

## Chapter Ten

### I Leave with Miss Viola

We went outside and walked Miss Viola to her car. Slim had his hands pushed deep into his pockets and continued to rattle his coins.

Viola opened the car door and turned to Slim with a smile. "Well, Slim, thanks for fixing my car."

He laughed at that. "Well, I didn't do much, as you noticed."

"You got shocked."

"It don't take much brains to get shocked, Viola, but at least we found the problem. And thanks again for the shearing. You're a good hair-cutter. What I mean is..." He frowned and kicked at a rock. "It's kind of nice, getting your hair cut by a lady."

Her eyes lingered on him, as though she expected more. When it didn't come, she filled her lungs with air and looked up at the sky.

"Well! Isn't this a beautiful day? Spring is such a wonderful time of the year. It almost makes you want to...kick up your heels and dance. Doesn't it?"

Slim gave his head a nod. "Yeah, it's mighty nice. The old cows have slicked off and are picking up weight. Horses are feeling frisky and..."

I didn't hear the rest of what he was saying, because at that very moment it dawned on me that Miss Viola had left her door open. And both she and Slim were looking up at the trees and the sky and weren't paying any...

Hmmm. If Slim wanted to spend the rest of his life talking about cows, that was okay with me, but I had a better idea.

I slipped into Stealth Crouch Mode and in the blink of an eye I had sneaked myself into Miss Viola's car—on the floor between the seats, where I became virtually invisible.

Heh heh.

The car door slammed. The motor started. We were driving away and...ork...I found my thoughts turning to...sardines. I mean, the car was closed up and kind of warm, and there is a certain malady called "car sickness" which I had never thought much about until...

Remember all that oil in the can of sardines? It had tasted delicious the first time around, but now, in a hot stuffy car that was swaying back and forth...

Fellers, I had a serious problem on my hands. Getting sick on sardines in the back seat of a lady's car was no way to impress the lady. I knew that, and yet...

Ork. Ump.

How far was it to her house? Five miles? I sure hoped she would chunk the coal to that car, because I was beginning to suspect...

All at once I heard her voice. "Oh, you stupid old maid! You should have known he wouldn't ask you out, so why did you throw yourself at him like a...like a common hussy? Oh, I'm so embarrassed and humiliated! I'll never go to a dance for the rest of my life. I'll just stay home and rot!"

It appeared that she was talking...to herself. My goodness, she was crying. And pounding her little fist against the steering wheel.

And all at once I understood what had happened.

She'd wanted to go to the dance with Slim, see, but she'd figured out that he was too bashful to ask her, so she'd made up an excuse to "drop by" his house—she'd pulled off one of the spark plug wires, a clever little trick which only a country girl would know about.

And then she'd found an opportunity to trim up his scorched hair, which should have solved his mainest reason for not wanting to attend the dance.

It was a nice idea and it should have worked, only Slim was too...I'd tried to tell him. I did all a loyal dog could do, but did he listened to me? Oh no.

And now he'd made her cry and had broken her sweet little heart, and I should have bitten him on the leg when I had the chance, the big oaf.

She wasn't a "common hussy" and she wasn't just an "old maid." She was one of the sweetest, finest ladies I'd ever met, and why some cowboy hadn't latched onto her years ago, I couldn't imagine—except that some cowboys (we won't mention any names) were just DUMB. All at once I forgot about Sardine Sickness and everything else but her sadness. All my cowdog instincts came boiling to the surface, and I hopped over the seat and laid my head in her lap.

"AHHHHHHHHH!"

My goodness, she almost wrecked the car when I appeared so suddenly. She looked at me through tear-filled eyes...and started laughing.

"Hank, what on earth are you doing in here!"

Well, I...uh...it was a little hard to explain, actually.

She gathered my head into her right arm and gave me a big hug. "Well, you rascal, I guess we're pretty good pals, aren't we? And maybe you knew that Viola made a fool of herself and needed a shoulder to cry on."

She pulled over to the side of the road, thank goodness, because I had begun to worry about her hitting one of those big cottonwood trees.

She fished a tissue out of her purse and dabbed her eyes, then blew her nose. To tell you the truth, I was a little shocked that such a cute lady could make such a loud honk with her nose.

Then she stroked my ears and began talking. "You see, Hank, my parents are up in years and need my help. I love them dearly and I'm glad I can help them, but...sometimes I want to go out and hear music and laughter. And kick up my heels, just to see if I can still do it."



She took my face in her hands and looked into my eyes.

"You understand, don't you? Sometimes I think dogs are smarter than people, and I'll bet a silver dollar that you would have invited me to the dance, wouldn't you?"

Yes...ump...ma'am, and what a lousy time to burp sardine fumes in a closed car.

All at once her nose wrinkled up and her eyes crossed. She rolled down the window and began fanning the air with her hand.

"Hank, what on earth have you been eating!"

Well, uh, a can of rotten fish, it seemed. And no one regretted it more than I.

I hate sardines, always have.

She leaned her head back against the seat and laughed and laughed. "Oh Hank, this is too funny for words! At last I find a fellow who adores me, but he turns out to be a dog who's been eating sardines!"

She was laughing so hard that she didn't notice the dark shadowy form that had suddenly appeared at her window.

It was a man.