Mice - Life in the Big City

#8 in the Chris Mouse series



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - MontanaLand 3

Chapter 2 - A Whole Lot of Shakin' 13

Chapter 3 - Pick-up Sticks 21

Chapter 4 - Four in a Row 27

Chapter 5 - Circus Hocus Pocus 38

Chapter 6 - PawdCast Surprise 50

Chapter 7 - In Mid-Air? 60

Chapter 8 - Getting Mail in a Mouse World 69

Chapter 9 - Biting the Big Apple 75

Chapter 1 - MontanaLand

Back in Chapter 8 in Book 6, “Growin' Up Mouse,” Cousin Clarence brought news that Christine inherited some land in Montana - "The estate consists of one hundred acres of land in Montana, mostly cleared, some wooded, no buildings on the property."

Christine has been curious about the land since she got the news, but she's been so busy with Mouse Academy that she hasn't had time for more than just idle wondering about what it looks like.

Now that Mouse Academy is about to let out for the summer, she and Chris are discussing possible trips and plans for the summer.

"I wonder what that land is like, Chris. I mean, what do we want to do with it? It's 100 acres but it's way up in Montana and I don't think we can do much with it remotely. We're down here in California and Montana is about 1200 miles from us, according to Google."

"Well, sweetheart," says Chris, "we don't have any plans for the summer yet and Cousin Clarence did offer to take us around if we visited. Maybe we could go to Montana and see your land."

"Traveling sounds fun. We loved the train across the Canada Rockies. Maybe we could follow the instructions from Clarence and Bardle on how to take a train there."

"Sure. I could talk to Franklin and Donna to see if they would like to go, but Franklin's really focused on his job and I'm not sure he'd be all that excited. Besides, they don't have any connection to Montana as far as I know."

"Okay," says Christine, "let’s think this through. If we *were* to go, the best time for me is early summer. Later in the summer I have to work on class schedules, deciding on classes, class descriptions, who will teach them, and all of the other planning for the fall semester."

Chris offers, "I'll send a message by MouseMail to Bardle and Clarence and get their opinions on timing and suggestions on travel. They seemed very anxious to be helpful to us the last time we heard."

"Good idea, Chris. Until we hear back let's do our own planning and then we can modify our plans if necessary when we get more information from them."

Mouse Academy still has two more weeks until the end of the school year. Wrapping up the year is not all that labor-intensive. Teachers are finishing their classes with tests,

students are already thinking about summer, and Christine's involvement gets less each week.

Chris puts a message together, gets Donna Dooty to print it out on paper, hangs a yellow streamer to signal Mr. Tailborn to stop and pick up their MouseMail and waits.

A week later, Mr. Tailborn comes by, gets the food gift and message, and the message is on its way to Montana.

Three weeks later the local mail mouse delivers reply messages from both Clarence and Bardle. Both are encouraging. Bardle offers to act as their tour guide, and Clarence has arranged for them to stay with relatives in Montana. Both mice suggest that Chris and Christine take the train to Missoula and stay with family while they use Missoula as their home base. From there Bardle will take them to see the land.

Clarence has made arrangements with family members for a couple of family gatherings, including food, music and dancing.

"Chris, do you believe this? They're going to a lot of work for us. Do you think we should go, and if so, when should we go?"

"From what Clarence and Bardle say it'll take us at least one week, maybe more, to get from Los Angeles to Missoula. We'll have to change trains at least once somewhere along the way. All we have to do is pack some food and a few clothes and we can be on our way to Montana.

“The big question, Christine, is when will you be comfortable leaving now that Mouse Academy is done for the summer?"

"I could be ready in a week, Chris. We can arrange for Carl to drive us to the train station in the Mouse Wagon. Candy also said that she might be able to have a Mouse Channel car take us, but the timing wouldn't be very flexible. I'll talk to Carl first and see if he can get away from Munch for part of a day."

With those details decided, both mice set the wheels in motion for their trip to Montana.

Franklin and Donna are excited for them to go and plan to have a special dinner for them prior to their departure. Chris talks to Carl and he agrees to drive them to the station in three days. Christine tells her Mouse Academy partners about the upcoming trip so they can discuss any issues with her either before or after the trip.

Dinner with the Dootys is fun, as always. They have still been having their weekly dinner with them, even though Candy is no longer living at home. This particular dinner is even

better because Franklin spreads out a big map of the western United States on the table so they can look at the most likely routes of travel as they eat.

Clarence sent very good and very clear instructions, which makes Chris and Christine much more comfortable with the trip. It's good to see the trains will they need to take to travel to Missoula.

Of course, it’s always a lot less stressful when you know the details in advance. Then, you can just follow the plan.

Franklin looks over the information Clarence sent and points out the route that each train will take. They'll have to change trains in Las Vegas and then again in Salt Lake City. After that, the last train should take them right to Missoula, Montana, in a picturesque mountainous region, and at the heart of five valleys. The trip looks simple on the map, with the exception that they'll have to change trains in big train yards so those changes might be a little more nerve-wracking than if they were traveling in a passenger car with the Dootys.

When they had answered all their questions and gained confidence in the travel plans, Chris says, "Thanks, Franklin. That's great information and it seems pretty straightforward. I think we have a pretty good idea of what we need to do now."

After dinner, Chris and Christine take the folded map back to their Home in the Wall and tape it to the wall in the living room, right next to their tablet tv.

For the next two days they watch YouTube videos about train travel and Montana, pausing the videos every now and then so they can look up locations on the map. Donna goes to the nearest travel office where she picks up flyers about Montana and the states the mice will be traveling through. Chris and Christine are having fun planning the trip and the videos and flyers get them excited about their upcoming travel.

The next few days they’re packing, checking their notes, reading the map and flyers, and getting ready to go.

On the morning they leave, Carl comes home from Munch, they load light luggage into MouseWagon and head toward the train station.

"Mom, Dad, are you sure you guys are okay traveling alone like this?" Carl asks.

"Oh heaven's yes, son," replies Christine. "Your dad and I have done so much research we could tell you in our sleep how we're going to do this. Don't worry about us."

"Okay, just checking to make sure you'll be alright on this trip."

The drive is actually very peaceful. Carl is a careful driver, the MouseWagon runs perfectly, and they show up at the train station relaxed and ready for their big trip. Most of their carryons are food for the trip, and those are easy to carry. Backpacks do the trick.

Next they need to find their train. Franklin gave them a printed list of trains leaving the Los Angeles station for Las Vegas, and then they need to get to the right track and get on board.

They see some luggage in a cart being loaded on their train and Christine jumps up on the cart. Chris hands up their few luggage items to Christine and they wait between bags for an opening.

Bingo. Daylight shines on them as the bag next to them is moved. Beside them is an open cardboard box. Chris puts their carryon bags in it, and they both jump in after that. Just in time. That box is the next thing loaded onto the train.

As soon as the box is set down in the train and the baggage loader goes back for more luggage, Chris and Christine scramble out of the box, get their belongings and go into a passenger car that's still empty because passengers haven't boarded yet.

Chris stuffs their things under a seat, he and Christine stretch out and relax, and in 15 minutes passengers start boarding their car. From where they sit, all they can see are human legs. Fortunately those legs can't reach under the seat where they are.

A whistle blows, a conductor walks through the car checking on passengers, and with a loud "clunk" and a little jerk, the train starts to move.

Chris and Christine stretch out on their bags, and fall asleep. The jostling of the train and rhythmic "clickety clack clickety clack" of the wheels on the rails makes sleeping even easier.

An hour or so later, Chris wakes Christine and the two of them try to figure out where they are, according to the map. It seems like the train must be somewhere around San Bernardino which means they have almost four hours to go.

Christine is looking at the travel brochures and sees that they're going to go through a pass, up to the desert floor and then roll on to Las Vegas.

"Chris, I want to see the river. Do you think we can do that?"

Chris takes a look at their car. Only about half of the seats have people in them, and those are all in the front half of the car.

"Sure, honey. Let's go take a look around," he says and then grabs her paw as they crawl out from under the seat.

Chris moves some of their stuff out from under the seat so they can jump up onto the seat and look out. It's pretty interesting and also restful. The train is moving and in the distance they can see human cars along a stretch of highway. There's a small river alongside them, cutting through the mountains to form this valley.

The conductor comes through the car as Chris quickly grabs Christine to pull her out of sight, just in time.

When the conductor's gone, they return to the window and watch the scenery roll by. An hour later the train is up on the floor of a desert, rolling along with the car traffic still somewhat visible a mile or so away.

After a while it feels kind of boring. Christine says it's "monotonous" and she's ready to chill and take another nap under the seat.

A few hours later the train pulls into Las Vegas and stops.

"This is where we transfer trains, honey," Chris says softly to his sleeping wife, starting to gather their belongings. The two mice wait until the train passengers start to disembark and as the last one leaves they scramble down the steps, onto the footstool, grab their bags and look around.

Chris looks for the northbound train to Salt Lake City, which he spots on a signboard above the tracks. That train isn't far from where they just got off, so they carry their stuff and head toward the track where their next train is waiting.

This train is a freight train. No passengers. That will make it a little easier.

Chris sees a cart with freight to be loaded on the train and he wrestles their stuff on the cart and then helps Christine get up on it.

A half hour later the freight is being loaded in a box car by a forklift. They stay inside one crate as it gets moved into the boxcar. Once all the freight is loaded, the door is closed and it gets dark inside.

With a clunk and a jerk the train starts moving. Chris has calculated that it will take them more than 5 hours to get to Salt Lake City. Once there, they'll make their transfer to the final train that will take them on the 8-hour ride to Missoula, Montana.

"It'll be dark when we get there," says Chris. "I don't know if anyone will know to come meet us or not. We'll have to see." Christine just smiles. She's still half asleep.

At the Salt Lake City train depot they scramble off of the train, find the train to Missoula and are on their way, this time in a passenger car again.

They're able to get up to the windows in the half-full car and watch as the scenery rolls by. Chris is busy trying to figure out how to let the Montana family the time they will arrive, but there's no real way to do that so they'll just have to wait until they get to Missoula.

After eating some of the food they brought both mice sleep for most of the trip. That makes the trip seem short and before they know it the train is coming to a halt at their destination.

Christine wakes Chris and they grab their bags and jump off the train into a luggage cart. Getting down from the cart in the station is a little tricky, but they manage. Now to see what's next.

Chris has some information from Clarence about a place to stay in Missoula within a short walk from the station. Fortunately, it's dark so they can walk without too much worry about being seen by people. They're not as worried about people as they are about being seen by animals, especially animals or birds that might find a mouse mighty tasty.

Walking on the side of sidewalks, Chris has to carry their bags and also watch out for danger. After 15 minutes they're outside of the place that Clarence said would let them stay for the night.

Chris knocks on the knot hole that Clarence mentioned. In a few minutes an older mouse opens the knot hole and after exchanging names and pleasantries, he invites them in.

It's a nice place inside the walls of an old building. There are spiders and other insects everywhere, which might make a tasty snack for the two mice if they weren't so tired.

Jiminy is the mouse that let them in, and he promises to contact Clarence and Bardle to let them know that their guests have arrived. It's night time, so he shows them to a comfortable place for them to sleep, excuses himself and goes off to sleep.

Both travelers find it hard to sleep. They've been sleeping for most of the day as they traveled and now they're in a strange place in a strange town and they're not sure how long they'll be there. Somehow, in the middle of the night, however, they both drop off to sleep.

The next morning, they hear knocking at the knot hole. Jiminy opens it to allow Clarence and Bardle to come in.

"Hey, cousins," says both mice before scurrying over for hugs and whisker cleaning.

"Hey Bardle, hey Clarence," answer Chris and Christine.

After the greetings the two relatives pick up the travelers' luggage and lead their family members outside.

The sun is shining bright causing Chris and Christine to squint and shield their eyes.

They look up and see a large ranch pickup in which Clarence and Bardle are loading their luggage. They jump inside with their two relatives who are introducing them to the driver.

"This here's Darius, but everyone calls him 'Pistol.'" says Clarence. "He's a tough cowboy but he's darned nice and he is really good to the mice that live at the place."

"Hey Pistol," Chris and Christine call, which makes him smile and answer them with "Hey, little mice. You must be tired from your long trip."

"We're okay. We got a good night's sleep near the station so we're wide awake now."

The rest of the short drive is quiet except for the continual talking by Clarence and Bardle, both of whom seem to want to tell their California family members everything there is to know about the area.

Arriving at the ranch, they meet other family members. The ranch house is built on a concrete foundation, with a few entry places for access to the underside of the house. They're ushered in one entry with their Montana family carrying their luggage.

"Here's where you can stay for as long as you want," says one older male mouse. "We're excited and proud to have you visit us. We'll take you out to see your property tomorrow, Christine, but today we're having a party in your honor. Relatives from all over are coming in and we're going to have a real fun ranch hoe-down for you."

The party's fun, everyone has a great time, and Chris and Christine meet lots of relatives. The Montana family seem very happy to have them visit, and everyone wants to talk to them, asking lots of questions about California and life in LA.

The party stretches into the late hours. Chris and Christine are rubbing their eyes and yawning until finally Clarence takes charge, shows them to their room and wishes them a good night's sleep.

That's all it takes. Both mice are out like a light and don't wake up until the morning. They hear stomping around which is the signal that humans are getting up to go to work on the ranch. That means the mice are getting up, too.

Clarence and Bardle have arranged for them all to go out to see Christine's property on horseback. It's a ride of just under an hour, with the two LA mice bouncing up and down in the saddle behind a ranch hand.

The horses stop in front of a rail fence with a gate that's tied closed with barbed wire.

"This is it!" shouts Bardle as they gaze out over some nice pastureland and small foothills.

"We've heard from our human friends that a human couple may be interested in buying your land, Christine. If you decide to sell, we'll introduce you to them."

After the ranch hand opens the gate, they ride around the property. It's really very nice. There are some great stands of trees, lots of flat land, and even a small stream that Clarence had not mentioned. There is a dirt road right in front of the property that can take a visitor right into Missoula. It's nice, it's pretty, but neither Chris nor Christine can think of a single way they could use it.

After they've ridden around the property Christine says to Clarence, "We won't be able to take advantage of this land. We could ask Bardle if he can contact the human friends that are interested, or do you think any relatives or friends would be interested in buying it? In either case we can put it up for sale with a land broker and see how that goes.

"We're southern California mice. We couldn't really use the land. It would take time to travel up here and even then we couldn't spend time on the land for 7 months or so out of the year because of the weather. It's better that we sell it to a human that can use it."

Clarence and Bardle put their heads together. Bardle contacts the humans that he knew might be interested, but tell him they're already over extended and can't afford to add any more debt.

So, Clarence introduces Christine to a land broker that is initially a little surprised and put off by the land owner being a mouse, and a Southern California mouse at that. But, Cheryl, the land broker agrees to list the property for sale.

Within a week Cheryl brings two offers for the land to Christine who declines one because it is from a developer that will probably change the pristine nature of the land.

The other offer is from a rancher/farmer that will use it for good purposes and maintain it as a part of the natural beauty of the area.

Christine accepts the second offer and works with Cheryl to swap the title and rights to the land in exchange for a cash settlement.

The call to Candy is quick. "Hi sweetheart, this is mom. We're in Montana and I've just sold the land I inherited. We need a bank account to deposit the money in. You still have your bank account, right?"

"Sure, mom. I'll text you the specifics on where and how to put the money in the account. You'll have to pay taxes on the money, but it sounds like you should still do pretty well with it."

That settles it and the deal is quickly consummated. Christine is now wealthy; actually very wealthy for a mouse.

With the money securely transferred and all the papers signed, Chris and Christina are free to visit, spend time with family, explore Montana and just be vacationers.

For the first part, Christine takes some money and throws a big hoedown shindig for the mouse and human community. She hires a good country band, pays for decorations and use of a local ranch for the night, and has flyers circulated saying, "Neighbors Hoedown. Friday night at 6 pm."

On Friday night, the entire local mouse community are at the party ranch, as are over 100 people. The food is great, the music is awesome, and everyone has a great time until the wee hours of the morning. Both mice and people think this is the first time the two species have ever spent time together, and it's a party, so that's the best.

Over the next week, Chris and Christine visit family members to get acquainted. It's a wonderful family time with everyone getting connected to these California relatives.

A few days later, Chris and Christine announce that they'll be returning to California after one last family dinner, which Christine is paying for.

The dinner is well attended with 35 mice family members attending. The food is tasty Montana fare, wild game and local vegetables, and the conversations and closeness are wonderful. What a great send off for distant cousins who extend an invitation to all their Montana relatives to come visit. After all, Clarence and Bardle have made the trip and can teach everyone how to do it.

The trip back home to California is just a reversal of the trip to Montana. After send offs at the train station from lots of mice and human friends, Chris and Christina board the train for their return trip.

Two transfers later and they're back at the Los Angeles train station.

Carl has agreed to pick them up, and he greets them at the train. Surprisingly, Candy is also there. She's shooting a segment on traveling mice and this will be a big part of the video for the Mouse Channel.

Now, it's just a matter of getting settled back into their Home in the Wall.

Traveling is such a fun activity, and seeing new and different places opens your eyes to the beauty that is all around us. Fortunately, there are several ways to travel. The first way is simply to go. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money, and it opens your eyes to the world that we don't always see. Another travel option is to watch travel videos. You can see places you would never be able to see and experience what it would be like to visit them, without any additional cost or travel time. Another way is through books or magazines. You can read those online or go to a local library. The best part is that travel expands your world, giving you a better understanding of others and other places. It's a gift that you can enjoy for the rest of your life.

END OF 1ST EDIT - 10/2/25

Chapter 2 - A Whole Lot of Shakin'

It's early on a Saturday morning. Chris and Christina are asleep in their nest. Franklin and Donna are similarly asleep. In fact, most of the residents of Southern California are asleep.

The first indication of a problem is announced with a loud bump and, for those asleep, the sensation of serious movement.

The second indication is the continued rolling of the floor. In their Home in the Wall, Chris and Christine, Carl and grandma and grandpa are shaken awake and confused by noises throughout their Home. Things are falling off of the wall, furniture is tipping over, dishes are breaking, and the whole house seems to be moving, walls creaking, lamps swinging.

Chris is the first to jump out of bed. He checks on his wife and then grabs a flashlight because it's pitch black in the Home. He runs to Candy's old bedroom to check on his elderly parents. They're sitting straight up in their nest looking around and at each other. They're fine but alarmed.

"Don't worry mom and dad, it's just an earthquake. A big one, but we're all okay. You can go back to sleep. I'm just going to check on things around the house and then I'm going back to sleep, too."

"Okay son," says his dad.

Whomp! Another big jolt hits and continues - everything is moving again, throwing Chris off of his feet. This time there are sounds of cracking in the walls and glass breaking in Franklin and Donna's bedroom outside the closet where the Home in the Wall is located.

Chris yells to his wife and parents, "I'm going to check on the house. Everyone stay in your nest. I'll be right back. Everything is okay."

As he runs down the stairs, he looks around the living room and kitchen, and then checks the front door. It's jammed and barely moveable, but he is finally able to get out the door into the closet.

He crawls under the closet door and sees Franklin running around in his bathrobe with a flashlight while Donna huddles in the bed with covers up to her neck.

"Franklin, how can I help?" Chris yells at Franklin as he's moving fast into the living room.

“I don’t know Chris. Just watch out for broken glass. Hey, get into my bathrobe pocket and you can see from there. I put shoes on so I’m okay with glass.”

Chris runs to Franklin who scoops him up and plops him into a bathrobe pocket, out of which his head pops so he can see.

Franklin moves quickly through the rooms.

There’s a broken picture in the living room where it fell off of the wall and smashed on the coffee table. Most of the furniture is in somewhat different places than earlier in the night.

The kitchen is a mess. Glass, dishes and other breakables have been shaken out of their cupboards and are now in broken pieces on the floor. It’s impossible to walk in the kitchen so Franklin turns around and walks to the guest bedroom. One dresser is tipped over and pretty well broken up. The bathroom is fine except for the medicine cabinet which flung open during the quakes busting out the mirror throwing reflecting pieces all over the floor.

Franklin walks to the front of the house and checks the family room. More broken pictures on the floor and one table lamp broken, plus a window that has part of a tree sticking through what is left of the glass.

Next the two make it to the front door and outside. The scene is a nightmare. It’s pitch black, no street lights or house lights in the neighborhood. There are glows in several directions from what must be fires. The yard is a mess. Two trees have been toppled tearing up a large part of the garden.

The garage looks pretty intact until Franklin gets closer. The garage door is off its tracks and is clearly not going to be able to be opened.

Sirens are sounding all over.

Franklin walks to the street. Emergency vehicles are now screaming around on the streets, power lines are down and sparking on the pavement, people up and down the block are out on the sidewalk looking at the damage and watching the emergency response. It looks like a war zone.

Making their way back into the house, Franklin goes to his wife to share what he's seen and also to comfort her. He puts Chris down who runs into his Home to do the same with his wife and parents. As Chris walks into his front room he can see that the tablet tv has a video call ring. Fortunately, the tablet has a battery and the cell network is still

working. He answers the call and immediately sees Candy. She looks shaken and she's crying.

"Dad, are you and mom and grandmom and grandpop okay? It's a mess here. We can't get down the elevators. The building is pretty damaged. We went into our human friend's apartment and looked out the windows. It looks like a war outside. So many buildings are burning, a gas main is burning up the street, all of our furniture is a mess and people and mice are running and crying. It's horrible here. I wish I was home!"

"Don't worry, Candy," says her dad. "It looks like the one aftershock is all we're going to get. Just stay calm. I'll stay on this call with you, if you want."

"No, that's okay. I just really wanted to make sure you were all safe and okay."

"We're okay, sweetheart. Just try to get back to sleep and don't do anything else except sleep, unless there are more shocks."

"Okay, daddy. Thanks. I love you."

"I love you too, sugarplum," and he blows her a kiss as they hang up.

Trying to follow his own advice, Chris goes back upstairs to look in on his parents. They're in bed but awake.

"Don't worry, mom and dad," Chris says. "The shaking is over and there are lots of emergency crews out working on the damage. Just go back to sleep. We'll have a little cleanup to do tomorrow, but it's nothing we can't handle."

"Thanks son," his dad says. "We love you."

Chris stops for a minute to realize that under normal circumstances he would take those words for granted, but now, with calamity having struck all around him, his emotions are high and his voice catches as he says, "I love you, too."

He walks back into his bedroom to find Christine sitting up in the nest, sheets to her neck, staring at the door.

"I'm back honey," he says the obvious. "I checked everything over. There's nothing that we can't fix tomorrow and nothing that needs our attention tonight. Let's get some sleep so we can be ready to help clean up and fix whatever needs it tomorrow."

The two mice crawl back into their nest, hold each other tight and say a prayer of thanks for being spared injury.

After a somewhat fitful sleep, Chris wakes up early to see Christine sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“Was that a nightmare I had last night, Chris?” she asks. “I dreamed we had a bad earthquake.”

“No, it wasn’t a nightmare, honey,” he answers. “We had a bad earthquake and there’s a lot of damage. As soon as we can get up, dressed, fed and moving I have to go help others. When I come back, I’ll try to assess what we need to fix here, but what I saw last night in the house looked pretty minor.”

"Okay, honey. Just be careful. I don't want you getting hurt trying to do something that you shouldn't do."

Chris nods and winks at this wife. He knows that she is just trying to protect him but he's a grown mouse and is pretty capable of taking care of himself. It's his family and friends that he's worried about.

He walks out of the Home, under the closet door, and into the Dootys' bedroom. Donna is still asleep, but Franklin is not in bed or in the bedroom.

Walking out of the bedroom Chris sees that it looks like some of the mess has been picked up in the living room. The picture and its shattered glass are gone and the furniture has been moved back into place.

Franklin is in the living room. He's wearing jeans, a shirt and some leather shoes - ready for work. He's picking up broken glass from pictures, lamp and the window. Chris scurries to help, yelling a quick greeting to Franklin. Franklin waves and keeps working.

Because Chris is small and close to the ground, he can see small shards of broken glass that might be harder for a human to see. Franklin is putting glass pieces in a plastic garbage bag in the middle of the floor and also on some paper he placed on the floor. Chris scurries around picking up small glass pieces and dropping the big pieces on the paper and the small pieces in the bag.

After the pieces are mostly picked up, Franklin brings out a vacuum cleaner and turns it on, running the hose and attachment over the floor. The whirr of the machine and the "clink, clink, clink" of glass being sucked up signals that the cleanup is making progress.

After the glass is all sucked up, Franklin leaves, goes outside and in 10 minutes he has cut off the tree limb sticking in the window, pulled the intruding limb out and set it on the ground. He returns with a large piece of cardboard and some duct tape that he uses to seal off the window, which makes the room darker, but it's cleaner.

That room finished, Chris and Franklin walk into the family room. The wall tv screen is no longer straight, but that's an easy fix. Franklin adjusts it and it's now back to the way it was. A couple of glasses that were sitting on a coffee table have fallen on the floor and broke. Chris and Franklin pick up the big pieces and Franklin sucks up the smaller ones with the vacuum cleaner. A few magazines have been tossed on the floor and the furniture has moved a bit, but it's pretty easy for the two friends to return this room to normal.

Now, for the hard part - the kitchen. It's a disaster area. The floor is littered with broken glass, dishes and pottery. Pots and pans are all over the floor. Containers of flour and sugar are broken with contents splashed among the pieces of containers.

Franklin grabs a broom and begins sweeping the mess into a pile. Then, he goes out to the garage, opens the side door and grabs a shovel and rake, bringing them back into the kitchen, returning outside to bring in a garbage can. Now, it's just a matter of sweeping, scooping things up and depositing the debris in the garbage can. Chris is perfect for the rest of this since he's close to the floor and he can pick up small pieces. Again, Franklin brings in the vacuum cleaner to get the last of the tiny shards of glass and the spilled food staples and ingredients.

Franklin and Chris go back to their wives to check in and let them know that it's okay to come out. Chris walks in the front door to his Home and sees his wife in the kitchen with a flashlight, getting breakfast food for Carl and his parents. Carl also has a battery-powered light making it look like a scene from a campground. Everyone seems fine, which is good.

Chris waves, says "hi" and gives a quick update on the cleanup process, letting his family know that he and Franklin are going outside next to check on the garage and yard.

Chris walks back into the main house where Donna is busy getting the kitchen in some sort of order. Franklin is going room by room to check for other damage.

"How can I help," Chris asks.

Franklin turns and says, "Let's go outside and see what we can do to clean up out there, okay?"

As they go out the front door and into the yard they take a visual survey of the damage. The trees that are down and laying in the garden are the worst of it. Everything else in the yard seems okay, and since Franklin doesn't have a chain saw or a saw that will cut that size tree all he can do is use branch cutters to trim the small branches over the garden. The trunk and main branches will have to wait until they can get a tree person to come and cut them into smaller pieces and take them away.

The garage is another story. The quake shook the walls of the garage which took the door out of its tracks. That repair is also going to have to wait for a garage repair person, which might take some time to get since damage has undoubtedly hit a large area.

Christine walks up to the two guys and announces that she is going to Mouse Academy to check on the condition of Mouse Church and the Mouse Academy offices and classrooms.

In the Home, Carl has turned on the tablet tv to the MouseChannel which is broadcasting disaster scenes live from the city. Candy is on the street with a camera crew and sound mouse doing interviews and filming scenes from the area.

"The damage is everywhere we look," she says to the camera. "Look around as the camera pans the area. The front window on this store is totally broken out. Store employees are standing outside to prevent any looting. As we look this way," she waves her hand, "we can see smoke from a large fire burning a few blocks away. I want to talk to a few mice on the street to get their reactions."

She turns to a mouse standing next to her and asks, "First, how are you and your family and what damage have you seen this morning?"

The mouse turns to the camera and says, "It was chaos this morning. People and mice were running everywhere, yelling. Out family lives in a large building one block away and when the shaking started we got up and tried to get outside. The emergency lights were on, so we could see in the hallways but the elevators weren't working. One human held the stairway door open so we could all go down the stairs. It was horrible. People and mice were crying, everyone was scared, we just wanted to get out of the building but so did the folks in the floors above us. The stairways were a mass of kids, adults and mice, all trying to get downstairs and outside. Once we got outside it looked like a warzone. There were fires and water flying in the air. Several cars were crashed and abandoned in the street where they were driving when the shaking started. Then the crying got louder as we all saw the damage."

"Thank you, sir. How are you and your family?"

"We're fine. A bit shaken, like everyone else, but we're all fine. Our kids are taking it pretty hard. They just found out that two of their friends were crushed by falling furniture in the human house where they lived."

"I'm so sorry, sir. We at the Mouse Channel, and all of our viewers. are praying for safety and comfort for everyone in this terrible time.

Christine turns and walks down the street with the camera crew, pointing out damage and interviewing bystanders.

One of the on-camera interviews is with a human.

"Ma'am, can we talk to you for a moment, please?" Candy says.

A lady looks down at her and says, "Yes, how can I help you?"

"First, how are you and your family?"

"We're fine, but shaken. We just moved here three weeks ago. We knew this is an earthquake area but we didn't expect anything like this so soon."

"We're glad you are all fine. This is a bad way to welcome you to our area, but we hope that you realize that this doesn't happen very often, especially this strong of a quake."

"Thank you. We're just trying to figure out what to do now. Our house is mostly okay, just broken glass and a few cracks in the wall. I'm walking around now looking at the damage and trying to see how bad things are. So far, it looks like everyone is just scared, but mostly okay. From what I've seen the visible damage isn't devastating, but it's going to be a big cleanup job. We just hope we can get electricity back soon."

"We hope so, too. Please be safe, watch out for broken glass on the streets and also cracks in the sidewalk."

Candy turns back to the camera. "We'll be walking around taking video and talking to mice and people on the street throughout the day. And, we'll provide updates every hour."

Carl and his grandparents have watched the entire interview. Candy was terrific - so relaxed and polished, just like a big time newsperson.

Carl turns to his grandma and grandpa and says, "That's my sister! She acts like she was born for this role. I watch her newscasts every day and we also play them at our restaurant for our patrons.

A little later, Christine returns and shares news about the outside world.

"Mouse Academy and Mouse Church are mostly okay. A tree came down and cracked a wall of Mouse Church but it shouldn't be a problem because the wall is still intact. Classrooms and church furniture are scattered everywhere, some damaged, but we can pick everything up and it'll be okay.

"Carl, how are things at your restaurant?"

"I was just leaving to check on it, mom. I'll be back in an hour or two."

Grandma and Grandpa Mouse seem calm. They've been watching Candy's reporting with Carl and they are taking it all in.

Chris walks back in the home. He's dirty, his fur is ruffled, and he looks tired.

"Is everything okay, honey?" Christine asks.

"Pretty much. Just a few things that will take time to fix, but everyone is safe and unhurt. It's going to be a long process. I'm just glad that everyone we know is okay."

Earthquake city, that’s what Southern California is called by some. Most of the quakes that hit the area are small and cause little to no damage. This "rattler" was different. The damage was significant in some areas. Fortunately, there was little loss of life.

Life sometimes brings unplanned events. When disaster strikes the important thing is to remain calm, find a safe place to ride out the event, and stay nice to everyone around you. Many families have an emergency kit for those "just in case" times. The key: get safe and stay safe.

Chapter 3 - Pick-up Sticks

After the big earthquake everyone is busy cleaning up and repairing so they can get things back to normal.

Crews are working all over the city to restore power, clear streets, fix broken water mains and damaged drains and sewers, and take care of fallen trees that threaten to do greater harm.

People and mice all over the area are checking to see if there is damage that needs to be repaired.

Electric power is restored three days after the quake, which is a great relief because so many things run on electricity, you know, like clocks, lights, refrigerators, entertainment systems, phone chargers and so on.

Franklin went back to work the day after the quake. A week later he still hasn't had time to handle repairs to the house and property, which prompts Donna to have a quick talk with him at breakfast.

"Honey, we have a lot of damage that needs to get fixed. I know you have responsibilities at work, but could you take a week off and take care of some of the more important things? Or, could you call a service that can come in and handle it for you?"

Franklin nurses his coffee as he thinks. "I don't know if I can get a week off since I'm pretty new at this job, but I could get a day or two off probably. And, after already being off work for a while after the earthquake I don't know if we can afford to have a service just take care of everything."

"We have to do something, Franklin. You took off the damaged garage door so we can get the car in and out, but now our garage is open to weather and everything else. I've also gone around the house and made notes of all the damage. I can put in claims with our insurance to cover some of the costs, but anything we can do to fix things will probably be quicker since so many people also have damaged homes and property."

"I'll ask my boss about getting a day or two off. I'm sure others have the same problems and I have to be reasonable because almost everyone at work has some damage."

That night Franklin tells Donna that he can take two days off to do repairs.

The Mouse household is going through the same discussions. Chris and Christine have inspected the whole Home and discovered damage that they hadn't seen at first.

One wall is partially collapsed, which is a big concern for structural safety. Other walls have cracks, some larger than others. The top deck patio floor is partially collapsed and many of the windows and window frames have some damage. All of the repair work will need to be done, and then the house will need to be painted.

Chris contacts Frizz and Frak to discuss the damage. They promise to come inspect the damage the next day and estimate the cost to repair everything.

In the morning, Chris goes out to tell Donna that he will have the builders come in to inspect their Home, and he sees Franklin in the kitchen.

"Hey Franklin. Aren't you supposed to be at work?" Chris asks.

"Oh, hey Chris. Yes, but I took two days off so I can get some of the repairs done here. Today I'm working on the garage door. If I can fix it, then I'll start working on the windows and other damage."

"Sounds like what I'm facing," Chris replies. "Our Home in the Wall has some minor and some major damage so I have the builders coming in to take a look. I'm sure it's not going to be cheap. Of course, mice don't have insurance, so I'll have to pay for everything, but we have the money from the sale of Christine's land so we're okay.

"Anything I can help you with, Franklin?"

Franklin thinks for a moment. "No, I think we'll be able to handle it all, so you can just focus on your own Home. I might like your opinion on fixing the garden, but we can talk about that later."

"Okay, just know that our family is available to help whenever we're needed."

"Thanks," and with that both turn to attend to their own repairs.

Franklin inspects the garage door and sees that the rollers on the door have been jerked out of the tracks. It looks like a pretty straightforward fix, but he needs help to muscle the door back and get it set in place. Plus, the spring on the door will have to be reset. It's not going to be a homeowner fix, for sure.

He calls a local garage door company and gets a date when they can come out and repair the door.

The windows are next. Franklin has taped cardboard over the damaged windows. Next, he calls a window company. They're backed up for one month with all of the damage in the area, so he puts his name and address on a list. Later he tells Donna that they'll have to put up with boarded windows for a month or so, but he'll nail wood over them to make them more secure.

Donna has a list of other things for Franklin to check and he goes through the list issue-by-issue. Most are minor - pick up this or that, make a quick repair here or there.

He talks to several neighbors - one of them has a chain saw he can borrow for the big trees that are down. That's going to be a full-day job, but it won't get done unless he gets started, so he gets the chainsaw and fills a can with gas. Now he's all set for that project.

Next he tells Chris about the need for both families to repair the garden while he has a day off, so Chris contacts Frizz and Frak to put off their inspection for another day.

The garden is a big project. The two trees that toppled are first. Neither tree is real thick but both are pretty tall.

Franklin starts by cutting in half the first tree that broke one of the windows in the house. After he cuts it in half he cuts each half again, this time into 2-foot lengths, just the right size to fit in the fireplace. After six hours of cutting, both trees are cut into logs. Next is the job of stacking them outside, which he does in an empty part of the backyard, several feet from the fence.

Later he'll have to set aside some time to split the logs into smaller pieces. There's not hurry on that, he thinks.

It's been a good day, with much done and the rest scheduled for tomorrow. Now, it's time to rest. He's been working hard all day, only taking a break for lunch.

The next day is garden day. Franklin and Chris agree that this should be a family project. Danny comes over, Carl takes a day from the restaurant, and the older males gather tools for the cleanup and repair.

The first half of the morning is just picking up debris from the garden and throwing it in trash cans. After that it gets a bit more intensive.

Everyone sets to work, pulling out destroyed plants and noting what needs to be replaced. After the old plants are gone, it's time to dig up the soil where they were removed and also level out the beds where the two trees fell. That work is split into two parts - morning until lunch, and afternoon after lunch.

Both families work hard and when all is done in the afternoon, Chris has made a note of the plants that will need to be replaced. There's still a little produce that both families can sell to Carl for use at Munch, but it will take some time to make up for the damaged and destroyed plants.

It's been a busy couple of days and everyone is tired. They have a dinner together that night to celebrate. Munch only has minor damage, so Carl is able to join them for a nice meal.

At the table that night Donna prays for the meal and thanks God for protecting them from worse damage. The meal is tasty, the table conversation is good, and everyone is full and satisfied at the end. There's still work to be done, but the big house and yard are coming back together.

The next day, Frizz and Frak inspect the Mouse family Home in the Wall. The partially collapsed wall and top deck patio floor are the main concerns. Frak says they'll need to bring in a crew to fix both, but neither is a structural concern because they don't bear much load. The cracks are mainly cosmetic and will be easy to fix. The broken windows and frames will need to be replaced. They can also touch up the house paint in the damaged walls. Frak says, "It'll blend right in and won't even be noticed."

Chris gives the go-ahead and Frak schedules the work to be completed over the next three weeks, maybe a week longer if it takes longer to get the windows. During the construction there will be noise and workers coming and going so there will be some disruption, but they'll try to minimize it.

The next month is filled with mouse and human workers coming and going. The Frizz and Frak team bring in ladders and tools and start working. The pounding and sawing echo through the house, workers go up and down the stairs, and it's a real crazy time in the Mouse household.

Grandpa and Grandma Mouse take it in stride. Their days are pretty easy, anyway. They get up in the morning, walk downstairs, usually dodging mice or human workers, and have a light breakfast. Then they settle into the family room to watch game shows on the tablet tv or work on a jigsaw puzzle or write notes to friends before sneaking back up to their nest for a nap.

Candy visits during the next weekend. She's been very busy with live video casts from various places in the city, reporting on continuing problems and the ever-present repair crews. She's such a popular personality that when she visits an area mice stand on the sidewalk looking for their favorite celebrity.

Candy's reporting of the earthquake and aftermath have earned her several awards and she's now more popular than ever, especially after Mouse Life did a special report on

her, including her childhood and upbringing. She's still a little shy about all the attention, but she's learned to not get too upset when the 30th mouse in a day stops her on the street to take a selfie with her.

Candy spends some time with her grandma and grandpa to make sure they're okay and just hang out with them. They, of course, are thrilled that their granddaughter leaves the city and her busy career to be with them.

During every visit home, Candy and Carl meet to look over the books for Munch and catch up on the latest challenges and victories. Munch is kind of her hobby. She doesn't need the money from the restaurant and she's happy she was able to help Carl buy it. He seems to be doing a good job of managing the business, so she's content to just catch up on the latest, read a few reports that Carl has prepared for her, and chat with him about the business.

During this visit, and actually on many visits, Candy goes to Munch for lunch, which thrills the restaurant customers. It's somewhat of a spectacle because everyone wants to talk with her. She's very gracious and spends time at each table asking everyone how they're doing and commiserating over their stories of earthquake damage and disruption, which puts smiles on everyone's faces and also quiet amazement that she's so willing to give up her time to talk to them.

The noise from construction inside and outside the Home in the Wall is pretty loud, and unfortunately there's no place to escape it. Chris and Christine go for walks with Grandma and Grandpa but all around the neighborhood they hear sounds of pounding, sawing and workers yelling.

Chris and Franklin spend two hours each weekend day to inspect the garden and do a little work in it. Chris got seeds from the New Mouse Store and shared them with Franklin and Donna. Both couples planted them the same day. Donna also got plants from a local home store so the garden is now back and growing. The earthquake broke the irrigation pipe to the garden, but it was easy to fix so Franklin had it repaired and ready to deliver life-giving water within the same weekend. With pleasant weather the garden is a few weeks away from again providing enough fresh produce for Munch and both families.

Donna and Christina continue to work on their homes. The construction creates messes with sawdust and dirt tracked in. It's not pleasant and both females have to stay on the cleaning to keep their houses from being messy.

Danny comes over and spends the weekend at the Dooty house twice a month as he and Chris record PawdCast and MouseKeTok. He also has a job working in audio and video production, but thankfully has every Saturday and Sunday off from work.

Chris walks around the neighborhood every couple of days to check on how neighbors are doing. He talks to every mouse that's home and as a result he has a good idea of the progress being made after the quake. Most mice are optimistic about the work being done. Some didn't experience any damage from the quake, and they're busy helping their neighbors and friends with their damage. It's going to be a busy time for several months, but work is slowly getting done and homes are getting fixed and finished every day.

Franklin's job was not disrupted at all by the quake or the aftermath, so he's been working steadily through it all as though nothing happened. That gives him a little break from the work around the house, for which he's grateful.

All in all, everything is continuing toward getting back to normal, or as normal as anyone's life is anymore.

What everyone learned in this experience is that you can be as prepared as ever for everything, but be satisfied if you just meet the typical requirements. If you do that you'll be around to pull yourself out of the hole and get back on your feet and running.

Chapter 4 - Four in a Row

Chris has liked dogs ever since he first met Ruff. Cats, not so much. Hawks, not at all, and traps, well those are just plain evil. Why would anyone want to harm an innocent mouse? Maybe some people just don't understand us, Chris thinks.

His experiences with dogs in his younger days weren't that great. He's been chased, harassed and almost bit a few times, and while dogs are only one of the many hazards a mouse faces, most of them are big and they can be pretty dangerous.

However, Ruff has been a good friend. He loves to take Chris and the other members of the Mouse family on his back for walks. It's like the pictures that Chris has seen of humans riding horses, elephants and camels. Sure it feels different but it's in kind of a fun way.

Since Ruff lives nearby it's been pretty safe for the Chris and family because their friend is such a great protector. Of course, he doesn't live with the Dooty's so it's not like he's close when things happen. Still, it's comforting knowing that he's their friend and he's been there for them when they most needed him..

Life got a little scary on a Monday morning after Franklin left for work because he somehow left the gate open to the driveway. That's very unusual for him because he's usually really picky about closing the gate, but it happened on this morning. Chris is out in the garden, applying organic fertilizer to some of the garden vegetables. It's a bit cool outside and he's focused on doing a good job, walking down a row, using a little hoe to shape the mound he's working on. This particular row is planted with carrots, the tops of which are coming up nicely. Chris estimates that the carrots will be ready to be pulled out in about three weeks, so he's focused on being careful not to accidentally cut into any of the developing roots.

He hears a sound coming from the driveway but keeps his attention on the work he's doing. Then another sound a little closer. When the noise gets even closer yet he looks up just in time to see a very large dog coming right at him. Now he's startled. There's no one else around, Franklin's at work, Donna is in the house, as are his parents. It's just him and a very large dog that is now growling and barking.

In a heartbeat the dog is in front of him snapping at him. Chris picks up his hoe and holds it like a bat to be ready to keep the dog away.

He looks to the house. It's too far away for him to get there without the dog getting to him first. There's nothing in the garden to hide behind except plants and they won't

shield him from the very large animal that seems intent on biting, eating or otherwise messing him up.

The dog lunges at him and at the very last minute Chris takes the stick end of the hoe and jabs at the dog, hitting him right in the mouth. The dog stops barking, startled for a minute, yelps once and then returns to the attack, snapping his jaw of very large teeth covered with slobber quite close to Chris' head. Whew! That was close, Chris thinks as he ducks away just in time.

For a second his mind goes to a dark place. "This may be the end of me," he thinks. "That dog is determined and so much bigger than me. I wish I had a better weapon that I could use to protect myself."

Then he remembers, Ruff told him recently that if he needs help all he needs to do is whistle and Ruff will come running.

He puckers his cheeks and lips and blows. Nothing. He curls his lips and tries again. A squeak. In a panic he wishes he had practiced whistling before this so he could get an emergency signal to his canine friend.

He curls his lips, blows through his teeth and now the sound coming from him is a whistle. That's good, but not loud enough. "Try again," he thinks. "Purse your lips and blow like there's no tomorrow." Better, and louder. "Almost loud enough," he thinks as he jabs at the dog again as it lunges at him.

The large dog suddenly stops snarling and snapping at him and is now looking at him trying to figure out what this little critter is doing.

Chris whistles again through his teeth. This time it's piercing and really loud.

He looks around for anything else he can use to defend himself, getting ready as the big dog prepares to attack. Just as the dog starts to lunge at him, Chris gets a good grip on the hoe and swings it like a bat. The blade on the end shines as it swings through the air, catching the dog on the side of his jowl.

"Yeow!" the dog cries as the hoe blade cuts into this cheek.

"WOOF" comes a loud, deep bark from the driveway. Both mouse and dog turn to see where the bark is coming from. It's Ruff and he's running to where Chris and the attacking dog are facing off. In a moment he's at the other dog's side growling with a low, deep sound while snapping at the other dog's side.

"Yip" comes out of the attacking dog's mouth, and it turns to take a defensive posture against the much larger Ruff. Ruff growls with a snarling loud sound, snapping his teeth

at the other dog who has now stopped attacking Chris and is standing ready to defend himself.

“What are you doing?” the other dog asks Ruff. “I’m just trying to get rid of this pest, this mouse in this house’s garden.”

“That is my friend and you don’t belong here,” answers Ruff with a low growl. “You need to leave now or I’ll show you what we do to trespassers. You know I’m bigger and stronger than you, and I’ve eaten bigger animals than you for breakfast” he says between growling and snarling.

The attacking dog has now moved away from the garden and is backing up to the driveway while facing Ruff and baring his teeth.

Ruff suddenly attacks the other dog and bites him on his hind leg.

“Yeow!” comes the cry from the strange dog. “That hurt.”

“You think that hurt? If you stay here you’ll be more than hurting. You’ll be a dog that used to be,” said Ruff. "Now turn around and leave this yard and never come back. If I see you here again I’ll finish this fight and you won’t be around to fight again. Do you understand?” Ruff says, again with a loud snarl and a bark.

The strange dog sees that he’s going to lose the argument, and he turns, puts his tail between his legs and moves slowly to the sideway, growling under his breath while glancing back over his shoulder.

When the attacker reaches the sidewalk, Ruff goes to the driveway gate and pushes it closed, then yells again, “If you come back here you’re going to wish you never saw this place, I can promise you that.”

The attacking dog puts his tail between his legs and runs away down the street.

Chris runs up to Ruff, grabs his hair and swings up onto Ruff’s back.

“Thank you, Ruff, you saved me. I thought for sure that he was going to bite me, which I’m sure would have been the last of me. You saved my life, good friend. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Oh now Chris, you don’t have to get so dramatic,” says Ruff. “I told you if you ever needed me to just whistle and I would come. You did and I did. That’s what friends do for each other.”

“Well, good friend,” Chris replies, “I’m very grateful. It didn’t look so good there. At one point I could almost see my life flashing before my eyes.”

“It's over so you can relax now.

"I have to get back to my house, Chris. Let’s get together for a ride around the neighborhood soon, and bring your family. You know I like giving rides.”

“That’s a deal, my friend,” Chris says as Ruff shuffles back to the driveway, opens the gate and turns to smile at his friend before leaving to return to his own yard.

“Whew!” Chris thinks. “That was very close. I better let Franklin know what happened so he'll remember to close that gate when he leaves.” And then he goes back to the garden, continues hoeing and when finished he goes home to his Home in the Wall.

That night he tells Christine and his parents about the close call with the dog. His dad shakes his head at the thought of being chased by a dog like that. Christine tells him that she's glad he's okay, but the whole episode sounds really scary.

Chris has a dream about the dog in his sleep that night, but wakes up rested and ready for continuing his work in the garden.

It's a sunny day, bright with a few fluffy clouds, warm breeze. Perfect for working outside.

He's finished hoeing one row and has just moved to another when he hears a distant screech from the air.

He looks up and sees a large bird, wheeling around above him. Just as he sees the bird it tucks in its wings and heads straight down at him.

"What?" he thinks. Then he realizes what is happening. The bird is aiming right at him. He looks for cover, but he's in the middle of the garden and there's nowhere to hide. He grabs the hoe, pokes the stick end in the dirt and gets down under it, aiming the hoe blade end at the rapidly descending bird.

As the bird gets about 10 feet from the ground he sees the hoe and tries to change direction but decides that won't work and pulls out of his dive. After he levels off he swoops up to gain altitude for another high-speed dive to try to catch that tasty mouse on the ground.

Donna comes out to the garden just in time to see the red-tailed hawk dive toward Chris. She yells at the hawk, and waves her arms while running to the garden, which causes the predator to swoop away.

Donna calls to Chris, "Are you okay, Chris?"

"I'm okay. Thanks, Donna! Boy, a mouse can't even work in the garden without being attacked," he exclaims.

'That was a close call," says Donna. "Good thing he screeched so you could look up and spot him getting ready to make you his lunch."

"It's getting pretty crazy, Donna. Yesterday I got charged by a dog that wanted to kill me. Today, I'm almost bird food. All I want to do is work in the garden. Somehow, I don't think self-help books cover these kinds of things," and he says with a quiet chuckle.

"You still have a sense of humor after those things, Chris. I admire you for that," Donna says and then turns to look at the Dooty part of the garden.

"I should get out here like you are and tend to our part of the garden, I suppose."

"We'll get our respective garden segments back to what they were. They're already looking better. I just like to be out here."

Donna smiles as Chris gets back to work. It's not likely the hawk will bother him now that the human is in the garden with him.

Chris works another hour and when Donna goes back in the house he goes in, too. He's a bit jumpy after two somewhat close calls. There's no need to put his life at risk.

The next day Chris' friend Rags calls and asks if he can come over and help him with a quick project.

"Sure, Rags. I'll be over in about an hour," Chris says.

"That's perfect, Chris. Thanks. I'll see you then," and Rags hangs up.

On his way over to Rags and Gentle's place Chris decides to take a shortcut through an empty lot that he's crossed many times. He is carrying a stick with him, after the scares of the last few days.

Right in the middle of the path he's taking through the lot is a big piece of cheese with what looks like some grass clippings all around it. He's hungry and he's tempted to go for the cheese but something just doesn't feel right. The cheese looks okay, and it actually looks very tasty. It's sitting in the middle of leaves and grass like it was accidentally dropped there. The sun has partially melted the cheese and it glistens a bit in the sunlight, making it even more enticing. He can almost taste it.

He starts to reach for it, but then in a second he hesitates. He decides that instead of walking across the leaves and grass to get it, he'll just use his stick to spear it from the side. With a quick thrust his stick goes in the soft side of the cheese. SNAP! A trap spring flips a mouse trap shut smashing the stick and clamping down right where he would have been standing.

"Oh my gosh!" Chris says out loud. That trap almost got him. If he had done what he first wanted to do he'd be a goner, taken out by a mouse trap.

He stands beside the closed trap, shaking and tense. That was too close. That's three close calls he's had in just a few days. He has to stop and just stand there for a few minutes to regain his senses. Rags is expecting him to come over, so he should probably compose himself and continue to his friend's place.

But he's not only shaken, he's also mad. Someone put that trap there with bait and expected to kill some poor unsuspecting critter. "That could have been me," he thinks. And then he imagines what would happen to his family if the trap had done what it was intended to do.

In the next minute he gets more angry. "That's just wrong for people to try to kill innocent creatures," he says to himself. He stomps his feet. And then he decides that the trap has been sprung and the cheese is just sitting there, looking very tasty. So, he walks over the grass, pulls the cheese off the trap, and continues on to Rags' house, but now with a treat to share.

The work that Rags needs help with is pretty easy. He's moving the family home from one place to another and just needs help moving the furnishings. The two mice get everything moved and set up in a couple of hours.

"Can you stay for dinner, Chris?" Gentle calls out from the doorway of their new home.

"Sure. Christine thought this might take longer so she already planned to make dInner for my parents and Carl."

At dinner Chris tells the story of the three life-threatening incidents he has experienced over the last few days.

"I thought the first experience, the one with the dog, was going to be the end of me. He was big and snarling and had sharp teeth from what I could see. He got so close I could smell the hot breath from his mouth. Fortunately, I was working in the garden. f I hadn't had my hoe and been alert, I wouldn't be here with you today. I'm telling you, that was a scary experience."

"Oh my goodness," said Gentle. "That does sound like a close call. I don't like dogs, myself. They have always scared me. I just don't think I could ever be comfortable around them."

"We have a great friend named Ruff who is a very large dog. If it wasn't for him coming when he did, I'm not sure that I'd be here today. The funny thing is I had to whistle to call him and it took me several tries before I could get out a whistle loud enough for him to hear it. I guess I was too scared to whistle at first. But it all worked out.

"That red-tail hawk was pretty scary. He was diving really fast and I had no time to whistle to Ruff or do anything other than what I did. I thought he was going to take another dive at me, but fortunately, Mrs. Dooty came out to the garden when she did, or he probably would have tried again. I haven't seen him since then so I'm hoping he moved on to easier pickings.

"And the trap? It was really hard to see because it was so disguised. Something in me just didn't feel right about the cheese and the grass around it. I could smell the cheese, and I almost reached for it, but I'm sure glad I decided to reach for it with my stick. I was sad that my stick was broken, but not after I thought about it and realized that it could have been me instead of the stick.

"Can you imagine, three close calls so close together. I hope that's the last of it."

Gentle said, "We are, too, Chris. That's a good reminder that we're still pretty small, which makes us an easy target for predators and people that want to hurt us."

"Or, kill us," said Rags. "It sure makes me mad. We're not trying to kill anything."

"Except maybe some garden produce and the occasionally tasty cockroach or beetle," Gentle says. "Mice aren't perfect, either."

After that, the conversation turns to kids with the Meece couple talking about their kids Rotary, Fran, Marta and Matt, all of whom are now grown and out of the house and living on their own.

Chris is enjoying spending time with his friends, but he excuses himself explaining again that his older parents are now living with them and he needs to get back to his Home to share the responsibilities with Christine.

As he excuses himself, Rags says "Thanks for your help today. We got everything moved over and now we're all settled in our new home. We'll have to have you guys over for dinner soon."

"Glad to help. See you soon," says Chris as he makes his way out of their home to head to his own.

Walking home Chris thinks about the chain of events with the three scary incidents. It's not uncommon to have an encounter with one problem, but three? That's pretty unusual and also a reminder that the world can be a dangerous place at times.

"I need to be alert and careful all the time," Chris muses. "You never know what might suddenly change your life."

The walk home is not very long. It's just three blocks, but that means that he has to cross two streets to get to his own block.

He's lost in thought. The first two blocks are uneventful, and he's daydreaming, playing over the three scary incidents in his mind.

As he comes to his block he jumps up on the curb from the street. Instantly there's a large orange cat standing in his way.

"Hey, little mouse. Where do you think you're going?" asks the cat.

"I'm just walking home. Don't bother me, I've had a rough few days," Chris answers.

"Gee, that's too bad. Let me think. You're a mouse and I'm a cat. What do you suppose that means?"

"I have no idea. You tell me," replies Chris.

"Okay," says the cat. "Cats like to play with mice and we're a bit rough. Sometimes the mice we play with aren't able to play for very long and then we bite them. They don't play at all after that."

"Hmm, it sounds like you're trying to decide what you should do, right?" asks Chris.

The cat comes back with, "Not really. I know what to do. I'm just trying to decide when."

"That sounds like you have a dilemma to me," responds Chris. "Maybe you should think about it some more and call me later when you know what you want to do."

"Okay, smarty mouse. I think I'll just go ahead and bat you around a little. I promise I won't use my sharp claws until you're tired. By the way, I don't really like the taste of mouse so I don't think I'll eat you when we're done playing. You would probably give me indigestion."

Chris is thinking fast. "This cat means business and he doesn't sound like he's in the mood to let me go. I'm not far from Ruff's house. If I whistle loud maybe he can get here before the cat does me in."

Chris points to the street and says, "Wow, look at that? It's the Animal Control."

When the cat looks in that direction, Chris puckers his lips, draws in a breath and whistles as loud as he can. "Wheeeeeeeeet!"

"Hey, what was that?" asks the cat. "I didn't see anything where you pointed and then you made a sound. Are you trying to be a bird or something?"

"No, I was just trying to see if you were smart enough to follow my directions," Chris answers. "I think you're actually a pretty smart cat. Do you want to get hurt really badly?"

"You're kidding, right? What do you think you could do to me? You're just a tiny mouse and I'm a big cat."

"Well," Chris says, "you're not as big as my friend."

"What friend is that?"

"The big brown dog standing right behind you," answers Chris.

Ruff lets out a low growl, which makes the cat turn around to see what made the sound.

"Oh, hi Mr. Dog. I was just talking to this mouse here, see?" the cat says to Ruff. "I wasn't going to do anything to him. Just playing around."

Ruff says slowly and confidently, "If you are smart, you'll apologize to my friend, Chris, and then turn and walk away while you're still able to walk. Or, you can continue with what you have been doing and discover how fun my play is with you."

The cat shrugs and starts to walk away slowly.

"RUFFFFFF!" Ruff roars with a deafening roar.

The cat takes off like a shot, leaving Ruff and Chris laughing at the sight.

Chris is relieved and shaking a little after the close call. Thanks to his friend Ruff he's escaped another close call.

Ruff gives Chris a ride the last half block to his home and on the way Chris is thinking "Dogs, hawks, traps and cats, that's a lot of danger to happen in a few days. I think I'll just stay home and watch movies for a few days."

Back home, Chris thanks Ruff for saving him once again. He tells his dog friend about the other two incidents that Ruff wasn't there for and adds, "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here now. I can't thank you enough, my friend."

"I'm glad I could get there in time, both times, Chris. Your whistle is getting better, by the way. That last one was perfect."

"I'm going to practice more, Ruff," Chris says. "I have a feeling there may be more problems in the future."

As they walk into the Dootys' yard, Christine is outside and in a minute Chris explains what just happened.

Christine gives Ruff a big hug and thanks him for being such a great friend. "You will always have a special place in our heart," she says as Ruff turns to walk back home.

The next day, Chris has Carl bring a special lunch home for Ruff from his restaurant. They each carry half of it and put it in Ruff's dish. Ruff walks out of his dog house, sees the food and the two mice, sniffs the food and eats it. It’s delicious.

It's a fitting end to this saga.

Friends are important in our life, no matter who they are. They can listen to us, calm us down, and sometimes even protect us. Ruff was a big dog. That alone should have been scary for the mice, but Ruff was a gentle and kind animal. That made him different and a great friend.

No matter what your life is like, find a friend that is kind and that you can talk to. It may take some time, and you may have to be brave and talk to some people that you don't know. Just be yourself and share your thoughts and feelings. Remember that everyone has many of the same hopes, dreams and fears. Share yours and you will be on the way to finding your friend.

If you have to deal with a bully, the kind that treats you bad, makes fun of you, or even tries to hurt you, remember this - you are not alone. Talk to your parents, your teachers, the principal, or a pastor, and if they don't help, use your phone or a computer to go to https://www.stopbullying.gov.

You can get help. Just keep your chin up and know that there are people that can help you and that want to help you. And whatever you do, don't ever stop believing that your life will get better.

Chapter 5 - Circus Hocus Pocus

Readerboards make the announcement, Facebook and Google, Instagram and YouTube all have flashes on it, and it’s kind of hard to miss that the circus is coming to town.

The graphics are bright, yellow, white and red for excitement. The photos splashing across screens show acrobats and trapeze artists and animals and aerial acts and Jugglers and on and on. The music is colorful, the announcers are young and excited, and there’s a general upbeat feeling about the circus. No nostalgia, just the new crowd-pleasing circus.

Chris is getting ready to leave the Home one morning when he glances at the tablet tv showing a commercial for the circus. It sounds fun.

Christine goes to the Mouse Academy to meet with her instructors and as she’s walking to the office she hears students talking about the circus. The instructors meeting goes well, but they're also talking about the circus.

Carl is in his office at Munch, working on employee benefits, and he overhears two of the employees talking about the circus. Then, on the way home, he sees a window poster promoting the circus. When he checks Facebook there is another ad for the circus.

Most of the connected, meaning online, mice use the Internet for email, voice mail, voice calls, social media, web, and so forth. The circus is in email, Facebook, and almost every other online place you can look. So almost no one can say, “I never heard of the circus coming to town.”

Naturally, the circus comes up in dinner conversation at the Mouse family home.

Grandpa and Grandma Mouse say they have never seen a circus and don't really know what it is. After dinner, Carl gathers everyone around the tablet tv and they watch circus acts on YouTube. Grandma and Grandpa are in awe, jaws dropped, watching intently as the different acts perform scary and what look to be death-defying stunts. Every mouse says ooh and aah as they stare at the screen.

Afterwards, Grandpa says, "In my day, mice never went close to those things because the elephants would stomp on them."

To which Carl adds, "Elephants aren't used in many circuses anymore grandpa, especially the big ones. I saw that horses and dogs and monkeys are still pretty common. This circus also has lions and tigers."

Grandpa and Grandma both draw in their breath at this news. "Oh my," says grandma, "I don't think I'd want to be around those big cats. They're quick and I think they might like to eat mice."

"Don't worry, grandma, the circus is really safe. You can't go into the ring during the performance, but the big cats are in a large cage so sitting in the audience is safe and fun," answers Carl.

After a few YouTube videos grandma and grandpa excuse themselves and go upstairs to bed. Carl and his parents sit in the family room and talk about the circus.

Chris says, "I could check with Franklin and Donna and see if they want to go see the circus. Then we could go with them and watch from their pockets."

Christine adds, "That would be great. Please tell them that I would be willing to pay for the tickets out of our Montana land proceeds. It's the least we could do for all the trips they've taken us on, and for being such a wonderful host family for us, being able to live in their house and be their friends."

Chris smiles. "I'll talk to Franklin tomorrow and see if they're at all interested. If they are, I'll tell them that you're buying."

Christine smiles and Carl gives the mouse equivalent to the "thumbs up" sign that humans use with each other. It's not easy for mice. To do that a mouse has to hold up one paw and fold down three claws while extending the inside claw. It looks kind of like humans holding up the first finger, but it's the mouse signal for "I get it," "I agree" or "that's good."

As Chris and Christine settle into their nest for sleep that night, Christine is still excited by the idea. "Oh Chris, I think the circus will be wonderful to see. We've never seen one and I bet the smell, the treats, the animals and circus acts will be really fun to watch in person. I hope we can go."

"I'll see if Franklin is interested. If he isn't maybe Candy can get us in with a Mouse Channel pass or something." Then both mice get quiet and are soon asleep.

The next morning, Chris is out in the garden again, tending to weeds, which by the way are pretty tasty.

Franklin comes out and starts working on the Dooty garden side. He's working to adjust the irrigation, which hasn't been quite right since the earthquake.

"Hey Franklin," Chris calls to his friend, "are you and Donna going to the circus?"

"Oh, hi Chris. We haven't talked about it but there's sure a lot of publicity and signs about it coming to town, isn't there?"

"Sure is. We've been talking about it, and Christine says that if you guys are going we'd like to go."

"I'll talk to Donna. She likes the circus so I'm sure she'll want to go. She just needs a little encouragement sometimes."

"That would be great. Christine said she'd like to treat us all to get in. She suggested that Danny might want to go, too, and he's included in the tickets she'll buy."

"That makes it even easier, not that we're watching our money or anything. That's really nice of Christine.

"I'll talk to Donna and Danny and see if they would like to go. If Christine buys the tickets we'll buy the peanuts and Cracker Jack. You know that's customary with the circus, right? You guys have had Cracker Jack before, right?"

"I don't think so, Franklin. What is that?"

"It's a snack of caramel-coated popcorn and peanuts. It's so good, I guarantee that you are all going to like it.

"Will Carl be joining us?"

"Hmm, I haven't asked him, but I think he will want to go. I'll check.

"Let's touch base tomorrow when we have everybody counted. Okay?"

"Sounds good, Chris. I think it'll be a lot of fun for everyone."

Later that day, Chris talks to Christine. She's all excited. She asks Grandpa and Grandma Mouse at dinner if they'd like to go.

Grandma says, "I get tired pretty easy. I think I'd like to just stay home and we can watch videos of circus acts on your tablet tv. Would that be okay?"

"Sure, Grandma. You can watch anything on the tablet tv anytime you want. I understand that you don't want to get more tired. An outing like this might last for four or five hours."

"Oh, goodness," says Grandma. "That would probably do me in, so I'm sure we'll be staying home. You guys go and have a fun time and we'll compare notes with the circus videos we watch here."

Christine smiles. It's so nice to have the tablet tv, especially since everyone can use it to watch TikTok, YouTube and Facebook videos, plus all the movies on the channels they get.

Carl is working late at Munch, but when he comes home his mom checks his interest in going to the circus.

"Oh yeah, I'm going, mom. The circus posters and postings got me as soon as I saw them. It sounds really cool."

Chris sees Franklin that afternoon and finds out the Danny will be going, too. So, three adult tickets and the mice go for free.

Christine orders the tickets and has them sent to Franklin's email address. Everything is set.

The day of the circus performance, everyone's ready, Chris, Christine and Carl say goodbye to grandma and grandpa, Franklin pulls the car out of the garage and everyone climbs in.

The drive to the circus is fun because everyone's in a good mood and chattering about what they're going to see.

Parking is always challenging. Too many cars are trying to get into too little of a parking lot to fight over the few open spaces. It's funny to watch but not as funny to be in.

Car parked, the three human circus-goers walk to the gate, show their tickets and walk in, with the Mouse family comfortably tucked into their pockets. The midway is a mix of smells and sounds. There are carnival games, everything from throwing darts at balloons to shooting moving objects on a wall.

The food smells are tantalizing. Hot dogs and chili dogs, hamburgers, curly fries, cotton candy. It's hard not to feel hungry even if you just ate. Christine buys corn dogs for everyone, with one for the Mouse family to split. Everyone soon realizes that a circus corn dog with mustard on it is about the finest thing to taste in the whole world.

Franklin shows their tickets at the entrance to the big tent. The attendant points to their seats. After making their way through the crowd, most of whom seem to be moving in the opposite direction, they find their seats, sit down and set their stuff around them.

The first order of business is to go for their corn dogs, which everyone does.
"Oh yeah," Carl says. "This is the best corndog I ever had," as he chews on his one-third of the family meal.

"You say that every time, Carl," says his mom. "Are you sure this one is the best?"

"Well, it is today, mom," Carl answers as he sinks his bigger two front teeth into a juicy corn dog piece.

There's 20 minutes before the show starts but it passes quickly because the group is all looking around at the people around them. As one not-so-famous-person said, "A lot of different bugs are attracted to the light," which in this case means that the people at the circus are a broad brush of humanity.

Chris, of course, keeps looking ahead. He spots two mice over in a corner of the stands watching the crowd pour into the tent and find their seats. Out of curiosity he runs over to them to talk.

"Hey there. Are you guys part of the circus?" he asks

"We sure are," answered one of the two. "We're circus mice. We travel with the show, pick up stuff off of the ground, even help with the games sometimes."

"Really?" asks Chris. "How could you help with the games?"

"It's easy. We just wait until someone has won several points and is about to win a big prize and then when they're about to shoot or whatever the game is, we run up their pants leg. They scream and miss the shot. 'Too bad,' says the person working at the game. We've saved the circus a lot of money that way."

"Yeah," says the second mouse, "We're part of the profitability of the circus. So, everyone treats us as part of the team, we get special food, and we're protected. It's a good life."

"That's pretty funny," says Chris. "It's nice talking to you but I have to get back to my family. It sounds like you have a very interesting life! Good luck!"

"Thanks. Enjoy the show," the circus mice call after him as Chris walks back to his seat.

Chris settles into his seat and then the lights dim and a single spotlight shines on the center ring, lighting up a man in a fancy jacket and top hat standing on top of a small round stage.

"Welcome, my friends to the Valerian Circus, the finest show of human capabilities and feats of daring that has ever been seen on this earth.

"Get comfortable, be alert - there will be acts performing in all three rings at times so don't miss any of the action.

"Now, I call your attention to the two aerialists at the top of the tent."

All eyes look up at the tent where a spotlight is lighting up two figures standing on a platform. One of them is holding the bar of a trapeze in her hand. The other stands beside her.

The first aerialist grips the bar, swings it up, then lifts her legs off of the platform and swings down and back up to the other side of the tent where she extends her legs to land and stand on another platform.

Next, both performers raise their bars, lift their legs and swing through the air, and just when it looks like they'll collide in the middle, they miss each other by a few feet.

Franklin says, "How did they do that? I can't see why they didn't crash together."

Christine has her paws in front of her eyes. "I didn't want to see what I thought was going to happen," she explains.

Chris just whistles slow through his teeth. "That looked real close," was all he said.

Next one of the aeralists swings out and then hangs from their knees on the bar to continue swinging, swinging their arms back and then forth to keep the momentum up. The second performer times their partner's swing and then swings out with the bar under her knees. As she gets close to the other performer she extends her arm. Her partner grabs her arms at the wrist as she lifts her knees from her bar. Now they're suspended together with the male holding the female in mid-air while she hangs from his grasp.

As she swings holding onto her partner's arms the audience gasps and applauds and voices around the Dootys and Mouse family exclaim, "Wow." "That was awesome." "Whew!"

The audience in the tent is watching breathlessly. It's one thing to see this in video, but this is being done live, in front of them. You can't edit this if there's a mistake.

The two trapeze artists are swinging together, one suspended by the legs from the other's arms. The female swings her arms to pick up momentum and swing higher.

Several more amazing aerial feats follow. The next one has each performer hanging from their respective swings, swinging toward each other. At the last second, both release their grips on their trapeze and float past each other to grasp the other performer's trapeze while the audience gasps and then breaks out into cheers and applause at the successful conclusion.

The two aerialists perform several more tricks to the happy applause of the audience.

After the trapeze act the clowns are set. They ride into the center ring in a tiny car with 6 grown humans in it all dressed in funny costumes and clown makeup. The car drives around the center ring and then stops. All the clowns get out and with no one in the car it starts up and takes off, zooming around the center ring while the clowns chase it yelling and waving their arms. One by one they grab a door handle, trip and fall down to the laughter of the crowd. Finally, one clown is able to get into the car and stop it. He gets out of the car to open the doors for the other clowns and the car takes off again, driving in circles, this time with the driver's door flapping open as it circles the ring.

The Mouse family and the Dootys are still laughing when the next act comes on.

It's a dog act with five dogs performing tricks in the center ring. They're very well trained and show off their skills as they jump through rings and run standing on their hind legs. Then they all spin on their hind legs in the middle of the ring, all of them spinning perfectly together. They're cute and well trained.

One large dog runs around the ring in a circle while two smaller dogs jump back and forth over its back. The audience loves it. The final act for the dogs involves two small dogs standing on the back of one big dog which runs through a ring of fire. It looks scary, but Franklin says that the dogs never get hurt because of all the safety precautions.

After that four jugglers claim the center ring. They are juggling what look like big bowling pins. Each one tosses their own pins in the air and catches them and then they stand in a circle and throw the pins to each other. Two jugglers pass pins back and forth while the other two throw their pins across the path of the other pins. Then they light the pins on fire and toss their flaming pins back and forth to each other. It's a pretty dazzling act and the audience responds with applause as each trick gets more and more difficult and dangerous.

Finlly, it's time for the big cats. Circus roustabouts set up a large cage in the center ring with a caged tunnel leading outside to what must be a much larger cage. Two lions go through the tunnel and exit into the large inside cage where a wild animal handler is waiting wearing a sequined outfit that sparkles in the lights of the tent. The two lions jump up on round boxes and stand on top of them. The handler in the cage keeps looking through the cage tunnel for another lion, but none comes out. Finally, she steps out of the cage and calls someone.

In a moment, the announcer comes to the center ring and stands right outside the lion cage.

"Attention, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. Please stay in your seats. We are looking for the third lion, who seems to have somehow got loose."

The crowd makes an audible "oooh" and people start texting on their cell phones.

This doesn't sound good. A wild lion is on the loose on the circus grounds? That's a big problem!

The Dootys exchange glances with the Mouse family. Franklin says, "Let's just sit here like the announcer said. We can't do anything to help and we want to stay out of the way, right?"

Chris agrees, "Right, Franklin. Let's just stay calm and sit here while they find the missing animal and return them to their cage."

Circus workers are running everywhere. Chris can see them outside the tent flap as they rush back and forth. Finally, Chris decides to help, tells Christine to save his seat, and jumps down to the ground.

He runs outside the tent and looks for anywhere the big cat might have gone. There don't seem to be any obvious places, so he starts walking through the circus grounds, looking under the parked circus carts and trucks.

The food concessions are the first place Chris looks, thinking "Maybe that cat was just hungry and couldn't resist the smell of hot dogs with mustard and relish."

The obvious place to look is under the carts, booths and vehicles. Most of the concessions are wheeled, making them easy to get on and off the trucks used to transport the circus from town to town.

He checks under each one. There's nothing but grass and dirt.

Next, he looks inside the tents. The performers' dressing room tent is first. He walks in and within a second someone spots him and starts screaming. That's not good, he thinks, so he runs back outside and goes to the next tent. It's a staging tent for the next performers. There are several clowns and a couple of brightly dressed performers, but no big cat.

The last place he thinks to look is the lion cage. He can't be there, Chris thinks, because they're all performing. But there in the middle of the cage is one lion, and outside looking in is another lion.

Chris walks up to both and says, "Hey folks. Are either of you supposed to be performing with that act in the tent right now?"

"That would be me, Mr. Mouse. Why are you asking?" says the lion outside the cage.

"Well, you're supposed to be performing. The other two lions are there and waiting for you."

"I know. I had to stay back to keep Leona company. She's not feeling well enough to perform, but she's my mate so I'm worried about her. I just decided to stay with her so I unlocked the performing cage door to get back here."

"I'm surry," said Chris, "but everyone's waiting for you and they sent out a search party. I think there's going to be trouble if you don't go in and perform. And that's not going to help Leona, right?"

"You have a point there. I hadn't thought about that. I just wanted to stay close to Leona. What do you think I should do?"

"If it were me," Chris starts, "I would do the act and then come back and be with Leona. I'm sure she'll be fine while you do the act."

"Okay, I guess I can do that. Leona, are you okay with me leaving to do the act?"

Leona nods up and down, "Sure Hems," says the lioness. "I'll be fine. I'm just resting anyway. The two shows yesterday and the day before tired me out. Go out then and wow them, you big cat, you!"

Hemsley stands up, stretches, looks right at Chris and says, "Jump on my back, little mouse. The audience is waiting for a show. Let's give them one!"

Chris runs, jumps up on a round pedestal and leaps at Hemsley's back, catching his long hair and pulling himself up on the lion's back. "How's that?" he calls to the lion.

"Perfect. Now here's what you need to do - hold on tight to my fur and don't let go. I'm going to run and jump and do tricks, but you have to stay on my back. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll try. Let's go!"

And with that, Hemsley finds the opening to the cage tunnel and leans over on it. Chris reaches for a handle and unlocks it which lets the door swing open. Hemsley steps into the tunnel and Chris reverses the process to close the tunnel.

"Alright, hold on" the lion yells and then takes off running down the tunnel and into the big tent, coming out the other side to be met by the sudden applause of the surprised audience. Chris waves from the big lion's back and kids in the audience start waving back.

Carl spots his dad right away and yells, "Look, there's dad. He's riding on the back of the missing lion."

Christine just shakes her head. She thinks, "I should have known that Chris would find that cat and get it back in the act, but I never thought he would be part of the act."

Franklin and Donna are pointing at Chris. They're smiling which makes Carl and Christine relax.

The act is a huge hit. Hemsley is quite acrobatic as he shows off his skills by jumping and running with the other two lions, all with Chris on his back. The other lions are surprised to see a mouse on their friend's back, but they're well trained so they go through all of the tricks just like they've been taught.

Chris is excited but just a little nervous. He read one time that Lions in the wild might eat mice if desperate, but they generally prefer bigger meals. That is somewhat comforting but doesn't totally stop his nervousness.

As the show continues Chris holds on for dear life. Even though he flops around on Hemsley's back he never lets go. At the end of each trick he stands up on the lion's back and raises both front paws above his head in a "v for victory" sign.

As the lion act finishes, the lion tamer calls each lion by name, and then says, "And to our new star performer, Mr. Mouse, let's give a big round of applause!"

The audience claps, cheers, stands up and yells with excitement. They've never seen a trained mouse doing tricks with lions before. It's been a very thrilling show and this was the icing on the cake.

The lions are sent back through the tunnel to their cage and the big tent performance continues.

After two more acts the circus performance ends with all of the performers standing in the center ring smiling and enjoying the audience’s applause.

The Ringmaster looks up in the stands, see Chris sitting with his family and waves for him to come down and join the circus performers for the applause.

Chris turns to his family and the Dootys all of whom wave for him to go down to center ring.

He runs down, jumps on top of the actual ring, does a flip into the center ring and climbs up on Hemsley's back, to the applause and cheers of the crowd. It's an exciting moment and one that Chris will not soon forget.

After the applause winds down, Chris says goodbye to Hemsley and the other lions and then returns to his seat. The audience around where he is sitting starts clapping and looking at Chris. He stands up and takes a bow and then blows kisses to the people. They all laugh and applaud more.

The Ringmaster sees Franklin and Donna and walks up to them.

"That's a pretty amazing trained mouse you have there," he says.

"Thanks," Franklin replies, "but he's not trained, he's just very smart."

"I talked to the owner and he'd like to hire him for our shows. Do you think he'd be interested?"

"I don't think so, but let's ask him. Hey, Chris. The Ringmaster would like to talk to you."

Chris smiles and looks at the circus person, "Yes, sir. How can I help you?"

The Ringmaster repeats his offer to which Chris replies, "Thanks for that. I'm flattered. I'm sure it would be fun but I have a family and I can't leave them to travel with the circus. If I was younger and didn't have a family I would seriously consider it, so thank you again. I'm glad I was able to get Hemsley back in the act."

"Is that his name? I never knew his name," exclaims the Ringmaster.

"Good luck with the other stops for the circus. We had a great time and enjoyed everything, even the excitement of the loose cat..." Chris says.

The Ringmaster holds out a piece of paper. "The owner asked me to give you all this permanent pass. This will let you all in to any performance of our circus, wherever we are. So, if you happen to be in an area where our circus is performing, you will be our guests, and that includes hot dogs and popcorn and other refreshments."

Chris winks at Franklin and waves his paw for Franklin to get the paper.

After a few goodbyes, the Dootys and the Mouse family go out to their car. Once they're inside Danny says, "I didn't want to say anything back there, but I was filming when you did what you did, and I'm going to add this to MouseKeTok. I'll use a short segment to promote this episode on Facebook, Instagram and the web. Get ready to be even more famous, Chris."

Chris grumbles under his breath, "Great. I'm probably going to have to change my name from Chris Mouse to Chris Famouse."

Danny heard his friend and says, "You're definitely going to be more famous, Chris. Candy was there interviewing some of the animals and I talked to her after the show. She said that her interviews and the video I shot will be on tonight's Mouse Channel news."

Chris groans. "I'll never live this down," he thinks.

Over the next several days, the news of the mouse that saved the circus audience from a loose lion appears everywhere. Human news channels show Danny's video and attribute it to MouseKeTok. They also mention Candy's interviews, which causes the Mouse Channel viewership to soar for the next week.

All of this excitement and publicity is because the circus came to town.

The circus is an old-time entertainment option. If a circus comes to your area, try to go. It's fun, it's thrilling, and it's a family activity that thrills young and old alike.

Plus, the hundreds of circuses around the world are carrying on a tradition that started in 1768.

Chapter 6 - PawdCast Surprise

Thursdays are rarely good days. They're not Friday, which generally is a good day. They're not Monday, another good day. They're almost in the middle of the week, so sometimes they're called the doldrums. Doldrums is another word for "not much is happening but it's close to the end of the week."

This Thursday is no exception. The Mouse household is awake and moving but there are no big calendar events for today, and the to-do lists that stack up every week are pretty well done - just waiting for the weekend list.

Christine is busy getting Mouse Academy set to reopen after the summer break. She met with the instructors for this semester, checked with Rev. Souris about some changes she would like to make to the rooms Mouse Academy uses, and even planned the coursework for the one class she teaches every year. The school year will start on Monday next week.

She's about to leave the Home to go to Mouse Academy and check on the work being done to get things ready. Her phone rings. It's Danny.

"Hi Danny, what's up?" she answers.

"It's all good, Christine. Say, I have an important question to ask you. Is this a good time?"

"Sure, Danny. Go ahead." Now Christine is curious. What's Danny calling her about on a Thursday? Even more curious, this is the first time he's ever called her.

"I'm planning out the PawdCast for next week and Chris suggested that you would be a great guest on this episode. Would you be willing to be on the show?"

"Tell me more, Danny. What is the time requirement on me?" Christine asks.

"We'll record for about two hours, so I'm guessing we would need you for the morning of the recording. The plan is to do that next Thursday."

Christine flips through her calendar. Not much leading up to Thursday, and nothing on the calendar for that day. "Sure, Danny. I could do that. What would you like to discuss?"

"Mouse Academy has done such a great job preparing young mice to be successful in the world. I'd like to ask you questions about how you started it, built it, and kept it

going. It would just be a conversation. I can send you a list of questions so you can think about your answers."

"That would be perfect. I could probably fumble my way through the interview without them, but the list would help me to provide more thoughtful answers."

"No problem. I'll send the list to you, and we'll do the taping next Thursday. I'd like to shoot some background video at Mouse Academy if that's alright."

"Of course. I'll let everyone know so they don't act weird when you show up with your camera."

Danny emails his list of questions and Christine puts a note on her calendar for this weekend to review them and think about her answers.

That would have been a good plan except this weekend is crazy with the Academy starting on Monday. Both weekend days are filled with planning, answering questions from instructors, giving directions to the support staff, and all of that is on top of the usual weekend household activities.

The first afternoon of Mouse Academy is always crazy. New pinkies show up with their parents. Academy staff needs to process them and get them assigned to classes. Second year students just want to see their class assignment so they can go to the right classroom.

This year, Mouse Academy is starting several new classes. That means that the instructors need to be ready, know their classroom assignments, and sign the agreement to follow Mouse Academy rules. Christine spends the early afternoon answering their questions and helping things move along smoothly.

At the end of Monday, the instructors and leaders breathe a sigh of relief. "Whew! We made it through the first day!" they all think.

Monday night is always quiet at the Mouse home because Christine and Carl are busy from the first day of the week. Christine checks feedback from instructors. Carl goes over the Munch receipts and counts from the previous week and plans the schedule for the new week. That leaves Chris and his parents to entertain themselves. Usually, they either watch videos or play cards.

The first Tuesday and Wednesday are also busy for Christine as she and the instructors work out the kinks of the start of the school year. Christine is able to glance at the questions Danny sent, but she doesn't have time to think about them. "I'll just have to wing it," she says to herself.

On Thursday Danny comes over to set up for the PawdCast. The first hour he takes video of the Home with Christine in some of the shots. Then he and Christine go to Mouse Academy to shoot background video. Finally, they're back at the Home in the Wall to shoot the actual interview.

Lights are set up, Chris and his parents are sitting outside in the garden area while the PawdCast is being recorded. Christine runs her fingers through her fur to look her best for the camera.

Finally, Danny sits down and motions for Christine to sit on a chair on top of the table beside him.

"Welcome to another episode of PawdCast, the online place for all things in 'mouse life.' Today we have a very special guest. She's the founder of a unique, innovative school to teach young mice how to live successfully in the world. The name of the school is Mouse Academy, and it gives young mice great lessons and activities on how to survive and thrive in a world of people. Most humans don't know this, but the mouse society is very sophisticated, mirroring the life and world of people. Young mice learn the basics of education at Mouse School, but Mouse Academy exists to give each young mouse a strong start at being an adult mouse. Mouse Academy has classes on electricity, finances, plumbing, construction and repair, public speaking, acting, nursing and many more. Almost 2/3 of Mouse Academy graduates are now working in fields that their classes prepared them for, which is a pretty remarkable statistic. Please welcome my guest today, the founder of Mouse Academy, Christine Mouse.

"Christine, thanks for being with us for this episode of PawdCast. Your husband Chris is a regular and a co-founder of this show. You started Mouse Academy, and it's been a terrific success. What made you want to go into education?"

"Thanks for having me on the show, Danny," Christine says. "I've always liked learning, and I saw an opportunity to give young mice a head start, by learning more than just reading, writing and math. We prepare young mice for life after school. I watched as my own young ones went through the educational system and then were woefully unprepared for the life of an adult. That's exactly why our team started Mouse Academy."

"That's a pretty nice objective, Christine. I'm sure you had some startup problems getting that going. What was the biggest obstacle you had to overcome?"

"Like most startups, we had lots of challenges to face. I think the biggest one early on was apathy. Our first year we had somewhat lower than anticipated enrollment. Fortunately, our first-year students were motivated and after that year they were getting good jobs and doing very well at home. Our data found that most students fixed up their homes, repairing things that didn't work and adding new touches. That was

encouraging to us, and it started a buzz in the community among parents who discovered that their young ones were now able to contribute to the household. Our second year we filled all the classes and this year we've had to add more classes and instructors."

"Excellent. It sounds like you are enjoying a nice increase in attendance. Tell me about some of your students. What are they doing and how are they doing?"

"Let's just start with my own family, Danny. Our daughter Christine is the co-anchor of the news on the Mouse Channel and our son Carl owns a restaurant called Munch. Both are busy and enjoying life. Christine has won a number of awards and Carl's restaurant is always full. Christine was part of the acting class at Mouse Academy, which helped her to relax and speak comfortably in front of audiences, an important trait for a news anchor. She's used those skills to do on-camera interviews many times.

"Before he bought the restaurant Carl learned about business in Mouse Academy, and after that by working at the New Mouse Store, a local store for mice. He did well and gained more knowledge and confidence about business. Then he got interested in the restaurant business and now he has built Munch into a large restaurant with several side businesses.

"But I don't want to just brag about my own kids.

"You mentioned that 2/3 of our graduates are working in a field they studied at Mouse Academy. Our graduates are working in several different industries. It's common knowledge in our community that the local mouse economy has grown tremendously over the last several years. That's interesting and perhaps a coincidence but those are the same years that Mouse Academy has been in existence.

"If you'd like I can bring in some of our graduates that are working in industry. They could share their stories."

Danny looks straight into the camera and says, "That would be terrific. PawdCast is about all things mouse, and the Mouse Academy is a really fascinating innovation in the mouse world.

"Let's shift gears here, Christine. What is the biggest challenge you've had in Mouse Academy?"

"Danny, I'm going to let you in on a little secret - every challenge has been big. I'm sure most business owners can tell their own stories about starting up.

"If I had to pick just one challenge, I'd say it is identifying courses that will give mice a strong start in a career, and then finding qualified instructors to teach them.

"We survey graduate students at the beginning of each new year to ask if they're working and if so, in what field. That gives us a measurement that we can use to predict the likely outcome of each class in the future. There are two criteria that we want to meet in our survey - are you working in a related field, or how useful in your life was what you learned in a specific class?

"We also make a list of potential courses at the end of each school year. Then we survey the local mouse community to see which ones are considered to be up-and-coming disciplines.

"We pick instructors that have excelled in their field, and then we pre-qualify them by letting them teach an introductory class which we record. Watching those recordings later we're able to pick out the best instructors.

"That's a really logical approach. So, what was your dream for Mouse Academy, Christine?"

"To 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. We wanted to teach the secrets to success in life that we learned after we got out of school so we could teach those important life lessons to help young mice get a great start to being the best mice that they can become."

Danny looks at the camera and asks Christine, "You started this great new learning place that's helping young mice get prepared for success. And it looks like it's working very well. Where do you see Mouse Academy going, Christine?"

"I like where we're at, Danny. The students and instructors are exceptional. The work is hard but fun. Our staff and instructors are all pumped about what they do.

"Here's what I see potentially happening in the future. We've talked about expanding into more specific training in several areas. One is construction. We have exceptional builders in our community that can build just about any structure. We are exploring having a general course, then splitting it into several different courses for plumbing, framing, finish work, glass, doors, and electric. The two local builders I mentioned would teach these courses and they have also committed to hiring the top three students every year.

"Our drama course is producing local plays, and the Mouse Channel has already inquired about buying some of the productions to put online. We think this may open up a whole bunch of new opportunities for students in class and after they graduate. We have some graduates already working in broadcast and they have committed to helping with instruction and also helping the best students get hired.

"Our IT, coding and social media classes are always popular. We're keeping an eye on AI because that could be a disrupter and also displace mice in those fields. So, this area of curriculum will be in flux and have to flex with the changes as they come.

"One thing we haven't talked about, Danny, is expansion. Honestly, I'm tired and our two other co-founders are also feeling a bit overworked. But our dreams are still big. We've had contacts from a half dozen other mice communities asking if we could help them start a Mouse Academy in their area. One idea is to franchise Mouse Academy so we can maintain the standards that have made this enterprise a success so far. Another possibility would be to simply sell our model to other areas so they could follow our success pattern in building a similar instruction environment in their area.

"We're just exploring those ideas and we have the help of a very smart business human that has been giving us good counsel. We'll see how this all plays out over the next year or two. The most important thing in expansion is to maintain a high level of quality instruction."

Danny says, "We're going to look at a couple of classes now, talk to some current students and later we'll talk to some successful graduates."

Danny shuts down the camera and tells Christine, "Let's go around and take some video in classes. Then we'll come back here and talk more about what we just saw."

Danny puts Christine in his pocket and they drive to Mouse Academy. Walking into Mouse Church they see signage for Mouse Academy with arrows pointing to the section of the church where those classes are held. It's between classes when they arrive and students are walking around and talking.

Christine walks up to several students and asks them to come over and talk to Danny.

Danny takes out his camera - puts it on a tripod and asks various questions.

"What are you studying here?"

"What do you hope to learn in this class?"

"Why did you pick this class?"

"What's next after you finish this class?"

The answers from students are very complimentary about Mouse Academy, mostly saying how happy they are to have classes that will make them more employable and successful as adult mice.

One interviewed student tells Danny that his mom and dad have said that they wished they had a Mouse Academy when they were young. Other students say that they share with their parents what they were learning so the whole family is getting educated. Only one student had anything negative to say, and she felt like one of the classes she took was too hard. When Danny asks her to explain what was hard, she tells him that the class is a coding class and it requires a lot of homework, which she doesn't like that much.

After interviewing young mice in the hallway, Christine and Danny go into a classroom that's in session. The class is called, "How to Use Social Media for Your Benefit" and it is packed with students. Each student has a phone that they're using to connect to the different social media platforms. The instructor is a smart, young mouse named Edgar Chosen who is a whiz at social media. In fact, he's so good that YouTube has a special channel just for him and he makes a lot of money for that and other social channels that he uses.

Danny and Christine stand at the back of the room and watch.

Edgar is teaching about using AI to post the same message on multiple channels, while students pay close attention. Edgar talks very fast which requires students to raise their hands to ask for more details or to have him repeat what he just said. The class seems very lively and the interaction between students and instructor indicates the high level of interest and desire to learn.

Danny and Christine pop into two more classes and then go outside the building. It's a cramped building for a human, so Danny is grateful to be able to stand up tall again.

Christine has arranged for several graduates to be waiting for them outside.

"Danny, this is Zelda. She's working in the entertainment industry now. She finished several classes on broadcasting and technology and was hired right after she graduated."

"Hi Zelda," Danny says. "How helpful was your Mouse Academy classes in getting your current job?"

"I couldn't have qualified for my job without the classes," says Zelda. "They equipped me to do the job and I passed every test they gave me before they hired me."

"That's terrific. What did you like in the class and what wasn't that useful in your work now?"

"I liked the instructor. She was very smart and very patient, which was good because it took me a while to understand what was being taught. The course material was excellent and right up-to-date. That gave me the language to show that I understood principles and was competent.

"There wasn't anything that wasn't useful, but some of the topics we learned aren't used in the business where I work. That's okay, because other entertainment businesses for mice do employ those other lessons we learned. That means I can work other places and have useful expertise."

The next student is actually working on assignment today at Mouse Academy. It's Candy Mouse who is taping a segment for the Mouse Channel news.

Danny sees that she is not talking and is just checking her phone. "Hey Candy, can we talk to you about Mouse Academy?" he asks.

"Oh hey, Danny. Sure. I've got a few minutes."

Danny turns toward his camera and says, "I'm standing here with Candy Mouse, who many of you may recognize. She's the co-anchor of the news desk at Mouse Channel and coincidentally, she is recording a segment on Mouse Academy for tonight's newscast."

"Candy, you studied here at Mouse Academy, right?"

"That's right, Danny. I took acting classes which gave me the poise and confidence to stand in front of a camera. I also took other classes in gourmet cooking and writing. I don't know that the gourmet cooking helped land my job, but the writing class sure did. And I enjoy gourmet cooking at home."

"What was the most valuable thing you learned at Mouse Academy, Candy?"

"More than anything else I learned that I can do things that I never thought I could. Mouse Academy pushed me out of my comfort zone and into the public eye. From the first day on my job at the Mouse Channel I felt comfortable with the technology and the lingo of the industry I work in.

"My instructors taught us all to stand tall, be confident, and speak clearly. Doing that on-camera in class made me very nervous at first, but after doing it many times I was finally able to relax and just be myself."

"Thanks, Candy. Your news cast is my personal favorite. Best of luck to you for the future."

"You're welcome, Danny." says Candy as she walks with a camera mouse back into the building.

After two more interviews with past students, Danny and Christine stand outside the Mouse Academy for his close.

"It's surprising how successful this one educational institution is in equipping young mice for the future. The model they follow was set by Christine Mouse and her team, and they have shown us that humans have a lot of catching up to do to give human students similar value and outcomes.

"Christine also wanted to introduce the two female mice that helped her start and grow Mouse Academy. Christine, who are your co-leaders?"

"These two gals and I are the core of the leadership. They joined me in the beginning and they're core leaders of the Academy now. This is Famous Trackle and Matilda Meece."

"Hi Famous and Matilda," says Danny. "Christine has talked about how the three of you have built the Academy. One question, 'Why did you get involved with this school?'"

Matilda spoke first, "I just love the passion that Christine has for young mice. She has a big heart and wants every pinkie to get a great start in life. My young ones have gained so much so I'm not just a teacher and administrator, I'm also a satisfied parent."

"I couldn't agree more with Matilda," says Famous. "We both caught the vision from Christine. She has a clear view of what needs to be done and where we should go. Matilda and I are simply thrilled to support and help grow the Academy. I also have young ones that have gone through the Academy and I could tell from the first week they were in classes that this was going to get them a boost toward their future. The bonus for me is I get to work with Christine, who is a visionary, and Matilda, who is very smart and one of my best friends."

"Those are great endorsements from two mice moms that caught the vision and, according to Christine, have helped advance it forward.

"Thank you to Christine Mouse and her management and instruction team for letting us peek into an educational institution that is paving the way for youth to be successful adults.

"What we've seen today might be a good model for humans to follow. Preparing youth for their future is part of our role as adults. It looks like mice have some important lessons to teach us all about how to get the younger ones in our society ready for the real world.

"That's it for now. Be sure to watch the next episode when we go for a tour of the Mouse Channel on YouTube."

"So long" he says as he and Christine and Famous and Matilda wave to the camera.

Chapter 7 - In Mid-Air?

Carl's at work at Munch on Thursday. The day is going slow. There's no explaining it, and no obvious reason why, but Carl recognizes that some days just go like that.

The day starts early with one of the cooks calling in sick. Then one of the wait staff also calls in sick. Carl fills in for one of the positions, but the other will just have to go empty and they'll have to limp along the best they can .

The breakfast trade is about average, with a few customers coming in between breakfast and lunch. Lunch is a little slow, but it picks up toward the end of the noon hour. Now, it is just keeping on trying to make it to the last shift of the day.

At 2:30 one of Carl's friends, Bobtail Furr, comes in and finds Carl.

"Carl, I got a great deal for us. You know we live in a house with a Navy pilot, right?"

"Yeah, I remember you telling us about that. Sounds pretty cool."

"Well, here's the really cool thing. He told us about a really amazing air show that's going to happen at the Marine air base next weekend. And, he said he could score tickets for me and five of my friends to go. I can go, and you can bring your family. Would that be cool or what?"

"Sounds very cool, Bobtail. I'll talk to my parents and grandparents and see if they're able to go. When do you need to know?"

"Probably in a couple of days. He just told me about the tickets today, so I'm sure I could get back to him in 2 or 3 days and it will be fine."

"Great. Let me talk to my family tonight and I'll let you know. They might want to think about it for a day, so I might have to let you know day after tomorrow."

"No worries. I'm getting pretty jazzed myself. By the way, do you know what they do at air shows?"

"Not really," Carl answers.

"They have acrobatic teams that fly close formations and do some pretty amazing stuff in the air. Some of the fastest jets buzz the field at a low altitude. Then there are more cool planes and other stuff. It's really fun."

“Okay, I’ll see what my family says and let you know if we can use the tickets. Thanks!”

“You’re welcome. I hope we can all go. It’s going to be really fun.”

That night, Carl gets home and joins the family at the dinner table. They’re talking about what they did today, and what’s in store for tomorrow. Carl waits for a lull in the conversation and then says, “Hey, guess what, I can get tickets for us all to go to the big Marine air base air show in two weeks.”

Chris says, “That sounds interesting. What do they do at air shows?”

"My friend Bobtail says they do acrobatic flying and also have some races, plus you can look at alot of different airplanes on the ground, including some of the latest jet fighter planes."

Grandpa Mouse joins the conversation, “I’d like to see that. Those military airplanes are fast and exciting.”

“That does sound like fun, Chris,” says Christine. “I might like to go see that, too.”

Grandma Mouse is quiet but when pressed she says, “I’m okay with going. I like the noisy jets and those military pilots are supposed to be the best.”

“Okay then,” says Carl. “I’ll tell my friend we’ll take the tickets.”

Over the next several days, Carl pulls up YouTube videos of air shows. They’re pretty awesome. The roar of the jets shakes the cameras which means it’s probably deafening on the actual airfield. The precision flying is really neat. His parents and grandparents sit in front of the tablet tv and watch the performances. Carl makes some popcorn for everyone which makes the evenings feel like parties. It’s all fun.

Finally, the day of the airshow arrives. It’s going to be a somewhat challenging day because they’re going without humans. Normally, Franklin and Donna take the Mouse family in their pockets but this time they’re on their own.

Bobtail is going to the airshow with the Navy pilot he and his family lives with. He'll meet the Mouse family at the field.

Chris and Carl direct the other family members into the MouseWagon for the drive to the show. It’s quite a ways, which means they need to leave many hours before the show starts. No problem. It’s a beautiful sunny day, birds are singing, flowers are blooming, it’s going to be fun and exciting and something different.

The drive is uneventful. Chris drives very responsibly and in a few hours they're pulling into the parking area for the airshow. This is the most challenging part of the day because Chris needs to park where they can find the car, and because the MouseWagon is so much smaller than human cars he has to find a place to park that's visible to humans so they don't drive over their parked vehicle. He decides to park next to a chain link fence. No human cars can park there and the car isn't visible because it's behind a trash can. That's a perfect place because no one is going to accidentally run over their car and no child will think it's a discarded toy and try to take it home.

The sound of the jets is really loud as they walk to the entrance. Grandma has to put her paws over her ears and everyone feels the roar as much as they hear it.

Just as they get to the entrance gate five military jets scream overhead flying so close together that it looks like they're touching. The thunderous jet engines are exciting to hear and the whole family can feel the vibration.

Carl has the tickets but the ticket collectors at the gates are looking at people and don't see the mice, so Carl lays the tickets on the ground next to the gate and they all walk in to the base.

The field is crowded with people. Carl looks for Bobtail, but he's not where he said he would be. Carl shrugs and guesses that his friend got tied up in something with his Navy friend.

Everyone is taking photos of the static displays. Those are the planes on the ground that you can walk up to and look at. One giant plane is a transporter used to carry large and heavy equipment to places all over the world. As the five mice stand under the plane looking up, the plane is bigger than anything any of them have ever seen. It's one thing when a giant plane flies overhead, it's another when you're right underneath it. That just makes it seem even larger.

The announcers are voices being broadcast from speakers around the field. It seems that one of the most important functions of the announcers is to tell the visitors to the air show what events are coming up. Secondarily, the two male and one female announcer talk about the event, its history, the importance of military aircraft in helping protect and defend our country and they provide live commentary and descriptions of the flyovers and demonstrations on the field.

"Today, Ladies and Gentlemen, you are in for a treat. This is the best air show ever put on at this location and we have a great day ahead for you. Enjoy the music and the food vendors but pay close attention because we're going to clue you in on all of the exciting events and demonstrations.

“We mentioned the food vendors. You can pick up all of the best food from food trucks and in the food court. The food is excellent, and you can either get your food and return to the field or sit and eat your food at tables while enjoying the roar of the aircraft. Either way, you are in for a treat.”

Just hearing those words, Chris’ mouth starts to salivate. He imagines sinking his teeth into a nice, juicy hot dog. Grandma and Grandpa must be hungry, too, because they’re looking around like starving animals seeking anything to eat. Christine finally says, “Okay, let’s go over to the food area. I’m sure we’ll find some discarded food that will make everyone’s stomach stop growling.”

The mice go to the food area, creeping along the side of buildings and running fast between structures. When they get in the food court, they see garbage cans piled high with discarded plates and other implements. The cans are so full there’s rubbage alongside them. Sifting through that uncovers two almost complete hot dogs and one partially eaten hamburger, plus chips and fries.

The five mice eat until they’re stuffed, listening to the roar of jet engines while the announcers broadcast each event as it happens.

After lunch, no one feels like going back on to the flight line, so they decide to walk among the static displays. Besides, the humans are all over on the flight line and this is much less crowded, meaning less dangerous for mice.

The aircraft in the static displays are very impressive. The F-22 Raptor is a lean, mean fighting machine with angles and curves that make it less detectable to radar. It’s low and sleek and fast and very, very bad news for an enemy.

The next plane they see is the massive C-17 Globemaster. This big plane can carry huge payloads. The C-17 on display has its back ramp lowered to the ground so guests can walk inside. Grandma Mouse wants to see how big its cargo area really is so the five mice struggle up the ramp. It’s big, and the large signboards next to the plane describe how it’s able to land and take off from very primitive landing strips, making it useful for flying into and out of many different types of terrain.

Helicopters are also on the list of aircraft on the field in the static displays. The Black Hawk must be very popular because there's a crowd of humans standing around it, admiring this workhorse aircraft.

More fun, and certainly more versatile is the V-22 Osprey. It’s a plane, no, it’s a helicopter. Actually, it’s a twin engine aircraft with massive blades that point upwards to make it able to take off and land vertically, then swivel forward so it can fly like a plane. That makes it ideal for fast ins and outs of tight places and unimproved landing fields.

Other aircraft on display include lots of World War II vintage fighters and bombers. The P-51 Mustang was one of the fastest fighters in the skies over Europe during the war, dominating the enemy. The four-engine B-29 Superfortress was large, and the only bomber to ever drop an atomic bomb during wartime. Both aircraft on the field have a lot of humans standing around looking at them. The mice are able to sneak up, go between the human legs and stand right in front of all the people without being visible. Everyone is staring at the aircraft, not down at their legs which makes the mice practically invisible.

The announcers call everyone's attention to the flight line where the flying demonstrations are about to begin.

The five mice hurry back through peoples' legs to the fence at the flight line. The first plane to fly is a P-51 Mustang. Painted with snarling teeth in front, the fighter buzzes the field very close to the ground, flying very fast! It climbs straight up, turns on one side, and hurtles back toward the earth, pulling up in plenty of time, while also firing blanks from the machine guns on both sides.

"Wow! What a display," Christine says, "That pilot must be really strong to handle that stress and not pass out. I get dizzy walking upstairs too fast, but I can't imagine doing that."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the announcer says. "The P-51 pilot has just told us that he wants to race one of the exotic cars that are here today. Do we have a car willing to compete against him?

"Okay. Don't look now, but there's a super Porsche pulling onto the flight line and the driver is signaling with his arm that he's ready to race.

"Let's see, the P-51 is just now approaching the flight line. Now watch, that Porsche streaks off the line and is picking up speed. He's now doing over 100 miles per hour, and the P-51 is not far behind.

"Now the Mustang is gaining on the Porsche. They're neck and neck. The P-51 is making its move. Hear the roar of the Packard V-12 engine? That's 1400 horsepower, ladies and gentlemen, capable of propelling this amazing aircraft at a top speed of 430 miles per hour.

"Look at these two daredevils go! They're at the end of the runway and the P-51 has just barely beat the Porsche. Give them a hand, ladies and gentlemen. These guys have just given you quite a show here today."

The next flying display is the famous Blue Angels, the elite precision flying team of Navy and Marine pilots.

The announcer comes over the speakers, "Ladies and gentlemen, kids of all ages. Look at the left of the field. Those four jets on the runway are the world famous Blue Angels. Traveling with them from their base is their support aircraft 'Fat Albert,' a KC-130J Super Hercules."

The four Blue Angels aircraft roll down the runway in a diamond formation, take to the sky, then execute loops and rolls as the crowd yells and applauds. From the ground, it looks like their wings are actually touching. With every maneuver the crowd gasps.

Then, two other jets take to the air. They do high-speed rolls, fly at each other and pass within feet, and then fly straight at each other, turning away from a possible collision at the last moment.

It's an exciting show that thrills everyone on the tarmac. The mice are amazed, having never seen anything like this.

Grandpa Mouse has his mouth open, Grandma has her paws over her ears to cut down the roar of the jet engines, Carl has a smile from ear to ear and Chris and Christine hold each other's paws and watch in amazement.

The formation that thrills everyone is when the jets fly by with one of them flying upside down, which brings a gasp from the audience.

For the final part of the Blue Angels show the four formation jets and the two solo jets come together for their last maneuver, flying in a delta formation over the airfield. The roar of the jet engines on the six aircraft almost shakes the ground.

The announcer says, "This concludes the Blue Angels performance, folks. Let's give these men and women pilots a big round of applause!"

The crowd cheers and claps. The mice jump up and down. Grandpa and Grandma suck their teeth and break into big smiles.

The next performance is from the Leap Frogs, the U.S. Navy parachute team.

"Please turn your attention to the sky, folks. At an altitude of two miles you'll see the Leap Frogs, a precision parachute team from the U.S. Navy. These daring sky divers will exit their plane and travel at high speed through the air, forming a formation just a few feet from each other. Watch as they do various stunts in the air, and then as they trail smoke so you can see their descent more clearly. Each one of these performers is serving on active duty in the U.S. Navy, showcasing the precision and tight coordination that their training provides."

Humans and mice all look skyward and then start pointing, "There they are." "See the formation?"

After several fascinating maneuvers, individual members of the team split off of the formation and each ignites smoke from the heel of one boot before doing controlled glides to the airport tarmac.

Chris turns to his dad and says, "So, do you think you'll want to take up sky diving, Dad?"

His dad looks at him and replies with a smile, "Sure son, when mice fly. I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon."

The last part of the airshow is a demonstration from the C-17, the big transporter. As it sits on the flight line the announcer tells the crowd to watch closely. The big aircraft begins to back up on the runway. The crowd gasps because no one has ever seen a plane back up on its own power.

The announcer tells the crowd that the plane is designed to fly into and out of unimproved fields in dangerous and remote parts of the world, delivering and picking up fighting forces and equipment.

Then the plane taxis out and takes off, doing a slow turn and then making a slow, low pass over the field. The fighter jets were impressive, but this big lumbering beast is a really something.

The flight demonstrations are over, the announcer suggests visitors again go to the food court and vendors, and music plays over the loud speakers.

The mice decide to leave now and make their way through the crowds to the parking lot.

On the way to the gate, Carl spots Bobtail and waves. Bobtail comes over with his Navy pilot host.

"Hi Carl, this is Capt. Roberts. He's a Navy pilot and he provided the tickets for us to enjoy today."

Carl and family look up to see the pilot and Carl says, "Thank you, sir, for the tickets. This is my parents and my grandparents. We have had such a great time at the show today and we can't thank you enough."

"You're welcome, Carl. I'm glad you guys enjoyed the show. You know, we have a lot of mice at this base and I hope you got to meet some of them. We consider them to be special members of the Navy."

"We didn't see any other mice, sir, but that's really cook that you treat them well. I'm sure they appreciate it."

"They're all really good. Sometimes we take them flying with us and some of them are learning a lot about planes. Whenever we get voice control for planes I'd be surprised if we don't train some of our mice as pilots."

Grandpa mouse sucks in his teeth. "Boy, that would be a great day," he thinks.

"Well, thanks again, sir," Carl says and points to Bobtail. "My friend says you're a great host home and that says a lot about you.

"Thank you for your service."

The Navy pilot salutes and smiles. He and Bobtail walk back to the flight line as the Mouse family leaves and walks to their car.

The Mouse Wagon is just where they left it and because they're leaving a little early the streets and roads aren't crowded with big human cars yet.

During the ride home, the car is full of conversation. Every mouse has noticed something different, and the combination of observations gives everyone a more complete picture of what they all saw.

It's a several hour drive home, again dodging cars, staying out of the streets and roads, and being very watchful for danger. The sun is bright, the weather is warm, and with the windows down everyone is enjoying the beautiful day.

About halfway home, grandpa and grandma have to stop and stretch their legs. Actually, grandpa has to pee, which he does behind a large bush. Grandma just walks back and forth and looks out at the fields beyond chain link fences.

This prompts the other mice to also get out and walk around a bit.

Then, they all get back in the car to travel the rest of the way home. There's a car accident a half hour later that slows traffic and forces Chris to drive alongside the road. They have a close call as a human car pulls to the side of the road very close to their Mouse Wagon, but Chris expertly maneuvers around it just in time. He does it so smoothly that none of the passengers notice the near miss.

When they get back home everyone piles out of the car, Chris pulls it into the garage and plugs it back in, and they all walk back into the house and into their Home in the Wall.

This has been a fun and very interesting day, one that they'll talk about for a long time.

Going to events like air shows is a fun, family thing to do. Not everyone lives near a military base that puts on an air show so sometimes you have to make up your own events because it's not possible to go to one like this.

All you have to do is find a friend and say, "let's make an air show." Then you fold a few paper airplanes and put on your own air show. You can hold your airplanes and take off and land them on a sidewalk or your driveway. You can do aerial tricks while holding your airplane.

If you can watch a real air show on YouTube or other channels, then later you can use your imagination to make up your own show. Don't forget to make loud jet plane sounds as you "fly" your aircraft.

Chapter 8 - Getting Mail in a Mouse World

You might wonder how mice keep in touch with each other. I mean really, with human estimates suggesting that there are billions of mice in the world how does this vast global community communicate over distances.

Well, the truth is, they stay connected through a lot of different ways, but one that's very common in mail.

Sounds old fashioned, right? The mail? Well, I guess some humans still use it.

In fact, just in the United States over 110 BILLION pieces of mail are routinely handled each year. That sounds like a lot, doesn't it?

Mice have the same need for mail as people, but the good news is they don't get junk mail. Do you know what junk mail is? It's when you get a piece of mail from someone you don't know and you didn't ask for them to send it to you.

Mice don't have much concern about junk mail although some mouse businesses do use MouseMail to make the local mouse community aware of them. Fortunately, there are no national mouse businesses that flood MouseMail with junk.

But with hundreds of millions of mice just in the United States, you may be wondering, how mail gets delivered in the mice community and what kind of structure is in place to get that mail to mice anywhere in the world. And, if you sent mail internationally to a mouse in another country, how would it get there and how long would it take?

Well, we're going to explore MouseMail and let you in on a few secrets. That's right, secrets, because very few people know anything about MouseMail.

First thing that most people don't know - MouseMail has been in existence for many years as a method for communicating from mice to other mice. It's not easy, but with all the mice in the world, there are plenty of willing mice that can help this process work.

Second, every area has MouseMail, even in the country. That makes it super easy to let a relative in, say Montana, know what is going on with a local mouse in any other area, like maybe California where Chris Mouse and family and many relatives live.

The local MailMouse where Chris Mouse and his family lives gets a piece of mail from a mouse that brings mail coming from other places addressed to a mouse in a local neighborhood. Then that local MailMouse delivers that piece of mail directly to the mouse it was addressed to.

Sounds simple, right? But with hundreds of millions of mice, the numbers get very large and so that requires a system.

Now, if you're a mouse in one area, you create your message to a mouse in another area and you hand it to your local MailMouse, who takes it to the local collection area. This is where other mice work to sort and direct messages to mice in other areas.

If you're mailing something through the MouseMail system it might take some time for your message to get to a faraway mouse because first it requires a mouse to carry it to a local MouseMail collection place. And, if you want to send a message to a mouse that lives in different area, the local MouseMail collection place will hold it until a mouse is traveling to that other area. Every traveling mouse is asked to check in with MouseMail before they travel so they can carry any messages to their destination area.

What's interesting is that all of this is surprisingly efficient but also challenging. Traveling mice know to pick up messages for the area they're traveling to, but they may not know where to deliver the messages in that area.

That's the trick. When they get to the area they're traveling to, mice have to ask other mice about their local MouseMail collection place. Then they can take the message there or give it to a local mouse that knows where it is.

Now, in some cases, like with Christine's relatives in Montana, they wait until a mouse relative like Bardle or Clarence plans to travel to, let's say Christine. Then that mouse carries it themselves which totally bypasses the MouseMail system.

But most mice simply give the message to their local MouseMail deliverer who takes it to the local collection place and then it sits there until a traveling mouse going to the destination comes by and picks up any MouseMail to take with them.

You might be wondering how a single traveling mouse could carry all of the mousemail going to a very populous area, like a major city. Truth is, they can't. But there are lots of mice going to major cities, so almost every day there might be one mouse that will pick up mousemail for that city. If one mouse does that every day then all the mousemail going to that city is divided by 365, for the number of days in a year. That smaller amount is what the traveling mouse will carry with them. And for some very popular destinations there may be two or more mice traveling to there every day. Needless to say, this all sounds kind of messy, but the MouseMail system carries millions of messages every week, and it does it remarkably efficiently. The longest delays are to small towns and rural areas where there aren't a lot of mice traveling to those destinations.

Local mail mice are very popular and quite well-known. Take for instance Mr. Tailborn. He's the MouseMail delivery and pickup mouse where the Chris Mouse family lives. Once a week he goes past every mouse living area. If a mouse in that area has mail to pick up, they hang a small yellow streamer on a bush visible from the sidewalk. Visible if you know where to look. Of course, Mr. Tailborn knows exactly where to look. If there's a streamer hanging on a bush, he looks under the streamer to get the message and take it back to the local MouseMail facility.

By the way, packages are a different thing. MailMice can't exactly juggle a lot of packages so sometimes a local MailMouse has to make a note of where the package is, and let the local MouseMail location know to pick it up. It isn't easy, it isn't quick, but surprisingly it works pretty well.

Mr. Tailborn is a local favorite. Every mouse knows that he is the glue that keeps their families connected as mice grow up and leave their nests to start their own families. And that makes them appreciate him even more.

He's been a MouseMail delivery mouse for a year now. Mice greet him as he scampers around the neighborhoods on his route. In case you're wondering how he gets paid for doing his job, every mouse with a message to be delivered through MouseMail leaves a bit of food with their message. Mr. Tailborn wears a coat with big pockets so when he picks up a message, he also picks up the food and puts it in one of his pockets. At the end of his delivery route every week he empties the food from his pockets at his home and keeps half of the food to feed him and his family for the week. The other half goes to the local collection place where mice sort the mail. Both are good jobs and most MouseMail mice live a good life while they help mice send and receive messages all over the world.

At the other end, when a message gets delivered by a MouseMail mouse, they get a piece of food from the receiving mouse. So, if they are delivering MouseMail locally, like within their own neighborhood, they get food from the sender and the recipient. It's a small price to pay for most mice to send and receive messages from other mice. This is another reason that there isn't a lot of junk mail in the MouseMail system. Mice that send them pay with food, but mice that receive them don't want to pay for unrequested, unexpected or unwelcome messages. So, food is only given at the source, not at the destination. Mr. Tailborn isn't happy when he has junk mail to deliver because he knows there probably will not be any food for that delivery.

What's surprising is when MouseMail is used to send messages to other countries. After Thom Mouce left the Mouse family that we told you about in Chris Mouse Family Adventures, he carried mail to England with him. England wasn't his first stop after leaving California, but he eventually got there and dropped that mail off at the MouseMail location in London. He was "paid" with food from the sender. That helped him eat during the long journey by ship. At the other end, MouseMail London Central

gave him some food when he delivered the messages to them. Traveling mice are always happy to carry MouseMail because it means they won't have to forage for food as often, and of course it helps other mice so that's very nice, too.

On a typical day, the MouseMail system in just one city may handle thousands of messages picked up and delivered by hundreds of MouseMail local mice.

It's not a fancy system, but it works and mice around the world are very happily connected through MouseMail.

So, you might ask, what happens when MouseMail from an English-speaking country arrives in a city where mice don't speak English? Have you heard of bilingual mice? They're mice that speak or understand two languages. MouseMail messages, of course, have to be addressed to an address that will be understandable in the language of the area where it's going. Occasionally, some messages in major international cities are addressed in the language of their area even though they're going to a far distant country where the language is different. That's where the bilingual mice come in. They take those messages and try to write in the language of the address to which it will be delivered. It's not perfect, but usually it works okay.

Let's just follow Mr. Tailborn on the day of the week when he's working as a MailMouse mouse.

His morning starts by going to the MailMouse delivery center near his route. There, he checks in at the section of the center that has messages for routes near his. He asks the distribution mouse for messages for those routes, and picks up those for his deliveries. Then he goes on his route, stopping at yellow streamers and walking on past mouse homes that don't have a streamer or will be receiving a delivery from what he's carrying.

Here's what happens when he gets to the home of Rags and Gentle Meece. There's a message for them and a yellow streamer telling him that they have a message to be picked up. He walks to the streamer, pulls it down and lays it on the ground, picks up the message they're sending, puts the food in his pocket, and lays the message for the Meece family under the streamer. The next time he comes by, there will be some food to pay him for the delivery they received.

Since he knows almost all of the mice on his route, they greet him if they're outside when he comes by.

"Hey Mr. Tailborn," call the adult mice and their kids when he stops at their streamer.

"Hey Rags," he calls back and then adds, "Hey Rotary and Fran," for the two Meece kids that are playing in the yard.

"How's everyone today?" he asks. Like most MouseMail mice he is very friendly and well thought of in the neighborhoods he serves.

Rags responds, "We're doing okay. Nice weather today, isn't it? The MouseChannel says there's a chance of rain today, but it looks pretty clear now.

"It certainly does, and I hope it stays that way until I'm done with my route. By the way, thanks for the berries today. They look very good and Mrs. Tailborn will be happy when I get home. I'm sure the workers at the distribution center will be glad to see one or two of them in the main bucket."

Every delivery mouse brings back the food they gather and then takes a portion for them and their family, leaving another portion for the workers at their distribution center. Most days every mouse gets enough food for them and their family, but sometimes there's not much to pick up or deliver from a route, however the other MouseMail delivery mice generally bring back food and that makes up for the routes that didn't collect much.

If there's a week with no deliveries and no pickups Mr. Tailborn will leave a note for each family on their route. The following week those families will each leave some food for Mr. Tailborn. That helps and it's a very efficient way for the MouseMail system to work.

Of course, you might be thinking "What if a MouseMail mouse takes everything for their family and leaves nothing for the distribution center mice?" Well, the answer is simple - after a while that mouse is asked why they're not sharing and if they don't have a good reason, they lose their job and get replaced by a more honest mouse.

If a mouse family sends and receives messages and doesn't leave the required food payment, they are skipped and they get a notice delivered from the MouseMail system that they will no longer be able to use MouseMail.

That rarely happens. The mouse economy relies on honesty and a sense of fair play. Mouse families are happy to get the benefits of MouseMail and supporting it is the way they can continue to enjoy its benefits.

Of course, sometimes older mice don't have extra food, and then they have to rely on a neighbor mouse to carry a local message, and not be able to send or receive messages to and from mice that live farther away. That's okay because mice are very community oriented. They help care for each other in what is called a mutually beneficial society, which means that they give and they take in equal measure.

Not every MouseMail delivery mouse is as friendly as Mr. Tailborn, but they all understand that being a kind and friendly mouse almost always results in more and

better food payments. So, the distribution center mice notice those delivery mice that bring back good food, and those that don't. When a delivery mouse routinely doesn't bring back much food even though they bring and deliver messages on their route, they are invited to sit down with a supervisor to explain what is happening on their route to cause poor results.

Sometimes, the delivery mouse just needs a little tune-up to their personality. They get to go to a class that teaches them ways to be friendlier and nicer. Those sessions are actually kind of fun with lots of laughter and a very positive outlook.

After they go through that class, they return to their duties and their supervisor keeps tabs on how they're doing.

Rarely, a supervisor will go out into the community to a route that's not doing well. They'll visit with the mice on the route to get some feedback and better understanding of what's causing the poor performance.

Almost always, they learn that the route just got a new MouseMail delivery mouse that hasn't yet made friends in the local mouse community. Sometimes, they learn that the route just doesn't have many messages coming or going. That might mean that a local delivery mouse will need to cover more territory.

It all works out, and MouseMail is a very good system. For delivery mice, it's great exercise and some fun greeting local mice on their route. For the mice on their route, they get a friendly mouse that comes by once a week, carrying their messages and delivering messages to them. It's a system that works for everyone.

And, that's the main story about MouseMail. It's a system that benefits everyone. It gives work and rewards to the mice working for MouseMail. And, it offers a very valuable service for mice that use it to send and receive messages to friends, family and others.

That's true about most work in the human world, too. If you provide a service that is valuable you get rewarded. And, if you have a good attitude about your work, and with others around you, you have a much more pleasant outlook on life, you make friends with others, and you have the satisfaction of doing good work. All of that brings pleasure to your life and that is the best.

Chapter 9 - Biting the Big Apple

Chris is working out in the garden, eating a few very tasty weeds that he digs up, throwing the other ones away, and carefully digging around plants so the roots can more easily get the life-giving water that comes on every day through the sprinkling system.

Franklin pulls into the driveway, spots Chris and walks over to him.

"Hey Chris, how's the gardening?"

"Good, Franklin. How's work?"

"It's going good. I got off early today because I have to get ready to go on a business trip to meet one of our customers."

"Sounds fun. Where do you get to go?"

"They're sending me to New York City. I'll leave day after tomorrow and come back in a week. They also said I could bring Donna, so are you and Christine available to go? It could be pretty fun. Donna and you two could do a little shopping or sightseeing while I'm with the customer. Then we could all go out and see the sights of the big city."

"Wow," says Chris. "That sounds like so much fun. I'll have to check with Christine. I know she might be worried about my parents with us gone so long."

"Hey, I have an idea. We could bring them along. They can fit in our pockets like you and Christine, and it would be fun for all of us to see the sights. Do you think Carl would want to go?"

"Probably, but I know he's going through some challenges at Munch, so I doubt that he can go, but I'll check with Christine and my parents and see what they think."

With a wave, Franklin leaves and walks to the house while Chris continues to hoe and finish up working on the Mouse family portion of the garden.

An hour later, Chris walks into the Home in the Wall and spots Christine working at the kitchen table.

"Hey honey, guess what? Franklin has to travel to New York City on business, and he's invited us to go. We can even bring grandpa and grandma if they want to go. Isn't that exciting?"

Christine looks up, "That sounds like fun, Chris. I've always wanted to see the big city. Do you think we can see the Statue of Liberty?"

"I'm sure we can see whatever we want. Franklin says we would be there about a week. That's a pretty good stay in one place, so I think we'll be able to see a lot while we're there.

Talk to your parents and see if they also want to go," Christine says as she continues working on a Mouse Academy project.

Chris goes upstairs and knocks on grandpa and grandma's bedroom door. No answer. He goes up to the roof top patio and finds them there, relaxing on the lounge chairs.

"Hi Mom, Hi Dad" he says.

"Hi son, how was the gardening?"

"It was good. Got it all done.

"Hey guess what? Franklin is being sent to New York City on a business trip. He's taking Donna and he said we could all come with him. He's going to be there for about a week, so that means that we could be tourists and see the big city. What do you think?"

"Well, the sounds pretty interesting, son," says Grandpa. "We've been feeling pretty good lately. What do you think, grandma?"

"I think I'd like to go, grandpa. But, it's up to you. You're the one that's been under the weather a few times this year."

"I'm game to go, son. What do we need to do to get ready?"

Chris replies, "I'm not sure. I'll check with Franklin and see when we'll need to be ready to go."

That evening Franklin tells Chris that they should have everything ready to go by tomorrow night because they'll be going to the airport early the following morning.

The next day the four mice are busy planning and packing. They won't need to bring much and what little they do need can fit in Donna's suitcase easily.

That night they take their stuff into the Dooty's kitchen where Franklin and Donna put it all in their suitcases after dinner.

"We'll take an Uber to the airport," says Franklin. "Can you be ready by 6 am tomorrow?"

The mice nod and it's set.

The next morning everyone's sitting in the kitchen at 5:45. The Uber driver shows up, suitcases are put in the vehicle, and they're off to the airport.

After their luggage is checked, security is pretty easy. Like always, the mice go through the X-ray in the Dootys' pockets and then it's just a matter of sitting and waiting.

Once they board the plane, everyone settles in and except for Donna they are all asleep right after takeoff. There's food service during the 5 1/2-hour flight, but no one is hungry.

After landing in LaGuardia they get their luggage and Franklln hails a taxi at the taxi stand.

The drive into Manhattan has everyone glued to the windows. None of them has ever seen New York City before. Manhattan is loaded with traffic and the skyscrapers are so tall that there is no sunshine on the streets - they're all in shadows.

They check into their hotel. It's a six-story hotel just outside the theater district. Franklin doesn't have to meet with the client until tomorrow so this afternoon and evening are open for fun. After they unpack their luggage it's time for some sightseeing.

They decide to go to Broadway to see the bright lights. It's not a far walk and everyone is energized after sleeping for much of the flight.

Their first stop is Hershey's Chocolate World. Walking inside they're filled with the wonderful smell of chocolate.

"Ooh," says Donna. "I like this place already.

"Franklin, I'll buy you a Resse's Peanut Butter Cup if you tell me what you want in it."

Franklin lists what he wants, Donna orders it, and a few minutes later she pays and hands it to Franklin.

The four mice have their noses pointed up in the air and they're breathing in the delicious, sweet smells.

Chris asks Donna if she can order another one that he'll pay for.

When it's handed over the four mice are all over it, grabbing bits and biting them into smaller pieces. "Oooh, this is soo good," Christine says as the other three mice nod in between bites.

Grandpa licks his whiskers for a few minutes after they finish. "Oh boy, this is the highlight of the trip, I'm sure," he says to his wife.

"Well, Grandpa," Grandma answers also licking her whiskers, "there's a lot more we're going to see so let's just hold judgment until the end and then we can all vote on our favorite thing. Today is just our first day here. But it sure is the highlight so far, for me, too,"

Chris and Christine just smile. They were thinking the same thing.

After Hershey's they make the short walk to the heart of Times Square. It's starting to get dark and the whole place is electrifying. The big electronic billboards and bright lights are dazzling. Everywhere they look, everything is lit up with signs promoting Broadway shows, movies, and famous musical acts that are playing in town.

Everyone draws in their breath at the displays. It's almost too much. Chris points out several famous names, as Donna stares at the show bills. It's almost too much to take in. Grandma looks around to see if Ryan Seacrest is around. "Isn't he always here?" she asks. The others just chuckle and nod.

There are street performers on every street. Some are statues, like the Statue of Liberty and Abraham Lincoln, others are buskers, playing and singing for the people walking by. The music is very good, and it adds to the fun, party-like atmosphere on the street.

Franklin points out that many of the street performers also appear on Broadway stages, some of them between gigs, others just like entertaining crowds between shows.

Donna looks up at One Times Square where the ball drops on New Year's Eve. "Well grandma, if you want to see Ryan Seacrest, he'll be here on New Year's Eve."

The crowds on the street are so interesting, it's almost as entertaining to just stand close to a building and watch the moving parade on the sidewalk. There are people of all types and descriptions.

Chris and Christine look down from Donna's pocket just in time to see three mice walking next to the building.

They ask Donna to put them down and Chris shouts, "Hey guys, are you tourists or do you live here?"

The biggest mouse calls out, "We live here. We're just cruising for some food. Have you seen the goodies that people drop on the sidewalk? It's like a restaurant, I'll tell you."

Chris smiles, "That's pretty smart. We're just visiting from Los Angeles. What's good to see around here?"

The other mouse says, "This is the coolest place. We don't go very far from here. We just live two blocks away in an alley. My name's Jerry and this is my wife Emily and our daughter Belinda."

Donna watches the conversation and says to Franklin. "Boy, mice are such friendly creatures, aren't they? They make friends everywhere."

Grandpa and grandma just watch from Franklin's pockets. Grandpa says, "There's no need to go down there, grandma. Our son will get the latest scoop from them."

Grandma just smiles. Their son is a very outgoing type and grandpa is right, he'll learn a lot by talking to the local mice.

Chris gets lots of information from Jerry. The best food is two streets over, in the alley behind restaurants. Each establishment throws out pounds of the day's food every evening and the next morning it's ready for eating. Jerry warned Chris to watch out for rats. They're everywhere, they're mean, and they think they own all of the food in the alleys.

After standing along the sidewalk for a little longer, Donna picks up Chris and Christine, and she and Franklin continue their walk.

By now, everyone is tired and they're glad to be heading back to the hotel. It's been a good day for the few hours since they arrived, but the time is 3 hours later than at home and it's dark. That makes everyone yawn and feel ready to get some dinner and go to bed.

The hotel has a small deli at the ground floor where they're able to get some food and relax before going up to their room. Franklin and Donna order pastrami and a fruit bowl and nuts for the mice. Everyone eats and enjoys the meal, but once they're full they're tired and ready for bed.

The hotel room has windows that look back at the Theater District. Chris and Christine sit on the window sill, letting their food digest and watching the people on the streets below. It's dark, but the streets are well lit and it's fun to see the different people. Chris points out some mice across the street on the sidewalk, and they decide that tomorrow when Franklin is with his client they'll talk Donna into taking them down to the street. It's nice to make connections with more local mice.

The next morning, Grandma and Grandpa decide that they would like to stay in the room while their son and wife go visit with neighborhood mice, but they'll be rested and ready for more tourist activities in the afternoon.

Donna puts the two mice in her pocket, takes the elevator to the first floor, walks through the lobby and out onto the street. Chris asks if she would mind taking them across the street and dropping them off.

Crossing the street is a little scary. The crosswalk signs work, but cars don't seem to pay much attention. Donna says, "Most of the license plates are from out of state. It doesn't look like visitors are very respectful to the local laws, but I'm very watchful so we'll be okay crossing the street. I always look both ways."

About halfway across the street a car comes whizzing by them, just missing them by a few feet. Not only that, but the driver honks at them. Christine says, "Boy, tourists are sure not very nice."

Donna just smiles. They're across the street now and she takes Chris and Christine out of her pockets and sets them on the sidewalk. They ask her if she could come get them in an hour and she nods and smiles, "Of course."

The two mice walk along the sidewalk up next to the buildings. Within a half block they spot some mice and walk up to them.

"Hi, we're from out of town. My name is Chris and this is my wife, Christine."

"Oh, hi. We're Staz and Ginga. Where are you from?"

"We're just visiting from California. Do you live here?"

"Sure."

"What's cool to see around here? Our human friends are carrying us everywhere and we can take human transportation. What should we see?"

"We don't go very far from here because this is our home," Staz says, "but the hotels around here are full of tourists. We hear lots of them talking about where they visit.

"You have to ride the subway. They're fantastic. We go there sometimes and always find lots of good food in the garbage cans. Just watch out for the rats. They're big and mean. You don't want to argue with them over food. They always win."

Ginga adds, “We hear humans talk about the Statue of Liberty and the 9/11 memorial. Also SOHO, the Empire State Building and Central Park. Central Park is huge, right in the middle of town, and it has all kinds of natural beauty. It’s like being in the country in the city.

"Plus, Harlem is really great. It’s so interesting, the food is excellent, the music is amazing and everyone is really friendly.”

Christine asks, “What’s the 9/11 memorial?”

“It’s the place where terrorists flew planes into the two World Trade Center towers,” says Staz. “Both buildings collapsed from the attack, killing lots of humans and mice. It was horrible. We heard about it from our grandparents who heard about it from their grandparents. It was terrible, but they built a nice memorial to the tragedy with pools and plaques and descriptive panels. We haven’t seen it, but all the tourists talk about it very quietly.”

“There are lots of other things that people go see,” continues Ginga. “You said you’re with humans, right?”

“Yes,” replies Christine.

“Then I’ll bet they already have ideas on what to see here. We’ve heard that humans like to go to Madison Square Garden. It’s a big arena where they have lots of concerts and other stuff that humans like.

“Anyway, hope you guys have fun. Did you come with others?”

“My mom and dad came with us,” says Chris. “They live with us and when we got the opportunity to come here they were invited, too. It’s pretty cool.”

“Well, have a great stay. If you get bored, come back here and we’ll show you around this neighborhood.”

“Thanks, we should probably get back to our hotel, but we really appreciate the information. It’s been nice talking to you. Maybe we’ll see you again.”

Both couples wave as Chris and Christine look at the traffic, wait for the right moment and run back across the street. As they stand next to the wall of the hotel, Donna Dooty walks out the door, looks around, sees them and walks up.

“Hi guys, did you meet some interesting mice?”

“Yes, and we got some good information on what to see, but I’m sure you and Franklin already have that figured out,” says Christine.

“You know Franklin. He researched everything and he has a whole list of things to go see.”

“Great,” says Chris. “Do you think we can see Central Park?”

“Oh, I know that’s on his list. We’re also going to take the ferry to Statin Island. We’re going to be busy every day.”

Chris and Christine smile to each other. This is going to be one of the greatest trips ever.

The trip to the observation deck of the Empire State Building is fun. They also take a horse drawn carriage around town. And, Donna takes them to Central Park for an entire day while Franklin is meeting with the client.

Grandma and grandpa are having a great time. They ooh and aah at just about everything and they are up for doing literally everything.

Franklin does a good job and the trip is successful for his company.

Chris and Christine love every minute. The food is good, the accents of the local people are fun, and they have plenty of time with their friends, Franklin and Donna.

Everyone sleeps on the flight back to California, and in a few hours after landing at Los Angeles International airport they are back home and telling friends, family and neighbors about the fun and interesting trip.

When Franklin goes to work on his first day back, his boss has him come to his office where he is complimented and given a nice raise.

What the Dootys and the Mouse family did on this and other trips was to take the time to visit and see interesting places. The experiences they have become stories that they will tell for a long time to come. The people and mice they meet, the food they eat, the sights they see that they have only heard about before – all of these things make their lives more interesting and also enlarge their knowledge of life and the world.

Traveling is like that. It doesn’t make the world smaller. It makes your world bigger. If you get the chance to go see someplace you’ve never been, take it. Then you'll have stories to remember and to share. Those are the experiences that make your life richer.

© 2025 Ron Wilbur. All rights reserved.

Cover photo licensed from Shutterstock