

Killing the Man



Kenneth B. Humphrey

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ISBN 978-1501027758

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DEDICATION

This book is for Jennifer, the tumbler that just fits.

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ONE

April 1999

So, get this. In the course of trying to make sense of life, I found my road on the other side of a man who played no favorites. He killed whomever he needed to: black, white and everything in between.

And of course this whole mess also involved a girl, but she wasn't my wife.

Kevin's voice blares to life in my earpiece, knocking me out of my reverie. There's something going on back in the electronics department. I punch a key on the monitor console and the screen instantly changes to reveal five kids walking down the aisle.

My pulse quickens a little and bells dingle-dangle in the back of my skull.

This is what I do. I catch crooks.

In the lingo, people like me are called thief dancers. I don't know where the term originated, but it stuck. Corporations label us with terms like Asset Control or Loss Prevention.

The theft business, like many other human-centric fields, has tipping points where instinct rules the day. It's what separates the good from the great; I like to think my instincts were pretty well honed.

And they are telling me we had some live wires, walking this way.

Kineisha looks over. "You want another angle, Rick?"

That's me, by the by. Rick Johann Killing, Loss Prevention Manager for the Hyper-Mart chain in

North Haven, Illinois. Sprawling on thirty acres, a massive complex combining grocery and retail products, it has been touted as the wave of the future, a huge store where everyone can get everything.

Chicago lay seventy miles southeast, just far enough to give the area its own sense of identity but close enough to offer all the big city amenities.

Perhaps due to these factors, the town of North Haven had expanded rapidly over the last few years. People with money migrated out of the overheated Chicago housing market, bringing along their toys, their opinions and their problems. This same story played out across the country as the economy climbed upwards on the back of the Internet dot-com boom, making people wealthy and wealthy people ridiculous.

“Yeah, camera seven,” I reply.

She pulls up another angle, viewing the kids from the side. They all look to be in their later teens, early twenties, walking closely in a group. My team and I aren’t much older, with me being the elder statesman at a rickety twenty-four years.

I zoom in, looking for the alpha male. In any kind of grouping, animal or human, there exists one that drives on the others. Find that guy and you’ve just made things a lot easier.

Three males, two females in this pack.

They near the electronics counter and slow down, still clustered too closely together to be natural. Unless you’re looking specifically for it, you wouldn’t notice. Most other customers might assume they’re just looking around for an employee.

And they were, but for completely different reasons.

Behavioral tendencies, body language, even choice of clothing; these are the stock in our trade, since no thief ever walks into a store holding a sign that declares: “I’m a thief!”

Though I will suggest it to the parents of the next third grader that decides to pocket baseball cards and waste my time.

Eyes are the first clue. We watch the way they dart their vision around, the snap of a head when someone walks by. Nerves are the great betrayer and eyes are the hazard signals for nerves.

Next we watch how they interact with others. In a group, it’s easy. They cluster. For single lifters, we often see them avoid anyone else. It’s like they are afraid someone can smell the steal on them.

We even watch the paths they take through the store. Certain areas give off a sense of isolation – the thief’s refuge – better than others.

I settle on the kid in the middle. He appears casual, yet I can see him whispering under his breath to the others. He’s lean and looks fast, which makes my pulse hammer just a little more. I love fast.

Kineisha is chattering back and forth over the radio with Kevin and my other employee Kari, coordinating positions. I tune them out and stare at my new nemesis on the screen before me.

This is how I like to hunt.

The kid wore his ball cap backwards, bill well-curved from years of use. A faded flannel hung loose over a t-shirt and already I can envision how this will play out. He'll stuff something down the back of his pants, pulling the flannel over to hide it.

"Ten on the Sony, Rick," Kevin spouts off in my earpiece. He's betting on the new Sony digital camera that just came out last month. The group mills around that section of the counter, so it's a good bet.

"I'll take that and raise you ten for the Canon." Packaging for Canon digital cameras had shrunk last year.

"Bad bet," chirps Kari. It's the first thing she's said to me all morning. She's quiet by nature.

Alpha male nudges one of his pals. The kid does a slow three-sixty while stepping behind the counter. Kevin hums a little cartoon song over the radios, in concert with the kid's movement. I can't remember the song, but he also can't carry a tune.

The kid grabs one camera, followed quickly by another. Nice, a two-fer.

All five targets turn as one, hive movement, and walk away from the department. The forced nonchalance and nervous energy is comical. I expect to see one start whistling, as if to show any witnesses that they were just some people out on a casual stroll.

The top of Kevin's head is visible in the background as he stalks along a parallel path.

"Two Sonys. Double payout, right?" He goads me.

I ignore him and turn to Kineisha. "Shall we?"

A smile crosses her face. We bail out of the office to hit the floor. Technology is nice and all that – and if you're my wife, technology *is* all that – but it has limitations. I like the personal approach.

There exists an element of great challenge in thief dancing: Stay as close as possible without being made. For someone like Kineisha, that job comes a little easier. She has a nondescript look, similar to a dozen other girls I might pass at the mall and never remember. With my size, it's tougher, and that's what fires me up. I want to eavesdrop, to smell their cologne or perfume, to invade their personal space.

Everyone gets their kicks in different ways.

Even though we come in all shapes and sizes, there seems to be some common thread, some personality facet, and it's not pure honesty. I'm too cynical for that. Nor do I believe it's the zealous pursuit of justice.

I suspect many of us just savor the chase.

Kineisha and I wind through the clothing areas, communicating with the others to coordinate our placement. Nothing like spoiling a perfectly good ‘lift by walking down the wrong aisle at the wrong moment.

That wrecks everyone’s day when I prefer just to wreck theirs.

Without a word, Kineisha peels away from me, taking a different intercept angle. We now have the kids surrounded from all points of the compass. Two of the five targets split away from the others. Neither had ever possessed the merchandise, so I dismiss them from consideration.

It could be possible to make a case for them as accessories, but it really isn’t worth it. The paperwork is already enough of a hassle and accessories to a crime often degenerate into court hearings.

I dislike having to dress up just to testify.

Kineisha follows them on the chance they have their own agenda or are playing lookout for the rest. If they try to circle around and spot any of us, she’d give a shout.

That leaves the alpha male, his lackey boy and the other girl.

I radio Kevin and Kari to stay on lackey and the girl. A click of the radio transmitter acknowledges my words and also lets everyone know that Kevin stood so close he didn’t want them to hear his voice. It’s not the most glamorous job in the world, but catching crooks can sure be fun at the right times. I smile in anticipation.

Alpha is all mine.

The three kids move towards an aisle I’ve nicknamed Lifter Alley. Plastic storage tubs are stacked high on top of the shelving, creating shadows and giving a false sense of security. In reality, I have a perfect sight line.

Standing behind a double-high rack of dress shirts, I parted a couple to look through them. From a casual glance, it probably looks like I’m searching for my size. Anyone watching me for a few seconds more would begin to notice how long I stood, how still I stood and how my eyes never waver. I’m like a statue, because movement attracts attention.

The physical requirements for crook-catching are not what most people assume. Size doesn’t really matter because events rarely devolve into a scrum. If they do, you’re already in trouble.

Being fast doesn’t make or break the job either, although it certainly comes in handy when arresting a runner. Proper planning and anticipation – in other words: backup – neutralizes any speed advantage from a lifter.

For my money, the best asset to have is quick vision. Not just good vision, because glasses can

remedy that. Quick vision: the ability to identify, categorize and track items with just a glance. I have a test I administer to applicants that serves to assess this skill. It consists of flash images that create the same fractional glimpses we often get. Not everyone is blatantly obvious like alpha and his crew. Many walk past us palming something small. There are often only little snatches of indictment that propel us into action.

In the alley, my target has finally screwed up enough courage to tuck the camera in the back of his jeans. The other two stand with their backs to him, shielding the view, but his body motion betrays the story.

He yanks the flannel shirt over his butt to hide the bulge.

Finished with his task, alpha switches positions with lackey boy. That's when things start getting funny. And I mean funny ha-ha, not funny strange.

Lackey darts his head around so sharply he looks like a bird. I can nearly see the nervous sweat running down his neck. He gives it a couple of aborted tries and the sound of his nerve crumbling is almost audible. He finally sets the camera down on a shelf. Don't worry, pal, it happens to every guy.

Exasperated, the girl makes a move of bravado that will change her entire day.

She stuffs the item in her purse. It's too big for her zipper to close so she settles for clutching the top with both hands. She gives him a hard stare. Ouch, she's a ball breaker. All three exit the aisle.

Kevin and Kari come to life in my earpiece, predicting how the stop will go down. I've already got my own opinion.

"You two take the girl and chicken boy. I've got alpha."

"Who?"

"The guy wearing the flannel."

I hear Kevin mutter something about me and my weird nicknames. He's covering the mouthpiece, thinking that it's enough. Nice try.

Lackey boy and the girl split off from alpha, heading towards the far set of doors. I let them go without another thought.

Alpha circles around at a leisurely pace, eyes slowly scanning everyone and everything. This isn't his first time. Mine either.

No cherries getting popped today, pal.

He sees me once, but I make sure to avoid eye contact. It's weird, but just as we can often spot a potential lifter based off body clues, so too can they make us. Undoubtedly many of them are moving in a state of hyperawareness and spook easily, but still, it's happened enough that I realize we can quickly ruin a good arrest with one ill-timed stare.

And if they do spook, dump the merchandise, and we stop them anyway, well that's where things can get real ugly, real quick. It's called a bad stop and you only get a few mulligans with them.

Alpha approaches the front of the store. Past him I can see the other two at the far end of the registers. They're stalling. Lackey boy looks like he could faint at any moment.

The electronic doors slide open and the girl marches through them without hesitation. Her spine is rigid, projecting confidence but I'm not impressed. It's all false bravado. Lackey boy follows at a slower pace, glancing backward.

Kari walks casually past him, cell phone pressed to her ear in mock conversation. She blends in so well, she might as well be invisible. He never even glances at her.

After a few more seconds, he proceeds out the door and disappears. I can hear Kevin's voice going through our stop script. He must have went ahead and left Kari inside to follow them. Nice teamwork.

My guy loiters near the door, watching his friends leave the store, presumably waiting to see if any commotion ensues. None does, nor would he see it if there did. We have a separate side entrance to our offices.

Seemingly satisfied that things are cool, alpha turns and takes his first steps towards freedom and capture.

Time to dance, my friend.