

## The Cougar Kid

by

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Lightening flashed and peals of thunder re-echoed off the mountain as the wind-whipped rain pelted down on the preacher's little two room log cabin. Judy snuggled closer to her husband; and he put a protective arm around her without seeming to awaken. "What more could a woman want?" she ask herself as she thought of Ron's devotion, and the baby in the crib at the foot of their bed.

Judy was just dropping off to sleep again when the baby began to cry. Forcing herself awake, she lit a lantern in the other room and changed his diaper. She put the soiled diaper in the bucket beside the door, and turned to see that the crying babe was crawling after her. Ron was awfully proud that Chuckie was already crawling. So was she; but it meant that she'd have to watch him like a hawk now that he was able to get into things.

The preacher's wife crawled back into bed, and laid the babe between herself and Ron. When he was finished nursing, she sat up on the bedside, patted his back until the bubble came, and placed the sleeping child back in his crib. She felt that she had barely gotten back sleep when there was a loud knock at the door.

Ron was up and dressed almost instantly. He opened the door to find an Indian lad begging him to come to the Indian settlement about a three hours climb up the mountain trail from the cabin.

"It's Sunday," Ron told him. "I have to preach at the church before I can come."

"Parched Earth dies, maybe already." the Indian boy begged. "He longs to hear of the Son of God again."

"Just a minute," Ron requested. He invited the Indian in, and placed a quarter of a loaf of bread before him before going in to talk things over with Judy."

"You have to go," Judy told him bravely. "Hitch Frisky to the shay before you leave, and I'll take Chuckie to church. I'll ask Brother Jones to give the sermon for you. He does a good job when you are needed elsewhere."

"Thanks, Hon," he replied, folding her into a hug and a kiss. "Frisky's actually very gentle, and I'm sure you can handle her without any trouble."

Ron started up the trail afoot with the Indian shortly after dawn. His thoughts were with the little woman that was making his life so bright. How it had thrilled him when she

agreed to give up being a school marm to take on the duties of a preacher's wife, especially since he was more of a missionary to the Indians than a preacher to his own people.

The travelers moved quickly, arriving at the Indian settlement at about nine o'clock in the morning. He was taken directly to Parched Earth's wickiup. The old Indian had been attacked from behind by a huge cougar while he was skinning out a deer. The beast had bitten him in the back of the neck, crushing the vertebrae and partially paralyzing him. The arrival of several other Indians had scared the cougar off before it had finished off its victim.

The old man's respiratory system was barely working by the time Ron got to him. Gently the missionary reviewed the gospel story with the dying man. How God must punish sinners to maintain his righteousness; how He placed all our sins on His own Son as He died on the cross; and how the death of Christ pays the debt of sin for all who acknowledge their sinfulness and trust Him for forgiveness.

"Parched Earth has been too evil for God to forgive," the old man replied, raising his right eyebrow almost hopefully.

"No," Ron explained, "The death of God's Son covers every sin. He says he will not turn anyone who comes to Him away."

"I will come," the Old man gasped out. "Take me, O God, as you promised you would." A smile crossed his face as he closed his eyes in death.

Ron stayed for a few minutes to comfort the family, but they showed little remorse that the old renegade had died. Except for the young Indian who had called Ron to the Indian settlement, they were totally uninterested in the gospel.

The younger Indian was a grandson of Parched Earth, named "Screaming Eagle." He accompanied the missionary part-way down the trail asking many questions about the white man's religion. He cheerfully agreed to start attending the village church before returning to his wickiup.

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Just about the time that Ron had arrived at the Indian settlement, Judy had bundled Chuckie up and placed him securely in the portable wooden bassinet that Ron had built while they awaited his arrival. She grinned as she remembered him dubbing it, "The ark," because the finished project looked somewhat like a miniature flatboat with a fold-

down handle. Placing the baby beside her in the seat, she started down the rut towards the village of Glitter. Frisky behaved like a lady, even when they forded the swollen Color Creek just before they hit the main road to Glitter. Judy grinned again as she thought of how much she had learned to do since she had left city life behind to come out west. She didn't miss society a bit, especially since she had met Ron and become a Christian.

Glitter was a stable mining community surrounded by minimally productive one or two-man gold mines sparsely scattered along Color Creek. They yielded a good living to those who were willing to put in a hard day's work for a somewhat better-than-average livelihood. No one was going hungry, but neither were they likely to strike it rich. Besides the church, the town had a dry goods store, a grocery store, a hotel with a restaurant, a livery stable, a barber shop, a telegraph office, and several saloons, one in the inevitable red-light district that was ubiquitous in mining towns.

Judy stopped at Brother Jones's house to ask him to take the sermon, and hurried on to church to arrange the home-made benches and set out the hymnbooks. She filled out the rest of the time before people started arriving by sweeping the floor and dusting.

The singing was hearty, if a bit off key. Judy longed for a piano or pump organ to help the less gifted miners stay on key. The sermon was excellent-on the Prodigal Son; and Judy congratulated Brother Jones for a job well done. She nursed the baby after everyone had left, locked the doors, and headed homewards.

When Judy reached the creek the water was even higher than it had been in the morning, but Frisky didn't hesitate to plunge right into the ford. The faithful horse was already ascending the opposite bank when a wall of water five or six feet high came crashing into the side of the shay. Judy heard the shafts splinter as the shay overturned in the flash flood. She was thrown out and carried several hundred feet downstream before she was cast ashore half-drowned at a sharp curve in the creek. Spluttering and coughing, she searched the water for any signs of the baby, but he was nowhere in sight.

The frantic mother rushed back up the shore of the creek, tearing her dress to shreds as she crashed through thick patches of underbrush to reach the ford; but although Frisky had been able to hold the shay from washing away, Chuckey and his bassinet were gone. "Nooo!" She wailed as she rushed back down the creek looking vainly for any sign of her baby.

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An hour after Judy should have arrived home, Ron started walking down the rut to meet her. When he came upon the little horse, still attached to the shay by the traces, he released her and sent her home with a swat on the rump. By this time the water level had fallen considerably, so the shay was no longer in danger of washing away.

The distracted man rushed down the side of the creek, tearing through the underbrush as his wife had done. Judy's stocking-footed tracks told him she was still alive. The shreds of her dress told him of her reckless hurry to find the baby. He ploughed through the underbrush on her trail until at last he found her several miles downstream. She was wandering about in a disoriented fashion with a vacant look in her eyes. By this time she was chilled to the bone and spoke only in incoherent sobs.

The desperate man had no matches with him to start a fire. He wrapped his wife in his shirt and jacket, but could not get her to come with him. Eventually he picked her up and carried her back up the creek towards home. She snuggled into his arms clutching him so tightly it was almost painful. "Please Lord, help me not to give out until I get Judy home," he prayed.

It was well into the night when Ron struggled through the cabin door and laid his unconscious wife on the bed. He stripped her wet clothes away and dressed her in a flannel nightgown before covering her carefully with several blankets. He lit a hearty fire in the fireplace, put a kettle of water on to boil, and went outside to put Frisky in the barn. He fed her a bait of oats, forked her some hay, and stumbled back into the cabin. He tried to get Judy awake enough to drink some hot coffee, but eventually gave up and gulped it down himself. Finally, he found some dry night clothes and crawled into bed with Judy, spooning himself against her to share his warmth with her.

When Ron awoke the next morning Judy was turning the house upside down searching for Chuckie. She was coughing a lot, and her skin was very hot. Because of her confusion he was afraid to leave her to go for the doctor. He mixed some lard with turpentine and rubbed her back and chest down. He managed to coax her into drinking some hot tea loaded with honey.

Along about mid-morning there was a knock at the door. A couple of miners had recognized the shay and pieced out enough of the story to figure out what had happened. Many of the townspeople were already searching for the baby's body. The miners were on horseback, and one of them rode out to get the doctor while the other went out to rub Frisky down. "She doesn't seem any the worse for the wear," he reported as he went back outside to chop some firewood.

The doctor arrived about noon. After listening to Judy's chest, he reported that she had pneumonia. He sent some ill-smelling dark liquid back to the cabin after he left, but Judy refused to take it, as a child might have done. Ron kept rubbing her rib cage down with lard and turpentine, and was able to get her to drink honeyed tea occasionally. Her legs and arms were horribly scratched from her flight through the underbrush, and her

breasts were painfully swollen by this time. She was miserable of body and delirious of mind.

The doctor returned on Wednesday, and seemed rather grave when he left. Over the next several days Judy got steadily worse. By Friday she was fighting for every breath, and seemed too unaware of her circumstances to even remember that she had a baby. Ron's anguish was almost unbearable. Brother Jones came to comfort him; and Screaming Eagle came and volunteered to take care of Frisky, the chickens, and the milk cow.

The Indian slept in a blanket on the floor by the fireplace. He was fascinated by Ron's tenderness for his wife. He also heard Ron's prayers for Judy, and watched curiously to see if they would be answered or not. By Sunday Ron had given up all hope for his wife's life. That night the Indian heard his anguished prayer as he kneeled at her bedside:

"Lord, you know how much Judy and I loved Chuckie, but in your wisdom you took him. Now it looks like you are taking Judy too. Lord, you know how much I love her, but I know you know what's best. I give her into your tender care Lord, but I'm not sure if I can live without her. Thank you Lord Jesus, for giving her to me for this little while I've had her."

As Ron prayed, a sense of serenity flooded his soul. Shortly after Ron's prayer all the Indian could hear was his snores and her restless tossing. When they awoke the next morning Judy's fever had broken and she was breathing much easier. God has answered your prayers and given you back your squaw," the Indian told Ron. I will give myself to this powerful God.

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The huge male cougar weighed well over 200 pounds and was nearly ten feet long from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail. He had jumped a large bull elk; and the beast had thrown its head backwards and caught the big cat between its antlers and its backbone before the predator could administer its typical vertebrae-crushing bite to the back of the elk's neck. The cougar had bailed off the bull with a shattered scapula, and had been unable to rush its usual prey for more than a week when it came across Parched Earth as he skinned the deer. When the cat was chased away from the injured Indian, his feline anger new no bounds.

The disabled cougar had traveled painfully down to the creek to hunt smaller game, maybe even a porcupine, when it scented the female's nursery. She was out hunting; and he entered the den unchallenged. He quickly dispatched the three cubs, swallowing

them almost whole in his hunger. The female returned to the den as the big male was leaving. Hissing and spitting, she flew to the attack, noting the smell of the Indian as well as that of her cubs on his breath. Her swiping paw caught him on his injured scapula, and he fled with a yowl that only a cat could make.

The female surveyed her den nervously, but the damage had already been done. Letting out an almost human wail, she abandoned the empty den and headed aimlessly down the creek at a steady lope. She had covered nearly a dozen miles when she heard the weeping of a damp and hungry human child. Ever curious, the deprived mother cat soon found the crying baby wrapped in a blanket in the bassinet, which now rested against a deadfall just off the bank of the receding creek. Carefully picking the child up by the blanket, she carried it back to her empty den and lay down to watch it with a strangely stirred motherly instinct.

When Chuckie found himself on the floor of the den, he crawled out of the blanket and snuggled up to the large warm beast like her own cubs had done. The cougar instinctively rolled to her side to present her painfully distended breasts to him, and he began nursing vigorously. The child and was soon fast asleep, little knowing what relief his nursing had brought to the cougar. It had sealed the bond between them so firmly in her brain that she would have fought to the death for the preservation of her adopted cub. She spent many an hour purring encouragement to her strange new cub as it nursed.

Chuckie seemed so helpless that his cougar mother rarely left the den except to hunt for her own sustenance. She contented herself with catching small game close to the den where she could keep an eye out for the huge male that had killed her cubs. A week later he scented the child in the den, and tried to enter while the female was present. She met him with a ferocity that he had not anticipated, scratching his right eye with a lightning-fast stroke of her paw. He retreated to seek easier prey at a considerable distance from the den. From that time on he would be blind in that eye.

The patient mother cat was kept busier and busier keeping the child in the den. At first she herded him with her paws and head when he strayed toward the entrance. Finally, when she began losing weight because she had so little time to hunt, she took to smacking him gently with her claws retracted. It didn't take many swats to teach him to stay in the den. In this way she also taught him to maintain absolute silence whenever she grunted a warning. Thus, the child learned obedience early in life.

After a month or so the mother cougar began bringing scraps of meat back for her human cub. At first he ignored them. Slowly he learned to suck on them, finally developing a taste for their flavor even though he did not have the teeth to actually eat the meat.

By the end of the second month Chuckie was climbing all over his foster mother's body. He learned how to grasp her ears with his hands and pull himself up to a standing position. Finally he was toddling around inside the den.

When the child was walking fairly well, the mother cougar waited for him as she left the den. Sensing the invitation in her soft grunt, he grunted back and followed her out into the sunshine. After a couple of moments of squinting as his eyes adjusted to the light, he began looking about with keen interest. The light stirred latent memories of a pleasant life somewhere in his past, and he sat down to puzzle over them as the cougar lay watching over him from the rocks above his head. As the evening drew on she grunted a call and led him back into the den.

Chucky's outings became longer and his excursions wider as the days went by. The cougar let him play by the creek, even letting him fall into the water and learn a healthy respect for it before rescuing him. She showed him how to look under rocks for tasty bugs; and he quickly learned to distinguish between those that bit or stung and those that were safe. But the cat was adamant that he stay in the den while she was hunting. She cuffed him severely if she caught him outside when she returned home.

Chuckie had been with the cougar for about four months when she suddenly became nervous and irritable. When she left the den, he could hear her caterwauls echoing from the cliffs of the mountains that towered above the den. After a couple of days, she failed to return to the den one night.

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When Judy had recovered enough from her bout with pneumonia, the church held a memorial service for Chuckie. The town had searched for his remains for at least ten or twelve miles along Color Creek, but not a trace of the baby could be found. Brother Jones preached a comforting service on the widow's son from 1 Kings 17; "Give me your son." He encouraged the grieving parents to give their little one up to a loving Lord who would surely raise him up at the last day.

Ron had been able to cast his grief at the feet of the Savior for solace, but Judy blamed herself for the accident and could not find any comfort outside of the love and understanding that Ron lavished on her. By the end of four months she had lost weight down to scarecrow proportions. She went about with sunken eyes and a hauntingly troubled expression on her face. Ron would often awaken in the night to find her sobbing her heart out on the other side of the bed.

One night Ron rolled over in bed and reached a comforting hand for Judy but she wasn't there. He suppressed a sympathetic groan and sat up on the side of the bed. As his senses sharpened with wakefulness he could hear her sobbing in the other room of the cabin. Tiptoeing through the door, he could just make out her shadowy form in the glow of the embers from the fireplace. She was kneeling at the loveseat. As he approached her, he could hear her agonized prayer.

"Lord," she sobbed, "It's been so hard. I trust your love, and I accept your will. But Lord," she continued, "I need some sort of closure to this nightmare. Please let someone find the remains to Chuckie's body, so I can at least have a grave to look at."

The big man knelt softly beside her, placing an aching arm around her waist. "Yes Lord," he added, "Please grant Judy this simple request. In Jesus's name we pray."

Judy arose with a glimmer of hope in her eyes, and they returned to the bedroom. Taking her into his arms, Ron could feel a more cheerful response to his embrace. "We'll go looking together in the morning," he whispered as they crawled under the covers. Judy slept like a baby for the first time since the accident.

Ron and Judy were up at the crack of dawn. Her cheerfulness amazed him, especially considering the task they were undertaking. It was like she had just been relieved of a grievous burden. She had breakfast ready and a lunch packed by the time he had cared for the animals. Hand in hand they walked towards the ford where the accident had happened.

Still hand-in-hand, they meandered slowly downstream, checking every conceivable spot where the remains of their son could be resting. They had thoroughly covered over two miles of creek bank before stopping long enough to share a lunch together. While they were eating she suddenly stiffened. "Do I hear a baby crying?" she asked.

"You do!" he acknowledged. "Come on, let's go! Someone's in trouble."

The alarmed couple rushed up the mountain side, and suddenly came upon a naked baby crouching cat-like among some boulders.

"It's Chuckie!" she called, reaching for the babe.

"The baby responded by spitting and hissing like a cat."

Ron stepped behind the child, picking it up with both hands around its waist.

The baby hissed, spit, squirmed and scratched, even trying to bite Ron. Ron held him until the exhausted baby relaxed. Then taking off his shirt, he wrapped it and handed it to Judy.

As Chuckie was cuddled in his mother's arms, those old memories awakened afresh. This was the most pleasant feeling he could remember. This woman smelled like the blanket that still lay on the floor of the den. He snuggled into her bosom, and looking into her face he mouthed that long-forgotten word, "Mmuh."

Judy sat on a boulder and talked baby talk to the little one, who cooed responsively for a half an hour before Ron interrupted.

"Let's get home," he urged. "We need to let everyone know that we found Chuckie alive, though how he survived, we'll never know."

"He acted just like a cat when we first found him," Judy remarked thoughtfully.

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The village of Glitter was alive with gossip about the preacher's son. Every imaginable theory was offered, from fraud on Judy's part to kidnapping by the Indians. Ron and Judy did not reveal the cat-like behavior he had exhibited when they first found him, but neither did they forget it. It was enough just to have their baby back from the dead.

One thing Ron and Judy noticed from the start. The child obeyed their commands instantly, like he had been well disciplined. Nor were there any marks of abuse on his body. At first, he spoke no words except, "Mmuh," and seemed to be trying to communicate with grunts. Within a few months his vocabulary became appropriate for his age. His re-integration into civilization went relatively smoothly, although some mothers at church were reluctant to let their children play with him when they noted how he hunted bugs, and ate them with relish.

The child loved the outdoors so much that Ron built a four-foot picket fence around the back yard so Judy could let Chuckie play outside without watching him one hundred percent of the time. One busy day she left him unattended for nearly a half an hour. When she glanced out the back window, she saw him asleep with his head pillowed on a cougar. She was paralyzed with fear until she saw the beast turn its head to lick the child's face. Putting two and two together, she became convinced that this huge cat was the one that had kept the child alive for four months in the wilderness.

When Judy told Ron what she had seen, he was ready to go on a cougar hunt to insure the child's safety. "Would you really kill the beast that nursed your son all the time that he was gone?" she asked.

“Of course not,” he replied as comprehension dawned on him. “I guess she has earned visiting privileges.” From that time on, they stayed out of the way and allowed the cougar to visit whenever she dropped by.

As the child grew and learned to communicate reliably, he told his parents snatches of hazy memory that came to him at odd times. He recounted how she had encouraged him to snuggle up to her on chilly nights. He remembered the spat that his cougar mother had had with the huge male, and how she had ferociously protected him from the larger beast. He remembered how she had shown him how to find edible insects under the rocks. Ron and Judy taught him to keep such memories within the family, as most people would be slow to believe his experience with the cougar. They also taught him not to eat unconventional things, lest he be despised by un-understanding people.

As he matured, Chuckie would often slip into the forest to bound over the rocky heights with his cougar friend. He quickly developed a cat-like agility to land on his feet when he happened to fall. By the time he was a dozen years old he could run barefooted behind her for hours, sometimes along hair-raising trails where one slip of the foot would have sent him hurtling to his death hundreds of feet below. Occasionally they visited her dens, where she allowed him to play with her cubs as if they were kittens. As the cubs got older he sparred playfully with them, sharpening both their agility and his own.

Chuckie had been an able student at school from the first, always producing the nearly flawless work of an intelligent and well-disciplined child. The only upsetting incident occurred when an older student began picking on a younger girl that Chuckie secretly liked. Suddenly he was in the face of the bigger bully hissing and spitting like an angry cat. Two or three lightning-fast cuffs with his open hand sent the bully running to the teacher for protection. Chuckie took the teacher’s switching with his head held high, determined not to show any repentance at all.

The older students at the school occasionally earned petty amounts of spending money by trapping small animals for their furs. Chuck didn’t have to trap them, he ran them down. A miner who happened to see him in action swore that he scented the animal before he gave chase. One way or another, Chuck was able to earn enough money in his thirteenth winter to purchase a beautiful hunting knife that was sheathed in a tooled leather case. It had an eight inch blade that the lad kept honed to razor-like sharpness.

Chuck’s cougar suddenly stopped coming by the cabin the next summer. Sensing that something was wrong, he set out to find her. He quickly picked up her scent and followed her to a new den, which reeked of the scent of the tyrannical old one-eyed cougar. She had been terribly mangled in a failed effort to defend her cubs. Chuck gently placed the 160 pound cat on his shoulders and carried her home, where Ron helped him build a temporary lean-to against the side of the barn to shelter her from the weather.

The next morning Chuck was searching for the old one-eyed mountain lion at the crack of dawn. He scented its trail high in the crags, and began following it at a dead run. The

path eventually led along a precarious crack on the face of a two-hundred foot cliff, which Chuck was familiar with. He knew that it petered out into sheer smooth rock about a quarter of a mile from its beginning.

Knowing his quarry was trapped; Chuck drew his blade and worked his silent way along the crack. The wind was from his front, so the huge male would have little warning of his presence. There was a horizontal ridge of harder rock running down the cliff that protruded about four feet further out than the rest of the wall. Chuck waited behind the near edge of this ridge. It was an ideal position. The cougar's blind eye would be toward him as it came around the ridge, giving the boy the advantage of a surprise thrust of his knife on the unsuspecting beast.

As Chuck pressed his body against the face of the cliff, knife in hand for an overhand strike into the heart, his mother carried a five pound hunk of venison out to the injured cougar that had nursed her son. The cougar was used to seeing her work in the garden as she lay in the shade with Chuckie, but the wise woman had never approached her before. She came directly to the cat as though she expected to be tolerated if not welcomed. The cat kept wary eyes on her as she offered it the meat. Slowly the cougar overcame her distrust and took the meat out of the woman's hand. Judi sat beside her as she ate, and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder when she had finished. Gradually the big cat began to purr as the woman stroked its fur. They were Chuckie's mothers.

Chuck awaited old One-eye's coming with Indian-like patience and absolute alertness. A failure to get in the first disabling blow would likely be tantamount to death by claws, jaws, or a fatal fall. He was tensed and ready when the big beast came around the corner. His thrust was true, but the big animal took a desperate swipe at him as it fell, yowling and spitting, to its death on the rocks below. Its claw snagged Chuck's shirt; and the young man was jerked off his precarious foothold on the narrow crack. Catlike, he managed to right himself and grab the crack with his left hand. The claw ripped loose from the shirt, leaving Chuck dangling from the crack by his left hand. He calmly waited for his body to stop swinging before placing his other hand on the crack and pulling himself up until he could get a knee on the narrow pathway to regain his footing. Chuck trotted back to the origin of the crack and worked his way down the mountainside to where his knife had fallen. Recovering the knife he skinned out the hide of the only real enemy he had ever had. He left the head attached for a superior trophy rug.

The young man arrived home after dark with the rolled cougar skin lashed to his shoulders. He stashed it in the lean-to by the old female and went into the house eat. When his parents asked where he had been so long, he told them he had gone after the cougar that had injured his second mother.

"How could you possibly tell which cougar injured her, much less find him?" his father asked.

"By the scent, of course," the boy answered as if it should have been obvious.

“So how do you expect to kill it?” Ron continued.

“I got him with my knife, Dad,” Chuck replied. “His hide is out there by our cougar.”

When the family went out to see the cougar skin the next morning, they found that the old female had unrolled it. She was lying on the furry side of the hide with her head up like a victorious queen. She recovered quickly, and took to sleeping by the back door of the house, waiting for the family to come out and fraternize with her. Chuck sold old One-eye’s hide to a taxidermist for enough money to buy a rifle so he could hunt meat for her, but the cougar never stopped hunting for herself.

Months later Screaming Eagle, the Christian Indian, pointed out the place where Chuck’s fight with old One-eye had taken place to Ron. The astounded Indian had observed the fight from a distant hidden vantage point. The missionary never told his wife of the precarious place where their son had nonchalantly killed the huge cougar singlehandedly with nothing but a knife.

Chuck was sixteen years old when his mother found the old she-cougar dead at her accustomed spot beside the back door of the cabin. Ron helped Chuck dig a grave for her on the back side of their property. Tears trickled down all of their cheeks as they gently lowered her body into the grave. They had lost an almost human friend that had been a godsend to the whole family, and they thanked God for providing her when her help was so dreadfully needed years ago.

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Someone began robbing the miners along Color Creek of their gold troves during Chuck's eighteenth summer. Several of the miners had been shot in the back, and the sheriff had been unable to figure out who the culprit was. One day as Chuck was crossing the trail from the mines to the village with a deer carcass over his shoulders, he met the girl who he had protected at school years before galloping madly towards town on a horse. She stopped long enough to gasp out that her father had been robbed, and was unconscious at the entrance to his mine. Chuck advised her to proceed to town and get the doctor and the sheriff while he went to the mine to see if he could be of any help to her father.

Chuck found the miner still unconscious, with a nasty lump where he had been hit on the back of his head. He appeared to be breathing easily, so the curious young man began to snoop around to see if he could piece together what had happened. He noted that there was a patch of sage brush growing in the tailings of the mine. It must have been seeded from an outside source, because sage brush did not normally grow in

forested areas. He found stocking-footed footprints leading from the sage patch to and from the mine. Carefully avoiding the sage, he stepped around it and found the same footprints leading into the edge of the forest. Once out of sight of the trail, the rider had put his boots on and ridden off through the pine needles on a horse.

At that point in his investigation Chuck heard the doctor's buckboard rattling up the path, and returned to help load the unconscious man into it for the trip to town. The doctor asked Chuck to drive while he attended the patient. The frantic girl had stayed in town to get the sheriff, but had been unable to find him. She was waiting at the doctor's office when they arrived with her father.

The miner was a popular man, and several friends, including the banker, had gathered at the door awaiting news from the doctor. As they waited, the sheriff rode lazily into town. He stopped when he saw the anxious crowd.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Billy Reynolds has been hurt," the banker replied.

Suddenly interested, the sheriff asked, "Mining accident?"

"No," someone responded. "His daughter said he's been robbed."

"I'll go right up there and see who done it," the sheriff promised, turning his horse.

"No need to do that," Chuck spoke up. "It's pretty obvious who did it."

"I don't need any interference from anyone else," the sheriff retorted hotly. "I'll solve this professionally."

"No," Chuck replied, "You don't want anyone else investigating because you did it yourself."

Instantly the sheriff was off his horse facing Chuck. "And just what makes you think I done it?" he demanded, leering into Chuck's face. "I haven't been anywhere near Billy's mine for weeks."

"If you'll check his socks," Chuck explained to the crowd, "You'll smell sagebrush. There may even be bits of sage caught in the cloth. There isn't any sage anywhere near here, except for a patch in the tailings of Billy's mine, and the robber walked right through it in his stocking feet."

Suddenly the sheriff drew his gun, pointing it at Chuck's chest. "Since you know so much about a mine that don't belong to you, you're under arrest for robbery, and for murder if Billy don't survive."

“Yah,” someone in the crowd spoke up. “How’d you come to be up there when the doctor arrived?”

“I met Ruthie coming down the trail,” Chuck answered clearly. “I went up to help her dad while she came to town for the doctor.”

“We’ll check that lie out later,” the sheriff responded. “Meanwhile you are going to jail. You won’t be allowed no visitors to help you cook up an alibi, neither.”

“I’m not going anywhere until someone checks out those socks,” Chuck answered calmly.

“You’re goin’ now,” the sheriff replied, cocking his gun with his thumb.

Suddenly the cat in Chuck awakened. His head leaned forward and his jaw protruded, dropping until his mouth opened unbelievably wide. His facial muscles tensed into a snarl that emphasized his eye teeth, and some of those who saw it even swore that his ears folded back against his head. He grabbed the gun from the sheriff’s hand in a lightning-fast swipe before the lawman could pull the trigger. Turning the weapon on the sheriff, he commanded him to take off his boots and pass his socks to the crowd.

“Now,” he addressed the banker, “Do you smell sage on the sheriff’s socks?”

“Yes,” the banker admitted.

“Is there any sage or sage-colored seeds caught in the weave?”

“Yes.”

“Does anybody here disagree with that?” Chuck demanded as the socks were passed around.

When no one spoke up, Chuck emptied the gun’s chambers, slammed the hammer against a boulder to render the gun useless, and dropped it into a public watering trough.

“You’d better arrest your sheriff,” he advised the crowd as he disappeared cat-like into the forest and headed toward home. He picked up his deer carcass along the way. He told Ron and Judy what had happened right away.

“What makes you so sure the sheriff was the robber?” Ron asked.

“When he rode up I recognized the scent of the stocking-footed footprints, Dad. Without his boots on, the scent was so strong there was no possibility that it could be anyone else.”

"Did you really expect anyone who does not know you to believe that?" Ron asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Nope," Chuck replied. "I told them to smell his socks for sage. He denied being anywhere near Billy's mine for weeks, and those tracks went right through the only sage brush within fifty miles of here. No one could miss that odor. Besides, there are sage seeds in the weave of his socks."

About nine A.M. the next day a citizens committee surrounded the cabin with drawn guns. "Chuck," they ordered, "You are surrounded. Come out for questioning with your hands up."

"Actually," Chuck called back from the barn where he had been working, "I'm back here in the barn, and could easily have given you the slip, but I have nothing to hide, so I'll come."

Chuck came without raising his hands. No one had the crass to object since he was not armed. "Well, what do you want to question me about," he asked when no one spoke up.

"We're not completely satisfied about exactly what you were doing at Billy's mine when the doctor got there," someone stated. "The sheriff still insists that that proves you are the guilty person."

"Did you ask Ruthie if she agreed that I should go there in case he needed help while she went for the doctor and the sheriff?" Chuck queried.

"The problem is," someone else chimed in. "The sheriff says that she's too upset to talk to anyone."

"Hey!" a tall man with a tied down holster growled out at the speakers. "The sheriff deputized me to lead this committee, and I'll ask the questions."

"I'll answer any man's questions except yours," Chuck responded softly. Then turning to the rest, he told them, "I'd better come into town with you so you'll know that I'm not running away. But you have to talk to Ruthie before this can go any farther."

"Saddle his horse so we can take him to jail," the deputy instructed one of the men that obviously looked up to him.

"I don't have a horse," Chuck told them. "I'll just run into town and you can follow me."

Turning before the cocky deputy could object, Chuck started down the rut at a pace that forced the horses into a trot. Every member of the committee expected him to slow to a walk in a short time, but Chuck was used to following the mother cougar over much

more difficult terrain than this at a similar pace for hours. He cleared the ford in a single bound, and was still running easily when the horses were beginning to lather.

When the amazed group stopped at the hotel, the deputy dismounted and turned to face Chuck at point blank range. You're going to jail, he snarled, hunching into a gunfighter's stance. An instantaneous cuff to the side of the face from Chuck's right hand knocked the obnoxious deputy to the ground. Chuck pounced on the dazed man like a cat would a mouse, jerking his gun from its holster. He disabled the gun just as he had the sheriff's, and handed it back to the deputy as if nothing had happened.

OK, gentlemen," he addressed the committee. "Let's go to see Ruthie. I'm kind of partial to her anyway."

Chuck led the way to the Reynolds home, but no one answered the door.

"Two of you go in and see if she's in there," Chuck commanded. "Her mom's dead, so she should be the only one at home."

Two of the men went through a window for a look around. They came out the front door after a brief search.

"She's not here," they reported. But her bedroom is a mess. "Looks like there's been a scuffle or something."

"Let's check the doctor's office," one of the men suggested.

"She left here about midnight," the doctor told them. "I told her that her dad might be unconscious for several days, and sent her home to get some sleep."

"Looks to me like someone didn't want us talking to her," one of the committee members said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Chuck replied. "I was wandering when someone would catch on to that. We need to have a couple of men guard Billy so no one can polish him off if they suspect that he knows who clobbered him. Then we need to track the sheriff to find out what he did with Ruthie. His tracks were all around her house.

"Them tracks was made with moccasins," the deputy snarled. What makes you think they're the sheriff's?"

"Let's just say I could scent 'em," Chuck replied. Then, suddenly turning on the deputy, he whipped the surprised man's arms behind his back. "Put his handcuffs on him," he directed the committee member who seemed to be catching on.

When the deputy was handcuffed, Chuck addressed the committee. "Gentlemen," he spoke earnestly, "Ruthie is in grave danger. That sheriff has abducted her, and may kill her when he finds that this conspirator was unable to get you to jail me. Be sure you keep this man under guard in jail. The key will be in his pocket. I'm going to trail the sheriff to wherever he took Ruthie. Pray for her!"

"We'll go with you," most of the committee volunteered.

"Some of you had better guard the jail so no one can let the deputy out to alert the sheriff," Chuck advised. "Some of you should guard Billy until he recovers enough to defend himself. Maybe someone else could follow me with an extra horse for Ruthie, but no one will be able to keep up with me if that trail leads through any rough terrain."

Two men were appointed to follow Chuck. They kept up with him along the trail until it turned to circle a rough rocky area. Then they saw something they never could describe quite right. Chuck was leaping from rock to rock and foothold to foothold without ever slowing down. Within a minute he was lost to their sight.

The amazed men continued along the trail, and soon saw Chuck's footprints where he had re-joined it. His shortcut across the rough terrain had gained him ten minutes or so.

The cougar-man noted that another horseman had joined the sheriff along the trail. Suddenly his face lighted up as he figured out where they were likely to be going. There was a small cave hidden by some huge boulders that the female cougar had occasionally used for a den about five miles up this trail. Anyone coming up the trail could easily be seen and picked off with a rifle from among those boulders.

Thinking about Ruthie's danger made Chuck begin to realize just how partial he really was to her. She was always the woman he pictured coming home to. She was always the woman he pictured mothering his children. She was always the woman of all his dreams. If he hadn't been so shy he would have been courting her long ago. Suddenly he struck out across country for that cave with reckless abandon, leaping wider gaps and taking greater chances than he ever had before.

The cave was on a part of the mountain trail that doubled back on itself as all such trails have to do occasionally, so Chuck actually hit the trail somewhat beyond the cave and worked his way back down toward it. He was approaching the rifleman from behind when he detected a female cougar bringing meat to its cubs. At the same moment a puff of wind confirmed that this was now an active den. As the cougar scented the rifleman, she crouched, the black tip of her tail twitching nervously. Cautiously she stalked the gunman from the downwind side. Just as cautiously, Chuck approached the den from behind her. He had to beat that cougar to the den or Ruthie was dead meat.

As the cougar sprang on the rifleman from behind, Chuck slipped into the den. Ruthie was sitting against the side wall of the den, bound hand and foot, and gagged with a rag.

Once inside, Chuck gave a desperate grunt, and three fluffy kittens came out of hiding. He quickly scooted behind them, herding them towards the entrance of the den. By the time he had them beyond Ruthie and himself, the mother cougar was crouching at the mouth of the den.

Chuck slowly and deliberately drew his knife, being careful not to make any sudden moves. There he stood, staring down the crouching cougar, her mouth agape and her ears flattened against her head. Finally she grunted to her cubs, and they ran out beyond her. She issued a warning hiss and turned to follow her cubs to safety.

Stepping behind the astounded young woman, Chuck untied her gag. Then cutting her bonds he came around to face her. Taking her by the upper arms, he lifted her up and hugged her to himself. When he bent down to kiss her, she met his lips with her own.

“Sure took you long enough,” she said as they came up for air.

“I came as quick as I could,” he answered defensively.

“I meant the kiss,” she replied impudently. “I’ve been waiting for it ever since that day you stood up for me at school.”

“Me too,” he answered, pulling her close for another one. “We’ll get married as soon as we get back to town.”

\* \* \*

The lovers checked on the rifleman when they came out of the den. He had died almost instantly from the cougar’s bite through the spinal cord of his neck.

“We really ought to bury him,” Ruthie remarked with a shudder.

“Not yet,” Chuck replied. “We’re going to have to use this as part of my defense. The sheriff is trying to pin the robbery of your dad on me.”

“He did it himself,” she retorted hotly. “They talked about it right in front of me. There’s a third man named Chet involved.”

“If they talked about it in your hearing, he’ll likely try to kill you before you spill the beans,” Chuck warned. “We’d better go to town cross country just in case he is lying wait for us along the trail.”

“Lead the way,” she told him, “But don’t expect me to run the way you do.”

“How’d you know how I can run?” he asked.

“Can’t a girl even watch the man of her dreams run with the cougars without criticism?” she asked mischievously. “There’s a spot about a mile up from Dad’s mine where I could see you lots of times. At first I could hardly watch, but I gradually realized that it was as easy for you as it was for the cats. How’d you ever make friends with that beast?”

“That beast,” Chuck replied, “Pulled me from the creek before I was a year old. She nursed me in a den about like the one we just came from for four months,” he added with misty eyes. She was literally my second mother until my parents found me again. She’s been dead a couple years now,” he confided brokenly.

“So that’s how you knew how to handle that mother cougar so well a while ago,” she mused. “You are literally The Cougar Kid.”

“And proud of it,” he added.

It took Chuck and Ruthie the rest of the day to reach town. Chuck took her to Brother Jones’s wife, asking them to keep her hidden until the sheriff was captured. Then he slipped up to the doctor’s office to inquire about Billy’s condition.

“He came around this afternoon,” the doctor told him. “Someone took a potshot at him from the upstairs of the hotel while they were taking him home. The shot missed, but one of the guards returned the fire. When they went up there, they found the sheriff shot through the heart. You sure called that one right.”

“The sheriff had Ruthie tied up in a cougar den way up on the mountain,” Chuck replied. “The cougar killed her guard, but Ruthie says they spoke of another man called Chet as being involved.”

“That’s the guy you jailed this morning,” the doctor informed him. The banker sent a telegram to Denver and found he’s wanted for claim jumping and murder. He’ll be under heavy guard until the marshal from Denver gets here to pick him up.”

“Then everyone’s accounted for, so I can take Ruthie back to her dad’s tonight,” Chuck answered. By the way, you are invited to our wedding tomorrow at noon. It’s too late to get Dad to marry us tonight.

“Humph!” the doctor grunted. “She’s one of my favorite patients. I’ve been wondering how it could take someone as bright as you are so long to see what a great little woman she is.”

\* \* \*

Chuck and his parents came to town early the next morning so they could start decorating the church for the wedding. The whole congregation pitched in to help. If I knew where my stolen gold was, I'd treat everyone to dinner at the hotel," Billy told Chuck.

It'll probably be hidden in or around that old log cabin along the trail to the Indian settlement," Chuck told him. "All three of those criminals reeked of Bee Balm, and there's a lot of Bee Balm growing around that cabin." A delegation was sent to the spot by horseback, and returned with all the recently stolen gold before noon.

"We want you to be our next sheriff," the citizens committee told Chuck. "You seem to be able to sniff out the details of other men's misbehavior."

"We'll consider that on our honeymoon," Chuck promised. "But as soon as dinner is over, we're headed for the mountains to be together with God for a couple of weeks. We want to be sure that He is the rallying point of our marriage."

Chuck and Ruthie were married with everyone's blessings right at noon. At Ruthie's suggestion, they spent their first night together in the old den where Chuck had been nursed by the cougar. "It's the closest I'll ever come to sharing that experience with you," she said.

"Nothing could please me more," he replied, pulling her into a passionate newly-wed kiss.