

## Chapter Six

### I Have a Visitor

I told you you'd never guess who it was.

You guessed Loper, right? Not even close. See, it was a woman's voice, therefore the person was a...well, a woman, of course.

So your next guess was Sally May, right? Wrong again. Sally May was a woman, all right, but not the one at the door.

Give up?

Okay. The voice at the door belonged a woman, and the woman just happened to be one of my all-time true loves. No, not Beulah or Miss Scamper or Missy Coyote, the lovely princess, or...

By George, that's a pretty impressive list, isn't it? You bet it is, and without seeming to brag or boast, I could say that the list goes on and on.

It was Miss Viola, my lady friend...okay, Slim's and my lady friend who lived down the creek several miles—the very lady about who or whom we had been discussing that very day.

Quite a coincidence, huh?

She liked dogs, but the dog in particular she liked the most was ME. I mean, here was a lady who would smile when she saw me, and she would call me over and scratch me behind the ears and pull stickers out of my coat and let me stay inside the house and sleep at her feet.

Yes, she was my kind of lady and here she was, standing at the door of Slim's house. I went straight to her, gave her a big cowdog smile, and accepted a nice scratch behind the ears.

"Well, hello, Hank. Is Slim around?"

Yes, but he was busy cleaning up garbage off the kitchen floor and we didn't need him hanging around and trying to steal the attention from my lady friend, so, uh, it would be okay with me if...

Rats. He heard her voice and came into the livingroom, wiping his hands on his jeans. I gave him a dark scowl but he didn't seem to notice.

"Well, I'll be derved! Morning, Viola. Won't you come in and sit?"

She continued to stand in the door, clutching her handbag in both hands. "Well, I didn't want to bother you."

"You ain't, believe me. Will you have a cup of coffee?"

"Oh...well, I really shouldn't, but if it's already made..."

"Yes, it's made. It's been made for three days. Here, sit yourself down."

He pointed to the big rocking chair beside the woodstove, but before she could sit, he had to clear out a saddle and a pair of chaps.

She sat down on the edge of the chair and continued to hold her handbag, as though she might run away at any moment. She seemed a bit uneasy about being there. Maybe it was the clutter of the place that made her uncomfortable.

While Slim was banging around in the kitchen, I noticed her eyes moving around the house. She saw the trail of dirty socks leading to the back bedroom. She saw the two holes in the sheetrock, the pile of livestock papers on the floor, the dead flies on the window sill, and the empty Vienna sausage cans scattered around the room.

I happened to be watching her when she peeked into a coffee cup that was sitting on the table. Her eyes widened when she saw that the coffee was covered with a skim of white mold.

I was embarrassed. I mean, Slim was a terrible housekeeper and a lady of her quality had no business wasting her time with him. But ME, on the other hand...

Burp.

Miss Viola wrinkled her nose. "Hank, have you been eating...sardines?"

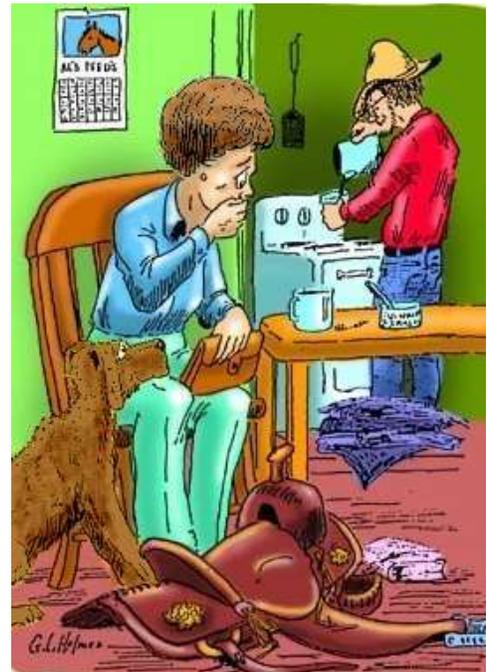
Who me? Oh no, not me. I, uh, never ate such things, or very seldom. In other words, Slim's house always smelled of sardines.

I slid my head onto her lap and looked up at her with eyes full of adoration.

She reached out a soft rose-petal hand and began scratching me behind the ears.

Ah, sweet and lovely lady! By George, if Slim was too thick-headed to take this fine lady to the dance, I just might do it myself.

He came out of the kitchen with a cup of coffee in each hand. He gave her a cup. "You want anything in your coffee?"



"Oh, if the cream and sugar is handy..."

"Sure, you bet. Sit right there." He trotted back into the kitchen. "Viola, do you mind if there's a few ants in your sugar?"

"No ants, thank you. Cream will be fine."

The ice box door opened and shut. Then we heard Slim say, "I don't know how long this milk's been in here."

"Oh, don't bother. I usually take my coffee black anyway."

He brought the carton out and set it on the coffee table. Then he flopped down in the chair across from Viola. She studied the date stamped on the top of the milk carton and I saw her left eyebrow jump, ever so slightly.

I wondered what she had seen.