

# Buck Hale-Part 12-Return

Buck remained hospitalized for 24 hours. What the doctors called, a “cautionary” measure. His ankle was badly sprained and his shoulder dislocated. With warnings not to go overboard trying to speed his recovery he retired with Geoff and Lisa to their ranch to begin the healing process.

No one knew how the news got out but when Buck was wheeled out of the hospital there was a small group of reporters falling all over themselves asking about the cougar and his being having been saved by it. Buck said he was still not clear as to exactly what had happened but the fur on his jacket had been identified as that of a cougar by a local biologist. Whether or not the cougar saved Buck or just rejected him as being too old and tough to make a decent meal was unknown and would remain so. At least, that was what Buck told them as he was being helped into Geoff’s truck.

Three days later Buck set aside the crutches and began limping around the house on his ankle. His arm was still slung but he quickly worked through the pain of the ankle. He was, truth be told, anxious to get back on the trail. A day later he was helping Geoff, putting aside Sylvia’s disapproval, carry in the wood in preparation for the coming winter. The snow storm had been short lived but the nights were getting downright chilly so gathering the wood was of tantamount importance. This was after shutting down and draining the irrigation system to stop pipes from bursting from freezing temperatures.

Geoff and Buck were out at the barn when Buck stated clearly, “You know, Geoff, I lied about the cougar. You know, not knowing if she saved me or not. She did.”

With that out in the open he told Geoff how he had just crawled under the log when he saw the cougar coming across the road toward him. He had been scared to death that he was going

to be chewed to pieces. He knew he was absolutely helpless to defend himself. It was, Buck said, as though she had been tailing him all the time he had been walking through the Bluff area. She couldn't have just come along by happenstance. She had to have seen him fall and crawl under the fallen tree.

He described how she had cautiously approached him; growling, low and gutturally. How she had come to him as his heart raced at his own helplessness. In fact, he said, he stayed absolutely motionless as the cougar sniffed him up and down. Even going so far as to sniff his mouth and nose like she was trying to sense something on his breath. He had been terrified. He had remained frozen, without a prayer, he thought.

The surprise came when she finished snuffling him and turned to lay down; placing her head on his lower abdomen and , careful to keep her weight off of him, snuggling in as close as she could. The warmth was instantaneous but his fear of making even the slightest movement remained for an hour. He didn't, as Buck put it, know of a reasonable approach to this occurrence. So, he lay still barely daring to breathe.

There she had stayed. She perked her ears up once in a while when she heard any type of noise. Buck heard none but it was apparent she did. He didn't know if she was protecting him or just holding him until she got hungry. It wasn't until Geoff, Sylvia, and the Ranger had come that she roused, looked momentarily at Buck and then walked away.

Geoff just stood there, mouth agape, not knowing if Buck was pulling his leg or reciting the book of Daniel. It made no sense. Geoff had heard on TV some weird stuff like this but figured someone was making money by publishing tales. Or, just flat making stuff up for the fun of pulling the wool over people's eyes.

"Are you sure you weren't just hallucinating?" Geoff asked

Buck. Buck shook his head and crossed his heart.

“I wouldn’t make this up Geoff. I am to blown away by it and, besides, that tuft of hair wasn’t something I picked up on the trail, screwed up my shoulder and ankle to make it look good, crawled under a log and stuck it on my parka before the Ranger found me.”

Geoff grudgingly agreed that, though fantastical, this was too weird to make up. “You have a tale to tell your grandchildren.” Then, he bit his tongue. Buck and Rachel had never had children. “Sorry, Buck, I didn’t mean it like that,”

“I know. It’s Ok. Now you know why I didn’t mention the truth until this. It’s between you, Sylvia and me, OK?” Nodding, Geoff got back to work.

“Oh, and Geoff, I found a cell phone coming here. It was beside the river near the bridge a few miles from Kirkwood. It’s pink and I am betting it belongs to a lady who would like to have it back. I think I’ll just charge it up and give her a call. Maybe she’ll come to get it and I can finally meet someone to share my tale with besides you and Sylvia.”

Geoff chuckled, “Yep, maybe you just found yourself a date. Or, another lioness!”