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Rory and the Coyote

Chapter 1: The Dog Park

My story begins with... well, me. My name is Rory and I'm a golden retriever. As I tell you this tale I am six months old, but when it started I was just a pup.

I live with my family in a neighbourhood called the Mission. I was born in Armstrong, and my family brought me home to live with them when I was eight weeks old. Tony says our home is in the Mission, but he also says it's in Kelowna. From what I understand, our neighbourhood is a part of Kelowna like I am a part of my family.

My family is made up of my Wendy, Tony, my Daniel, and me. Daniel is the son of Tony and my Wendy, and he's like my brother. Wendy is like my mother. Tony I don't know as well, but we've been much better friends since I came home from my adventure than we were before.

See, I got lost in the woods not long ago, and while I was there I learned a lot. Before I got lost I wasn't the nicest dog. I was actually a little mean. Like, when I would play with Daniel and I'd get the ball, I would never, *ever* give it back. There was no playing fetch, that's for sure. And when I found something around the house that I liked, I would sooner eat it than let

anybody take it away from me. I was basically a brat. But then I met Coyote down at Mission Creek, and I really changed – forever.

Here’s how it started: I was playing in the backyard with my Daniel one day, and my Wendy was watching from the deck. It was summertime, and I had come to live with my family just one month before. Daniel tossed me a tennis ball, and I caught it and was playing keep away. He was chasing me around, and I was running from him as fast as I could go. Then he got tired of chasing me, so he went into the house and found a bone, thinking I’d be tempted by the treat and would drop the ball. I could tell what he was thinking though, and there was no way I was falling for it. When he threw the bone, I ran over to it and put the ball down so I could pick it up. When he started for the ball, though, I put my paw on it and growled. Then I chewed the bone. I had won! It felt great.

Wendy watched and shook her head. “That puppy has such bad manners,” she said to Tony through their screen door. He was in the kitchen making dinner.

“I know,” he said. “I’m not sure how you picked her from eleven puppies, Wendy. She’s really spoiled.”

“Mom!” called Daniel. “Rory won’t give the ball back to me, so I can’t play with her! What do I do?”

“Come inside, Daniel,” she said. “It’s time for dinner, and then Dad will take you to soccer camp. We’ll deal with Rory later.”

* * *

That night, Tony took me to the dog park. As we drove from the Mission sports fields, he eyed me from his seat. I just looked out the window at all the things moving past. I didn’t much care what Tony thought of me.

Our car pulled into the parking lot under a cloudy sky, and Tony took me out of it and carried me into the field. There were lots of small dogs there. There were fluffy ones, short-haired ones, and puppies my size. There were even some grown-up dogs that were smaller than me. I laughed at them. They looked downright silly.

A black lab pup ran over to greet me.

“Hello,” she said, wagging her tail. “Do you want to play?”

“Not really,” I said. “Not unless you have something to play with. Do you have a toy?”

Her ears drooped. “Well, no, not here...”

“Then I don’t want to play,” I said. “Go away.”

“Rory!” I heard Tony’s voice above me. “Why are you growling?”

The black lab whimpered and ran off. I went over to the fence around the field and started digging. If there was no other way to have fun at this park, I would dig holes.

Tony stared. “Now you’re *digging*?”

A man who had been standing nearby piped up.

“Your pup’s got some attitude,” he said.

Tony looked embarrassed. “Yeah, she does...”

Just then, it started to rain.

“Oh, forget it,” Tony said, and he clipped my leash back on.

I walked at his heels across the parking lot. I preferred my home to parks, so I didn’t mind that the outing had been short. It was raining more and more as we neared the car, and Tony’s hands were busy looking for his key spike. Then there was a loud *CRASH!* from above, and everything went bright for a moment. Suddenly it was like the sky had opened up, and somebody was dumping buckets of water down on us.

I admit it, I freaked out. Everything inside me said *run!* I know that I shouldn't have, because the car was right there, but I pulled and jumped and twisted out of my collar. I dashed towards a line of trees near the lot and pelted under their cover. *BOOM!!!* I heard again, and it sounded like the terrible noise was chasing me. I ran and ran through the underbrush, trying to escape the awful thing that I just knew was hot on my tail. Then, I looked back over my shoulder, and – *SMACK!* I ran right into a tree and tumbled over backwards.

Rain dripped down between the branches of the tree overhead, and I blinked into the falling twilight. Everything was spinning, and I could hear the sound of rushing water. I saw small, spotted bats winging by above me, but I couldn't tell if there were two or ten because everything was moving so much. I heard little squeaks as the bats called out to the insects they were flying after, telling them to slow down so that they could fill their tummies. Then, out of the darkness, something hooted.

I scrambled to my feet and looked around, trying to find out what had made the noise. My heart was pounding, and I didn't have a clue where I was. I whimpered and called to Tony quietly. There was no answer. Maybe I could at least find someplace dry where I could figure out my way back to the parking lot. I felt pretty dumb for running off. The booms and crashes had all stopped, and I realized, because the rain was letting up, that that they had just been storm sounds and I shouldn't have been so afraid.

Right near where I'd hit my head, which was hurting pretty bad now, there was a big bush with a hollow underneath. I shoved my way through leafy branches until I reached the hollow. Then I turned in circles and lay down. I was just thinking of how warm it was under there when I felt a breath on the back of my neck. Slowly, and with dread, I turned around. Two huge yellow eyes were staring right at me.

Chapter 2: Coyote

I leaped up.

“Whoa,” said a strange voice, “Hold on.”

Teeth closed around my tail.

I yelped and tried to dash away. “Let go!” I said, and strained against the thing that had me.

It did let go, and I rolled out of the bush and bounced along the ground until I met another tree. My rump smacked up against it, and I came to rest lying on my back with all four paws up in the air. Those same yellow eyes appeared above me, and a big nose on a long snout sniffed me over. I could hardly breathe. Then, the creature smiled, and I blinked, surprised.

“Hey!” I said, “Are you a dog?”

“Ahhhh-ha-ha-ha!” it laughed. I scrambled to my feet and ran behind the tree.

“I am *not* a dog!” it said. “I’m a coyote! Or a *senklip*. Take your pick.”

I couldn’t pick. I had never heard of either, and I had never seen any living thing larger than myself except another dog or a person.

“You’re lost, eh?” the creature said.

“You’re huge,” I responded, peeking around the tree.

“Well, yes, I am rather large...”

“And your eyes are yellow!”

“True, they are an amber colour...”

“And your nose is pointy!”

The coyote held its nose up with pride. Then she smiled. Her eyes narrowed.

“You know, you should come with me. I’m just on my way to breakfast, and you might like what I’m going to eat.”

She leaped into the bushes, and in that instant I decided that I would rather be with this strange dog-thing than alone in the woods. I rushed to follow. *If I see something I recognize, I’ll split off*, I thought.

Coyote dashed through the trees, jumped over rocks and zigzagged around shrubbery. I could barely keep up, but her tail was so fluffy and the smell of her so strong that even though she got ahead of me, I was able to find her again in a small clearing.

“Where’s your food dish?” I asked, as I looked around. All I saw was a pond, a picnic table, and a garbage can. *Oh my goodness*, I thought. *Did she mean that I’M her breakfast?!*

Coyote grinned. “This is my dish,” she said, and she put her paws up on the garbage can. “*Timber!*”

It crashed over, and all kinds of trash poured out. Coyote dug in.

“Jackpot!” she yipped, as she found a burger wrapped in foil. My mouth watered.

“You know how this got here? My dish is a burger garden, and I eat burgers every day!”

My jaw dropped. “No way!”

Coyote snickered. “Yep, these burgers grow here! Humans planted them for me. They... err, know I like them.” She tore off half the burger and ate it. I stared. *Would she share? Could I steal the rest?*

“Kid,” she said. “You’re leaking.”

“Oh, I...” She was right. There was a string of drool hanging from my mouth.

“Here.” She tossed me small bite. I caught it and swallowed. Then I looked back at where the rest of the burger had been, but it was gone.

“Now for liquids.” The creature burped. “I bet you drink from a bowl. Well, let me show you how *I* drink. It’s *way* cooler. Follow me!”

Coyote crossed a wide, bare path, and I tagged along. *If a coyote eats out of a burger garden, what does she drink from?* I wondered. *A gravy boat?!*

The sound of rushing water became louder as we crossed the trail. What I saw on the other side made me gasp.

Chapter 3: The River

There, before my eyes, was more water than I'd ever seen. It coursed along a small valley, over rocks and around little islands. It shone under the stars like Wendy's car on a hot summer day.

"What is that?" I breathed.

"It's a creek!" said Coyote.

"A creek..." Its name tasted like the wet air.

Coyote started climbing down the bank toward the water, but I stayed up on the path. I was worried I would slip and fall in if I got too close. Then, partway down, Coyote glanced over her shoulder.

"You're not thirsty?"

"I'll just stay here," I said.

She chuckled. "Fraidy cat!"

That got me moving! I was at the creek quick as a wink.

"I've been told that works with dogs," she grinned. "Now, stick your mug in there and have a drink. It'll be the best you've ever tasted."

Stick my mug in there? It seemed strange, but I would *not* be called a 'fraidy cat, so I thrust my face into the creek. Water filled my nostrils and I came back up sputtering.

"Haha!" laughed Coyote. "I didn't mean it like that! Are you hopeless, or what?!"

I was *not* hopeless! I could keep a toy away from anybody twice my size, and that was saying something! I crouched down to the creek, and this time I only put my tongue in, like I would have with my bowl at home. What I tasted was the coolest, most delicious water that I'd ever had. It was rich with the flavours of leaves and fish and tree roots digging deep, of silt and

fresh air, and of cold rocks and mountain passes far up and away. I lapped at it as if I'd never had water before.

“Good, eh?” said Coyote. “No puddle or dish water compares!”

I brought my head up from the creek. “*Idd’z ammazigg*,” I said, water dripping from my lips.

Coyote laughed.

I shook the droplets off my mouth and sat down. Then I looked across the creek in the moonlight. I had never imagined that this world could exist. The sights and sounds that I had noticed when I found myself alone were all still there, but somehow they seemed less frightening now. Something hooted, and it sounded like music. A bat flitted by across the water, and I thought it was like a bird, but with more mystery. I heard the sound of the rushing creek, and I felt the cool breeze off the water. I took it all in.

Then I looked at Coyote, and she was the most beautiful thing of all. She was glowing in the moonlight. Pale beams were streaming through the fringes of her thick coat like dreams through a dream catcher. In that moment I felt small, but special. Special to be a part of it all.

“There’s one more thing I love about the water,” said Coyote.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s this!”

I was shoved into the creek.

Chapter 4: Swim

Water swirled above my head, and I could feel it pulling me downstream. I fought towards the light and broke the surface only to see Coyote rolling on the ground laughing.

“You should have seen your face!” she hooted. “It was even better than when I told you the burger story!”

That had been a trick? I understood but hardly cared, because the water was pulling me farther and farther along.

“Don’t fight it,” Coyote called. “Just let it take you back to shore. Swim *with* the river toward the bank.”

I was panicking, and she was making no sense.

“Pup,” called Coyote. “Listen to me. Puppy!”

I squealed with fright. In an instant she was beside me.

“Okay,” she said. “See that patch of cattails downstream? Swim toward it and you’ll be fine.”

My mouth filled with water, and I choked and coughed. “Save me! Please!”

“No, no, you can do this. Keep that spot in sight, and your instincts will guide you there.”

She struck out toward the cattails, the fur on her back shining in the moonlight. With her head at one end, and her long, bushy tail at the other, Coyote was like an arrow pointing where I should go. One at a time, my front paws struck out as my hind legs kicked. I was being swept past my guide, but I was also getting nearer to the bank. As the way that I was moving started making sense, I paddled faster and faster, and the dry land came closer. A moment later I was standing on the shoreline with shaking legs, a heaving chest, and water from the creek pouring off of me.

Coyote stood beside me and shook out her coat. Water sprayed in all directions.

“Well,” she said. “That was an adventure!”

I thought I might cry. “An adventure?! You could have killed me!”

“Oh, it wasn’t so bad!” said Coyote. “Besides, now you know how to swim!” Still, she looked a little sorry.

“I want to go home,” I said. “You should take me home.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why go back to humans? Life is better out here. Besides, I have no idea where you live. You’re lost, so you might as well get used to it.”

I hung my head and sniffled.

Coyote sighed. “Come on,” she said. “Let me show you around. You might find you actually like it here.”

Chapter 5: Howl

Coyote led me down a trail between some aspen and some alder trees, and through a thicket of tall grass and fallen branches. On one side of us was a chain-link fence and on the other side was a short slope up to the gravel path.

“This is not a trail that people use,” Coyote said. “This path is for us, and for the deer and the quail.”

I didn't answer her. *Who cares whether people walk this way?*

“Trust me, puppy,” she said. “You'll like this.”

In a moment we arrived at a bush hanging with tiny clusters of blue and purple.

“This is *siya*,” said Coyote. “It's a food that *really* grows from seeds! Go on. Try some!”

I snorted. “You're not tricking me with *that* again. Food doesn't *grow*, and I'm *not* eating those. I bet they taste rotten.”

Coyote chuckled. “I'm not fooling you this time! These are berries. See?” She pulled down a mouthful and swallowed. “*Mmmmm*, good! Come on. Eat up!”

I watched her, and then sniffed at the bush. Tony and my Wendy didn't let me eat anything unless it was in my dish. *Everything is different with Coyote*, I thought. Stretching my neck up to where the berries hung, I pulled a small clump off the bush and chewed them slowly. Juice squirted onto my tongue. It had a sweet and nutty taste.

“Well?” said Coyote.

Feeling a bit better, I pulled down another bunch. She did too, and we ate there together.

* * *

By the time we had finished, the bush was nearly empty. Coyote sighed with contentment, lay down, and rolled onto her back to scratch it.

“Thank you for that meal, *siya*,” she said. “One day I’ll repay you. But... you know that.”

I stared at her. I had never heard anybody talking to a bush before.

“My mama taught me that it isn’t right to take without saying thank you,” Coyote said, by way of explanation.

“Who was your mama?” I asked. Even with her bright eyes and long legs, she looked a lot like a dog.

She glanced past me with a mischievous grin. “Turn around – but do it slowly.”

I turned around fast, knowing there was something there.

“What is that?!” I gasped, ducking behind the *siya* bush.

While we had been eating, the moonlight had shifted and exposed the ribcage of a huge dead animal. Its curved bones were bare and glowing pale, and each one was at least five times my height.

“That, pup,” said Coyote with a smile, “is our common ancestor.”

I had no idea what she meant. “What’s an ancestor?” I whispered. I could not tear my eyes away from the bones.

Coyote sat up. “When I told you that I’m not a dog, I was telling the truth,” she said, “but it wasn’t the whole truth. I am not a dog, but you and I have the same great-great-great-great-grandmother. She arrived in this land long ago, and her puppies are the dogs and the coyotes, the foxes and the wolves. We’re all different now, because of how we’ve lived, but we were once the same, and we’re all still cousins.”

I crept out and sat beside her. “You’re telling me that’s my grandmother?”

She chuckled. “It’s dead, kiddo, it won’t hurt you. And yeah, I’m telling you it’s one of them.”

I noticed there was a plaque beside the bones, like the ones I sometimes saw on benches. I wished that I could read it.

“What’s that say?”

Coyote laughed. “What, you think that I can read now? Hmm, it says...” she wracked her brain. “It says that cousins play tag. Yep. You’re it!” I felt a nip at my ribcage, and she dashed off.

I barked and raced after her. I’d played tag with my brothers and sisters back in Armstrong, before I came to live in the Mission. Now, knowing that Coyote was a cousin, I was happy to play it with her, too. We tore around the field, running down the nearby paths and even, for a moment, wading in a shallow pool coloured pink by algae. Startled ducks woke from their sleep and took off flying across the water, scolding us with loud quacks. Back on the shore, quail left nests behind to scurry out of our way. Coyote was much faster than me, but playing with my Daniel had made me a good dodger. We played until our paws found the soft dirt at the water’s edge, and then we started digging. Clumps of wet earth showered out behind us, leaving little pits that filled with water. Then, Coyote rushed out of the field onto the path and threw back her head, letting loose a sound like I had never heard before.

“*Aaaoooooooooooooooooooo!*” she called, and I felt a thrill. “*Aaaoooooooooooooooooooo!*” It was starting to rain, but the moon was just visible through the clouds, and it glowed brighter every time she howled. “*Aaoooooooooooooooooooo!*”

I couldn’t help but join in. “Aa...aaa... aaewwww!” It didn’t sound quite right at first, but I tried again. “Aaa... aaaaooo... aeewwwwoooooo!”

In a moment, both of our faces were tilted upward, and we howled as one.

“*Aaaoooooooooooooooooooo!*”

Our voices mixed like harmonies. Mine was small, but confident, and Coyote's was sure and strong and free.

I watched as she brought her head back down. She was grand, and I was proud to be her cousin.

"Good job, puppy," she said. "You sang the song of our ancestors. Now we're truly family."

For a moment my chest puffed out with pride. Then, a thought struck me. "What you said about those bones – it was true, right?"

She grinned and twitched her ears. "Well, the humans call those *art*, and they built them there only a few years ago. Still, we– "

I choked on her words. "What? Hang on! Hang on a minute – that was just another trick?!"

"We're still cousins, though. That part's true!"

I stood up. My legs were shaking.

"Yeah, *right!*" I growled. "I'm a dog. You're a coyote. You said so yourself! I bet we're not related at all, and you're just lying to me – again!"

"What?" she said, surprised by my sudden anger. "No, I'm not! We *are* family. It's the truth!"

"I don't believe you," I snapped, and I began to stomp away. "You keep on tricking me! Now you'd *better* help me get home. You owe me for all these tricks. And I want to go home!"

Coyote growled. The sound came from deep within her chest.

"You think you can order me around?" she said. "I don't *owe* you! I've fed you, and I've shown you all around these woods. I've been very kind to you!"

I didn't hear her. "It's *cold* here!" I ranted. "And it's wet and *dirty*, and – and you're *wild*! No one should have to be here any longer than they want to. And I don't want to. I want to *go home*!"

Just then there was a crash of thunder and a flash of lightning. The rain began to fall twice as hard, and for the third time that night I was soaked. But I wasn't scared. I knew that the sound and the light were from the storm. Besides, I was so mad that I had no room to be scared. I grabbed a tree branch in my teeth and started twisting it and whipping my head back and forth, as if I would tear it right off the trunk. I knew that this would make Coyote mad, she who talked to bushes.

"Puppy, stop it!" she said.

"No!" I snarled. *Good!* She was upset.

"Stop it! Let go!"

"I *won't*!"

A second crash sounded, nearer than all the others. Coyote dove forward and pushed me away from the tree just as light coursed down it to the ground and the whole thing went up like kindling.

Chapter 6: CRASH!

The storm light travelled down the tree, along the branch and into Coyote. Her fur stood on end and she leaped into the air with a yell that was even wilder than her howls had been.

I turned and ran. Branches whipped my face and stones bit at my feet, but I didn't stop. I had to get as far away as possible as quickly as I could. I was running blindly, though, and my paws were still so big for me that before long I tripped and sprawled over a fallen branch.

I lay there in the bushes with my heart pounding and my breath coming in gasps. All around me it was quiet: dawn was breaking, the rain was letting up, and the night creatures were going back into their nests and holes.

Suddenly I felt foolish. It was my fault that Coyote had been hit by the storm. If I had listened to her and let go of the branch, she wouldn't have been touching it when the light attacked. Now she was definitely hurt, if not worse.

In my blind rush I'd made a clear path through the grasses. Now I got up, turned around, and started back the way I came. I couldn't abandon Coyote. Not after she had fed me and shown me all around the woods. Not after she had saved my life, even though I was just a bratty little puppy.

It took me longer to retrace my steps than it had for me to run them in the first place. As I walked, the woods were waking up. Robins and bees and sparrows were coming out. Flowers were opening, too, and the grass was dotted with splashes of blue and yellow.

I arrived at the place where I had left Coyote, but I didn't see her. A single aspen tree stood smoking, and the scent of ash was heavy on the air. There was another smell as well – the smell of burnt fur.

I approached the tree. The closer I got, the more my nostrils stung, but the stronger the scent of Coyote became. I sniffed around the base of it. A scent trail led from the dead trunk into some nearby bushes. I followed it, finding small spots of blood along the way.

I found Coyote lying under a fallen cottonwood. Her paws were badly singed, the pads were raw and cracked, and the fur on their tops and sides was charred. *Is she even...? Did she make it?* I wondered. I whined and started to lick her paws, but Coyote brought her head up, snarling. I leaped back with a yelp of fear. Then she saw me, and the growl stopped.

“Oh, kiddo,” she said. “I thought you’d gone away. Sorry if I scared ya.” Her head slumped down again.

“I came back,” I said. Knowing she was alive whooshed the terror right out of me. “I... I had to make sure you were okay.”

Coyote smiled, but her face was pinched with pain. “I’m okay. Just a little pink-pawed is all.”

I looked again at her paws. “Can I do anything?”

“Well... it felt pretty good when you were licking them.”

I started licking them again. Her paws tasted gross, but I knew how much it helped. I remembered that once, when I had hurt my nose, my mother had licked it until all the pain was gone.

By the time I was done, Coyote’s feet were really clean. There was no dirt left where they’d been bleeding, and the cracks were beginning to scab over.

“Thank you,” she said. “That feels much better.”

“You should really stay with me for the rest of the day, though. It’s bright out now, and humans come out with the sun. They bring their dogs and bikes and walking sticks, and you

wouldn't want random humans to see you alone. It isn't safe for our kind to be around human strangers alone."

"Our kind?" I said. "But Coyote, we're not the same kind."

With an effort, she pulled her head up. Her eyes were glassy but earnest. "Yes, we are," she said. "I understand why you have trouble believing it, but we really *are* cousins. That's as true as the *siya* bush grows food."

I just stayed quiet and looked at her.

Chapter 7: Rory's Mission

We slept the day away together. We had eaten late enough in the night that we weren't hungry until dusk began to fall. When it did, both of our tummies growled so loudly that a quail that had been walking by took flight.

"Quail," said Coyote, watching it hungrily. "I could sure go for some quail right now." She turned to me. "Hey kid, it's July, and there are millions of nests around. You know what would make me feel better? Quail eggs. They're rich and delicious and every other kind of tasty! Remember when we were chasing each other and we frightened quail away from their nests? Would you go back to where we were and find some eggs, and bring them here for me. Please?"

I got to my feet. I was on a mission! It was my fault Coyote was hurt, but this would make up for it.

"You bet!" I said. There was just one thing... "Err, which way was that place?"

She could have rolled her eyes at me but she just pointed with her nose. "It's that way," she said.

"Right-o!"

I crawled out of the space under the tree and climbed up the little rise onto the main path. When I got there, I saw that it was bright with the light of a full moon, so I stuck to the shadows until I came to the field where Coyote and I had played by the pond. I sniffed around for a bit, but I didn't know which bird smell was made by the funny, pear-shaped quail, so I lay down in some tall grass and hoped that one would walk by. Being alone in the dark made me nervous, but I was determined not to be a 'fraidy cat. *It's alright, I thought. I'm alright.*

I waited. Half an hour passed, and I noticed the same sounds that I'd heard the night before. I heard the little squeaks of bats as they flew along the pathway. I heard the rustlings of

mice, and the *ribbit, ribbit* of the frogs along the creek. I heard the breeze dancing through the branches of the aspens, cottonwoods, and alders. Instead of seeming strange or new, though, these sounds were now familiar and comforting.

I was just beginning to wonder if I'd have to chase a mouse to get Coyote food when a quail scuttled right past my nose. I peeked my head out of the grass and watched it until it disappeared around the trunk of a tree. It rustled along a little further and then was quiet. I followed the quail and poked my head around the tree trunk, but I didn't see anything, and so many birds lived near this pond that I'd already confused its scent with others. Disappointed, I turned to go back to my hiding place. Right then, though, the quail exploded out of the underbrush and flew up into the branches of the tree! *Pit-pit*, it said. *Pit-pit!*

Confused, I nosed aside the grass where the quail had been hiding. There, in the ground, was a shallow pit, and in the pit were twelve spotted eggs!

I looked up at the bird, feeling grateful and knowing that there was something I should say. *What did Coyote tell the berry bush...?* "Thank you?" I said. The words felt strange on my lips, but I knew they were the right ones. "Yeah – yeah, thank you!"

Pit-pit! said the bird once more, and it flew away. Then I lowered my head to the nest, took an egg up in my mouth, and cracked its shell with my teeth. I needed to eat if I was going to do a good job on my mission. Just like Coyote had said, the egg was rich and fatty and delicious. My tummy was delighted, and it only took three of the twelve eggs to satisfy my hunger, which still left nine.

I picked up another one and carried it slowly back to Coyote's den. I had to be careful not to bounce around too much, but I managed to arrive without breaking it, and felt very pleased with myself. Coyote wolfed it down.

“How do you feel now?” I asked.

“A *bit* better,” she said.

“I bet you’re thirsty.”

“I am. But I don’t think that you can bring me water.”

I thought about it. “Err... I guess not.”

“Right. So I’ll just take another egg.”

I didn’t like being ordered around, but I swallowed my pride, remembering that she was in this situation because of me. I nodded and started off again.

I carried two more eggs without a problem, but then, on my fourth trip, when I was coming back around the tree, I stopped short before the field. There, beside the garbage can, were three big, rough-looking raccoons. I saw them and shrank back into the trees, but it was too late. One of them had seen me.

“Hey!” it said. “What’s that in the shadows?”

A second raccoon turned around to look. This one was smaller and had long eyelashes, but it also had a nasty scar across one eye. “I dunno!” she said. “I’ll go check it out.” She trundled towards me, and I backed up as fast as I could go, but it was not fast enough.

“Hey,” said the scarred raccoon, “it’s a puppy!”

All three of them began to giggle and cackle. The one who had seen me first walked over. I felt a growl rising in my throat, but I pushed it down and placed my egg gently on the ground. I would try to talk to them.

“Please,” I said as nicely as I could, “I’m just taking food to my hurt friend. You might know her. She’s called Coyote, and she lives around here. Yesterday she got hit by a light during

the storm and it burned her paws, so she needs me to bring her this egg. I'd just like to go by, if that's alright."

"You have an *egg*?" said the first raccoon, glancing down by my feet. "Oh yeah, so you do! I'll take *that!*" It stepped forward.

I couldn't help it. My lips pulled back in a growl and I snapped at them.

"Whoa!" hissed the second raccoon. "*Poopy's* growling at us!"

The first one snarled back at me. "How rude!" he said.

I'd made things worse! I had to think fast. What would Coyote do? I wracked my brain. Then it hit me: she would play a trick.

"Did you know that hamburgers grow in that garbage can?" I said. My voice came out high and squeaky. "It's true! Humans planted seeds so there are always burgers in it! When my friend is well she eats from that can every day. It's her best-kept secret!"

"Eh?" said the third raccoon. He was big and fat and hadn't left the side of the garbage bin. "Burgers, you say? It does smell like burgers..."

The other two turned to look. It was the chance I needed. I snatched up the egg and dashed toward the creek.

"Hey! We've been tricked!" I heard the scarred raccoon hiss. "*Get her!*" Then all three of them were after me.

I rushed down to the water before I could change my mind. Leaping into the current, I swam until the shore seemed to move away. When I looked back, I saw that the raccoons were at the top of the embankment, snarling down at me but not following. I breathed a sigh of relief, but then – *cr-r-r-rack!* I bumped over a rock and felt the shell break in my mouth. *Oh no!* I thought. *How am I going to get back to the nest for another egg with those bandits around?*

The current was strong, and I only swam with it for half a minute before I began to angle towards the shore. I paddled the way Coyote had shown me and soon I arrived on dry ground. Quick as I could, I clambered up the bank and ran to the place where I had left her. I wasn't sure if the raccoons had tried to follow me on land, and I really didn't want to find out.

Coyote stared in amazement when she saw me dripping. Not only had I clearly taken a dip in the creek on my own, but I also had bits of eggshell around my mouth and a chunk of cattail in my fur.

"Geez!" she said. "What happened to you?"

I told her the whole story, to which she listened attentively.

"I really tried to get the egg back here to you!" I said at the end. "But it broke while I was swimming, and I don't know how I could get another one past those robbers. I'll try, if you want me to, but they seemed really sneaky!"

"Wow, kid – I respect that!" she said. "But I wouldn't ask you to tangle with even *one* raccoon. Three is no barking matter! You shouldn't go out there again."

"It's Rory," I said suddenly. "My name is Rory."

"Oh! Okay, Rory," repeated Coyote. "And you're right, it is time for names. I'm pleased to meet you, Rory. I'm Senna."

Senna. The name was softer than I'd thought it would be, and yet it suited her.

"It's nice to meet you, Senna," I said.

Chapter 8: Senna

Senna told me to rest, and that she would get her own food again the next night. Her paws were scabbing over well, and she thought she would be able to walk by then.

I have to admit, though, the next day was pretty boring. I actually passed the time by counting the ants that crawled by our makeshift den. Then, when I ran out of numbers I knew, I started counting the ants that were carrying leaves versus the ants that were only marching, and then the ants that were carrying other ants versus the ants that were carrying leaves and the ants that were marching, and... you get the idea.

Night fell eventually, and when it did the hungry Senna stretched and smacked her lips.

“Here goes,” she said, gathering her feet under her body. Slowly, she pushed down against the ground and rose up to her full height. Her coat looked shaggy and her ribs stood out more than usual, but the sharp angles made her look even taller than she had before. She wasn’t bigger than I would be one day, but I felt like she would always seem it.

She limbered up her shoulders and looked at me. “Do you still want to go home, Rory?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Why? What’s the reason?”

I thought about it. When I had demanded that Senna take me home during the storm, it had been out of discomfort and anger. I wasn’t angry now, and, after spending a few more days outdoors, I didn’t think that even a storm would upset me the way it had before. And yet... “I want to see my family,” I said. *Yes. That’s really what it is. That is what it’s been about all along.* “I miss them, and I think they miss me too. I don’t want to live apart from them. I don’t mind it out here now, but I feel like I belong with them.”

Senna couldn’t argue with that. “Then, let’s get you home,” she said.

Chapter 9: The Journey Home

Senna needed a meal before we could travel, so I took her to the quail's nest that I had found the night before and we finished off the eggs. Next, she led me to a cottonwood that overlooked the creek.

"This is the home of a Great Horned Owl. I think he could lead you to your house, because he flies over this area every night and he knows it really well. He doesn't take every request, though, so you'd better –"

"*WHOOO?*" a loud voice called.

"Oh! He's seen us. Be respectful! Good luck, kid!"

The next thing I knew, I was standing alone in the dark, looking up at the tree but seeing nothing.

"Excuse me," I said.

"*WHOOO?*"

"Oh, sorry! My name's Rory. I'm a golden retriever. But, you can probably see that..."

Just then I caught a glimpse of fuzzy talons gripping onto a branch, and, above them, two yellow eyes that were even larger than Senna's. I froze. This was a big, big bird, and it was staring down at me.

"You're lost, is that it?" asked the owl in a deep voice.

I nodded and swallowed.

"You are not the first dog who has come to me when lost. I don't always grant the favours that they ask of me, but I witnessed your kindness to Coyote here last night, so it would be discourteous of me not to assist you now..."

I felt a sense of warmth rising in my heart. Had this owl called me kind? That was something I had never thought I'd hear.

“What does your house look like?”

I cleared my throat. “My house is tall and white with a big fir tree in front and a silver car in the driveway at night. It sits on the corner of two streets. One is straight, and the other curves along a high stone wall.”

“Hmmm....” said the bird. “I’m not sure. I’ve seen several like that...”

“Oh, and near my house it sometimes smells like food, because there’s a meat shop around the corner with a big dumpster in the back.”

“Ah!” The owl nodded. Its sharp beak bobbed up and down in the moonlight. “I *do* know it. Alright. To you I will seem just a shadow, and you will not hear me fly, but if you can follow the place without stars you will find your way home.”

I was so happy. I was going home! I looked over my shoulder at Senna with a huge smile. Then a serious thought struck me: was this our goodbye?

She answered my question before I could ask it. “I’ll come along for the walk,” she said and winked. “I want to see my new food dish!”

I laughed and we set off.

* * *

Senna and I followed the shadow of the owl along the course of the river, and when I heard the sounds of an approaching road I caught the familiar scent of my neighbourhood. It smelled like lake water and pepperoni, old wooden buildings and fresh-paved concrete. I looked around, but I couldn’t see my street. Still, I knew it was close.

A curve in the path led us behind a row of restaurants and stores, and we followed a short flight of stairs into a wide alleyway leading out to Lakeshore Road. We walked along the road

until we came to a cross street and the starless place wheeled left. My eyes lit up as I recognized the stone wall. Sure enough, after we had followed it a little further, I looked across the street and saw my house standing on a corner.

“There it is!” I said. “That’s my road! That’s my house!”

I ran across the empty street to my front yard and started barking at the door and the dark windows. Senna followed and sat down under the spreading branches of the big tree.

“You don’t have to hang back,” I said as a bedroom light turned on. “My family isn’t just any old bunch of people. I think you’d like them!”

Senna stayed put. “I don’t know, Rory,” she said. “That would be a first.”

The yard light came on and I saw the shadow of the owl circling on the grass.

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Owl,” I said to the sky. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

He hooted quietly and flew off. I noticed that this time saying thank-you hadn’t felt so weird. It had actually felt pretty good.

There were sounds of movement from inside the house, and Tony pulled up the blinds at his window. He did a double take and rubbed his eyes.

“Oh my gosh!” he said. “Wendy, it’s the puppy! Wendy! Rory’s barking at us from the front yard!”

Senna had remained and was watching me. I spoke to her again.

“I mean it,” I said. “I really think you’d like my family. Maybe you’d even like it here at the house with us!”

She smiled. “It doesn’t work like that, puppy. I belong out there. I belong where there are rivers, where the trees don’t only grow where they’ve been planted... where I can move freely.

I'm glad you're happy here, but I have a way of life I won't give up, as much as people want me to. I hope you understand."

My eyes grew wet, but I nodded. "I understand."

Just then the front door burst open, and my whole family rushed out. I leaped up and barked a joyful hello.

"Where have you been?!" cried Wendy.

"You came back!" said Daniel.

They gathered around and hugged and squeezed and stroked me, and nobody told me not to jump up on them. Then I turned to say good-bye to Senna, but she was gone. There was an empty place where she had been sitting at the base of the big fir.

"Come on, Rory," Daniel said. "Let's go inside."

I let my family lead me in, but before the door was shut behind us I looked for Coyote once more. That time I thought I saw the gleam of two bright eyes from the hollow under the tree. It was like she was watching me safely indoors and telling me that she was glad we'd met. Then again, it could have just been moonlight.

Chapter 10: Back to the Park

My family decided, after I had been back with them one week, to take me to the dog park again. I think they wanted to see if I would act differently than the last time I was there.

“Hang on! Hold your horses!” Tony laughed as he pulled the car into the parking lot. I was pawing at the door, eager to get out and play. He fastened a leash to my collar and gave it to my Daniel, who led me across the asphalt to the park gates. I accepted the plan happily. I needed to make up for lost time with my fellow dogs. It would be good for me to make some friends.

I greeted a Samoyed, a Shi Tzu, and a Jack Russell cross with a wagging tail. Then I yipped, jumped into the air, and took off into the park. The mixed-breed barked and gave chase, and the two of us shot into the center of the field.

“Isn’t this amazing?” said my Wendy. “I feel like every dog should get lost when they’re young!”

From the bushes at the edge of Mission Creek, two yellow eyes looked on. Then, though it was daylight, Senna let loose a howl.

I recognized her voice immediately. All of the dogs in the field heard it, too, and even the humans noticed. The others all looked confused, but I ran over to the fence near the creek and scanned the tree line in excitement. When I couldn’t find Senna with my eyes, I did the only other thing that made sense. I sat down and began to howl.

“Aaaa-aaa-aaaaooooooooo!” I called. I hadn’t sung the ancient song since that first night, so my voice shook a little. “Aaooooooooo!”

“Aaaaaooooooooooooooooo!” I heard in reply from the bushes.

“Aaaaaooooooooooooooooo-oooo-ooooo!” we sang together.

Then the other dogs began to join me. The Samoyed, the Shi Tzu and others ran over, and each one began its own version of the song.

“Aaaaaayuuuuuu!” called the Shi Tzu.

“Baaaaarroooooooooo!” bayed a hound.

“Ahhooooooooouuuu!” sang the Samoyed.

The humans laughed and smiled, and my heart felt so full that I thought it might burst. Senna and I would be stay connected after all! Not only that, but my two worlds had joined. I felt complete now, and I knew that it was because all of us, whether we had learned it yet or not, were truly family.

Author's Note

This story draws on First Nations tales about Coyote, called *sənk'lip* in Nsyilxcen, as its inspiration. For further reading about Coyote, I recommend the work of Thomas King and Harry Robinson. Thomas King's stories for children, including *A Coyote Columbus Story*, *Coyote Sings to the Moon* and *A Coyote Solstice Tale* were particularly important to me as I wrote this book.