Life in a Chris Mouse World

#3 in the Chris Mouse series



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Chapter 1 - Fins Away

It's a Monday morning, and Mr. Dooty is wandering around the kitchen when Chris walks in.

"What's going on, Franklin?" Chris asks.

"Hey Chris," Mr. Dooty replies. "I've been thinking about going on a camping trip with Mrs. Dooty. I'd like to get away for a week so we can get out into nature."

"That sounds fun," says Chris with a thoughtful smile. "Christine and I used to do that before we had babies. Now that Carl and Candy are older, we have talked about going again one of these days but we just haven't got around to it yet."

Franklin grins, "I have an idea. We've all gone on vacation together to the Caribbean and South America, and we get along really well. Why don't we go camping together? We could have lots of fun and there are some things you could do with us that you probably couldn't do camping with just your family. What do you say?"

"Well, that does sound like fun," replies his very interested mouse friend. "I'll talk it over with Christine and see how she feels about it, but I really like the idea. When are you thinking of going?"

"A good time for us would be in about three weeks. The weather is getting nicer where we'd like to go, and all of the things on our to-do lists will be done just before then," answers Franklin.

Chris turns with a smile and a wave and without saying anything more he scampers back to the Home in the Wall to talk to his wife.

Christine is interested, but of course she is protective of their two young family members and wonders out loud how they might protect them from any danger. "I remember when we went camping a long time ago and we were out in the woods. There are still wild animals and birds that like mice, right?"

"Well," says Chris confidently, "Mr. and Mrs. Dooty have lots of camping gear and they will certainly be better protection than if we were to go on our own. When we went camping before the kids were born that cat did try every which way to catch us, but he didn't. And, Mr. Dooty would never let that happen."

Christine frowns at the memory and then says, "I suppose you're right. And, we'll have three weeks to get ready. That's probably enough time to teach the kids what they need to know to be safe."

"I'm sure of it, my lovely wife," Chris adds with a broad smile. "This could be one of the highlights of the year for our family!"

Later that afternoon when Carl and Candy come home from Mouse School, Chris and Christine are waiting for them.

"Hey kids," starts Chris, "How would you like to go camping with the Dootys? They have invited us to go with them and they're going in three weeks."

Carl and Candy look at each other and then turn to their parents with big smiles and arms in the air, both saying almost at the same time, "Yes, yes, yes!"

Carl adds, "That sound great, but I have a million questions. What do we do about school? What do we need to take? Where are we going? How do we get there? Do we bring food? What clothes should we bring? Will we sleep outside? Will it get cold at night? What kinds of things will we do when we get there? Can we bring some toys?"

"Draw a breath, son," suggests Chris. "School is over for the summer in two weeks. We'll make a list of things to take. We're going where Mr. and Mrs. Dooty want to go. We'll ride in their car with them. We might bring some food, but the Dootys will provide most of it. Clothes? Only some jackets in case it gets cold or rains. Yes, we'll be sleeping in the great outdoors, but Mr. Dooty will set up a tent and we'll sleep inside of that. It will get cold outside, but Mrs. Dooty says she's bringing blankets, and we can all sleep under one of them. You can bring toys, but the better idea is to play in nature which is what we'll do most days. We may go for a few hikes with the Dootys and Mr. Dooty said that he's going to rent a boat so we can go out on a lake. He wants to go fishing and he's offered to teach us, too."

"Fishing?" asks Carl. "I've never thought about that. Can mice fish?"

"Sure, Carl. We can fish but we do it a little differently than humans. We use a line with a hook on the end, but we have to brace our back paws against the side of the boat in case a fish bites our bait. We have to be careful because most fish can pull us right out of the boat and into the lake, so we'll yell if we get a bite so Mr. Dooty can help keep us from water skiing behind a fish." This last part was kind of funny and both Chris and Carl started laughing at the thought of water skiing behind a fish.

Carl has a funny look on his face as he says, "That's what I was wondering. How will Mr. Dooty keep us from being pulled out of the boat behind a fish?"

"I guess we'll find out, Carl," replies Chris to his son. "But, I know that he is very careful for us so I wouldn't worry about it just yet. I'm sure he'll explain his plan."

Candy interjects with a question, "How much stuff can I bring, Dad? Can I bring extra clothes so I can look good in case there are other mice nearby?"

"Well, daughter," replies Chris, "your mom can help you sort that out, but we're riding in a human car so I'm sure you can bring whatever clothes you would like." That last part brings a happy smile to Candy's face.

After the conversation with their parents, Carl and Candy can't stop thinking about the camping trip.

Of course, over the next two weeks the real planning and gathering gets underway for the two families.

At the occasional dinner with both families, the table conversation includes lots of questions and with each answer the Dootys and the Mouse family get more excited. This is sounding like it will be a fun adventure for everyone, and it will be out in nature.

The week of the trip is finally here and the two families get together to compare notes on what they are each bringing.

The Mouse family is comforted by what Mrs. Dooty has planned for food and sleeping arrangements, and everyone is excited by the activities that both Dootys describe.

Finally, departure day arrives and the two families stack up in the living room by the door all that they're bringing. The Dootys have the biggest stack, with tent, sleeping bags, blankets, food, cooking utensils and other kitchen items, and clothes. The Mouse family has clothes and some food which means they have the lightest addition to the pile the group is carrying.

Loading the car is pretty easy. Mr. Dooty puts most of everything in the back of the SUV. The Mouse family has just a few items on the floor of the backseat where they will be riding.

After everything is loaded in the car, Mrs. Dooty goes down the list and as she reads each item the person most responsible for that item says, "Check," to confirm that it's packed in the car. It's an easy process and it makes the adults more relaxed as all essential items are confirmed to be in the car.

Finally, with everyone seated, Mr. Dooty starts the car, backs out of the driveway and turns the car down the street. Within a few minutes, they are on the freeway and on their way. The Mouse kids can hardly contain their excitement. They have traveled with

the Dootys to other countries by plane but never gone on a camping trip. This is going to be the best!

The drive to the campground only takes a little more than five hours. Mr. Dooty stops once at a gas station. The car isn't that low on gas, but everyone is happy to be able to get out and stretch a little. After a little walk around, gas tank topped off, everyone climbs back in the car and they're back on the road.

The drive is fun for everyone. Franklin suggests they play a game of license plates. With each car they pass or that passes them, everyone tries to be the first to identify which state the license plates is from. Most of the cars are from their own state, but it's a race to yell out a new state when one is spotted. Candy is very good at this game because she seems to have much sharper eyes than anyone else.

After an hour of playing this game, the car falls silent for a while until Carl suggests they chsnge the game. He tells everyone, "Okay, now let's see who can be first to guess the color of the next car that passes us. Mr. Dooty, you can't play because you can look at them in the mirror. Okay?"

Franklin agrees and the game is on. Once again, Candy does well and is leading after ten cars. The game continues for another half hour and then, one by one, the Mouse family members begin falling asleep to the steady sound of the tires on the freeway pavement.

As the only awake passenger besides her husband, Mrs. Dooty is the first to notice the sign, "Franklin, that's our turn up ahead, right?"

"Yes, dear," he answers. "The campground is just five minutes or so down that road. Everyone get ready to unload the car and help set up camp, once we get there. Mouse family, please get under the blanket on the seat when we stop at the entrance station."

That last direction was easy because all four mice were under the blanket, fast asleep.

In exactly 6 1/2 minutes Franklin pulls the car next to the ranger station, hands the ranger his reservation slip through the side window, and a minute later they're driving into the campground looking for their campsite.

Franklin has reserved a campsite right on the lake shore and close to the boat dock.

He pulls up to their site, turns off the motor, and calls, "Everyone out!" The mice wake up, rub their eyes, and everyone jumps out of the SUV, checking out the campsite where they'll be camping for the next week.

"This is cool!" exclaims Carl and Candy excitedly, now wide awake. Candy adds, "I love the smell of the pine needles. That's what they are, right?"

Mr. and Mrs. Dooty nod in agreement, and begin to stack the camping gear next to the car.

The Mouse family watches as Franklin and Donna set up the campside. They start by laying a tarp on the ground, and then they unfold and set up the tent above it, with a shade/rain flap on top. The corners are staked down with plastic tent stakes, and thin ropes are used to tether the flap. Finally, the tent is ready to enter.

Both families carry items into the tent, with the Dootys taking in the big and heavy stuff. First, of course, are the foam pads and sleeping bags. After that, the clothes, blankets and food in one corner. And finally, the cooking gear and ice chest.

"Why are we putting the cooking stuff in the tent, Mr. Dooty?" asks Candy.

"Good question, young lady," answers Franklin. "There are lots of wild animals in the campsite like squirrels, chipmunks and raccoons. There may even be bears, although we hope those big animals don't come into our campsite. By utting the food stuff and camping gear that just keeps all of our food safe from those other animals."

The tent is pretty large, so even though i seems like they brought a lot of stuff to put in one tent, it's not crowded at all, which surprises Chris. He had wondered how all of the boxes and clothes and cooking things they packed would possibly get into a tent for protection.

After everyhing is safely stored in the tent, they take a look at their campsite. There's a picnic table with attached benches, which will be perfect for the two families to enjoy their meals together. There's also a fire ring. Franklin mentions that they'll have a fire on most nights and they can sit around it for fun and snacks.

The first item on the agenda after setting up the campsite is lunch. Donna puts together a simple lunch from the sandwich ingredients in the ice chest and both families sit down at the table, Dootys on the benches and the Mouse family on top of the table. Lunch is simple but filling, and once eaten, everyone settles in to relax for an hour or two. After that, they all go for a hike along the lake shore. It's very nice, the water is lapping softly on to the land, and they can see very small ripples on the water. The boat dock isn't far so they walk to it and a little farther so they can see where they'll be getting the boat for fishing tomorrow. The hike is fun for everyone. The Mouse family ride in the pockets of Franklin and Donna and occasionally, when they stop to look at things, the two humans put their mouse friends on the ground to explore close up.

Later that afternoon, Franklin gathers some wood for the fire ring, and that night after dinner they all sit around the ring for an evening fire.

The quiet of the forest and lake is only broken by the gentle crackling of the wood fire. Both families have contented looks on their faces which are illuminated by the fire.

Mrs. Dooty brings out some long metal sticks and puts marshmallows on them to roast in the fire. Carl and Candy have never seen that done before and they're excited to try this new idea. Carl holds his marshmallow too close to the fire for too long and it becomes a burning torch that Mr. Dooty grabs. He blows out the flames, which leaves a blackened blob on the end of Carl's stick.

"Don't worry, Carl," Franklin says, "just crunch through the outside and you'll taste the delicious inside. I know you'll like it."

Both families laugh when Carl follows Mr. Dooty's directions and ends up with melted marshmallow all over this face and whiskers. Carl, however, has a huge smile on his face and cleans his face with his paws, licking the delicious, sweet white marshallow.

Mrs. Dooty suggests they sing a campfire song. This is all new to the Mouse family but Chris asks, "What's the song and how do we sing it, Mrs. Dooty?"

Donna says, "I'll teach you one. It's a song from Spongebob Squarepants and it's called "The Campfire Song Song."

Mrs. Dooty sings the song and then motions for everyone to join in. It's fun. Carl and Candy pick up the song right away. Franklin and Donna chuckle as Chris and Christine stumble over the words but after the second time through, everyone gets it right.

The laughter around the campfire is like music itself. Everyone is smiling and enjoying the time together singing, smelling the wood smoke and having more toasted marshmallows.

Like all good things, this one must come to an end as the evening gets long, and eyes get sleepier.

After the fire has been doused with water and is completely out, both families get ready for sleep because tomorrow is going to be a fishing day. Mr. Dooty, Chris, Carl and Candy will be going out in a boat that Mr. Dooty rented from the boat dock during their hike earlier in the day.

Sleep is easy, but the sounds of the forest keep Carl and Candy awake until late, just listening and trying to imagine what causes each noise. Their imaginations are pretty wild - they think they hear a bear, or maybe it's a deer, or perhaps just a squirrel, but

something is making noise, whatever it is. They keep watching the tent flap, ready to sound the alarm if any creature tries to come through it and get into the tent. Fortunately, that doesn't happen and finally, everyone is fast asleep in the fresh mountain air, dreaming the dreams that always get dreamed on camping trips.

The next morning it's barely light when Mr. Dooty quietly gets out of his sleeping bag, puts on his clothes and goes out of the tent to get the rental boat.

He returns in 30 minutes bringing the boat to the shore by their campsite and then walking to the tent to wake the ones that will be fishing today.

Chris, Carl and Candy are already awake, excited, dressed and ready to go.

Once they have loaded the fishing gear and snacks on the boat, Franklin puts the Mouse family on board, and then shoves the boat off of the shore, jumping in at the last minute.

Mr. Dooty pulls the oars from the sides of the boat and rows it about 50 yards from the campsite, where the water is deeper, and just off shore of where a small stream is flowing into the lake.

Franklin has brought a small, fishing pole and reel outfitted with line and a hook. He puts a fat worm on the hook and casts the line out about 10 feet from the boat in the direction of the stream. Then he hands the rod to Chris and says, "Okay, you first, dad. Let's watch you hook a big one."

No more than five minutes later, Chris feels a small tug on the line. "He's just nibbling on that worm, Chris," says Franklin. "Just wait until he swallows it and when I tell you to, pull back on the rod to set the hook."

Everyone watches the line which is now slack with part of it floating on the surface. Then suddenly, the line disappears and Franklin shouts, "NOW!"

Chris yanks the rod back toward him and the fight is on. The fish is not going to go easy and the way it's fighting it seems that this fish may be bigger than he is.

"Help!" yells Chris and both Carl and Candy rush over to help hold onto the rod. They now have it wedged against the rail of the boat but Chris is still having trouble. He's trying to reel in the fish but it's so strong that he can't even turn the crank on the reel.

Mr. Dooty is now close to Chris, and he picks the mouse up with one hand and puts him on his lap, while helping hold the rod upright with the other hand.

"Good job, Chris," says Franklin. "Now, here's what we're going to do. We're going to pull back on the rod and once it's pointing straight up, I want you to turn the crank on the reel while we lower the rod. It's called, 'Pull up, reel down' and it makes it easier to bring the fish closer to the boat. Okay."

All Chris can do is shake his head in agreement because he's too busy trying to hold onto the fish and do what Franklin told him to.

For Chris, it's like a fight to the death. This fish is strong and he's just a mouse. Carl and Candy are also poised to help, but with Franklin holding their dad and helping him, the two young ones can only watch the battle Chris is fighting.

After five minutes of fighting, the fish is getting closer to the boat as the kids watch from their seats. When the fish finally breaks the surface, Carl yells out "Fins away," thinking that expression sounds like something a fisherperson would say when they spot the fish close to the boat.

With they get the fish close to the boat, Franklin puts Chris, Carl and Candy on the seat and tells them to hold the rod steady. Then he grabs the line with one hand and the net with his other hand, pulls the line to bring the fish alongside the boat and in one quick move scoops it out with the net and brings it on board.

The whooping and hollering of the three mice is very loud, although to humans it sounds just like squeaks, the noise only exceeding the broad smile on Chris Mouse's face, but not by much. As Franklin holds the fish up for all to see Carl and Candy do high fours while their dad sits back on his seat, totally out of breath and energy.

The fish is a beauty; a nice rainbow trout that will be great to eat tonight.

Franklin thumps the head of the fish with a piece of wood, places it next to Chris on the seat, tips it up standing on its tale and helps Chris keep it upright. Then he takes a photo of the two of them, fisherman and fish, with his phone. It's a trophy that Chris will show with pride forever, he thinks.

Carl and Candy get their chances to fish and even though each gets a bite, the hook doesn't get set either time and so there are no fish to fight. Franklin also has a slow day. No bites, no fish.

After several hours with no more luck, Franklin rows the boat back to shore where Donna and Christine are waiting.

"We heard all the yelling," says Donna. "We thought you all fell out of the boat, and we would need to come rescue you!"

"Nope," says Chris. "Take a look at what I caught. It's a monster, bigger than even me. And I caught it myself, with some help from Franklin, Carl and Candy. No one else caught any fish so I guess you can thank me for dinner tonight."

"Wow," says both Christine and Donna.

"I'm so proud of you, Chris," adds Christine. "That's a trophy fish for sure." And turning to Mrs. Dooty she asks, "Is that fish good to eat?"

"Oh, my yes," replies Donna. "That's one of the best tasting fish. We'll pan fry it tonight and have it with some corn and biscuits. You'll see. It's really wonderful."

Franklin guts the fish while Carl and Candy watch. Chris is tired from the fishing experience and takes it easy for the rest of the day, only getting active again just before dinner.

Of course, dinner is great. Franklin builds a small fire, pulls the grate down over it, and Donna wraps three ears of corn in foil and nestles them into the embers. Then she dredges the fish in milk and drags it through some flour, salt and pepper before dropping it in the wrought iron skillet to cook. She also puts some already made biscuits in foil and puts them on top of the grate, outside the flames.

After the fish is done, Mrs. Dooty grabs the corn with tongs, puts the fish on a plate, pulls the biscuits from the grate and, cutting the fish, puts a piece on each plate with corn and biscuits. Of course, the Mice family have much smaller portions, but everyone has plenty to eat. The dinner is delicious.

Franklin takes the opportunity to share a lesson from the day's fishing expedition. "Fishing is really three P's - one-quarter preparation, one-half patience, and the last quarter persistence. We prepared with the right bait on the hook, we waited patiently until there was a bite and Chris set the hook, then Chris kept working the fish with persistence until it was finally aboard the boat. That's really kind of like life, isn't it?"

The adults nodded with knowing smiles while Candy and Carl had thoughtful expressions on their faces. This was a very good lesson that they will think of for a long time to come.

Over the campfire later, with marshmallows over a crackling fire, the happy campers reflect on the day.

Later that night, as everyone is comfortable in the blankets, Christine whispers to her husband, "Oh, Chris, the fish you caught is the best food I've ever tasted. You're my hero!"

The rest of the camping trip is fun and when it's over, with all the gear packed once again in the car, both families head for home. Chris is fast asleep in the back seat, dreaming of catching even more fish. In his dream, the fish are even bigger than the wonderful trout that he caught, and with each fish, he hears Carl yelling "Fins away!"

It's a perfect ending to a wonderful vacation.



Chapter 2 - Kits!

For Chris and Christine, today is just like many other days in the Mouse household. Get up, get ready for the day, have a little something to eat and wander around.

They are usually the first to wake up. A half hour later they check on Carl and Candy, who are still sleeping soundly in their bedroom nests.

To wake them up, Chris scratches on the door with the claws on his right forepaw. The sound in each quiet bedroom is enough to cause each young mouse to open one eye, listen and then, realizing that it's their dad at the door, lift their heads and look at him.

To each one he calls out, "Time to get up, sleepy head. The new day is dawning and it's waiting for you to come join it."

Every morning it's the same cheerful wakeup call, bringing both young ones out of sleep and into the day. To be honest, both Carl and Candy can't imagine getting up without their dad waking them up to welcome a new day.

Both mice crawl out of their nests, wiping their faces with their paws. Christine walks to a small mirror in her room to make sure she looks ready for the day. Carl doesn't care if he looks ready or not, he's a male. He's ready and already hungry.

Going downstairs in the Home in the Wall is fun. The Mouse home is really like a big playhouse and everyone has fun going up and down the stairs. Of course, for the young ones, greeting their parents in the morning makes it all the better.

"Hey, dad. Mornin' mom," each one calls out as they enter the kitchen where Christine has nuts and peanut butter set out for them. The peanut butter is several days old, a gift from Mrs. Dooty, and it's not only very tasty, but it's very fragrant. The smell is so inviting that each young mouse is practically drooling by the time they finally get to sink their teeth into the delicious dish.

The day starts like almost every other day, except today is Saturday so there's no Mouse School today. It's a free day. Of course, they have to clean up their rooms, and they will be helping in the garden today, but there will be several hours that will be free for them to do whatever they want after they get their school work done.

As soon as breakfast is over Christine calls everyone together for instructions on what they will be doing in the garden.

"We have some really nice plants that have come up so here's what we will each do. Carl, you have the row of peas, Candy, you have the strawberries, Chris, please take the

broccoli, and I'll take the cauliflower row. Each of us will look for weeds in our row. When you find one, pull it out with your teeth or paws and take it to the end of the row. Next, check all of the garden plants for bugs. Those little beetles have been a problem lately. If you find one, you can either invite it to leave, or if it refuses to do that, take it to the end of the row, crush it and put it with the weeds. If it looks tasty and you're hungry, you can eat it. Now, is everyone ready?"

Chris and the two young mice nod their heads, and the four mice start out of the Home in the Wall, go under the closet door and push out through the cat door in the kitchen to get outside.

On the back porch Christine adds another note of caution, "The two kittens next door are now a lot bigger, and I heard from Sophie at Mouse church that two family members on the other side of the kitten house were attacked by them and are no longer with us. So, be very careful and keep an eye open for any sign of these cats. Dad and I will also be watching out for them."

Everyone nods and then steps off the porch and onto the lawn.

The garden looks very nice. Their plants have grown a lot since last weekend when the family last did garden duty. Of course, the constant possibility of danger now makes being in the garden a little less fun than it has been.

Carl is the first one to spot the grey cat lurking under the fence. He whispers to Candy, "Look out. Do you see that cat over there? It looks like it could get under the fence."

Candy sees the feline too and noting that it's just watching and apparently not trying to crawl under the fence she whispers loudly to her dad and mom, "Hey, there's a cat over there!" pointing with her right paw.

Both parents look in that direction and now can also see the cat. The situation is beginning to look like a predicament. If the cat gets under the fence they will have to run for their lives or possibly find a hole they can crawl into that the cat cannot dig out.

There's tension in the air now as the danger is not just a possibility, it's real. With two mice neighbors already victims of these cats it's become a very scary situation right here, right now.

Chris and Christine silently signal to their kids to be very quiet, move very slowly and follow them. Then they gradually inch their way, one at a time, toward the kitchen door. The cat doesn't seem to see them yet - so far so good. But it's scary because neither adult mouse knows what to do if the cat corners them or one of their kids. Their only option is to keep inching their way to the door and scramble back inside the house.

As the four mice get within a few feet of the steps to the kitchen door, Chris spots the cat crawling under the fence and yells to his family, "RUN!"

Chris and family are like a blur, each jumping up the stairs to the landing and running face first into the cat door, which flaps open letting them into the kitchen.

They stop inside the kitchen to make sure that they're all inside and then breathe a sigh of relief. They're safe.

Or so they thought.

As they're walking across the kitchen floor toward the bedroom and safety of their Home in the Wall, they hear the sound of the flap of the cat door being suddenly pushed up and falling back with a "Thwap!." Chris turns around and sees the cat as it is already through the cat door into the kitchen, and he scans the room for his family. The other three family members see the cat at the same time and now it's a race for their lives, scrambling faster than they have ever ran and skidding around corners on the wooden floors.

They can hear the sound of the cat running after them. "Oh no, it's seen us and is trying to catch us!" the thought goes through every furry mouse head.

Faster and faster they run to the bedroom and just as the last mouse squeezes under the closet door they hear a "Thump!" It's the sound of the cat running full speed into the closed closet door. Whew! They just made in time.

But the danger isn't past. They can hear the cat madly clawing at the door - the sound is frightening. Carl and Candy are both shivering with fright and Chris holds Christine tight.

They go through the front door to their Home in the Wall, close the door tight, scamper upstairs to the bedrooms and huddle in the Chris and Christine's bedroom while listening to the cat howling and scratching below. It's terrifying! Carl and Candy are both crying and Christine is trying hard to keep her composure. Chris is looking for anything he can use as a weapon in case the cat gets inside the closet.

Finally, it's quiet and Chris wonders if the cat has given up and left the house.

He sneaks downstairs as quietly as he possibly can. No sounds from the closet door. Maybe the cat is gone.

When Mrs. Dooty gave the Mouse family some fruit a few days ago, she delivered it on long skewers with pointed ends. Chris finds one and gobbling the fruit up, he hoists the skewer on his shoulder and walks out the front door of the Home in the Wall and into the closet. He listens for any sounds on the other side of the door and just as he puts his

ear down to the ground he hears the cat snarl and he jumps back just in time as the nose of the growling cat appears on the other side of the bottom. He can see the teeth flaring on the animal under the door and it looks ready for action.

Thinking quickly, Chris holds the skewer tightly with both fore paws, with the sharp end facing the door, and he runs as fast as he can shoving the skewer right under the door and into the nose of the cat.

"YEOWWWW, OWWW, OWWW!" screams the cat as the sharp skewer penetrates its tender nose.

Chris can hear the cat scampering back from the door and then he hears a human voice yelling, "Hey, who let you in!" It's Franklin Dooty who has just come home from the store and, hearing sounds in the bedroom, he came in just in time to see the injured cat scampering back from the closet door, howling.

Franklin quickly closes the bedroom door before the intruder can run out. He reaches down and grabs the cat by the nape of its neck, just behind its head, and snatching it up he walks out of the bedroom with the cat dangling from his clenched hand.

Mrs. Dooty had stayed in the kitchen after they got home, putting groceries away, and she's surprised to see Franklin holding a cat as he comes out of their bedroom.

"Well, what have we here, Franklin," she asks as her irritated husband continues toward the back door from the kitchen.

"It's one of the kittens from next door," he explains. "It looks like they're all grown up now and are on the prowl. I think this one chased the Mouse family in through the cat door and it had them cornered in their home in our bedroom closet until Chris poked its nose with one of your skewers. I'm going to take it back to the Lukowsky's and tell them to keep their cats in their yard. Christine told me yesterday that two neighborhood mice have already lost their lives because of these rascals, and we have to protect our little friends."

"Oh dear," exclaims Donna. "The Mouse family aren't just our friends, they're our housemates, as well as very good friends."

Franklin walks out of the house carrying the cat, then goes out of the gate and over to the house next door, knocking on the door loudly.

Lydia Lukowsky opens the door and seeing Franklin with the cat, she says, "Hi Franklin" and then asks, "You're bringing one of our cats back?"

"Hi Lydia, yes, I'm sorry to tell you that this rascal got in our house and tried to attack our housemates. I have heard that several neighbors have already lost pets because of your cats. What do you think you can do to help us protect against that?"

Lydia Lukowski turns her head toward the inside of the house and yells, "Hey Ed, please come here for a minute, will you?"

When Ed Lukowski joins his wife at the door, Franklin repeats his explanation of the problem.

"Oh, Franklin, we're really sorry. We haven't trained our 'kits' just yet and I'm so sad that they have caused a problem. Could you please explain to the neighbors who lost animals that we will fix this right away?"

"Of course, Ed. Thanks for understanding. We really like having you and Lydia as our neighbors but we also like our animals, so whatever you can do to help will be great. I hope you have a solution that will keep everyone safe and also keep your 'kits' happy."

Franklin hands the cat over to Mrs. Lukowski and says goodbye to the couple, walking back to the Dooty home.

Two days later Ed Lukowski knocks on the front door of the Dooty home and explains that he has found a solution. He just purchased a new technology that looks like it will work. It's a perimeter system for the outside of their yard that will give his cats a small, harmless, buzz on their collars if they try to cross it. The instructions say that after a few weeks the animals will be trained to never leave their yard.

"I hope this takes care of my wandering kits, Franklin," says Ed. "I'm very sorry that they caused a problem before this. Please let me know if you have any further problems with these little rascals because we want to be responsible neighbors."

"Will do," replies Franklin. "Thanks for helping out, Ed. You might want to talk to the Gangas and the Adebayos since they also lost pet friends to these rascals. I'm sure your cats are wonderful pets, and we appreciate you making sure that we can all live together in peace," he finishes with a smile and a wink.

After Mr. Lukowski leaves, Franklin walks into the bedroom, opens the closet door and knocks on the door to the Home in the Wall.

In a minute, Chris pops his head out of the door. "Hi Franklin!" he says.

"Hey, Chris, I have good news for you and your family. You shouldn't be bothered again by the cats next door. The neighbor installed some technology that will train them to not leave their yard.

"I'm sorry to say this, but please be careful for the next few weeks until we can be sure everything this new technology is working correctly. If you and your family want to work in your part of the garden, just let us know and Mrs. Dooty and I will work on our section at the same time so we can keep an eye out for any intruding animals."

"That sounds great, Franklin," says Chris with a hopeful grin. "Carl and Candy were pretty rattled after the cat episode. I'll tell Christine and the kids what you just told me. Thank you for removing the threat from the house the other day. We've been very nervous about going out of our house since then, but this is very good news.

"We like to work in our garden on Saturdays so if that works for you, we'll let you know next weekend when we'd like to go out and work. If the timing doesn't work for you guys that day, just let us know what will work and we'll go out then."

"Perfect, Chris," says Franklin and then with a big smile he adds, "or maybe I should say purrr-fect!"



Chapter 3 - One-Two-One-Two

Carl Mouse is growing into a fine young buck. With each month he is excited to see that his body is changing. Growing up changes how he feels about himself, and it begins to also change what he does.

The first time that his family notices the growth in Carl is when he's working in the Mouse family section of the garden. He usually walks on all four legs, because that's what mice do. But on the Saturdays when the family is out working in the garden Carl also does some unusual things.

At first, his new behavior goes unnoticed, until one afternoon when Candy looks over at him and sees Carl doing pushups, bending his front legs until his chin touches the dirt and then straightening those legs back to their normal length. She's not quite sure what he's doing or why he's doing it, but she can't help but keep watching.

After a few minutes she gets concerned and calls over to him as he's exercising in his row, "Hey Carl, are you having a problem with your front legs, brother?"

"Nope," he answers, "I'm just stretching my legs. It feels good and I think I can do a bunch of stretches. Watch this!"

And with that, he bends and stretches his front legs five times in a row, the front of his body going up and down as he does this.

"What do you call that, Carl, and why are you doing it?" Candy asks.

"I saw this in one of the magazines Danny left behind after finishing a PawdCast with dad. This is called exercising. The exercise I'm doing now is called 'pushups,' or something like that. It's supposed to make certain muscles in your body stronger, and I believe it. I'm already feeling like all four of my legs are much stronger than last week."

"Oh, very interesting," responds Candy. "It looks like stretching to me, but I'm not a human. I guess I would try it, but girls don't really want to look stronger. If it made me prettier, I might try it."

"Whatever," says Carl, and he continues to do the 'pushups' as Christine returns to working on her row of the garden.

That's the end of the conversation with his sister, but Carl has been growing very interested in building his strength so he can grow into a strong and capable adult mouse.

After the two mice finish working in the garden Carl finds Danny's magazine again and looks through more pages.

Danny's magazine is called, "Muscle Up" and it shows adult male humans doing all kinds of things to build up their strength. Most of the pictures don't look very easy for mice to do, but the last time he pawed through the magazine he found the pushups so he's thinking that maybe there's something else that he can try.

Farther back in the pages of the magazine he sees some promising pictures. They show humans doing things that are called "sit-ups," "curls," "presses," and other types of exercises that look very possible for mice to do.

Carl folds over the edge of those pages so he can find them again when he has more time. In the meantime, he looks at the photo of the sit-ups and decides that he will try those with the pushups. What's great, he thinks, is he can do both of these exercises in his room. That's important because some of the exercises humans are doing in the magazine are done with equipment that he doesn't have. Mr. Dooty has a weight bench and a floor mat with a bicycle-looking machine in his bedroom. Carl has seen him lifting weights on the bench and riding the machine occasionally. All of that stuff is human-size, and not mouse-size.

For the next two weeks, after his dad wakes him up in the morning, Carl crawls out of his nest and does pushups and sit-ups. The first week, his front legs are very sore and tight, and he almost quits doing the exercises. He thinks to himself, "Why does something that is supposed to be good for you also cause you to hurt?" but he never mentions these thoughts to anyone.

The following week at breakfast, Carl talks to his dad about what he's doing and he confesses that he feels like quitting the exercises.

Chris tells him, "Son, don't look at the future. Sometimes, new things can look very challenging because it seems like they take a lot of energy or skill that you don't have. Imagining those possibilities will make you doubt yourself, and you'll be more likely to quit, right when you're doing very good things for your body.

"Instead, just look at the next move you need to do. Then, maybe every week or even every two weeks, check yourself to see how you're doing. When you notice that you're making progress you'll feel and get excited about doing more.

"Son, persistence is very important to accomplishing most valuable things in life. Most of the time that means you must not let your mind think about what doesn't feel good or doesn't seem to be making a difference. You just keep your thoughts on what you're trying to accomplish.

"Do you know how some mice are able to walk long distances, sometimes because of fires or lack of food or other problems?"

"No, Dad, I haven't heard about that. What do they do?"

"Well Carl," Chris continues, "a while ago, some famous mice asked older mice that had to do these long walks how they were able to go such long distances even though it was hard. Some of the older mice had traveled during very uncomfortable or even dangerous times, times when it didn't look like there would be enough water or food and it seemed like the trip would be farther than they could go."

"Those older survivors told them this - they never let their minds worry about how far they had to go, or the trouble or trials they could possibly face on their journey. They shared this simple lesson: 'you don't think about it, you just keep going. You put one paw in front of the other 'One-Two-One-Two' and before you know it you have done it. Their point was, don't look at the distance and think about how hard it will be to get there because that will make you think that the trip is too difficult to do. Instead, just say to yourself, ''One-Two-One-Two' and, as you do, put one paw in front of the other. Thats 'one.' Then, put the other paw in front of the first one. That's 'two.' Just keep going 'One-Two-One-Two' and you'll be surprised because you'll soon find yourself at your destination, and you'll be very happy that you made it.

"Look at your exercises the same way. Don't think about how many exercises are ahead of you. Just focus on 'One-Two-One-Two' and you'll be amazed at how easy it will be to finish your exercises."

"Thanks, dad," says Carl. "That's great advice. I'm going to use that."

The next week Carl looks at his front legs and can see that they are stronger. "That's pretty cool," he thinks, and that motivates him to do the exercises that morning and through the next week, too.

Chris and Christine notice that their son has more energy than usual, as well as a happier attitude about everything. So, at breakfast the next morning Chris asks Carl, "You seem to be moving quicker and the other day I saw you lift a box easily. It looks like you have a lot of confidence. I know you were thinking of quitting your exercises. What made the difference and kept you going?"

"Dad, you made the difference," replies Carl. "I know I told you that I've been doing some exercises that I saw in one of Danny's magazines. It was hard at first but then I talked to you, and you told me the story about 'One-Two-One-Two' so I tried that. After a week I started feeling stronger. The longer I keep doing the exercises, the better I feel. So, I just keep going.

"Also, the next time Danny's here to do a PawdCast with you would it be okay if I talked to Danny about it?"

"Of course, Carl," says Chris. "I'm very impressed that you kept going and that you're seeing a difference. You're going to grow into a fine buck, son."

The next week, Danny comes by to record another PawdCast and Chris tells him about the conversation with Carl. Danny's eyes brighten.

Danny asks, "Chris, would you be willing for us to do a PawdCast episode with both you and your son? I think our audience would find that very interesting and that kind of great advice can also help us get more publicity for the show?"

"I guess, Danny," says Chris, "but I don't want Carl to get too big of a head over the publicity."

"Well, Chris," Danny says, "you remember that your family's musical group, 'Here We Go,' got lots of excitement from people when the videos of your performances hit YouTube, right? You figured out how to deal with that exposure, right? And it also helped you earn a little money from YouTube. Carl's doing something very interesting and also very motivating. If we do this, Carl will be helping others find the courage to better their lives. Those are all good things. Humans have an old saying, 'Don't hide your light under a bushel.'

"Oh goodness," responds Chris, "I also heard that same thing in Mouse Church. Well, I guess it's okay then, so you can go ahead with Carl."

Later that week, Danny sets up the recording area for Chris and Carl to both be on the next PawdCast.

After the PawdCast intro, Danny announces, "Welcome to this week's PawdCast. Today, Chris and I have a very interesting guest with a message that's important for all of us. In a minute, you'll meet Carl Mouse, who just happens to be the son of Chris Mouse and a very smart young mouse.

"Chris, tell us about your son and why we decided to have him on our show."

"Well, Danny, you know we've spent a lot of time on this show exploring mousedom - sharing the similarities and differences between mice and humans. My son, Danny, has been working on improving his physical stamina and strength, all on his own. When you and I talked about what he's doing, we both agreed that he has learned some lessons that we can all benefit from. Now, before we bring him on, Danny is a mouse teenager. He's not as old in physical years as human teenagers, but we mice age quicker than people so he's got the same interests and abilities as human teenagers, although he's a bit younger in age."

The session seems to go smoothly. Carl explains what he's been doing, and the results he's seeing.

Danny asks some pointed questions, like "How are you able to do human exercises since you're so much smaller than humans?"

Carl is quick to answer, "It's just a matter of scale, Danny. If a human adult jumps off of the top of a table they probably don't have anything to worry about because it's less than the height of a human. But, if I jump off of a table, I could get badly hurt because a table is eight or ten times taller than me. That would be like you jumping off of the roof of your house. So, I do pushups and pull-ups that are perfect for my size since they're just stretching my own body parts. I can't do weight lifting with the same weights that humans do, but I can lift mouse-sized weights because they're appropriate for my size."

"Pretty smart, Carl," responds Danny who then asks Chris, "How do you feel about your son doing these exercises, Chris? I mean, these aren't things that most mice do, right?"

"Good question, Danny," says Chris. "For one thing, Danny isn't most mice. He's my son and that makes him pretty special," he says with a smile and a wink. "I'm proud of him for getting the idea from one of your exercise magazines and then adapting it to mouse proportions. Of course, his mother and I have noticed that he's getting stronger and gaining more confidence. Those are really important qualities for a young mouse to have."

"Next question, Carl," from Danny. "What's next? How do you think this will change your life in the next year or so?"

"That's anyone's guess, Danny," replies Carl. "But if I were to guess, and I would have to guess because as far as we know no other mice are doing this, I believe that I will become a strong adult mouse and I also believe that I will have more confidence than other mice my age. Plus, I'll be able to do things that they won't yet be able to do. Of course, I'm sure it will make me better looking and help me find my mate for life, too," he says with a wink and a broad smile.

"Okay, last question for Carl," said Danny. "Many humans quit exercising because it seems like doing exercises for life is just too big of a pill to swallow. How do you keep going with your routine?"

"I'm glad you asked that, Danny," says Carl. "It was my wise father who gave me the secret to developing lifelong habits that require persistence. In a nutshell, it's simply this - keep going. Dad told me the story of mice that survived traveling for weeks. This is the secret he shared with me. It's called 'one-two-one-two.' For the long-distance traveling mice it meant simply focusing on putting one paw in front of the other.

"So, here's the lesson. Instead of thinking about how far you have to travel or how much you have to do, you simply think 'one-two-one-two' and focus on just the next steps. You do one step and count "one." Then you do the next step and count "two." You keep repeating one-two, and one-two and one-two and before you know it, you have done it.

"That advice changed my attitude, and it is helping me get past many of the mental obstacles that I face, most of which are how I think about things."

"That's really great advice, Carl," Danny says, "and it's perfect for all of us. We often get defeated when we see how far away the finish line is, and we imagine how hard it's going to be to get there. Instead, with your simple formula you just focus on taking the next step and before you know it, you're there. Brilliant!

"Hey, son, why don't you show us a few exercises so we can see your efforts at work," asks Chris.

"Sure," replies Danny. "The first one I'll do is one that humans call 'pushups.'"

Carl is already standing on his four legs, so, to demonstrate, he bends his front legs until his chin touches the table, then straightens his front legs out until he's standing with all four legs again. As he does this, he says "One!" and then he does another pushup and says "Two!"

Next he says, "This is just one complete pushup, so now I repeat that - 'One, Two,' and I've done another complete pushup. I don't count how many complete pushups I do. I count time. So, I do One, Two, One, Two for a certain length of time. Each day I add a few more seconds to the time. It adds up. I'm now up to 15 minutes of pushups.

"This next exercise is pretty fun. I stand up on my back legs and bend them while keeping my back and hands straight up, front legs up in the air. 'One, Two, One, Two.' See how easy that is? And I do the same time with this exercise. I'm also up to 15 minutes with this exercise that I call 'stand up'."

Danny says, "Thanks Danny. That's great instruction for all of us. I'm going to try that tonight, and I challenge each of you watching this PawdCast to also try this. Do this for a week and then let us know next week how you did.

"Thanks Chris and Carl, and good luck to you, Carl, on getting better looking and attracting a mate for life," Danny says with a smile. "I'm sure our subscribers will be following along to see how that works out for you.

"Until then, it's Danny, Chris and Carl signing off from PawdCast. See you next week for another exciting and valuable episode."

Danny turns off the equipment and lights, and removes the set from the table top that they use for Pawdcast.

After the set is taken down and Danny has left, Chris and Carl talk about the experience and Carl's answers to Danny's questions.

Chris says, "Son, I'm proud of you. Keep doing what you're doing, and until then, don't neglect your homework or your work around the house. It's good that you do your exercises in your room in the morning, so they don't interfere with the other parts of your life. Just keep your focus on doing the essentials and that makes you a winner."

"Thanks, Dad," says Carl with a quiet smile. "I like doing the exercises and I'm adding more each week. I feel stronger and actually it feels like I am thinking better and quicker. I don't know if the exercises have anything to do with that, but it seems like these other good results started happening right after I began doing work outs. Now, if we can just get Candy to stop laughing everytime I show her how strong I am."

"Good luck with that, son," chuckles Chris.

Chapter 4 - MouseCapades

It's a cool December afternoon in Southern California where the Dooty and Mouse families live. Chris and Carl are out working in the garden area. Chris has been watching YouTube gardening videos on their tablet tv and discovers that a great way to prepare a garden for winter is to remove all of the plants from the dormant garden. So, today, they're digging up last year's plants with their paws and making a mound of the withered plants on the side of the garden. Mr. Dooty has kindly offered to pick up all the old plants and put them in the green waste bin for the weekly trash removal.

The air is cool, but the work helps warm the two mice and it is good exercise, which Carl really likes. Just as they're almost finished with the task, they hear a nearby voice calling, "Chris Mouse? Is that you?"

Carl hears it first and looks to see who is calling his dad's name. Just then, Chris also hears the voice as it repeats the question, and he turns in the direction of the sound, spotting a strange mouse standing at the edge of the yard.

It sounds like the mouse is calling his name, so he yells, "Hello, my name is Chris Mouse. But who are you?"

The other mouse scampers over to Chris and Carl and introduces himself. "My name is Clarence Mouse and I believe that we're related. I heard all about California from our Great-Great-Great Uncle Caleb. We all live in Montana. I wanted to see California, so I hopped on trains and finally got here. I've been traveling for the last two months. I got some directions from Uncle Caleb, but you sure are hard to find."

"Hello, Clarence. It's nice to meet you," answers Chris as Carl watches with a curious look on his face. "Boy, you sure must have wanted to get here to travel that long and that far."

"Yes, I did. It's cold in Montana now and I heard that California was warmer so here I am," replies Clarence. "I'd like to stay for a few weeks before I head back. Would that be alright?"

"Yes, of course. You're welcome to stay with us, Clarence. Let me introduce you to my family. This is my son, Carl," pointing to the young buck next to him. "Come along with me and I'll show you our home where you'll be staying, and you can meet the other members of our family."

"That's sure nice of you, cousin," says Clarence with a smile.

Chris leads the way into the house with Clarence following him and Carl taking up the "tail" end.

Through the cat door and into the bedroom, the three mice walk like soldiers marching on a field. It is pretty cool to see as they match each other's steps, step-for-step.

Chris shows Clarence how to squeeze under the closet door, and then they're standing facing the Home in the Wall.

"Wow!" says Clarence. "You must be rich. That's the most beautiful mouse home I've ever seen."

"We're not rich," explains Chris. "We just were fortunate enough to find some buried treasure n a trip with our human friends, and they used part of the money to help us build this place. Let me show you where you'll be staying."

Into the front door they walk. In the front room, Clarence stares at the tablet tv before asking, "What is that, cousin?"

"It's called a video tablet, Clarence. Let me show you how it works," as Chris walks over to the tablet and pushes the power button. Instantly, the front of the tablet lights up. Clarence jumps back, frightened by the sudden change in the dark grey surface. Chris pushes a few more buttons and selects a show on YouTube, which starts a nature program.

Clarence draws in his breath and sucks on his front teeth. "Whoa! That's magic. I'm not going to ask how that works because I probably wouldn't understand it anyway. But, that's the coolest thing I've ever seen."

Just then, Christine and Candy walk into the living room.

"Look who is visiting us?" says Chris. "It's our distant cousin Clarence who traveled all the way from Montana to see California. He'll be staying with us for a while so let's make him comfortable."

"Clarence, welcome to our home," responds Christine. "We're pleased to have you visit and we can't wait to hear all about Montana."

Candy is eyeing Clarence, who is a pretty fine looking young buck. It's clear that she's sizing him up and that she is interested in knowing more about him, but she's quiet and just watches. Finally, her curiosity gets the better of her and she asks, "Where is Montana, Clarence?"

The visiting cousin goes into a short explanation of how far away Montana is, and how many days he had to travel to get here.

That satisfies Candy for now.

Chris says, "Come on, Clarence. let me show you the rest of the house, and also where you'll be staying."

He leads the way up the stairs, and they pass the family room and sitting room on the second floor, which Chris describes while waving his hand, and on up to the third floor with the family bedrooms, then up again until finally reaching the rooftop patio.

'This will be your place to sleep, Clarence," says Chris." We have some bedding over here that we keep for guests to use. Just lay out the straw and string on the floor to make your nest when it's time to take a nap or sleep for the night."

As Chris talks, Clarence is silent, but his eyes are wide, having never seen anything like this.

Chris continues, "Why don't you settle in for a little bit after your long journey. We'll be eating in an hour or two and we'll call you down for dinner. Okay?"

"That sounds really good, cousin," answers Clarence. "After I got off the train here, I wandered around for a whole day trying to find you. I could sure use a little break."

"See you later then," replies Chris, and he and Carl go back downstairs. Chris explains to Christine and Candy that Clarence is going to rest up and they can learn more about him at dinner that night.

Chris and Carl go back out to the garden to make sure they have their old plants set aside and ready for Mr. Dooty to dispose of. A quick scan of their plot in the garden confirms that fact and they go back in the house to relax. Carl has homework to do, and Chris just needs to relax and watch a little video entertainment after the strenuous work of the morning. He also wants to think about how to be a good host to this relative that has traveled such a great distance to visit.

At dinner that night, Clarence eats like he hasn't had much to eat for a while. In between bites he describes his journey south and, after questioning by Carl and Candy, he talks a bit about life in Montana. It's cold there right now because it's winter, he says, but the spring and summer are beautiful, and the fall is spectacular with the changing colors of trees. He's pretty good at his descriptions and the whole family imagines what Montana is like. It's like they're taking a trip without having to travel.

Clarence asks if they are able to watch anything about Montana on their tablet tv, and after a little search by Carl, they watch several short videos. It is, as Clarence described, a very beautiful place.

"Cousin Clarence," asks Carl, "what kind of things do you do there? Do mice enjoy any sports in Montana?"

Clarence responds quickly, "Oh sure, during the warmer months we probably do some of the same things you do here, but winter is different. Everything is covered with snow for weeks and sometimes a month, and the ponds and lakes are frozen over."

Candy stops him. "What does that mean, frozen over?"

He explains that when it gets very cold the water gets a cover on it that is called "ice." It looks clear, like you can almost see through it, but it's hard and you can walk on it. Even humans can walk on it without it breaking.

Carl breaks in with, "So you can walk on water? That's pretty cool, but are there any games that you can play on it? I mean, do mice have any sports on this ice?"

"Oh, sure," explains Clarence. "We can run and slide and some mice even do acrobatics and a game that people play - they call it hockey.

"But the most fun is running and sliding. If you do it right, you can slide forever just by throwing out one front paw and pushing off with your hind paws. You keep doing this, one paw after another, and you can go all around a pond on the ice. We call it gliding. Some mice are really good at it, and they can do tricks and fancy moves that are pretty impressive."

"That sounds like fun," from Carl. "Is that a sport, too?"

Clarence answers, "Yes, it is. We actually have competitions when all the mice come together to watch others do great moves. There are mice judges that decide who does the best and some of the better gliders even put on shows for the mice community that are called MouseCapades. The gliders in those shows are beautiful to watch as they turn and twist and jump and land and move around the pond with impressive moves. Those mice practice a lot, I'm sure, because most mice can't do any moves like they can. It's amazing to see!"

Candy has been listening closely, and her eyes get wide as she hears about MouseCapades. "I wonder if there is anything like that here," she ponders out loud.

Chris answers her, "Let's ask Mr. and Mrs. Dooty. They would probably know if there's even any frozen water anywhere in California."

The next day Chris sees Franklin Dooty and puts up a front paw as if to stop him. "Excuse me, Franklin. Are there any places where people can slide on frozen water here?"

"Oh, you mean ice," says Franklin. "Sure, there is an ice rink not far from here. Would you like to go check it out?"

"Yes, sir, that would be great. Do you think I could bring my family and my visiting cousin from Montana? He told us about mice doing acrobatics and tricks on this 'ice' and we wondered if that was possible here."

A day later Franklin and Donna take the Chris Mouse family and their cousin Clarence to the neighborhood ice rink where they watch ice skaters with fascination. Clarence points out some of the skating moves that mice gliders do in Montana.

Franklin and Donna share the names for many of the skating moves and then they tell their guests about the Ice Capades, a show that humans do on ice that people pay to watch.

"Ice Capades?" asks Clarence. "That's so interesting. In Montana we call a competition that we have, 'MouseCapades,' and it's kind of the same. I always wondered where they came up with that name. In MouseCapades the best gliders put on shows for local mice and they really show off some great moves. We all love to go watch those shows."

Donna Dooty jumps into the conversation. "You should watch some ice skating on your video tablet tonight. You'll see what some of the better human skaters are able to do, and maybe that will give you some ideas."

"And then," she continues, "we can all come back to this rink and try some of the moves. Franklin and I used to ice skate several years ago and it would be fun to do it again."

So, it's decided. The Mouse family with their guest, watch videos of the best human skaters and then, along with the Dootys, they travel to the ice rink the next week.

The Dootys strap on ice skates. The mice plan to slide on their bare paws, which is what Clarence described that mice do in Montana.

On the ice Clarence slides around okay. Chris and Christine have trouble getting their footing on the ice and their legs try to slip out from under them, but Candy and Carl are naturals. They scoot and slide very well. It's a fun couple of hours.

After everyone is tired, they travel back home. The two young brother and sister have big, contented smiles on their faces. Clarence seems quite impressed with his two young cousins.

"That was so fun," says Candy when they get home. "Can we do it again, please?"

Mr. and Mrs. Dooty offer to take everyone ice skating once a week, an offer that is quickly accepted by the mice.

Over the next several weeks, Chris and Christine decide that ice skating won't be their activity. They're able to get around the rink okay, but two times they're almost run over by humans that didn't see them. Once, a lady spots them and thinks they're wild mice, so she starts screaming. Franklin and Donna calm her down by explaining that they're pet mice and they're very friendly and okay to be around people. That helps, but the incident makes Christine nervous, and Chris already isn't all that comfortable, plus they're both falling a lot, so they decide to simply watch Carl and Candy and Clarence.

Candy is really showing promise. She even attempts to do jumps. Her first try isn't very good, but she doesn't fall. Fortunately, after that, she gets a little better with every attempt. Clarence shows Carl how to circle Candy when she does a jump. The result looks very professional and gets smiles and loud applause from the Dootys and Chris and Christine.

In two more visits to the rink some of the human skaters stop to watch the two mice and their ice-skating tricks. Clarence never shows off any of his skills or tricks but more importantly, he shares ideas with his young cousins of what he's seen skaters do in Montana, which Carl and Candy try. Soon, every human at the rink stops skating when the two young mice take to the ice and they applaud loudly at every move, jump and twirl. Candy is beaming, and Carl looks so proud he could pop the buttons on his shirt front.

Rev. Souris and his wife are invited to come watch their next practice. They clap and grin and then Mrs. Souris suggests that Carl and Candy try out for the local mice ice skating competition. It's a big surprise! Neither mouse was even aware that there was such a thing. If they sign up, they will only have a few weeks to get ready.

Carl gulps and Candy wrings her front paws nervously, but they agree to try. Rev. Souris signs them up for the competition and they're on the slate for the big event.

Now, they have little time to practice before the competition, but the Dootys are glad to take everyone to the rink several times. Franklin and Donna are enjoying skating again, and everyone loves watching Carl and Candy practice. They try some new tricks and both fall a few times, but they keep getting better and better at each practice. They're still working on a few moves, and both feel a little shaky, but they calm down when their dad tells them that all they have to do is simply have fun during the competition. That's all.

Three weeks later, they're on the ice at the rink, waiting to begin the competition. It's quiet because the human and mouse crowds are very respectful of all the competitors.

Chris reminds his son and daughter, "Don't take this too seriously. You have nothing to prove. Just go out and have fun and everything will be great. You'll see!"

The first skaters are Carl and Candy. The lights of the rink are dimmed and a beautiful song is played for them on the rink speakers. As they skate, a single spotlight follows them around the ice. It's a great performance, and the Mouse and Dooty families clap loudly. Danny is there to record the entire event, and he captures every move, jump and turn on video. He turns to the Dootys and says, "This is going to be the best MouseKeTok ever!"

The other competitors are excellent, and Carl and Candy watch breathlessly as each pair turns, twists, jumps and dances through their routines. It's fascinating to watch, and they note several new moves that they would like to try in the future.

After all competitors have skated, the judges rate each team. The suspense is very hard on Carl and Candy. They're nervous as they wait for the scores

The competition is not like human skating where scores are announced for each team after they skate. In mouse skating competition the scores are kept secret until all contestants have skated and then all scores are announced at the same time.

Finally, the moment arrives when the results are announced.

Carl and Christine are on pins and needles waiting. It seems to take forever to find out how they placed. Carl feels faint and Christine nervously rubs her front paws together, back and forth, back and forth.

And then the scores are announced. The winning team is:

Torent and Feline, a very dramatic looking husband and wife mice couple.

Coming in second place is:

Rictin and Rachal.

They were very good, also, and their jumps were very dramatic. Their score is just a little less than Torent and Feline's score which makes them jump up and down with happiness. They came sooo close.

Carl and Candy are in third place. Carl is frowning, but Christine is bright and bubbly. She didn't think they had a chance to place in the top five, and she saw how good the other two teams were that placed ahead of them.

When it is announced that they took third place Candy grabs Carl and hugs him and jumps up and down. It's a victory, in her mind. They just started gliding a few months ago and she is excited because this is really a good outcome.

After all the scores are announced, Carl and Candy congratulate the other competitors and get congratulations from each in return. Torent and Feline are surrounded by both people and mice but they see Carl and Candy and call out to them saying that they were very impressive and must continue because they will be champions in the future. That makes brother and sister very happy. It is a gracious gesture by the winners, and it seems very genuine.

Clarence also congratulates them for doing so well and repeats several times how impressed he was with their performance. "No mice in Montana are as good as you two," he says.

Of course, Chris and Christine are glowing with pride for their kids for even attempting to compete in so short of a time. On the way home, Franklin and Donna tell Carl and Candy how proud they are for their courage and their beautiful performance.

This has been a great lesson for the two young mice. They learned that if they practice and work hard, they can do things they never could do before and even do them well. To place third in competitive ice gliding, when they had never even glided a few months ago, is a great lesson in believing in themselves and toughing it through the times when they felt like they would never be any good at what they were attempting.

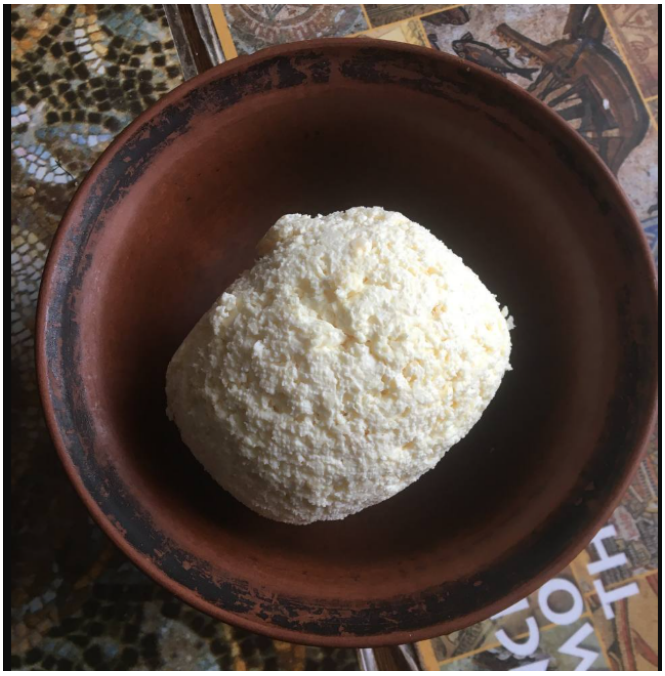
As Christine tells them at home that night, "You two amazed your dad and me. More than anything we were impressed that you never gave up. You kept going even when you were discouraged. We are so proud of you!"

Chris just beams and nods his head in agreement of his wife's praise.

What Christine said was worth everything to Carl and Candy. They worked hard, had fun, and did well. Their achievement is something neither mouse will forget for the rest of their lives and it taught them that if you try something, and you keep trying, you can do things you never thought you could.



Chapter 5 - Chris Cheese



Like many people and mice, the Mouse family likes cheese, but mice don't really like the smelly kind that much. After all, they have very sensitive noses. While cheese is not their favorite food like nuts or fruit, if it's available and it doesn't disturb their sensitive sense of smell, they're up for a tasty cheese snack.

Franklin and Donna Dooty used to think that cheese was a favorite of mice. However, one day when Chris is in the kitchen Mr. Dooty is looking inside the refrigerator with the door open. Spotting his mouse friend, he turns to Chris and says, "Hey, Chris. I've got some pretty tasty cheese that I've been saving for you. Would you like to try some now?"

"Oh sure, Franklin. Why not?" exclaims Chris, mostly because he doesn't want to offend his friend by turning down the offer.

"Great, taste this. This is some special cheese that our neighbors made, and it's supposed to taste very good. Tell me what you think." And with that, Mr. Dooty cuts off a small slice and hands it to Chris.

Chris holds it up in his front paws for a minute, nibbles on the edge, chews on the nibble for a few moments, sniffs the cheese slice again, and then turns to Mr. Dooty. "Well, that's actually pretty good," he says. "I wasn't sure I would like it, but that's pretty good. How do you make cheese, anyway?"

Franklin answers, "I'm not the cheese expert in this family. Mrs. Dooty has made several types of cheese occasionally. I prefer the mild kind that she makes, personally."

"Hmm, interesting. Maybe when she makes some next time, I can ask Christine to try it. It isn't a regular part of our diet, but she might like the kind of cheese that you like."

That's the end of their conversation. Franklin continues looking through the fridge and Chris walks back to the Home in the Wall.

When he walks in their house Chris sees Christine in the kitchen and says, "Hey honey, Mr. Dooty just gave me a sample of homemade cheese. Have you ever had cheese?"

"Oh sure," says Christine. "When I was young, we came across some in a part of a hamburger that someone threw away. I didn't like it."

"I know," replies Chris. "I never really liked the cheese I tried before either. But the cheese Franklin gave me was pretty good. It might be worth trying again. What do you think?"

Christine just nods. She's busy with what she's doing and doesn't feel like getting into a long conversation about cheese, of all things.

The subject doesn't come up again for a few weeks until Chris and Franklin are both in the kitchen at the same time again.

Chris thinks for a minute and then asks, "So, you said your neighbor made that cheese you let me sample a couple of weeks ago. How do you make cheese anyway?"

"I'm not sure," Franklin answers and then says, "but let's take a look on the Internet and see what it says."

He turns on the small tablet on the kitchen counter and types, "How do you make cheese?"

The instant response has a brief description, which doesn't look very difficult, Franklin thinks.

"Well, Chris, it looks like we could actually try to make some ourselves. Do you want to give it a try?"

"Sure, Mr. Dooty. That sounds like fun. Do you have everything we need or will we need to get more ingredients," asks Chris.

After a look inside the refrigerator and on the shelves of the pantry it's obvious that a quick shopping trip is necessary. Franklin talks Chris into going with him to the store and they are soon prowling the aisles together, gathering the necessary elements to make cheese.

It's hard to find raw milk, but they manage to spot a gallon and put it in the cart. The second item is white distilled vinegar. Franklin finds that, and the two ingredients are now nestled in the shopping cart. That's really all they need, but Franklin also gets a package of nice nuts which he knows will make Chris happy. With the key ingredients for cheese, and the tasty nuts, they take their purchases to the cashier and pay.

Chris is excited. He has never made any edible food in his entire life. He has eaten a lot of food, and one time when Christine was gone to her parents' house he tried to make some food. It didn't turn out very good, and he and the kids ended up eating with the Dootys, which was great because they like to cook and their food always tastes good.

So, making cheese sounds like fun and maybe it will even be good to eat.

When he and Franklin get back home they take the two ingredients into the kitchen. Mr. Dooty is very organized. He puts both ingredients on the kitchen counter in the order that they will be used.

"Why did you do that, Franklin?" asked Chris.

"Well, my friend, it's a lot easier to lay out the ingredients like this than to have to search for them when you're in the middle of making something."

"Oh, that makes sense. So, are we ready to make cheese yet?" asks Chris.

With a nod, Franklin says, "Okay, the first thing we have to do is heat the milk. Let's put it in this pan and put it on the stove to get it hot."

Which he does while Chris watches. Franklin stirs the milk until it is hot to the touch, and then he takes the pot off of the stove, measures the vinegar and pours it into the milk. Then he coves the pot and sets a timer.

He explains all of this to Chris who watches him intently.

After the timer rings, Franklin takes a big wooden spoon and lifts out the thick bunch of curdled milk and places it into a bowl of water.

"This is called the 'curd,' Chris. It's what happens when you add vinegar to hot milk. It's the beginning of cheese."

Next, Franklin washes his hands and picks up the curd and squeezes it. The extra water drips off of the curd and into the bowl. He does these steps two more times and now, the curd starts to look like a ball of cheese.

"Watch this, Chris. I'm going to heat it in the microwave for a little bit."

Chris is fascinated. He didn't realize you could actually make cheese. The only cheese he has seen is in a wrapper or on an old hamburger. All he ever knew was that cheese was apparently made using a mysterious process.

Franklin pushes the microwave button, and the box starts humming. After a short while the machine buzzes and Franklin pulls the cheese out of the microwave. Then he uses his hands to form the cheese into a round ball before putting it into a bowl of cold water and ice.

"That's it, Chris," says Mr. Dooty. "Do you want to taste what we just made?"

Chris immediately replies, "Oh yeah, I can't wait. That's the coolest thing I've ever seen!"

Franklin is actually pretty pleased with how this has all gone. It's really his first time at trying to make cheese, and he wasn't sure how it would turn out, but the ball of cheese in ice water looks pretty real. It's amazing!

Mr. Dooty wraps a paper towel around the cheese ball to dry it and then cuts off a few pieces for the two to try.

"Yum. That's pretty good, Franklin. You did a good job. I'll eat your cheese anytime!"

"Well, I won't be making it very often, Chris" says Mr. Dooty. "I prefer to buy it, but I thought it would be fun for us to try to make it. I just followed the recipe, and it seems that it turned out okay. It does taste pretty good, I think."

Chris nods in agreement as he continues to munch on his chunk of the cheese. "Do you think I could take some of this home to my family to share with them?" he asks.

Franklin nods and says, "Of course. I bet they'll be pretty impressed with our cooking skills."

And impressed they are. Christine chews away amd Carl gets cheese all over his whiskers. Candy is a bit more delicate than her brother, but she doesn't stop eating until her piece is gone.

It's been an interesting experiment for Chris, and Christine is impressed that he even tried it.

"Well, Mr. Dooty did all the work," said Chris. "I just helped, but I learned a lot. People make food all the time and I never really paid attention to how it is made. Now, I have a great appreciation for what it takes to make food to eat.

"Also, thank you for always making sure we have food for our meals. I promise that I will help with that chore from now on. I admit, it looked kind of fun and it was really great to eat what we made. That put a smile on my face."

"Thank you, Chris. You're welcome to help anytime. I'll call you when it's time to get things ready for dinner, so you can help," says Christine, to which Chris wrinkles his nose and closes his eyes.

"Well, I hope that whatever I help make is good to eat," Chris thinks to himself.

Chris wanted to share the following recipe in case you want to try making cheese.

Chris Mouse Special Cheese

Make this with an adult

You'll need:

- 2 large pots
- Microwave-safe bowl
- Large wooden or metal spoon
- Thermometer

Ingredients:

1. 1/2 gallon Raw Milk
2. 1/2 cup white distilled vinegar

How to make it:

1. Pour the milk into a cooking pot and heat it on the stove on medium heat, stirring constantly.
2. When the milk is hot to the touch, turn off the burner and pour the 1/2 cup of vinegar into the milk.
3. Mix the milk and vinegar with a large spoon for 1/2 a minute.
4. Cover the pot and let it sit for 20 minutes.
5. Use a large wooden or metal spoon and press the curdling cheese to the side of the pot.
6. Pick up the curdled cheese with the large wooden or metal spoon and put it in a bowl.
7. Use a slotted spoon to find more curdled milk in the pot and add it to the curdled cheese in the bowl.
8. Wash your hands and grab the curdled milk with both hands, then squeeze it gently to get the excess milk from it. Do this a few times until the excess water is gone.
9. Put the new cheese ball in a microwave-safe bowl and microwave it for about 1/2 a minute at full temperature.
10. Stir the cheese and then heat it again for 15 seconds.

11. If you have a thermometer, check the temperature of the cheese. It should be around 160 degrees. If it isn't hot enough, just heat it for another 5-10 seconds.
12. After it's at the right temperature remove it from the bowl and use a large spoon to stretch the cheese and fold it. When the cheese is cool enough use your hands to make it into a ball and then put it into a bowl of cold water for 10 minutes before putting ice cubes into the water. When the cheese is cold, dry it in paper towels and then slice it and put it on crackers or toast.
13. Enjoy eating your homemade cheese!

Chapter 6 - Mouse Games

Dinner with the Dootys is always one of the highlights of the week for the Mouse family. During garden season each family contributes fresh produce from their respective garden sections. Christine helps Donna with the menu and also, to a limited extent, with food preparation. Then they all sit down to eat, hands folded as Chris offers a prayer of thanksgiving for the food and their friends, Donna and Franklin.

After prayer, it's chow down, which of course for the Mouse family means jumping in with both front paws and eating with gusto. In between mouthfuls the two families talk about their week and upcoming activities. This conversation is always interesting, because sometimes there is overlap and sometimes the two families have very different schedules and events.

Tonight, there is some really tasty squash on the menu, slices of ham, and also green beans. Yumm! That's a wonderful way to cap off the day and, even better, it uses two ingredients from the garden. The green beans come from the Mouse family section.

Carl is really energized at the dinner table as he talks about a team sport called Pawball. He and his buddies are facing off against a team from a nearby neighborhood this coming weekend, and to hear him talk it will be a very serious match.

Franklin interrupts Carl by asking, "So, Carl, what exactly is PawBall? How do you play it and what are the rules?"

Chris adds, "Yes, son. It's not polite to talk about a subject that our friends don't understand. Please explain the game."

"Okay." says Carl, "Well, there are two teams and they each will get the ball at least one time. The field is marked off to 100 paw lengths long.

The ball is put in the middle of the field and both teams have to stand back 20 paw lengths.

Each team has selected a leader that will decide what and how to play.

When the whistle blows both teams will rush forward and try to get the ball.

The other team will try to stop the mouse that gets the ball and get them down so their nose touches the ground. That ends the first play.

After that, the team with the ball tries to move it forward without the other team getting the ball carrier's nose on the ground. If the team with the ball doesn't move the ball 15 paw lengths

in two plays then the other team gets the ball. However, if the team with the ball does move it 15 paw lengths within two plays then they can keep the ball and keep playing. As long as they keep moving the ball the required distance within two plays they keep the ball.

No team can throw the ball; it has to be either carried or kicked.

The only time the ball can be kicked is if the team that doesn't have the ball manages to get their paws on it. Then they can kick it forward toward their goal, and both teams will scramble to try to get it.

"That sounds interesting, "says Mr. Dooty. "So how does a team win the game?"

Carl explains, "The game ends after both teams have had the ball at least once. The first team to get the ball past the end of the field is in line to win, but the second team gets the ball on their end of the field and they get the opportunity to try to get the ball past the end of the field. Of course, they have to move the ball 15 paw lengths within two plays or the game is over and the team that scored first is the winner.

"Sometimes the games are short and sometimes they take a long time, but the celebration by the winning team can go on for quite a while.

"Those are the rules for PawBall," he finishes.

Carl jumps in, "You should see the other games we play, too.

"My favorite is 'Mouse Pull.' It starts out with two mice, each at one end of a piece of string. They play on a shorter field, only 30 paws long. There are two teams and they put their strongest player to pull against the other team's player.

If one side starts to lose, like their player is getting pulled to the other side, then that team can send in another player to help. If a team is stronger and the other side starts to lose they can send in another player. Each team only has six players and they can only add one player at a time and only if they're being pulled to the other side. The first team to pull the other team to their end of the field wins."

"Oh, that seems like a fun game," Mrs. Dooty says. "Can anyone play?"

"Sure, it doesn't matter if they are male or female, young or old," replies Chris, "but you can only have 6 players on a team."

"Okay, so there are only two games?" asks Mr. Dooty.

Candy answers, "Oh no, we play many different games. Those are just the two that Carl likes best."

Donna Dooty has a quizzical look on her face. "What other games do you play?"

"Well, there is 'Round-a-Mouse,' which is two mice holding each other's feet to form a round circle, head to toe, and then rolling end over end toward a winning line. There can be several teams playing 'Round a Mouse' because it's a race."

"There is also 'MiceTower.' Teams of mice climb up on top of each other to form towers. The tallest tower wins. That game is really fun, especially when a team is very high and then it crumbles and everyone falls to the ground. That team loses. Mice are very strong, you know, so no one gets hurt but it's a fun game to watch.

"Another game we play is 'Food Race.' Food is placed at the end of a field and teams race to get it. The first team to the food gets to eat it. That game can last all day. It's a great equalizer because the best teams get fat from all the food and then they start to lose."

Carl adds, "I really like 'Crazy Paws.' This is a game for two mice. They face each other and then the first mouse tells the referee what they're going to draw and then moves their front paws to draw that picture in the air. Bystanders get to play, too. If the second mouse doesn't identify the picture then the bystanders get to guess what it is. If one of them gets it, the first mouse wins. If the bystanders can't figure it out then the second mouse wins. The object is to draw a paw picture that is understandable by the audience, but stumps your opponent."

Christine says, "We also have some games that are specific to females, although most games can be played by either bucks or does. In fact, many games include both males and females and often the does are better at winning than the bucks."

Franklin jumps into the conversation, "I'm curious, Christine. What kind of games are best played by females?"

"Well," Christine replies, "there is 'FeatherThreader.' Two contestant mice of either gender each get a thread and a bird feather. The goal is to weave the thread through the feather. Both contestants have until the count of 50 to finish a thread-wrapped feather. The most attractive wrapped feather wins. For some reason, female mice seem to win more often at this game than male mice.

"To make it more interesting, sometimes we have five or six competitors playing this game. That makes it more challenging and with that many contestants it's typical that two or three finished feathers are really good."

Franklin jumps into the conversation. "Boy, we'd love to watch you guys play some of these games. Do you think it would be alright if humans attended your competitions?"

Chris and Christine think that would be okay, and so they bring it up with Fickle Furr who is in charge of the next Mouse Church Mouse Games competitions. Fickle thinks it's an interesting idea and says, "Let's give it a try and see if it works. If there are any problems, of course, we might not want to do that again. I know these are your friends, so is that okay?"

Both Mouse adults agree and Fickle promises to announce it at the next church service. When he does that, he tells the mice attendees that any human that comes to their games must bring chairs and sit on the sidelines to watch the games. "There will be no interfering with the play or movement into the field of play. Understood?" To which all the mice nod their heads in agreement.

Two Sundays later the games are played on a Sunday afternoon after church. Mice bring picnic lunch food and the invited humans bring chairs and their own food. Besides Franklin and Donna Dooty are Jim and Francine Gorman, Hal and Teri Billings and Michal and Tae Voznik. The human couples didn't know each other before they showed up at the competition, but since they are all mouse family hosts, they make easy social connections and sit together to watch the games.

Before the games begin Rev. Souris reminds all mouse contestants to be on their best behavior. The games are for fun so no fighting, no yelling, no calling each other names, and no cheating. At the end of his short talk he shouts, "Are all of you mice ready for some fun?" To which they all cheer "Yes" and throw their front paws up in the air. It's a good start to the games.

The humans line their chairs up on one side of the lot where the church shed is located. Rev. Souris explains that the games will be played on the grass in front of them. Fickle promises to explain each game to the audience before it is played. This is always done as a reminder for the competitors but now with humans watching that won't know their games or rules or how anyone wins, it's important to share that information so they can enjoy the games, too.

After briefing the humans and the mouse competitors, Fickle gathers all the contestants in the middle of the field, right in front of the human audience. Putting two claws from one paw in his mouth he lets out a loud whistle as a sign that the games are ready to begin.

The first game is MiceTower. Three teams of mice stand in different places in front of the audience and after Fickle lets out a whistle they each begin to build their tower. Two teams have four mice on the bottom and then add three mice on top of those. The third team has three mice at the bottom, and three on the second row. As each row gets added there is tension in the air because no one knows when a tower will tip and fall. Now, each team adds a third row to their tower. The two towers with four mice on the bottom look like they might be a little tippy because the three mice on the second row have trouble finding their footing on the four mice making up their base. Still, all three towers seem pretty stable after three rows. Next, a fourth row climbs up the rows of mice in each tower.

The human audience is holding their breath and all of them want to cheer but they're afraid that they will scare the mice and cause them to tumble. So, everyone just sits there quietly, watching and trying not to move or make a sound.

A fifth row climbs up, and then a sixth. Now, the two towers with four mice on their base row are struggling to keep upright. Finally, one of the four towers collapses with mice falling over each other. As the last row falls the mice tumble into the other four-tower team causing them also to collapse. It's an accident but the other tower was very tippy already, so it is not a big surprise that it also falls.

The mice making up the three tower team cheer and one-by-one they climb down to the ground and then stand with their front paws in the air in a victory salute. The human audience claps and smiles with each person thinking, this is pretty fun.

The next game is MousePull. This is a very energetic game with lots of shouts and cheering for teams. The game has four teams each with six team members. There two matches, each pitting one team against another, and both matches are held at the same time.

The game is fun because it starts with just one mouse on each side, with mice running in to help their team from being pulled over the other finish line. New mice can be added until all six are in on each team.

Because the two matches are held at the same time, the audience has to watch from one match to the other to see who is winning.

Carl's team loses its match against Tatt's son Teaser's team, and Christine's team wins against a team led by Shirley Fun.

Now, it's time for the final round, the two winning teams against each other. Teaser and Christine gather their team mates together and give them a quick pep talk. Teaser tells his team, "You know how to play this game. We've all been playing it for a long time. Let's go out and win!" Christine looks over her team and rallies them, whispering, "Here's what we're going to do. I want one of our stronger players to start, then we'll fill in with three middle players, and I and the strongest player will finish. Let's go win this!"

The game starts off with Christine's first player pulling Teaser's player until Teaser adds a second player. Then it's even. Back and forth they pull until finally Christine's team starts to take an edge at which point Teaser adds his best player, making it two against one in their favor. It's a mistake that could cost the match because his other three players aren't that strong, but for now it looks like it will be a good advantage because his team is now pulling Christine's team. She adds a second player and that stops Teaser's team's momentum. Teaser adds a third player and that starts the pull in their favor. Christine adds a third player and that equals the match, with each team pulling better and the other team pulling back. Teaser adds a four player and now the advantage has gone to his stronger team. It's four against three in

Teaser's favor. Christine responds by stepping into her team and pulling. She's pretty strong and her team is reversing the direction of the pull in their favor. Teaser jumps in as the last player on his team and grabs the thread and they're successful in slowing Christine's team. Both teams strain as Teaser yells at his team to pull with everything they have. It looks like they have stopped Christine's team but she adds her last and strongest player, at which time the game is totally lost for Teaser as Christine's team drags them over the finish line.

The humans have been watching this match with enthusiasm, some cheering for one team, some cheering for the other. At the end they're all standing up and yelling and then as Christine's team pulls the other team over the line, the cheering is loud and excited. The mice audience is a little nervous because these big humans are standing up and shouting. That has usually been a sign of danger to mice and they're a little anxious until they see that the humans are cheering for the game. That eliminates any concerns as they join with the same enthusiasm and stand and cheer. It's a thrilling end to a very good contest.

Christine and her team stand up on their hind paws, face the audience, grasp each other's front paws and hold them up in a victory salute, which brings even more cheering and even jumping up and down from both humans and mice.

The audience members tell each other what a great game this was. Franklin turns to Donna and says "I wish I had taken videos of this with my cell phone. That was exciting!" to which she nods in agreement, unable to speak because she's hoarse from yelling.

The other games are fun and some are even exciting. Watching mouse games is great. The mice are really energetic and they take their games very seriously. None of the three human couples have ever seen anything like this.

The final game of the day is PawBall and it is a very aggressive game. The two teams seem very evenly matched. Chris coaches one team and Frak coaches the other.

The first possession is won by Frak's team after a mad scramble in the middle of the field.

The three referees gather both team captains and coaches in the middle of the field and explain the rules, which they already know, but this is a formal start to every PawBall match.

At the sound of the referee's whistle the two teams begin with Frak's team having the first possession of the ball. Three plays later they turn the ball over to Chris's team. Then it's war. The two teams go back and forth, each one getting a few extra 15 paw lengths but neither team able to sustain a long possession.

The two coaches call a break and both teams huddle on opposite ends of the field with their coaches. It is pep talk time and Chris is very enthusiastic with his direction and praise. He tells one of his players that it's time to step up his game and be more aggressive. He praises two other players, one for his aggressive play and the other for being mentally into the game. At the

end of his talk to the team, they put their front paws together in the middle of a circle and shout "Hoorah!" while throwing their paws up in the air. It looks like a very good talk because the players come out with smiles of determination.

Play begins again and this time the game is very one-sided. The team managed by Frak goes 60 paw lengths without being threatened by Frak's team. It looks like it's going to be an easy win until a player on Chris's team gets into a fight with a member of Frak's team. Both get thrown out of the game, as the humans in the audience watch with amusement. It looks like a human game, they tell each other.

After the fight and the players being evicted the game becomes more of a stalemate. Neither team makes much progress and ball possession goes back and forth. Finally, Jin Wackle gets the ball and after Orcle Peanut blocks the opposing player that is running right at him, Jin runs down the side of the field and past the finish line. Frak and his players throw their paws up in the air in victory and their team is named the victor. It was a hard-fought contest, with an exciting finish!

Frak calls his players together for a victory talk. His voice is strong as he says, "What you did today is you didn't give up, even when it looked like we weren't going to continue with the momentum we had at first. Instead, you each decided to do your best, and I am so proud of you because, most importantly you decided to have fun doing it." With that, he leads the team into a cheer which ends with every player throwing their front paws in the air and shouting.

Of course, the mice and people watching the game are excited. It was a great game and it was hard fought, but in the end determination and teamwork made the difference.

After the games are all played, food is served by mice and people. They eat together in a festive mood and everyone says this is one of the most fun things they have done in years.

Rev. Souris gathers both groups together and thanks them for the fun and good sportsmanship. He graciously invites the human guests to join them at any time and commits to reminding their mice friends to tell them when there will be upcoming games.

At the two-family dinner in the Dooty home that night Franklin and Donna thank Chris and Christine for allowing them to come to Mouse Games.

"That was so much fun, friends, and we hope we were good guests to have at your games," says Donna.

Christine answers for her family, "We had fun with you being there. Thank you for being good and respectful guests. Our friends felt safe with you watching and I'm sure everyone would really enjoy having you join us for future games."

With that said, the Mouse family join hands and motion for the Dootys to do the same. As Chris counts, at the count of three both families raise their hands and shout, "Hoorah."

Chapter 7 - The Mouse Academy

Carl and Candy are both pretty good students. Candy always gets her homework done on time, she works hard to finish every assignment as good as she can, and as a result her grades are very good. Carl puts off doing homework until the last minute and then rushes to get it done, sometimes not quite in time. As a result, his grades are always just above passing.

Chris and Christine talk about their kids and their schoolwork almost every week. Sometimes they even get into arguments because Christine is concerned about what kind of grades they're getting, and she wants Chris to help Carl. The last argument ends when Chris agrees to take on the responsibility of encouraging Carl.

In his conversation with Carl, Chris talks about the importance of studying because his future as an adult mouse will depend on the effort he puts in. Grades aren't just numbers or letters on a page, they're an indicator of how well Carl will be able to survive and thrive as an adult. Someday he will be responsible for a family, and if he doesn't learn how to put in the effort to become a smart and capable adult mouse, his family may suffer.

This is a talk that is uncomfortable for both males. Chris feels that it's a difficult subject because he wants to encourage his son and not make him feel bad. Carl doesn't like it because he knows he's been lazy with schoolwork, and it bothers him to not look good in his father's eyes.

As Chris and Christine get ready for bed that night, Christine asks Chris, "So, how did it go with Carl? Does he understand why we're concerned, and did he agree to do better?"

"Well," replies Chris, "I made the points, and I think he understands. He did commit to getting his homework done earlier, but I'm not sure that's going to be enough. Honestly, I wonder if we shouldn't consider homeschooling him so we can help him more directly with his education."

"That's an interesting idea, Chris," Christine acknowledges. "I always liked school, and I have some ideas about how I would teach it. In fact, when I was a young doe I actually thought I might become a teacher. In fact, I even studied teaching during my last two years of school. But, then we got married and had kids and I set that aside. You know what's funny? I've secretly wondered what would happen if I started a school."

"Really?" said Chris. "I didn't know that. I bet you'd be good at it. What would you do differently than Mouse School?"

Christine gets a faraway look in her eyes. "Well, I would teach more practical information about what it takes to be an adult mouse, a mouse that doesn't just survive but also does as good or better than the best mice around them. You know, kind of learning the secrets to success in life

that we learned after we got out of school. The only difference is these important life lessons would be taught in school so the young mice would have a great start to being the best mice that they could become."

"I like that a lot," replies Chris. "Would you consider doing that with our kids? Maybe you could test it out. We both want to see them get a good start in life."

"I'll have to think about that, Chris," says Christine. "It's kind of exciting to think about but I'm not sure how I feel about it. Can we talk about it next week?"

"Of course, sweetheart," is her husband's reply. "You're very smart and I'm sure you have really good ideas. I'd love to hear more about them."

For the next three weeks, Christine thinks about various ideas, and she finds her old notebooks where she described how she would teach and maybe even run a school. Each time she looks at her notebooks she gets more excited and writes down more ideas. She realizes that now that she's an adult and a mom, she has learned really valuable lessons that help in her life. Those lessons, plus what she wrote down when she was younger, are helping her come up with new ideas on how and what to teach.

When Christine feels like she's done enough thinking about it, she decides to do a test by teaching her own young ones during the spring break at their school.

After discussing her idea with Chris, the next night she tells Carl and Candy at the dinner table, "I know you have next week off from school but I'm going to use that time to teach you some great lessons that will help you as you get older. We'll have fun and I promise that you will get valuable training that you will use all of your life."

Carl and Candy sit quietly as their mom talks, wondering what she has in mind and how that's all going to work out. Candy is more excited than Carl. He was looking forward to having the next week off, and now it's going to be more school instead. He's hoping that it will at least be fun and not boring.

Monday morning, Christine reminds the kids that they will be having class after breakfast, and they will meet in the family room on the second floor. Both kids are nervous as they eat, taking their time with their food, not sure what to expect when they join their mom upstairs.

After finishing breakfast, both young mice walk up the stairs to the family room where Christine is waiting.

"Carl and Candy," their mom starts, "this morning we're just going to have some fun for a little while.

"I have several things here that I want you to help me with. I'm going to give you a plum, a carrot and a beetle. I want you to make something useful with them. Take your time and work together. Let's see what you come up with."

The two young mice are quiet and then Candy says, "Carl, what if we put them together? Could that work?"

"It might, but what if we make two things out of them? We could combine the plum and the carrot, but the beetle is something different."

They both think for a few minutes and then Candy offers, "Well, if we take the carrot and make something else out of it, that would be interesting. It's kind of a strong structural thing, isn't it?

"Hmm, good idea. The beetle is dead so that could make a nice crunchy snack. Could we just eat all three things and call it lunch?"

Candy thinks and then says, "Sure, we could mash the beetle with the carrot and add the plum to it for flavor. But, what would we do with the carrot after that?"

"We could eat it too, right?" says Carl. "The whole thing would be a meal that would last a while."

"Okay," Candy says, "we could also use the carrot as a tool and hold it so we could use the pointy end to dig in the dirt. That way we could plant the plum seed and grow a plum tree."

"Good idea, 'Can-do,'" says Carl with a smile. "I like that. Let's talk to mom and tell her what we have come up with."

The two mice share their ideas with Christine and ask her for the correct answer to the assignment.

"Kids, I wanted to see you explore this from as many angles as possible. There is usually more than one right answer to every problem or question. The best answers come after you come up with the first answer. Good job for thinking of several answers. That's the path to success in life - just don't stop at the first good answer."

Carl looks at his mom with a funny look on his face. "That's different than what we learned at Mouse School, mom. When the teacher gives us a problem, we are supposed to give her the one answer that she wants."

"Well, that's good, Carl, for adding things together to see how many things you have," says Christine, "but in life that isn't always the best approach. More than anything else, thinking on your feet, exploring different ideas and determining which is best, maybe even trying several things - that's often the best answer."

The rest of the morning and the other mornings for the week are about problem solving. Christine challenges the kids to find as many possible solutions as they can. It's very fun and both kids are learning a lot of life lessons.

A few neighbor families hear from their kids what Carl and Candy are learning and, one by one, they approach Christine to ask if she would be willing to teach their kids, too. The usual thing they say is, "I want my little one to grow up to be smart and successful. I don't want them to get hurt or not succeed in life because they can't think on their feet. Could you teach our kids these lessons?"

Well, that poses a problem. This is more than Christine bargained for when she decided to just try to teach her own kids. But, so many mouse parents are asking her that she finally agrees to try it.

So it's not confusing with Mouse School, she decides to call it "Mouse Academy." It's a school to teach young mice how to live happily and successfully in life. She decides to try this for just a month or two to see if she likes it and wants to do it longer. Of course, she has doubts. What if it doesn't work? What if she can't really teach kids? What if they don't learn?

She confesses to Chris that she has these worries. "I don't want to let anyone down, Chris" she says.

Chris, like a good husband, replies, "Well, honey, your idea is good. Just try it for a month or so and then decide what to do after that." That's the kind of encouragement Christine needs, and she commits to giving it a try.

The hours of regular Mouse School are during the mornings. So, in the afternoons, five days a week, Mouse Academy meets in the family room of the Mouse family Home in the Wall. With more students than just her own kids, Christine sees several challenges – where can they meet, and how do they get course material that the young mice can take back to their homes?

Christine enlists Famous Trackle and Matilda Meece to help, since they have the largest families in the neighborhood. The key to Mouse Academy, as she sees it, is to challenge the students while building fun into learning. The two mouse moms have many questions, but as Christine shares the vision she has for kids, both moms get excited and sign up. Famous jumps in with both hind paws and loves teaching but she also shares some great ideas about trying new things to grow and expand the Academy. Matilda is also a very good teacher. She loves the kids and really enjoys stimulating them with ideas. After her classes each afternoon her face is practically beaming. She's a natural teacher and class facilitator.

After two weeks of Mouse Academy, the word has spread, and more mouse kids are showing up each afternoon. Soon classes are too big for the Home in the Wall and Famous suggests that a solution may be to move the Mouse Academy classes to Mouse Church. Alphonse and Mandy

Souris are delighted with this idea because this will help the church become a more central part of the local mouse community, something they have been hoping and praying for since they started the church several years ago.

In the Academy, mice kids are now learning great living skills, such as how to find the best food, how to avoid danger, how to get along with others, how to coexist with people in a human world, how to find joy and life answers through creativity, and how to think on your feet in a hurry or when you're in danger. They also get exposure to work activities - different types of work, learning the skills that each requires as well as the results from pursuing them.

These are topics that aren't taught in Mouse School, which mainly teaches general knowledge and not situational knowledge or life skills.

Christine decides that they can teach with the knowledge that already exists in the mouse community. Famous and Matilda both jump on the idea and Famous offers to help enlist parents and others to talk about and teach what they do.

Frizz and Frak teach a fascinating course in home building, and they even let the kids help out on their latest projects. This proves very popular for both male and female students.

Teeny Thimble talks about her close call with the cat that injured her and could have killed her. She shares several different danger situations and challenges the students to figure out the best way to get out of them.

Mrs. Murine leads students in singing and music, with Chris Mouse giving three hands-on lessons on playing the guitar.

One human guest speaker is Danny, Mr. Dooty's nephew, who shows them how to use social media and theatrical presentation.

Lightbulb has two sessions on electricity, how to use it and how to avoid getting hurt by it.

With every guest "instructor" the students get new ideas and learn new answers to challenges. Plus, they get ideas about what they like to do and the things they would be better off letting other mice do.

Mouse Academy is a hit with mice students. The young mice get to try different things, get exposed to different ideas and develop interests because of it all.

After three months of having classes at Mouse Church, parents of young mice from surrounding neighborhoods learn about the innovative "school" and ask Christine if their young ones can attend. It's a dilemma that none of the three mice leaders have considered, because they didn't think this would happen. Now, however, it's suddenly time to decide if they should either expand or stay small.

Christine sets up a meeting at the Home in the Wall for a quiet lunch and discussion.

As the one that started this whole thing, Christine speaks first.

"I only wanted to give my kids a good start in life. I didn't ever think it would go beyond that. To have 100 students now was never my dream. I'm not sure I want to be an administrator of a large academy. It just sounds like it would take me away from my goal. What do you two think?"

Matilda jumps in with, "I'm so proud of our students. I see them growing very fast and they're all a lot smarter now than when they started. It feels like this is such a valuable experience in preparing them for real life that it would be unfair for other kids not to get the same. I really love teaching them and I want all mouse kids to get the advantage we're able to give them. Those are just my thoughts."

Next Famous shares her opinion. "I agree with you both. It seems that we have a passion for teaching life lessons and it's clear that our students are excelling at what we're teaching. But, maybe we should each focus on our strengths and see if there is a way that we can bring in more mice to help us expand without taking away what we love to do."

Christine and Matilda both jump in with, "That's a great idea." "That makes so much sense." "How do we do that?"

The last thought, a question, is always the challenge and in reality that's what Mouse Academy is trying to help the students develop - more possible answers that they can choose from.

Matilda offers a suggestion. "What if we ask some humans to help us with this idea? Who do we know that is pretty smart about growing things without messing them up?"

The three females kick around lots of different ideas. There are a few suggestions that show promise. Christine suggests Donna Dooty and Danny, Franklin's nephew. Matilda suggests Frizz since he has a good history of growing the business that he and Frak run. Famous scratches her head and then blurts out, "Horace!" He's the business person in whose home she and her family live and they developed a friendship with him after learning how Chris and Christine made friends with the Dootys. Horace is a business development expert with a large and fast-growing business advising businesses on expansion. Famous shares that he is very honest and very smart. She and Tricky have told him about Mouse Academy and he's offered a few ideas that Famous has brought to her two friends. His ideas worked. Maybe he would be a good ally to bring in.

It's decided in a quick vote to meet with Horace and share their challenge. Perhaps he can offer some good advice - to grow or go home.

Famous sets up the meeting for a morning when kids are in Mouse School and they meet at her house, which is the home that Horace and Florence Linkin own. It's a good meeting. The three female mice sit on the kitchen table and explain the situation with Mouse Academy to Horace while he listens attentively.

After the mice have shared the story and their challenge, Horace begins talking.

"Well, first, congratulations on the great success you have enjoyed with Mouse Academy. I am very impressed. You have grown an idea from a seed to a growing enterprise and that is no small feat.

"My first thought is, keep your academy small. The larger things get the more they tend to dilute the original dream. You have control over how things are done and you can make sure that everything fits your vision. Once you expand beyond the three of you, and especially to other locations, you will lose a little control over the vision, and your roles will change from being visionaries and teachers to becoming managers and leaders. Is that what you want?"

The three mice look at each other and then Christine blurts out, "That's not something I'm interested in. I want to teach and I have ideas on the best ways to do that. I'm a teacher, but not a manager or executive."

Matilda offers her opinion, "I'm the same as Christine. I like the hands-on part of what we're doing. I can see the direct result of the classes and it thrills me to see our young mice getting such great life skills. I don't think I would like to be an expansion manager."

"Well," said Famous, "I like the whole idea. I think we should expand to different neighborhoods to teach more kids. We can use some of our own adult mice to teach beginning classes until we find out which mice in those neighborhoods also have great life skills to teach. I don't have the management experience, but I'm excited by the challenge of learning and growing. I'd like to try this. I'm in!"

Horace turns to the three and says, "Okay, we can see how the skills and interests of each of you have blended. I suggest this - I will show you all how to expand Mouse Academy slowly and surely. I can teach Famous how to spot leaders and grow them with your vision. And she and I will keep you all informed with as much as you'd like to know. We can meet as a team every few months to see how things are going. We'll all share the problems and the successes, and you can enjoy what you each do best while getting excitement and pleasure out of how your great ideas are helping other communities. It will be a division of effort with each of you focusing on what you enjoy the most. What do you say to that?"

The three females start jumping up and down. This is exactly the kind of outcome they were hoping for. More young mice will learn how to succeed in life, and each of them can spend their time doing what they love to do. It's a perfect answer.

They thank Horace for his interest and his excellent guidance. He promises to meet with Famous next week for an hour to discuss next steps. Everyone leaves the meeting with smiles on their faces.

Mouse Academy is ready for expansion to greatness!

Chapter 8 - Rock Hop

Since their fishing trip with the Dootys, the Mouse family has loved the whole camping experience. It's not something they get to do very often, but that may change soon.

The Mouse family and the Dootys are together for their usual weekly dinner. The food is good, everyone is having a good time, and Carl and Candy just shared about the most recent things they learned at Mouse Academy. When the kids finish talking, Mr. Dooty has a surprise topic to discuss.

"Mrs. Dooty and I would really like to go on a trip to see two really beautiful national parks and we're wondering if your family would like to join us," starts Franklin.

Christine answers right away, "That sounds exciting, Mr. Dooty. We loved camping with you and Mrs. Dooty." And then she looks at Chris before asking, "Will there be any fishing on this camping trip?"

"Not this time, Christine," responds Franklin. "We would like to go to Zion National Park and Bryce National Park. They're two very different kinds of places. Zion has beautiful, very high mountain peaks that reach up to the sky. Bryce has very interesting landscape features, called hoodoos, that look like upside down icicles, except they're kind of a sandy-orange color."

"What's an icicle?" asks Candy.

"Well, icicles are like when water drips from the roof on a very very cold day," answers Mr. Dooty. "The water starts to become solid as it drips and it forms a long piece of ice that hangs. down. Hoodoos are like that, but they're bigger at the bottom and less big at the top. Some of them are very tall and narrow and they stick up in bunches all over. They're very impressive and Bryce Canyon is like no other place on earth."

Chris asks, "When are you thinking of going? Would we sleep in tents? How long would we be gone?"

Donna Dooty asnwers, "We're thinking about going next month and we would sleep in motels or lodges. Those are like houses, but they just have one room for sleeping and keeping our stuff in. How long do you think we'll be gone, Franklin?"

"I've been looking at a calendar. I think a really good trip would take about five days. Would that work out for you guys?" answers Mr. Dooty.

Christine jumps in, "That might work. I'd have to have Famous and Matilda take my classes at Mouse Academy and the kids would miss those classes and also Mouse School, but we can

probably make that up. With four weeks to go, I can make arrangements. How about your schedule, Chris?"

"I'm good, Christine," replies Chris. "I don't have anything coming up that can't be moved."

"Great," says Donna. "It's settled then. Shall we start planning right away so we can have everything ready in time?"

The four adults all nod and they decide to meet after each family has a start on their plan.

After dinner, the Mouse family returns to the Home in the Wall. Chris and Christine start a list for what needs to be done. It looks like this:

1. Ask the Dootys if we need to take any special clothes or other gear.
2. List the clothes to take.
3. Talk to Mr. and Mrs. Dooty about food. How will we eat?
4. Arrange for Famous and Matilda to cover Christine's classes at Mouse Academy.
5. Talk to the kids' teachers at Mouse School about Candy and Carl being out for several days.
6. Let the Friday night party crowd in the house know when we'll be gone.
7. Tell Rev. Souris and Mrs. Murine that we'll miss church one Sunday, so Christine and Candy won't be able to sing in the choir and Carl won't be able to usher.
8. Make sure any chores in the garden are done and ready for them to be gone for five days.

For the next four weeks the Mouse family prepares everything for their trip. That's plenty of time for arrangements to be made and preparation to be done. Each item on the list they made is handled, one by one.

The day finally arrives for departure. Mr. Dooty has prepared a breakfast for them to eat so they'll be energized for travel. Mice and people eat quietly, thinking about what they're about to do.

The Mouse family stacks their gear by the back door and the car gets packed by Franklin. Finally, Franklin calls out, "Let's go, guys!" and the mice scamper to the door and out to the car along with Franklin and Donna. It's kind of a mad scramble because everyone is excited for the trip.

Mr. Dooty starts the car after everyone is in and the doors are closed. Off they go. About one hour later, Carl and Candy are asleep in the back, heads on each other's shoulders. Chris can almost hear snoring coming from their direction, but it's really just heavy breathing from the two sleeping young mice.

It's hard for their parents to stay awake. The car is rolling along, the rhythm of the tires is soothing and steady, and the Dootys are quiet in the front seat. Those are perfect conditions for a nap and shortly, both mice are also asleep, curled in together.

It's a long drive, only broken up by Mr. Dooty getting gas for the car. Once again, the mice are fast asleep and only wake up when the car finally slows and then stops.

"Where are we?" asks Chris sleepily.

"This is St. George, Utah, Chris," answers Donna Dooty. "It's where we're going to spend the night. You all have been sleeping all day. You should be wide awake by now, right?"

"Actually, mice can sleep for days, Mrs. Dooty, "says Christine. "But we're good. What's next?"

"We're going to check into our hotel, get some dinner and then get to sleep so we can get an early start tomorrow," says Franklin.

And that's what they do. After they put their luggage into the hotel room, the Dootys go to a local restaurant, eat and bring back "mice bags." The Mouse family eats and then with full tummies they go to sleep.

"That's so cute, Franklin," says Mrs. Dooty. "Let's get ready for bed and get a good night's sleep, too."

The next morning, both families wake up and are ready to go. After loading everything in the car, they leave the hotel and then stop at a fast-food place, buy food for breakfast in the car, and then leave, eating food while they travel.

The scenery is different than anything they have seen in California. The mountain range they can see in the distance looks interesting and large. Candy says, "Hey mom, doesn't this remind you a little of our trip to the Andes that time?"

"Sure does," answers Christine. "Not quite as large but it looks like a long line of mountains."

The car is soon making its way through valleys and finally stops at the entrance to Zion National Park. Franklin buys a pass from the park ranger and they're on their way again, driving deeper into amazing mountains that jut up in tall rows with valleys below them. Traveling through tunnels is interesting with Carl and Candy sucking in their breath, not sure what's happening.

Mr. Dooty hears the sound and says, "Hey kids, these are called tunnels. They pass through mountains so that cars don't have to climb them. It's straighter, more level than climbing the mountain, plus it's pretty interesting, right?"

Both young mice agree, as do their parents. None of them have seen grandeur and beauty like this since South America. Although the Andes were high and dramatic, Zion is dramatic in a different kind of way.

Franklin stops twice for the two families to take hikes.

The first hike is on the Riverside Walk trail, which takes several hours. The Riverside Walk is along the Virgin river, with exciting views of the walls of canyons. The Walk will take longer than the Dootys want so they just go part way and then turn back.

The second hike is on the Weeping Rock Trail. This trail is much shorter short but the trail is steep in places causing Franklin and Donna to stop and catch their breath a couple of times. Of course, both hikes are pretty easy for the Mouse family, because they're riding in pockets in either Franklin or Donna's coats.

The hike on the Weeping Rock Trail leads to a waterfall, which is really cool and very different. As they stop to admire the natural beauty, Franklin tells everyone that Weeping Rock is also called Nature's Tears because the water drips down a wall of rock and nourishes beautiful green plants that hang from the wall.

After the two hikes the families return to the car and drive again, passing up out of the Zion canyons to a flat plateau, and eventually stopping just outside Bryce National Park. Franklin announces that they will be staying for three nights at Ruby's Inn, which is where they have stopped. Franklin explains that there is shopping and food and rooms, which is perfect for the two families. During each day they'll be going into the park for hikes and seeing the natural wonders of the area. At night they'll return outside the park to the room and food.

Franklin and Donna check in to the inn leaving the very excited Mouse family in the car. It's already been a terrific day traveling through the dramatic beauty of Zion and getting to take two hikes, but this park looks not only different, but way different. The land is flat, there are lots of trees, but it doesn't look mountainous or even hilly. Candy and Carl are chattering about what they're going to get to do, while Chris and Christine look at a large map with photos, showing the natural wonders of the park.

After they unload the car at their room, the two families sit down in the room to discuss the game plan. The first hike tomorrow will be a loop around Sunrise Point. This will give them their first view of the hoodoos, the mysterious rock formations for which Bryce is famous. Looking at the brochure of the park, everyone is excited because the photos are very interesting and show really different natural features. It looks like something in one of the science fiction shows that the Mouse Family occasionally watch on their tablet tv.

The Dootys walk to the Inn and bring back food for everyone. The dinner conversation is Dootys about the amazing things they saw in Zion today. Franklin shows off some photos on his phone that he took during the day, including one that he had a stranger take of the four of

them showing huge mountains behind them. After dinner the two families get ready and then settle in to sleep, Mr. Dooty in one bed and Mrs. Dooty and the Mouse family in the other. The night is quiet and the air is cool, which helps everyone sleep really well.

First thing in the morning, Franklin and Donna go to get some food, bringing it back so they can eat together. After the hikes yesterday, everyone is starving and eats every crumb. Of course, the food is delicious, and afterwards the mice clean their whiskers and lick their paws while the Dootys wash up.

Finally, it's time for their first hike in Bryce and going a bit further to the Sunrise Point hike. It's a circular walk with mice in coat pockets and Franklin and Donna walking with new hiking sticks that they bought the night before at the Inn's general store. It's a pretty casual walk and they reach the overlook easily and without much effort. The mice look out of their pockets when they hear Mr. Dooty exclaim, "Oh my goodness! Look at that Donna! That's the strangest thing I've ever seen!" to which she answers, "That's so different. It's kind of pretty. The hoodoos are dramatic. They look like people sticking up!"

Christine says, "Look at that, kids. Have you ever seen anything like that? It's pretty amazing."

Chris adds, "We read that these are formed over long periods of time. The tops of those hoodoos used to be the ground level, like what we're walking on right now. Rain and time, and probably snow and ice, helped eat away the ground between them making them stand all alone. We can read the brochure when we get back to get more of the history and learn about how this all happened."

The hike takes several hours as they stop every few feet and then stand for a while to soak in the scenery. They spot scampering squirrels, curious chipmunks, flapping birds and even a slithering snake making this a real nature hike. As they walk around the trail they even spot a prairie dog running into a hole in the ground. In fact, it's not just one prairie dog. Standing quiet, they can see lots of prairie dogs going in and out of holes in a field nearby. Candy says, "That's like a whole prairie dog city. Pretty cool!"

After they have stopped several times to look at the vista from different angles, they drive back to the Inn for a nice nap and then wakeup in time for dinner and some relaxing time before sleep. The after-dinner conversation is all about what each one saw today on the hike and driving around. Everyone shares - some of them saw things that others didn't. It's a great way of getting a bigger and more complete experience out of the day. They also look at the park brochure to look at the various hikes and see details on the map that explain what they saw today. The kids talk excitedly about this and that. The adults share observations about people as well as the natural wonder of the area.

Sleep this night again comes easily with the cool high mountain air making everyone tired and bringing sleep easily.

The next morning, the Dootys again go bring back breakfast for everyone. The food tastes great and it gives them good energy for the day. Today they're going to take two separate hikes, one to Sunset Point and the second one is to Inspiration Point.

Mrs. Dooty suggest that they drive through the park and see what they can for the road before hiking today. Everyone agrees. They're excited to get a feel for the rest of Bryce and also see some of the wildlife. It's a nice drive and they stop at several flat areas to look around. One pick area has lots of prairie dogs. Others have other animals. It's a beautiful drive and a great way to experience the park. Mrs. Dooty brought along some lunch food and they stop at one area to enjoy lunch and just soak in the scenery. It's so peaceful and quiet, except for the occasional cars driving by. The trees are also interesting.

After lunch eyes are getting droopy and they decide to take a quick nap before going on to their hikes. It's a great idea. Everyone is soon asleep in the car with the windows mostly rolled up and the sun bringing a warmth inside that makes naps even better.

Candy is the first one to wake up. "Hey, guys, what time is it?" she asks. "It looks like afternoon. Shouldn't we take our first hike so we can see everything we planned to see today?"

The others are awake now and shaking the wonderful nap from their heads. Everyone sits up, Franklin starts the car, and they drive the half hour to Sunset Point. Franklin has to drive around to find a parking spot for the car but once he's parked everyone piles out gathering jackets and packs. The Dootys each grab two mice and tuck them into jacket pockets where they can peek out and see the surrounding landscape.

It's a warm afternoon. During their walk around Sunset Point Carl spots a sign pointing to the Navajo Loop Trail. Carl and Candy immediately start asking if they can take that trail so they can get closer to see the natural wonders of the park.

Franklin likes the idea and agrees right away, but Donna decides to stay back at the top and wait for everyone to come back. The adventurous hikers step onto the trail, and after a few minutes when they're among tall hoodoos with more below them. It's fascinating. They're tall with rough sides and if you look at them just right they almost look like an army of people.

The trail weaves through the base of some of the hoodoos, but they are also at the same height as the top of others below them.

Chris asks Franklin to set him down so he can see everything from the ground level. Once on the ground he feels his old mouse instincts to run, and he scampers over to one edge to look down at the impressive statues below.

He was in such a hurry that he didn't notice that the small rocks and sand at the edge are kind of loose. He steps closer and suddenly the ground he's standing on begins to give way. Franklin

and his family only hear him make a brief yell, "Heyyyy!" and then nothing. No Chris can be seen.

"Oh my goodness!" yells Franklin. "What happened? Can anyone see Chris?"

Carl and Candy scramble over close to the edge as Franklin calls out, "Be careful! Those rocks look loose. They could be very slippery! We don't want all of us to slide."

"Franklin, we can't see him, but I think that might be him yelling down below!" says Carl.

Mr. Dooty gets a little closer to the edge but he still can't see anything. "Hey, Chris, can you hear me?" he calls out.

A very faint voice is heard, "Helloooo. I'm down here! Can you help me?"

Franklin yells back, "Don't move, Chris. Everything up here is very loose and slippery. Just wait for us to find a way to get to you!"

Over an hour later, they're still looking for a way to get to Chris. Franklin goes back up the trail to get help, leaving Christine, Carl and Candy to keep talking to Chris and encouraging him to hold on. The sun is now dropping lower in the sky, and no other hikers have come by since Chris fell. This is a getting concerning because the air is starting to get cooler - the nights at this altitude can get pretty cold.

Franklin finally returns with Donna and says they sent word to the park and some park guides will be coming soon. Christine has an idea. "Let's form a chain to reach Chris. Franklin, you're the anchor to the chain. Stand right here and hold Donna's hand. Donna you will be closer to the edge but not on the slippery part. Franklin you and Donna will make sure our chain is strong. I'll hold Donna's other hand and stand just over the edge on that small rock, Candy, you grab my other hand and then stamd over on my downhill side. Everyone hold hands very tight! Carl, you come down after Candy and holding onto her other hand tight, go on her downhill side. When you're feet are stable, look down and see if you can see your father."

They do exactly as Christine says and once Carl is at the end of the chain he calls back, "I can see Dad. He's very close to me. I think I can grab his hand if he reaches up."

"Good," replies Christine. "Grab his hand and tell him to hold on to each of us and climb back up the ledge."

Carl passes on this instruction, and Chris begins to climb holding on to one after another and using them to pull himself up. When he gets to Christine, he pulls himself up on to the ledge next to Donna Dooty and calls back, "Okay, I'm up. Let's get everyone back up here so we're all safe."

Christine yells for Carl to come next. He begins the climb past Candy and then past his mom. When he gets to Mrs. Dooty he yells back, "Candy, your turn!"

Candy is quick and up on the ledge right away as they pull their mother up from the small rock.

Soon, everyone is standing next to Franklin as the now cooler air gives everyone a chill.

Franklin says, "Okay, enough adventure for today. We all got a more exciting day than we planned, but thankfully, everyone is safe and okay. Let's go back to the Inn and get warm. Then Mrs. Dooty and I will get dinner for us, and we can talk about today's adventure."

Warming up in the room, they start to talk about the scary part of the day until Franklin reminds them that they should all be hungry. He and Donna will go get some dinner and bring it back to the room.

When they come back from the general store they have sandwiches with tasty meat inside, and some fruit and nuts. It's a feast to celebrate their safe return from a scary incident. As they eat, they talk about the scary challenge they faced and the danger from hiking on rocks.

Chris interrupts the discussion, "I'm really sorry. It's my fault. I wasn't paying attention, and I should have been watching where I stepped. I learned something important today. Always have someone with me when hiking on trails like today and discuss with my closest hiking partner every move I plan to take before I do it. Two heads are better than one, and today I was lucky that my idea didn't result in a serious accident. I'm very sorry. I promise that I will be more careful in the future."

"Good thinking, Chris," said Donna Dooty. "We all learned a valuable lesson today. Don't take chances but instead look several steps ahead and make sure that where you put your feet next will not be slippery. Also, make sure you have someone else close by you so if you start to slip you can grab their hand. If you're on the upside of someone else, make sure you have stable footing in case they need to grab on to you for help."

"All good lessons, honey," said Franklin. "We are grateful that we got to learn these lessons without anyone getting hurt. Thanks to Christine's quick thinking, we're all safe. Great job, Christine. You are our hero!"

Christine says, "I'm just happy that everyone is safe and no one got hurt. I was pretty scared when I didn't see Chris, but I'm sure grateful that we all worked together and everything worked out okay."

Everyone nods in agreement, and they bow their heads to thank God for the safe ending to what could have been a serious calamity.

After a quick conversation about the next day's hike, the tired hikers go to bed and sleep soundly all night.

Chris wakes up before dawn and thinks to himself about what happened yesterday. He never really felt like he was in real danger, but he had been a little nervous when he couldn't see anyone above him, and he had trouble even hearing them. He was grateful for his wife's quick thinking, and he shuddered to think what might have happened if he had slipped even further.

The next day they go to Inspiration Point and then Bryce Point. It's a full day of hiking and everyone is very careful not to get too close to the edge. Fortunately, there are rails and fences that keep visitors from getting close to danger.

That night, everyone eats and talks and then slips off to sleep.

Tomorrow is going to be a full day. The plan is to drive to Las Vegas tomorrow, spend the night in a hotel there, and then drive home the next day.

It's been a great trip with fun adventures, scenic hikes and good times with friends.



Chapter 9 - Where There's Smoke

Fridays are always fun at the Dooty and Mouse family households for several reasons. Franklin and Donna look forward to going bowling Friday night, and Chris and Christine forward to the Friday night party with all the other residents of the house while the humans are away.

Friday is also the day that Franklin and Donna go shopping for the weekend and the following week. The morning starts with list making. Both Dootys go through the cupboards and refrigerator-freezer to see what they need to replenish, writing each needed item on a paper list that Mr. Dooty transfers to his phone for the shopping trip.

One of the things that is regularly on the list is Mixed Nuts, because the Dootys like them and the other residents of the house also love them for their weekly party. Of course, there are plenty of other things that get added to the list because Donna Dooty is very careful to not miss any items that are getting low or have been consumed.

After the list is made and transferred to the phone, the couple get in their car and drive to the local supermarket, just five blocks away. It's a quick trip there and back, but they usually spend an hour or two at the store. Total time gone from home can sometimes be up almost three hours.

The reason this time is important will become apparent as our story continues.

There's one small problem that gets missed before they depart. It's the iron that Donna Dooty has left on the ironing board, and it's hot and still heating. That normally wouldn't be a problem except that today she has left it in the living room plugged into an old extension cord. That also wouldn't normally be a problem, but the old extension cord is frayed and, as the wires heat up from the electricity flowing through them, the insulation begins to melt.

Fifteen minutes after the Dootys have left for the store, the insulation has melted away from the wires and the two wires are now in contact with the carpet. A few minutes later the carpet is hot enough from the wires that it begins to smoke.

In the Home in the Wall, the Mouse family has just finished their morning routine of eating breakfast together.

Carl and Candy leave for Mouse School while Christine and Chris have started cleaning up the Home in the Wall. The two mice always start at the rooftop patio, cleaning the floor and

the patio furniture, and making sure everything is picked up and put away. Then it's on to the bedrooms on the third floor.

Candy and Carl are responsible for keeping their bedrooms clean, but Chris and Christine always inspect both rooms on Fridays. If they're not clean, the two young mice will have to clean them after classes at Mouse Academy that afternoon. Today, their rooms look pretty clean, so it's only Chris and Christine's bedroom that needs straightening up.

Christine starts by dusting their bedroom furniture and just then Chris sneezes. That's not unusual. He's a mouse with a long nose. It doesn't take much dust to get a mouse to sneeze. What is unusual, however, is that he sneezes again. And then again.

"Chris, are you okay," asks Christine. "You're sneezing a lot."

"I'm fine," he answers, "but something smells funny. Do you smell it?"

"Hmm, let me see," and with that Christine starts sniffing around the room. "There is kind of a funny smell, but I can't tell where it's coming from," she says finally. "Maybe it's from me dusting."

Chris shugs his shoulders and says, "Well, let's go downstairs and see what's causing that smell. Whatever it is it just doesn't smell normal."

The two adult mice climbs the stairs back up to the rooftop patio and then walks around sniffing. "Nope, I still smell it, but it doesn't smell like it's coming from here," says Chris.

Walking back down to where Christine is standing in their bedroom on the second floor, Chris says, "Let's check the first floor."

Chris is moving faster because the smell seems to be getting stronger. On the first floor he checks the tablet tv and the lights. Nothing looks out of place but he can still smell something and it's starting to smell more like smoke. That gets him worried and he turns to Christine,"Honey, I'm going to check the Dootys part of the house to see if I can find what's creating this smell. I'll be right back." And with that he goes out the front door, squeezes under the closet door into the Dootys' bedroom and looks around.

Nothing seems out of place, but there's no question about it, the smell is definitely stronger and it does smell like smoke.

Chris runs out of the bedroom and into the living room. The smell is strong and it's definitely smoke. In fact, he can even see the smoke in the air. This is definitely not right, he thinks to himself, which makes him anxious to find the source of the problem. He feels responsible for investigating the cause of the smoke because the Dootys are at the store and there are no other humans in the house.

He walks around the living room quickly and spots the ironing board. At the base of the ironing board there is smoke coming from the carpet and as he watches small flames start appearing on the carpet.

Alarm bells go off in Chris's head and he tries to think what he should do about this. He knows that water can put out a fire, but he's just a mouse and he couldn't carry enough water to put out these flames even if he tried. Even worse, the flames are now getting bigger as he watches.

His first thought is to get Christine out of the Home in the Wall and to safety. He runs back into the Dootys' bedroom, squeezes under the closet door and through the front door to his house.

"Christine," he yells. "Hurry! We need to get out of here. I think there's a fire in the living room."

Within two shakes of a mouse tail, Christine is beside him and they head back out through the living room, which has quickly filled with smoke. They run into the kitchen and then out the cat door.

Once Christine is safe, Chris goes back in the house, runs back into the bedroom and the into the close and into the Home in the Wall. He rushes to the tablet tv, which can also make cell calls, and he uses it to call the fire department. It's not very easy because his small voice isn't easy to hear by the operator on the other end of the line, but he manages to explain that the house is on fire. The operator asks him for the address and then says she will send it to the fire department dispatcher. She tells him to get out of the house and stand safely away from it. She adds that a fire crew is on the way and will be there as soon as possible.

After he hangs up the call he runs back through the living room. The smoke is even worse - it's really bad now. The smoke is thicker and through the dense black air he can see small flames on the carpet. There's nothing he can do, he realizes, so he runs through the kitchen and out the cat door, spots his wife and the two of them run to the garden to wait for the fire crew.

Smoke is now coming out around the kitchen door and it looks like it's going to start coming out of one window, too. He holds Christine tight as the two mice watch their host home in great danger.

"Oh Chris, I'm so scared," says Christine. "We may lose our home. What are we going to do? I'm so scared."

“Well, honey, we have done all we can do,” Chris answers. “I called the fire department and they’re sending help. Now the only thing left is to wait and pray.”

Which is exactly what they do.

As they finish praying for help and protection, they hear sirens coming up the street. Moments later a fire truck with crew pulls into the driveway.

Fire team members with smoke masks move quickly from the truck while the fire captain suveys the problem. Two fire people are sent to try the doors and finding the door to the kitchen unlocked they enter the house, radioing the crew at the truck and describing what they find.

Two more fire people run to the house with fire extinguishers and soon have the flames out, just as the Dootys arrive back home.

Franklin rushes to the fire crew and, after explaining that they are the homeowners, he asks what happened.

“Well, sir,” says the fire captain. “We got a call about a fire here. We entered your home and our crew found the source of the problem. An electrical cord to an iron had burned through and heated up the carpet creating a lot of smoke and starting a small fire on the carpet. The crew unplugged the iron and the extension cord that it was plugged into, and then they used fire suppressants to put out the small flames. They used water to make sure the underlying floor was not burning. The flames are out and we’re just cleaning up. We have a team that will take in fans to exhaust the smoke. Just stay out here until our crews give the “all clear” signal that the house is safe to enter.”

“Who called in the fire?” Franklin asks.

“We’re not sure exactly. The dispatcher said it was someone named Chris. He had a voice like a young child but there was no one in the house when we arrived so we aren’t able to confirm that individual.

"We'll be here for at least another hour to check out your basement below the floor that was affected, and also to ensure that there are no hot spots that we missed. Then we'll clean up and get back to the station where I'll write my report. You can certainly get a copy of the report, but it will simply say exactly what I just told you."

"Thank you, sir. The report will be really important for our claim to the insurance company," said Franklin.

Franklin walks back to where Donna is standing by their car and tells her what he has just learned. “Chris apparently discovered the fire and called it in,” he explains. “It looks like our mouse friends saved our house from burning down.”

Donna replies, “Oh my goodness. That’s a stroke of good fortune. You said it was an iron that started the fire? I must have left that darned iron on when we left for the store. I knew it was old. I should have replaced it a long time ago.”

Franklin replies, "Well, it doesn't sound like it was your iron. The fire person said it was the extension cord that it was plugged into that likely started the problem. He said the fabric wrapping the insulation was frayed and the insulation was badly cracked and split. That probably cause the problem."

Franklin and Donna walk around the yard and spot Chris and Christine in the garden. “Hey, you guys,” Donna yells, “Are you both okay? Where are your kids? Are Candy and Carl safe?”

Christine answers, “Yes, we’re both okay. The kids are at school. We were very lucky because we were cleaning our Home when we smelled the smoke. Chris called the fire department when he saw the flames and we're so happy that everyone is okay. That's good news!”

Two hours later the fire crew leaves, with “thanks” from the Dootys and a promise from the fire captain to check back later to make sure there is no further problem.

Later, Christine leaves to go to teach her students at Mouse Academy, while Chris helps Franklin and Donna clean up the mess in the house.

At Mouse Academy Christine finds Carl and Candy and tells them what happened at home.

"Oh, my goodness, mom," says Candy. "Is my room okay? Is everyone safe? How bad was the damage?"

Carl has a different set of questions for his mother. "Cool, mom. Did you see flames? Did they get out the hoses from the fire truck to spray the fire? Is there water all over inside?"

Christine patiently explains to both that the damage was minor, and that the biggest problem is the smoke smell and the burned carpet. But later she has a hard time keeping her mind on the lessons she's teaching today, because at times she finds herself thinking about what might have happened if Chris had not discovered the smoke and got them both out of the house.

Fortunately, she reminds herself, the damage is relatively minor, thanks the quick work by her husband in notifying the fire department.

Donna Dooty is troubled by the thick smoke smell and also that there will be crews coming in to work on returning everything to normal. She calls their insurance company and is told they can move into a hotel until the house is restored to normal.

That's a whole disruption for everyone. Franklin and Donna pack, as do the Mouse family. Christine tells Matilda and Famous that she won't be at Mouse Academy for a week or two, and notifies Mouse School that the kids will need to be out of school for the same time.

The move to the hotel is easy. They all just lug their clothes and other personal items to the room and settle in. Like their travels on vacation, Franklin sleeps in one bed, Donna sleeps in the other with the Mouse family. It's cozy, but they manage okay. The best part, though is the hotel food. It's really good. Franklin and Donna bring it up to the room for every meal, and everyone sits at the small table in the room to eat their meals. Everyone says a prayer thanking God for safety and the fact that damage was just minor.

Donna Dooty takes charge of the repairs, driving to the house every day to supervise the efforts. The carpet has to be replaced, and a remediation company comes in the following week to clean the living room ceiling and walls and take care of any other smoke or fire damage.

Franklin is very calm. His quiet attitude helps both familes make it through the disruption of being out of their homes and moving into a hotel for two weeks. He has a calm smile on his face most of the time, and even when things aren't perfect, like when they forget to bring napkins and forks to the room for one meal, he just says, "It's okay. We'll all safe and healthy. Let's enjoy this time and be grateful." That settles everyone down and keeps the attitudes pleasant.

Within two weeks, the house is totally restored and both family's move back home. The Dootys throw a thank-you dinner for Chris and Christine for their alert action in saving the house from further damage and several neighbors send flowers or cards with well wishes.

Of course, we shouldn't miss this one point. The saddest part of this whole episode is the cancellation of the Friday night parties for three weeks. During those weeks the Dootys don’t go bowling and the home parties with conga line and games by the other residents of the house are called off. While everyone is disappointed about those unfortunate cancellations, all are grateful that they still have a home to live in.

As Franklin says, "Let's all look at the bright side of this. It could have been much worse, and this was another adventure that we all got to take together. Life brings some problems, doesn't it? But the important thing is that we come through happy that we made it through, thanking God for protecting us, and learning some really good life lessons along the way. Those are great things to be thankful for, right?"

And everyone agreed. As usual, Franklin's wisdom brought smiles out of smoke...



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