**Chapter II: Chickpocolypse**

Klutin, wailing and pepper blinded, ran wailing and didn't stop until he spashed into the water of Silus Marsh. He didn't know where he was. He couldn't see anything. He couldn't smell anything. But nw he had come to water and he could go no further without swimming. He froze and trembled.

He dunked his head under the water and shook it.

“Should be fine in a few minutes. Then I can go back to the farmhouse. Back to my bed and a nice bowl of kibbles. Maybe some table scraps tonight. Just need a few more minutes here in Silas Marsh.

“Silus Marsh!”

Klutin bounded out of the pond. He sniffed. Mostly pepper, but there was somehting else, too. His blood ran cold.

Then a voice, sibilant and feminine, came from the water:

“The air tastes like fear,” it said. “You've finally scented me havent' you, hound?”

“What? Who are you? What do you want?”

Klutin heard turbulant swirling in the water and now the voice came from the land in front of him. “Can't see., can't smell. Go back into the water and wash yourself. Then you won't need to ask.”

“Just tell me!” Klutin begged.

The water swriled again. There was a rustling in the cat tails.

“Where have you gone?” called Klutin. But the creature was silent.

Klutin shifted uncertainly. He did not want to go back to the water. But his eyes and nostrils still burned. It occurred to Klutin that If the creature were going to eat him, he could just as easily do it with him starning here blind on the bank. He turned to the marsh.

“Don't go into the water, Klutin,” came a third voice. “She's tricking you”

The voice was familiar, but not in a way that Klutin found comforting.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“You should. You chased me into a car, a barn and a house. We broke windows, set off explosions, toppled a tower. You came out of it pepper blind and covered with paint. I lost a couple of pin feathers.”

“You're that hen?”

“Chickpocalypse, they named me.”

“Why are you here? What was that I was speaking to?”

“You didn't see her? That's too bad because I didn't either. She heard me coming and hid in the cat tails. Now quickly, follow my voice. We'll go back to the farmhouse.”

“Ok,” said Klutin. “First let me wash out my eyes and nose. The pain is terrible.”

“If you do, you'll die,” said Chickpocalypse. “The only reason that creature hasn't eaten you already is your' vocered with wet paint.”

The voice came from the cat tails.

“And what makes you think you won't die? You didn't get covered with this paint. Just lost a few pinfeathers. I won't miss them.”

Chickpocalypse turned toward the cattails.

“Come after me, then,” she said. “Maybe it'll work out better for you than it did this dog.”

There was a pause of a decision being made. Then a swirl and rush of something large barreling through the cattails. Chicpocalypse and Klutin wathed them bow backward the slap the water as the thing of Silas Marsh carved a swath of destruction that would soon be upon them. Chickpocolypse eyes widened and her courage began to fade. The swath was two feet wide. It formed in a an 'S' pattern and came inexorable closer. By the time could co not a foot further withoutt emerging frrom the cattails and exploding into view of the dog and hen, who now stood trembling and clutching one another.

And suddenly, it stopped.

The cattails rusthled as if whatever was inside charged. But then it stopped abruptly.

“No,” she said. “I've been patient many years now. I'll be patient just a little longer.”

“Come out,” said Chickpocalypse. “Show yourself.”

“Oh, I will,” said the creature. “And what I night that will be! Young was I when first I came to these waters. And so small a bullfrog a meal for me made. How I feared the raccoons! And the dogs at the farm! It's been so long since one dared approach, I didn't realize how small they've become. So go, hen. Take the hound. We'll meet again soon enough.” The cattails rustled and the creature was gone.

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“So, what is it that happens at these funeral? And why is it we're not supposed to roll in the dirt?”

“Because you've just had baths,” said Wess, who was scrubbing at Klutin's head with a bath brush.

“And because people are sad and they don't like it. You can't help dig either. Our job is to be a comfort, and we do that by looijng sad.”

“Thanks, Bofore,” said Wes. “We're all really lucky to have you.”

“Alright, you two, Line up for inspection!”

Klutin leapt from the bath, dodged Wes's towel, shook vigourously and seated himself beside Bangle.

“Let's see your funeral faces!”

Klutin was the picture of exquisite grief. Th.

Bangle, with her perky ears and bright eyes was another matter. Tried to emote something other than radiant happiness. The closes she could come was bright curiousity.

“Try drooping your ears a bit,” Bofore said.

“I can't,” said Bangle.

“Well, at least stop wagging your tail.”

“At least stop wagging your tail!” Bofore commanded.

That evening they buried Calla at the top of the orchard hill. The cousins came from across the creek. She was not a large goat, hardly bigger than a large breed dog. But it took considerable effort to dig a hole lay her in. The children took turns at this, and when they were finished, they had a proper grave and an impressive mound of dirt beside it.

Each of the children spoke words at the graveside service. Animals stood in attendance and conducted themselves in a manner that befitted the occastion. All except Bofore, rolled an wriggled exhuberantly in the mound of dirt.

“What's he doing?” asked Bangle.

“Isn't that a dog thing?” asked Floydarina. “I'm surprised you have to ask.”

Cody went to the mound and sniffed.

“It is pretty interesting,” he said. “I thnk I'll have a roll, too.”

“Knock it off, you guys,” said Wes. “This is a funeral.”

“I can't help it,” said Bofore as he lay on his back grinding his shoulders into the earth. “It's amazing.”

Wes pushed Bofore off the mound with his foot and began shoveling dirt into the grave.

Suddenly, the chickens clucked in alarm and scattered. Marnie was coming up the hill, Ferdinant her seing eye pig, on his leash as usual.

itn. it was a familiar sight now, but once it had been considered most remarkable that a blind woman should have a pig as a service animal. When Marnie first approachable Ferdinand with a leash an a collar, he might well have laid into her with his tusks and open her flesh. But he didn't. And when she worked the collar over his head and to his neck, he could have easily sluffed it off. But he didn't. Instead he led her to the door of the prailene cottage, through the living room, into the kitjen to the refrigerator. Marnielljn  
Day LPP 0 poured herself a glass of iced tea and allowed the pig to lead her to the front porch.  
"I've never seen anything to beat it," gasped Mosey.  
"It's her witchcraft!"  
"Hush, Buford!"  
Word got around. When Ferdinand escorted Marnie down the long driveway to the mailbox, a crowd had gathered to watch the pig stop her at the road, wait for traffic to clear, and guide her across the road. They cheered when she was safely back to her driveway.  
"You know that's my pig."  
"Hush, Buford," said Mosey.  
The Mary's Bluff observer sent a reporter out, and the day after the story ran reporters came from the newspaper and all three TV stations in Nashvanooga.  
"I don't see what all the fuss is about," said Buford. "There's lots of pigs out there that can do tricks. Impressive tricks, too."  
Buford had researched the subject.  
The media ignored him. Marnie beamed at the cameras.  
"No, he wasn't hard to train. I guess I have a way with animals."  
"Apparently there's this pig out in California that holds a position on the board of a philanthropical foundation," said Buford. "Now that's an interesting pig!"  
"No, I'm not a vegetarian. But I strongly believe more people should learn to relate to animals as something other than meat. "There's pigs that do a whole world of goodvisiting sick kids in hospital. One that I read about let's out big oink whenever his owners blood sugar gets out of whack. And then there's that one in Hawaii that surfs! Yes sir! Rides like the dickens on a surfboard with his owner. I'll bet that's a sight to see."  
Buford's resentment at Marnie's fame became a source of much speculation in the family.  
  
He was 4 years Marnie's senior, so she would have been born at a time when Buford would have been profoundly impacted by the loss of his parents attention. Or maybe he just had a senve

The event became known as the Ultimate Silver Spangled Death Derby of Clover Creek Bend. A while later, the name was changed to the Penultimate Silver Spangled Death Derby of Clover Creek Bend and still later to the First Silver Spangled Death Derby of Clover Creek Bend. No event that followed was more rife with ramification. Family Alliances shifted. There were indictments and recriminations. Repercussions spanned the years, casting a pall on family relations and ruining many a Thanksgiving meal. No two accounts of it were the same but one thing was agreed upon by all.

It was time to clean out that barn.

Buford, Rufus and Tennyson Jack set about this work while Wincie and Kacie Mel worked on the Praline Cottage. The cousins cleaned paint tracks from the deck and Marnie was tasked with distracting Mosey so they could burned the broken furniture and wallpaper.

“The boys are going to burn your antique furniture and expensive wallpaper,” she said to Mosey.

“What?” said Mosey, springing to her feet. “If they do, they'll be sorry.”

“Don't go now,” said Marnie. “If you do they'll get mad and leave without straighting the place up.”

“I don't care about straightening it up,” said Mosey. “I've not set foot in the barn for 10 years.”

“Yes, but if they tidy up, you'll have a place to store paper towels. Salvage Annie's is having a liquidation, there's a coupon in today's paper..”

“I suppose there's no rush” said Mosey, settling herself back to the couch. “Those boys do tend to get distracted.”

“If you want, I'll pitch a shiney object in with them. That should get you an extra couple of hours.” Marnie said.

Mosey laughed. “You'd think with eight able-bodied children, i'd have one who could keep a job.”

It was a common lamnet from Mosey, and this version of it indicated that Marnie was currently in Mosey's good graces. Otherwise, Mosey would have dropped the 'able bodied' qualifier and put the number of children at nine. Emboldened, Marnie turned to the subject she'd been thinking about.

“Seriously, why to you put up with it? Buford has been living in your house for months now and nothing good has come of it. He's not fixed anything and he's bardly broght in a dime. Send him back to town!”

“But I have to think about Wes. After all he's been through, he needs a fulltime parent.”

“They fight fulltime,” said Marnie. “Wes needs a stable dad to model work and responsiblility,” said Marnie.”

Indeed, Mosey had been disappointed in the progress Buford had made since he moved to the farm with Wes and his now-estranged wife, Molly. Until then, Mosey had lived in the main farmhouse had occupied both the main house and the guest house, alternating between one and the other as dictated by the shifiing state of disrepair.

When the refrigerator went out in the main house, Mosey refused to call a repairman, insisting that with six able-bodied sons, she shouldn't have to. This, despite protests from each of the six that they didn't know how to repair a refrigerator and, indeed, they themselves would have no choice but to call a repairmen if their own refrrigerator stopped working.

Mosey carried the contents of the refrigerator down to the Apple Cottage, which she had abandoned a few months earlier when the water heater stopped working at the farmhouse. There, she got along well enough with cream in her coffee and courtroom dramas on TV and a shower just a few steps away in the framhouse.

When the refrigerator at the Praline Cottage also stopped working, Mosey moved back to the farmhouse to be closer to a functioning water heater. The cream for the coffee she kept in an ice chest Oincy had liberated from barn, and here she got along well enough by dispatching one or the other of her progeny to retrieve ice until driven back to the apple cottege when the air conditioning failed at the farmhouse. She remained at the Praline Cottage, even after the septic system failed there, reckoning that the inconvenience of an occassional trip to the farmouse for a bathroom break was nothing compared to the cost of paying a stranger to pump her spetic tank.

Matters finally came to a head when the roof began to leak in the Prailine Cottage. Here was an inssue that she could not be ignored without substation financial consequences. She drove three of the four able-bodied sons up a ladder burdoned with shingles and tar. An afternoon's effort prduced a concussion and a fractured vertebre but made no difference in the leak in the roof.

“You've got to call a roofer,” Buford insisted over he writhing form of Tennyson Jack.

“But they'll come back and rob me!” Mosey responded, weeping.

A family meeting was convened and it was agreed that Buford and Wes should move into the farm house and Monsey would go to the praline cottage.

Buford was certain he could make a go of the farm. He had, for a number of years, supplemented his income from a family trust by truck farming – selling corn, tomatoes and melons from the bed of his pick up truck parked at a shouldter off Hwy 411. He was convinced the farm was a all set to explode itno money with a visonary like himelf at the help.

Buford was certain the farm would become profittable, but it would take vision and unconventional thinking.

“Branding” he declared. “That how you turn hazelnuts to gold!”

“Branding?” asked Mosey.

“Sure,” said Buford. “It's what separates your ho-hum garden variety vegetable from upscale designer produce. Take Grainger County and its tomatoes. Every grocery store in town piles those tomatoes high on a table in the middle of the produce section and sets a sign on top to that pile that says 'Grainger County Tomatoes!' And every one of those tomatoes has a sticker on it, and do you know what that sticker says?”

“Grainger County Tomatoes?” asked Mosey.

“Grainger Coounty Tomatoes!” Buford affirmed.

“And do you really think a tomato from Grainger County is any better than a tomato from Scott County, or Green County, or Blount County or any other County in East Tennessee?”

“No!” shouted Buford, answering on Moseay's behalf.

“You see, it's not the tomato that sets Grainger County apart! It's the label!.”

Mosey agreed to front the cost of stickers that read, “Blount County Hazelnuts,” and while he was at the printers, Buford ordered some that said “Grainger County,” for the tomatoes he sold out of his truck.

Buford was up all night pracing stickers on hazelnuts until he had done and entire bushel. It was a slow task, and in the end, a profitless one.

“People don't buy hazelnuts” the grocer said. “Not a a grocery store, anyway. Hazelnuts are used to flavor something else. Coffee creamers. Pralines maybe. Or as a paste. There's a commercial spread that's pretty popular.”

Buford back at Mosey's:

“Hazelnut Butter! That'll make us some money!”

“That's good, honey,” Mosey said absently while she worked a crossword puzzle.

“It's simple economics. There's phases of production, you see, and every time there's a phase you spend a little bit of money but you add a little bit of value. So you start with something that has just a little value and you end up with something that has a lot of value. That's the whole basis of our economic system. That's according to many books on the subject that I have seen at the library.”

“What's an 8 letter word for \*

“Take a tomato, for instance, since that's what we started with. Now, you can grow a tomato and sell it and make a little money, sure. But what happens if you take that tomato and make it into tomato sauce?”

“Fifteen down is wrong,” Mosey said, attacking the newpaper with an eraser.

“You make even more money!,” said Buford. “Because you added value to it! And if you take that tomato sauce and use it to make a pizza and you sell that, well, the sky's the limit.”

Through research and experimentation, Buford produced a Hazelnut spread that, aided by a low, low introctory rate, sold well enough along side the garden vegetables in his truck. Sales tapered off as he raised prices enough to afford some reasonable compensation for the time and effort requred to shell and grind enough hazelnuts to make a jar of his hazelnut spread. Buford went to Mosey for money to rent space at the farmers market that occurs every weekend in downtown Nashvanooga. There he plied his wares alongside beeswax candle, goat milk soap, prayer beads, incense, hooka tobacco and hand thrown pottery sold by sandal-shod shod hippies, freckled milk maids and exotic foreign women in Jelabiyas and grand boubous.

Buford let his beard and hair grow. He wore tie-died shirts and a pony tail. Sales improved. But the price he could command brought in barely more that Buford could make if he put the same amount of time into a job at a factory. A factory! That's what he needed. Automation. It was too bad his father hadn't invented a machine that would shell and grind hazelnuts. No, he would have to think of something else.

His efforts in downtown Nashvanoog failed to make a profit, but they did give him new insight into the world outside Mary's Bluff. Buford had always reveled in his comtempt for the latte and frozen yogurt crowd downtown. Now he had a new perspective. There was a vitality in this amalgamem of people and perspective. An energy that Buford found he could both draw from and contribute to. He started bring his banjo with him to his stand at the farmer's market and would play at it during lulls in business. He began to develop a following, even became something of a minor celebrity. Prominent members of the community would hail him by name when he passed his booth. His picture appeared among a collage of images on the front of the Nashvanooga Visitors Guide. He became a popular and regular caller on Vic and Bill's Sports Talk radio program.

“Local Sourcing” he said to Mosey. “People want it, and they'll pay through the teeth for it.”

“Ok,” said Mosey.

“You see, when people go to a nice restaurant, they don't want anything that comes from somewhere else. They want food that comes from as close to the restaurant as it can get. I know a place that grows mint in the landscaping just outside the door and you should see how people order the julips.”

“Your uncle Joe just loved mint julips,” said Mosey.

“And everything on the menu is fronm a farm out in Sweetwater. Sweaetwater! Heck, we're way closer than that!. I've gotten to know people in pretty well in Nashvanooga. I know a restaurant that will pay top dollar for every vegetable we can bring them. And not just vegetables. Eggs too. We can sell every egg them chickens can lay! Lots more than I can sell at the farmer's market. And pork. You won't believe the way they eat bacon. Bacon Pimento Cheese. Bacon Pimento Cheese, Bacon Lattes.

And so, staked by Mosey, Buford purchased a pregnant sow and started in motion events that doomed his farm to sourching dreams. For, Buford, beijng but recently on the road to enlightenment, could not have known that no high-end, farm-to-table eatery wanted to serve bacon served from a pig that had served as a seing eye animal to a blind woman.

The attention couldn’t have come at a better time for McGillicuddy. He was only weeks from the slaughterhouse when his story got out, and it wasn’t long until fans formed a movement devoted to McGillicuddy’s salvation. Uncle Earl was condemned on local editorial pages and on animal-themed cable television networks. Letters arrived by the truckload.

Earls produce sales suffered. Cars sped past his roadside stand and yuppies veered away from his both at the Nashvanooga farmers market. Still he stood firm in the belief that a man had the right to dispose of his own god-given pig in that manner as best suited his own needs and temperament. Pigs were put here on earth for a very specific purpose, and that purpose remained constant, no matter what tricks his sister had been able to teach one. And, even if people didn’t know it, a 300-pount boar was a poor choice of service animal for anyone, particulary for a frail blind woman. Its tusks were razor sharp and it could eviscerate Marnie without any provocation or warning.

Marnie told her story on a network morning show.

Whereas McGuilicuddy the Wonder Pig is a resident of Anderon County, Tennessee, and

Whereas McGillicuddy the Wonder Pig performs a singular humanitarian service for Marnie Hooper, also a resident of Blount County, Tennessee, who tragically became blind as an adult, and

Whereas McGillicuddy the Wonder Pig accompanies Marnie on walks on her family farm

Whereas McGuillicuddy the Wonder Pig, affords Marnie Hooper a degree of independence that would not be practical without McGillicuddy the Wonder Pig, and

Whereas McGillicuddy the Wonder Pig is a distiquished and remarkable representative of his species, and joins such bovine luminaries as Pigasus, Curley Boy, The Tamsworth Two, the great King Neptune, Monster Pig, Hogzilla, Big Norm, Toby the Sapient Pig and the unnamed Learned Pig of 1864

Therefore be it Resolved that this Bount County Commisssion herewith extols, and implores those parties to allow McGillicuddy the Seeing Eye Wonderpig be exempted from those \* and \* usually accorded farmyard livestock and allowed to continue his good work on behalf of the less fortunate.

Customers and friends deserted him. Uncle Earl was a reed shaken and he would now relent. The only media outlet with which he had any comfort at all was a local sports talk show.

“92.7 WPSM, home of the Nashvanooga State Fighting Possums bringing you news, analysis, talk and all things possum, welcome caller, you’re on Sports All Day with Vic and Bill.”

“Hey Vic and Bill, this is Earl P. Hooper. I’m the feller with that pig everybody keeps talking about. I just want to say I love your show and I think you guys to great job.”

“Thanks Earl”

“I’ve got a question and a comment today, if it’s OK. My question is do either of ya’ll know if coach Blevins is doing anything to recruit some talent for their secondary? They haven’t really stopped anybody from passing the ball all season. And my comment is that I’ve decided I’m not going to slaughter that pig of mine, I’m just going to let is stay on the farm until it dies on its own or everyone loses interest in it.”

“Well,” said Vic. “We normally try to limit our subjects to just sports, but we can’t resist a scoop when one just falls in our laps. As many of our listeners know, Mr. Hooper here has maintained that he’s going to butcher and freeze his pig, known to the nation as McGillicuddy, even though the pig serves as a service animal for his own blind sister. What was it that changed your mind, Mr. Hooper.”

“I guess it comes down to my own personal family values,” said Earl. “I believe there’s three things a man should always put before himself. That’s God, family and football.”

“Well,” said Bill. “I’m sure everyone’s going to be very happy that you’ve made the decision you have.”

“And country!” Earl interrupted. “I forgot about country. It’s God, family, country and then football. So I guess really there’s four things a man should put ahead of hisself. And maybe five if you count honor, and I do. I’m a man who really believes in personal honor at all times. You know, Vic and Bill, it’s really hard to put an exact count on the things a man should put ahead of hisself. You probably don’t really have to worry about it much as long as you go to church on Sundays.”

“Thanks, Mr. Hooper,” said Vic. “Now if I can just come back to your question about recruiting …”

“No man can know,” continued Earl. “Why God in his wisdom saw fit to strike that woman blind in the prime of her life. Some believe god sent adversity to our family to test our faith. Others believe it had to do wth the evil that lie in Marnie’s heart.”

“I’m going to have to cut you off there, Mr. Hooper. Thanks for your call. Now Bill, If you’ll just respond to the question about recruiting.”

“Well, Vic, I’m sure it’s occurred Coach Blevins would love to improve his defense by putting faster players on the field. But there aren’t all that many players coming out of high school with the kind of speed to make a real difference at this level. And to get those few that there are, coach Blevins has to compete with the other schools in the conference and, for that matter, nationwide.”

“Thanks Bill. Hello caller, you’re on Sports All Day with Vic and Bill.”

“It was Earl Hooper’s rank moonshine whiskey that caused me to go blind, not God like Earl just said. Earl Hooper condenses his moonshine through the radiator of an old Dodge Powerwagon that’s been sitting there at the farm since before Dad bought it, and I regret that I ever took one sip of that stuff. Never ever buy moonshine whiskey from that man!”

“Were going to have to cut you off there, caller, who I believe was … Is that correct? Yes, that was Marnie Hooper, the blind woman at the center of the controversy of the seeing eye pig. We’re giving her an opportunity for some equal time, we’re going to go back to sports now, ou’re on Sports All Day.”

“Well, you’d think out of six children I’d have at least one that could get and keep a steady job...”

“And there you have it,” said Vic, hanging up on Mosey. “McGillicuddy the Seeing Eye Wonder Pig saved from the slaughterhouse and you heard it here first on WPSM FM.”

Up until recently, Buford had to make daily visits to Wes's mother's house for his daily parenting time with Wes. Now that that was no longer the case, Buford was eager to move to the farm with Wes and Molly. Mosey agreed that the Praline Cottage suited her better than the farmhouise. So Wes and family moved in there.

“Don't you think he's had enough time?” Marnie asked. She pulled a piece of papter from her pocket. “I brought you an eviction notice. I think the best way if for you to sign it. He'll have 30 days to leave.”

Mosey sighed and took the sheet of paper from Marnie. This was not the first occastion that required Moseay to act as the vessel through which reality would assert itself in the dreams of her children. And it was a brood of dreamers that

to be one of many occassions when Mosey served as the vessel through which reality would assert itself against the notions of her sons and daughter.. And it was a progeny of dreamers that Conrad McGuilicutty had left behind on this earth. Each convinced of their own exceptionality. Each convinced that matters of sustenance and livliedhood would resolve themselves as long as they were true to passion and purpose. And they came to Mosey seeking their blessings on this, the pursuite of their dream, this, the fullfilling of their lives purpose, this hiking of the applacian trail, this sourcing of grass feed beef , this engineering of a nitrogen-powered engine, this forging of an emu empire, this distilling of moonshine whiskey, this writing of literary novels, this chainsaw sculpting of black bear yard ornaments, this bio-engineering of curative genomes, this gathering of wild mushrooms.

And thse, Mosey denounced each after the other as ill-concieved, half-backed notionss that would lead to naght but bunions, stampeeds, fierey explosions, head kickings, blindness, rejections, ampuatations, zombie hords, poisonings.

To one degree or another she was always right. And when those enterprises collapsed it was always she, Mosey who paid a price. When the neighbors demanded compensation for car on grass fed cow collisgion, they demanded it of she, Mosey, and son Buford, hippie farmer and lazy fencer. And when

When Mosey and Marnie entered the workshop, they found Buford, Rufus, Tennyson Jack and Casie Mel hovering over an unfurled sheet which they had laid out on the work bench.

“They go in this hopper here,” said Rufus. “They you turn the crank and they come out this shoot.”

“It looks like it could be that, alright,” said Tennyson Jack.

“It couldn't be anything else,” decared Buford.

“What do you boys have there,” asked Mosey.

“Well,” said Tennyson Jack. “Buford thinks he's founds plans for a device dad invented to shell Hazelnuts.

“Really?” asked Mosey.

“I don't know what else it could be

“I suppose it would make sense that Conrad had something like that in mind.”

“The plans are all here,” said Buford. “We've got to build this right here in the shop, just like Dad used to do! We can have it finished by the time the nuts drop this fall. Then we can make hazelnut butter to sell at the farmer's market in time for christmas. It's gonna be the best Christmas ever!”

“Well, said Mosey. “It sounds like you might finally be onto something.”