

# Kill Zone

by Robert Liparulo, ...

Published: 2006  
in »Thriller«



In the first draft of Robert Liparulo's thriller *Comes a Horseman*, the coprotagonists—FBI agents Brady Moore and Alicia Wagner—were helped out of a particularly hairy situation by police sniper Byron Stone. Byron was a moody fellow, renowned as much for his reticence as for his skill with a rifle. Ultimately, pacing considerations trumped Liparulo's (and early readers') affection for Byron, and his scenes wound up being edited out.

Byron, of course, wasn't happy. He nagged at the edges of Liparulo's mind, always asking the same questions: What makes me so gloomy? How did I become so proficient with a gun? What's my story? After a while, Liparulo started jotting down answers, eventually explaining Byron's life in the notes, outlines and fragments of three yet-unwritten thrillers—

*Recoil, Recon and Return.*

While Byron Stone draws blood from Liparulo's own heart, he's also a compilation of Liparulo's acquaintances, including a SWAT sniper and an FBI

sniper (imagine *their* dis-agreements). These two shared the qualities of quiet, nearly impenetrable machismo and subtly troubled spirits. The taking of lives made them each respect life that much more.

They would kill only when it would save more lives, or a more innocent life. But this creed allowed them only to pull the trigger. Bad guy or not, a life is a life, and to hell with how tough snipers act, their souls ache for each of the ones they ended.

A sniper's knowledge that his job is necessary, crashing headlong into his humanity—this was the conflict Liparulo wanted to explore with Byron. *Kill Zone* does not answer all of Byron's questions, but it opens a window on the police sniper's moral struggle.

## **Kill Zone**

The sweaty, beard-stubbled face wavered behind the sniper's crosshairs. The suspect's eyes flicked around—to the kids, weeping in a corner; to the apartment door, propped closed with a chair because he had broken the latch when he kicked it in; to the window, where he seemed to expect the peering faces of would-be rescuers. Forget that it was five stories up, with no fire escape.

*Keep looking, buddy*, the sniper thought. *All the better to keep you in my sights.*

It was bad enough that the gun-brandishing creep had provoked the wrath of the city's SWAT team; now he had Byron Stone's rifle pointed at him. Most folks would have told the of-fender to jump out the window and get done with it.

Byron was as comfortable with a rifle as an accountant is with a mechanical pencil. From his eighth birthday, when he was be-queathed his granddaddy's .22 for plunking at cans and ground-hogs (and stray cats when no one was looking), through boot camp, Ranger training, sniper school and the police academy, he figured he hadn't gone longer than a week without shooting a gun. Breathing required more thought.

Now he was poised across the street and a floor up from the commandeered apartment. He could see the perp, scruffy and likely drunk, holding a woman in front of him with a thick arm around her neck. In his other hand was a pistol, which he alternately held to the woman's temple and pointed at the kids. The sniper panned to the next window. The children were still there.

The boy was little, no older than three. The girl was about eleven, his own son's age. They were terrified.

He panned back to the man who was threatening them. He tensed. The woman was no longer struggling. She was hanging like a doll in the man's grip. There was no blood and he'd heard no shot. Could he have strangled her? Broken her neck? She lifted her hand to touch her captor's arm, and Byron relaxed slightly. She had simply realized the futility of fighting, or was too exhausted to continue. Now she was only partially blocking the man's face from Byron's view, instead of randomly

flailing her head around, which wasn't the brightest idea in situations involving snipers.

He watched the perp jerk her this way, then that, waving the gun like a conductor's baton. It appeared to be a .38 snub-nose revolver, what they used to call a Saturday night special—cheap, but lethal.

Eyeing the scene through the scope's optics was like watching a television program with the volume turned off. The networks would have dropped this show a long time ago. The acting was melodramatic, the plot was nonexistent. In fact, Byron did not know the story at all. Was this a lovers' spat gone off the deep end? A fouled drug deal? Maybe the guy had chosen a door at random: some people meet their soul mates in chance encounters; the woman and her children had met the devil. Whatever ill wind blew the man to that apartment also stirred people like Byron, people who made it their life's work to stop bad guys from preying on innocence.

Byron noticed the woman was wearing a waitress's uniform, light blue with white trim. A name tag clung to her left breast, but her constant flailing prevented him from reading its inscription. He felt a pang of sympathy for her. Two kids. A dead-end job. Living in a one-room dive, in which the "kitchen" amounted to a few appliances and a countertop running along one wall of the living room; he could see its pink tiles, a plastic grocery bag of something lying like a disemboweled stomach on the counter, an open bag of bread. And now this.

He drew a bead on the man's head. He was going for a clean kill, one that would short-circuit even the death spasm that could cause the hostage-taker's finger to twitch on the trigger and grant him one last victim. That meant severing the nervous system pathway, an inch wide, at the back of the skull—on a wildly moving target. Between the rifle's muzzle and the target were a hundred and twenty yards of gusty winds and a pane of glass. If the bullet managed to zing past the hostage's head to find its mark, a final barricade of tooth and bone would try to deflect it away from the brain stem, so crucial to the hostages' safety.

"Piece of cake," Byron whispered as he aligned the crosshairs on the man's philtrum, the dimple between nose and upper lip.

His heart seemed to thump especially hard, causing Byron's aim to jerk away from the man's head. He knew the spasm, imperceptible to anyone but him, was no involuntary physical tic—the kind that ended the careers of surgeons and snipers. This one came from deep within, from a bit of conscience that told him the object in his sights was flesh and bone.

Perspiration tickled his scalp. The sweatband along the inside edge of his cap would keep it from blinding him. He allowed his eyes to close. For only a second, then two. Vision, again... and the man's head in the scope. Byron's stomach cramped.

A creak of wood reminded him he was not alone. His spotter—the second half of every police sniper team—stood on a chair behind him, watching the scene through powerful binoculars. Usually, the spotter gave periodic updates on wind velocity and direction, SWAT team movements, the position of hostages. In this case, he would have confirmed the children's whereabouts so the sniper's attention could have stayed on the target. But this spotter was different. He had been silent for the nearly three hours the two had been in position.

Three hours. Sometimes an operation lasted only minutes.

More often, it was a waiting game.

Upon receiving a brief sketch of the situation, Byron had selected this building, and after rejecting three other locations, settled on this abandoned room. The fading ghost of something rotting lingered in the air, but his nose had acclimated to it.

Carefully, he had cut the pane from the window, because raised windows tended to draw suspicion, and shooting through glass decreased accuracy. He'd hung cheesecloth over it like sheer curtains to hide behind, without affecting his tightly focused view through the sniper-scope.

Then he'd made a platform to lie on from a door and two chairs. His vantage point and stability were perfect.

Through it all, the spotter had quietly observed. And that was okay; Byron preferred checking things out for himself.

For the first two hours, he'd waited for the word: *red* to stand down, *green* to shoot. Some fifty minutes ago, he'd received the go-ahead. Apparently, the creep had a long history of violence.

Earlier in the day, before taking the woman and two kids hostage, he'd stabbed his former employer with a screwdriver. Somewhere, a tactical-unit leader had gathered intelligence from sniper teams, police investigators, a psychologist, a hostage negotiator. He had determined there was sufficient cause to effectively sign the guy's death warrant.

Byron wasn't so sure. Against sniping wisdom, he never forgot that his targets were human, men (usually) who'd been boys full of hope and wonder, who probably loved someone and was loved back, who had somehow lost their way. Given the choice, he'd rather see a peaceful resolution. But the choice wasn't his.

It was in the hands of the guy on the other end of the scope. If he continued to threaten others, if it looked as though he would cause them serious harm, it was Byron's duty to eliminate him.

So for three hours, Byron had held his position, ready, vigilant.

"Shoot 'im, man," his spotter whispered. He had grown impatient. "You got the green light."

Byron ignored him.

In the scope, the man half turned from the window and seemed to yell at the door. Byron adjusted his aim to a spot just above his ear, where the side neural motor strip lay, another instant-incapacitation spot. He nestled the rifle stock more firmly in the pocket of his shoulder. He had already adjusted the scope's Bullet Drop Compensator for distance and the difference in their elevations. The wind was a concern. It was rising and dropping like gusts through a valley. He had spotted a rag caught on a telephone wire. Its flapping gave him a sense of the wind speeds, and he could see it without lifting his head from the scope by opening his other eye. He would move the crosshairs slightly to the left to adjust for the wind at the time of the shot—a method of compensation called Kentucky Windage.

The perp abruptly spun and fired two shots through the apartment door. The negotiations weren't going well. Byron maintained his composure. He pressed the

tip of his finger against the trigger. He knew precisely how many ounces of pressure he was applying to the trigger's four-pound pull, and when it would slam the firing pin into the bullet. His lips moved in silent prayer.

Riding a surge of adrenaline, the man threw the woman to the floor below the window. Her mouth open in a scream Byron could not hear, he raised the pistol toward her.

The rag was almost horizontal in a strong wind. Byron adjusted.

He took in three-quarters of a breath, held it—and pulled back on the trigger. The rifle *cracked!* and kicked against his shoulder, which was well muscled for just such times. He didn't even feel it.

He was frozen in what marksmen call the follow-through: no movement for a full second after firing to prevent starting the after-shot procedure a hair before the bullet left the barrel, causing it to miss its mark. He saw the bullet impact and the target go down. He chambered another round, watching for movement through the scope.

"Direct hit to the head," he called to his spotter, who responded, "Suspect down."

The spotter yelled into his mic, then yanked the earbud plug from his radio handset, and a buzz of voices filled the room.

The door of the apartment across the street burst open.

Men and women streamed in. They gathered around the body, some of them kneeling, pointing at the hole perfectly placed below the suspect's nose. A policewoman with short-cropped hair inspected the bullet hole in the window. She looked up toward Byron's position, his "hide." She smiled and waved. Behind her, a burly-looking cop with a mustache hoisted up the body, holding it for Byron to see. Someone else gave him the thumbs-up.

A chill skittered along his spine, and he shook it off.

After three hours of mentally filling in the gaps to make the target as real as possible, it was a difficult task to start thinking of it again for what it was—an animatronic target mannequin, used for high-level training and top-flight competitions.

Puppeteers, situated safely away from the target, controlled its movements. He peered once more through the scope at the face of the pretend hostage-taker. The latex skin looked gen-uine enough. Even the eyes had rolled back, the mouth had dropped open. It didn't look so different from the real corpses he had seen.

The woman cop was dragging the woman mannequin from the room. He panned to the other window. The kids were huddled in place, now just looking like sad dolls. The illusion of reality, so strong in Byron's mind, was wearing off. When he looked again, a photographer was trying to snap pictures of the suspect-mannequin's wound while someone else danced with it.

He released his grip on the rifle. It rocked on its bipod and settled on the sandbag below its stock. Joints popped and muscles protested as he rolled onto his side to look back at his "spotter"—actually, a fine marksman himself who'd volunteered to help judge this contest.

"Jack, I'm getting too old for this," he said.

Jack came around the side of the platform and extended his hand. "My man, that was incredible." His voice, deep and smooth, made the words sound true. They squeezed each other's hands. For a second Byron thought Jack might try to butt heads, or some such crap. Blowing the heads off things had that effect on men. Instead, Jack pivoted and planted his butt on the platform beside Byron. He fished a pack of cigarettes out of a breast pocket and tapped one out. He offered the pack to Byron.

Byron stared without seeing. His mind had returned to the shoot, the perp, the hostages. He rolled back to his scope.

Beside him, Jack said, "You got this thing bagged up, dude."

A cloud of white smoke drifted into Byron's periphery. "That idiot Hanson took off the perp's ear. Schumann, that prima donna acting like his farts don't stink because he won National, and everyone said he'd take this one. Sorry cuss plugged a hostage."

He kept rambling, a talker released from a three-hour vow of silence, but his words became background static in Byron's ears.

The kid-dolls reminded him of a time when it wasn't make-believe, when he hadn't been so perfect with his aim, when the perp had retained enough life force to empty his Glock.

One of the kids jerked his head to look directly at him. His heart wedged into his throat.

The kid jumped out of view. Byron panned to see a cop dragging it by one leg toward the apartment door.

He closed his eyes and moaned internally. Could he ever do this without investing so much of himself? He doubted it.

"Dude." Jack elbowed his hip. He turned. "We gotta— What's with you?"

Byron pressed his fingers to his cheek. Wet.

"Bug or something flew in my eye... this *smoke*." He waved his hand, clearing away a thin tendril.

Jack glared, suspicious. He stood. "Let's get outta here, man. Grub's on, beer's flowing."

Byron nodded, and pushed up onto his knees. He looked out through the cheesecloth. The windows into the kill zone were dark.

