

The Adventures of Commoner Mouse

by Helen Young

Chapter 1

Scene 2

Cat Alley, a few blocks down from Brivilian, is one of the most notorious alleys in the neighborhood, one that mice stay away from. All but one brave rodent, Jeremiah Whisker, avoid Cat Alley. In Cat Alley is a tight wooden fence. On the other side of this fence is a Wire station, a stop on the mouse-built subway trolley that runs through the city's storm sewers. Jeremiah believes that stopping at this station and traveling through Cat Alley is quicker to rush through on his way to and from Treible Park, a human park he visits frequently. No matter how many mice, and especially his mother, warn him about the growing population of cats hanging around that alley, he still visits there. And recently, more and more often.

Jeremiah uses this cat-infested alley as a shortcut whenever he returns from Treible Park. The park is wonderful enough to roam around in but Jeremiah visits for another specific reason. Gathering the herbs and spices that grow in the human park. Jeremiah's family owns a bakery and those herbs and spices blend well with the pastries they make. So he

braves going through Cat Alley to bring home these amazing ingredients whenever he gets the chance to. He may be called a stubborn daredevil but he's just looking out for his family's profession.

Peering around the corner and into Cat Alley, the young brown-furred mouse checks the area. No cats, which is rare. They could be hiding in trashcans or dumpsters for all he knows. Though he shivers at this disgusting image in his mind, he won't pass up the opportunity to save a few minutes on his journey. So, he enters the alley and slinks along the brick wall toward a short tower of boxes.

The boxes stand beneath a fire escape which humans use. Lines of laundry link between buildings on opposite sides of the alley, running from fire escape to pulley hold. He tried using those lines before as a means of getting over the wooden fence but they were too high in the air. His jumps would be his instant demise. So he has always opted to navigate the alley by climbing up and crossing the building at the ridge. Which he can reach by climbing to the first landing of the fire escape. Something he can do with no real trouble. Except, and here's the kicker, when the fire escape ladder is too high up for him to jump on.

As he passes behind a dumpster, his nose catches a particular scent. Jeremiah stands on his hind legs, following the scent slowly over toward a small patch of cardboard. A piece of cheese sits on it and his eyes widen. The idea of grabbing the cheese and placing it in his sack, along with the

things he has gathered at the park, to take home for his mother to bake her famous cheesecake tempts him. As he processes the fact that it's in the open near a dumpster, he scrunches his nose and shakes his head.

“Another time, Jer,” he says to himself. “We can wait to get something *edible* and *clean* to eat.”

Unlike what some think about mice being scavengers, Jeremiah detests collecting garbage. He may live in a recycled box that is his home but he won't rummage through trash for food. He'd rather copy the humans and harvest fresh food or create it in healthy environments. Being mindful of sanitation comes from his being part of a mouse family that cooks for a living.

Jeremiah starts for the pile of boxes again only to freeze in his tracks. A rush of paws comes down the alley toward him and fear strikes him. He retreats into the shadow of the dumpster just as a trashcan clangs against the hard ground. His ears stand tall as he hears another set of paws, slower compared to the first, approaching the same location. Then he overhears conversation.

“Geez, Gus-tah, take it easy. There's plenty of garbage for us tah eat from.”

“I can't help it, Toby, I'm so hungry.” A pleased hum comes from the other side of the dumpster. “Oh, gosh, I haven't had fish in so long.”

Jeremiah cringes as he sneaks a peek around the dumpster and sees

two cats. A fat tabby rummages through the tipped can while a gray-furred cat stands on his hind legs, picking grime from under his claws. Jeremiah shivers, ignoring the image of “Gust-ah” eating garbage while thinking what might happen if the cats spot him. Mice are delicious food for cats, just as fish are delightful. He looks around, scanning for a safe route to the small tower of boxes while continuing to listen to the cats.

“Why don’t you join me, Toby?” one of the cats says.

“You kiddin’? I just cleaned mah front paws. I’m not touchin’ that rubbish. Not while there’s fresh-ah food in this big thing than in that canist-ah.” The dumpster shakes from a slam. Jeremiah glances up and sees that Toby is slowly walking on top of the dumpster. “Well, it’s fresh-ah than what you’re eatin’.” One side of the top opens and the cat hops down into the dumpster. Guster, as Jeremiah believes the other cat’s name to be from Toby’s accented speech, follows Toby inside. “Oh! Well, go ahead then. You take one side, I’ll take the oth-ah.”

“Fair is fair,” Guster replies.

While the two cats make a feast of whatever spoiled food is in the garbage container, Jeremiah takes his chances and runs. He jets on all fours, cringing since he loathes running with his front paws. It’s faster in getting away though, so he stops complaining so he can find his route safely back home. He easily reaches the start of his escape route and starts climbing.

The young brown-furred mouse hops up the mountain of boxes toward the bottom rung of the ladder. The top box is a little too short but he keeps jumping. His fingers barely brush the metal rung. Grumbling to himself, he stops bouncing, climbs back down, and searches for another stackable object. He spots a flowerpot and immediately drags it over to the base of the cardboard boxes. It's heavy, so he hopes it doesn't fall through the boxes. The boxes may be stable enough for him to climb on, but will they support a flowerpot? Slim chance.

As he considers the pot, Jeremiah quickly pieces together his plan. Once the pot is in position, high in the air atop the boxes, he'll scramble up onto it and jump up to the bottom rung of the ladder. Hopefully he can make his escape without alerting the cats.

But, knowing his luck ...

Right when the pot is where he wants it, he executes his plan. He climbs up onto the pot, sets himself up to jump and—suddenly feels a cold rush through his body.

Beneath him, the top box gives way and the pot falls through. He hurriedly launches himself into the air but misses the ladder by a small margin. He falls back down, cringing as he hears the pot break. Thankfully, Jeremiah lands on soft dirt but he immediately knows that he's in trouble when silence fills the alley.

“Did yah hear that, Gust-ah?”

“Yeah,” Guster says. Raising his voice, he shouts, “Is someone out there?”

Both cats look out over the dumpster’s side and Jeremiah’s heart leaps into his throat. He prays not to be noticed. The tumbled boxes lie between the dumpster and his location. And he's camouflaged in dirt the same color as his brown fur. Maybe it'll be enough. His clothes and the sack he carries on his back are also dark so it should help but he doesn't know for sure. He wants to rush over to the brick wall close to him and try again for the fire escape. But, with the tower of boxes toppled, he can't reach the ladder anymore.

As he hides in the dirt, planning his course of action, Guster notices him. “A mouse!”

“Where?” Toby squints his eyes, trying to locate the rodent.

“Over there. In the dirt!” A glint passes through the tabby’s eyes.

“How can ya see 'em?”

“See that. He’s quivering!”

“Well, so much for camouflage,” Jeremiah mumbles. He abandons his plan and starts running.

Just then, Toby finally sees him. “Get ‘em!”

The cats' claws scratch against the metal of the dumpster as they scramble out to chase Jeremiah. He squeaks in fear, rushing along the wall, dodging boxes, searching for some tiny protrusion to start his climb.

But when he does find one and starts ascending, he immediately gets batted through the air as one of the cats takes a swing at him.

“Nu-uh! No escaping for you, mouse!”

“Crap, crap, crap!” Jeremiah repeats, quickly picking himself up as he tries to run away from their thundering steps. He doubles back and scurries along the path of fallen boxes and runs behind the dumpster. Then, grateful that he’s small enough to fit under it, he slides himself in and gags at the residue on the bottom. Toby and Guster squeeze their paws into the gap, swiping at him. He grins. “Ha! Can’t get me back here, stupid cats!”

“That’s what you think.” Toby looks at Guster. “Move the bin!”

“Gotcha.” Both cats move the boxes out of their way and restack them just beyond the fire escape. Then, with the way clear, the tabby moves back, runs at full speed, and rams into the dumpster, rolling it away from the wall so they can get behind it.

An idea pops into the mouse’s head. As long as he stays in the middle under the dumpster, he’ll be safe! Which was the right thing to do. Even after the dumpster has moved, both cats complain since neither of them can reach him.

So they keep moving the dumpster in hopes of getting Jeremiah. From side to side in the alley and finally along its length and toward the fire escape. They push the dumpster closer and closer to where the boxes

have been restacked and stop a few feet from them. With the ladder just inches beyond the dumpster!

Jeremiah sees the boxes and realizes how close he is to his escape route. He takes a last breath—trying not to gag—and makes his escape, barely missing Toby’s paw as he clammers out and up onto the boxes. When Jeremiah reaches the top box, he pushes it off the stack at Guster’s head just as the cat turns around. As a reflex, Guster swats the box away and it lands on top of the dumpster, on one of its lids—high enough to reach the ladder from!

Seeing this opportunity, Jeremiah jumps from the box he stands on and onto Toby’s head. Then he launches himself through Guster’s outstretched paws and crashes into the dumpster, near the top edge. He pulls himself up onto the dumpster, runs to the box Guster has just thrown up there, and quickly climbs atop it as the cats hoist themselves up onto the dumpster as well.

“Hah! You’re not getting away, mousy,” one of the cats says as they rush forward.

“Just watch me!” Jeremiah gloats, grinning as he leaps from the edge of the box. The cats crash into the box just as Jeremiah miraculously grasps the bottom rung of the fire escape ladder. Jeremiah is safe!

Hurray!

He climbs the ladder to the roof. Turning around, he smirks down

at the arguing cats. “Better luck next time, guys!”

Jeremiah scurries to the ridge and crosses to the other side of the fence. He jumps across a tiny gap to another tower of boxes and crates, descending to the ground beyond the alley. Now that he’s away from danger, he shudders once more and let's out a huge sigh of relief. He grins, happy to have survived.

Then he goes in search of a crack leading to The Wire Line. After spotting the entrance, he raises himself up to walk on his hind legs and squeezes himself through and follows the path to a dimly lit platform where other mice are waiting for the next train.

As he joins the group, he pulls open a pocket of his sack and grabs for some hand sanitizer. He wipes his paws as best he can, thinking that when he gets home he’ll definitely take a long shower. Shuddering at the memory of all the gunk around him during the chase, he tells himself not to go back there for a long, long time. Cat Alley may be fun to traverse once in a while, but he really needs to be more careful.

“Train to Brivilian arriving at the station. Stay behind the line until the doors open.”

Electricity sparks off the overhead wire and everyone lines up behind the yellow line. A small trolley-like train compartment slows down at the platform and the doors open as it stops. Jeremiah gets on with the crowd, holding the pole closest to him as the doors close. The train starts

back up and slowly goes down The Wire toward Brivilian.

End chapter 1