

Hall & Goats:
A Bubba the Monster Hunter Short Story
John G. Hartness

It was the middle of the night, and I was crouched in a damp, smelly field waiting for something to happen. This wrapped a lot of my least favorite things all up in a nice little ball of suck for me to gnaw on. I hate waiting. I'm a man of action, as they say. I like to *do* stuff, not wait around to do stuff. Now I'll admit that some of the stuff I do sucks, like chasing down zombies, or werewolves, or fighting witches or ghouls or vampires or pretty much anything else that goes bump in the night. But it's a damn sight more entertaining than sitting around waiting for something to show up for me to kill. Especially when I don't know what I'm waiting on. Waiting to me just seems like a great big waste of my precious drinkin' time.

I hate being wet, too. I'm a big dude — six-five and a good bit past three hundred pounds. And every damn inch is covered with hair. I got a ponytail that hit me halfway down my back, a beard that reaches almost down to my chest, and a pretty good suit of man-fur everywhere else. I ain't one of these billboard pretty boys that's got nowhere for a tick to hide on their cute little manscaped six-pack abs. I got a whole great big fuzzy pony keg of a belly, and that all makes it pretty uncomfortable when I'm rolling around in the cold damp grass. And it takes forever and about three big towels to dry off. I tell you, it's just irritating.

And as much as I am a bonafide country boy, I'm not a big fan of the smells of nature, if you know what I mean. And this field was full of some impressively natural smells. I much prefer the kind of smells that come from a bottle. Like the sweet, soothing smell of Jack Daniels. Or the glorious lavender-scented

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cloud of stripper perfume. I once heard a fella say, “they call it Destiny, but it smells like shame.” I disagree. It smells like the hopes and dreams of desperate men and women smart enough to take advantage of them. I love strippers; they have an uncomplicated view of life. You give them money, they show you boobies. I have a similarly uncomplicated view of life — monsters need to be killed, I kill ‘em.

And that’s why I was stuck in a damp, smelly field in the middle of the night miles away from the scent of whiskey or the sight of a boob. I had a monster to kill, and as long as the critter was playing shy, I was stuck out there freezing my ass off and bitching to Skeeter over the Bluetooth. Skeeter’s my backup, my technical liaison, my navigator and my best friend. He’d appointed himself my best friend since the day I kept Jason Skoonfield from running his underpants up the flagpole in middle school. I probably wouldn’t have stopped Jason from having a little bit of innocent fun, but since Skeeter was still wearing his underpants I thought that was a little over the line. So me and Skeeter struck up an unusual alliance. I kept him from getting killed for being the only black kid in our school, not to mention the only gay kid and the smartest kid in three counties, and he made sure I passed algebra and got out of high school. Even the principal thought it was a fair trade. He was pretty tired of replacing all the desks that couldn’t hold me, and he didn’t want to deal with the paperwork if Skeeter ended up dead. So he didn’t ask about my grades, and I didn’t tell.

“Skeeter, you remember when Jason Skoonfield was gone run your drawers up the flagpole in tenth grade?” I asked the air.

Skeeter’s disembodied voice came back in my ear. “It was one of the most traumatic experiences in a traumatic youth, Bubba. Of course I remember it. It may have been the pinnacle of my humiliation in that vile institution they called a school. Why do you bring that up now?”

“You know I get all philosophical-like when I’m stuck out here smelling cowpies and staring up and the stars. You ever wonder where we’d be if I hadn’t stopped Skoon and his buddies?”

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Skeeter's voice got very quiet. "I do, Bubba. Sometimes I do, but I try not to think about that too much. And you shouldn't either; we've got a job to do."

I knew where he was going, and it wasn't a road I wanted to go down right then. Or ever, for that matter. I looked down at the glowing face of the child's Mickey Mouse watch and thought back to happier days. Then I gave myself a shake and answered Skeeter. "Yeah, but what the hell is the job, Skeeter? I'm freezing off my danglies out here and ain't heard nothing all night."

"You know the monster's been feeding every third night, and this is the only herd that hasn't been attacked this month. So if there really is a chupacabra somewhere around here, this is the best spot to find it."

"Yeah, it's a pretty damn good spot to get a frostbit sack, too." I grumbled. "You got it easy, sitting there in your nice warm little command center. Remember, I was on a lake just a few days ago in flip-flops and no shirt, and supposed to be there for another four days. Instead, I'm fully dressed in long pants, a leather jacket and a sweater and I'm still freezing my ass off!"

I heard a sharp intake of breath as Skeeter started to reply, but I cut him off with a hiss. "Shut up, I think I hear something." There was a rustling sound coming from the fence line a few feet away. I crept over in the direction of the sound and suddenly realized that the source of the sound was a cow. I got to within three feet of the beast before I could make out its shape in the moonless night, then I scrambled backwards as quickly as I could as the cow unleashed the most terrible stench I'd ever experienced right in my face.

"Skeeter you sonofabitch a cow just farted on me!" I screeched into the earpiece, trying to get away from the cloud of methane that was wrapped around my head. I heard Skeeter laughing uncontrollably in my ear as I worked hard not to vomit.

"You know I'm gonna kill you when I get out of here, right?"

"I don't make the assignments, Bubba, I just send you the emails." He sounded dangerously close to hyperventilating, and I was dangerously close to walking off the job when I heard the scream.

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If you've never heard a goat scream, you should do everything in your power to keep it that way. It's a sound like nothing on earth, kinda like a mix of a human scream with a deeper tone than any human can make, and it can carry for miles. It chilled me to the bone, and put my butt in gear. I started running for the sound, drawing Bertha, my fifty-caliber Desert Eagle as I went after the monster. When I got there, I stopped dead in my tracks at the scene in front of me.

This was *not* what I had come here to hunt.

And here's where I do that irritating thing they do on TV all the time nowadays — the two-day flashback. You see, instead of telling the story straight I'm gonna get you to someplace real interesting in the narrative, then I'm gonna pull back and dump a couple days' worth of exposition on your heads. It drives me batshit when they do that on TV, but I figure if it works for the boys on *Supernatural*, then it oughta work for me too.

I was sitting on my boat fishing with an unbaited hook when the phone rang. After my last couple of jobs, I didn't really want to kill anything else for a while, even a fish. But if I was gonna go fishing, I figured I oughta at least get my hook wet. But nobody ever said anything about having to bait it. So I was listening to the Dirt Drifters' new album *This is My Blood* while I dozed on the back end of my pontoon boat. I had on my typical fishing gear: size 16 flip-flops, cut-off jean shorts, and a Roger Creager baseball cap I bought at a concert a couple months ago. I'd slathered on enough sunscreen to lube up half the Village People and I was ready for some serious relaxation.

Then my cell phone rang. I wasn't wearing my Bluetooth earpiece because I was on vacation, and Skeeter was three of the top five people I didn't want to hear from. And he knew it. So when "I'm Sexy and I Know It" blared from my phone, I knew it was trouble. I grabbed the phone, and sure enough, there was Skeeter's face.

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I pushed the TALK button and said “I’m on vacation. Go screw yourself for forty-eight hours.” Then I pushed the red button and threw the phone into the lake.

Then my backup cell phone rang. I dug around in my tackle box for it, and flipped it open. Skeeter’s face again. I pushed the button and said “Why did I ever give you this number? Piss off.” Then I pushed the END button and threw it after the first phone.

I sat there in blessed silence for about two minutes before Queen’s “Fat Bottom Girls” started to blare out from somewhere on the boat. I didn’t have another phone. And I’d never set that as a ring tone. I found it in a bait well of the boat and pushed ANSWER.

“Are you gonna hang up on me again?” Skeeter asked.

“Probably. But what is it?”

“A chupacabra. In Florida.”

“Is that anything like a chalupa, ‘cause I’m getting hungry.”

“Maybe if you’d put bait on that hook you’d catch something.”

“Then I’d have to clean it. And how did you know I ain’t got no bait on the hook?”

“I put a camera on your boat when I put this phone on there. You really need to do something about your back hair. I could braid a rug off your shoulders alone.”

“Shut your piehole, Skeeter. What about this chimichanga?”

“Chupacabra. It’s a giant half-bat, half-goat creature that sucks the blood from livestock.”

“Does it hurt people?”

“Not usually.”

“Then it can wait. I’m on vacation.” I went to push the END button and Skeeter spoke up, fast.

“It’s killing off all the prime beef stock in a couple of counties in Florida. If we don’t do something soon the price of steak is going to skyrocket.”

“That could be bad.”

“Like you not being able to afford your weekly porterhouse down at the Beef Barn?”

“I’m on my way.”

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“And put on a shirt!” Skeeter called just before I threw the phone in the lake.

“Asshole,” I grumbled as I reeled in my lines, pulled up my little anchor and steered back to my dock. A couple hours later I had the boat tied off, my beer stowed back in the house, and was in the truck rolling toward Skeeter’s. I’d showered to get all the sunscreen off before I got in my truck, but I was still planning on dropping by Skeeter’s shirtless. I shouldn’t be the only one whose day was ruined by this chinchilla, or whatever the hell it was.

I pulled up to Skeeter’s place and parked my Ford F-250 pickup next to his Mini Cooper convertible. I test-drove one of those once, but figured I shouldn’t buy a car that I couldn’t drive with the roof closed. I walked in Skeeter’s front door without knocking, ‘cause I never knocked at Skeeter’s. That, and the biometric lock on his front door only opened with a palm print from him, me, or Uncle Father Joe, our handler for the Holy Roman Catholic Church. I knew Uncle Father Joe was there, too. I’d seen his Harley in the driveway.

I made my way back towards the conference room, stopping off at Skeeter’s fridge to help myself to a dill pickle and a Bud. I knew he only kept the Bud in there for me, ‘cause Skeeter’s more of a wine drinker. Probably more of a wine spritzer guy if I was really gonna give him crap about it, but I figured he was nice enough to keep some Bud in the house for me, so I’d give him a pass for the day, anyhow. I got to the conference room and sat down at one end, propping my feet up on some random black box on the floor.

Skeeter came in a minute or two later, smacking my feet off the box. “That’s expensive, Bubba, keep your feet off it. And haven’t you ever heard of a napkin? You’re drippin’ pickle juice all in your beard.”

“I’m saving that for later. Now what about this enchilada I’m supposed to go huntin’?”

Uncle Father Joe came in and sat down across the table from Skeeter and handed each of us a manila folder full of pictures. “Hey Bubba, Hey Skeeter. How’s the family?”

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“They’re good, Uncle Joe.” Joe really was Skeeter’s uncle, but it got kinda confusing what with him also being a priest, so I just always called him Uncle Father Joe. Skeeter kept better track of it than me, so he switched up depending on if they were talking family or business. They were almost always talking business, on account of most of the family didn’t speak to Skeeter since he told them he was gay. And most of the family didn’t speak to Joe since he turned Catholic and became a priest. I’m not sure which one of them the Baptists in their family thought was going to Hell first, but I’m pretty sure neither one of them had been to a family reunion in a couple decades.

Me, I hadn’t had any family outside the two of those guys for quite a few years, ever since I got started killin’ monsters. But that’s a story for another time when I ain’t quite so sober.

Anyhow, Uncle Father Joe got done with the pleasantries pretty quick, and we got down to business. He let us flip through the pictures for a few seconds, then he started talking. “What you’re seeing is what the locals think is the work of a chupacabra, a lizard-like creature said to suck the blood from livestock. These pictures show a string of goat and sheep in the panhandle of Florida that have been bled almost completely dry, then left in the fields. Migrant farm workers first brought this to the attention of the Church, and after significant evidence accumulated, we decided to investigate.”

“Goats and sheep? What about cows?” I asked, glaring at Skeeter.

“There aren’t any significant cattle farming operations in the Florida Panhandle, Bubba. But to date nearly two dozen sheep and goats have been attacked.”

“I wouldn’t have got off my boat for sheep, Joe.” I was pretty well shooting lasers at Skeeter with my eyeballs by this point.

“I know that, Bubba, that’s why I told you it was cows. I know how far you’ll go for a good steak, so I reckoned if you thought it would affect your diet, you’d be more likely to come off the lake.”

Skeeter jumped in. “Joe didn’t know anything about my deception, I swear.”

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“Of course not, Bubba. I would never lie to you,” Uncle Father Joe protested.

“All right, I reckon since I’m already dressed I might as well take a look at it.” I said, shooting Skeeter a look. “But when I get back you’d better have a week with nothing to do but fish and drink lined up for me.”

“I promise!” He swore. I just looked at him. “And this time I mean it!” Joe laughed, and after a second so did I.

“Where am I going?” I sighed, getting up and going into the spare bedroom where I kept a packed suitcase. I dug around until I found a 3XL AC/DC concert shirt to put on with my overalls, and I was pretty much ready to roll.

Seems the trouble was centered on a pair of farms just outside of Wausau, Florida. If there was a poster child for small Southern towns, Wausau was definitely in the running. One main street, a supermarket, one cafe and bunch of churches were pretty much the whole town. Anymore you could tell how small a town was by whether or not it could support a Walmart, and by that measure Wausau was tiny indeed. I drove through it twice, circling the main square a couple times and trying to figure out how and why a chili pepper monster would ever find this place, much less decide to set up shop here. Of course, that kind of isolation is exactly what makes a place appetizing for monsters, no pun intended.

It was on my second loop around downtown that I noticed the blue lights in my rearview mirror. I pulled over to let Smokey go by, and was surprised when he pulled over right behind me. I sure hadn’t been speeding; if anything, I was going too slow trying to get a finger on the town. I looked around the cab of the truck and saw nothing incriminating, for a change. I wasn’t even wearing Bertha while I drove. All my guns and knives were safely locked up in their hidey-holes under the back seats. And if you didn’t have the right fingerprints, you were not getting into those cases.

An honest-to-God Southern stereotype got out of the car and walked up to the side of my truck. The cop was about five-eight

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in all directions. He must have weighed three hundred pounds if he was an ounce, and he had the seventies cop mustache rocking. He sidled up alongside the truck and tried to lean in the window with his elbow, but the truck was a little jacked up with mud tires on her, so he wasn't quite tall enough to lean in without looking like a little kid trying to buy candy at the drug store.

"You lost, son?" he drawled.

"Well, Sir, I reckon I could use a bit of help finding my cousin's farm. His name's Jacob Mueller, and I hear he runs a farm out on the east side of town, but I been ridin' around for about an hour now and I ain't seen hide nor hair of it."

"Mueller? I know Jake, and he ain't never mentioned no family. You from up north or something?"

I wasn't quite sure what he meant, since just about everything was north of where we were standing, so I went with honesty for a change. "I'm from North Carolina, but that ain't what most folks call north, if you know what I mean." I grinned at the cop, but he didn't even crack a smile under his mirrored Ray-Bans. Looking at his fat ass I reckoned the only time he smiled was when the dinner bell rang. Humorless shithead.

"I reckon I know what you mean, boy. Anyhow, Jake's farm is out on 278. You get to the big pond, you done gone too far. Shouldn't be too hard to find, it's the one with them news trucks and out-of-towners hovering about."

"Thank you kindly, Sheriff. I do appreciate the help." He walked back to the car and I banged on the steering wheel in frustration.

I pushed the button on my earpiece and called Skeeter. "What's up, Bubba?" He asked a second or two later.

"We got a problem, Skeeter. The media's here."

"That ain't no problem, Bubba. Just don't let 'em see you."

"Skeeter, in case you missed it I am over six and a half feet tall and weigh over three hundred pounds. I'm hard to friggin' miss! And I usually carry more guns than some Latin American countries. I stand out a little in a crowd, you know! So how am I supposed to investigate this la cucaracha thing if I gotta hide from the TV cameras, too?"

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“I bet they can’t get onto the farm, can they?”

“I don’t know. I ain’t been out there yet,” I admitted.

“Well first things first, dumbass. Drive on out there and see if they’re on the farm or just parked all along the side of the road. If they can’t get onto the farm, then you just need to drive right up to the front door, tell Mr. Mueller who you are, and then go about your business.”

My heart stopped for a couple of long beats before I could gulp in enough air to reply. “Tell. Him. Who. I. Am?”

“Of course. Look in the glove box.” I did like I was told, and found a leather wallet with a badge in it. It said “FDA Livestock Inspector” on the gold badge, and the other side had a picture of me wearing a white shirt and a necktie on an official looking identification card. It listed my name as John E. Carson, and I decided that it was better than ripping off musician names. I remembered Skeeter making me wear that stupid shirt and tie and taking a bunch of pictures one day. I told him if they ever ended up on Facebook I was gonna rip out his kidneys, but now I see he had a plan.

“Fair enough. I reckon I been sent out to investigate some reports of mysterious livestock deaths?”

“Exactomundo, my big muchacho. Now get to investigatin’!” I pushed the button before I worried too much about what Skeeter had just called me. Half the time that boy talks I got no idea what he’s saying, anyway. That’s what happens when you hang around with people that are way too smart for their own good.

I did like Skeeter suggested, and sure enough, there were news vans lining the road out in front of the farm, but none on the property. I had put a polo shirt on over my AC/DC tee before I pulled into town, so I looked at least a little bit respectable. I pulled up the gate and an old dude with a shotgun walked up to the driver’s window. He looked an awful lot like somebody who knew how to use a shotgun, so I quickly jumped on my best behavior.

“Who are you?” The old man growled and spit a stream of brown tobacco juice into the dirt.

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“Agent Carson, FDA. I’m hear about some reports of unexplained livestock deaths we’ve received from this area. I need to check out the barns, the fields, the whole nine yards.”

“Yeah, I know why you’re here. Go on in. Your girl’s down at the barn, I reckon she’s waiting on you.” He opened the gate and I drove on through. *Girl? What girl is he talking about?* I thought as I drove. I pulled up beside a black SUV with government plates and got out of my truck. I opened the back door and flipped up the seat. I didn’t know if churrascos hunted during the daytime or not, but I grabbed Bertha and slid her into the back waistband of my jeans just in case. I slipped a couple of extra magazines for the Desert Eagle into my back pockets, making sure I had one in cold iron, one in silver, and one alternating those two with phosphorous rounds. I can’t think of anything that really *enjoys* being set on fire, and it’ll kill most things pretty well. I had an old leather satchel that looked enough like a briefcase for my taste, so I grabbed it, stuffed Uncle Father Joe’s file in it, and dropped a couple of throwing knives in a side pocket just for good measure. They weren’t very big, but they were silver-plated, so they were good against all kinds of nasty critters.

I got as loaded as I could and still look a little bit like a government agent, then I closed up the truck and headed for the barn. I didn’t know who else was here, but I figured they were connected to that SUV and might even be useful. Besides, the old boy out at the road did say it was a woman down here, and it had been a few days since I’d had any companionship of the good-smelling curvy variety.

I crossed the dirt front yard and stepped through the open door to the barn. Even with sunlight streaming in from one end, it was pretty dark in there, so I couldn’t see crap. I smelled fresh hay, and horse poop, and the other smells you usually associate with barns, but there was one smell that seemed a little out of place. I followed my nose deeper into the darkness and stopped when I heard a gun cock behind my head. That would be where the smell of expensive shampoo had been coming from.

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“Put your hands on your head and turn around slowly.” The voice was coming from just a few feet behind me, so that tipped me off right away that she was kinda new to this. If you’re alone and trying to take down a bad guy, or even somebody who might be a bad guy, and that person is a lot bigger than you, don’t get close enough for them to turn around, smack your arm ’til your gun is pointing straight up, then wrap a huge fist around your gun and the hand that’s holding it. Because that leaves them with another hand about the size of a normal person’s whole head with which to choke you, punch you, shoot you, stab you or otherwise make your life miserable or short.

I didn’t do those things, not because I couldn’t, but because I didn’t feel terribly threatened and I was curious to see what woman was out here pretending to be with the government. And I wanted to see what kind of gun she thought I was going to be afraid of. So I did as she asked. I put my hands on my head and turned around.

She was doing a lot better job of impersonating a government agent than I was. She had the whole costume - cheap-looking black suit, white shirt, black tie, shades pushed up on her head. She did have some serious heels on her boots, and her boobs were bouncing around under that crappy jacket like two kittens wrestling in a burlap sack, but the Sig Sauer pistol she had aimed at my face held my attention pretty well. I thought I saw the bulge of a backup around her right ankle, but I wasn’t sure about that. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, so I had about a decade on her, not to mention a foot in height and a couple hundred pounds. Her long blonde hair pulled back in one of those no-bullshit ponytails that looked like they’re so tight they make your eyes water just thinking about yanking that hard on your hair. Or maybe she used gel. I couldn’t tell, it was dark.

“Here I am. Now what?” I asked, trying on my best disarming smile. There just aren’t many disarming looks that come along with this many tattoos, this much hair and being this damn big. Apparently that smile didn’t get the job done either, because she took a step back and steadied the gun with her left hand.

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“Now you tell me exactly what the hell you’re doing here,” she said. It sounded a lot like she was trying to sound tough, but didn’t swear enough in her everyday life to pull it off. It’s not easy, swearing well under pressure. I cuss like a sailor most days, so it’s second nature to me now, but this girl was still wearing her profanity training wheels.

“You first. And I’m gonna sit down if you don’t mind.” I reached around behind me for a milking stool and settled onto it.

“Get back on your feet and answer my questions!” She barked. That’s when I knew it was either A - her first field job, or B - she was out here on her own without an assignment. I was betting on B.

“No. And why don’t you have a seat and put that gun away. Your arm’s got to be getting tired and I don’t want you to drop that thing and shoot either one of us in the foot.”

“I will not under any circumstances surrender my firearm to a suspect. And my arm is just fine, thank you —“

She shut up as I stood up, slapped the gun out of her hand and stuck Bertha in her face. The bore on a fifty-caliber pistol is bigger than that poor child’s nose, so she shut up in a hurry. I motioned over at another stool, and she pulled it over and sat, never taking her eyes off my trigger finger. For my part, I never bothered to put my finger on the trigger. If I needed to knock this little girl out, I’d just punch her. I didn’t see any reason to think about shooting her. She didn’t look like a chalupacobra, or whatever the hell I was looking for.

I pushed the button on my earpiece and dialed Skeeter just in case. He answered on the first ring. “Yeah, Bubba?”

“Skeeter, can chupabubbles shapeshift?”

“No, why do you ask. And it’s a chu-pa-ca-bra.”

“Whatever. I ain’t planning on swappin’ cell phone numbers with it. I’m planning on killin’ it. And never mind why I asked, I’ll tell you about it later.” I hung up and turned back to the girl, who was trying to be subtle while she inched her stool over to her gun. “If it makes you feel better, go get it,” I said.

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She looked at me like I had grown two heads and one of them looked like Abraham Lincoln. “You’re going to let me have my gun?”

“Sure. I got my gun, you oughta have your gun. Now you try and shoot me and I’ll get irritated, so please don’t do that. You wouldn’t like me when I am irritated.” She didn’t get the *Incredible Hulk* TV reference, but I amused myself, and that’s all that mattered. She got up and grabbed her Sig, turning back at me.

“Don’t do it. Just dust off your piece and put it back in the holster. Anything else is going to cause you a lot of pain and me a fair amount of paperwork and penance. And I still owe twenty-seven Our Fathers for last Friday night alone.” She did as I asked and then sat down on the stool opposite me.

“Who are you?” She asked. “And don’t use the FDA line. I already did.”

I grinned at her. “That’s what the old coot by the road told me. He figured we must really be with the government since we didn’t talk to one another. My name’s Bubba, and I kill monsters. I’m here about the enchilada that’s been sucking on goats.” I stuck out my hand.

“You mean the chupacabra?” She asked with a smile of her own. She shook my hand, then said “I’m Amy Hall, Department of Extra Dimensional, Mystical and Occult Nuisances.”

“DEMON? Reaching a little for the acronyms nowadays, ain’t they?”

“I don’t name the department, I just shoot the nasty things.” She didn’t even crack a smile at me.

“No shit?” I knew the government had offices for everything, but I didn’t know they were messing around in my neighborhood.

“No shit. We try to keep tabs on most of the major players, but every once in a while something new crawls out of the woodwork and we have to take a look. By the way, nice work with the vampire clan down in Charlotte last year.”

“You heard about that? Well, thanks. There was a lot of ‘em, but they died just like everything else.”

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“Yes, and in your case everything else has included a nest of vampires, a family of bloodthirsty faeries, a necromancer and his zombie horde, a love-struck werewolf, a rakshasa, three demons that we know of, a cupid, and at least seven hauntings. You’ve been a busy boy, Mr. Bubba.”

“Just Bubba. You go throwin’ mister around too much I’m gonna worry that my daddy really has come back from the grave to kick my ass like he always said he would.”

“Again,” she said without batting an eye.

“Beg pardon?”

“Your daddy might come back from the grave *again* to kick your ass. We have a file on that, too.”

“Yeah, well, me and pop settled that one, so you don’t have to worry about him coming back for any more visits. So if you know all about me, you had to figure I’d be all over this like white on rice, so why bother sticking the government’s nose in?” I wanted to cut this interrogation off before she got into stuff I didn’t enjoy talking about.

“Maybe I just wanted to meet you.” She flashed me a smile that I’m sure had a lot of boys all over Washington weak in the knees and stiff in other places, but it didn’t have no effect on me. I’ve been flirted with by some of the best strippers in the world, and if they can’t sucker my fat ass back into the VIP room, no moderately cute government agent with a file on me thicker than a billy goat’s forehead was gonna bat her eyelashes and twist me around her cute little pinky finger .

“And maybe I’m dancing Swan Lake tomorrow night when I get home. But I don’t think that’s real likely either, so let’s cut the BS and be straight with one another.” I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees to get myself almost down to eye level with the pretty agent. “So Agent Hall - why are you here?” I dragged out each word, making everything real distinct like you do when you’re talking to a little kid, or an idiot, or anybody who works for the government.

“We’re looking into the chupacabra attacks. And yes, I knew you would likely be investigating this yourself. And I really did want to meet you. What you’ve done, with no support, no

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infrastructure to speak of, it's truly impressive." From the way she was talking she knew a lot about me, but didn't know nothing about Uncle Father Joe or the Church's involvement. She probably knew about Skeeter, but seemed like she thought we were independent contractors. I was pretty content to keep it that way, too.

"I got Skeeter. He's pretty infrastructure-ish himself." I said, leaning back a little.

"Yes, Skeeter. William James MacIntyre Kwame Jones III. An interesting figure, to say the least." It had been a few years since I'd heard anyone say all of Skeeter's names, and it always made me grin. Skeeter was adopted, which is how a black kid ended up in Uncle Father Joe's whitebread Baptist family. They'd wanted to name him after his daddy, William James MacIntyre, Jr., but a couple of cousins objected to giving a black baby the old family name, so his mama added in the Kwame Jones in there to make it sound more "urban." I loved Skeeter's mama, she was one of the sweetest women I ever knew to walk the earth. Maybe not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but sweet as pumpkin pie, and she loved that boy just like she had given birth to him. Cancer took her about four years ago now, and they tell me Skeeter was inconsolable for a week. I didn't know, because after the funeral I went home and got drunk for two weeks myself. We didn't talk about her, but her picture on his desk is the one thing I never mocked Skeeter about. Just like he never made fun of my Mickey Mouse wristwatch. Some things are sacred.

I made a U-turn before my trip down memory lane got too sappy, and pulled back up alongside Little Miss Gubmint Agent. "Yeah, Skeeter's my buddy. So I ain't alone. And I do just fine without any government interference. So if you'll just get back in your little Suburban and head on home to Washington or Atlanta or wherever they've got you based, I'll appreciate it."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Bubba. You see, I've got two jobs down here. Figure out what the chupacabra is and what to do about it, and figure out what to do with you."

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I stared at her, not an unpleasant activity, but not one that was really getting me anywhere nearer to finding the chalupa-thingy. “What do you mean, figure out what to do with me? I mean, I’ve got some ideas that involve whipped cream and bungee cords, but that’s probably a discussion better left to another time.”

“Almost certainly. But that’s not what I meant. You see, Bubba, you’ve gotten yourself involved in some things that the United States government feels are best kept out of the hands of civilians, so we need to figure out what to do about that.”

“Well, Miss Agent Hall, the way I see it is I work for the Holy Roman Catholic Church, and since we still have a little bit of a separation of church and state here in this country, you don’t get to tell the Church what to do. And since I do what the Church tells me, and you don’t get no say-so in that, then you don’t get no say-so in what I do. So now I’m gonna go out yonder in that field and look at some dead goats and see if I can figure out where this chimichanga monster is hiding. Then I’m gonna shoot it. And if I need to, I’m gonna shoot it a bunch more. Then I’m going home. And I might stop along the way for an adult beverage and some female companionship along the way. So if you’d like to provide some assistance in any of those endeavors, feel free. And if not, then you should get back in your little vehicle out there and haul your tight little ass on up the road.”

“I’ll help you find the chupacabra, but we may have different opinions of what needs to happen after we find the creature.” She smiled what I think she was trying to make be a grim smile and put her hand on her sidearm.

“You can have all the opinion, Agent Miss Amy, I’ll handle the shooting.” I turned my back on her and went out to continue my investigation. The hair on the back of my neck stood up the whole time, reminding me that I was turning my back on a government agent with a loaded weapon.

I stomped across the field, Miss Agent Cutie-Pants following along, stumbling a little in her screw-me heels and doing her best to dodge the cowpies and goat poop that littered the pasture. The

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oldest scene was mangled beyond all investigation, with dozens of muddy footprints obscuring any evidence that may have remained. I took a few pictures with my phone and emailed them to Skeeter.

He called me back a minute later. “These pictures are useless, Bubba. I can’t see nothing but a bunch of footprints and a cute girl.”

“I know there ain’t much to work with, Skeeter, but see if you can find me any information on what you *can see* in the pictures.”

“I told you, I can’t see nothing but this chick, Bubba.” A moment of silence, then “Oh! You want me to figure out who the girl is and what she’s doing there. Is that it?”

“You got it, Skeeter. Thanks. Hit me back when you got something.” I pushed the button on my Bluetooth headset and clicked Skeeter off.

“What did Skeeter say?” Agent Poop-on-Boots asked.

“He’s gonna run it all through some kinda computer doohickey and get back to me.”

“He won’t find anything.”

“Well ain’t you just little Miss Optimistic?”

“I know the deal, Bubba. I won’t show up on any facial recognition software, at least not in any database you and your friend have access to.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that, so I kept my mouth shut and trudged on to the newest slaughter site. This one was in much better shape, without all the footprints in the dirt. The goat was laying in the middle of a cleared out patch of dirt, and there were several distinct tracks around it. I pegged one set for the farmer’s, ‘cause I can recognize a size eleven Wolverine work boot from half a mile off. The other two sets looked for all the world like bare human feet, but I went ahead and took pictures for Skeeter. The last thing I needed was them turning out to not be human footprints and then having to listen to Skeeter say “I told you so” for the next six months.

“They look human,” Agent Amy said, taking several pictures with her phone. She knelt down to get a better shot of one of the

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footprints and I subtly snapped a picture of the way the slacks stretched tight across her round rump.

“You can delete that picture, Bubba. Or I can shoot your big toe off. Whichever.” I looked down and she was pointing her Sig and my left foot. I deleted the photo and she re-holstered her weapon. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

“I’d like a few more lessons in understanding the rest of you, Agent Amy. You doing anything after we get done here tonight?”

“I don’t think we’re getting done here tonight, Bubba. I think we’re going to end up in Mr. Mueller’s south pasture waiting for the chupacabra.”

“And why the hell would we want to do that when we could be off somewhere nice and warm getting better acquainted?” I leaned down and gave her a grin.

She didn’t grin back. “Because I don’t mix business with pleasure. No matter how little pleasure I think may be in the offering.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I didn’t think it was real complimentary. I took a couple more pictures and started off toward the next dead goat. Along the way I saw the bare footprints lead off to the right, toward a thick stand of undergrowth. I decided this was not the time to bring that up to Agent Smarty-Britches, and trudged along through the field to the next attack site. It was just like the rest of them - a dead goat in the middle of a field, no blood anywhere, huge gaping holes in its throat and a few footprints around the body. The same Wolverine work boots and the same bare feet. I was starting to get an idea, and I didn’t like it at all.

“Well, Agent Amy, ain’t nothing going to happen around here ’til nightfall, so we might as well head out and come back later. I like your idea of staking out the south pasture. Why don’t we go get some adult beverages, maybe a steak the size of Rhode Island, and wait for dark together?”

“Bubba, I am a federal agent. I do not fraternize with freelancers. Not to mention the fact that I am a vegetarian. And this is a dry county. Strike three, you are out, sir.” Damn, that was the worst shutout I’d seen since I turned Skeeter loose on the

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cast of Thunder from Down Under on an ill-fated trip to Vegas with him and Uncle Father Joe. Lemme tell you, a Catholic priest and a scrawny homosexual are not the best choices of wingmen for a straight boy in the City of Sin. I've never gone to bed before sunrise so many days in a row in Las Vegas.

"Well I've got a jar of a little something in my truck that might dampen this county up a bit, and I bet that ole farmer up yonder knows where I can find a piece of dead meat that ain't been chiaroscuro'd all to death. I'll be back about half an hour after the sun goes down." With that, I turned away from the cute little fed and stomped back to my truck. As soon as I was out of earshot I pushed the Bluetooth button.

"Skeeter?"

"Yeah, I'm here. And I don't want to see no more pictures of that little federal agent, Bubba. She's scary."

"What do you mean, scary? She ain't hardly no bigger than you are."

"She also doesn't show up in any federal database. None of them, Bubba. Not just the FDA, FBI, CIA or Homeland Security databases. She don't even show up in a driver's license search, or a tax return search, or even looking at old high school yearbooks. This woman does not exist, Bubba, and that worries me a little. Who did she say she was with?"

"Some damn thing about Extradimensional, Magical and Occult shit. It spelled out 'Demon.'"

"I've heard about them. They don't exist."

"I don't think I'll bother tellin' her that."

"That ain't what I mean. I mean that when you go work for them, you cease to exist. They erase everything about you. Public records, memories, birth announcements, the whole deal. It's like you were never there in the first place."

"What happens when you retire? Do they put you back?"

"I don't know, Bubba. Nobody's ever admitted retiring from there."

"I get your drift. They're a little freaky."

"No Bubba, Jim Jones was a little freaky. David Koresh was a little freaky. These people are batshit crazy, scary as hell, and

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they have the full power and support of the federal government behind them. Do not screw with this woman. She is bad news.”

“She might be bad news, but she’s got a fantastic ass.”

“I mean it, Bubba. Stay as far away from her as you can. She ain’t gonna do nothing but cause trouble for you and all the rest of us.”

“All right, all right. I won’t screw her, I promise. Now where’s the nearest steakhouse?” I was back at my truck by now and meant what I’d told Her Bootiness about wanting to get into a serious discussion with about sixteen ounces of USDA Prime.

So I fortified myself for the stakeout in the best way I know how — with a steak. Then once it got dark I made my way back to Old Man Mueller’s farm and set up in the south pasture to wait for the chimichurro to make its appearance. Agent Asscheeks was all the way at the other end of the pasture, and the temperature had dropped significantly since the sun had went down. I was just about to resume bitching to Skeeter about being cold and wet after the aforementioned cow-farting scene, when I heard the goat shriek. Once I figured out what the god-awful noise actually was, I started to run in that general direction. I had Bertha, my fifty-cal pistol, in one hand, and a silver-plated Bowie knife in the other. I came over a low hill and stopped cold at the scene in front of me. Or at least, as cold as I can stop. I’m a big dude, and it takes a while for me to run out of momentum. So I staggered forward for three or four more steps, but finally lurched to a halt and stared at the mess in front of me.

It was a goat-sucking all right, just not the kind we expected. You see, the chupacabra is supposed to be about four feet tall with scaly skin, and is supposed to run around on two legs like a super-sized lizard. What I saw sucking on a goat was about six feet tall with pale white skin, two long skinny legs ending in a pair of Chuck Taylor Converse high-top tennis shoes, a pair of beat up blue jeans, and a Sex Pistols t-shirt. In other words, it looked awful human, and not the least bit Mexican.

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“What the hell are you?” I bellowed as I came into the clearing. Then I looked around and saw that we were not alone. I wasn’t just in a pasture with a dude sucking on a goat and pretending to be a chupacabra. I was in a pasture with a dude sucking on a goat, a hot federal agent, and about a dozen pale-faced skinny men and women who looked like they were waiting for their turn at the goat.

“Crap. Vampires.” I answered my own question. Well, at least I had my silver Bowie knife.

Agent Amy was standing on the other side of the circle, her sidearm in her hand. I hoped she was loaded with silver, or holy water, or phosphorous, or something that wasn’t just going to get her killed. I didn’t have time to spare her more than a fleeting thought, because the vampire dislodged himself from the goat’s throat and flung himself at me. He was a skinny bastard, but when you’ve got supernatural mojo juicing up your strength, speed and reaction times it doesn’t really matter. He knocked me flat on my ass and went for my neck quicker than a hiccup.

Fortunately for me, I’d seen this movie once or twice before, so as soon as he flung himself at me, I jammed an arm up between his mouth and my throat. It still hurt like hell, and he was still draining my blood, but he was getting a lot less of it thanks to my leather jacket and sweater. I quit bitching about being cold and started concentrating on stabbing the shit out of the vampire straddling my chest. He had his fangs buried pretty deep in my left arm, so I jabbed my Bowie knife into his side with my right. I couldn’t get anywhere close to his heart, but the silver blade hurt like a mother anyway. He reared back and let out a scream, but he had to come off my arm to do it. I punched him square in the nose with my left fist, and he rolled off me. Probably more to get away from my knife than out of fear of my knuckle sandwich, but I didn’t care.

He stood up again and turned back to come at me again. I hadn’t made it up past my knees, but I brought the knife around and made ready to fend him off again. I watched his legs tense and figured I had about three seconds before he was on me again. Then his head exploded. I mean, his head *blew right the hell up*.

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I turned around to see Agent Amy holding a smoking Sig and looking over at me with a little smirk. “Nitro-tipped rounds. I’ve heard that decapitation works on these creatures, so I figured a headshot would be just the thing.”

“It’ll do, Agent Sweetbuns, but you might want to duck right about *now*.” I finished my sentence by hurling the Bowie knife right at her. Agent Amy hit the dirt and the knife buried itself up to the hilt in the chest of a vampire standing behind her. The best part about a fourteen-inch blade is that if you get anywhere near the chest, you’re probably hitting the heart. And if you hit a vampire heart with a sliver of silver, it’s toast. None of the other vamps had moved, so I got to my feet and made it over to where Agent Amy was lying in a pile of goat pellets. I reached out a hand and pulled her to her feet.

She stood up, turned so we were back-to-back, and said, “Thanks.”

“No problem. If you’d like, I’ll help you get the goat poop out of your bra.”

“Maybe later, if we survive this.”

“That gives me a little more incentive, I reckon.”

“I only said maybe, Bubba.”

“Maybe ain’t a no, Agent Cutie-Pie.”

“Are you always this much of a chauvinist?”

“Yeah, pretty much. But at least I’m consistent. Hell, Agent Hall, you’re the first woman I’ve talked to in weeks that doesn’t take her clothes off for money. This is like a huge step for me.”

“Fair enough. Do you have a plan to get us out of this?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d shoot about eight of ‘em, and I’d leave you a couple. That sound fair, or you want to shoot more?”

“I’d really rather we forego the shooting altogether if that’s possible.” I looked up to see one of the vampires, this one a lot older and stronger-looking than the kid that had attacked me earlier. He was standing about ten feet in front of me, hands held over his head. That’s when I noticed that all the vampires had their hands up, like they were surrendering or something.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

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“I wish to show you that we mean you no harm. My name is Norman, and this is my family.” The vampire said. “May we sit?” He didn’t wait for my answer, just dropped cross-legged to the dirt.

“Family?” Agent Amy asked from behind me. “Bubba, what the hell is going on here?”

“Sweetheart, I have absolutely no damn idea.” The rest of the vampires had moved around by now and they were all sitting on the ground behind Norman. I didn’t see any harm in it, so I picked a spot free of goat pellets and sat down myself, keeping Bertha close by my right hand. Agent Amy sat down next to me and a little bit behind.

“Okay, Norman, what the hell is going on around here?” I started when we were all settled. I figured I’d better get the questions rolling before somebody busted out a guitar and started singing Kumbaya.

“We are vampires. Undead creatures of the night damned to feed on blood-”

“Yeah, yeah, we got that part. The fangs are a dead giveaway. That and the aversion to silver. We know all about vampires. I want to know why you’re killing goats, and why your boy tried to kill me, and if we can figure out a way to get out of this field without me killing all the rest of y’all.”

Norman looked surprised. “Well, if you know about vampires, then you know Terrence was feeding on the goat. That’s what we do — we feed on livestock to slake our thirst and keep from attacking humans. When you interrupted his feeding, Terrence was unable to restrain himself and unfortunately attacked you. I apologize for that oversight. It will not happen again.”

“Yeah, we kinda fixed that with old Terry. But what about the guy who was sneaking up on Agent Hall here?” I jerked a thumb over at where the other vampire was quickly dissolving to a puddle of goo. It would take me hours to get that knife clean. A while back, I’d have just left it, but the recession has hit The Church, too, and they’re looking a little more closely at my

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weapons budget. And you should see what they've done to my strippers and booze budget.

"That was regrettable. Jacob never fully adapted to our ways here, and when he saw an opportunity for fresh human blood, he took it. I am sorry again for the inconvenience, but you seem to have suffered no ill effects. Please, let us put these past indiscretions behind us and move forward in good faith."

"Pretty words, Norman, but those past indiscretions are like three minutes ago, so let's not act like it's all ancient history. So gimme the straight poop — what are y'all doing here and why shouldn't we just kill every one of you and leave you to rot in the grass?"

"We are a peaceful people." Norman started to say, then stopped at the look on my face. I pointed back at the dissolving pile of Terrence, and he started over. "We are typically a peaceable people. We do not hunt humans, and only rarely do we hunt at all. Our standard mode of survival is to buy our blood on the black market, from blood banks or hospitals. It is rare that we find ourselves in such a rural setting as to require us to hunt."

"So why are you here?"

"What?" Norman asked.

"If y'all are so civilized and urbane, what are y'all doing out here in the middle of MonkeyButt, Florida, sucking on goats?"

Norman didn't look up for a long time, and when he did, he did something I'd never seen a vampire do before - he blushed. "We're on our way to Disneyworld."

"What?" Agent Cleavage and I said at the same time.

"We're taking a family vacation to Walt Disney World. We booked an all-inclusive stay at one of the resort hotels, scheduled to begin tomorrow night."

"Well, Norman. I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you are a hell of a long way from Orlando. About five or six hours would be my best guess." I said, exchanging a *what the hell is going on here* look with Agent Sexpot.

"I am well aware of that fact. What I was not aware of as we began our journey was the price of gasoline at this particular time." The vampires behind Norman giggled a little, and he

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flushed an even deeper red. Vampires don't make their own blood, so I wondered where the blood came from to keep Norman blushing. I figured his toes must be shriveling up a little. Or worse.

"So you want me to believe that you and your family of bloodsucking fiends were on your way to the Magic Friggin' Kingdom when you ran out of gas and cash, and now you're stuck in Wausau, Florida drinking goats and impersonating a chimichanga?" I said, shaking my head through the whole line.

"Chupacabra," Agent Amy corrected.

"Bite me," I snapped. I turned my attention back to Norman. "Where are y'all coming from, anyhow?"

"Lawrence, Kansas."

"Good lord and butter, son! You done made it almost halfway across the country, but you're gonna stop now? Why not just bite somebody and steal their wallet?" I asked.

"I told you, we do not bite humans. Under any circumstances," Norman replied calmly.

"I wanted to, but Papa wouldn't let me," a young girl vampire chimed in. She looked to be about twenty, which meant she was somewhere between eighteen and sixty thousand years old. I suck at guessing ages of undead, unaging creatures.

"So you don't bite people?" I asked.

"Never," confirmed Norman.

"And you're not from around here anywhere?"

"Correct," said the paternal vampire.

"And once you finish your vacation you'll go back to Kansas and never come back to the South? This isn't going to turn into some kind of annual outing?"

"No. I can think of no reason for us to ever come back to Florida."

"I ain't just talking about Florida. I want you to promise me that you'll stay out of the whole South. I cover from Virginia down to Florida, and everything East of the Mississippi river. Plus New Orleans, but that's a perk. You ain't never coming back to any of those places, right?" I leaned pretty heavy on the *right*, trying to make sure that Norman got the point.

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He got it. “Right. After our vacation is over we go back to Kansas and never cross the Mississippi again, unless it is to visit the historical segments of New York, Boston or Washington, D.C.?” He looked at me for verification on D.C., and I nodded that it was okay for him to go there and check out the museums. D.C. was some other hunter’s territory.

“Okay, then.” I nodded and reached into my back pocket, pulling out my wallet. “Here’s a BP credit card. It’s got about a grand on it, so that oughta get you from here to Orlando and back to Kansas. Throw the card away at the last station you fill up at. In a month I cancel the card, so don’t think you’re buying Twinkies on my nickel for the rest of your life. And if I hear of you eating anybody on the way, I’ll hunt you down and feed you to my pet DEMON agent here.” I nodded at Agent Amy, who smiled a vicious smile and licked her lips.

Norman looked like the hillbilly who’d just won the lottery when I handed him that gas card. He jumped up and hugged me, almost knocking me over in his enthusiasm. He also almost got a faceful of Bertha, but I realized he wasn’t going to try to kill me just in time. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” He hyperventilated in my ear.

Norman got himself under some semblance of control and stood up, brushing the dirt and grass off his pants. “Come, my children. Our time here is done. We’re going to Disneyworld!” The vampires all leapt to their feet and vanished off into a nearby stand of trees. I heard the repeated slamming of a flimsy door, and then the rumble of a big engine coming to life. A few seconds later, a huge RV pulled out of the forest and headed for the nearest pasture gate. Less than a minute later, the vampires were gone, the gate was closed behind them, and I was left sitting in a goat pasture with a hot government agent.

“Nice work, Bubba,” Agent Amy said as she got to her feet. “I thought for sure that was going to end in bloodshed.”

“Yeah and I was pretty worried that most of the blood shed was going to be mine.” I retrieved my knife from the now-dissolved vampire corpse and wiped it off as best I could on the grass.

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“But you managed to resolve the situation without killing all of the supernatural beasts. How often does that happen?”

“Not as often as I’d like, but sometimes.” She gave me a strange look, and I went on. “You gotta understand, Agent Hall. I don’t want to kill all the freaks in the world, just all the ones that hurt people. If they don’t hurt people, then I don’t hurt them.”

“Live and let live?” the pretty agent asked.

“Something like that. Now, you want to get across the county line and have a drink to celebrate?”

“Or we could just sit on the tailgate of your truck, look at the stars and drink moonshine ’til the sun comes up.”

“Then what will we tell Old Man Mueller in the morning?” I asked.

“We’ll tell him it’s top secret and if he asks too many questions I’ll have to send his goats to Gitmo. Come on, Bubba. I know you’ve got a jar tucked away somewhere in that truck.” She started off back towards the farmhouse where my truck was parked next to her SUV. I followed along, just to see what happened when that old man found our drunk asses sprawled across his barnyard in the morning with one last dead goat and a destroyed jar of moonshine. And that’s exactly what he found.

The End