

Honorable Mention – Young Adult Fiction

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The Desert Saga

THE DESERT SAGA: THE COYOTES

CHAPTER ONE

BROTHERS

The midday sun made the air hot and dusty. There was little wind causing a stuffiness to hang over the three as they trekked along their carefully picked pathway. Rafe grabbed Cache by the neck and threw him onto the ground. Cache winced and jumped back up looking comically fierce for a smaller brother. He got down on all fours in an attack stance while Rafe again grabbed Cache's hindquarters and spun him around.

"Rafe." Jet called out sternly. "You have to be careful playing with your smaller brother. You and Cache are just playing now, but there will come a time when the play will turn to violence and you could hurt your brother!"

Rafe began licking his little brother all over his reddish brown fur and then he nudged him from the side.

"I could never hurt Cache, mom. He is my best friend," again Rafe bit down teasingly on Cache's ear. "You don't let us be around any other coyotes and that means I only have my little brother to pick on. But I would never hurt him. "

Rafe trotted along and turned to look at his brother. His yellow eyes squinted as he remembered a few days ago when he had grabbed Cache's ear.

"Ouch, that hurts, Rafe. You are going to rip my ear off!!" Cache had cried.

Rafe had jumped back away from Cache and gasped in horror. His heart pounded and his mouth became dry.

"Gosh, Cache, I'm sorry." Rafe had quickly said, rubbing and licking Cache's ear. "I didn't mean to hurt you." Cache rubbed his ear on the ground, trying to stop the sting. Rafe shook his head, not sure where the instinct to hurt Cache had come from.

Cache brought Rafe's attention back to the present as he body slammed Rafe, yelping in triumph catching his brother off guard. Rafe's unsettled feeling washed away and the two tumbled down the side of a hill laughing uncontrollably.

Jet called to the two pups and they jumped up the hill to follow behind their mom. The air was warm, yet Jet's fur shivered in the sunlight. Her pace slowed, then she hesitated, deciding to continue her discourse.

"It is part of your nature to fight violently among yourself," she began slowly. "The Coyotes of the East, where I come from, start playfully fighting among themselves. Later the conflicts become real, and the weaker of the clan is cast out or relegated to a lesser position." Jet's pace picked up as she continued.

"What's cast out mean, mother?" Cache asked, his paws crunching rocks on the ground as he tried to catch up to his mother.

"It means sent away," answered Rafe, jumping over a bush filled with sharp spiky branches.

"Come on, Cache, follow me and jump. Bet you can't, bet you can't!" sneering as he watched Cache pass far away from the bush.

“All of the males want to be the number one Coyote,” Jet continued

“Like me,” Rafe quickly blurted out, this time jumping on a rounded boulder. He cocked his head into the air and howled. Cache looked up at his brother. Rafe’s formidable body cast a large shadow onto the ground that looked like a blackened Live Oak Tree. The dark shadow dissipated as Rafe slid down the side of the granite outcropping and pranced alongside his mother, occasionally resting his oversized head on top of hers, sniffing the air with his prominent snout.

“Yes Rafe, like you,” She resumed trotting at the normal pace. “The western coyote does not have playful behavior. When they start to brawl with other family members, they sometimes fight to the death.”

Cache gasped and suddenly halted. He could feel his breathing quicken and his eyes squint. “I’m not like Rafe, mother. I can’t fight. What am I going to do?” Cache dropped his head and looked straight down to the ground.

“I’ll make sure you are not kicked out, Cache.” Rafe pushed Cache forward with his snout making him lose his balance.

“I’ll protect you, won’t I mom? I will protect him!”

Jet licked the black stripe on her smallest son’s reddish brown coat. The stripe coursed from his head to his tail, just as hers did. She lifted his downcast eyes and spoke with authority.

“You are very clever, Cache. You will use your wits which will get you a lot farther than just using your muscles. Rafe will be able to fight his way out of almost anything. But you, my little pup, will THINK your way out of almost everything. Now straighten your back, look straight ahead and follow your brother’s strong muscular body. He will be by your side leading you ahead on this journey”

The three trotted through soft wilderness grasses that opened into wide plains of purple and yellow blossomed plants. Cache bounded over hills and canyons, never needing to stop. Rafe sprinted ahead of the other two, then fell into a heap of bushes gasping for breath and unable to get his body to move any further. He loved running fast, but his body could not match Cache's endurance. Jet remained steady in her pace, lifting her head up to smell the air for danger. If she perceived a predator, she abruptly stopped, and so did her pups. If she traveled as usual, the pups naively played with each other as if the three were invincible.

They had passed under two sets of moon cycles when Jet peered upward at the overhead sun. She scanned the surrounding terrain to see short stubby trees with black bark and green spiky leaves. The predominant plants in the area appeared hostile and non protective. She slowed her pace and brought her pups closer to her.

"We have crossed into what is known as the desert. Can you see that shade is sparse? The days will be hotter and we must look for a good shelter to keep cool."

Rafe ran ahead and Jet chased after him, forcefully pulling on Rafe's tail and growled. He yelped as he skidded to a stop. "Stop jumping over the cholla cactus, Rafe. If you land in one, it will take us hours to get the stickers out of your thick gray coat of fur."

"Ah mom," he fired back at her. "I got this!" he said, jumping over a large prickly pear cactus barely missing the top of it by inches.

"Rafe, did you hear what mom said," Cache yelled at his brother, tripping over a rock that blazed the trail where he was trotting.

"You howl like a ferret!" Rafe taunted back at Cache, as he ran off trying to grab a yellow butterfly in his snapping jaw.

The sun settled, layering a brilliant orange glow on the horizon and cold air came from nowhere. Jet herded her two pups toward a bushy alcove. Cache plopped onto the ground and Rafe moved as close as possible to blanket his brother's shivering body.

"We must eat. I will be back soon." Jet said, billows of steam coming from her mouth as she spoke.

The two pups peered out from under thick bushy brambles. Dried prairie bush crunched under Jet's paws as she quickened away to look for prey. Both Rafe and Cache began to drift off to sleep when a scent of dried animal blood and sweaty animal fur filtered into the small coyotes' nostrils. Rafe's eyes widened as he stared at Cache, both hearing sounds of multiple footfalls surrounding them. Their eyes squinted and a noisy pack of coyotes came into view. The animal at the front of the group trotted with his head high, looking from side to side. A female, next in line, also held her head high, sniffing the air. The coyotes that followed cackled and growled, hurrying to stay up with their leader. There were eight in total, Cache counted. He saw that the female was smaller than his mother. The coloring of the group was gray black, much like Rafe's color of fur. Rafe crept ahead of Cache and spat on the ground.

"That's the alpha and his mate in the front," Rafe snarled. "Jet could overpower them both, I am certain. I would never follow those two the way the others are following." Rafe spat on the ground again.

The group passed. An owl hooted causing both pups to startle in unison. Cache moved closer to Rafe. A foul smell hit their nose.

"What is that smell?" Cache asked Rafe.

"Ugh, I don't know!" He took his paw and tried to block the smell from his nostril.

A medium sized pig-like hoofed squadron of animals began to forage close by. Large straight tusks emerged from the jaw and they each gnawed on the top part of a collection of prickly pear cactus right in front of Rafe and Cache.

"They are looking right at us," Cache whispered to Rafe."How come they are not running away or charging? It's like they can't see us."

"I know," mumbled Rafe. He stared right into the eyes of one of the animals who kept on eating. The smaller pups rubbed up against each other, as if they were trying to polish the thick greasy outside lining of the other. The foul smell again permeated the air and the coyotes gasped. The larger animal moved closer to the pups and stopped chewing abruptly. His pointed nozzle turned in their direction. Thick hair immediately puffed up from his body and he turned and ran as fast as possible, the others following close behind.

"I think they were a skunk - pig. Mom told us about them. She called them Javalina. " Again they both rubbed their snouts into the ground to try to offset the horrible smell.

At first light, the brittlebush crunched and the brambles parted. A freshly killed piece of meat plopped on the ground in front of the pups. Jet moved slowly into the protected space and settled next to the pups, her eyes unable to stay open as she breathed slow and hard, draping her head over her muddied paws.

"Today we talk about hunting pack rats." she said, and fell asleep in front of her pups.

Rested, Jet was eager to teach her pups more about different prey and led her two offspring out to a desert wash. She smelled the recent droppings that lay in their pathway. She nudged the two pups forward and indicated for them to do likewise. Cache scrunched his nose to try to get the scent and raised his head in triumph.

"I recognize that scent. I've smelled it before." He stuck out his chest prancing about, eyes glued on his mother's.

Rafe smashed a spider with his paw. He yawned and rolled over on his back.

"Rafe, do you recognize the scent?"

"Yes, of course, mother. I have chased the little long-tailed furry creatures into the desert and found their collection of sticks and dried cactus. I know their scent."

"Now you need to show your brother how to chase and capture them. You work together.

We never kill just to kill. And we never kill more than we can eat, That is the law of the Coyote. But we must eat." Her voice was soft and assertive.

Warm, cloudless days followed, filled with lessons of hunting rabbits, then prairie dogs and pack rats, then snakes. Rafe smelled a scent and took off, Cache breathing hard trying to keep up. The two watched as their mother often looked behind her, her eyes wary and cautious. Her face grimaced a warning to be silent, and she lowered onto her belly to creep along the desert floor. Cache and Rafe followed, trying to mimic her movements. Their eyes met, both blinking and widened. They both smelled a familiar scent of sweaty dank fur and heard multiple footfalls. It was another group of coyotes. Cache stiffened and Rafe hissed. Jet again hurled them a warning of silence through her stern countenance. The three crouched motionless until Jet finally arose from the ground, moved out into the open and continued on her way. Rafe and Cache bolted forward to catch up.

"Coyotes," she said to her pups. "We hide from coyotes until we are in the West."

The brothers glance at each other, puzzling over her words.

CHAPTER TWO

“ I think we will stay in this area for a few days to hunt and rest.” Her eyes spotted a large outcropping further to the west.

“Up ahead,” Jet declared scanning in the distance, “ there is a cluster of large boulders that may provide a good shelter. We can check up ahead.”

As soon as she declared what Rafe decided was a mission, he took off, playfully jumping over thick low lying bushes, exhibiting his athletic prowess. Cache followed in quick pursuit, both animals laughing and howling. They had been frightfully tethered to their mother’s side, and for some reason, they took their mother’s announcement to mean they were in charge of finding shelter. They ran with reckless abandon, not paying any attention to the smells or sights surrounding them. Reaching the boulders first, Rafe leaped over the top of the outcropping and disappeared from Cache’s site.

“Wait, Rafe. Wait for me.!” Cache yelled as Rafe

A terrorizing howl reached Cache’s ears. He momentarily paused, then flung his body toward the top of the rocks to peer down. His brother was lying on his side, a large group of nesting pit vipers slithering over his thick fur. Rafe whimpered and moaned in agony as the snakes hissed and rattled, weaving their way around his neck and body. Cache caught sight of about 10 vipers, all sinking their fangs into Rafe’s limp body.

Jet shot to the pinnacle of the outcropping to stand next to Cache. A terrified howl released from her throat as she walked back and forth on top of the outcropping, assessing what she could do. She called to Rafe, and if he answered, his voice was weak and muted. She saw one of the snakes starting to move away from Rafe and she instinctively jumped down and stomped on his head with both forepaws, issuing a mighty blow to the snake, momentarily impeding the predator's senses. The commotion distracted the other snakes so they too began to move away from the wounded Coyote. Cache stood on the edge of the outcropping, motionless.

His mother moved carefully to Rafe's side, licking his nostrils clear of the mud and blood that were present. His eyes were shut, but slowly opened as he sensed the presence of his mother.

"I feel cold, mother," he whispered.

"Shh, don't talk, Rafe. You must save your strength." Tears were forming in her eyes.

"I can't see you very well, " he said. "Why can't I see you, mother?" His breath was shallow.

Reddish purple discoloration formed around his neck and paws. His coat was matted with goo and dirt.

"What's happening to me?" He called out.

Cache picked up one paw to move it forward, but it stuck to the top of the outcropping as if buried in sap pouring from an injured tree, preventing him from jumping to the place where Rafe lay.

"What's happening, mother?" Cache called out from above. "Is he going to be alright? What is happening?"

Jet sat silently next to her son. She nudged him gently to see if he could get up. There was no response. Rafe closed his eyes. His breathing slowly receded and he lay motionless. The adrenaline began to retreat from Cache's body and he vaulted to where Rafe lay. He moved

close to his mother, his eyes filled with panic and horror. The three lay together for a long time as the sun set and the cool night breeze floated over the stillness surrounding the desecrated coyote family.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LOG

The large winged bird flew above Cache and his mom as they lay sleepless next to Rafe. In time, there were two more circling overhead. Jet looked up and calculated her options. She could not permit Rafe to remain unattended in this crevice of the boulders allowing birds of prey, other coyotes or bobcats to feast upon his fallen body that seemed vulnerable in death. Her upward glance spied smaller boulders hovering overhead at the cliff's edge. She firmly but gently nudged Cache's trembling body to begin moving, knowing that he too would have a heavy heart.

"Those birds will pick apart your brother in hours. We can't let that happen. We need to find a way to bury him with those rocks overhead. Do you think that you can help me?" Her voice was steady and directive.

"How are we going to do that? How can we move rocks?" Cache looked up to survey what his mother was instructing him to do.

"There must be a way, but we have to move quickly. As soon as we leave Rafe's side, the raptors will move in. Are you ready?"

Cache stood up, his legs wobbly with devastation as well as from the long period of immobility.

"I am ready," he answered.

Jet led Cache swiftly up and over the outcropping. She saw a fallen tree precariously teetering above the edge of the cliff.

"If we roll this log down toward the edge of the cliff, it may take the looser boulders with it as it falls off the edge. It is worth a try." Jet nudged Cache to approach the tree trunk from opposite ends.

"Remember how you used to body slam your brother?," she asked, her voice breaking slightly as she said this, "We need to do that to the log. We will back up and run at it as fast as we can. We have to hit the log at the same time so watch me closely. You can do this, Cache." her voice steadied as she looked at Cache.

"I can do this," Cache replied, uncertain in his response.

Jet nodded and they took their approach from 20 yards away.

"On my count. One, two, three".

They sprinted toward the loose log with rapacious speed. They hurled their bodies into the log with a revengeful force. The log responded with a jerking motion, then quickly picking up momentum, it hit the smaller boulders with a force that defied gravity. The boulders fell over the cliff along with the log, and picked up a large amount of dirt and dried plants that catapulted over the side along with the displaced boulders.

Both coyotes hurdled toward the edge due to the speed they had generated hitting the log, but both used their athletic agility to fling their bodies to the side avoiding a freefall. Jet was on her feet faster than Cache, streaming back down to where they had left Rafe unattended with lightning speed. She stopped at the top of the outcropping. Rafe's body was nowhere in sight. The rocks, the log, the bushes and dirt had covered his body completely. Cache caught up to her side and peered down over the edge. He slowly looked up and saw the tears in his mothers eyes as she reverently bowed her head at the hidden grave of her precious Rafe. She glared

up at the sky and no longer saw the predatory birds. She glanced down at her remaining pup. He was all she had now. Her life had shattered in too many ways. She had failed to tell her two pups why they needed to go to the west. She had been silent, and protective, and now she would never be able to explain to Rafe who she was and who she hoped he and Cache would become. She needed to be honest , now , with Cache.

“We must be on our way, .” she said quietly to Cache. “ I need to tell you about your family. I need to tell you who you are and where you come from” She picked up her speed and the two coyotes moved away from east toward the destination Jet was seeking, the west. She would tell them the story that they were part wolf and part coyote, escaping from the wolf pack in the east to join the coyotes in the west.