

Saturday at the C Bar W

(part one)

By Cody Denton

Saturday dawned bright and clear, and Cody Denton rolled out of his bed before sunrise, like he had done thousands of times before. Shaking his head to clear the last traces of sleep from his brain, he quietly pulled on his jeans and then carefully folded them around his legs so as to fit neatly inside his boots. He picked his favorite pair of tall buckaroo boots up off the floor beside his bed, and pulled each one on almost lovingly before standing to stomp his feet and settle them into the boots snugly. Given that the temperatures were forecast to be in the high 90s today, he elected not to put on a shirt. Instead, Cody pulled on one of his well-worn leather vests, leaving it hanging unbuttoned to reveal his scruffy but muscular chest. After a few quick licks with a comb in the mirror, he headed down the stairs to fix himself a bit of breakfast. Turner had always chided him about not showering in the morning, but Cody didn't believe that the cows would really mind if he looked a little bedraggled. And besides, after an hour in the furnace heat of summer, he would just be sweaty and smelly again anyway. There would be plenty of time for a relaxing shower at the end of the day, when he needed it most anyway.

The smell of bacon sizzling brought Cody back to his senses from his thoughtful reverie. "Dang it, better pay attention or you'll burn your breakfast," he muttered to himself. Sadie, his attentive and obedient golden retriever, sat on her haunches waiting for her own morning repast.

Oddly enough, she didn't seem to care that her master was a wolf, or to even notice that he didn't go about on all four paws like she did. As she muzzled his left paw affectionately, Cody chuckled. She wasn't always the brightest dog in the world, but she was good-natured and even-tempered, and she faithfully stayed by his side while he was at home. When it came time to go to work, she handed her master off to the capable paws of Buck, a very capable and athletic cattle dog. She always seemed to wag her tail just a little bit too cooly when Buck was around, and Cody secretly had suspicions that given half a chance, Sadie and Buck might go out courting. Well, they were both loyal and devoted to him on the ranch, and Cody saw nothing particularly wrong with what they did in their personal lives.

Once again, he was snapped out of his deep musings by the smell of bacon, this time with a slight tinge of char smoke. "Dang it all and hang me by my toenails!" he bellowed, jerking the iron skillet off of the gas flame. "If I don't quit daydreaming and start paying attention, I'm going to have charcoal for breakfast instead of bacon. Sadie, fetch me your bowl, dear." Tail wagging, the tawny-haired retriever picked her bowl up in her teeth and placed it at Cody's booted feet. She sat patiently, whining almost imperceptibly, as he filled the bowl with a few heaping cups of kibble, and then lightly spooned on a few drops of the still-hot bacon grease. "All right, dear, let this cool a bit before you chow down. I don't want you getting burned." Sadie, of course, said nothing... but her smile was like the sun coming up.

Setting the bacon on a towel-covered plate to drain, Cody cracked a few eggs into the hot skillet, quickly scrambling them to a rich, fluffy perfection. "Far sight better than trail breakfast," Cody murmured. Yes, it had been a long time since he had been a lowly cowhand out on the trail. He proudly owned his own ranch now, the C Bar W. It wasn't the biggest ranch in the area, but it was his. He wished he had someone to share it with, but being a bachelor was

all he really knew. Besides, Sadie might not be much for conversation, but she enjoyed a good belly rub in the firelight on a cold winter night, and she was as good a companion as a wolf could ask for.

Cody once again snapped out of his daydream, realizing that he had eaten three eggs, four slices of bacon, and two leftover biscuits from last night's supper without even once stopping to realize what he was doing. "Danged fool, I am, off with my head in the clouds. Well, better in here than out there, I guess." Ranching was dangerous work, and Cody knew to have his wits about him once he set out for the range. Quickly clearing away the breakfast dishes, he gave Sadie a playful scritch and headed for the door. There, hanging on his hat tree in the hallway, was the rather unusual belt that his friend Dylan had loaned him the night before. "Heh, heh, I almost forgot about this. My chores shouldn't be so bad after all." Cody slung the belt around his waist with one paw, catching it in the other and fastening the buckle tightly. Almost instantly, the belt tightened itself to his waist. Within moments, he felt his arms and chest growing more muscular... and Cody was no lightweight to begin with. Though he was usually soft-spoken, Cody couldn't help but to grin and yelp, "Oh, I have got to find myself one of these!" Noticing his larger build in the mirror, he was glad he had forgone a shirt today. Good shirts were expensive, and it would be a shame to rip out of one by being careless. Thank goodness his jeans and boots were well broken in and had a little room to spare!

Grinning like a pup with a rabbit fur, Cody picked a hat at random, popped it down around his ears, and headed out to greet the day, whistling cheerfully as he walked. Suddenly, Sadie burst out the door and ran to be at his side. Buck was waiting at the edge of the yard, as always, though with Buck, he often wondered if it was him or Sadie that the faithful border collie

was really happiest to see. Buck did appear a bit curious about Cody's unusually buff appearance, but apparently decided to let it pass as just another of the wolf's many peculiarities.

The three of them set out across a field to start the day's chores. On any ordinary day, Sadie would have remained at home, frightened as she was of cows. Today, however, the cattle were all off in the high country, led by Cody's competent team of cowhands. Today, uninterrupted by the incessant foolishness of his herd, Cody could actually get some repairs done. Patting his borrowed belt, he smiled and got down to work.

As Cody got into the business of replacing some rotting planks in the barn door, he once again allowed his mind to wander. There were no worries today, no angry bulls waiting to charge him, so he allowed himself to let his guard down and work in a sort of dreamy reverie. He thought first of his friend Turner. The young drifter was, no doubt, still snoring soundly and would likely not be up much before noon. His propensity to sleep late had been one of the many reasons for his failure as a cowhand, during the one season when Cody had hired Turner on to help around the ranch. There had, of course, been far more egregious shortcomings, such as when Turner fell asleep in the bed of the pickup when he was supposed to be tossing out hay to the hungry cattle. Or the time when Turner negligently failed to close a gate behind him, allowing 250 head of prime beef stock to wander from the pasture onto the open road. Turner even looked ridiculous as a cowboy, the wide-brimmed hat on his head at stark odds with the ten or so highly visible, large-gauge piercings in his ears and face. Somehow, though, Cody still felt a bond with the carefree and reckless young husky, even after all of his misadventures. Turner had quit voluntarily, freeing Cody of the burden of firing him, but somehow the two had managed to remain friends. Cody chuckled at the realization that they were actually much closer now, without the clear boundaries of ranch owner and cowhand to separate them. He felt a close

kinship with the young rebel, and actually admired the way he looked with his biker gear, heavy tattoos, and extensive piercings. Not something that Cody wanted for himself, mind you, but they somehow fit his friend's personality. Turner was also only 4 years younger than Cody, though he usually acted considerably less mature than his age.

The barn door repair completed, Cody headed over to change a flat tire on the rickety old farm truck. He started to get out his somewhat unreliable old hydraulic jack, then on a whim, decided to try it a different way. He set a concrete block on its edge beside the truck's fender well, and then squatted down to get a firm grip under the vehicle frame. With only moderate effort, he found that he had raised the cranky old junker more than high enough to be able to scoot the block under the frame with his boot toe. Setting the truck down on the block, he began changing the tire, this time thinking back to last night, and to his most recent meeting with his new friend, Dylan.

Dylan was quiet and somewhat mysterious. They had met one night after Cody made a chance comment about a nice pair of knee-high boots that Dyl was wearing. The two had started talking, and on a whim, had even tried on each other's boots. Dylan seemed to like the tall cowboy boots so much, that Cody had just yesterday gone to his house with a pair of old boots worn by one of the ranch hands. The shafts on them had the same red and blue colors as Dylan's favorite shirt, and the young dog had seemed genuinely thrilled with them, and with the spurs that went with the package. Cody was surprised, however, when he likewise walked away from the deal with a nice pair of his own: a tall pair of English-style riding boots that fit his muscular legs snugly yet still enjoyably. Like this belt, which was just on loan from Dylan, the riding boots seemed to possess magical powers; Cody was intrigued, but hardly eager to try them out

again, at least not until he had a friend standing by to help him in the event of any untoward effects.

Cody wondered at Dylan's origins. It was long known that there were animals in the world who somehow took on more "human" characteristics, like walking upright, speaking, wearing clothes, using tools, and engaging in everyday occupations and hobbies. Turner had once dragged Cody to a university lecture on the subject, and some tiresome old windbag had droned on for hours about the hypothetical probabilities involved in evolutionary leaps and so on. Cody decided at that point that he didn't really care why he walked upright and held a career. He sort of resented these things being labeled as "human" traits, as though animals with these abilities were somehow still inferior to their human counterparts. After hundreds of years of destroying the earth, humans hadn't done anything to show Cody that they were particularly intelligent beings, and as far as he was concerned, he could hold his own at anything one of those poor furless half-wits could do. He silently chided himself for thinking of humans as half-witted; after all, such preconceptions led to prejudice and misunderstanding. Still, it was an easy thing to do, particularly when those humans had been hounding and taunting him for most of his life...

Sharply jerking his mind back into focus, Cody again started thinking about his friend Dylan. He knew nothing about the young dog, really, except for his sort of humorous nickname of "Fluffy Pup" and that he had a very gentle, loyal disposition. Maybe some time in the near future, Dyl would accept Cody's invitation out to the ranch. Perhaps then they could discuss his origins more in depth. There weren't, after all, that many so-called "anthro-furs" around, and Cody did have a certain curiosity about why they were different from their relatives that went around on all fours.

The belt made short work of changing the flat tire, as well as the numerous other chores to be done. It was amazing. By noon he had finished everything on his to-do list, and with the cattle out at the highcountry pastures, there really wasn't anything else to do. Cody called to Buck and Sadie. "Why don't you two spend the day playing? I don't really need you for anything, and I expect you have some catching up to do." The two dogs wagged their tails exuberantly, ran a few circles around Cody, and then took off for the stream. Cody suspected that Sadie might be a little muddy when she returned home tonight, but he knew Buck would keep her safe, and he wanted the two of them to have some private time together. If only Cody could have a special someone of his own...

As he walked back to the house, Cody resolved to call a few friends and ask them if they'd come over. It couldn't hurt, and maybe at least one of them would make it by. He might even dust off the old barbeque grill and do a cookout; he had recently culled one of his cows to have slaughtered for his own meat, and there were plenty of steaks left. Cody brushed the dirt off his boots, entered his house, and picked up the phone to call Turner and Dylan with invitations to an impromptu cookout.

Satisfied with the day's labors so far, Cody removed the belt, hung it gently back on the hat tree, and headed upstairs to take a nice, soothing shower. No longer empowered by the belt's magic, he did feel a few aches now, but that wouldn't stop him from enjoying the rest of this spectacular day. In fact, his Saturday was just beginning.

TO BE CONTINUED...