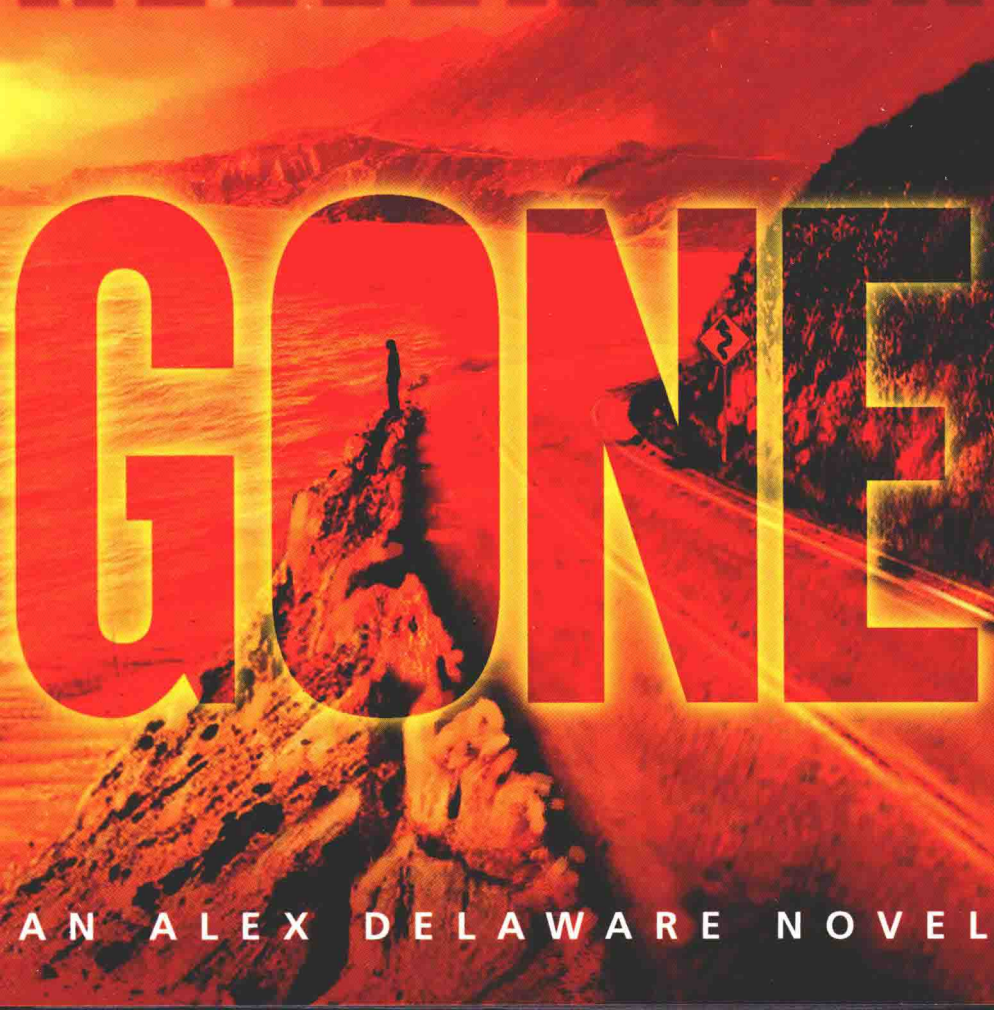


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF RAGE

# JONATHAN KELLERMAN



# GONE

AN ALEX DELAWARE NOVEL

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KELLERMAN**

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*Gone* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Special thanks to Captain David Campbell (Ret.)  
Los Angeles Coroner's Office

# GONE



## CHAPTER

# 1

**S**he nearly killed an innocent man.

Creighton "Charley" Bondurant drove carefully because his life depended on it. Latigo Canyon was mile after mile of neck-wrenching, hairpin twists. Charley had no use for government meddlers but the 15 mph signs posted along the road were smart.

He lived ten miles up from Kanan Dume Road, on a four-acre remnant of the ranch his grandfather had owned during Coolidge's time. All those Arabians and Tennessee walkers and the mules Grandpa kept around because he liked the creatures' spirit. Charley had grown up with families like his. No-nonsense ranchers, a few rich folk who were still okay when they came up to ride on weekends. Now all you had were rich pretenders.

Diabetic and rheumatoid and depressed, Charley lived in a two-room cabin with a view of oak-covered crests and the ocean beyond. Sixty-eight, never married. Poor excuse for a man, he'd scold himself on nights when the medicines mixed with the beer and his mood sank low.

On happier days, he pretended to be an old cowboy.

This morning, he was somewhere between those extremes. His

bunions hurt like hell. Two horses had died last winter and he was down to three skinny white mares and a half-blind sheepdog. Feed and hay bills ate up most of his Social Security. But the nights had been warm for October, and he hadn't dreamed bad and his bones felt okay.

It was hay that got him up at seven that morning, rolling out of bed, gulping coffee, chewing on a stale sweet roll, to hell with his blood sugar. A little time-out to get the internal plumbing going and by eight he was dressed and starting up the pickup.

Coasting in neutral down the dirt road that fed to Latigo, he looked both ways a couple of times, cleared the crust from his eyes, shifted into first, and rolled down. The Topanga Feed Bin was a twenty-minute ride south and he figured to stop along the way at the Malibu Stop & Shop for a few six-packs, a tin of Skoal, and some Pringles.

Nice morning, a big old blue sky with just a few clouds from the east, sweet air blowing up from the Pacific. Switching on his eight-track, he listened to Ray Price and drove slow enough to stop for deer. Not too many of the pests before dark but you never knew what to expect up in the mountains.

The naked girl jumped out at him a lot faster than any deer.

Eyes full of terror, mouth stretched so wide Charley swore he could see her tonsils.

She ran across the road, straight in the path of his truck, hair blowing wild, waving her arms.

Stomping the brake pedal hard, Charley felt the pickup lurch, wobble, and sway. Then the sharp skid to the left, straight at the battered guardrail that separated him from a thousand foot of nothing.

Hurtling toward blue sky.

He kept hitting the brake. Kept flying. Said his prayers and opened the door and prepared to bail.

His damn shirt stuck on the door handle. Eternity looked real close. What a stupid way to go!

Hands ripping at his shirt fabric, mouth working in a combination of curses and benedictions, Charley's gnarled body tightened, his legs turned to iron bars, and his sore foot pressed that brake pedal down to the damn floorboard.

The truck kept going, fishtailed, slid, spattered gravel.

Shuddered. Rolled. Bumped the guard.

Charley could hear the rail groan.

The truck stopped.



Charley freed his shirt and got out. His chest was tight and he couldn't suck any breath into his lungs. Wouldn't that be the shits: spared a free fall to oblivion only to drop dead of a damned heart attack.

He gasped and swallowed air, felt his field of vision grow black and braced himself against the truck. The chassis creaked and Charley jumped back, felt himself going down again.

A scream pierced the morning. Charley opened his eyes and straightened and saw the girl. Red marks around her wrists and ankles. Bruises around her neck.

Beautiful young body, those healthy knockers bobbing as she came running toward him—sinful to think like that, she was scared, but with knockers like that what else was there to notice?

She kept coming, arms wide, like she wanted Charley to hold her.

But screaming, those wild eyes, he wasn't sure what to do.

First time in a long time he'd been this close to bare female flesh.

He forgot about the knockers, nothing sexy about this. She was a kid, young enough to be his daughter. Granddaughter.

Those marks on her wrists and ankles, around her neck.

She screamed again.

*"Ohgodohgoohgod."*

She was right up to him, now, yellow hair whipping his face. He could smell the fear on her. See the goose bumps on her pretty tan shoulders.

*"Help me!"*

Poor kid was shivering.

Charley held her.

## CHAPTER

# 2

**L**A's where you end up when you have nowhere else to go.

A long time ago I'd driven west from Missouri, a sixteen-year-old high school graduate armed with a head full of desperation and a partial academic scholarship to the U.

Only son of a moody, hard drinker and a chronic depressive. Nothing to keep me in the flatlands.

Living like a pauper on work-study and occasional guitar gigs in wedding bands, I managed to get educated. Made some money as a psychologist, and a lot more from lucky investments. Got The House In The Hills.

Relationships were another story, but that would've been true no matter where I lived.

Back when I treated children, I routinely took histories from parents and learned what family life could be like in L.A. People packing up and moving every year or two, the surrender to impulse, the death of domestic ritual.

Many of the patients I saw lived in sun-baked tracts with no other kids nearby and spent hours each day being bused to and from beige corrals that claimed to be schools. Long, electronic nights were

bleached by cathode and thump-thumped by the current angry music. Bedroom windows looked out to hazy miles of neighborhoods that couldn't really be called that.

Lots of imaginary friends in L.A. That, I supposed, was inevitable. It's a company town and the product is fantasy.

The city kills grass with red carpets, worships fame for its own sake, demolishes landmarks with glee because the high-stakes game is *reinvention*. Show up at your favorite restaurant and you're likely to find a sign trumpeting failure and the windows covered with brown paper. Phone a friend and get a disconnected number.

*No Forwarding.* It could be the municipal motto.

You can be gone in L.A. for a long time before anyone considers it a problem.

When Michaela Brand and Dylan Meserve went missing, no one seemed to notice.

Michaela's mother was a former truck-stop cashier living with an oxygen tank in Phoenix. Her father was unknown, probably one of the teamsters Maureen Brand had entertained over the years. Michaela had left Arizona to get away from the smothering heat, gray shrubs, air that never moved, no one caring about The Dream.

She rarely called her mother. The hiss of Maureen's tank, Maureen's sagging body, ragged cough, and emphysemic eyes drove her nuts. No room for any of that in Michaela's L.A. head.

Dylan Meserve's mother was long dead from an undiagnosed degenerative neuromuscular disease. His father was a Brooklyn-based alto sax player who'd never wanted a rug rat in the first place and had died of an overdose five years ago.

Michaela and Dylan were gorgeous and young and thin and had come to L.A. for the obvious reason.

By day, he sold shoes at a Foot Locker in Brentwood. She was a lunch waitress at a pseudo-trattoria on the east end of Beverly Hills.

They'd met at the PlayHouse, taking an Inner Drama seminar from Nora Dowd.

The last time anyone had seen them was on a Monday night, just after ten p.m., leaving the acting workshop together. They'd worked their butts off on a scene from *Simpatico*. Neither really got what Sam Shepard was aiming for but the play had plenty of juicy parts, all that screaming. Nora Dowd had urged them to *inject* themselves in the scene, *smell* the horseshit, open themselves up to the pain and the hopelessness.

Both of them felt they'd delivered. Dylan's Vinnie had been perfectly wild and crazy and dangerous, and Michaela's Rosie was a classy woman of mystery.

Nora Dowd had seemed okay with the performance, especially Dylan's contribution.

That frosted Michaela a bit but she wasn't surprised.

Watching Nora go off on one of those speeches about right brain-left brain. Talking more to herself than to anyone else.

The PlayHouse's front room was set up like a theater, with a stage and folding chairs. The only time it got used was for seminars.

Lots of seminars, no shortage of students. One of Nora's alumni, a former exotic dancer named April Lange, had scored a role on a sitcom on the WB. An autographed picture of April used to hang in the entry before someone took it down. Blond, shiny-eyed, vaguely predatory. Michaela used to think: Why her?

Then again, maybe it was a good sign. If it could happen to April, it could happen to anyone.

Dylan and Michaela lived in single-room studio apartments, his on Overland, in Culver City, hers on Holt Avenue, south of Pico. Both their cribs were tiny, dark, ground-floor units, pretty much dumps. This was L.A., where rent could crush you and day jobs barely covered the basics and it was hard, sometimes, not to get depressed.

After they didn't show up at work for two days running, their respective employers fired them.

And that was the extent of it.

## CHAPTER

# 3

I heard about it the way most everyone else did: third story on the evening news, right after the trial of a hip-hop star accused of assault and floods in Indonesia.

I was eating a solitary dinner and half listening to the broadcast. This one caught my attention because I gravitate toward local crime stories.

Couple abducted at gunpoint, found naked and dehydrated in the hills of Malibu. I played with the remote but no other broadcast added details.

The following morning, the *Times* filled in a bit more: a pair of acting students had left a nighttime class in West L.A. and driven east in her car to the young woman's apartment in the Pico-Robertson district. Waiting at a red light at Sherbourne and Pico, they'd been carjacked by a masked gunman who stashed them both in the trunk and drove for more than an hour.

When the car stopped and the trunk popped, the couple found themselves in pitch darkness, somewhere "out in the country." The spot was later identified as "Latigo Canyon, in the hills of Malibu."

The carjacker forced them to stumble down a steep hillside to a densely wooded area, where the young woman tied up the young

man at gunpoint and was subsequently bound herself. Sexual assault was implied but not specified. The assailant was described as "white, medium height, and stocky, thirty to forty, with a Southern accent."

Malibu was county territory, sheriff's jurisdiction. The crime had taken place fifty miles from LASD headquarters, but violent who-dunits were handled by major crimes detectives and anyone with information was requested to phone downtown.

A few years back, when Robin and I were rebuilding the house in the hills, we'd rented a place on the beach in western Malibu. The two of us had explored the sinuous canyons and silent gullies on the land side of Pacific Coast Highway, hiked the oak-bearded crests that peaked above the ocean.

I remembered Latigo Canyon as corkscrew roads and snakes and red-tailed hawks. Though it took a while to get above civilization, the reward was worth the effort: a wonderful, warm nothingness.

If I'd been curious enough, I could've called Milo, maybe learned more about the abduction. I was busy with three custody cases, two of them involving film-biz parents, the third starring a pair of frighteningly ambitious Brentwood plastic surgeons whose marriage had shattered when their infomercial for Facelift-in-a-Jar tanked. Somehow they'd found time to produce an eight-year-old daughter, whom they now seemed intent on destroying emotionally.

Quiet, chubby girl, big eyes, a slight stammer. Recently, she'd taken to long bouts of silence.

Custody evaluations are the ugliest side of child psychology and from time to time I think about quitting. I've never sat down and calculated my success rate but the ones that work out keep me going, like a slot machine's intermittent payoff.

I put the newspaper aside, happy the case was someone else's problem. But as I showered and dressed, I kept imagining the crime scene. Glorious golden hills, the ocean a stunning blue infinity.

It's gotten to a point where it's hard for me to see beauty without thinking of the alternative.

My guess was this case would be a tough one; the main hope for a solve was the bad guy screwing up and leaving behind some forensic tidbit: a unique tire tread, rare fiber, or biological remnant. A lot less likely than you'd think from watching TV. The most common print found at crime scenes is the palm, and police agencies have only started cataloging palm prints. DNA can work miracles but backlogs are ferocious and the data banks are less than comprehensive.

On top of that, criminals are wising up and using condoms, and this criminal sounded like a careful planner.

Cops watch the same shows everyone else does and sometimes they learn something. But Milo and other people in his position have a saying: *Forensics never solves crimes, detectives do.*

Milo would be happy this one wasn't his.

Then it was.

When the abduction became something else, the media started using names.

Michaela Brand, 23. Dylan Meserve, 24.

Mug shots do nothing for your looks but even with numbers around their necks and that trapped-animal brightness in their eyes, these two were soap-opera fodder.

They'd produced a reality show episode that backfired.

The scheme unraveled when a clerk at Krentz Hardware in West Hollywood read the abduction story in the *Times* and recalled a young couple paying cash for a coil of yellow nylon rope three days before the alleged carjacking.

A store video confirmed the I.D. and analysis of the rope revealed a perfect match to bindings found at the scene and to ligature marks around Michaela and Dylan's limbs and necks.

Sheriff's investigators followed the trail and located a Wilderness Outfitters in Santa Monica where the couple had purchased a flashlight, bottled water, dehydrated food packets designed for hikers. A 7-Eleven near Century City verified that Michaela Brand's nearly depleted debit card had been used to buy a dozen Snickers bars, two packets of beef jerky, and a six-pack of Miller Lite less than an hour before the reported time of the abduction. Wrappers and empty cans found a half mile up the ridge from where the couple had staged their confinement filled in the picture.

The final blow was the report of an emergency room physician at Saint John's Hospital: Meserve and Brand claimed to have gone without food for two days but their electrolyte tests were normal. Furthermore, neither victim exhibited signs of serious injury other than rope burn and some "mild" bruising of Michaela's vagina that could've been consistent with "self-infliction."

Faced with the evidence, the couple broke down, admitted the hoax, and were charged with obstructing officers and filing a false

police report. Both pleaded poverty, and public defenders were assigned.

Michaela's D.P.D. was a man named Lauritz Montez. He and I had met nearly a decade ago on a particularly repellent case: the murder of a two-year-old girl by two preadolescent boys, one of whom had been Montez's client. The ugliness had resurfaced last year when one of the killers, now a young man, had phoned me out within days of his release from prison and turned up dead hours later.

Lauritz Montez hadn't liked me to begin with and my digging up the past had made matters worse. So I was puzzled when he called and asked me to evaluate Michaela Brand.

"Why would I kid, Doctor?"

"We didn't exactly hit it off."

"I'm not inviting you to hang out," he said. "You're a smart shrink and I want her to have a solid report behind her."

"She's charged with misdemeanors," I said.

"Yeah, but the sheriff's pissed and is pushing the D.A. to go for jail time. We're talking a mixed-up kid who did something stupid. She feels bad enough."

"You want me to say she was mentally incapacitated."

Montez laughed. "Temporary raving-lunacy-insanity would be great but I know you're all pissy-anty about small details like facts. So just tell it like it was: She was addled, caught in a weak moment, swept along. I'm sure there's some technical term for it."

"The truth," I said.

He laughed again. "Will you do it?"

The plastic surgeons' little girl had started talking, but both parents' lawyers had phoned this morning and informed me the case had been resolved and my services were no longer necessary.

"Sure," I said.

"Seriously?" said Montez.

"Why not?"

"It didn't go that smoothly on Duchay."

"How could it?"

"True. Okay, I'll have her call and make an appointment. Do my best to get you some kind of reimbursement. Within reason."

"Reason's always good."

"And so rare."



## CHAPTER

# 4

**M**ichaela Brand came to see me four days later.

I work out of my house above Beverly Glen. In mid-November the whole city's pretty, nowhere more so than the Glen.

She smiled and said, "Hi, Dr. Delaware. Wow, what a great place, my name's pronounced Mick-*aah*-la."

The smile was heavy firepower in the battle to be noticed. I walked her through high, white, hollow space to my office at the back.

Tall and narrow-hipped and busty, she put a lot of roll-and-sway into her walk. If her breasts weren't real, their free movement was an ad for a great scalpel artist. Her face was oval and smooth, blessed by wide-set aquamarine eyes that could feign spontaneous fascination without much effort, balanced perfectly on a long, smooth stalk of a neck.

Faint bruising along the sides of the neck were masked by body makeup. The rest of her skin was bronze velvet stretched across fine bones. Tanning bed or one of those spray jobs that last for a week. Tiny, mocha freckles sprinkled across her nose hinted at her natural complexion. Wide lips were enlarged by gloss. A mass of honey-colored hair trailed past her shoulder blades. Some stylist had taken a