

Chapter Four

Goats Don't Eat Ketchup Bottles

I raced to the pickup. Slim hadn't gotten there yet to open the door but that was no big deal to me. Hey, if they don't open the door, I can always jump through the...

BONK!

usually wait for someone to open the, uh, door. Which is what I did this time. I was in no big rush.

Slim came along at his usual pace—cold molasses. At the pickup door, he leaned down and looked me in the eyes. "When the winder glass is rolled up, pooch, you can't jump through it."



Yes, I knew that.

"And what makes you think you deserve to ride up front with me anyways?"

Well, I...at the time it had seemed...

"You're just a dog, did you know that? Just a dog, and you're five bales short of a full load of brains."

I, uh, didn't know how to respond to that.

"You snap at ashes and you run rabbits and you try to leap through winder glass, and Hank, you're just dumb." He reached down and scratched me behind the ears. "But so am I, so I reckon we're pretty well matched." He opened the door. "Get up, Einstein, we've got work to do."

I leaped into the pickup and took my position of honor in the seat. Then he called for Mister Stub Tail, who had come back down from the machine shed, the treacherous little...

He came in a slow walk and had to be lifted into the pickup because of...something. Short

legs, tired blood, stunted growth, lack of ambition.

He took his place in the seat between us. Slim fired up the pickup and off we went on a new and exciting adventure.

"Where are we going?" Drover asked as we turned east on the county road.

"Before I answer that, Mister Weasel, I want some information out of you."

"Really? Gee, I hope I know the answer."

"You know the answer."

"Oh good. What's the question?"

"The question is, why did you suddenly vanish when Loper came down to the trash barrel?"

"Well, let me think here. I was worried about all that fire."

"That is a bald-headed lie, Drover."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yes sir, that bad. You know very well why you left."

"Yeah, but if I told you, you'd get mad and then I'd feel guilty about it, and I hate feeling guilty."

"You should feel guilty. What you did was shameful and chicken-hearted. I mean, snapping at ashes was your deal from the start. I was an innocent bystander who got involved by accident."

"Yeah, and accidents happen."

"But your leaving the scene of the accident was no accident, Drover. You knew how stupid the whole thing looked and so you left me there to become the scapegoat of their

laughingstock."

"I met a goat once. He ate rose bushes."

I glared daggers at the little mutt. "Don't try to change the subject."

"Just think about swallowing all those thorns."

"Don't tell me what to think. I don't care what goats eat."

"I've heard they'll eat tin cans."

"Drover, answer the question immediately."

His gaze wandered out the window. "I guess I forgot the question."

"The question, you moron, is..." Hmmm, I seemed to have forgotten the question myself.
"Something about goats."

"Oh yeah, you asked if I'd ever met a goat before."

"I asked about goats?"

"You sure did, I heard you myself, and his name was Billy."

"Wait a minute, back up. Who was this Billy character?"

"He was a goat."

"Ah yes. Billy goat. I'm beginning to see a pattern unfolding here."

"And he ate tin cans and ketchup bottles."

"That's very interesting. They're amazing creatures, aren't they? Well, Drover, there's an important lesson here. If a goat can find nourishment in a ketchup bottle, many things are possible in this old world."

"Yeah, and we can all learn a lesson from that."

"Exactly." I blinked my eyes and shook my head. "I think I've been working too hard lately."

"Yeah, and being late to work is hardly working at all."

"I've noticed a certain scrambled pattern in my brain waves."

"Boy, I love scrambled eggs."

I stared at him for a moment. "And Drover, I'm beginning to suspect that talking to you has something to do with it."

"Thanks, Hank."

"Because trying to carry on an intelligent conversation with you would scramble anyone's brain waves. You see, I really don't care about goats."

"Me neither."

"Or what they eat."

"Oh, they'll eat anything."

"And since neither one of us seems to care about goats or what they eat, why don't we just drop the subject and never talk about it again?"

"Fine with me. Where are we going?"

"Insane, Drover."

"I'll be derved. I've never been there before."

"Ha! You've been there so long, you can't find your way back home."

"Yeah, and I'm already missing the machine shed."

"Drover?"

"Yes?"

"Shut. Up. Now."

At last he shut up and I was able to concentrate on what we were doing and where we were going.

We drove down the county road until we came to Slim's mailbox. He pulled over and checked the box. He leafed through the contents two grocery store circulars, a pictureshow calendar, an appeal for contributions from the Polio Foundation, and a giveaway offer from somebody who promised to make him rich.

He didn't waste much time on the grocery store circulars and he got a good chuckle out of the appeal for funds.

"If they're writing me for money, they have definitely come to the goat's house to get wool."

Goats? I shot a glance at Drover to see if he would pick up on it. He wasn't listening.

Good. I had heard and said everything about goats that I ever wanted to hear or say, and I didn't believe that baloney about goats eating ketchup bottles anyway.

Goats don't eat ketchup bottles.