

# COYOTE KILLER

## By Matt Buchanan

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**CAST:** One Male or Female. Young teen, sensitive, determined, smart.

You'd never know it to look at me, but I'm a stone killer. Stone cold. I'm not proud of it. The things you learn about yourself.

I got Archie when I was two and he was my best friend. Sometimes, like when Dad went away, and when my stepfather first moved in, it seemed like he was my only friend. He used to sleep in my bed every night—except I think after I was asleep he left to go hunting, but he always came back before I woke up. Not that he ever caught anything but dust bunnies, because when he was a kitten he tore up a ratty old chair that used to belong to my great-grandmother and my Mom had his claws ripped out by the vet. But then again she also had his balls cut off and he never seemed to miss them either.

Archie loved me as much as I loved him. He didn't love everybody—just me. He hated my stepfather. When my stepfather would come into the living room, Archie would get up and leave. I don't think he was afraid of him—he just got up, real stiff, with his tail in the air, and marched out of the room. *Every* time. He liked my Mom okay because she fed him, but he really was afraid of my little brother Charlie.

Until last fall, Archie stayed indoors most of the time. He sometimes came outside to play with me when I was little, but we live near some woods and my Mom thought it would be dangerous for him to be out at night. But then Charlie started getting sick all the time and it turned out he had allergies. Suddenly my Mom didn't care how dangerous it was outside. The day she told me I threw my first real tantrum in like ten years.

“You're the one who always said it wasn't safe out there!”

“The neighbors have a cat and it's fine.”

“But *she* has *claws!*” Then my stepfather has to get his input in.

“I can't believe you're being so selfish! Is your pet more important than your own brother?”

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“I’ve had Archie a lot longer than I’ve had Charlie, and he’s a lot nicer! Why don’t you make Charlie sleep outside?”

Well, I said a lot of stupid stuff and I ended up grounded with no cell phone for about a month and Archie ended up outside. At least out there Charlie couldn’t catch him. Maybe his allergies wouldn’t have been so bad if he hadn’t tortured Archie so much.

Actually, Archie seemed to like living outside. Even without claws he used to go hunting in the tall grass and chase squirrels all over the yard. At first I made a point of going outside all the time to sit with him and pet him, but as winter came and it got cold I started doing it less and less. I’m really sorry about that now. By spring I’d gotten so used to the arrangement that when our neighbor reported seeing a coyote in his yard I thought, “Cool!” I mean, it’s not like we live in the Arizona desert or something. There’s a huge city like fifteen minutes from our house. I found myself hoping the coyote would come around and I would see it. I even told some kids at school I *had* seen it. It never even occurred to me to worry about Archie until I found him that morning.

Half of him anyway. At first I thought he was just sleeping. His head and front legs looked normal. But when I went up to him that was all there was. His front half was lying there in the grass and the rest of him was just gone. Something had just bitten him in half. There was hardly any blood on the part that was left, but somehow that made it even worse. I ran away and threw up for a long time. That night I went out to the shed and got a shovel and buried what was left of my best friend underneath his favorite squirrel tree. But I didn’t cry. Not once.

The next night, after everyone was in bed, I took a flashlight and went for a walk in the woods. I was looking for the coyote but I have no idea what I thought I was going to do if I found it. I wasn’t really thinking—I was just angry. Angry like I could never remember feeling. Angry until there was no room for anything else. I really think if I had run into the coyote that night I would have tried to kill it with my bare hands.

Of course there was no chance of that. Between the flashlight and all the noise I was making crashing through the woods, the stupidest coyote in the world could have kept away from me. After about an hour I gave up even trying to be quiet and screamed as loud as I could, “Come on, you bastard! Come pick on someone your own size!” I’m surprised the neighbors didn’t call the cops.

The next night I left the flashlight home, but I brought an aluminum baseball bat and I brought some hamburger I stole from the fridge. I

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found a tree with a nice sort of chair in its roots. I put the hamburger on the ground and settled down to wait.

I woke up at about five in the morning, stiff and cold, even though it was July. The hamburger was gone. I took my bat and went back inside before anyone else got up. Even though I had slept most of the night I went back to bed and slept 'til noon.

I did the same thing the next night, except I brought a blanket and I took some tuna instead of hamburger. I was determined to stay awake but there's something about sitting in the dark. I just kept sneaking out every night. If my Mom ever wondered why there were leaves and pine needles in my bed she never said anything. I don't know what she thought happened to all the food. I'd been at it maybe two-and-a-half weeks when it happened. I'd fallen asleep with my bat in my arms as usual, but then suddenly I wasn't asleep. Very slowly I opened my eyes and there it was, about to scarf down the last piece of my Mom's lasagna.

It was huge. Much bigger than I thought a coyote was supposed to be. I was afraid to move—afraid I'd scare it away. I just looked. And just for a second, as it was snatching the food and running away, I swear it caught my eye.

That night I put the food—it was a big hunk of American cheese—a little closer to me. I didn't hear it until it was right on top of me. I sat frozen, with my eyes glued to it. It looked me in the eye and I thought it was going to balk, but it darted in, never taking its eyes off mine, grabbed the cheese and ran away.

The next night I put the food even closer, and closer the next night, until I actually set it on my lap. This was maybe two weeks after I first saw it. I never fell asleep again, and the coyote seemed to get more confident each night.

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