

Full House Fan Fiction

The Joy Of Good Deeds

By: Doug Fowler

This was a book I tried to get published in the book series, but not only has my writing improved a whole lot & I don't feel like overhauling this (when I have my own works) but after 9/11 security at airports is much tighter, and this wouldn't happen, meaning a whole new explanation of how this girl got there would be needed. So, enjoy..

MICHELLE AND FRIENDS - THE JOY OF GOOD DEEDS
Chapter One

Nine-year-old Michelle Tanner lounged in the large, crowded airport terminal. She sat in front of her dad's best friend, Joey Gladstone. She was reading a mystery. Michelle enjoyed many kinds of riddles. Her mind flooded with questions as she tried to discover clues. It being summertime, most of her time was spent playing. However, at times like this, she was glad she loved to read.

She and Joey were waiting for an airplane to arrive. Her Uncle Jesse and his family were returning from Twinsburg, Ohio. Jesse, her Aunt Becky, and their four-year-old twin boys, Nicky and Alex, had flown there for a vacation. They'd attended that city's annual twins festival. Michelle's home had felt very empty without them there.

Suddenly, she heard a voice behind her. "We'll look for your daddy," came the soothing tone.

Michelle glanced up. She shifted to her right. A lady in a dark blue uniform walked with a small girl. Michelle determined that the lady was a flight attendant. The girl appeared to be crying. "I wonder if I can help," she asked herself.

She watched as the two walked to an empty row of seats. It was midway between them and the terminal sign. Apparently, the person they were looking for wasn't there.

Michelle decided to investigate. The tot could probably use some company. "Hey, Joey. I'm going over there for a while," she told the fellow in front of her. She pointed toward the empty seats.

"Okay, but stay in here. Don't go beyond that terminal sign." He indicated a yellow sign behind him. It hung from the ceiling about 100 feet away.

"I won't." Michelle put down her book and jogged toward the girl. The tot sat alone.

Michelle deemed her to be about 3 or 4. She was a couple inches shorter than her cousins. She had long, black hair.

Michelle sat beside the child. She noticed another attendant smiling at her. She grinned

back. She loved making people feel good. Michelle overheard the attendant say she would look for someone. Another attendant remained in the area, glancing over from time to time.

Michelle put an arm around the weeping girl to comfort her. "Hi, I'm Michelle. You look really sad. Are you lost," she inquired.

The child wasn't sure who Michelle was. However, she was too lonely to ask. All she could do was think about how strange everything was. She couldn't figure out how she'd gotten there. "I miss my Daddy," whined the child.

Michelle smiled at the girl. "I was right. The girl's lost." Out loud, she reassured her. "He'll come looking for you, I'm sure," Michelle remarked.

As Michelle looked up, Joey glanced back to check on her. Joey smiled. "I'm sure he's thinking that I'm just like Dad, always hugging and showing love to others. And, he's right."

Michelle thought about the girl seated next to her. The child appeared a little more comfortable, though still puzzled. Michelle imagined that the airport felt quite strange. It was so large, and easy to get lost there.

Michelle understood why the tot would miss a parent so much. She sometimes missed knowing what it was like to have a mom. Michelle's mother, Pam, had died when she was a baby. Her father, Danny Tanner, had needed help raising her and her sisters, Stephanie, now 14, and D.J., now 19. So, her Uncle Jesse and Joey moved in with them. Later, her Uncle Jesse had married. Now her Aunt Becky, Nicky, and Alex also lived there.

The girl looked less fearful. Michelle could tell she made the girl feel more secure. However, the child still whimpered sadly.

The girl's next words stunned Michelle. "He left," the child spoke shyly.

The comment added to Michelle's confusion. "Who, your dog," Michelle wondered. Her face showed incredible puzzlement. "If I was lost, I sure wouldn't be thinking about our dog Comet."

A slight smile emerged on the girl's face. The thought was silly to her. She told her new friend the answer. "No, Daddy." Michelle seemed more like a friend to her all the time.

Michelle was happy that her mistake had caused a small giggle to come through the tears. However, she wondered why anyone would leave this tiny child. Or, had the girl misunderstood her question? That easily could have happened, Michelle determined. She couldn't have been very old, so she might not even grasp things the way Michelle could..

As the girl wept on Michelle's shoulder, the older girl stroked the tot's long, black hair. "It's going to be okay." She asked her where the tot had last seen her dad. She learned the girl had gotten into his car when he was leaving. When he got out, she tried to follow him, but lost him.

Michelle grinned slightly. She thought she understood the problem. She tried to finish the

little girl's story for her. "So," Michelle deduced, "you came into this airport. Then, you asked one of those flight attendants for help, right?"

The other girl lifted her head and looked Michelle in the eye. Whatever her new friend was saying, it was wrong. However, she did seem to know some things. She was older. Perhaps she could help her. "I got on a plane," the girl admitted. She was still teary, but felt more talkative around Michelle. She even added to her story. "There were lots of people."

Now, Michelle was really perplexed. "Uh...you did get off, didn't you? You are from here in San Francisco, right?" The name seemed totally foreign to the girl. Michelle could have named a planet, for all she knew. "Where are you from?" The girl hesitated. Michelle quickly said "California?" The child looked puzzled, with all the question flying at her at once. "The United States?"

Just then, a stewardess walked up to the girls. "Thanks for sitting with her, dear," she said to Michelle. "She came on a plane alone. Apparently, her dad isn't here yet. A stewardess suddenly saw her in a seat. She would only say she wanted to see her daddy. She was in a ticketed seat, so we figured she must know where she's going."

"Actually..." Michelle was going to explain the situation. However, the woman was summoned away for something else before Michelle could talk. Therefore, she simply muttered "you're welcome." Maybe she should try to find out where the flight started.

Glancing around, Michelle noticed a man walking toward them from the hall outside the terminal. The fellow looked rather well dressed. He suddenly called out to the girl. "Come on, I'll take you to your Daddy."

The child stood. Finally, someone knew where her daddy was. However, before she could go anywhere, Michelle quickly grabbed her arm. "Don't go," the older girl whispered. "There something I don't like about this." She decided walking with her over to Joey would be the best thing to do.

The little girl hesitated. She wanted to talk to the strange man. He said "come on, honey, your Daddy's waiting." The child tried to break free of Michelle.

Michelle wouldn't let her go. "That's not her dad, and I don't think he even knows her. I've got to do something!"

Michelle pulled the girl toward her. She gave her a fast hug. She ensured they were a safe distance away. The stranger was a good fifteen feet from them. She considered that quite safe.

However, another problem hit her. "Oh no, I need a girl's name!"

Her mother's was the first to come to mind. She'd been thinking about how she missed her.

It was just like the girl missed her dad. "Oh, Pam," Michelle remarked. She ran toward Joey with the stunned youngster in tow. "I'm so glad we found you. Daddy and I were so worried because you were lost!"

Michelle glanced behind her. "Good, the man's not following. I really surprised him."

Now, the tot felt as confused as she had ever been. She hadn't given her real name to this other girl. But, why would she call her Pam? "What..." came the stunned whisper.

Michelle and the girl walked toward Joey. She lectured the girl slightly. She used a stern but loving voice. Michelle thought she sounded like her dad. "Listen, you never go with someone like that. I don't think he knew your daddy at all."

The tot saw things differently. The man had said he would do it. So, how could he not know her daddy? "But, he said..."

Michelle shushed her as they reached Joey's chair. She noticed the stranger walking slowly toward them. She whispered to Joey. "Joey, you're Dad right now. This is your younger daughter, Pammy."

With a quite curious look, Joey laid the comics section beside him. He gazed at the girls. "I'm what? Who is..."

"I'll explain." Michelle hugged Joey and the startled girl. The tot decided they must be playing some kind of weird game. She didn't know if she wanted to be part of it or not.

So the man could overhear, Michelle spoke loudly. "Yes, Dad, it's so great we found Pammy.

We were worried sick, weren't we?" She turned to the man, motioning for Joey to look at him.

"Pammy was looking for her daddy. But, I found her before this man could take her to you."

She hoped Joey caught her point.

This further startled the tot. Hadn't her friend just said she didn't think he knew her daddy?

She thought that's what she understood. And now, he did? Or was she saying...no, because this man wasn't her daddy. Boy, was she confused! Luckily, so many odd things happened, she had no time to be scared. She took quite a while just thinking about things.

While Joey considered what to say, the man stammered. "Uh....this is your daughter, Sir?"

Still confused, Joey decided he should play along. Michelle had emphasized the words "take

her." In fact, she had over-dramatized them. The little girl decided things were too weird for her

to talk. "Uh, yeah, this here's my daughter Pammy and..." He looked at Michelle, as if to ask her

what her name was supposed to be.

"Donna Jo," Michelle said quickly. This was her oldest sister D.J.'s full name. A name only her family and close friends knew. "But, you can call me Donna."

"Oh...okay. And, I guess you're waiting for your mom?" The girls looked quite different.

Michelle's hair was strawberry blonde. However, one of them could be adopted. They seemed to know each other. He could tell he would get nowhere here. The man left.

All three looked on as the man exited the terminal. He disappeared down the hallway. Joey finally turned to Michelle. "Michelle, what's going on? I feel like we're going to a Halloween party disguised as each other."

Still confused and slightly scared, the girl spoke. She felt shier now that another adult was with her and her friend. Especially since her friend had just acted so odd herself. She spoke to Michelle/Donna. "Why did you call me Pam?"

"Because I didn't get your real name," Michelle stated simply. "And anyway, it's bad to give your real name to strange adults. Unless it's the police."

The girl began to whimper. She didn't want to be bad. And yet, she expected that the man would have taken her to her daddy. She'd wanted to tell him who she was.

Joey looked the little girl in the eye. He turned her face toward him. "Michelle's right. He could have said anything. If he said he was a dog that wouldn't make him one. Even if he started barking."

The child would have believed that a man would bark. Things were quite bizarre here. Much stranger than simply a new place. For one thing, her friend now had two names. Only one could be right. "Michelle?" The tot was quite perplexed. She hoped the older girl could explain. "Are you Michelle or Donna?"

"She's Michelle. Donna's her pretend name," joked Joey. "What's yours?"

"Well..." She recognized the word "pretend." She wondered if people pretended a lot here. Wherever she was. Right now, the most important thing was learning about this place. Finding her way home was also important. However, to feel more secure, she wanted to know more.

With a very shy smile, she tilted her head. She looked at Michelle, who nodded her approval. She determined if Michelle said it was okay, it was. Michelle had hugged her right away, after all.

"My name's Betty."

"Good to meet you, I'm..." Joey decided to skip that explanation for now. "Betty's a pretty name. Why don't you sit and read while I talk to Michelle."

"I don't know how to read." She hoped she wasn't expected to.

"Then look at the pictures." Turning to Michelle, Joey spoke lowly with a puzzled tone.

"Michelle, what's going on? And, why are we pretending to be everyone else?"

Michelle wondered how to explain. She didn't have a lot of facts. So, she stumbled along with what she had. "Well, this girl...Betty got on a plane she wasn't supposed to. She was looking for her dad. I think he ran away." She was guessing that was what was meant by her dad

leaving. Why else would he be at an airport? "She's probably small enough she snuck through a crowd in the terminal. She came here, and now...well, now she's here."

Michelle glanced at the doorway to her left. Her Uncle Jesse, Aunt Becky, Nicky, and Alex were walking toward them. Nicky and Alex rushed up to Michelle, almost knocking her down.

"Whoa, baby, you guys are getting big!"

Betty slunk back in her seat. More people? It was becoming almost as crowded as that big, long place with all the seats. She'd sat down when everyone else did. Then, she'd told the nice lady she was going to see her daddy. Wherever she was now, he wasn't here.

"How was the twinsfest?" Joey wondered.

"It was great," Jesse remarked. "Everyone loved their Elvis outfits." Jesse was a huge fan of singer Elvis Presley. He tried to pass some of that interest on to his kids.

Betty grabbed Michelle's hand and spoke in a whisper. "Who are all these people?"

"Oh, Betty," Michelle remarked suddenly. She had forgotten about her for a moment. "This is my Uncle Jesse and Aunt Becky, and their boys, Nicky and Alex. This is Betty."

"Hi, Betty," came Becky's grinning response. "Did you come with Michelle to get us?"

Betty felt a little more comfortable, though not much. Michelle whispered for her to answer. The young girl responded. She thought she understood the question. How had she come? "I came in a plane."

Jesse scratched his head, unable to make sense of that comment. He tried to explain. "What she means is, right now, did you come with her." Betty shrugged. "Let me try it this way. Do you live in the neighborhood?" Another blank stare came. "That is...our neighborhood." Jesse turned to Becky and asked "are my question too hard?"

Michelle could tell the many queries were quite peculiar to the girl. She was glad to be able to help. She just hoped the tot would feel more talkative.

"Where do you know Michelle from, dear," Becky wanted to know.

Betty wasn't sure what to make of all those questions. She also had no idea what their neighborhood was. She knew where she'd met Michelle, though. "From here," spoke Betty. "I met her Daddy, too."

Becky raised her eyebrows. "How could she meet Danny? I thought he was working on our show." Danny and Becky hosted a television show called "Wake Up, San Francisco."

Joey explained. "She thinks I'm Danny."

As Jesse looked more confused, Betty pointed to Michelle. Maybe this strange man needed to know about how Michelle pretended. "She was Michelle, then she was Donna Jo."

Jesse was completely bewildered now. "Michelle was D.J.?"

Betty continued as Jesse shook his head. "I was Pammy. Now I'm Betty again." Puzzled, the girl turned to Michelle. She wasn't sure why the pretending happened. However, she wanted to

be prepared. "Will I be Pammy again?"

"Only if a stranger comes," Joey told her.

Betty turned to him. She tried to get the names straight. "You're Michelle's Daddy?"

"Actually, I just pretended to be. I'm really his friend Joey. But I'm like a daddy to Michelle."

Joey offered to help Jesse get the family's bags, and the men left. The twins told Michelle all about their trip.

Betty sat and thought for a moment. More pretending? Why would they do this? And where was she? It had taken a long time to get there. She didn't know how long. She thought she even fell asleep for a short time. All she knew was, it was getting curiouser and curiouser.

Her eyes widened abruptly. That reminded her of something. Of course! Her face brightened immensely. "I get it now," she shouted for the terminal to hear. Becky politely shushed her.

Michelle asked Betty if she remembered something about her home. Hopefully, something reminded her of where she lived.

"No," Betty remarked. "I know where I am." She felt much better now. She still wanted to get home. However, at least she knew where she was. That greatly boosted her confidence.

"Good, she knows where San Francisco is," pondered Michelle. "So you've been here before," Michelle asked her.

Betty thought Michelle wondered how she knew her location. "Mommy reads me stories."

Michelle opened her mouth to say something, paused a couple seconds, then slowly closed it.

She struggled to remember childrens' stories that took place in San Francisco.

"Do you know of any stories from here, Aunt Becky?"

Becky seemed to realize what the girl meant. "I don't think she means San Francisco. From how crazy this has been, she might think she's in a make-believe place."

Betty hadn't paid attention to that dialogue. She spoke again. "Mommy reads me Alice in Wonderland every night."

Becky nodded. "I had it down to that or The Wizard of Oz."

Michelle understood now. It probably did seem very curious. After all, Betty didn't even mean to come here. It likely felt like she went down Alice's rabbit hole, or flew through that tornado with Dorothy.

The thought made Michelle feel even worse for the lost girl. She hoped Betty could help with her address, or she might never find her way back home.

Chapter Three

Joey and Jesse returned with everyone's baggage. A policeman trailed closely. Joey told the group he'd spoken with security. "This is Officer Harris," he explained, introducing the new

fellow. "I told the police here the complete story. The plane could have made a few stops with her."

Michelle was greatly concerned for her new friend. By this time, Betty was coloring in one of the twins' books. "But, what does that mean?"

Jesse knelt down to Michelle's level. "It's gonna take some time to find her folks."

The policeman sat next to Betty. "Do you know where you live, honey?" She glanced at the fellow. She looked unsure of whether or how to answer.

Michelle decided the policeman seemed like just another stranger. But she had made friends with Betty. She figured Betty would talk to her. So, Michelle asked "what's your Mommy's name?"

"Mommy."

"I should have known." She chuckled slightly. Her experience with mysteries might be useful.

"What do others call your Mommy?" Since the girl paused, Michelle tried another fast question.

"Who or what do you miss most?"

With a very sad face, the girl began to think of her home. She'd been away for a while. There were quite a few people and things she missed. One stood out. She cried lowly. "Winston."

"Her mother's name is Winston?" kidded Joey.

Michelle asked if there was a town in North Carolina called Winston-Salem. "I think I remember reading about it."

Harris nodded, grinning broadly. "Winston" could have been the answer to several questions, But, it might be the city. "The flight started from there. We'll contact the authorities there." He added that they needed to find her a place to stay.

Michelle quickly spoke up, holding the girl's hand. "Officer, I'm just about the only friend she's got. She needs to come home with us."

Officer Harris smiled at Michelle. "Actually..."

Michelle didn't give her Uncle Jesse or Joey any chance to respond. "Oh, great! We'll take good care of her." She was glad to see the men slowly nod in agreement. "Oh, boy, Betty, you get to stay at our house," she declared, hugging the still stunned girl. As if their house wasn't full enough normally, now they would have a visitor.

Betty grinned shyly. She didn't remember anything like this in Alice in Wonderland. But, it still seemed very close. Now, she might be going to the most curious place of all. She decided it could be lots of fun. As long as she stuck with Michelle.

"Hey, everyone, I'm home," shouted Danny Tanner as he came through the front door that afternoon. Michelle and the twins all tried to hug him at once, and he returned the hugs. Betty sat shyly on the couch, away from the crowd. She'd been in the Tanner home a couple hours.

However, she was still timid. She stayed close to Michelle when she could.

"Dad," Michelle told him, "I've got some really exciting news."

Before Danny could speak, Betty looked at Michelle. She needed to know what was happening. After all, things had gotten quite strange at the airport. They could be here, too. "Is that your Daddy, or are you pretending?"

"What?" Danny looked over at the couch. He noticed a little girl he'd never seen. And, what was this about pretending? With a goofy grin, he asked "okay, what did I miss?"

"Well, you see..." Joey tried to imagine an easy way to explain things, but couldn't. "Tell him, Jess." He held an arm out, indicating that Jesse should go forward.

Jesse made a similar motion toward Danny. "No, you tell him. You saw more of it."

"Maybe we should let Michelle tell him," suggested Joey.

Michelle was glad someone had suggested that. She was excited to introduce their guest. While she hadn't asked her dad, she was very hopeful he'd approve. After all, he had taught her to be nice to everyone. Plus, the other adults in the house had agreed. She was glad it was summertime, so she could spend time with her, too.

Before she could get a word out, D.J. ran in the door. She carried several shopping bags. Michelle wished she could get Betty used to people one at a time. It would be a lot easier for her new friend.

"Hey, everyone, welcome home! I got some great college stuff," remarked D.J..

The small child knew something odd would happen. And, it had. Still more people coming in the door. Did it ever stop? "Who is she," Betty wanted to know.

Michelle walked over to take Betty's hand. She led the tot to the new arrivals. Betty looked slightly less frightened than when Jesse and his family had come. Being in a house felt more normal. Plus, only one person entered at a time here. "Betty, I'd like you to meet my dad and my oldest sister, D.J.. Guys, this is Betty."

"Hi," came D.J. as she knelt down to Betty's level. "Are you new here?"

With her head down, Betty spoke in a near whisper. "I came today." She still felt shy. She hoped that was what the question meant, but she wasn't really sure.

D.J. assumed she was with a family that had just moved in down the street. She spoke joyfully. "Well, welcome, you're going to meet lots of great friends here."

The happy voice relieved Betty. She described her adventures so far. "I met Joey, he was Daddy. Michelle was Donna Jo. Who else was there?" Betty gazed at all the people, trying to make sense of things. She still considered the name changing to be a funny game. However, she looked quite confused as she studied the crowd. She'd heard everyone's name but one.

"Where's Pammy?"

Danny asked "who?"

She gazed around some more. "Pammy. We're all being each other. I was Pammy. Who's Pammy?"

A sad silence hung over them for several seconds. Everyone looked at each other. Finally, D.J. sighed and spoke. "Pam was our mother. She died in a car accident."

Betty looked sorrowful. "Oh." She could think of little else to say. She wished she could make them feel better.

"Hey, it's okay," came D.J. as she put an arm on the new girl's shoulder. The smile relieved Betty. She was glad the sad faces were disappearing. "She's in a far better place. We have lots of fun here. There's lots of people, and lots of love."

Betty grinned at D.J. She'd been told Michelle had been D.J. That made sense to her. They each had warm, comforting smiles. She still felt safest around Michelle, though.

Danny wondered "how did you get to be Pam? Which is one of numerous questions I have," he told Michelle.

"Okay, Dad." Michelle stepped in front of him. He didn't seem upset, only very puzzled. Still, she felt it best to add some humor. "Do you want the book or the movie version?"

"I take it this is a long story?" She nodded. "Give me the sneak preview version."

Michelle grinned, confident she had done the right thing. After all, one was supposed to be kind and loving to others. She knew he'd be very proud. "Betty's dad ran away. She stowed away in his car, got out at the airport, then lost him. She got on a plane. Nobody saw her until she was on the plane. A flight attendant asked who she was. She would only say she wanted to see her Daddy. They assumed she knew to come here, since she wouldn't say any more. She was too shy to answer questions, so she just got off here."

Joey added an explanation of the stranger incident. "Michelle thought fast on her feet, so we all started being everyone else."

"Okay, now I get it - I think." Danny asked if any police had been called.

"They're doing a search for missing children here and in North Carolina," Jesse reported.

Michelle enjoyed solving mysteries. She was proud to have discovered the answer to this one.

"She said she missed Winston. I looked at the road atlas on our way home, and I was right. Winston-Salem is in North Carolina."

"How old is she," Danny wanted to know.

Michelle looked slightly guilty. Her dad asked more questions than she expected. She hadn't thought to discover a number of helpful facts. "We hadn't gotten that far," admitted Michelle, shrugging her shoulders.

"I'm glad you got as far as her first name," Michelle's dad considered aloud. "And did you check for identification? Or make sure she wasn't pretending?"

Michelle looked down. "Actually, I didn't even think of asking that. And I'm the one who said she could stay here first. Uncle Jesse and Joey just agreed later." She hoped he wasn't mad. Luckily, he really only sounded worried. "But why? I did the right thing by helping someone."

"You said she could..." Danny knelt down to Michelle's level. "Honey, I'm delighted to see

how you cared about her. There are emergency places, called foster families, where children like Betty can be placed, though."

Michelle hadn't known that. However, she insisted that Betty needed to be with a friend. She couldn't imagine anyone being so scared or alone.

Danny paused to think for a second. He spoke proudly. "I understand. I'm glad the lessons about love and compassion sink in like this. That makes me feel great." With some reluctance in his voice, he assured her that he wouldn't mind them keeping Betty.

However, his smile quickly disappeared. His face and tone became quite serious. "It's not like an older stranger. It's okay to take someone like Betty into your home. Understand there's a price you pay when you open your home up, though."

"Like what?"

"For instance, did you think about sleeping arrangements?" She hadn't. Danny demonstrated how well he took control of situations. He quickly explained what would happen. "She's going to sleep with you. You'll need to get your sleeping bag out from camp. And if she's as attached to you as it looks, she's going to need to be with you wherever you go. Which includes horseback riding if you go tomorrow. That means one of us will go with you." He named several other conditions, and explained that Michelle needed to go along with all of these for Betty to stay.

Michelle hadn't considered those things. She loved the hustle and bustle of her large family. However, she also enjoyed the quiet of horseback riding with just her friends. She hadn't thought that Betty would even want to come along.

There was a whole lot more to some good deeds than she'd thought. As she went upstairs to pull out her sleeping bag, she was stunned as to just how much went into helping others.

Chapter Four

Michelle called her best friends, Mandy Metz and Cassie Wilkins. She wanted to introduce them to Betty. She also wanted them to know they would have company when horseback riding the next day. Michelle then took Betty down to Joey's room. She found that Betty felt somewhat at ease with Joey. So, she went upstairs to wait for her friends.

Her dad entered the living room once the girls arrived. Danny relayed bad news about the search. He explained somberly. "I'm sorry, honey, but whatever Winston is, Winston is not in

North Carolina."

"But Dad," Michelle complained, "Winston-Salem is in North Carolina."

"At least it was the last time I looked," Mandy remarked.

"I'm not talking about Winston-Salem in North Carolina," Danny explained carefully.

"That's the only Winston-Salem I know," Michelle told everyone.

"Unless...Dad, could there

be two Winston-Salems?" Her mind was still set on the town being the "Winston" in question.

Danny chuckled as he put a hand on Michelle's shoulder. "I know. You want it to be the town. Then it would be easy to find Betty's home. But, no missing children in that whole area match Betty's description."

Michelle nodded sadly. Her dad was probably right. She'd wished to find her new friend's home quickly. However, it would likely take a lot longer.

Also, she wondered if her guess was really logical. Michelle could recite her name and address

at that age. However, she never would have known her city. So, this girl likely would not think

of her home town. Winston could be the street. However, she wasn't sure how many streets in

the country were named Winston. There could be thousands, for all she knew.

She would not give up easily, though. Michelle imagined several ways to get information from

the girl. She knew adults were trying to help, too. She expected her dad to also have ideas.

"Okay, what next?"

"We're checking with a national hotline for missing children," Danny told her.

Michelle wondered if they had a national hotline for found children.

"That's the place to tell them what happened."

Danny wished he could cheer his youngest. She held such faith that this occurred often.

However, he needed to tell the truth. "It doesn't usually work this way.

Listen, you girls play

with Betty. See if you can learn more."

Cassie explained that she'd been invited for dinner. "My mom said it was okay. I called her."

Mandy reported the same thing.

"Good. Michelle told me she could use some help. We have so many places set, why not add

a couple? You can assist Michelle with the salads." Dinnertime was a family effort at the

Tanners. Any friends invited over had to assist in part of the meal.

Cassie and Mandy went into the study. Michelle ran to Joey's room. Betty was cautiously

putting her hands in several of the puppets when Michelle arrived. She had enjoyed listening to

Joey make them talk.

Joey explained he and Betty had talked a little about the puppets. However, Betty had said

nothing about herself yet.

Michelle hummed. "She might feel comfortable talking to an animal. But, how do I get her

to talk to one?"

Suddenly, she snapped her fingers. It was worth a try. "Come on, Betty. I'll show you

someone you can talk to. Maybe he can help us learn more about you."

Michelle left her alone a couple minutes later. She gave Betty time to get used to the animal she'd shown her.

Betty examined the stuffed bear. It was a very dark brown one. It wore a detective's outfit. It had on a trenchcoat, hat, and scarf. She spoke to it and cried lowly for several moments. She didn't notice the three teenage girls standing in the bedroom doorway.

Coming out of the bathroom, Michelle chuckled. Stephanie, who shared Michelle's room, stood with her friends Allie and Darcy. Stephanie's face held intense confusion. The three stared at Betty as she sat on Stephanie's bed and wept.

The bear Betty held was named Mr. Bear. Stephanie received it from their mother when Michelle was born. This was mere months before Pam died. It was still one of Stephanie's most treasured possessions. She just didn't talk to it or play with it like she once did.

Stephanie turned to face Michelle. "Uh, Michelle..." She seemed to be struggling over what to say. "There's a...girl I've never seen in my life holding Mr. Bear and talking to him. Do you know anything about this?" The voice held a hint of accusation.

Michelle laughed at her confusion. "Hey, Steph, come on in." They walked inside. "Betty, this is my sister Stephanie and her friends Allie and Darcy. This is Betty. She needed to talk to someone."

Stephanie greeted her warmly. Betty expected this. The people were friendly here, at least. But, once again, they just kept coming. She thought one looked a little like a babysitter back home. Not much, though.

The teens excused themselves. The four older girls walked out into the hall. "Michelle," came her sister in a stunned tone. "Why is she talking to Mr. Bear?"

Michelle couldn't think of a quick explanation. She simply told the others "she's lost, and she needs someone while she's here."

"Well, how far away could she live," Stephanie wondered.

Michelle decided it was still possible. "Maybe North Carolina."

Allie looked dumbfounded. "Now I'm lost. That's thousands of miles away!"

Michelle explained for the shocked teens. "Look, she got on a plane she wasn't supposed to. She's a long way from home. She needs a friend."

"There are dozens of stuffed animals in there between the two of us," noted Stephanie with agitation. She didn't like anyone holding Mr. Bear except her or her sister. Especially not without her permission. "Why can't she talk with one of the others?"

Michelle rolled her eyes and spoke wearily. "Steph, she needs someone special. We don't know where her home is, and she's too scared to talk to a person. Not just any animal will do. She needs the one Dad says you held and talked to and cried with all the time right after Mom died. She needs the one you call a friend, not just a bear."

"She's got you there," teased Darcy.

Stephanie couldn't help but admire her sister's unique logic. She grinned broadly. "I guess

you have a point. It's a strange one. But, it is a point."

Betty walked out of the room carrying Mr. Bear in one arm. She wanted to meet Michelle's friends. She knew they were coming soon. She felt more comfortable walking around with her new friend, Mr. Bear.

Michelle hoped Stephanie wouldn't take Mr. Bear away from the girl. Betty needed all the help she could get.

Stephanie got down to the little girl's level. "Oh, I see you found the President of Mr. Bear and Associates." Betty gave her a confused look. Was this more pretending? Or was this bear actually a president? Wasn't that someone who ran a country?

Stephanie continued speaking. "You mean Michelle didn't tell you about Mr. Bear's business? Michelle, I'm shocked!" Stephanie pretended to sound insulted.

Michelle assumed she was kidding. She had no idea what Stephanie meant. It was Michelle's turn to be dumbfounded. She followed Stephanie as the older girl led Betty and Mr. Bear back into their room.

Stephanie sat on the floor with Betty. The little girl studied the newcomer's face. Would she hear a story about this bear? She remembered sitting on the floor like this for stories at home or in nursery school. Betty listened intently. "See, Mr. Bear is so good at helping that he runs this great big company. It has all these other animals in it." Betty was impressed. "He even has his own school. The Academy of Stuffed Animal Professionals - when you need help ASAP, that's their motto."

Betty's eyes grew wide. She thought only people had schools. This was like Wonderland.

Michelle mouthed the word "what?" "She's inventing lots of cool stuff, but why?"

Stephanie explained. "Mr. Bear is great when someone you love dies. He's my personal friend, though." She grabbed a small rabbit off one of Michelle's display shelves. "Mr. Bear talks to children. He finds out which animal is best for each problem. And he tells me Buddy the Rabbit is even better than Mr. Bear for children who are lost a long way from home." Betty took the rabbit warily, then began cuddling it as Stephanie put Mr. Bear back.

Michelle took Betty and Buddy out of their room. She assured Betty Stephanie was right. She hadn't wished to bug her sister, but she'd wanted to make sure Betty trusted one of their animals. Telling her about Mr. Bear seemed like the best idea. She was glad Stephanie ad libbed that part about the business.

She turned back and thanked her. "She'll make a great Mom someday. I just hope I can help Betty that well now."

Chapter Five

Michelle led Betty and Buddy into the study. "Come on into my dad's office. My friends and I want to show you something."

Betty hurriedly followed Michelle. Bashful around the others, she had quickly learned to trust Michelle. She hoped the new children she was about to meet didn't yell and scream like Nicky and Alex had right away. She wouldn't have minded it as much now, though. Her friend's house wasn't as big and crowded as the airport.

Michelle introduced her to Cassie and Mandy. Betty smiled while holding Buddy tightly. The animal had been taken off of Michelle's shelf, but Michelle didn't mind. It was just one more sacrifice to make Betty feel comfortable. Besides, she'd done the same thing to Stephanie.

Still the list of things she'd done - or would do - grew by the hour. She still held faith it would work out well, though. She couldn't afford not to have that faith.

Her friends had laid a large map of the United States on the desk. "I want to show you where we are," Michelle told the tot. She pointed to a spot on the left. "That's San Francisco. That's where we are right now."

"Okay." She agreed to be polite. She wondered if San Francisco was part of Wonderland. It might be a separate place. That would explain why she saw no other Wonderland characters.

"Does anything on this map look familiar," Michelle wanted to know. Not sure if the girl understood, she continued. "Have you seen anything like this before?" She'd asked lots of questions at once sometimes. However, as she scratched her head, she knew one of them should provide a quick answer.

Betty studied the odd shape for a few seconds. She tried to remember if she'd ever seen such a shape. Or been shown anything on it. It looked unusual. Especially with one part. It stuck out like a thumb.

Finally, her eyes brightened. She pointed to the thumb. "I know that!"

Michelle's face brightened. She figured Betty must be from Florida. "What about it?"

"Mommy showed me once. I saw Mickey Mouse there. And Alice."

Cassie shook her head. Her brown hair bounced as she mumbled. "Great, she remembered it from a vacation."

Michelle countered that they could still live near there. The best way to find out would be to see how they'd gotten there. "What did you go in to get to Disneyworld?"

Betty remembered a big parking lot. "A car."

"Anything before a car," Mandy wondered aloud. Mandy, like Michelle, loved mysteries.

Michelle hoped she could help find clues, or think of questions about the clues.

Betty pursed her lips. She tried hard to remember. She thought she'd been in something like what she'd been in that day. "A plane," came the tot after several moments.

Michelle sighed. It had been worth the try. However, this was not the easiest way to find Betty's home. "Well, we've ruled out Orlando as her home. Only a hundred thousand cities left in the country."

Cassie wasn't into mysteries like the other two. Still, she could assist in many things. She even came up with questions. She asked Betty where her dad worked.

"Good question," pondered Michelle. "I hadn't thought of his leaving on a business trip, either."

The small girl looked downcast. "He lost his job," Betty spoke sadly. When asked how, she replied: "His place laid down."

The girls exchanged baffled looks. Michelle couldn't comprehend that statement. Finally, Mandy guessed. "You mean he got laid off?"

"That's it," Betty spoke somewhat confidently.

Michelle nodded. Nobody in her family worked at a plant where layoffs happened. No wonder she hadn't guessed that. Thoughts of the father caused Michelle to remember an earlier comment. She wanted to make sure she recalled correctly. "When you said your daddy left...or did he run away? What did your daddy say he would do?"

Betty was glad Michelle asked easy questions. She remembered just what he said. "He said he was going."

"Like, for longer than Sesame Street lasts?" She nodded slowly. "Maybe a few days?" Another sad nod came. Michelle decided it was best to discuss more pleasant things. She hated seeing her new friend depressed.

"Betty really loves Alice in Wonderland," Michelle told her friends. Cassie would be especially interested in that information.

Cassie clasped her hands together. "Betty, I love that book, too. What's your favorite part?"

Michelle was glad to see Betty excited. The tot felt good seeing someone with the same interests. She was feeling more secure all the time. "My Mommy does a great rabbit. Oooh, I'm late, I'm late, I'm late," she spoke in a quick, deep voice. "That's how she talks."

Michelle grinned as Cassie happily described her seventh birthday party. Mandy wished she had been able to go. Her family had lived in New Jersey then.

"It was a Mad Hatter's Tea Party," Cassie spoke happily. "We all dressed as different characters. I was Alice. Joey entertained as the Mad Hatter, and we had tea and cupcakes. Then we played games like croquet. We did some of the other stuff that Alice did, too. You should have seen when we opened presents. It was like the trial. We all gave silly clues about what each present was." Michelle told Betty it was the best birthday party she'd ever attended.

Betty clapped excitedly. "I hope I have a party like that on the ninth."

"Why, what's the ninth," Mandy wanted to know.

"My birthday," came the reply with a "duhhuh" look. How could she not know that?

Michelle asked if she meant the ninth of this month. "Because that's tomorrow."

"Yes, I am going to be four." She still didn't give out much information. However, she felt like giving more and more to the girls. They weren't quite her age. However, they were still just like playmates back home. Her mind was still quite young, though. She couldn't yet grasp that these playmates didn't know everything about her. So, she didn't offer lots of help. And yet, they needed to learn. It would help them find Betty's home a lot faster.

Michelle told Betty to find out more about Cassie's party. She motioned Mandy over to the other side of the room. "Mandy, did you hear that," whispered Michelle. "We might not find her parents in time. We need to figure out a way to give her a birthday party."

Chapter Six

Michelle helped Betty place napkins around the kitchen table. Cassie and Mandy made salads.

A card table was brought up from the basement. It would be placed beside the regular kitchen table. More chairs were added, as well.

"Wow," declared Cassie. "It's like Thanksgiving at my grandma's!"

Michelle grinned. She handed spoons to Betty. "It feels like Thanksgiving every night here."

Michelle set sharp utensils around the table herself. Betty placed the spoons. Joey crumpled up a wet paper towel. He tossed it into the trash can on the first shot. Nicky and Alex helped arrange the chairs and carry plastic plates to the table. The adults prepared the meal and did other chores.

Michelle decided the subject of dinner could provide a clue or two. Maybe it would remind

Betty of her home. "Do you have big Thanksgiving dinners at your house," Michelle asked Betty.

She shook her head. "Where do you go?"

"Grandma's." Betty seemed much shier all of a sudden. The activity appeared as wild as at the airport. She waited for Michelle's instructions. She needed to follow her, because it was getting quite confused again. She liked it better when just she and her friends had been together.

Danny noticed Betty's bashfulness. To Michelle's concerned look, her father revealed the problem. "I think she's a little scared by all these other people at one time."

Mandy took the little girl's hand. "Well, don't worry, Betty, we'll give you a seat right between Michelle and I. I've got just as a big family in my house." Mandy walked Betty over to a seat and sat with her.

Betty felt confident. She was eating with her new playmates. They seemed like a lot of fun.

They had helped her get used to this new place fast. If it weren't for this huge crowd, it would be

perfect. She didn't know if there were this many at her Grandma's, though. Because she was so young, she had trouble keeping all the names straight in her mind.

Danny grinned broadly as he observed Michelle, Mandy, and Cassie helping Betty. Grated cheese was passed to the girl. Mandy helped her put some on her salad. Cassie cut a slice of meat loaf for her. Michelle grabbed Betty's plate. She plopped potatoes onto it while Betty ate her salad.

Michelle couldn't help but notice her dad whispering to her Uncle Jesse. She wanted to be in on whatever secret was being passed. "What, Dad?"

Danny looked surprised that his daughter had caught him. He quickly explained. "I was just telling your Uncle Jesse something. You three remind me of him and Joey and I with you girls."

The rest of the family finished placing everything on the table. All sat down.

Jesse spoke lovingly as he pulled in his seat. "You know what, munchkin," he spoke, using one of Michelle's favorite nicknames. "Fifteen years from now, I bet you, Cassie and Mandy will be helping each other with your kids."

"Better make it twenty, Jess," remarked Danny. Michelle would be near thirty by then. Michelle's dad sometimes was very protective. He found it hard to see his daughters grow up. Therefore, he hoped Michelle waited till she was at least thirty before having children.

Michelle didn't care. Both times were an incredibly long way away to her. "Whenever it is, I sure hope we do. That'd be so cool!" Her friends agreed.

Betty didn't speak much at the start of dinner. She was even reluctant to discuss cartoon characters with Joey. She simply ate and listened. It was quite noisy with all the talking. How would she understand it all? She hoped Michelle told her anything important.

Michelle brought up one of the subjects which bugged her. "Guys, let's all try to figure out who or what Winston is."

D.J. raised her eyebrows. "You still think that could be a clue?"

"It might be." She rattled off a list she'd formed in her head. "It could be a brother, a neighbor kid, or a pet. Anyone have other ideas?"

"A stuffed animal," spoke Nicky.

"Why didn't I think of that," Michelle wondered. She looked frustrated for a split second.

Betty didn't seem to respond when Nicky said it, though.

Alex suggested it was an imaginary friend.

Stephanie agreed. "That makes sense. Just like Glen was for you for a while."

Michelle thought hard. She remembered having Glen for a short time. However, she soon shook her head. She doubted that could be the answer. "Steph, I only had him when preschool ended one summer. I didn't see my friends, so I made one. She's even more lonesome.

Wouldn't she get an imaginary friend here, instead of missing him?"

D.J. nodded. "Good point. Mine stayed with me longer, too."

"This should put a smile on that face," Michelle decided. She looked at Betty. "Guess what

D.J.'s imaginary friend was called," she asked in a silly voice. She wished Betty felt more at home than she seemed right now. Sadly, even if someone guessed what Winston was, she might not answer.

The little girl shrugged. She looked confused. She wasn't sure what to guess. At least there weren't lots of people talking at once, though. She could follow this conversation easier.

D.J. told them. "Norton the Duck was my imaginary friend." A slight grin appeared on Betty's face.

Cassie asked Mr. Tanner how long he'd kept his imaginary friend. "On and off for a year, just like D.J.'s. My imaginary friend was Terry the Talking Washcloth."

Betty began giggling. She accidentally spit out a bite of potato.

Michelle smiled. This was the cheerful face she'd seen when only she and her friends played with Betty.

Mandy patted Betty on the back. "We knew you could smile for us."

Michelle's Aunt Becky offered a different idea. "This reminds me of a movie named Citizen Kane.' At the end of various scenes the main character keeps saying Rosebud.' Part of the fun is to figure out who or what Rosebud' was."

Michelle leaned forward. Maybe her Aunt Becky had solved the puzzle! "What was it?"

"His horse," guessed Mandy.

Cassie shook her head. "How about his dog?"

Stephanie grinned and leaned forward excitedly. "She knows the answer," thought Michelle.

Before Becky could tell them, Stephanie blurted "Rosebud' was his sled." She'd learned the answer playing Trivial Pursuit with D.J. and her friends.

The entire table, except for Becky, Danny, and the two oldest girls, laughed. Betty couldn't help but join. Michelle spoke while giggling. "Yeah, right, like Winston is Betty's sled."

Becky and Danny assured her it was true of the movie. "This fellow was about five when he got a sled, and he named it Rosebud,'" Becky told them.

"Oh, yeah," declared Joey. A light bulb seemed to go on over his head. "I remember that now, because Lucy spoiled it for Linus in one Peanuts' comic strip."

Jesse continued to chuckle. "Come on, Becky," he kidded his wife. "Who would name a sled?"

"Boys would name anything. You talk to your hair, after all." This habit arose during the days that Jesse played in a band.

The idea of talking to hair brought more giggles from Betty. This might not be Wonderland.

But, parts were just as silly. First the name changes. Then, bears with schools. Now, people talking to hair.

Michelle was glad to see the tot enjoying herself. She knew it would happen sometime. Their dinners were always fun and lively.

Cassie returned to the previous subject. "Who was your imaginary friend, Stephanie?"

"I never really had one, except for Mr. Bear. But, I talked to him quite a bit. Especially soon after Mom died."

Soon the group was finished and clearing the table. Michelle helped Betty take her dirty dishes to the sink. She then walked up to Danny. "Can we have an 'Alice in Wonderland' birthday party tomorrow? We found out Betty's turning four." She wished the girl had revealed more to the bear or to the rabbit while they were playing. However, she hadn't. Maybe later she would.

Danny smiled. He turned his attention away from the dishes and gave it all to Michelle.

"That's a big task, on such short notice. Are you willing to stay home from horseback riding to help?" She wasn't sure. "Just having all these people will feel like a party to her."

"Can we at least get her a cake? Please?"

"We can do that much. But maybe her parents will be found by then. Talk to her some more.

I'm sure my little Nancy Drew can find something."

Michelle smiled. Her dad always came up with loving, affectionate nicknames. She thanked him and left. She was starting to wonder if she could find anything, though. So far, all the things she'd tried had led nowhere.

Chapter Seven

Michelle, Mandy, and Cassie were reading Alice in Wonderland to Betty in Michelle's room.

The girls did funny voices. Michelle held Betty on her lap and read most of the words.

Michelle grinned. She remember her sisters doing this quite often for her. She was not only glad to help someone, but also glad to have a younger girl in the house.

Suddenly, thinking of her sisters gave Michelle an idea. "Betty, what's the name of Alice's older sister?" she asked.

"She doesn't..." began Cassie before Michelle shushed her. Cassie and Mandy shot confused looks at Michelle, then looked at each other.

The little girl thought a moment. She tried to recall her mother reading. She thought the only name mentioned was Alice. After a moment, Betty replied. "She doesn't have a name."

"Not even when someone reads to you," Michelle wondered. Of course, Betty couldn't read.

But, she could have gotten her answer from a video.

Mandy's eyes lit up. Now, she understood the purpose of the question.

Not that it mattered. The little girl knew no other name was mentioned. She shook her head. Michelle sighed.

"What was that about," Cassie wanted to know.

"She's an only child", pondered Michelle. "I can see why she doesn't get it." She couldn't help but impersonate Sherlock Holmes. Her British accent was moderately good. "Elementary, my dear Wilkins." The oldest girls laughed.

In a normal voice, Michelle continued. "Stephanie and D.J. loved reading it to me. Each would make herself the older sister in the story. I thought if Betty had an older sister, we could learn her name that way. It could have even been her mom's name."

"Hey, clever," Cassie remarked loudly. She held up her hand to give Michelle a high five.

Michelle slapped her friend's hand very weakly. She sounded and felt discouraged. "Yeah, I guess. I'd feel a lot more clever if one of my ideas really worked."

"Hey, we've gotta find something," Mandy remarked. "She's talking more now that we're alone with her."

Michelle agreed. "There sure were lots of people at supper, huh?"

Betty nodded. "I never saw so many at one table."

Cassie asked about Thanksgiving. It was too far away for Betty to recall. She didn't see her grandma that often. Only a couple times a year.

"What about at home," Michelle wanted to know. "How many eat there?"

Betty counted on her fingers. It helped her keep numbers straight. "Let's see. There's me, and Mommy, and Daddy, and Winston. That's four."

Michelle smiled. Back to Winston. Now, it was time to play Twenty Questions. She thought she could figure it out in less than five. "Does Winston eat the same food you do?"

Betty shook her head. Cassie mumbled to Mandy. "So he's not a person."

Michelle smirked. She usually didn't boast. But, her friends just weren't as good at mysteries sometimes. "Does he eat baby food," she asked.

"Yeah, cause Winston's a baby," Betty told them.

Michelle hid her happiness at solving this riddle. She didn't want to embarrass Cassie. So, she made a joke instead. "I knew it couldn't be your sled."

Betty laughed. When asked, she told them Winston was three months old. She felt so proud to be a big sister.

"I know what you mean," Michelle told her. Just spending one day with Betty was so rewarding.

Mandy suggested something else. She knew it would take a lot more than twenty questions to learn some things. She decided telling stories would work best. "Let's tell her about our moms."

Michelle grinned. Betty might tell things about hers if she heard them talk. Then, maybe they could learn where she lived.

Cassie and Mandy told her about their mothers for several minutes. Michelle remained quiet.

She wished she had stories to tell herself. Some of the things her sisters or Aunt Becky did were like a mom would do. However, it just wasn't the same.

Betty noticed her friend's silence. "What about your Mommy?"

Michelle tried to sound more cheerful than she felt. Yes, her family was great. But, a small part of her always wanted a mother. "My mommy died when I was a baby. I don't remember her."

Betty quickly hugged Michelle. The older girl was thankful for this. Sometimes there was an uncomfortable silence when she'd tell people that. Others didn't know how to react. Betty's hug felt like the perfect response, though. "Thanks, it's okay. D.J.'s right, she's in a far better place."

Betty's mood became very quiet. "You mean Heaven?"

Michelle nodded. Why did the girl speak so sadly? Just when things were going well, too.

"My grandma might go there," spoke Betty almost in a whisper. The others could barely make out what she'd said. Betty felt very sad. She knew people were very worried about her.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Michelle was especially sorry because they were trying to cheer her up while getting clues. Instead, they had made her sadder. "Does she live near you?"

Betty shook her head. It was especially hard for her because her grandma was so far away.

"In another state."

At least she was still living. "Is she really sick?" Betty nodded. A tear rolled down the tot's cheek.

"I don't think she's going to feel like talking much more now," Mandy remarked.

Michelle frowned. She hated seeing the little girl feel so bad. "I'm supposed to be helping someone. This is supposed to make us both feel good." She spoke dejectedly. "I guess you're right. Let's call it a night."

Michelle hugged the girl for a moment, telling her it would be all right. How would they know, though? How could they find her home? And, how could they even make her feel better?

"What are we going to do," she mumbled to herself.

Chapter Eight

Michelle tiptoed out of her room. Betty insisted on sleeping in a bed. Therefore, Michelle planned to use her sleeping bag. She placed it next to her bed. It was just as well, she decided. If Betty needed to go to the bathroom during the night, she would likely wake Michelle, anyway. Why not have to cross over her to get there, too?

Michelle bade her friends goodbye. Cassie and Mandy were permitted to spend the night. However, they needed to go home for a moment. They required toothbrushes and other items.

Once they left, Michelle prepared for bed. She tried her best to remain quiet. With her

pajamas on, she wandered into the study.

She held the eraser end of a pencil to her chin and studied a sheet of paper. Stephanie entered and gazed at her. The younger girl didn't notice Stephanie was there.

"Michelle, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were cramming for a test."

"I feel like it," the younger girl muttered. She examined the clues she'd written. She slumped back in her seat. Flinging off her clip, she let her hair down. She plopped the clip and her pencil on the desk. "This is nuts." She held out her hands. "It makes no sense at all!"

Stephanie didn't want to alert Michelle to one sad possibility. She thought Betty could have been abandoned. Instead, she explained something a famous fictional detective had said.

"There's a key to solving mysteries. First, make a list of anything that can happen. Then, cross out things that can't be because of the facts of the case. Sherlock Holmes once said, when all else has been eliminated, that which remains, however implausible, must be correct."

Michelle barely glanced at her sister. She tried to focus solely on finding her friend's home. She didn't feel her good deed would be complete without that. Others helped. However, she was determined to be the one to solve this mystery. "Yeah, but what's that mean?"

"It means not all answers are easy to find. Most only seem like it later." She browsed Michelle's list of clues. "HmMMM."

"See what I mean? Take the plane. Why was there an empty seat? Was there only one? Or does the seat have nothing to do with it?" Michelle tried to imagine ways to narrow the search.

She halted. She suddenly heard Betty and Buddy in the doorway. "Hi, Betty. I bet you're lonely." The girl nodded. "I know what will make you feel better. Ice cream."

"You're just saying that because you want ice cream," Stephanie kidded her.

"Hey, I know what kids like. I'm an expert," came the return joke.

Michelle scooped ice cream for each of them. Stephanie gazed out the door. She was waiting for Allie's mother. The teen was spending the night at her friend's house.

"Do you like ice cream?" Betty liked it a lot. "Is it cold where you live?"

Betty shook her head. "It's very warm." She had never seen real snow in her life, in fact. She wondered what it felt like. Maybe her friend would know.

Before she could ask this, Michelle asked if there was a lot of sand. Betty confirmed this.

Michelle grinned. Now, she could narrow things further. "Is there a lot of water near this sand?"

"Only if it rains," she answered between bites.

Michelle grinned. Betty likely wouldn't know the word desert. So, Michelle avoided words which would be too big. She discovered questions she could ask which Betty understood. Even if they couldn't find her house, they could restrict the area they needed to search.

Cassie and Mandy returned as Michelle and Betty finished their snacks.

"Drag your sleeping bags upstairs. I'll be there in a minute," Michelle told them.

Stephanie stood behind her with her arms folded. "Don't you have something else to say?"

Michelle was slightly embarrassed for forgetting. Even with all her thoughts on finding Betty's home, she should have remembered to thank her sister. "Thanks for helping get the room ready and going over to Allie's tonight, Steph."

"You're welcome. But if any of my stuff is messed up..." She trailed off in a teasing threat.

"Hey, having Betty around shows me just how great it is to be a big sister." The dishes were placed in the sink. Michelle led Betty and her bunny upstairs. Cassie and Mandy had rolled out their sleeping bags.

Betty got back into Michelle's bed. She felt pretty tired. However, she needed some company for a while. "Sing to me," she requested.

"What would you like to hear," Cassie wanted to know.

Betty tried to think of a song. She'd heard a funny one about food once. She hoped her friends knew it. She couldn't remember the exact title, though. So, she named the food. "Pasketti."

The girls were confused for a second. They seemed to catch on at the same time. Michelle began. "On top of spaghetti," sang the girls. Betty joined in for a second as she closed her eyes.

"All covered with cheese..."

As they sang, Stephanie and D.J. appeared in the doorway. A small tear snuck out of Stephanie's eye. D.J. ran and told their dad to bring the video camera. He did.

Back in the doorway, D.J. waved her hand in a circle. She wanted them to sing again. When the girls began the song, Danny started filming. Michelle gently rubbed Betty's back as Stephanie and D.J. joined the song. The small girl heaved a contented sigh.

"...watch out for your meatballs, and don't ever sneeze," the girls finished. Betty was snoring. The others tiptoed out of the room.

"Are you okay," came Mandy's concerned whisper. It was directed at Stephanie.

"Yes. It's just that our Mom would always sing that to us. Those were such fun times."

Michelle remarked that she didn't remember having that sung to her. "I was too little. But it was great to do it with my best friends."

"She'll remember that," Danny remarked. "I got it on tape. If her parents don't come it'll be the start of her fourth birthday party tape."

Michelle corrected him. "You mean if they don't come on time."

Danny bent down to her level. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Honey, I think they'll come, too. But, you have to admit, it's mighty strange that we've had no calls." He asked if they'd come up with any more clues.

"I wrote all our clues down in the study. Oh, except she lives near or in a desert." She shot her dad a determined look. "Dad, we're going to find them. We have to!"

Danny patted her on the head. "I know, sweetheart. We're trying everything, and so are the

authorities. The story's going to be on Paul Harvey's national radio program tomorrow."

Mandy told them her parents listened to that all the time. "We should get something from that."

Michelle and her friends soon drifted off to sleep. It was an unusual slumber party. Normally on a sleepover, they didn't get to bed until well after their normal bedtimes. This time, they were too tired. Michelle grinned. Someday, she considered, they would be doing this as adults.

Recognizing dreams came rather easily for Michelle. Especially when she, Cassie, and Mandy were suddenly in their twenties. The twenty-something Michelle walked down the back stairs into the kitchen. Her friends each held a baby while trying to prepare dinner. She spoke of her daughter in the dream. "Where's Pam,"

The adult Cassie and Mandy exchanged worried looks. They said they didn't know.

"You gotta watch her, three year olds are fast," Adult Michelle remarked. The adult Michelle ran into the living room. The girl was scribbling on the couch. "Freeze! You're in big trouble, Mister!"

The child flashed a cute smile. "I'm not a Mister, Mommy. I'm a Miss."

Adult Michelle pointed upstairs. "That's not important. We only color on paper! You go to your room for coloring on the couch!" The couch had ink stains all over.

Minutes went by in an instant. A tall, dark, and handsome man appeared. He and Adult Michelle hugged. "Hi, honey. I just have to get changed. Then we can fly out to Nebraska for your cousins' college graduation."

"Thanks, Teddy. It's a shame Dad has to miss it. He pretty much had to move in with Grandma when she got sick, though. I'm so thankful Cassie and Mandy can help us raise Pammy and the quadruplets." Adult Michelle laughed. "Two sets of twins at once make me nuts!"

Adult Michelle was suddenly on the couch. She wore a fancy dress. Pam and the babies were in various places on the three adults' laps. "Tell us a story," requested Pam. The girl looked a lot like Betty.

"Okay, I have time for one. Then your Daddy and I have to go. Be good for Cassie and Mandy." Adult Michelle began to tell a story. Then, she noticed one of the babies had wet his diaper. It had soaked through to her dress. "It figures, now that I'm all ready."

As she awakened, Michelle still felt the wet spot. She couldn't tell why.

The nine-year-old was brought back into reality by a tiny voice. "Sorry, Michelle," whispered Betty. She rubbed her eyes, and noticed Betty's sad face.

"What..." It wasn't daylight yet. What was happening? "Oh, that's what," she considered. She recognized Betty had crawled into her sleeping bag. The girl had apparently fallen back

asleep after that. She was either so scared or tired that she wet it.

Michelle tried hard not to look frustrated. It would be difficult to get back into that sleeping bag for a while. Even with her dad's intense love for cleaning. She hadn't wet her bed since she was two. "How embarrassing to have anyone wet it!"

Still, she didn't want to look bothered. "It's okay. Do you have to go now?" The girl decided to try.

Michelle led her to the bathroom. She then let Betty lay on her bed while she told her dad.

Danny fetched new pajamas from Nicky and Alex's room.

While she was up, Michelle went into the study. Danny had taken the original notes, and laid a copy there. She examined the pages thoroughly. "What are we missing," she whispered to herself in the pre-dawn dark.

Her thoughts drifted to the dream. She would remember it fondly. Although, if she had four babies at once, she would need her whole class to help her. She wondered if she was thinking of the birthday party tomorrow. She had no clue how to handle that. It would require a lot of effort.

She quickly sat up as she pondered one part of the dream. "Wait a minute. Could that be the missing piece?" She paused for a moment, then snapped her fingers. "It's worth a try."

Chapter Nine

"Wake up, Michelle." The voice was Cassie's. Michelle turned over and mumbled. "We checked the study, like your note said."

It took Michelle a half minute to realize what was happening. "You got my message?" Cassie nodded. "Good. What time is it?"

"Almost nine. You must have been up all night thinking," kidded her friend. "Mandy's with Betty eating breakfast. Betty's pretty comfortable down there. Of course, your Uncle Jesse took the twins someplace. Your dad and Aunt Becky are at work. So, right now it's just Joey, D.J., and them. Not much of a crowd."

Michelle jumped up and walked to the bathroom. "Betty wet my sleeping bag. While Dad was cleaning she slept in my bed. I did some thinking in the study."

"Well, it sounded good. They'll probably use it." Cassie waited for Michelle, then they went

back into her room. They discussed the day ahead while Michelle got dressed. "So what are we doing? Horseback riding, birthday party, what?"

"I got to thinking." Michelle put on her riding outfit. "What will she think of as a party? Balloons and cake. Dad's right. A big party is hard to plan. But, I've had birthday parties which were made up as we went along. We can do that here, too."

"Okay, sounds good. I brought my riding stuff just in case." She opened her backpack.

Michelle finished putting on her gear. "Great, I'll go tell Mandy. D.J. gets to come with us. She likes the smell of horses more than Stephanie does."

Stephanie came walking into the room. She had gone to Allie's with only pajamas. However, now she had on all clean clothes. "Did you come in here while Michelle was sleeping, Stephanie," Cassie wanted to know.

"No, these are all D.J.'s clothes. I borrow them enough she told me I might as well just get dressed in there." Stephanie used her own brush and combed her hair.

Cassie referred to the earlier name changes. "So now, Michelle and you are both D.J.." Stephanie laughed out loud.

D.J. drove the four girls to the stables where Michelle rode. It would be a little like babysitting, but not totally. There were plenty of adults to help. Her main concern was helping Michelle with Betty. After all, Betty would almost certainly want to stick with Michelle.

Michelle showed Betty around the barns. "Have you ever ridden a horse," she wondered aloud.

"No. They're big." She'd seen some up close. However, she'd never been up on one. She petted one to get used to the feel.

Michelle saw one of her riding instructors. She requested a small pony for Betty. Maybe she could ride alongside the little girl.

"She doesn't have any riding pads or helmet," noted the woman. "How could I have forgotten about that," Michelle wondered. Luckily, the stables had some that they could rent. D.J. pulled out a camera once Betty got dressed. She snapped a picture.

"That's one of those that develops right away, isn't it," Mandy wondered. The picture came out. The image was already forming.

Michelle nodded. Such devices were her dad's second favorite thing. At times, he might enjoy recording more than cleaning. That part seemed hard to believe, though. "Between that and videos, Betty, we could buy a small house just to store all our memories. Here, let me help you."

With D.J.'s and Michelle's help, Betty soon sat atop the pony. She seemed a little fearful as she looked at the ground. Sitting on her dad's shoulders felt a lot safer. This animal was quite strange. "How will I get down," the girl inquired. She didn't think of people simply pulling her down.

Cassie couldn't resist telling a joke. "You don't get down off a horse. You get down off a duck." She looked disappointed when the girl didn't get it.

"Oh, Cassie, that's so old," came a sneering voice behind them.

Michelle recognized the voice immediately. She turned around to look at classmate Rachel Tilly. She challenged Rachel's prideful attitude. "Do you have any better ones?"

"No." She brushed back her long, brown hair. "So who's the kid, your cousin?"

Michelle wished she didn't have to talk to Rachel right now. Rachel was the snobbiest girl in their school. Rachel thought she was much better than anyone else just because she was rich. Her dad owned a national bakery chain.

However, she knew she should. Rachel didn't know how to be nice to others. Not being nice wasn't going to help her learn how to be nice. "This is Betty. She got on the wrong plane. She's lost, a long way from home. I'm doing a good deed by taking care of her." If she emphasized her good deed, Rachel might want to do good things for others.

Betty nodded. Since Michelle spoke to Rachel, Betty figured she was just like Cassie and Mandy.

She thought Rachel was just another playmate. "Today's my birthday."

"Swell. Are you having a party?" Betty told Rachel she was.

Rachel turned toward Michelle. In an offended voice, she spouted "and why wasn't I invited?"

Michelle rolled her eyes. Why couldn't they just get on with riding? "We don't have time to plan a big..."

"Come on, Michelle, a good deed like this should be in the papers."

Michelle grumbled. If Rachel ever did anything nice, it seemed to be to get publicity. "Look, I came here to ride. But, I'll call my dad right now. He'll get started on things. We'll have everyone in last year's fourth grade class there," she proclaimed proudly.

"There's not going to be a birthday-" began Michelle. She glanced at Betty. She didn't want to disappoint the girl. So, she didn't know what to say.

Rachel wouldn't let her think. "Not a birthday party? Oh, I get it, a come as you are' party. That's good thinking for you, Tanner. That way we don't have to worry about all those hats and things. My dad'll cater. How does two o'clock sound?"

Michelle tried to hide her frustration at Rachel. Yes, this could turn out good. However, she had a feeling with Rachel involved, it was more likely to be a disaster.

"Okay, I guess." Why did Rachel have to impose on her good deed? Michelle wasn't trying to show off. But, Rachel certainly was.

Cassie reminded Michelle there would be a party. "That's what you wanted, right?"

Michelle bit her lip as she watched Rachel strut away. "Yeah, with an Alice in Wonderland' theme. This is more likely to be a Celebration of Rachel."

D.J. looked compassionately at Michelle. "Having her in your grade's a real bummer, huh?"

Michelle nodded. "Well, maybe you'll be a good influence yet. Remember my best friend

Kimmy?"

Michelle nodded. Kimmy Gibbler had her own apartment now. Before, she'd lived next door to the Tanners. Her family moved there around when Michelle was born. The Gibbler home wasn't nearly as close and loving as Michelle's. So, Kimmy had been at the Tanner's house a lot.

D.J. continued. "Kimmy could be annoying. It was a little different than with Rachel. But, in one way it was the same. She hadn't learned good values. But, she saw something special, more caring, in me. In all of us, really. She looked up to me because of it. And, I steered her in the right direction. You can do that with Rachel."

Michelle nodded wearily. She wished she could be sure of that. Rachel had a lot more pride than Kimmy. It would be a lot harder to help her.

After they rode a while, the group grabbed sodas at the stables' snack shop. They wanted to hear Paul Harvey's national radio program.

They listened as Paul Harvey's voice broadcast the following information. "Usually you hear about missing children. Today, we have a found one to report. A little girl got on the wrong plane and wound up in San Francisco. Police there say her name is Betty. Today's her fourth birthday. The parents may...in fact, they probably do think each other has her." "All right, they used our clue," considered Michelle. "The police will have questions so they can verify that a caller is one of Betty's parents. Then they'll give the phone number of the family caring for her. And now, page three."

Mandy could tell Michelle was extremely excited. "Let's hope that works," she remarked.

Michelle wondered why he didn't tell them any other clues. She'd developed quite a few. Even if not all worked, some had to. For instance, she probably came from Phoenix. It was the only desert city on the flight's path.

D.J. was finishing the last of the group's sodas. She spoke assertively. "That's true. But, remember, the more they make public, the harder it is to find the right ones."

"Yeah, but they'll call first, anyway, won't they?" D.J. agreed with Michelle. "Betty will know their voices, I'm sure." Betty hadn't known that stranger. But, she had to recognize her own parents.

"Speaking of that, where is she," Mandy wanted to know.

"Cassie's doing her hair in the girls' room." Michelle chuckled. "We're letting her be the mom for a while."

Suddenly, Cassie came running out with Betty. She spoke to Michelle. "D.J., you remember that man you described at the airport?" Michelle nodded.

D.J. snickered. "Cassie, I'm over here," D.J. told her.

"No," Cassie told Michelle's oldest sister, "you're not D.J. Michelle is. This isn't Betty, and I have no clue who I am!" exclaimed Cassie. "But, I think I saw the same man outside the snack shop!"

Chapter Ten

Michelle was prepared. She had time to think. So, they could use any names they wanted.

D.J., however, was much more clever, being ten years older. She spoke with authority.

"Okay, we don't have to say funny names," came the instructions. "The only ones we need to know are Betty is Pammy."

"But what if..." Michelle began before being quickly shushed. D.J. noticed the man walking up to them.

"Hi, Pammy," he remarked kindly. Maybe this wasn't such a bad person after all, considered Michelle. Whether he was or not, she didn't want to give out any personal information. "Are all these your children, Ma'am," he asked D.J.

Michelle wasn't sure if D.J. would panic or not. Joey had seemed uncomfortable pretending at first. Of course, he'd had less warning.

Her oldest sister shook her head. "Actually, I'm watching my two nieces this morning, as well as Donna and Pammy. I'm Mrs. Donaldson." She shook the man's hand.

Michelle was glad to see her oldest sister take charge. The name would be easy to remember, too. It was her Aunt Becky's maiden name.

"I'm Loren Spencer. The girls probably told you I saw them at the airport," he spoke regretfully. "I just wanted to apologize. It's just that from what I remember, Pammy looks so much like my niece, Betty. My brother said he was coming out here. I thought he had her. I hope I didn't scare you."

"Oh, it's no problem," came D.J.'s smiling comment. "Anyway, we need to get home. But I appreciate you taking the time to apologize." The group left.

Michelle's mind whirled. If what he said were true, it confirmed several theories. She could be right even if it wasn't. They got into the car. "He knew Betty's name," remarked Michelle. She was unsure what to believe now. However, she was still inclined not to trust the man.

Cassie and Mandy thought he might be her uncle. D.J. nixed the idea. She explained on the ride home. "He could have tried that after hearing the broadcast. I'll be the first to admit if I'm wrong. But, she's still safer with us than with anyone right now."

"Plus, the police have our number," remarked Michelle. The others agreed.

Mandy scratched her curly hair. "So, now D.J. is Michelle's Aunt Becky," she spoke hesitantly. "Or, rather, since Michelle is D.J., the sisters are both the same person. Both are their own Aunt Becky. I need to write this down. I'm getting a pencil and paper when we get back"

"I'm just getting a headache," Cassie confessed.

D.J. laughed as they headed home. "And, in a way, you three are sisters now. I was going to use Stephanie's and Michelle's middle names on you."

The girls laughed out loud. Michelle demanded that this silliness be used on the birthday party tape. "If this name stuff isn't like something out of Wonderland, I don't know what is." She

couldn't believe how one impromptu idea could develop into something so crazy.

Her friends noticed Michelle thinking hard after a moment. She bore a large grin and nodded slowly. "What," Cassie wondered.

Michelle spoke with authority. "Guys, I was right. It's Betty's mom's mother who is sick."

Mandy gave her a startled look. "How can you know it's hers?"

"Yeah, I thought it would have to be the dad's. That's why he would leave. He would come to take care of her," Cassie explained. "Especially after what we heard just now."

D.J. hoped the girls didn't think that was Betty's uncle. Michelle assured her she didn't. Not totally, anyway. She impersonated Holmes again. "It's elementary, my dear Wilkins," she

remarked. After they chuckled, she resumed her normal voice. "Her mother would have known she wasn't there. Only if it was her mother who was sick could she not know."

"But that doesn't make sense," cried Mandy. "Wouldn't her dad know she was gone, then?"

Michelle shook her head. "I don't think so. I kept looking at that clue. He left.' I realized last night what my problem was. I thought he had to tell her mom he was leaving. But, Betty could have heard him telling anyone."

But, that didn't mean the stranger was Betty's uncle. "We can't use clues that aren't there. The empty seat might be a clue. But, we don't know." In fact, she didn't think it was.

Mandy glanced at Cassie. The clues were way too confusing for her. "I think I'm getting your headache."

Michelle glanced behind her. "Betty, did your daddy tell your mommy he was leaving?"

Betty, too, had been confused. The many clues reminded her of all the questions she heard in the beginning. She could handle one simple question easily, though. "I don't know. He was on the phone."

Cassie asked if it was Betty's mom's mother who was sick. She hummed a moment. "I think so," she stated sadly.

"It might be hard to remember which grandma is which," D.J. explained. "She is only four."

Michelle understood. "Was your mommy in the house when your dad was on the phone?"

Betty said she was. Now, things made sense. Betty's mom's mother probably was sick. Where had Betty's dad gone? Or, had he gone? That, she didn't know.

They entered the Tanner home. Several balloons were tied to chairs. A box of noisemakers

sat on the couch. Michelle recognized the noisemakers from last New Years' Eve.

"Here's the birthday girl," proclaimed Danny. He pointed a video camera at Betty. "She's

back from horseback riding. Say hi' to everyone, Betty."

Having been in the Tanner home for a day, Betty felt more talkative. "Hi, everyone."

Mandy turned to Cassie. "The way things have gone, that should be hi to everyone who is actually everyone else."

Michelle agreed. She introduced everyone. She then explained who they pretended to be. She also debated how to explain Rachel's plans to her dad.

Danny took charge. "That's great; we've got lunch in the kitchen. Your plates are all ready. Nicky and Alex are already eating. I thought we'd play some games in the backyard then. I've also got board games, Twister, you name it." Danny always had things very well organized.

Sometimes too organized. How would he handle the mess to come?

Michelle put off telling him. It would happen soon enough. "Remember that song we made up during lunch last year?" Cassie and Mandy nodded. "Let's do that."

Betty and the family sat around the kitchen table. Michelle, Cassie, and Mandy stood in front of Danny, who recorded them.

Michelle plucked an apple from the refrigerator. She walked over to Joey. He had several carrot sticks on his plate. The girls sang a song to the tune of the "Brady Bunch" theme song.

Michelle began. "Here's an apple, for your carrot. If you like you can give my noodles a whirl."

Mandy picked up Alex's dessert. The boy stared at her as she sang. "Got some peanut butter cookies for some of my cheese curls."

Cassie walked over to D.J. and Stephanie. She pointed to and swapped their plates. "Look who's got some beef with gravy. If you'll trade it for chicken on a bone," she finished.

Michelle pulled a sandwich out of the refrigerator. "You can have my tuna sandwich, for that and some calzone." The girls looked straight at the camera as she sang. Laughter filled the background.

Michelle danced toward her dad and took his salad bowl. The girls sang the end together.

"And if you'll trade your salad for some fruit cup, maybe we can share a few grapes from his bunch!" Michelle held up the grapes from the centerpiece. She pointed at Nicky's orange juice.

"And some milk for that nice fruit juice. That's the way we all do when we trade our lunch. We trade our lunch. We trade our lunch. That's the way we do when we trade our lunch!"

Betty clapped as Michelle, Cassie, and Mandy exchanged high fives. "Yay, good singing."

Michelle grinned at Betty. "It's amazing how just a little entertainment will brighten someone's day."

"We should sing some more," Cassie commented.

Mandy raised her hand. "How about opera?"

"Isn't that always in Italian," Michelle asked herself. "What do you mean?"

Mandy giggled as she told them she knew an opera. "It's called Bovine Violetta."

D.J. wrinkled her nose. She loosed quite confused. "Bovine Violetta? That's purple cow."

Mandy nodded. She sang part of a poem in a silly voice. "I've never seen a purple coooooow!"

Michelle caught on quickly. She'd forgotten that her Aunt Becky sang the poem at her ninth birthday party. Aunt Becky's bad singing made it even funnier. Michelle sang a line. "I hope I never seeeeeeeeee one."

"But I can surely tell you noooooow," sang Cassie off key as she held out her hands.

All three sang "I'd rather see than be one." They lengthened the sounds so each word lasted about five seconds.

As the girls finished, the entire room exploded in giggles. Once the song was completed,

Danny turned off the camera. He, too, need to recover from fits of laughter.

"Sing some more," hollered Betty joyfully. She loved this comedy.

"Steph, I think you, D.J., and I should do ballet," Michelle suggested. Michelle, unlike her

sisters, was not a good ballerina. But, that would make it funnier.

Cassie quipped "that's fine, just do it in English." The others caught the joke quickly.

"Oh," came Michelle's dad. He quickly turned on the camera. "I need to get that on film.

Could you do that joke again?"

Michelle snickered as they repeated the gag. At this rate, Betty's birthday party tape would be two hours long.

No, two would actually be short. Once all her guests came, there might not be enough room on one tape for everything.

Soon after lunch, the doorbell rang. "Maybe that's her parents," Michelle considered.

Instead, several men greeted Joey as he opened the door. Michelle and her dad followed him

into the living room. She recognized one as a reporter from her dad's TV station.

"We got a tip about a big party. It's being held for a lost girl," came the somewhat questioning tone.

Michelle rolled her eyes. She looked up at Joey and her father. "What has Rachel gotten us into now," she wondered.

Chapter Eleven

Embarrassed, Michelle turned to her dad. She spoke meekly. "Sorry, Dad. I'd been trying to figure out how to tell you. We saw Rachel this morning. She wanted to have this huge party for

Betty."

Danny looked uncomfortable. "Huge? How huge?"

Michelle blushed slightly. "Like...the whole fourth grade." Danny gasped. That meant

Michelle's and another class. Over thirty kids might be coming. "I tried to tell her we said no huge birthday party. So, she's calling everyone and saying it's a come as you are' party."

"And you didn't suggest anything else to her?"

Michelle held out her hands. "Dad, she wants attention. She wants it to seem like it's her party. So she can get a piece of my good deed."

Danny spoke softly. "Honey, if she wants to do something nice, she's entitled to." Michelle tried to complain. Her dad wouldn't let her. "Let's let Rachel do this for Betty. I'll just have to make sure it doesn't get out of hand."

Michelle slowly agreed. At least her dad understood it wasn't her fault. There wasn't much that could be done. She hoped he wouldn't send them home, though. Now that they were

coming, why not let them stay? As long as Rachel didn't try anything else.

Michelle shook her head. That was unlikely. Rachel probably wouldn't stop at inviting thirty kids. What else she would do, Michelle didn't know. But, knowing Rachel, it would be crazy.

Before Danny could make suggestions, Michelle's worst fears began to be realized. Betty walked into the living room. The tot's eyes were incredibly wide. She spoke in a stunned voice.

"There's an elephant in the back yard!"

Joey chuckled. "Yeah, sure. And there's a polar bear in the bathtub."

Michelle fretted. She followed Betty. She knew Rachel loved publicity. This was ridiculous, though. Michelle would have to have a long talk with her. She clenched her fists and walked outside with Betty.

D.J. filmed the proceedings. Jesse tried to keep Nicky and Alex from crawling under the circus animal. Instead of Rachel, however, Michelle's friend and classmate Lucas Hamilton sat atop it. What was going on here?

"Hey, Michelle," shouted Lucas. "Rachel called my mom. She came and told me about the party. My Uncle Ed's in town with the circus. We were just doing some elephant training at the fairgrounds." Jesse let Nicky and Alex take turns sitting on the creature.

Betty gasped. She'd never been this close to anything like it. She'd certainly never seen an elephant in someone's back yard. A zoo, maybe. What a crazy place this San Francisco was.

"You brought an elephant to my birthday party," inquired the shocked little girl.

Michelle whispered in her ear. "Rachel's telling them it's a come as you are' party."

"What does that mean," Betty wanted to know. She'd never heard of such a thing.

Before Michelle could explain, Danny and Joey walked out to the backyard. "There's an elephant in our yard," shouted Joey.

Michelle shot him a satisfied look. "I knew it."

Danny hurriedly turned to Joey. "Quick, grab as big a bucket as you can. I don't want to have to clean..." As he spoke this, he heard a large "plop." He glanced back at the elephant.

"Joey...make that a shovel."

"Do you want to ride on him," D.J. wanted to know.

Betty studied the creature. It was a lot scarier than those horses. Michelle and her friends tried to tell her it was okay. She still wasn't sure, though. If this San Francisco was like Wonderland, though, maybe it wouldn't hurt her.

"D.J. will hold you," Cassie told her. "She babysat me all the time when I was little. I know she'll watch for you."

Michelle confirmed this. She and Cassie had met the first day of Kindergarten. Cassie had known D.J. for over a year longer. "You'll be safe."

Finally, Betty walked up to the animal. She petted it. It felt really rough. She decided to try it. She insisted that D.J. hold on to her the whole time. D.J. hoisted Betty onto the beast. Danny held the video camera.

Stephanie walked outside and gawked at the elephant. "My friends will never believe this," she spoke lowly.

Michelle could hardly believe it herself. "Dad, I don't know what else is going to happen. But, we could have forty people to feed."

"Forty," came Stephanie's shocked voice. "There hasn't been that much food eaten here since Steve was here last." Steve had been D.J.'s steady boyfriend. He had an enormous appetite. Michelle chuckled. Steve joked about his own appetite. So, he wouldn't have been hurt by that joke.

"Okay, let's clear the elephant out of the yard," Danny spoke insistently. He explained to Ed Hamilton. "If that many kids show up, there will be quite a mess without that."

"We need to get back to the circus, anyway. Lucas just wanted to stop and say hello."

"Should I have brought a present," Lucas asked Michelle.

The girl wasn't sure if there were any gifts or not. She gave her dad a questioning look.

"Steph and I did some shopping while your Aunt Becky worked on tomorrow's TV show. We'll have plenty to give her."

Michelle, Cassie, and Mandy finished petting the animal, and it left. Danny and Joey cleaned the mess. Michelle asked if they could set up the twins' wading pool. "Betty can play in it, too.

I'm sure we can find one of my old bathing suits." Danny agreed.

Her dad glanced at his watch. "That'll keep her occupied while we sort this out." He motioned the reporters into the house. Danny planned to explain the situation to them.

Michelle was elated. Now, they would know this was her good deed. Then, Rachel couldn't take credit for anything Michelle did.

The day was hot and sunny. Betty, Nicky and Alex playfully splashed in the large wading

pool. Stephanie, Cassie, Mandy, and Michelle sat by the pool watching them. They also blew up balloons. Michelle sensed that Betty felt quite comfortable now. As long as she was around other kids, she was okay. Or, at least as long as Michelle was one of them.

Betty was, however, more quiet than the boys. The girl preferred playing with a small boat. Nicky and Alex grabbed buckets, though. They got out. They walked up to the older girls. DJ, on the patio, turned on the camera and zoomed over to them.

"We wanna dump this stuff," Nicky said.

"Yeah, on you," proclaimed Alex.

Stephanie pulled her feet up on the chair. "I've got my clothes on, though. How rude!"

Michelle pleaded with them. "Yeah, we're not in our bathing suits." She hoped she didn't get wet. Then again, Betty had been okay eating with Mandy. She supposed the tot wouldn't mind her leaving for a moment to change.

"Let us dump it on your feet, then," Nicky requested.

Michelle refused. She suggested they dump it on their own feet. They refused. "Okay, dump it on your heads," advised Michelle in a silly voice.

Both boys dumped their buckets on their heads. The girls laughed and exchanged high fives. The boys went back, got more water, and returned to them. "Oh, no, now what?" They dumped it on their heads again, drawing more laughs. They continued this for several minutes.

"You know, this could go on for a while," Cassie remarked.

"Hey, we're keeping them happy," Mandy reminded the others. "I think Betty's enjoying it."

Michelle agreed. The little girl seemed much more at ease. Betty laughed as the twins drenched themselves.

Michelle still worried about having dozens of kids there. But, maybe there wouldn't be so many. Only Lucas had come. If Rachel truly told them "come as you are," that meant to come right then. It might not be too bad.

As she considered this, she heard Cassie say "come on out." She looked back. Michelle expected one of her classmates.

Instead, there were at least twenty. "Oh, no," cried Michelle.

Chapter Twelve

"Did Lucas leave yet," wondered Jeff Farrington. He looked around. "Rats, no elephant. He must have left."

Children continued to pour out the door, onto the patio, and into the yard. "Where were all of you," Michelle asked insistently. Not that she really wanted them there, but it would have been nice to get things out of the way quickly.

Sidney Wainwright raised a hand. "Rachel called Lucas first. Then, her mom had to use the phone for a long while." She looked around. "By the way, why don't I feel like I'm going to sneeze? I usually sneeze like crazy when I'm in a new house." Sidney was allergic to almost everything.

Danny stepped forward proudly. "That's because you are looking at the King of Clean."

Sidney said she should play at Michelle's more often. She spoke with awe. "The only person I know who keeps things nearly as clean is the Tilly's maid."

Joey brought several more children out into the backyard. Michelle was amazed at the variety of outfits. Less than half wore normal clothing. Some wore bathing suits and water wings.

Others wore baseball outfits. Denise Chow wore horse riding gear. Anna Abdul wore a party hat from a cousins' party she'd just attended. She also wore some leftover cake, which Comet was in the process of licking off her face.

However, one person was missing. Rachel.

"I can't believe Rachel's not here," Mandy mused.

Just then, Comet sprinted away from Anna. The dog knocked several children to the ground as it raced over to the fence. Comet barked thunderously.

"What's wrong, Comet, ol' boy," came Michelle's concerned voice. To the others, she spoke loudly. "He usually doesn't act like this."

I see what he's barking at," hollered Cassie. She pointed at the sky.

"Look," cried Mandy.

Joey ran to the fence to watch a hot air balloon slowly descending. "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's...well, it's a bright green ball."

"Get Comet in the house," Danny ordered. D.J. quickly shooed him inside and took him down to the basement. Danny explained this was so Comet wouldn't hear the shrill noise of the balloon. That was what excited the dog.

Ronald Parsley pounded the air with his fist. "Aw, rats, I was hoping to see what would happen if the dog caught it."

Cassie agreed. "That would be funny. It wouldn't know what to do, would it?"

Michelle and her friends gawked at the balloon. The reporters were furiously taking notes. The newspaper photographer snapped pictures.

As the balloon landed in the Tanners' back yard, Rachel waved to everyone. "Attention, everyone," she cried into a megaphone. "Courtesy of my dad's famous national bakery chain, we bring scrumptious treats for the party in honor of the birthday of this little girl. Let it be known that Rachel Tilly will never rest when others are in distress."

"As least if she can get her picture in the paper," mumbled Michelle to her friends.

The children flocked to Rachel's balloon. Mr. Tilly helped Betty climb into it. Michelle rolled her eyes. All the pictures would be of Rachel with Betty. True, Rachel was helping with the party. Cans of lemonade were unpacked from a cooler. Fresh baked cookies were quickly given to everyone. Michelle realized that they wouldn't have to worry about refreshments at all. However, she couldn't stand that someone else could get credit for how she'd helped.

Danny noticed his youngest daughter's sour face. "Come here," he whispered. They walked

over and sat on the patio. "What's wrong?"

Michelle tried to put her thoughts into words as D.J. stepped back outside. How would she describe it? Rachel's acts just drove her nuts.

"You're not jealous, I hope," remarked Danny. He was obviously trying to guess.

"It's not that." Michelle sighed. It was as much a guess to her. However, she was certain of one thing. "She's just doing this for all the wrong reasons."

"What are the right reasons," Danny asked her.

"Well..." Michelle had to think for a second. "To be nice, I guess. To help someone who's feeling bad."

Danny grinned proudly. "That's exactly right. And you've done that, haven't you?" She supposed so. "Honey, sometimes the world makes a bigger deal out of the louder good deeds than the quiet ones. But that doesn't make the loud ones better. The loud ones don't get the rewards the quiet ones get. Because you see, the loud ones are using up all their reward with attention now. But, where is your reward going to be?"

She thought she knew. "In my heart?"

"That's right. Your reward will last longer, because that's where you try to keep it."

Michelle thanked her dad. He was right. She was doing this for Betty, not for herself. That meant she'd treasure it a lot longer than Rachel. Rachel might not think about it after this.

Betty might treasure it for even longer than Michelle. Betty would remember Rachel's balloon as being fun. But, she probably wouldn't notice any love behind it. However, Michelle could tell Betty appreciated what she did. Betty felt loved while with Michelle.

As Rachel and Betty left the balloon, Michelle noticed that Betty held a stuffed dog. "Rachel gave me a present," Betty explained.

Michelle muttered "that's nice," and strode up to Rachel. She had to say something now.

"Rachel Tilly," spouted Michelle, "you are not earning anything by this, I hope you know that.

You won't feel rewarded like I do."

Rachel pointed at the newspaper camera. "I have my reward," she spoke smugly. "What I'm doing is good enough."

She heard Willie Redding quoting a Bible verse. He spoke of building treasures in Heaven. Willie was a national champion Bible Quizzer. He'd beaten out fifth and sixth graders to win at his level at a national tournament.

"You tell her, Willie. We can never be good enough. We'd have to be perfect," Michelle cheered him. He was in a different class, but she often saw him on the playground.

Michelle suddenly noticed D.J. and Stephanie behind her. "You can tell her, too," said Michelle's oldest sister. "You know the difference between where your trust is and where hers is. Maybe that's why you're together, so you can show her."

Michelle admitted that was true. She really wasn't in the mood to hear any more of Rachel's

boasting, though. She wished she could think of something to stop her. To teach her a lesson.

Then, she remembered one of D.J.'s anatomy texts. It gave her an idea. She could show

Rachel just how she sounded. She could prove that Rachel just wanted attention.

Michelle grinned broadly. It sounded great. She sorely hoped it worked. Otherwise, Rachel might get credit all over the city for something which, when compared to Michelle, she hardly lifted a finger to do.

Chapter Thirteen

"You think this will work," Cassie wanted to know.

The balloon had quickly left. The other children played numerous outdoor games or board games. Michelle, Cassie, Mandy, and Betty had snuck inside. They now sat in Michelle's room.

"I'm pretty sure. Knowing Rachel, she'll jump on it like a flash." Michelle turned to Betty.

"Now, you remember how we play this joke?"

Betty nodded. "I act a little sick. I don't have to throw up, do I?"

"No, just look like you might," explained Michelle. She didn't want Betty to do too much. In fact, she gave the girl only one speaking line. She didn't want her getting confused.

Mandy suggested they say she threw up once. Michelle quickly rejected the idea. She didn't want to encourage Betty to lie. Or anyone, for that matter. Everything they said should be the truth. That was the purpose of the textbook she chose. It contained big words. Words that could trick people easily.

"Why are we doing this," Betty inquired. She understood that they would tell the truth. And, that telling the truth would make her seem very sick. Even though she wasn't sick at all. It was straight out of Wonderland, all right.

Michelle struggled with how to explain their plan. Would Betty understand about Rachel boasting so much? Would she comprehend anything about the need to take Rachel down a few notches? Probably not enough. "It's just something funny. Rachel will overreact."

The four walked outside. Betty placed her hands on her stomach as she was instructed.

Rachel turned away from the reporters. She jogged over to Betty. "Well, there you are,

Betty. You ate too much," came the blunt, slightly scolding remark.

Michelle wished Rachel would speak nicely. However, even during her so-called good deeds, Rachel couldn't hold her tongue.

Cassie sighed. "Actually, Rachel..." She looked down and shuffled her feet.

"We didn't want to tell you this before," Mandy remarked. She acted as though she were holding back tears. Michelle held out her hand and made a downward motion. This was to signal her friend not to overact.

Michelle allowed a small gust to come out of her mouth. She spoke in a near whisper.

"Rachel...Betty has bifurcation of the pelvis."

Rachel held a hand to her mouth. "That sounds serious." Because her best friend, Sidney, was allergic to many things, she knew that sicknesses could cause many problems.

The four other girls nodded slowly. "I'm a biped," Betty said simply. She hoped she said it the right way.

Michelle whispered, as if delivering a grim diagnosis. "Rachel, Betty is a total biped. And everyone who is a biped dies eventually."

Rachel's face grew determined. Michelle, Cassie, and Mandy stifled giggles. They were able to make it sound enough like choking back tears that Rachel didn't notice.

As expected, Rachel ran up to the reporters. "Before you go off to write your story, and we have cake and ice cream for this poor little girl, I need to share something with you. I've just been informed that Betty is a total biped. She suffers from a grave condition known as bifurcation of the pelvis! Every time someone becomes a biped, it leads to death."

Strange noises came from Michelle's, Cassie's, and Mandy's mouths as they desperately tried to suppress their laughter.

Rachel finished with a flourish. She pumped her right fist in the air. "Let me go on record as saying, that I will not rest until a cure is found for bifurcation of the pelvis! Bipeds suffer a great deal, and we must ensure that nobody fears being a biped again!"

The girls could no longer contain themselves. Michelle, Cassie, and Mandy rolled on the ground laughing like fools. The laughter infected everyone else. Even though they didn't know why, the entire group began laughing uproariously.

Rachel's face was purple. "What is so funny?! I am trying to tell people about a serious illness!"

Michelle spoke through intense giggles. "Rachel, what you just described was how the body splits into two parts at the middle."

"They're called legs," Cassie proclaimed. She was finally able to get off the ground.

As Rachel's mouth hung open, D.J. confirmed it. "Bifurcation' means splitting into two equal sections. The pelvis is in the body's center."

Michelle was down to mere chuckling now. "And Comet might agree about bipeds suffering.

But, a biped is just someone who has two feet."

Rachel's face turned from purple to beet red. Michelle hadn't seen anyone blush so much in her life.

"April Fool," cried Betty. She figured April Fools' Day could come any time in San Francisco.

"Ooooooh," growled Rachel. She clenched her fists, then ran into the house.

Michelle gazed at the door where Rachel entered her home. She was concerned when she didn't come out right away. She hoped she hadn't upset Rachel. Now that she saw her reaction, she felt a tinge of guilt. Was embarrassing her like that really going to teach her to be nice?

Cassie and Mandy could tell their friend was worried. "She looked pretty bad, didn't she," Mandy remarked.

Michelle frowned. She felt remorseful. "Yeah, she did. Come on, let's go find her. You too, Betty." She knew Betty should hear her apologize. She wanted to be a good role model.

Michelle was stunned as she entered the kitchen. Rachel lifted her head from the Tanner's kitchen table. Her eyes looked red and watery. "Oh, great," muttered Rachel. "Now the whole school's going to know I was crying."

"No, they won't," Michelle assured her solemnly. She told Cassie and Mandy to watch the door.

"Are you okay," came Betty's concerned voice.

Michelle pulled up a chair and sat beside Rachel. She couldn't believe she was about to do this. However, she knew it had to be done. She never thought she'd see Rachel so hurt, though. Not the way she boasted about herself. "Look, Rachel...I'm sorry I made you cry."

"That was a mean joke," exclaimed Rachel. "You knew I'd make a fool of myself when I tried to help!"

Michelle nodded slowly. She wasn't sure how to continue. So, she spoke her mind. "Rachel, look. I just thought it would be funny because...well, you seem to jump on every chance to get noticed."

"I want to help people, too, you know. You're not the only one who can play Miss Goody Two Shoes," spouted Rachel.

"I'm not playing, Rachel." She lowered her head. She should have explained about good deeds to Rachel long ago. Now, it would be harder for Rachel to understand. The joke she'd pulled made her seem pretty bad. However, she had to try.

"Look, when I saw Betty at the airport, the first thing I thought was that she needed a friend. I didn't care if anyone else noticed. I did it for her. I just like being nice. And, I try to be all the time."

She heard the phone ring. Nicky and Alex ran inside. Alex picked it up.

"I know I wasn't nice today. I'm sorry I embarrassed you. I know it was wrong. I feel really bad about it. But, I really like helping people. Not because I do it for me, but because I do it for

them. I get a great feeling without thinking about myself." She decided it was best not to add "like you do" on the end.

Nicky and Alex ran out the door. The phone remained on the counter. Michelle decided that someone must have called for one of her classmates.

Rachel mulled it over. "You know, I've never heard anything like that."

Michelle smiled. She wondered if Kimmy had been the same way. She imagined them having talks like this in fourth grade. Talks about how other people matter. Talks about doing to others what you would want done to you.

Michelle felt guiltier now. How was she supposed to help Rachel if she pulled jokes like that?

She pushed aside those concerns. She could explain more later, when Rachel wasn't as upset.

She turned to her best friends. "Ask Nicky and Alex who they want," she called out to Cassie and Mandy.

Mandy answered back after a moment. "They're looking for someone named Foster. Nicky, Alex, we don't have any Fosters in our grade."

"Okay," Alex remarked. He ran in and picked up the phone. "Sorry, nobody named Foster here." He hung up.

"Wrong number," Michelle wondered.

Alex nodded. "Yeah, someone askin' for a Foster family."

Michelle turned back to Rachel. "See, when you're nice to others, people will be nice-" She turned abruptly in her chair, banging her shoulder against the back. "A foster family?" "Alex, what was that?"

The phone rang again. This time, Michelle dashed over to it. "Hello?"

The caller chuckled and explained. "I guess we confused the little boy who answered last

time. We're calling from Arizona. Is this the Tanner residence?" Michelle responded excitedly.

"This is Mrs. Spencer. I was hoping my daughter, Betty would be there."

Michelle smiled and handed the phone to Betty. "I think someone wants to talk to you."

Tears of joy snuck down Michelle's face as she watched Betty chat excitedly with her parents.

She beamed with pride as she walked over to Rachel. "See that? That's the joy of good deeds. Seeing someone helped because of me."

Chapter Fourteen

"Your moms say they want you home in thirty minutes," Danny informed Cassie and Mandy.

They were in Michelle's room with Michelle and Betty. The tot looked half asleep. She'd

enjoyed a long party and opened many presents. Michelle was reading the end of Alice in Wonderland to her.

"Mr. Tanner? Are you sure we can't spend the night again," Mandy wondered.

"Yes. Betty's parents will be here soon. Your moms are missing you almost as much as

Betty's mom misses her." He added that he was proud of how they helped. "Some day, you'll all

be helping with each other's children that way."

"Yeah, that would be so cool. We should live together, too," declared Cassie.

Michelle hugged Betty. She pondered Alice's adventures and envisioned her own children. "I hope I have a girl just like you, Betty."

"Thanks, Michelle." Betty giggled. "Or do you want to be Donna again?" She enjoyed the name changing. It was very confusing, but it was silly, too.

Michelle sensed Betty saw love behind her good deed. She hoped Rachel had understood, too. She thought she and her dad explained it well later that afternoon. Still, Rachel hardly ever heard about such things. The joy of giving of oneself in a quiet, loving way. Getting her to act that way would take time. Lots of time.

However, Michelle had patience. She merely had to be constantly caring. Then, Rachel could observe where she placed her trust and why. Being that witness for Rachel could be her best deed of all.

Michelle's thoughts were interrupted. Her dad burst into the room again. Two people were with him. The tot's eyes brightened. "Mommy, Daddy," shrieked Betty gleefully as she ran to hug them. The three embraced joyfully.

"I think that's them," noted Mandy.

Michelle rose. "Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, I presume."

They nodded. The Spencers tearily hugged Michelle. "Thank you so much for taking such good care of Betty, Michelle. Your father said you did a wonderful job," remarked the mother.

"You're welcome. It was just something I knew needed to be done," came the modest reply. She addressed Mrs. Spencer again. "I hope your mom's doing better, Mrs. Spencer."

Mrs. Spencer nodded slowly. She looked a little gloomy. "Somewhat. She's home from the hospital. My sister and I will have to take turns watching her, though. This last trip to the Emergency Room was pretty bad."

"Michelle's mommy's in Heaven, too," Betty told her parents. "If Gramma goes she can meet her."

Mr. Spencer knelt down to Betty's level. "Mr. Tanner told us about that. Everyone dies sometime."

Michelle didn't want Betty to start feeling sad again. She changed the subject to the party.

"Wait till you see the video. We had so much fun."

Betty nodded. "An elephant came into the back yard. So did a big balloon. I rode a horse, and we kept changing our names. Did you change your names?"

"Change our names?" Mr. Spencer looked quite puzzled. He turned to Danny. "Was this one of their party games?"

Danny chuckled for a moment. "Actually, it started at the airport. Michelle did it to get away from a stranger."

A light bulb seemed to go on above Mr. Spencer's forehead. "Oh, okay. When my brother

came." Michelle mouthed the word "what." Mr. Spencer hastened to add "my brother really made a mistake in trying to get Betty."

"So that was her uncle," Michelle said slowly.

"Right. He said he thought he saw Betty. I only had the one ticket. But, he didn't know that. He figured I brought her and we got separated. So, he was going to take her to find me. Then you called her Pammy. So, he decided he was mistaken."

Michelle couldn't believe it. Her mouth flung open. "You mean...we could have avoided this whole thing? She wouldn't have had to go to a strange home, wouldn't have had..." She was in total shock. "And he saw us again today! I don't believe this!"

Mr. Spencer snickered. "Yes, but I'm glad it happened. She hadn't seen my brother since last Christmas. He would have been just as strange as you. And she never should have gone with him if she didn't know for certain who he was."

Danny nodded. "I always tell my girls if they're lost, find someone with a uniform. Especially the police. If they can't, they should find a family with small children and stay with them. Somebody like that is a lot safer than anything else."

"I get it now," Mandy told them. "So, your wife figured you must have taken Betty with you. And when you came home she and Winston were gone. So, you thought she took Betty."

"Right. She and her sister could take turns with the kids. She did take the baby, after all."

They all walked out of the bedroom. "Mommy, San Francisco is just like Wonderland," Betty told her joyfully. "There's a man with lots of puppets who talk all the time. They have another man who talks to his hair." She hoped there was still time to see that. She suddenly remembered she hadn't seen him do this.

What other funny things did she see? Betty related what she recalled. "They have a bear with a school. His name is Mr. Bear. They have horses and elephants. And, the elephants come into your yard. And you get to be everyone else!"

Danny tried to explain some of the other strangeness. "She'll never believe San Francisco is a normal city."

Michelle laughed out loud. She had forgotten the rule of first impressions. The silliness Betty had seen was all she knew of San Francisco. For all she knew, it was all like this. "Really," Michelle tried to explain, "it isn't always this crazy. It just was this time because..." She tried to think of a good explanation. Finally, she shrugged. She gave the best answer she could. "Well, that's just how birthdays are here."

Betty gave a nod of understanding. "Oh," she spoke slowly as the group went down the stairs. That made sense to her. Cassie's birthday party had sounded just as fun. She turned to her parents. "Can I have my birthday here next year, too?"

"We'll see," Mr. Spencer remarked.

Mandy felt she had to jump into the conversation. She'd been to one weird birthday party now. But, she still wished she'd been to Cassie's. "Maybe we could do a real Alice in Wonderland party this time."

Danny decided that might be possible. It would require lots of work. But, they would have a lot of time. "Just be sure to book it a month in advance next time," he kidded them. Michelle was thrilled. That meant Betty could come back.

Betty ran over to the bassinet on the couch. D.J. and Stephanie were smiling at the baby. "Winston," cried the tot.

Michelle looked in triumph at her sisters. "I told you Winston wasn't her sled."

Danny explained how Betty had missed Winston. He went into what they discussed before discovering the answer. "She's very attached to her baby brother," Mrs. Spencer told them.

The husband explained why he'd planned on leaving. "I've been watching the kids. My wife's run back and forth to her mom's for quite a while. When I got laid off it got to be too much. Her mom seemed to get a lot better. So, I thought I could take a break. Then, I changed my mind. I decided to stay one more day. Besides, it was quiet at home then."

He hugged his wife and daughter, and began sniffing. "When she called asking how Betty was, I realized she wasn't with her mom. I was terrified. I realized as hard as things are, I have to stay. I can't take a break whenever I want. Hearing about what your dad went through losing Pam really made me think, too. It could be a lot worse. But somehow, there's always grace and love out there when you need it. You just have to look for it."

"I'm glad it all worked out," Danny told them. Michelle agreed. Having Betty around had been a hassle. However, now that it was over, she could say she enjoyed every bit of her good deed. It had been lots of fun. They all hugged.

"Can I see the man who talks to his hair," Betty asked.

Mr. Spencer had been told about Jesse. "He's putting his boys to bed. That'll be something to look forward to next time."

Betty slowly agreed. She wanted her friends to see it, anyway. "Maybe next year I can bring some friends to my party." In her mind, she'd already been promised a San Francisco birthday party. She knew several kids she wanted to invite.

Stephanie turned to D.J. "What does she think this is, Disneyland?"

"Close. Some pretty funny things happened," Michelle admitted.

She helped collect Betty's presents. Joey got a bag for the family. He put in the presents and the birthday party videotape.

"She's welcome to stay here a few more days," Michelle told the Spencers. She knew Betty enjoyed it. But, she'd enjoyed having her just as much. It was amazing how good it felt. She hoped Rachel could learn to appreciate that someday.

Mrs. Spencer thanked Michelle for the offer. "We're lining up some more friends to take care

of them. But, maybe once in a while, she can stay here. If one of us comes with her."

The families embraced again, and the Spencers left. Danny knelt beside Michelle. His

daughter was grinning broadly. But, she also had a small tear in her eye.

"You're going to miss her, huh?"

"Yeah. It sure is great to do nice things for others."

D.J. agreed. "They really appreciated it. But, it wouldn't matter if they didn't. The joy comes from giving of yourself, or your time, or whatever, just to help someone."

Danny hugged Michelle. "That's right. We're really proud of you."

Michelle spoke sorrowfully. "I sure wish I knew she was gonna come back, though." Yes, she could have another birthday there. But, a year seemed like forever. "I really feel like I made a new friend."

"Well, I'm sure she'll come back now," came Cassie's voice. She held up a doll. It was one of Betty's presents.

"Where did you find that," Michelle wanted to know.

Cassie explained. "It was under the dog's bed. And I've been to my Grandma's enough to know this. When you leave something behind, it's usually so you'll have an excuse to go back there." The room erupted in laughter.