

# Chapter 1: The Day Before

Things had changed.

Chip was sitting in the Headquarters' main room, a bit aside. His friends had taken their places on the U-shaped couch, watching TV and waiting for that day's prime time movie. And his best friend and former competitor for a certain inventor mouse was wrapped up in the wings of a certain red bat.

Things had changed since Foxglove had appeared.

Chip remembered what it was like just one month ago. He and Dale both fought for Gadget, and they were really busy fighting each other. It was impossible for either of them to make a move towards her without the other taking either a similar step or countermeasures. When Chip tried to approach her, he could be sure that Dale was in his way, and vice versa. They both tried to win the same girl's heart—and to keep each other from winning, of course. That way it was with Gadget, and that way it was for a while with Clarice before she was hired by some place in Las Vegas in '85. And Gadget seemed to enjoy this little game, though she seemed to be unaware that it was more than a game for one of them.

Now the game was over, now that another, this time chiropteran, player had joined it. While Dale still struggled for Gadget, Foxglove fluttered onto the scene, saved his life, and laid her heart into his hands. Furthermore, it took her only a few days to win his. For the first time in his life, Dale had found a girl whom he didn't have to compete for with Chip. A wonderful, fun-loving one no less. They were the perfect couple. So perfect that Foxglove tried hard to become diurnal, at least as diurnal as late-night-movie-loving Dale was. Gadget didn't mind Dale's advances missing, she even made him a hang glider, so he could be together with his beloved bat up in the air. It was obvious for not only Chip that this was more than an adventure, more than the usual game between them. For maybe the first time in his life, Dale was really and truly and deeply in love.

Chip knew that feeling too well. He himself had felt it for two years now, since the day he and Dale first met Gadget. Back then, it was something new for him. She was more than a trophy, unlike Clarice. But when he realized, around the time when his and Dale's home in the oak tree was transformed into the Rescue Rangers Headquarters, that and how much he was in love, it was already too late, and he was in the middle of the same old game with Dale as his opponent and Gadget as the prize. If he wanted or not, he had to play it, otherwise his best friend would have had it too easy to take the girl of his dreams away, just for winning the game and getting the cute female.

He didn't know for sure what Dale played for. But he knew what he himself played for. Her heart. Her mind. Her mind-bashingly high IQ. Her beauty. Her kindness. Her little quirks. Her everything from her goggles to the workshop floor she walked on. And playing against an opponent who knew him and his methods as well as Dale was tough.

One of his first moves in the game came back to his memory. He took all his courage and asked her out one day. Of course, Dale didn't let him get away that easily and joined them, soon followed by Monty and Zipper to complete the group. This was the first of a number of days and nights out for all the Rangers. Chip never tried to ask Gadget and Gadget only out again, knowing

that they wouldn't be alone anyway; besides, these days and nights out led to many a case which the Rangers were only able to solve together. It was a weird coincidence that it was a Rangers' night out at the drive-in when they met Foxglove for the first time.

Staring at his fedora hat he held in his hands, Chip fast-forwarded his memory to the day before. It had been a month since the Rangers were on a night out. So he asked them as usual. But one thing was not as usual.

And that was Dale's reply.

He said he couldn't come with the Rangers. He said he already had a date with Foxy.

Dale's words made Chip realize that nothing was going to be the way it had been for two years. He was confronted with a new situation in which nobody put obstacles into his way to Gadget anymore. Now he was able to go where he couldn't have gone before.

But was he ready, too?

He who worked on cases until far beyond exhaustion, he who kept the probably most successful semi-professional group of rescuing and crime-fighting animals running, he who faced opponents that even humans would rather escape from, he whom even a death prophecy could not keep away from his work, could he do that one first step?

There had been situations when Chip tried to make such an advance, but he had never taken the possible outcome into consideration. He had never wasted a serious thought about what would happen if he really had the chance to be alone with Gadget, without Dale or anyone else disturbing them. What would happen if he finally did what he so desired to do deep in his heart, namely tell her how he felt for her. How she would react.

And most of all, how she felt for him. There was no doubt that she liked him. But did she love him? And what if not?

Or was he just thinking way too much about it?

"Chip!" Gadget's sweet voice worked on him like a wake-up call, and her blue eyes, precisely aimed at him, dragged him back into the here and now. She smiled invitingly as her left hand patted the free place between herself and Dale. "Come and sit with us, the movie will start soon!"

It was impossible to resist that smile. Chip got up, put his hat back on, and slowly walked across the room to his now five friends. Watching that movie would perhaps clear up his mind a bit.

Everyone looked at him with worried expressions on their faces as he sat down without saying a word. He could almost read from said expressions what they thought. Yes, he knew that he had been behaving strangely since the previous evening. He was fully aware that although it was his idea to go out, he was the only one not really having fun. But he was unable to turn these thoughts loose which spun around in his mind.

"Chip, what's up with you?" Now that even Dale was concerned, Chip felt even more like spoiling the overall mood.

"Oh, everything's just fine."

"C'mon, I'm your friend, you can tell me whatever it is."

He doubted he really could. "No, it's alright. But thanks for asking." Then again, whom else could he talk about it with?

Though it was entertaining for the others, the movie had no effect on Chip but reminding him of his current situation. He didn't blame it on the movie, though. He felt like he could watch four Miss Marple movies in a row, and they wouldn't have any different effect. He was hardly even interested in what happened on the screen.

Instead, when the suspense was particularly intense, he secretly gazed to the beauty sitting right of him without her noticing it. She was so close to him, he could feel her warmth, smell that trademark scent of oil. A part of him felt like holding her, kissing her tenderly, telling her that he loved her... But he couldn't. And it wasn't because she was busy watching the movie. Not only. He could also have been alone with her, with the TV turned off. And even then he would have been afraid of doing such a big step.

The movie was over. Dale accompanied his Foxglove to the door and kissed her good night before she took off to the higher branches of the tree. It wasn't much more than a makeshift dwelling-place, but it was a place for her to stay after roaming around for years, a place where nobody would chase her away. She was used to sleeping outside, and she was near her darling, so she was happy with what she had. Chip watched that heart-warming scene for a second, but when Gadget got up to go to her room, he followed her almost automatically. It was like Monty following his beloved cheese, though not entirely as ridiculous and still following the rules of physics.

When he reached the door to his and Dale's room while Gadget had to walk a bit further, he felt he had to say something.

"Gadget?"

"Yes, Chip?"

His mind formed the words, 'I love you,' but his mouth refused to say them.

"Good night."

"Good night, Chip!" She smiled and went on.

Chip entered the room, replaced his bomber jacket with a nightshirt and a matching cap, and threw his hat into a corner and himself onto his bed.

"Good night! Good night! That was all I could say? Good night?"

When he heard Dale come in, he pretended to be asleep. But even when Dale put away his comic book and switched off the light, he was still awake, trying to take at least a little nap. After all, he was still the leader of the Rescue Rangers, and he would hardly be able to lead them if he wasn't well rested.

## Chapter 2: The Night

For a while, Chip tossed and turned, but there wasn't the least bit of sleep to find, and it wasn't due to the full moon's pale light shining in through the window. Then he decided that when he was unable to find sleep, maybe sleep would find him. So he just lay there on his back and stared at the small ceiling which Dale's bed formed.

He lay and stared...

If his sleep was out there, it would have no chance to get past his thoughts.

He saw Gadget's face on the lower side of Dale's bed, bright and clear as if he had a projector strapped to his head. She smiled at him. He stretched out a hand to touch her, to caress her. But as he realized that she felt like wood, he also realized that he couldn't stand that anymore. It wasn't even a dream, he was awake all the time.

'Okay... I could stay in bed... try to sleep... and slowly go insane...'

He decided against that and got up. He tried his best to be quiet while sneaking to the door. But that wasn't necessary.

"You can't sleep?"

Chip turned around and saw his friend looking at him, slightly illuminated by a bit of the moonlight.

"Oh, sorry Dale, did I wake you up?"

"Chip, you didn't even let me sleep. Now what's up with you that you're walkin' around in the middle of the night?"

"I'm thirsty. I'm going to the kitchen and have some drink."

"No, you're not. You're not lyin' awake all night due to thirst. So, what is it?"

Chip didn't say a word. That was not the reaction he had expected from Dale, nothing he was prepared for.

"Does it have something to do with yesterday? Why aren't you yourself anymore since yesterday?"

"Well..." He wasn't able to go on. What should he say after all?

"C'mon, Chip, you can tell me everything. I'm your friend, remember? Your long-time best friend. Now, what's up? Are you afraid of losin' me to Foxy?"

"No, I'm sure you'll always be one of us. A Rescue Ranger as well as my friend."

"So it's about Gadget, am I right?"

Dale was right, but the least thing that Chip wanted to hear now was the name of his love spoken by his former competitor.

"Where did you get that idea from?"

"Chip, I'm not blind. I can see your reactions when she's around. The way you sometimes stare at her."

"Dale, how do you think you have the slightest hint about how I feel and what I'm goin' through?!"

"Calm down, Chip, you'll wake up the others. Now listen. I know very well how you feel. I started realizing it when I fell in love with Foxy."

"When you fell in love with Foxy, she was already almost your girlfriend. That's totally different."

"Not for Foxy. When we were out yesterday, she told me how she watched us on some of our late night cases before we first met. How she was waiting for a chance to finally come and see us, especially me. And how her chance came when she had to save my life at the drive-in. And I understood her," Dale slipped in a sigh, "because now I love her the same as she loves me. Besides, we two, you and me, have been friends now for ages, so I should know you, don't you think?"

Chip felt the urge to deny what Dale had said like he was used to, but he couldn't do that this time. It wasn't the usual nonsense. Dale had a point. Things did have changed.

"That's true, of course. So, what do you think I shall do now?" Chip was fully aware that this was maybe the first time ever that he asked his friend for such an important advice.

"Well, you're in no way like Foxy, and Gadget's not me, so you can't do as Foxy did. But I think you can't go wrong with a little date. Ask her out. Take her somewhere, just you and her."

"Do you believe I can do that?"

"Aw, Chipper, surely you can do that! You could do that back when I spoiled your first attempt at a date, why shouldn't you now?"

"Hm. Maybe you're right."

"Of course, you can also throw a love confession at her for breakfast, but I don't think you'll get as far with that as with a date or two. Or maybe a few more."

Dale's sudden knowledge about these things was not only surprising, it was downright frightening, compared with his usual goofiness, and yet the best that could happen to Chip.

"Now come back to bed and dream of something nice."

Chip shook his head. "I'll still not be able to sleep now. No, I must think about all this. Good night, my friend."

He left the sleeping-room and snuck through the murky corridors to the main room where he let himself fall onto the couch. His mind started to project images onto the dark TV screen as he tried to form something useful from his thoughts.

'So I'll take her out on a date. I'll finally have her all for myself.'

Gadget's face almost filled the screen.

'Gadget... I so want to tell you how I feel for you... This date has to be absolutely wonderful, as wonderful as you are. What shall we do? Where shall we go? What would you love to do together with me?'

Possible locations flicker up on the TV screen.

'A stroll in the park? Nah, not only. We can do that spontaneously. Drive-in?' Chip remembered the Winifred incident. 'Not really. Though the last time gave Dale his Foxglove and me a free path to Gadget. Maybe one of the airports? Uh, no, she has spent almost all of her life on one. Besides, she'd just get carried away by all that high tech. The Acorn Club? No, that's no place to take a girl on a first date. And it reminds me too much of Clarice. Has that already been five years now? Oh well... Hm, some café, or some restaurant maybe...'

He started to simulate possible dates at several locations in his mind while watching them on the switched-off television. Slowly, his subconsciousness took over, the simulations turned into dreams, and two tired chipmunk eyelids grew heavy as Chip leaned back, lost himself in his thoughts more and more, and did not try to defend himself against the sleep which had found him half sitting, half lying on the couch, and which finally came over him.

Music surrounded him as he suddenly found himself seated at a table, Gadget sitting opposite him. She had done what she usually did to dress a bit up-she had replaced her goggles with a flower in her hair. They had just finished some light dinner, and now they were chatting about all sorts of things. None of the other Rangers was there, and Chip enjoyed being alone with Gadget, listening to her voice when she talked, and seeing her face before him, especially when she smiled which she did often.

Gazing to the side, Chip found out that the place they were at had a large dance floor on which some couples of rodents were moving to the music. His view was directed back to Gadget as he heard her voice again.

"Would you like to dance?"

He didn't know how, but within seconds, Gadget had changed from her lavender overalls to a sleeveless evening gown made of silky dark blue fabric, still wearing the flower. Of course he liked to dance with that overwhelming beauty sitting at his table-though he had to admit he didn't know that she could dance. However, after he had led her onto the dance floor, he found out that and how well she could. The music filled his ears, a gorgeous mouse girl filled his eyes, her scent filled his nose, and this time it was not the scent of oil, and he felt her right hand in his left while they held each other close with the other hands gently touching each other's backs. This overload of

sensations made him more and more dizzy, so he decided to tell her what he always wanted to tell her as long as he had his mind at least barely under control.

Along with the music, the two Rangers stopped, and Chip took the chance that was offered to him.

"Gadget," he started, when he realized how tough going on was.

"Yes, Chip?" Gadget replied. "You want to say something?"

Another attempt of Chip's to talk followed. "Yes, I..."

"What is it?"

"I..." He gathered all of his courage, more than he ever needed on any case against any villain, and forced himself to finish what he had started. Now or never. "I... love you, Gadget."

A slight smile appeared on Gadget's face. "That's wonderful, Chip. That's really wonderful, don't misunderstand me." Misunderstand what? "But... I'm afraid I'm not ready for love yet. I need more time." With these words, she lost her smile and removed herself from Chip's hands. "Sorry," she added, turned around, and walked away.

"Gadget?" Chip shouted, trying to follow her. "Gadget!" But somehow he was unable to keep up with her.

A moment later, he was back in the RRHQ, sitting on the couch in his nightgown. It was just a dream. A dream which he hoped will never come true.

The first thing which came to his mind was that he may have shouted out Gadget's name not only in his dream, but as well in reality. So he sat for a while and waited for a reaction. But the Headquarters stayed silent. His shouting was only a part of his dream, or if they were partly real, his friends didn't hear him. Either way, he felt relieved.

'Hm. How long have I been asleep here?' Chip remembered that the time appearing to pass in a dream was not necessarily the time really passing. He shook off the last bit of sleep as he tried to figure out which of the watches on the walls was the one set to Eastern Standard Time. It was around 2:30 AM. 'Makes sense to go back to bed for a while,' he decided, 'before someone finds me here.'

He snuck back to his room and silently opened the door. Dale was lying in his bed and dozing. 'I bet he'll be more difficult to get out of bed than me.'

Laying down and closing his eyes, he let the recent dream run through his mind once more. Did it predict a possible future? Was it a warning? 'Chip Maplewood,' he thought by himself, 'since when do you believe in such a non-sense? Unrealistic stuff about her wearing a dress no less? You will ask her out! End of discussion.' With this self-convincing, he shoved his doubts out of the way, so there was no further need to think about it for now. Within few minutes, he found back to sleep.

## Chapter 3: The Morning

The rest of the night went by with some confuse dream which Chip didn't remember when he woke up. The brightness outside the window and the smell coming in from the closed door told him that it was breakfast time. He got up, replaced his nightshirt and cap with his bomber jacket and fedora hat, and was about to leave the room when he heard Dale behind him.

"One moment, Chip."

He turned around to see Dale—still in his bed, but awake.

"Good morning, Dale. And an early one for you, it seems. Not sleeping anymore?"

"What's more important is what you're gonna do today. So Chip, what'cha gonna do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Chip, answer my question. What are you going to do today?"

It was still a bit early for Chip to get a clue that quickly, but though it took him a while, he got it. "Ask Gadget out," he whispered to Dale.

"I can't hear ya!"

"I'm gonna ask Gadget out," Chip repeated, still quietly.

"I still can't hear ya!"

"And I won't shout it out loud. The others will hear it. Now get up, breakfast is waiting."

Within almost no time, Dale was out of bed, in his Hawaiian shirt, and ready for breakfast.

"Wow," Chip spoke surprisedly, "I've never seen you that eager to be up early."

"C'mon now, Chip, we don't wanna let them wait, y'know, Monty, Zipper, and..." Dale slipped a little pause in before he continued with a wink, "Gadget."

It was still hard to believe for Chip what had happened to his best friend. 'Foxglove must have enchanted him. It's almost as if she has received a bit of magical powers throughout her time with Winifred. Five weeks ago, Dale would have done everything to keep me from dating Gadget. Now that he's got his Foxy, he's driving me into dating Gadget. Not that I complain about it, it's just, well, strange.'

Gadget and Zipper had already sat down at the table, and Monterey Jack was busy in the kitchen part of the room when the two chipmunks arrived.

"G'mornin', lads," Monty greeted them. "Dale, who or what 'as thrown yer outta yer bed?"

Gadget joked, "This coffee is the best you've ever made. It can wake folks up who aren't in the same room. And it even works on Dale."

Chip doubted that it was the coffee scent. No, Dale was up that early for a different reason, and that reason was obviously making sure that he, Chip, did what he was expected to do.

They sat down with Gadget and Zipper. Monty brought the breakfast before he joined them. But although the Rangers were together, nobody said a word. Everyone had his or her breakfast in silence. A silence which disquieted Chip more and more. He had to ask her. But he was way too excited to pull it off easily. And the silence made everything only worse. Finally, Dale broke it.

"So, what are we gonna do today?"

It took Chip a while to realize that these words of his friend's had nothing to do with his very special duty.

"Well, as usual. We pay the police station a visit and check for new cases, we go on our patrols, and we solve some occasional cases. Any trouble with our equipment, Gadget?"

"No, everything's ready to go. At least it should be." The Rangers had gotten used to that word over the years, so it induced no abrupt reactions.

"And what about this evening, Chip?"

These words definitely had something to do with it.

"Well," Chip answered, "no plans for the evening yet. Maybe our next case will take a bit longer to solve, so..."

"What if not?"

"If not... then we've got time to relax, time to have some fun..."

Dale's look told Chip that what he said didn't fit him. He wasn't the kind of guy to talk about relaxing and having fun. He was the workaholic, and that wasn't more than a bad excuse.

Chip's eyes locked onto Gadget as he continued, "We could go out somewhere..."

"Chip," Gadget wondered, "the Rescue Rangers have been out two days ago."

"Besides," Dale added, "I'm gonna ask Foxy if she's got time tonight. So I'm out again."

That was it. Chip was caught. No elegant way out of this situation. "No, I mean... just... just the two of us... Gadget..."

"What do you mean, Chip?" the blond mouse asked.

"I mean... would you like to... go out with me?" Hastily, he went on, "It's not a problem when you don't want to, I can understand that..."

"You and me and who else?"

"Just you, Gadget, and me. No-one else."

This was the point when the most experienced member of the Rescue Rangers felt like saying something. "Gadget luv, I believe 'e's askin' ya out on a date." 'Blimey, it took 'im ferever ta ask 'er, and now it takes 'er ferever ta grasp it with 'er mind-bashin'ly 'igh IQ.'

"A date?" Gadget smiled in excitement and anticipation. "Golly, I've never been on a date! That's gonna be a brand-new experience for me."

"I take it that's a yes?"

"Yes, of course that's a yes, Chip! So, what will we do?"

Within a split-second, Chip realized that he had no idea what to do that evening. 'Aw, crud. As if it wasn't enough to have a date with a girl who defines 'romantic' as a cruise on a junk barge. I can't even ask her what she'd like to do.'

He tried to stay cool and appear as if he had everything under control. "Oh, I've got no plans yet."

Dale suggested, "What about Infinity, that nice little restaurant where Foxy and I have been so often?"

Chip remembered some things about this place. It was not particularly fancy, but it was nice, and it was within walking distance. Dale had told him that he and Foxglove were there on some of their dates, especially the first few. It was breakfast for Dale and dinner for Foxglove who had just started to consider getting used to a diurnal life for her cutie. And Foxglove had loved the wordplay and Dale's expression when he found out what she meant with flying with him to Infinity. "Sure, why not? We'll have dinner there and a nice stroll back. I don't think it'll rain today." He decided against overdoing it the first time. "Is seven o'clock okay for you, Gadget?"

"Yes, of course it's okay, Chip." This answer, together with her smile, nearly blew him away. That was it. He was going to have a date with the girl of his dreams. He had a place, and he had a time. Tonight was going to be his night. His and Gadget's.

## Chapter 4: The Day Goes On

After they had finished breakfast and cleaned up, looking out for cases was the next item on the agenda. Like most of the days, it started with a flight on the Rangerwing to the police station. The Rangers took their usual way into the building and to the ceiling fan above Sergeant Spinelli's desk. But the few files lying out were all closed.

"Well," Chip said, "looks like our police are good for more than gathering cases for us."

"Yes," Gadget replied, "they can sometimes solve their cases without our help."

Dale worried, "They aren't pushing us out of business, Chip, or are they?"

"How can they? They hardly know that we exist... with Monty's exception, of course." Chip watched his rotund teammate take his chance while the Sergeant was absent and snatch the cheese from his sandwich. This had grown into a part of their almost daily ritual. "No, they're just currently running low on crimes. Such things happen, and we can actually be glad about it."

"Aw, how boring." Dale yawned. "So we can stay here, and I'll have a nap 'til something happens, okay? Been up awfully early, y'know."

"Not okay, Dale. We'll do a patrol flight... well, as soon as Monty has finished emptying the mousetraps." Long ago, Chip had stopped wondering how Monty still had enough space inside for such quantities of cheese shortly after breakfast. Today, he simply took it as a fact.

Unseen by the officers and well fed with cheese, Monty made it back to the Rangers' secret entrance. "I'm ready to go when you are, mates!" he shouted. The other Rangers followed him to the roof of the police station where the Rangerwing waited for them.

The city almost seemed quiet, although it was as busy as usually. Gadget almost drained the Rangerwing's batteries to the critical mark on the several-hour patrol flight, but there wasn't one single crime to investigate, not one single human or animal in need of rescue. So the Rangers headed back to the park and the Headquarters.

"Gadget," Chip requested, "can we do a little detour to the restaurant? I'd like to book a table for tonight." The lack of action had allowed his mind to return to the special event he was so looking forward to. And like always, Chip preferred everything being thoroughly planned.

"Sure," Gadget answered, "the batteries have enough power for another landing and take-off and taking us back to the Headquarters." She slightly changed the direction towards the restaurant where the Rangerwing touched down a few minutes later. But the Rangers were not alone when they entered the restaurant. Two rats were already there, and they didn't only look like crooks, judging by the way they were interacting with the owner of the place.

"Okay, dis is da deal," one of the rats said. "You'se pays fer yer protection, an' we protect ya."

"Protect me from what?" the owner asked.

"From us, fer example," the other rat replied.

"But what shall I pay with? I've got no money. In our part of society, no money is needed." He was right. Money was only used by the underworld and those who strove for belonging to it. Besides, the animals had no currency of their own, if they used any money, it was human coins.

"Aw, what a pity," the first rat said again before his tone got a lot firmer. "In 24 hours, you'se gots da money, or else..."

"Or else what?" Monty shouted. The Rescue Rangers had watched the whole scene, and now it was time for doing something. The rats turned around and saw the Rangers stand there. "Who's gonna protect ya from us?" Monty snarled, clenching his fists.

"You'd better listen to what he says," Chip advised them, "and leave this restaurant now and forever."

"Now and forever! How funny!" The rats laughed for a few seconds before they charged towards the Rangers.

They were tough, but Monty was tougher. His experience in street-fighting, jungle-fighting, outback-fighting and fighting in many more surroundings was his advantage. He who could easily take on Fat Cat—a fact which makes one wonder why he's still afraid of cats—had no difficulties with disposing of the rats by throwing them through the door after a short fight.

Despite their treatment from Monty, they didn't give up and came in once more. "Strike me starkers," Monty commented, "looks like ya 'aven't 'ad enough yet. Ready fer the second round?" The rats answered by attacking him once more—just to be thrown out once more. This time, they decided to leave the restaurant in peace and walked or rather limped away.

The restaurant owner was glad that the Rangers had appeared just in time to save his place from being partially dismantled. "Heaven must have sent you folks! These crooks have stalked me for some days now. How can I ever thank you for what you've done?"

He shook hands with Chip who answered, "You don't have to reward us for that. See, we're the Rescue Rangers, and this is our task. Well, one of them. But there's indeed something, the reason why we've come here. I'd like to book a table for two for tonight."

"Sure, there shouldn't be that much going on. What time exactly?" The owner gave Gadget a glance, guessing correctly who will accompany Chip this evening.

"7:30," Chip replied.

"7:30? No problem, no problem at all."

Chip smiled. "See, now I have to thank you." And leaving the place with the other Rangers, Chip added, "See you in a few hours!"

On the Rangers' way back to the Headquarters, Chip was glad that they had finally done their good deed and helped someone in need of help. In fact, it was only Monty who had done something, but the leader of the Rescue Rangers knew their muscle-mouse well enough by now to

figure that he did it in the name of the whole team. However, Chip's satisfaction was mixed with excitement. He was finally going to have a date with Gadget. She had accepted his invitation, they even had a table booked at a restaurant, and the weather was fine. Only he could cancel the date, and he was too happy about it to waste a single thought on backing down. No, he had waited for this date since the Rangers went on their second case. Something very unusual and very important would have to happen to make him annul it.

The battery power had been notably fading away for the last two minutes of the flight, but the Rangerwing made it safely to the Headquarters. Chip helped Gadget get it into the hangar where she connected it to her self-made battery charger. She had switched from one-way batteries to rechargeable batteries a while ago, so the Rangers didn't have to get new batteries and dispose of the old ones every few days of usage.

"I should really invent a special rechargeable battery for the Rangerwing," Gadget said, still holding the wires in her hands. "As far as I know, I've got most of the parts I'll need at hand."

Concerned about the operability of the Rangers' most important vehicle, and struggling for something to talk about with Gadget, Chip asked, "What kind of changes will that battery bring?"

"Oh, when I stay with the weight of three standard batteries so I won't have to recalibrate the Rangerwing's hover controls, I can increase the charge by an estimated 59% so we won't have to recharge that often. The life cycle will be extended, too, as this battery will allow maintenance." Chip was delighted while Gadget went on talking her technobabble, not only because this modification would improve the Rangers' mobility, but also because he loved to listen to Gadget's voice.

When she finished her rant, she left for her workshop. "Gotta start working on it before I lose my ideas. You know where I am when you need me."

Chip watched her go. He watched her with a bit of worries. What if she simply forgot about the date while inventing? There had been nights which she spent in her workshop because she couldn't sleep. But there had as well been nights which she spent in her workshop because she couldn't stop working on one of her inventions. When the other Rangers found her asleep among tools and parts and waked her up, she told them that she didn't want to leave her recent invention alone before she hadn't fixed this and solved that problem, and then she continued working. They had to bring her breakfast to her workshop, especially the coffee so that she didn't fall asleep again.

And sleeping at night was certainly more important than going out on a date. Chip wondered if Gadget thought so, too. Because if she did, it could get hard to pry her off her work.

However, he decided not to worry too much. Instead, he got himself one of his Sureluck Jones novels and sat down on the couch. He had already read that particular one half a dozen times, but every time he read these novels again, he found new details and learned more about the work of a detective which was astonishing, considering the knowledge he had gathered so far.

The Headquarters were silent now. Monty and Zipper were out to refill the supplies in the kitchen, and Dale had gone flying his hang glider with Foxglove. The only noises which made it to Chip's ears were the ticking of the watches mounted on the walls, Gadget working on the battery or whatever she had decided to work on instead, and the pounding of his own heart. What excited him was not the novel, he knew the outcome. It was rather the expectation. He was to go on a date with

Gadget, the girl of his dreams. He was finally about to go on a date with Gadget. Just him and her and none of the other Rangers.

'No, I won't make myself crazy,' he thought. 'Hm... maybe I should get something from one of the local libraries.' There was still a lot of time before the date. 'Nah, I'd better stay here.' He picked up the Sureluck Jones again and went on reading. In between discovering new details, thoughts crossed his mind like, 'I wonder what Sureluck Jones' first date was like.' But he figured that it would be pointless to compare. Sureluck Jones was a human in Victorian London while he was a chipmunk in 1990's New York City. He didn't even have Sureluck's attire, he had left it behind at Baskerville Hall.

Chip remembered once more what he and the Rangers had done after that case. Macduff had given them the finished manuscript of the last Sureluck Jones novel. Chip had felt honored, but on second thought, he decided against keeping it. It would have been a bit too large to keep it at the Headquarters or at least to haul it across the Atlantic. Besides, he wasn't the only Sureluck Jones fan in the world, and what would they say when they found out that the only specimen of this novel was in the hands of a chipmunk? Besides, wouldn't that be too selfish for the one who led the Rescue Rangers?

The next day, when the rain had stopped, the Rangers had wrapped the manuscript up and sent it to the same publishing house in London which had published the original editions of all other Sureluck Jones novels together with a note from the Rangers themselves. Instead of the manuscript, Chip kept some clippings from both human and rodent newspapers about the formerly unknown novel which had appeared out of nowhere and a rodent-sized edition of the book, printed by a staff of mice in the same publishing house, all of them descendants of those who had produced the rodent-sized editions of all other Sureluck Jones novels. He was sure that this was the best to do.

This reminded him of something. He brought the Sureluck Jones back to his room and got another book. It had been sent to him and arrived a few days ago—from Kingston-on-Hull in England. A letter which came with it revealed the story behind this book. A young squirrel who was a Sureluck Jones fan, too, had written it. But it was no Sureluck Jones fan novel, it was a Rescue Rangers adventure. This guy had researched and researched to find out whatever he could about the Rangers and turned it into a novel which he had printed then. He had kept the first specimen, and he had sent the second one to the original Rangers to thank them for the last Sureluck Jones novel.

'Let's see if this guy has researched thoroughly enough and written us at least roughly in-character.' Chip opened the book and started reading. To his surprise and amazement, it sent the Rangers onto a thrilling case in London's Eastend and the ruins of the Docklands. They were certainly well-known, judging from how close their fictional selves were to their real selves. And the author had just as certainly read masses of criminal novels from several authors, many of whose styles Chip was able to detect in the story. He himself had read a lot more than just Sureluck Jones, but the Victorian detective was still his favorite. Nevertheless, or maybe because of it, this fan creation packed him. It did not only have a lot of suspense, but it also showed a unique atmosphere, partly due to the British English, spiced up with some dialogs in authentic Cockney rhyming slang. This wasn't Howard Bask's feudal Victorian London, this was the modern world of the working class and the decaying remains of the early industrial era behind the veil of the English rain and the just as typical fog.

Again, Gadget's voice called him back to reality. "Chip, are you ready?"

## Chapter 5: Early In The Evening

Chip looked up from the fan-made novel and saw Gadget standing in the room and smiling at him. She had changed her exterior for him—instead of her goggles, she wore a flower in her hair. This was her way of making herself beautiful. But for Chip, she was beautiful in whatever she wore.

'I can't believe she has remembered it by herself. And I would've missed it. Is it already that late?' "What time is it, Gadget?"

"Look for yourself. We've got enough clocks in here."

'Wha- 1 am? Have I read for that long? Uh, no, that's Greenwich. This is not Eastend, Chip, this is not Eastend! Besides, in London's Eastend, the sun wouldn't shine at 1 am either. If it ever shone at all.' He found the right clock, the East Coast one. '7 pm. That's better.' "It's time to go, I think. Shall we?"

"Of course, otherwise we'd both be late on our date or miss it completely."

"Okay," Chip said as he got up from the couch, "then let's go." He went ahead to the front door and held it open for Gadget. Tonight, he wanted to show her his very best manners. And there was it again, that smile, when she walked past him.

It was half an hour to Infinity. Half an hour for Chip of walking side by side with Gadget. The weather was still fine on that early summer day, and the sun was still up high enough in the sky to light the park. But even before they set off, he started to rack his brains to find something to talk about. He knew that when he had to spend all that time in silence, he would have gone insane before they had reached the restaurant.

To make things even more complicated, Gadget hooked onto Chip's arm when they left the tree. He was quite surprised about it because he would never have expected her to do that. She must have read the surprise from his face. "I thought that's what the lady does when accompanying a gentleman on a date," she explained. "But I can take my hand away if you want me to."

"No, no, it's alright, Gadget. Leave your hand where it is. It's just fine." The lack of dating experience was even more visible with Gadget than Chip thought it was with him.

Anyway, he noticed that they had run out of topics to talk about too quickly. And she was not only walking next to him, but he could also feel the warmth of her hand through the sleeve of his aviator jacket. He needed distraction, and he needed it now. So he employed something he knew that it was overused, but he felt that he had no other choice than this method. Small talk.

"I'm glad that we're so lucky with the weather today."

Gadget looked up to the sky. "Yes, it could be worse. Wlachally, it could hardly be better, so it could almost only be worse. I mean, it's likely to rain a lot around this time of the year, and I don't like getting soaked when I'm going out, let alone wading through the mud. Or it could as well snow. Well, of course not in this season and on this hemisphere, but..." Chip listened to her rambling. On

the one hand, this taught him that small talk with Gadget could easily grow very big, but on the other hand, this was far better than the silence he feared. And he loved to hear her voice. "...we could examine the reaction of Monty's tail. Then again, it only reacts on blizzards, and there's a lot more awful weather. Or we could use Nimnul's weather machine to change the weather for the better if necessary. No, it has been destroyed. Well, we wouldn't need it today anyway because I can't see anything one could improve about this weather. It's wonderful the way it is."

'That's what you are, Gadget.' Again, Chip didn't dare say that. What he instead pronounced was a mere, "Indeed."

The topics of their further talk were not of more importance as they walked on through the park. In fact, they didn't even talk all the way. Every once in a while, the disquieting quietness was there.

Finally they arrived at the restaurant. Chip had gotten that far now, and there were only a few steps to enter the place, but as he was to do it as part of a date with Gadget, he was excited as if he was to be the first chipmunk to set his foot upon the moon's surface. He could hardly believe that she had really gone with him that far, that she really was still there.

"Don't you want to go inside, Chip?"

"Um, sure I want. After all, that's what we came for, isn't it?" Chip tried to hide his excitement and uncertainty behind some light joking. He opened the door for Gadget and let her go ahead. It was not only a question of good manners for him, he also felt a bit more secure when he had to follow her.

"Welcome to Infinity," the restaurant owner greeted them.

Chip was a bit irritated. "Say, you do remember that we've been here just a few hours ago?"

"I do remember you, but I thought it was polite to welcome you to my restaurant. Regard it as a saying."

"A saying..." Chip refrained from giving further comments. "Um, which table is reserved for us?"

"The one over there at the window." The restaurant owner pointed to a table with a reservation sign on it.

"Thank you." It wasn't before Chip and Gadget went to their table that Chip noticed another feature of this restaurant. 'A dance floor... like in my dream...' But the dance floor was empty. Nobody was there to dance. But there were quite few guests at the whole restaurant.

The two of them sat down and had a look at the menu. It certainly offered something for about every rodent's taste. "Look here, Chip, they have a cheese chowder, too."

"Let me see." Chip bowed over the table to where Gadget showed him the famous dish on her menu. "I wonder if it's as good as Cheddarhead..." His words faded out when he looked up and realized how close he had come to her.

She looked up, too, smiled and said, "I think I'd like a portion of that cheese chowder."

"Yes, I'll take one, too." He was actually curious if the Infinity kitchen staff was able to whip up something close to what Monty's father had created, and despite being a chipmunk, he had started to like cheese after living together with two mice for about two years now. But he figured that he had just followed Gadget's choice.

Soon, a waitress came to their table and took their orders. But when Chip mentioned the two portions of cheese chowder, she lost her smile. "Sorry, but no cheese chowder today."

"Why not?" Chip wondered.

"We have some trouble with our pressure cooker."

"Well, as long as you haven't blown it up..."

"Er, what do you mean with that?"

"Oh, that's an inside joke between me and my friends."

"May I have a look at your pressure cooker?" Gadget requested. "Maybe I can fix it."

"Sure," the waitress said, "give it a try."

Gadget got up and went to the kitchen together with the waitress, and Chip watched them go. 'Will all my dates with her end up like this? Oh well, I guess I should really get used to that and take her the way she is. She's a mechanic, an engineer, an inventor, and she loves helping.' His train of thoughts was briefly interrupted by Gadget's voice saying, "Golly, I didn't know they make them that small! Well, that should make things easier." He sighed. 'At least she's in her element. Yes, I can say that there's something about this date that has made her happy. Nevertheless, we should steer clear of junkyards and the like on our next dates.'

Some minutes later, she came back from the kitchen. "Sorry for leaving you alone here, Chip, but I couldn't leave their pressure cooker unrepaired, and I really love to have some cheese chowder today."

"So do I, Gadget." Chip couldn't blame her. Help those who are in need of help was what all the Rangers did after all. And a whole lot of that intention had been brought to the group by Gadget. Apart from that, yes, he wanted his portion of cheese chowder, too.

"Don't worry, it works now. It actually turned out to be a little trickier than I thought despite the cooker's small size..." Gadget explained what was wrong with the pressure cooker and what she did to fix it, not even trying to cut down on technical terms. Chip only understood about half of it, but he let her talk. He knew that she appreciated him listening to her. And then there was still her voice... "...shouldn't be too hard to build a pressure cooker of a more appropriate size for Monty. Then again, considering Monty's appetite, I'd make it a bit larger than this one. But it would still simplify using it for him."

"Good idea, Gadget. We need a new pressure cooker anyway since Monty has blown up our last one. And if the new one exploded, it wouldn't make such a mess."

It was the restaurant owner himself who brought the cheese chowder after a while. "Let me say that you guys are a miracle. This afternoon, you've rid us of those crooks. And now you've fixed our pressure cooker. I can hardly believe the luck that came to my restaurant with you."

Gadget smiled. "Aw, it's okay. The Rescue Rangers like to help whenever and wherever they can."

"Say, since you're skilled in repairing things, can you do me another favor?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Our radio doesn't work anymore." He pointed to a tiny yet human-sized AM/FM radio standing near the dance floor.

"I hope it doesn't need soldering," Gadget said as she was about to get up. But Chip laid a hand on her forearm.

"Let's wait with it 'til after dinner. The radio won't run away."

"Well, it doesn't run at all now." She snickered.

The dinner itself went on rather quietly. But this time Chip didn't feel disturbed by the quietness. He and Gadget were both busy having their cheese chowder which distracted them. However, as soon as they had finished, Gadget got up to check the radio.

"Hm, let's start with the easier potential sources of this failure. The batteries. Chip, can you help me?"

"Yes, wait a minute." Chip got up, too, and joined Gadget in moving the radio away from the wall.

The cause for the failure was found quickly when Gadget removed the lid of the battery compartment and revealed two button cells. "Golly, it's no wonder that the radio doesn't work. One of the batteries is inserted the wrong way round." She pried it out of the compartment, put it back in correctly and mounted the lid. "Now let's see if it works."

She turned the radio on—and it did work. The station it received played some easy listening music, but it sounded nice to dance to.

Gadget stood up in front of Chip and smiled at him. "Would you like to dance?"

## Chapter 6: Later In The Evening

Chip had not expected that question. 'Sure I'd like to dance. I haven't had those dancing lessons for nothing. And Clarice loved to dance with me when she had the chance. But Gadget can dance? Has she even accepted the request to fix the radio just to have music for dancing? Nah, that wouldn't be her way. Can she even dance? I mean, she could in my dream...'

He remembered the dream. How she had asked him for a dance, not wholly unlike now. How he had danced with Gadget. And how she had run away after he had revealed his feelings to her. 'Be careful, Chip. Don't make her escape from her first date.'

"Chip? Would you like to dance?"

"Um, sure I'd like to dance with you, Gadget." He took her left hand and led her to the dance floor. "I was just a bit irritated. I'd never have expected that you can dance."

"Dad has taught me to dance some years ago. He said that when I meet the right guy, I'll need it."

'The right guy? Actually, I'm gonna dance with her. Am I what Geegaw has meant with the right guy? Or am I what Gadget would consider the right guy? And what did he say about his daughter's dancing skills?'

Chip decided to keep smiling as they took up their position and started to dance. Quite soon, he figured that his last worry had been unnecessary as Gadget proved that and how well she could dance. Except for Gadget not wearing a dress, it was like in Chip's dreams. But the way the slightly taller mouse looked down at him with her beautiful blue eyes soothed him. He just held her in his arm, felt her hand in his, and swept around on the dance floor perfectly synchronous with her as if they had been dancing together for years. His mind allowed only one question: Why?

"May I ask you a question, Gadget?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Why have you asked me for this dance?"

"I thought that belonged to a date, especially when a dance floor is available. Why, wasn't it okay?"

"Aw, Gadget, you can see that I'm enjoying this dance." 'So it was nothing but lack of experience. She might have heard about it or seen it on TV or so.' "It's wonderful to dance with you, Gadget."

She blushed. "I can say the same, Chip."

Only the waitresses were partly busy while the restaurant owner and the other few guests watched the chipmunk and the mouse dance. They almost forgot the time until Chip happened to

catch a glance out through a window. As the day was near the summer solstice, it hadn't grown dark yet, but the remaining brightness reminded him of something.

"Gadget," he said, "let's leave, there's something I'd like to share with you."

She stopped dancing when he did. "Will I like it?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll like it, otherwise I wouldn't ask you to see it on our date. But we have to go now, it can't wait."

As they left the dance floor and headed for the door, the owner of the place had something to say. "Before you leave, let me express that I've never had guests like you. Your friends have saved me from those crooks, you've brought my pressure cooker and my radio back to life, and I've rarely ever seen anyone use the dance floor except on balls and the like. I hope you enjoyed your evening at Infinity."

"You can be certain that we did," Chip said as he shook his hand, "and that we'll come back soon." At least he hoped so.

Outside, the sky to the east had turned dark blue while it was much more colorful to the west. "Great, we haven't missed anything. Come on, Gadget."

He led her to a tall oak tree and started to climb upon it. He moved upwards rather slowly compared with his usual speed, but he was aware that as a mouse, Gadget wasn't as used to climbing trees as he was as a chipmunk. Her time with the Rescue Rangers and living in a tree had given her a lot of training, though, so it wasn't hard for her to keep up with him.

After climbing for not much more than a minute, they reached a branch with an unblocked view to the west. Chip sat down and offered Gadget the place next to him which she accepted.

"Is this what you wanted to show me, Chip? The sunset over the West Side?"

"Yes, that's it."

Chip expected Gadget to ramble about the sun and the atmosphere now. She probably knew so much more about all that that he would hardly be able to follow her words. But instead, she just said, "It's beautiful."

He allowed himself a glance at her and noticed the dreamy look in her eyes. He wondered what she was thinking now, and what she was dreaming of. The expression on her face, lit by the warm glow of the sinking sun, told him that this mouse was more than the cute but quirky inventor. She looked so peaceful, so content, and yet a bit awestruck by the sunset. This was not the Gadget working on an invention in her mind, neither was it the Gadget mourning for her lost father. The longer he looked at her, the more he figured that of all forms of Gadget he had encountered so far, this was the one he loved the most.

He turned to watch the sun go down and paint the sky in many shades of red and orange behind the seemingly black silhouette that was the skyline. But he was honest to himself when he decided that the most beautiful sunset in the world could in no way be as beautiful as Gadget when she was happy.

The sun had disappeared behind the buildings and probably behind the horizon, yet still making the sky glow. And Chip was still sitting on that branch and pondering whether he should lay an arm around Gadget and let her feel a bit of his affection to make that moment perfect, or whether she already experienced a perfect moment which he might spoil.

And even when all the shades of red were gone after that quick midsummer sunset, and there was just a mere touch of yellow where the sun used to be, he hadn't come to a decision. However, the show was over, most of the dark blue sky would be full of sparkling stars if they weren't in the middle of Manhattan, and most of the light in the park was electric meanwhile.

Chip was looking at Gadget again instead of at the lower parts of the sky, so he felt caught when she turned and looked at him. "It's a pity that it's already over."

"Yes," Chip replied, "and I think it's time to go home now. That is, unless there's still something you'd like to do."

"Uh, no. It's quite late now anyway."

She got up before Chip could offer her a helping hand. He knew that she needed none, he had just loved to show some good manners again. 'Oh well,' he thought, 'maybe next time.'

The way down was the way it always was for rodents—fast and unromantic. Like climbing up, Gadget was meanwhile used to descending from a tree the way Chip and Dale did it. But once they were back on the ground, Chip offered her his arm, she put her hand around his elbow, and they stayed that way while walking back to the Headquarters.

And then there they were, standing in front of the door. Their first date was almost over, and Chip struggled for something to say while they still were alone. But it was Gadget who spoke first.

"Chip," she said with a smile, "thank you for spending this evening with me. I guess I've learned a bit about what a date can be like."

"So you liked it?"

"Of course I liked it. We had a wonderful dinner—well, not wholly as marvelous as the cheese chowder Monty makes, but still great. We had a few wonderful dances, and we shared a wonderful sunset."

Chip was more than glad about that. He had never heard her say "wonderful" so many times within one minute. In fact, he hadn't even ever heard her say "wonderful" so many times within 24 hours.

Now they stood opposite each other. Gadget's smile really rendered Chip numb. He wanted to kiss her. Or at least give her a hug. But he had even run out of words to say to her. He just stood there and did the best he could to enjoy the last few moments that they were on their own.

Finally, he got himself to open the door and let Gadget and himself inside. After all, they couldn't stay outside forever. They found Dale in a situation which grew familiar to them more and more—wrapped up in Foxglove's wings and watching TV.

"Good evening, Dale," Chip greeted his friend who was clearly delighted to see him and Gadget come back. "Are you going for another late night movie session?"

"Not tonight," Dale answered. "There's nothing interesting on TV."

"So how come you're still up?"

"Foxy and I have waited here for you."

Foxglove was curious about the past events, too. "And how was it, your first date?"

"It was wonderful," Gadget summarized it.

"No details?"

"We'll tell you tomorrow," Gadget said, "so Monty and Zipper can hear it, too. Just so much: As far as I can judge it from my bit of experience, it was wonderful."

"Okay Dale, tell Monty to make breakfast for six tomorrow. I'll be there, too," Foxglove announced as she stood up. "Now I need my sleep. Good night, Chip, good night, Gadget."

Dale gave her a kiss good night in the open door before she took off to her usual sleeping-place. "Guess I'll go to bed now, too. Have been up awfully early today. What about you, Chipper?"

"Go ahead, Dale. I'll come in a minute."

After Dale had gone, Chip and Gadget were alone once again. And Chip couldn't do much with this opportunity once again, and apparently, neither could Gadget. So they just stood and smiled at each other until Chip broke the silence.

"Well... good night, Gadget."

"Yes, good night, Chip."

But they didn't leave for their respective rooms yet. Chip noticed the expectation in Gadget's eyes. Apparently, she didn't want the evening to end with a mere "good night" either. So he stepped a bit towards her and carefully gave her a hug. The way she held him told him that what he did was right.

Chip still felt her warmth in his arms when he lay in bed some time later. He wasn't sure if he could sleep that night, but if he could not, it would at least be for a nice reason. He had been on a date with Gadget, it had gone along even better than he had expected, and he certainly had made her happy. She still didn't know what he felt for her, but he promised himself to let her know when the right time has come, and tonight, it was still way too early. It was a wise decision to take that dream seriously.

Gadget, however, lay awake in her bed for a long while. Something was different. Something seemed to have happened that evening. It wasn't the date itself, it was during the date. She didn't

know what it was. And she hadn't experienced anything like that ever before. But whatever it was, she couldn't quit thinking of Chip.

**The End...**

...or is it?