

RAGE

AN ALEX DELAWARE NOVEL



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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RAGE

CHAPTER

1

On a slow, chilly Saturday in December, shortly after the Lakers overcame a sixteen-point halftime deficit and beat New Jersey, I got a call from a murderer.

I hadn't watched basketball since college, had returned to it because I was working at developing my leisure skills. The woman in my life was visiting her grandmother in Connecticut, the woman who used to be in my life was living in Seattle with her new guy—temporarily, she claimed, as if I had a right to care—and my caseload had just abated.

Three court cases in two months: two child-custody disputes, one relatively benign, the other nightmarish; and an injury consult on a fifteen-year-old girl who'd lost a hand in a car crash. Now all the papers were filed and I was ready for a week or two of nothing.

I'd downed a couple of beers during the game and was nearly dozing on my living room sofa. The distinctive squawk of the business phone roused me. Generally, I let my service pick up. Why I answered, I still can't say.

"Dr. Delaware?"

I didn't recognize his voice. Eight years had passed.

"Speaking. Who's this?"

"Rand."

Now I remembered. The same slurred voice deepened to a man's baritone. By now he'd be a man. Some kind of man.

"Where are you calling from, Rand?"

"I'm out."

"Out of the C.Y.A."

"I, uh . . . yeah, I finished."

As if it had been a course of study. Maybe it had been. "When?"

"Coupla weeks."

What could I say? *Congratulations? God help us?*

"What's on your mind, Rand?"

"Could I, uh, talk to you?"

"Go ahead."

"Uh, not this . . . like talk . . . for real."

"In person."

"Yeah."

The living room windows were dark. Six forty-five p.m. "What do you want to talk about, Rand?"

"Uh, it would be . . . I'm kinda . . ."

"What's on your mind, Rand?"

No answer.

"Is it something about Kristal?"

"Ye-ah." His voice broke and bisected the word.

"Where are you calling from?" I said.

"Not far from you."

My home office address was unlisted. *How do you know where I live?*

I said, "I'll come to you, Rand. Where are you?"

"Uh, I think . . . Westwood."

"Westwood Village?"

"I think . . . lemme see . . ." I heard a clang as the phone dropped. Phone on a cord, traffic in the background. A pay booth. He was off the line for over a minute.

"It says Westwood. There's this big uh, a mall. With this bridge across."

A mall. "Westside Pavilion?"

"I guess."

Two miles south of the village. Comfortable distance from my house in the Glen. "Where in the mall are you?"

"Uh, I'm not in there. I kin see it across the street. There's a . . . I think it says Pizza. Two z's . . . yeah, pizza."

Eight years and he could barely read. So much for rehab.

It took awhile but I got the approximate location: Westwood Boulevard, just north of Pico, east side of the street, a green and white and red sign shaped like a boot.

"I'll be there in fifteen, twenty minutes, Rand. Anything you want to tell me now?"

"Uh, I . . . can we meet at the pizza place?"

"You hungry?"

"I ate breakfast."

"It's dinnertime."

"I guess."

"See you in twenty."

"Okay . . . thanks."

"You sure there's nothing you want to tell me before you see me?"

"Like what?"

"Anything at all."

More traffic noise. Time stretched.

"Rand?"

"I'm not a bad person."

CHAPTER

2

What happened to Kristal Malley was no whodunit.

The day after Christmas, the two-year-old accompanied her mother to the Buy-Rite Plaza in Panorama City. The promise of MEGA-SALE!!! DEEP DISCOUNTS!!! had stuffed the shabby, fading mall with bargain-hunters. Teenagers on winter break loitered near the Happy Taste food court and congregated among the CD racks of Flip Disc Music. The black-lit box of din that was the Galaxy Video Emporium pulsed with hormones and hostility. The air reeked of caramel corn and mustard and body odor. Frigid air blew through the poorly fitting doors of the recently closed indoor ice-skating rink.

Kristal Malley, an active, moody toddler of twenty-five months, managed to elude her mother's attention and pull free of her grasp. Lara Malley claimed the lapse had been a matter of seconds; she'd turned her head to finger a blouse in the sale bin, felt her daughter's hand slip from hers, turned to grab her, found her gone. Elbowing her way through the throng of other shoppers, she'd searched for Kristal, calling out her name. Screaming it.

Mall security arrived; two sixty-year-old men with no professional

police experience. Their requests for Lara Malley to calm down so they could get the facts straight made her scream louder and she hit one of them on the shoulder. The guards restrained her and phoned the police.

Valley uniforms responded fourteen minutes later and a store-by-store search of the mall commenced. Every store was scrutinized. All bathrooms and storage areas were inspected. A troop of Eagle Scouts was summoned to help. K-9 units unleashed their dogs. The canines picked up the little girl's scent in the store where her mother had lost her. Then, overwhelmed by thousands of other smells, the dogs nosed their way toward the mall's eastern exit and floundered.

The search lasted six hours. Uniforms talked to each departing shopper. No one had seen Kristal. Night fell. Buy-Rite closed. Two Valley detectives stayed behind and reviewed the mall's security videotapes.

All four machines utilized by the security company were antiquated and poorly maintained, and the black-and-white films were hazy and dark, blank for minutes at a time.

The detectives concentrated on the time period immediately following Kristal Malley's reported disappearance. Even that wasn't simple; the machines' digital readouts were off by three to five hours. Finally, the right frames were located.

And there it was.

Long shot of a tiny figure dangling between two males. Kristal Malley had been wearing sweatpants and so did the figure. Tiny legs kicked.

Three figures exiting the mall at the east end. Nothing more; no cameras scanned the parking lot.

The tape was replayed as the D's scanned for details. The larger abductor wore a light-colored T-shirt, jeans, and light shoes, probably sneakers. Short, dark hair. From what the detectives could tell, he seemed heavily built.

No facial features. The camera, posted high in a corner, picked up frontal views of incoming shoppers but only the backs of those departing.

The second male was shorter and thinner than his companion, with longer hair that appeared blond. He wore a dark-colored tee, jeans, sneakers.

Sue Kramer said, "They look like kids to me."

"I agree," said Fernie Reyes.

They continued viewing the tape. For an instant, Kristal Malley had twisted in her captor's grasp and the camera caught 2.3 seconds of her face.

Too distant and poorly focused to register anything but a tiny, pale disk. The lead detective, a DII named Sue Kramer, had said, "Look at that body language. She's struggling."

"And no one's noticing," said her partner, Fernando Reyes, pointing to the stream of shoppers pouring in and out of the mall. People flowed around the little girl as if she were a piece of flotsam in a marina.

"Everyone probably figured they were horsing around," said Kramer. "Dear God."

Lara Malley had already viewed the tape through tears and hyperventilated breathing, and she didn't recognize the two abductors.

"How can I?" she whimpered. "Even if I knew them, they're so far away."

Kramer and Reyes played it for her again. And again. Six more times. With each viewing, she shook her head more slowly. By the time a uniform entered the security room and announced "The father's here," the poor woman was nearly catatonic.

Figuring the video arcade attracted kids to the mall, the detectives brought in Galaxy's owner and the two clerks who'd been on duty, brothers named Lance and Preston Kukach, acned, high-school dropout geeks barely out of their teens.

It took only a second for the owner to say, "The tape stinks but that's Troy." He was a fifty-year-old Caltech-trained engineer named Al Nussbaum, who'd made more money during three years of renting out video machines than a decade at the Jet Propulsion Labs. That day, he'd taken his own kids horseback riding, had come in to check the receipts.

"Which one's Troy?" said Sue Kramer.

Nussbaum pointed to the smaller kid in the dark T-shirt. "He comes in all the time, always wears that shirt. It's a Harley shirt, see the logo, here?"

His finger tapped the back of the tee. To Kramer and Reyes, the alleged winged logo was a faint gray smudge.

"What's Troy's last name?" said Kramer.

"Don't know, but he's a regular." Nussbaum turned to Lance and Preston. The brothers nodded.

Fernie Reyes said, "What kind of kid is he, guys?"

"Asshole," said Lance.

"Caught him trying to steal scrip once," said Preston. "He leaned over the counter right when I was there and grabbed a roll. When I took it away he tried to whale on me, but I kicked his butt."

"And you let him come *back*?" said Nussbaum.

The clerk flushed.

"We've got a policy," Nussbaum told the detectives. "You steal, you're out. Top of that, he *hit* you!"

Preston Kukach stared at the floor.

"Who's the other one?" said Sue Kramer, pointing to the larger boy.

Preston kept his head down.

"If you know, spit it out," Al Nussbaum demanded.

"Don't know his name. He's here once in a while, never plays."

"What does he do?" said Sue Kramer.

"Hangs out."

"With who?"

"Troy."

"Always Troy?"

"Yeah."

"Troy plays and this one hangs."

"Yeah."

Al Nussbaum said, "Now that you know who they are, why aren't you going after them pronto, finding that kid?"

Reyes turned to the clerks. "What does hanging consist of?"

"He stands around while Troy plays," said Lance.

"He ever try to steal?"

Head shakes from the Kukach brothers.

"Ever see either of them with little kids?"

"Nope," said Lance.

"Never," said Preston.

"What else can you tell us about them?" said Reyes.

Shrugs.

"Anything, guys. This is serious."

"Spit it out," said Al Nussbaum.

Lance said, "I dunno, but maybe they live close by."

"Why do you say that?" said Sue Kramer.

"Because I seen 'em leaving and walking out to the parking lot and keep going onto the street. No one picked 'em up in a car, y'know?"

"Leaving at which exit?"

"The one that goes out to the parking lot."

Al Nussbaum said, "Three exits go out to the parking lot, Lance."

"The one near the garbage," said Lance.

Fernie Reyes glanced at his partner and left.

No body in the Dumpsters out back near the eastern exit.

Five more hours of neighborhood canvass finally ID'd the two boys. Both of them lived in a low-income housing project set like a scar across the scrubby park that paralleled the rear of the mall. Two hundred shoddily built, federally financed one-bedroom units distributed among a quartet of three-story buildings, ringed by chain-link fencing in which dozens of holes had been cut. A scruffy, prisonlike place well known by uniforms who patrolled the area—415 City, they called it, after the penal code for disturbing the peace.

The manager of Building 4 watched the video for a second and pointed to the smaller boy. "Troy Turner. You guys been out here before on him. Last week, matter of fact."

"Really," said Sue Kramer.

"Yeah. He smacked his mother with a dinner plate, busted up the side of her face." The manager massaged his own unshaved cheek. "Before that, he was scaring some of the little kids."

"Scaring them how?"

"Grabbing and shoving, waving a knife. You guys shoulda locked him up. So what'd he do?"

"Who's the bigger one?" said Reyes.

"Randolph Duchay. Kind of a retard but he doesn't cause problems. He done something, it's probably 'causea Troy."

"How old are they?" said Fernie Reyes.

"Lemme see," said the manager. "Troy's twelve I think, maybe the other one's thirteen."

CHAPTER

3

The detectives found the boys in the park.

There they were, sitting in the dark on some swings, smoking, the lighted ends of their cigarettes orange fireflies. Sue Kramer could smell the beer from yards away. As she and Reyes approached, Rand Duchay tossed his can of Bud onto the grass, but the smaller one, Troy Turner, didn't even try to hide it.

Taking a deep swig as she came face-to-face with him. Staring right back at her with the coldest fuck-you eyes she'd seen in a long time.

Ignore the eyes and he was a surprisingly small, frail-looking kid with pipe-stem arms and a pale triangular face under a mop of untrimmed dirty-blond hair. He'd shaved his head clean at the sides, which made the top-growth look even bigger. The manager had said he was twelve; he could've passed for younger.

Randolph Duchay was good-sized and broad-shouldered, with wavy, short brown hair and a puffy, thick-lipped face plagued by wet-looking zits. His arms had already started to pop veins and show some definition. Him, Sue would've placed at fifteen or sixteen.

Big and *scared*. Sue's flashlight picked up his fear right away, the

sweat on his brow and nose. A bead of moisture rolled off his pimply chin. Repeated eyeblinks.

She moved right in on him, pointed a finger in his face. "Where's Kristal Malley?"

Randolph Duchay shook his head. Started to cry.

"Where is she?" she demanded.

The kid's shoulders rose and fell. He slammed his eyes shut and began rocking.

She hauled him to his feet. Fernie was doing the same to Troy Turner, asking the same question.

Turner tolerated being frisked with passivity. His face was as blank as a sidewalk.

Sue put pressure on Duchay's arm. The kid's biceps were rock hard; if he resisted he'd be a challenge. Her gun was on her hip, holstered, out of reach. "Where the hell *is* she, Randy."

"Rand," said Troy Turner. "He ain't no Randy."

"Where's Kristal, Rand?"

No response. She squeezed harder, dug her nails in. Duchay squawked and pointed to the left. Past the swings and across the play area to a pair of cinder-block public lavatories.

"She's in the bathroom?" said Fernie Reyes.

Rand Duchay shook his head.

"Where *is* she?" Sue growled. "Tell me *now*."

Duchay pointed in the same direction.

But he was looking somewhere else. To the right of the lavs. South side of the cinder block, where a corner of dark metal stuck out.

Park Dumpsters. Oh, Lord.

She cuffed Duchay and put him in the back of the Crown Victoria. Ran over to look. By the time she got back, Troy was cuffed, too. Sitting next to his bud, still unruffled.

Fernie waited outside the car. When he saw her he raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Sue shook her head.

He called the coroner.



The boys had made no attempt to conceal. Kristal's body lay atop five days' worth of park refuse, fully clothed but with one shoe off. The white sock underneath was grimy at the toe. The child's neck was broken like that of a cast-off doll. Delicate neck like that, Sue figured—hoped—she had died instantaneously. Several days later the coroner verified her guess: several broken cervical vertebrae, a ruptured windpipe, concomitant cranial bleeding. The body also bore two dozen bruises and internal injuries that could have proved fatal. No evidence of sexual assault.

"Does it really matter?" said the pathologist who'd done the post. A usually tough guy named Banerjee. When he reported to Sue and Fernie he looked defeated and old.

Placed in a holding cell at the station, Rand-not-Randy Duchay hunched, immobile and silent. He had stopped crying and his eyes were glassy and trancelike. His cell stank. Sue had smelled that feral reek plenty of times. Fear, guilt, hormones, whatever.

Troy Turner's cell smelled faintly of beer. The cans the detectives had found indicated each boy had downed three Buds. With Troy's body weight, not an insignificant amount, but there was nothing spacey about him. Dry-eyed, calm. He spent the ride to the station glancing out the window of the unmarked as it passed through dark Valley streets. As if this were a field trip.

When Sue asked him if there was anything he wanted to say, he gave a strange little grunting noise.

A grumpy old man's sound—annoyed. Like they'd messed up his plans.

"What's that, Troy?"

His eyes became slits. Sue had two kids, including a twelve-year-old son. Turner freaked her out. She forced herself to outstare him and he finally looked away and gave another grunt.

"Something on your mind, Troy?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Can I have a smoke?"

