

A Mother's Nature

I smelled her before I saw her, wrinkling my nose and whipping my head around to see what gave off the pungent scent, expecting to see a skunk or a pile of decaying leaves. I did not expect to see a coyote, lean, yet strong, sleek fur a mix of buff, grey, and brown. My heart jumped at the surprise, and I slowed my walk, shuffling sideways as she passed me and turned around to block the path. My labrador didn't even bark. Surprised as I was, she remained silent by my side, her fur taking on a ridge over her back. The coyote crouched, getting low to the ground as my dog strained against the leash, quickly pulling it from my stunned hand.

That was when I found my voice. "No!" I screamed as the coyote and my dog squared off, getting ready for a fight. My sweet dog, domesticated and mild-mannered, didn't understand the rules, and was a second too late. The coyote grabbed her back leg and yanked her down, as I heard a sharp yelp. I reached for a large stick on the ground and swung it toward the coyote, as it let go of its grip on my dog's back leg. I wielded the stick hard near the tail, trying to avoid my dog who found her feet and limped away down the path. "Run!" I screamed, as I brandished the stick back and forth, trying to keep the coyote's attention long enough for my dog to get away. I swear my dog and I locked eyes, and I saw her hesitation to leave me. "Go!" I yelled again, firmly. This time she listened, and I saw her yellow tail disappear around the bend.

Just the coyote and I were left in the standoff. I slowly backed up, careful not to take my eye off her. Backing into a small tree, I quickly ducked behind it and reached my arms up to the crotch in the tree, using my feet to heave myself up to sit in its fork. I dropped my stick in the process and looked down once I felt secure to see the coyote at the base of the trunk watching me. I knew she couldn't get to me now that I was safe in the tree and as my pulse slowed a bit I took some time to really look at her. Her long snout reminded me of a German Shepherd. Her

ears were pointed slightly out as if she was trying to hear all around her, scanning the woods for more threats. Then she did something very unexpected, she put her paws up on the tree trunk and barked. It was a yip that was almost a howl- long and whiny. I nearly lost my balance and fell out of the tree with surprise. I almost laughed, imagining her finding me in an elaborate game of hide and seek. Then as quickly as she appeared, she backed away from the tree, positioning herself across the path and into the woods about 20 yards away.

I was unsure what to do next. The coyote alternated between keeping guard on me with her eyes and pert ears and sniffing at something in a fallen log at her feet. Her attention seemed so divided, and I got the impression that I was the unwanted intruder and she was protecting not just herself...but possibly pups. In the fallen log, it had to be pups that had her taking such risks, making herself known in the woods, pulling my dog down, keeping me in the tree. It all made sense now. I had never heard of a coyote bothering people in these well-walked woods. Maybe I was the first to come by this morning. She was protecting her pups and my dog and I were the threat. That was when I noticed her mate emerging from the trees and joining her at the fallen log.

I saw her in a different light, maternal, scared, and ... brave. I watched the proud parents as they took turns nosing into the log, nurturing and protecting their new babies. Their beauty brought tears to my eyes, and I waited patiently, enjoying my aerial view of their family unit, behaving the way any parents, human or animal, would behave to keep their family safe.