Chris," as Franklin hands each their new snow sports equipment.

Both mice try strapping on their equipment. Carl has no problem. The clamp works great and very quickly he's standing up on his snowboard. Chris tries to put his skis on standing up but after getting one ski on he falls over.

"Ow!" he yells as he lands on his side before propping himself up a little and grabbing Franklin's finger to stand up the rest of the way. "That was sure graceful, huh?"

"Well, it's probably better that you guys practice here first. We don't want you to be embarrassed when you're on the slopes," says Franklin. "And you should also have Candy come try on her equipment, too."

After clamping and unclamping the binding on his skis several times, Chris steps out of the skis and scampers from table top to chair and then to the floor. "I'll go get Candy and be right back."

In a minute, he's back with Candy and watching as she clamps on her snowboard. Just like her brother, she has no problem. Both young mice struggle to get the clamp to closed but both grunt and push hard, and "snap," it closes.

Franklin says, "It looks like you're all ready for your big snow adventure. What time is Danny picking you up on Saturday morning?"

All three mice look gloomy and say, "5 am." That's pretty early and they have to be dressed and ready to go by then.

Friday is a typical day for Chris, working in the garden and making a few improvements to their Home in the Wall for Christine. After dinner that night and catching a short video on the tablet screen, the three say "goodnight" and go to bed early.

Saturday morning before 5 am, all three are dressed and ready to go. They're all wearing warm clothes and coats, Chris has a stocking cap on, and Candy and Carl are both wearing ski masks. They all look like perfect skiers - small, but perfect.

They walk out of the cat door in the kitchen and wait on the porch. Danny's car pulls in the driveway. It's dark but his headlights cut through the still night air as he pulls up to the kitchen porch where the three mice are waiting. All three also have little overnight bags for the night's stay at the lodge.

"Hola, my mouse friends," greets Danny.

"Buenos dias, muchacho," calls Chris.

Danny grabs the equipment and their bags and loads them in the back of the car as the three mice scamper run their ride. After Danny opens the door, he scoops up all three mice in two hands and sets them on the front seat.

Then, they're off and headed for the mountains.

The ride is easy and also comfortable. Danny puts some music on his sound system and before long the three mice are swaying to the rhythm and beat.

Three hours later, they arrive at the lodge parking lot. It's filled with snow and cars, and they can see the ski lift to the left of the lodge already carrying skiers up the slopes.

Danny says,"I'm going to check us in. Wait here and I'll come back for you when we're ready to go to the room."

15 minutes later, Danny opens the door and again scoops up the mice, taking them to the lodge, finding their room, and opening the door before depositing them on the bed.

"I'll be back with our stuff in a few minutes. Check out the room and look out the sliding glass door at the slopes. We'll be coming down those slopes before you know it."

The view through the slider is pretty cool. They can see the lift and dozens of skiers sliding down the slope next to, and under, the lift chairs.

"Oh yeah!" exclaims Candy. "I can't wait to try that run under the chairs."

"Me, too," agrees Carl. "That looks really fun. Oh, look at that lady. She's really good. See how fast she is carving? Oh oh, that guy following her must be her friend or relative. He looks like he's about to fall. Oh my gosh!"

They all watch as the guy careens down the slope, clearly out of control, and hits a boundary net for the lift line. One ski goes through the hole in the net, and he cartwheels butt over tea kettle in front of 15 people standing in the lift line. They can't hear the sound in the room, but they all imagine what the people in the line are saying... and wondering about the guy that's now laying face down in the snow.

Carl says, "I bet the air is turning blue around that guy!"

All three laugh and shudder at the same time, hoping that they don't duplicate what they just saw.

In a few minutes, Danny comes back with their bags and equipment.

"I have the lift tickets, pin these on your jacket and let's go catch some snow. It looks dry and really nice!"

The mice ride in Danny's jacket pockets until they get to the lift. Danny suggests that they try their equipment out on the rope tow, which is a beginner slope.

Setting the mice and their equipment down at the base of the rope tow, Danny straps on his skis and says, "Okay, you'll ride in my pockets to the top of the rope. Then you guys will strap on your gear and I'll set you down so we can all slide down the bunny slope."

Candy asks, "Why do they call it a bunny slope, Carl?"

Carl responds, "I have no idea. But let's go!"

Peeking out of Danny's coat pockets they watch as he grabs a hold of the moving rope and is suddenly pulled uphill, while sliding on his skis.

"This is pretty cool, huh kids," says Chris to which the two kids both nod. Neither one of them wants to talk because they're afraid somebody might hear them squeek and know that they're scared.

On the way up the slope, several times Danny's hands slip on the rope and he has to grab it tightly again, jerking his whole body as his hand takes hold ofd the moving rope.

Finally, Danny gets to the end of the rope and he slides off to one side. Then he reaches into his pockets and pulls out the three mice and their equipment, which have all come off during the rope tow.

Chris straps on his skis while Carl and Candy strap on their snowboards. It only takes a few minutes and then everyone is ready to go.

Danny lines the three mice in front of him and gives them a few words of instruction.

“Chris, I want you to demonstrate what is called the ‘snow plow.’ How you do that is you’re going to point your skis to each side, making a ‘V.’ Your right ski will point off to the right front, making the right part of the ‘V.’ Your left ski will point of to the left front making the left part of the ‘V.’

The snow plow will let you go down this slope in a slow, controlled slide. Whatever you do, don’t let your skis point straight downhill. If they start to do that, just turn your right leg slightly to the right and your left leg slightly to the left. You’ll feel yourself starting to slow down, and if you don't, turn your legs a little more in the direction you just did. That's also the way that you stop sliding altogether.

When you want to start sliding again after you stop, just turn both skis slightly down the hill. Remember, slightly. Then you’ll start to slide again.

“Okay, now slide a few feet with your skis pointing in a ‘V.’ Don’t worry. You can stop by just turning your skis more to each side. Now, go ahead. Slide a few feet and then turn your legs to the side and you’ll stop.”

Chris points his skis a little downhill and starts to slide. He quickly turns his skis outward again and he stops sliding.

“Great job, Chris. Now I want you to go all the way down the hill to where we got on the rope tow, just by snow plowing. Ready, go!”

Chris again starts sliding, stops, starts sliding again, stops again, and does this again and again until he gets to the base of the rope tow and then stops.

Carl and Candy have been watching and now it’s their turn.

“Okay kids,” says Danny. “You’re going to do something way different than your dad. Your snowboard can’t snow plow. It’s only one board. So, what you’re doing to do is turn sidewards to point the front of your board downhill. You want to keep most of your weight on the back, or uphill, end of the the board.

"So, you’re standing sideways with the front of the board pointing downhill, but your back foot, the uphill foot, is where you put most of your weight. To slow down, you simply turn your legs so your feet are pointed down the hill and the board is sliding down the hill sideways.

"To start again, turn your legs until the board is pointing downhill, keeping your weight on the uphill foot. Any questions?

“No? Okay, let’s try this. Candy, you start out. Remember to turn your legs so the front of your board is pointing downhill, keeping most of your weight on the uphill foot. Then, when you start sliding, twist your feet sideways to twist your board sideways and then lean on the uphill side of the board.

"Think you’ve got it?”

Candy smiles and nods.

“Okay, then let’s try it. Go ahead and slide a few feet and stop.”

Candy swivels the board downhill and starts to slide. Within a few seconds she twists her feet and the board sideways and leans back slightly uphill. The board comes to a stop.

“Great job. Now Carl you do what Candy just did.”

Carl does exactly what Candy did and comes to a stop several feet downhill.

“Good job, Carl. Guys do you think you’re ready to go to the bottom? Remember, always keep your weight uphill. Point the front of the board downhill to go, sideways to stop. Always lean slightly uphill. Never lean downhill because that will make you go faster. We’ll do some of that later.

“Okay, let's go!”

Both mice point their boards downhill, start to slide, then turn their boards sideways and slow down. Then they repeat the process to go down the hill again. Carl falls once and Candy keeps going. Danny skis down to Carl to help him.

“Do you know what you did wrong that made you fall, Carl?”

“I think so,” the young mouse says. “When I turned sideways I think I had my weight on the front of my feet instead of the back of them. The front side dug into the snow and stopped and I kept going. I did a face plant.”

“You’re right, Carl. Good of you to be paying attention," says Danny. "Now you know what happens when you put your weight downhill too much. You’re doing good. Just do it again and keep going until you get down to the base.”

After both snowboarders are down next to their dad, Danny snowboards down. He’s fast, and he shifts his weight very well. It’s a good demonstration.

“Okay, you guys. Let’s do the rope tow several more times, okay?”

Danny takes them up on the rope, and lets them ski and snowboard down. The mice have picked it up pretty quickly. After three more rope tow runs, they're sliding and stopping perfectly.

Next, Danny takes them to the ski lift, again with all three mice in his pocket.

"We'll be on a little higher slope and it also points downhill a little more. So, does everyone remember how to stop?"

All three mice nod their heads.

"Great, so we're going to ride up on the ski lift and at the top I'll give you some more instructions."

Danny puts the mice in his pocket and slides to the lift in front of where the next chair is coming, where he points his board sideways. When that chair touches the back of his legs he leans back and slides his butt up onto the seat. When the chair gets to the top, he leans forward, slides off of the chair, and slides sideways to the side of the chair lift. He only stops for a moment and then slides sideways some more until he can see straight down the slope.

Danny takes the three mice out of his pocket and sets them down next to him.

"Okay, you're going to do just what we were doing on the rope tow. One important difference – the slope is a little steeper than the rope tow slope. So, remember, Chris, you keep doing the snow plow. Candy and Carl, you will keep your board mostly pointed sideways unless you're stopped. Then you're going to point the front slightly downhill, keeping your weight on the uphill side.

"All of you, just go slow. The important thing to remember is how to stand and how to lean. Lean forward to go, lean backward to slow down. So, shift your weight forward to go, and shift your weight backward to slow and stop.

"Now, slide down the hill like you did on the rope tow slope. Stop when you reach the bottom of the lift."

All three mice are slow because they're nervous. When they look downhill the slope looks steep, so they creep down the slope one at a time. No one falls and they all three make it to the bottom of the lift.

They stand at the bottom of the slope and watch as Danny effortlessly carves the snow on the way down to them, and then stops just before he gets to them.

Danny says, “I was watching you and you all did very well. We’re going to do this run three more times just like you just did it. That should take us to lunch. So, let’s go and try to have fun. Remember to keep your weight on the uphill side.”

For the next three runs the three mice move slowly and cautiously, but no one falls.

Now, it’s time for lunch. Danny takes them into the lodge where they sip hot cocoa, and split a hot dog three ways. It’s refreshing and the hot cocoa and hot dog helps to wake them all up.

The afternoon is short because Danny doesn’t want them to get too tired. He takes the mice up for three more runs on the chair lift, and tells them to wait at the bottom while he does two fast runs on his snowboard. Carl and Candy have their mouths open watching Danny come down the slope so fast and carve the snow so effortlessly.

When he’s done with his two ski runs, he picks up the mice, puts them in his pocket, takes off his skis and walks to their lodging. The place where they’re staying tonight is the next building over. It’s a very large stone building that looks pretty old, but very well built.

The small condo is perfect. It has a nice bedroom, a cozy living room, a bathroom and a small kitchen. A sliding glass door goes to a small patio off of the living room that looks up at the mountain. As Danny stands looking out, the three mice draw in their breath. They have never seen such a beautiful sight before. It's magnificent.

Danny orders food delivered and they all sit down at the table for the evening meal. Lunch was great, but they skied and snowboarded after that so everyone is hungry. Tonight's meal is a veggie pizza and it tastes great.

The mice will sleep in the living room. Danny has made a spot on the floor by taking a blanket off of the bed and bunching it up to make three nests. It's perfect. After a short conversation where everyone shares their stories of the day, it's time for sleep, which comes easily for the tired group.

Chris dreams about skiing as he sleeps. In his dream he's skiing very fast and like an expert, carving left and right, dodging in and out of trees and between people. At the end of his dream ski run he turns to one side and skids to a stop, throwing up a cloud of snow as the other skiers cheer. It's a happy dream.

In the morning, each one yawns and rubs sleepy eyes as they gather for a quick breakfast. Danny has brought some cereal with nuts and grains, which the three mice eat happily, while Danny has his cereal in a bowl with milk. After breakfast it's time for more fun on the slopes.

Everyone puts on their ski clothes, with the mice having coats, pants and mittens. Danny grabs them all with their skis and snowaboards, puts them in his pockets, picks up his skis and walks to the first lift.

"Do you want to do the rope tow first, or do you think you're ready for the ski lift first thing?" Danny asks.

Chris responds, "I'd like to do the rope tow just once, so I can get my ski legs under me."

Carl and Candy both nod. That seems like a smart idea to them, too.

The rope two is much easier today. They all ride quickly up the slope with Danny holding onto the rope tightly. At the top of the slope Danny sets them down on the snow, they make sure their skis and snowboards are tightly strapped, and Danny reminds them of the instructions he gave them yesterday.

Danny skis down first and then motions for the mice to come down the slope.

All three do pretty well, snow plowing gently as they try to remember what to do. When they meet at the bottom, they ask Danny if they can go up on the chair lift next.

Danny scoops them up and slides over to the chair lift line. After they're on the chair, the mice look out and watch the skiers below them as they swing up to the top of the lift.

Getting off the lift, Danny sets each mouse down on the slope, they check their bindings and start off down the hill.

Carl and Candy have picked up snowboarding pretty well. They make their way down the slope, occasionally pointing their boards downhill to pick up more speed before turning sideways to slow down. Chris watches his kids and feels a moment of pride seeing them do so well.

Now it's time for Chris. Danny followed the two young mice and is waiting at the bottom. Everyone is watching as Chris leans forward and slides forward and downhill.

After gaining a little speed Chris snow plows and slows his descent. Perfect! he thinks.

"Let's go for a little more speed," the thought goes through his mind. He points his skis downhill and off he goes. He remembers last night's dream, how easily he turned and skied.

"This is really fun," was the last thought he had before disaster hit. As he is going faster, one ski hits a bump first and digs into the snow. The next moment he's turning over and tumbling down the slope head over heels, skis catching in the snow with every turn.

When he comes to a stop he tries to stand up, but he can't quite get upright.

Danny and Carl and Candy have rushed over to him. Danny takes the skis off of Chris so Chris can stand up and then helps Chris to his feet. Chris is standing pretty shakily.

"Ouch, my leg doesn't feel so good," Chris says to Danny. "I must have hurt it when I was doing cartwheels down the slope."

"No problem, Chris," says Danny. "Do you think you can walk?"

"Yes, it just feels a little sore, but let me try." Chris walks a few steps, but he's kind of wobbly. "I probably just need to take it easy. Why don't you guys keep going. Just sit me down at a bench and I'll relax while you have fun. I think I shouldn't ski any more today."

Danny insists on taking Chris back to the condo, where he can relax in front of the tv while the others play on the slopes. He tells Chris that they'll only go until noon so they can drive home before dark.

Chris has a relaxing morning in front of the tv, with a little more cereal to munch on while the others are away.

When Danny and the kids return, the four sit down for a quick lunch and then pack to get ready for the return home.

It's a pretty easy trip back. Everyone is happy and the kids can't stop talking about this great adventure.

"Did you see how I skidded to a stop sideways and the snow flew in front of my snowboard," says Candy.

"You did good, sis!" replies Carl. "I had fun, too. I think I kind of got the hang of it now. I hope we can go again."

"How about you, Danny?" asks Chris. "Was it kind of a pain to babysit us mice?"

"Nope," says Danny. "It was fun watching you guys. You all did really well. I'm just sorry that you took your tumble, Chris. But, I wish I had my phone out to catch that on video. It was pretty epic!"

"Well, thanks, Danny. I'm glad I could at least be some entertainment. I'm sure we'll have this excursion as a topic in an upcoming PawdCast."

Danny responded, "You can bet on that, my friend. We'll dazzle every one of our listeners with this weekend's exploits. Maybe next time we go I'll shoot some video for a MouseKeTok episode.

"Everyone loves seeing you guys have fun and do things that people do. Just think, you're giving people an education into the mouse world, and all you have to do is just be you."

All three mice smile at this thought. It's been a pretty cool weekend, and they can't wait to do more cool stuff in the future.

What they all learned over the weekend was to go slow when attempting to do new things. Mastering each important step is the most important way to learn, because you can build on success. And mastering each step means doing it several times to get it right, and to feel how it feels when you do it right. They learned that practice doesn't necessarily make things perfect. Practice makes things better. And better is the first step toward being good at something.

Chapter 9 - The Biggest Dog I Ever Saw

"I remember the first dog I ever saw," thinks Chris. "I didn't know what to do because he smelled me and came running up to where I was in the bushes. I was just a young pinkie and fortunately, I was with my mom and dad. They showed me how to run deeper into the bushes where the dog couldn't get to us. It was kind of scary. All he could do was stand there and bark at us while we watched him. I felt safe but also scared at the same time."

That memory comes back instantly as Chris and the Mouse family are working in their part of the garden. Today is weeding, an important job because the weather has been nice and weeds have been happily trying to take over every inch of soil.

There's a sound as the front gate to the yard opens. Chris looks up to see a delivery person bringing a package to the house for the Dootys and following the delivery person is a huge dog. When we say "huge" we mean HUGE!

This dog is so big he looks to be about half the height of the delivery gal and he could almost weigh the same.

"Oh oh! Watch out everyone. There's a dog loose in our yard!" Chris yells to his family.

The Mouse family scrambles back in the house as Chris stands ready to defend them if the dog attacks.

He stands on the porch to the kitchen, ready to run through the cat door if the dog runs at him.

But, the dog just wanders around the yard, sniffing at various plants and yard ornaments, before walking slowly toward Chris. It looks like he's just curious, and he walks very slowly, kind of ambling along.

Chris stands quietly as the dog approaches him. He doesn't look threatening. "Maybe he's just checking everything out," thinks Chris.

Chris summons up his courage and calls out, "Hey pooch. What's up?"

The dog looks at him with big eyes and says, "My name isn't pooch. It's Ruff. What's your name mousey?"

"Well, my name isn't mousey, Ruff. It's Chris. This is where I and my family live. Are you lost?"

"No, my family just moved into the neighborhood and I'm just walking around to see what all is near where we live. And, I'm pleased to meet you, Chris.

"I'm a Saint Bernard. Have you ever heard of that kind of dog?"

Chris replies, "Can't say as I have. You're sure big, though. I bet you hear that from everybody."

"Yup, I sure do. My ancestors were working dogs. My breed has been used in a country called Switzerland to rescue people that have been lost in avalanches, or other accidents. We're pretty famous, but I was born here, and my family has never taken me to the mountains."

"Oh," says Chris. "That's very interesting. I and my kids went up to the snowy mountains not long ago to go sking and snowboarding. Do you know what those are?"

"Nope, I don't. I just like to walk around and meet people and animals. Tell me about your family, Chris."

For the next hour, Chris shares stories about his family, their exploits and travels and adventures, and other details of life like the Mouse Academy, Mouse Church and Mouse Store.

"That's very interesting," says Ruff. "I have never met a mouse before and I had no idea that mice had friends and schools and such. It sounds like you have a pretty good community here."

"Oh yeah, and my family and I live in a nice Home in the Wall that's inside of this house. Our home owners are Mr. and Mrs. Dooty. They're very nice people. We get along very well. Over there is our part of the garden that we share with them. I'll tell you all about everything whenever you want to know anything.

"By the way, do you ever let anybody ride on your back?"

Ruff answers, "Oh, of course. Especially small kids and even some animals. In our last house, there was even a neighborhood cat that liked to jump up and ride."

At the mention of "cat" Chris opens his eyes wide and says with a startled look on his face, "We don't get along well with cats, Ruff. They usually attack us and have killed several members of our community here."

"Oh no, that's terrible," responds Ruff. "I won't ever let anything hurt you or your family or friends. We all need to get along well together because we live in the same area, and we have to depend on each other."

Chris smiles, "That's very cool of you, Ruff. I'm so glad to meet you. Hey, would you like me to take you on a tour of the neighborhood? We have lived here for several years, and I can point out lots of interesting things."

Ruff answers immediately, "That would be really great, Chris. Thank you! If you want, your family could go with us. I have plenty of room on my back and you guys are pretty small. I wouldn't even notice you there. Then you could ride up by my ears and talk to me while we walk."

"Great. I'll go talk to my family. Give me a few minutes. Wait right here, please."

Chris walks in the cat door and into the bedroom closet and into the Home in the Wall.

"Hey everybody, I have a surprise for you," he calls out from inside the door.

Christine and the kids come into the front room with smiles, not knowing what the surprise is, but everyone loves a surprise so they're anxious to hear about this one.

Chris explains about meeting Ruff, and shares his conversation with the big dog. Then, he tells them that Ruff would like to see the neighborhood and has invited the Mouse family to ride on his big back while Chris gives him the tour.

"Who's in? Who wants to go for a great ride?" Chris asks.

"Me," "Me," and "Me," his family members answer.

"Well, let's go then. He's waiting on the kitchen porch. Let's go show him the neighborhood."

Chris and family walk out the door, through the house and out the cat door where the huge dog is standing. It's pretty obvious that Christine and the kids are a bit nervous around this very large dog, but Chris is friendly to the dog and that makes his family relax a bit.

Ruff says, "Okay, everybody, climb aboard," and he drops his head down to the porch step so the mice can climb on his head. "Now, find a comfortable place on my back and hold on. I walk pretty slow and I'm kind of big so my body sways a little when I walk. Just hold on and I'll walk slowly."

Christine and the kids find good spots to sit and hold on to Ruff's hair in front of them. That gives them a sense of safety and security for the ride.

Chris sits on Ruff's neck, right behind his head so he can talk almost directly into the big dog's ear.

"Okay, go out the gate," Chris says. "I'll show you how to open it. Then we'll walk down the sidewalk to the right."

For the next hour, Chris takes Ruff and family on the tour of the local area, visiting the various places where mice meet, learn, shop and worship. It's a beautiful day with warm sun and a few clouds. They all think, "You can't have a better day than this to be outside."

Once they're back at the Dootys' home, the mice climb down, Ruff thanks them for the tour, and then walks to his home.

Over the next several days, Ruff takes the family to various places while touring the local neighborhood. It's great. He's big and safe, and the Mouse family doesn't worry about any predators attacking them because Ruff's size scares any would-be dangerous creatures away.

Two weeks after Ruff shows up, he's missing for several days. Chris keeps checking outside the gate to the yard, but Ruff never shows up.

This is alarming, because Ruff has been a faithful friend for several weeks, appearing almost every day. Sometimes he has come just to visit, other times he invites Chris or the whole Mouse family to go on a ride. But now, he hasn't been at the gate for days and there's no explanation for it.

Chris finally decides to take his motorcycle to Ruff's house to see if he's okay.

He puts on his helmet, gets the motorcycle off of the charger, climbs aboard and roars off in the direction of the home where Ruff lives. It's a busy day on the sidewalk, with kids walking and playing. A few times he has to dodge a kid that runs right in front of him.

Ruff lives two blocks away, which means the Chris has to cross a street to get to his house. It's not too hard, because it's a side street and there aren't many cars.

Safely across the intersection Chris roars to the house where Ruff lives, parks the motorcycle and looks in the fence. No Ruff. Anywhere.

Chris crawls under the fence and walks slowly and quietly to the backyard. There in the dog house is Ruff. He's laying down with his head out the door and he looks fast asleep.

"Ruff," Chris calls out. No response. "Hey Ruff," he yells right next to the dog's ear.

One eye opens and looks at him. Then Ruff says in a quiet voice, "Oh, hi Chris. How are you doing?"

Chris responds, "I've been worried about you. I haven't seen you in several days. That's not like you. You've been coming over almost every day since your family moved here. What's going on?"

"I'm okay. I had to go to the vet to get shots and that kind of put me under the weather. I'm feeling better, but I've been sleeping most of the day for the last several days and I just didn't have enough energy to come see you. I'm better and I'll probably be ready to come over in a few days. Will that be okay?"

"Of course, my friend. I'm sorry you've been down," says Chris, "but I'm happy that you're okay. How is your people treating you, with you being down and all?"

"They've been good. My human dad has spent some time with me as has my human mom. After they brought me home, they spent a few days talking to me and petting me. I got some of my favorite special treats, but I just wasn't feeling that good. I could see in their eyes that they were a little worried about me.

"They come out to check on me every few hours during the day and they told me this morning that if I wasn't better soon they were going to take me back to the vet. But I'm feeling better every day, so I'm sure I'll be back with a good attitude and energy real soon."

"I'm glad to hear that they have been taking care of you," Chris says to Ruff. "We'll see you when you're up and around again. Just get better and then we'll have some more fun, okay? Christine and Candy made some special dog cookies for you and they're looking forward to seeing if you like them."

"That's perfect, Chris. Thanks for coming to see me and please thank Candy and Christine for making the cookies. That was very special, and it means a lot to me."

"You're welcome, buddy! See you soon."

Chris gets back on his motorcycle and heads back home. During the ride he thinks about how this new dog in the neighborhood, an animal that he was afraid of at first, has become such a good friend to him and his family. He feels sad that Ruff has been sick and he says a little prayer for his friend to get totally well again.

The next day, Chris and Christine are playing with their kids in the yard, but Ruff doesn't come around. Chris decides to give him a few more days to get better and if they don't see him Chris will ride over and visit him again.

Another day goes by without their friend, and then on the third day they hear a soft "woof" at the front gate. Chris runs out of the kitchen cat door and spots Ruff at the gate. He runs straight to the gate and waits for Ruff to open it, then jumps up and down, smiling and waving his arms.

“Ruff, you’re back. We’re so glad to see you. You look great. How are you feeling? Are you feeling okay? Do you hurt anywhere? How’s your stomach?”

Ruff looks at the mouse jumping up and down and talking a mile a minute, and says, “Chris, are you okay? Have you been eating jumping beans?”

“No, my friend, I’m just so happy to see you. We were worried about you and when I came home from visiting you, I told my family that you were not well. We all prayed for you to get better and here you are. How are you feeling?”

“I’m pretty good, actually,” says Ruff. “It took me a while to get better and I just had to rest and not do much for several days. That helped. Now I’m able to come visit you and walk around the neighborhood again, and even smell flowers. That’s one of my favorite things to do but I didn’t even feel like smelling flowers for all those days.

“I think in a couple more days I’ll be ready to go for walks with you and your family. I’d really like to do that because I like having your family with me, and it's fun to explore my new neighborhood. You are all like my own family.”

“That’s great,” Chris says with a big smile. “When you’re feeling back to normal, we’d love to go for walks with you. And we feel the same way about you. You are our family, too.”

At the dinner table that night, Chris shares the good news about Ruff with his family. Then he talks about their new friend and his own first impressions of the large dog.

"When I first saw that big dog I was afraid of what he might do. I mean, he's REALLY big and it’s been my experience that most big creatures are a danger to us. But when I got to know him, I discovered that he's a really nice animal and now he’s become a great friend. It’s funny, because even though he looks different and also looks dangerous because of his size, he's actually just like us, just different. That's a great lesson for all of us, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, Dad?" asks Carl.

"Well son, it's easy to think something about others if they look different than us. They might be taller, smaller, walk different, act different or just feel different. But what I have learned, and what we have all learned from Ruff, is that you can't judge anyone by what they look like. It's what's inside that is important.

"And, while we're talking about that, you might remember some of the mice you have met that were different. Maybe they acted different and that made you think they were not someone you wanted to be around. Then, you discovered they were just like you, and everyone knows that we want others to like us, right?

"Candy, do you remember when you helped Fanny Trackle after she was hurt. The other mice stayed away from her because her injury made her different. But you became her friend and now she's one of your best friends. You looked past what made her different and you actually found out what made you both the same.

"Have you guys noticed that some mice act out because they don't feel like they belong and so they do things that we don't understand. They do those things because they're angry or hurt. But, inside, they're just like you and me. They just want other mice to like them, and that means that sometimes they just don't know how to make that happen.

"And now, Ruff is one of the nicest animals I've ever met. I'm glad I was brave enough to talk to him and find out who he is. I think that big dog is going to be one of my best friends. Isn't that cool?"

“Yeah, dad, that’s really cool. This has been a great lesson for us all,” says Carl.

Christine nods and smiles, thinking “What a great lesson for our kids, and like all good stories it has a wonderful ending.”

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