When Did I Fall in Love With You?

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LEORA HOISTED HER SLACKS AT THE KNEE AND DROPPED TO THE GROUND.

With her bottom stuck straight up in the air, she peered under the shed and chucked, “Here, Kitty,” then went still, not even breathing as her eyes darted back and forth, hunting for the stray that had attacked her for no good reason. Why, all Leora’d done was turn the hose to the tomatoes when out from under that shed jumped a black fur ball, making the most god-awful sound. From where I stood, it looked to nearly cause Leora — well, there ain’t no polite way to say this — to nearly wet herself. I could’ve laughed ‘til high noon, but I knew Leora wouldn’t take kindly to that, so I kept right on picking myself some tomatoes from her garden while she grabbed Roy’s old rake from inside the shed.

Now, Leora never was soft on inedible animals, especially strays, and I could see she had no intention of letting that little beast terrorize her garden. She fisted that rake and lowered herself so that her cheek set right in the dirt beside the shed. It was clear as anything that she meant that little homeless cat no good. Problem was, she couldn’t make out exactly where under the shed the animal was hid. That shed was one of those assemble-yourself, aluminum contraptions — just the kind of thing Roy’d buy — but he didn’t trouble to flatten the land before he screwed it together. Needless to say, it didn’t set level. So Roy took himself a wheelbarrow and borrowed some bricks left over from the church addition. When he hoisted up the far side, he created a gloriously dark crawl space for critters in the family way and saddled Leora with her current strife.

It was dark as Hades under that shed and so was the cat. Though Leora made some valiant pokes under there with the rake handle, she just couldn’t get a good smack on the thing, much less scare it off. One thing about Leora, she ain’t easily discouraged. One thing about me? Well, I’m not stupid. I got my tomatoes, said my “thank-yous,” and “va-moosed” out of there before she dragged me into her battle with that wild kitten.

The way Leora tells it, she’d been flat on her belly for more than an hour, fishing around like that for a solid hunk of cat, blindly chasing hissing sounds, and — I’m certain, though she ain’t likely to admit it — cursing up a storm. All of a sudden, out of the blue, behind her she says she heard a fence plank groan.

So, she glanced back over the rake tines and found that little Winnie Fletcher had clambered up the back side of her fence and was standing on the cross board, staring down at her through eyes as round as store-bought onions.