

Ten Pounds of Cowdog

Jesse was always the fastidious type. Very concerned about his cowboy image, he trimmed his mustache one whisker at a time to make sure it was just right.

He carried an extra pressed shirt hanging in the back window of his pickup so that if he had to make an emergency trip to town, he had a clean, wrinkle-free western shirt and matching gladrag to put on. He drove only pickups and wore only boots.

He had several different western hats but no caps. Caps were for farmers and he was a rancher. I think he even got married in Levi's. He didn't want to risk anyone thinking he wasn't a real cowboy.

His cowboy image wasn't quite as important to his wife. In fact, revenge from the female side of the household always seemed to include a poke at Jesse's image.

She inherited a Cadillac from her aunt.

Cowboys don't drive Cadillacs.

That was okay, he could ride in the passenger seat.

It was three years before he rode in that car – and only then because his pickup broke down and she came to get him in the car. I think it was the air conditioner that won him over. Bonnie always insisted it was the leather seats designed to be sat in by humans.

Then one day she came home with a poodle – a fluffy little white one that weighed about ten pounds.

To go with the car, she said.

Absolutely NOT! he said.

I would have loved to have heard that conversation, but all I got to witness were the glowers Jesse shot at that fluffy little dog.

Just to twist the knife, she kept the little dog groomed. Not with a standard poodle clip, but she did have red toe nails and ribbons in her ears.

Candi was a rescue from a puppy mill. Surprisingly intelligent, and excited by her new rural world, she tagged along behind Jesse's blue heeler, much to Jesse's disgust. With her short legs, she couldn't travel across the big pastures so she rode in a saddlebag on the back of Bonnie's horse. If the heeler yapped or she heard Jesse whistle a command, that perfectly groomed

little white head crowned with red ribbons popped out of the saddlebag. If the situation looked interesting, she would yip for Bonnie to put her down so she could streak off after the heeler.

If the cows didn't pay much attention to her, it wasn't because she didn't try. Her teeth just weren't big enough to go through cowhide. She couldn't move cows, so she started concentrating on the calves.

She learned to slip in and move the calf while the heeler moved the cow.

Poor Jesse. His heeler's working partner was a poodle and they made a surprisingly effective team. Despite the ribbons.

Candi loved her new life, all but Jesse. His disapproval kept her head and tail down.



I hadn't seen Jesse and Bonnie for awhile, then one day I ran into Jesse on the road between headquarters and the calving pasture. He was obviously headed to feed, and there on the seat was Candi. Complete with bows and painted toenails.

I kinda grinned and commented on his well-dressed passenger.

He looked a bit sheepish, but his voice was firm.

"Yeah, Bonnie had to go be with her dad for a couple weeks, and I had to

keep Candi. Took her with me a couple days, and you won't believe what she does!"

"What?" I asked "Keep the seat warm?"

"You just get in here and see!" he defended, calling Candi over beside him with a hand gesture.

This I had to see. Jesse defending a poodle?

I parked my pickup on a pasture trail and climbed in.

When I opened the gate to the calving pasture, Candi bounced out of the pickup and before I could grab her, disappeared into the chollo.

As I opened my mouth to call her back, Jesse interrupted me. "Get in here, she'll be all right."

We bounced across the pasture to the feed grounds and he scattered cake. We counted cows and looked for sick calves. Then we unloaded a round bale of hay on the hillside where it would roll down and come apart. He didn't seem too worried about the cow missing from the bunch, or the one that had obviously calved within the last day or so but had come to feed alone.

When the cows were fed, he parked the pickup on the hillside, shut it off and rolled down his window. The March wind whistled through the cab. He talked a bit about the quality of the calves the new bull was producing while I clamped my teeth shut so they wouldn't chatter and quietly turned blue.

Then from the distance came a YAP! It was tiny and a long way off, but it was Candi's yap. A few seconds later I heard it again. A dog calling for help. Alarmed I whipped my head around to look at Jesse who was calmly surveying the pasture. Finally, he started the engine and headed in the direction of the yap.

We finally found her. She was standing about fifty feet from a bunch of scruffy little trees clogged with river trash. She saw the pickup, yapped again and turned to stare intently at the trees. She turned her head back toward the pickup, then back to the trees, ribbons fluttering as her ears swung out.

Jesse stopped and climbed out. Candi ran to meet him, made sure he got the message that something important was in the trees and then took off down the draw. Jesse walked over to the trees and carefully worked his way through the deadfall.

"Bring me that 216 tag and the tagger!" he called.

Among the trees, huddled down out of the wind and carefully hidden from predators and humans, was a new calf.

As we checked the calf over, again I heard Candi yap. Just a single bark. A few seconds later, I heard it again.

“She’s found another one,” he said returning to the pickup.

And she had. The missing cow was standing over a new calf that wasn’t in any hurry to get up. Candi, standing far enough away she didn’t disturb the cow, was sending up the signal to Jesse.

“She do this all the time?” I asked, eyebrows arched.

“Every morning and every evening.” He looked at me smugly. “I used to spend hours out here trying to find stashed calves. She finds them in minutes. And she never even gets them up, just barks to let me know where they are.”

He stepped out of the pickup and called her. She came bounding out from behind the chollo separating her from the cow and ran up his coveralls into his arms. She washed his face and he tossed her through the window onto the seat. She was shivering with cold, but so obviously happy I had to smile with her.

Jesse didn’t even notice the fuzzy hair and painted toenails any more, even when her red ribbons clashed with his shirt. And that was obviously the way Candi liked it.

“You know, poodles were originally bred for stock guardians and hunting dogs,” I said as we rattled back across the pasture.

“That’s not a poodle,” he said, reaching over and ruffling Candi’s ears. “That’s a cowdog.”