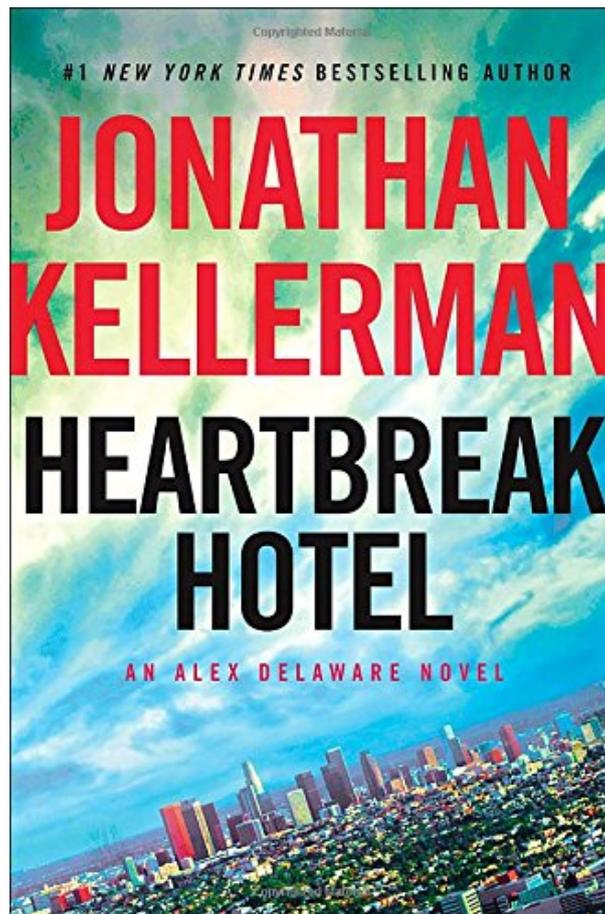
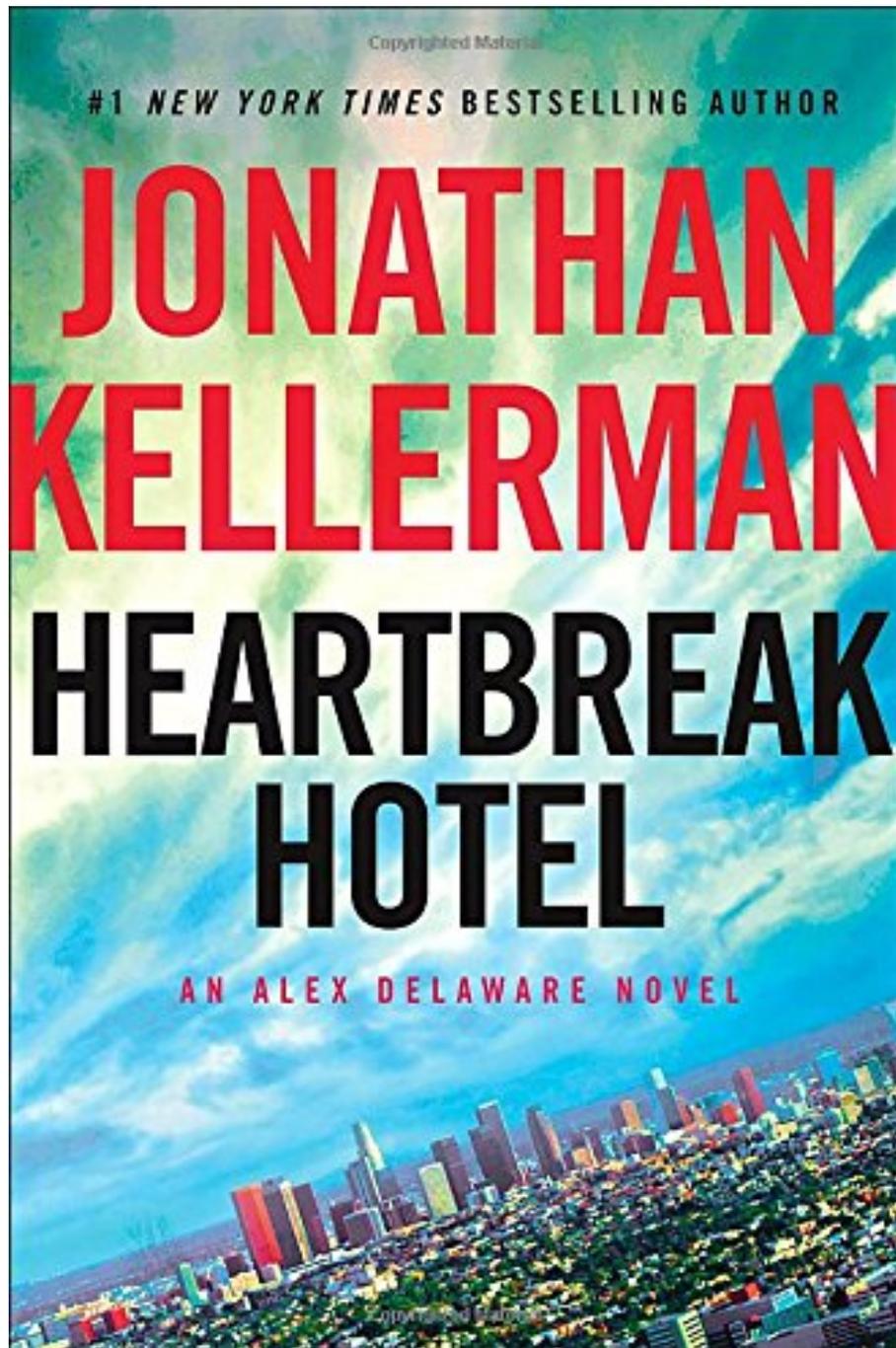


**HEARTBREAK HOTEL: AN ALEX  
DELAWARE NOVEL BY JONATHAN  
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CHAPTER

I lead a double life.

Some of my time is spent using the doctorate I earned: evaluating the mental health of injured, neglected, or traumatized children, making recommendations about parental custody, providing short-term treatment. My own childhood was often nightmarish and I like to think I'm making a difference. I keep my fees reasonable and bills get paid.

Then there's the other stuff, initiated by my best friend, an LAPD homicide lieutenant. Once in a while my name leaks into a news story. Mostly I keep out of public view. I doubt any of the families I see are aware of the murders I work on. They've never commented on it and I think they would if they knew.

When my invoices finally make their way through the LAPD bureaucracy, I may get paid at an hourly rate far below my office fee. Sometimes those bills are ignored or rejected outright. If my friend finds out, he makes noise. His success clearing homicides is first-rate. Getting me paid for my time, not so much.

Business-wise, the other stuff doesn't make much sense. I don't care.

I enjoy seeing bad people pay.

What began on a Monday morning in early June seemed to have nothing to do with either half of my life.

Go know.

The answering service operator was a new hire named James, with a shaky voice and a way of turning statements into questions that implied self-esteem issues. Either he hadn't been trained in handling non-emergency calls or he was a poor student.

"Dr. Delaware? I've got someone on the line, a Ms. Mars?"

"Don't know her."

"That's her name? Mars? Like the candy bar?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Um????I don't know, Dr. Delaware? She does sound kind of????weak?"

"Put her on."

"You bet, Dr. Delaware? Have a great day?"

A faint voice as dry as leaf dust said, "Good morning, Doctor. This is Thalia Mars."

"What can I do for you, Ms. Mars?"

"My guess is you don't do house calls but I'll supplement your fee if you see me at my home."

"I'm a child psychologist."

“Oh, I know that, Dr. Delaware. I’m well aware of the wonderful work you did at Western Pediatric Medical Center. I’m a great fan of the hospital. Ask Dr. Eagle.”

Ruben Eagle worked with Western Peds’ poorest patients as head of outpatient services and was routinely ignored by hospital fundraisers because the day-to-day maladies of the uninsured couldn’t compete for headlines with heart surgery, kidney transplants, and whiz-

bang cellular research.

Had he sent this woman to me as a way of stroking one of the few donors he had? It wasn’t like Ruben to politick without asking me first.

“Dr. Eagle referred you to me?”

“Oh, no, Doctor. I referred myself.”

“Ms. Mars, I’m not clear about what you want—”

“How could you be? I’d explain over the phone but that would take up too much of your valuable time. Once we get together, my check will include whatever charge you decide is appropriate for this call.”

“It’s not a matter of billing, Ms. Mars. If you could give me a basic explanation about what you need—”

“Of course. Your work suggests you’re an analytic and compassionate man and I could use both. I’m not a nut, Dr. Delaware, and you won’t need to travel far. I’m at the Aventura Hotel on Sunset, a short drive from you.”

“You’re visiting L.A.?”

“I live at the Aventura. That’s a bit of a tale, in itself. Would an initial retainer of, say, five thousand dollars set your mind at ease? I’d offer to wire it directly to you but that would require asking for your banking information and you’d suspect some sort of financial scam.”

“Five thousand is far too much and there’s no need for a retainer.”

“Don’t you take retainers when you work for the courts?”

“Sounds as if you’ve researched me, Ms. Mars.”

“I try to be thorough, Doctor, but I promise you there’s nothing ominous at play. The hotel’s a semi-public place and the front desk knows me well. Is there any way you could meet me today, say at three p.m.? You’d avoid rush-hour traffic.”

“What if I told you I had a prior appointment?”

“Then I’d request another time, Doctor. And if that failed, I’d beseech you.” She laughed. “There is an issue of time. I don’t have much of it.”

“You’re ill—”

“Never felt better,” said Thalia Mars. “However, on my next birthday I will be one hundred.”

“I see.”

“If you don’t believe me, when we get together I’ll show you my last active driver’s license. Flunked the test when I turned ninety-five and have depended, since, on the kindness of others and their internal combustion engines.”

My turn to laugh.

“So we’re on for three, Dr. Delaware?”

“All right.”

“Fabulous, you’re analytic, compassionate, and flexible. The front desk will direct you.”

CHAPTER

2

As soon as the line cleared, I phoned the Aventura.

Miss Mars is here. Would you care to be put through?

No, thanks.

My next call was Ruben. At a conference in Memphis. The Internet had nothing to say about Thalia Mars. No surprise, I supposed. She’d lived most of her long life before techno-geeks decided privacy was irrelevant.

I spent the rest of the morning writing reports, broke at one p.m., slapped together a couple of turkey sandwiches and brewed iced tea, brought a tray out to the garden. Pausing by the pond, I tossed pellets to the koi, continued to Robin’s studio.

Two projects occupied her workbench, a gorgeous two-hundred-year-old Italian mandolin restored for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and an electric contraption that resembled a giant garden slug.

The grub-like thing was part cello, part guitar, and dubbed the Alienator by the aging British rocker who’d commissioned it. Forced to learn classical violin as a kid, the invariably drunk Clive Xeno wanted to try his hand at bowing heavy metal. Per his insistence, the instrument was finished in metal-flake auto paint the color of pond sludge. An enamel-tile portrait of Jascha Heifetz protruded below the bridge, showing the maestro looking skeptical.

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I said, “The customer’s always right.”

“Whoever coined that never met Clive. Ah, lunch. You’re a mind reader.”

Blanche, our little blond French bulldog, rose from her basket, waddled over, and rubbed her head on my ankle. I put the sandwiches on a table and fetched her a stick of jerky from the treat bag.

Robin gave the slug another look. "Five hundred hours of my life and I end up with this."

"Think of it as an avant-garde masterpiece."

"Isn't 'avant-garde' French for 'weird'?" Washing her hands, she kissed me, tossed a drop cloth over both instruments, untied her hair, and let loose a cascade of auburn ringlets. "This is after I convinced him to tone it down."

"No more penis-shaped headstock."

"That and Heifetz doing something gross. How's your day going?"

"Finished some reports and heading out in a couple."

"Milo beckoned?"

"I'm going to see a woman who claims to be nearly a hundred and wants to talk."

"Claims to be? Like she's only ninety-eight and is being pretentious?"

I laughed. "No reason to doubt her."

"She introduced herself that way? I'm almost a hundred."

"She worked it into the conversation."

"Why not?" she said. "Last that long, you'd want to strut your stuff. My great-aunt Martina lived until ninety-eight and advertised it in every conversation. 'Canned green beans, anyone? Been eating them for ninety-eight years and I'm still breathing.'?"

She picked up a sandwich, nibbled, put it down. "Delicious, you're the perfect man????so why would a hundred-year-old chick call you?"

"She didn't go into details."

"But you agreed to do a house call?"

"She's one of Ruben Eagle's donors."

"So you do a good deed and get to escape the office. It has been a while since the Big Guy called. I've been wondering when it would get to you."

"I've been restless?"

She kissed my nose. "No, darling, but I know you. The crime rate falls, good for society, boring for you."

She took another bite of sandwich. “A hundred years old, huh? Imagine the things she’s seen.”

When you’ve lived in a city for years, there’s no need to know much about hotels. Robin and I sometimes ate or drank at the Bel-Air and back in my hospital days I’d attended fundraisers at Hiltons and such. My exposure to the Aventura had been driving west on Sunset and passing a directional sign staked at the mouth of an entrance framed by palms. First time for everything.

The opening fed to a cobblestone drive. The palms were overgrown, bordering on unruly. A second sign legislated 5 MPH. Speed bumps placed every twenty feet enforced the rule. Combined with the cobbles, that made for a kidney-thumping crawl.

Beautiful, sunny L.A. day. Isn’t it always? But when eucalyptus joined the vegetative mix, branches dense enough to form a roof created an artificial dusk. Ten spinal concussions in, I reached a fork marked by a clot of massive banana plants. Valet and self-parking to the right, hotel entrance to the left.

I pulled the Seville into a surprisingly shabby asphalt lot boxed on three sides by pale-pink stucco walls and backed by fifty-foot Canary Island pines. Out-of-state plates and rental cars predominated. A couple of golf carts in Reserved slots. No valets in sight.

I parked, walked for a while, finally arrived at a structure that might’ve been designed by Clive Xeno during a bender: two stories of tile-roofed hacienda in the same pallid pink, attached to a four-story steel-and-bronze glass cylinder.

Cracks had formed in the older building’s stucco where it merged with the tower. Spanish Colonial mama struggling to birth a giant alien baby.

The only indication of the hotel’s identity was a rusty iron A above glass doors centering the newer addition. When I was two steps away, the panels hissed open, creating a maw that led to a three-story atrium—a tube within a tube. Background music was a brain-eroding electronic mantra flicked with random bird peeps. The ceiling was matte black embedded with starry-night LED bulbs. What might have been actual constellations, but I’m no astronomer.

To the right, thirty-plus feet of waterfall trickled down a pebbly glass wall. A scatter of leather deco-revival chairs dyed a strange liverish red were sided by chunks of resin pretending to be boulders. Empty chairs but for a hipster couple in their thirties facing each other as they worked separate iPhones. A girl around five stood near the woman, limp doll in her hand, thumb in her mouth.

Ranchero Revival meets Missile Silo meets twenties Paris meets Fred Flintstone via Beijing.

With an overhead tribute to the Griffith Park planetarium.

Maybe dealing with that on a daily basis helped a hundred-year-old brain stay in shape.

To the left, a pair of chrome elevators preceded glass doors leading to the older wing. At the center, Reception and Concierge shared a poured-concrete counter. Three pallid, ponytailed people in their twenties were on duty, a woman and two men, each the same five-six or so and wearing Asian-style tunics colored the hepatic hue of the chairs.

No name tags, no notice of my approach as thirty fingers continued to tap laptops.

When I reached the counter, one of the men smiled with astonishing warmth while continuing to type. “May I help you?”

“I’m here to see Ms. Mars.”

“Thalia,” said the woman. Now three wan faces found me fascinating.

“We love Thalia,” said the other man.

The woman said, “You’re her doctor. She said to send you right over.”

“She’s in Bungalow Uno,” said the first man.

The woman eyed the glass doors. “If you go through there, you’ll be in El O-ree-hee-nal. Just keep going and go outside and you’ll see a sign leading to The Green.”

I said, “O-ree—”

The first man said, “Ori-hi-naaal. Spanish for ‘original.’?”

Second said, “What’s left of the old hotel. The Aventura believes in preservation and synthesis.”

The woman said, “Uno’s the last bungalow.”

First said, “We love Thalia.”

On the other side of the glass was a rose-carpeted hallway lined with numbered oak doors. The first few rooms had been converted to computerized card-slot entry. The rest retained heavy cast-bronze knobs and keyholes.

Partially ori-hi-naaal.

The corridor emptied to an echoing loggia that led outdoors. The air smelled like freshly cut grass. The Green was a wide stone path swathing through more palms, plus ferns and bromeliads. Like the entry drive, dimmed by overgrowth.

The first bungalow appeared fifty feet in, white clapboard, tar-roofed, swaddled in green. A sign over the door read Ocho: 8. The countdown continued with a series of identical structures through Dos: 2.

Then, a traipse through jungle until a larger building backed by a high pink wall slipped into view.

Uno: 1 was set on a raised foundation with three steps leading to a screened porch. A roof pitched higher, a brick chimney, and black shutters set it apart from the other bungalows. Paint flaked from boards, the roof was patched with tar where shingles had come loose.

Once upon a time, the VIP suite?

The location afforded privacy, the high wall security. But the distance from the parking lot would mean a serious hike for an older person. Maybe Thalia Mars was one of those super-specimens.

The porch door was open. As I climbed the steps, the arid voice I'd heard over the phone said, "Dr. Delaware! Who knew you'd be so handsome?"

Eighty or so pounds of vintage humanity in a Ming-blue dress sat in a rattan peacock chair and smiled up at me. The chair looked identical to the throne Sydney Greenstreet had occupied in Casablanca. The actor had been four times that weight and overflowed the cane. The current occupant evoked a toddler playing grown-up.

"Ms. Mars." I extended my hand and received a quick, firm shake by fingers that felt like chopsticks. A ring set with a huge amethyst collided with my knuckles.

Thalia Mars's wide amused mouth was augmented by meticulously applied coral lipstick. Her eyes were clear brown. Shoulder-length hair tinted the ivory of old piano keys had been whipped into a meringue of waves. Nearly a century of gravity had done its inevitable thing with her jawline, but a dagger-thin face below the cloud of hair retained enough integrity to suggest a once-firm chin and prominent cheekbones.

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Alex Delaware and LAPD detective Milo Sturgis investigate the death of Alex's most mysterious patient to date in the sensational new thriller from the master of suspense, #1 New York Times bestselling author Jonathan Kellerman.

At nearly one hundred years old, Thalia Mars is a far cry from the patients that child psychologist Alex Delaware normally treats. But the charming, witty woman convinces Alex to meet with her in a suite at the Aventura, a luxury hotel with a checkered history.

What Thalia wants from Alex are answers to unsettling questions—about guilt, patterns of criminal behavior, victim selection. When Alex asks the reason for her morbid fascination, Thalia promises to tell all during their next session. But when he shows up the following morning, he is met with silence: Thalia is dead in her room.

When questions arise about how Thalia perished, Alex and homicide detective Milo Sturgis must peel back the layers of a fascinating but elusive woman's life and embark on one of the most baffling investigations either of them has ever experienced. For Thalia Mars is a victim like no other, an enigma who harbored nearly a century of secrets and whose life and death draw those around her into a vortex of violence.

Heartbreak Hotel is classic Delaware and classic Kellerman.

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#### CHAPTER

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"Don't know her."

"That's her name? Mars? Like the candy bar?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Um...?..?..?I don't know, Dr. Delaware? She does sound kind of...?..?..?weak?"

"Put her on."

"You bet, Dr. Delaware? Have a great day?"

A faint voice as dry as leaf dust said, "Good morning, Doctor. This is Thalia Mars."

"What can I do for you, Ms. Mars?"

"My guess is you don't do house calls but I'll supplement your fee if you see me at my home."

"I'm a child psychologist."

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“Fabulous, you’re analytic, compassionate, and flexible. The front desk will direct you.”

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“She’s one of Ruben Eagle’s donors.”

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When you’ve lived in a city for years, there’s no need to know much about hotels. Robin and I sometimes ate or drank at the Bel-Air and back in my hospital days I’d attended fundraisers at Hiltons and such. My exposure to the Aventura had been driving west on Sunset and passing a directional sign staked at the mouth of an entrance framed by palms. First time for everything.

The opening fed to a cobblestone drive. The palms were overgrown, bordering on unruly. A second sign legislated 5 MPH. Speed bumps placed every twenty feet enforced the rule. Combined with the cobbles, that made for a kidney-thumping crawl.

Beautiful, sunny L.A. day. Isn’t it always? But when eucalyptus joined the vegetative mix, branches dense enough to form a roof created an artificial dusk. Ten spinal concussions in, I reached a fork marked by a clot of massive banana plants. Valet and self-parking to the right, hotel entrance to the left.

I pulled the Seville into a surprisingly shabby asphalt lot boxed on three sides by pale-pink stucco walls and backed by fifty-foot Canary Island pines. Out-of-state plates and rental cars predominated. A couple of golf carts in Reserved slots. No valets in sight.

I parked, walked for a while, finally arrived at a structure that might've been designed by Clive Xeno during a bender: two stories of tile-roofed hacienda in the same pallid pink, attached to a four-story steel-and-bronze glass cylinder.

Cracks had formed in the older building's stucco where it merged with the tower. Spanish Colonial mama struggling to birth a giant alien baby.

The only indication of the hotel's identity was a rusty iron A above glass doors centering the newer addition. When I was two steps away, the panels hissed open, creating a maw that led to a three-story atrium—a tube within a tube. Background music was a brain-eroding electronic mantra flicked with random bird peeps. The ceiling was matte black embedded with starry-night LED bulbs. What might have been actual constellations, but I'm no astronomer.

To the right, thirty-plus feet of waterfall trickled down a pebbly glass wall. A scatter of leather deco-revival chairs dyed a strange liverish red were sided by chunks of resin pretending to be boulders. Empty chairs but for a hipster couple in their thirties facing each other as they worked separate iPhones. A girl around five stood near the woman, limp doll in her hand, thumb in her mouth.

Ranchero Revival meets Missile Silo meets twenties Paris meets Fred Flintstone via Beijing.

With an overhead tribute to the Griffith Park planetarium.

Maybe dealing with that on a daily basis helped a hundred-year-old brain stay in shape.

To the left, a pair of chrome elevators preceded glass doors leading to the older wing. At the center, Reception and Concierge shared a poured-concrete counter. Three pallid, ponytailed people in their twenties were on duty, a woman and two men, each the same five-six or so and wearing Asian-style tunics colored the hepatic hue of the chairs.

No name tags, no notice of my approach as thirty fingers continued to tap laptops.

When I reached the counter, one of the men smiled with astonishing warmth while continuing to type. "May I help you?"

"I'm here to see Ms. Mars."

"Thalia," said the woman. Now three wan faces found me fascinating.

"We love Thalia," said the other man.

The woman said, "You're her doctor. She said to send you right over."

"She's in Bungalow Uno," said the first man.

The woman eyed the glass doors. "If you go through there, you'll be in El O-ree-hee-nal. Just keep going and

go outside and you'll see a sign leading to The Green.”

I said, “O-ree—”

The first man said, “Ori-hi-naaal. Spanish for ‘original.’?”

Second said, “What’s left of the old hotel. The Aventura believes in preservation and synthesis.”

The woman said, “Uno’s the last bungalow.”

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On the other side of the glass was a rose-carpeted hallway lined with numbered oak doors. The first few rooms had been converted to computerized card-slot entry. The rest retained heavy cast-bronze knobs and keyholes.

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The corridor emptied to an echoing loggia that led outdoors. The air smelled like freshly cut grass. The Green was a wide stone path swathing through more palms, plus ferns and bromeliads. Like the entry drive, dimmed by overgrowth.

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Then, a trapeze through jungle until a larger building backed by a high pink wall slipped into view.

Uno: 1 was set on a raised foundation with three steps leading to a screened porch. A roof pitched higher, a brick chimney, and black shutters set it apart from the other bungalows. Paint flaked from boards, the roof was patched with tar where shingles had come loose.

Once upon a time, the VIP suite?

The location afforded privacy, the high wall security. But the distance from the parking lot would mean a serious hike for an older person. Maybe Thalia Mars was one of those super-specimens.

The porch door was open. As I climbed the steps, the arid voice I’d heard over the phone said, “Dr. Delaware! Who knew you’d be so handsome?”

Eighty or so pounds of vintage humanity in a Ming-blue dress sat in a rattan peacock chair and smiled up at me. The chair looked identical to the throne Sydney Greenstreet had occupied in Casablanca. The actor had been four times that weight and overflowed the cane. The current occupant evoked a toddler playing grown-up.

“Ms. Mars.” I extended my hand and received a quick, firm shake by fingers that felt like chopsticks. A ring set with a huge amethyst collided with my knuckles.

Thalia Mars’s wide amused mouth was augmented by meticulously applied coral lipstick. Her eyes were clear brown. Shoulder-length hair tinted the ivory of old piano keys had been whipped into a meringue of

waves. Nearly a century of gravity had done its inevitable thing with her jawline, but a dagger-thin face below the cloud of hair retained enough integrity to suggest a once-firm chin and prominent cheekbones.

Most helpful customer reviews

64 of 65 people found the following review helpful.

An enjoyable book in the Alex Delaware series for fans familiar with the characters

By Sandy Kay

This book is, if I am counting correctly, the 32nd book in the Alex Delaware series. I have read most, if not all of them (after all this time it's a little hard to keep track of them all). This book assumes that the reader is extremely familiar with the main characters -- Milo Sturgis, Alex Delaware, and Alex's girlfriend Robin Castagna. There is very little background on the characters, and how Milo and Alex started working together, what Alex's professional background is, what Milo's relationship is, or what Robin does for a living. If you don't already know this before starting the book, you won't learn much of it by reading this book. As a long-time reader of the series, I am glad the author doesn't spend a lot of the book catching new readers up with the characters. But for this reason, it is important to have read at least some of the earlier books in the series before reading this book or you will miss a lot of subtext.

I enjoy this series and these characters so I am inclined to enjoy the books in the series. This was not my favorite book in the series, but it kept my attention the entire way through and the farther I read in the book, the more I liked the story. The pace was a little slower, especially at the beginning, than in many of the books. Unlike most of the others, Milo doesn't initiate the action in this book with a murder case for Alex to consult on. Alex has a meeting with an older patient (odd because he is a child psychologist), which leads to him calling Milo in to investigate. And unlike some of the other books in the series, there is more methodical investigating (i.e. mystery) and less chasing around being in danger (i.e. thriller). I enjoyed watching the investigation unfold as Milo and Alex pursue various leads to learn who killed the victim.

It is nice to know that after so many books in the series, the author can still write a story that keeps my attention and makes for an enjoyable mystery.

If you are a fan of the series, I think this is a book you will enjoy.

20 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Every Reliable

By michael langsdorf

Kellerman has again written a highly entertaining, well written tale based on the interactions between his usual protagonists. Is it great literature? Of course not, but it's a fun read, an excellent story, with plenty of evolving twists and turns, and an excellent way to spend a couple of hours.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

The Child Psychologist and the Centenarian.

By H. A. Friedman

Many times you read a book from a long series and find yourself disappointed because for whatever reason, the author has decided to make some major changes in his plotting and instead of finding an old friend you find a stranger. This was not the case in the latest Alex Delaware novel. It is a bit different in several ways; the subject is not the usual child (he is a child psychologist), it is a nearly 100-year old woman. Milo does not carry the story with Alex just tagging along. Because Alex was in at the start he takes a greater part in the actual detecting. Most interesting, we never meet the villains. Usually at some point they would show up and say this or do that. In this story they are saved for practically the final page. You know they are just awful people and tend not to leave many loose threads hanging, but there is never a point where you can say with

certainty that this person or that person did it. How do I know I loved this book? Usually I go slowly, hit points that I find annoying or illogical and stop reading for a few days. This one I went right through. It was a pleasure to read and you care about the victim who is very different and we and Alex no nothing about. Who is she? Where did her wealth come from? It was just fun to read. A very pleasant surprise.

[See all 311 customer reviews...](#)

# HEARTBREAK HOTEL: AN ALEX DELAWARE NOVEL BY JONATHAN KELLERMAN PDF

It is really simple to review guide Heartbreak Hotel: An Alex Delaware Novel By Jonathan Kellerman in soft documents in your gadget or computer system. Once more, why should be so difficult to obtain guide Heartbreak Hotel: An Alex Delaware Novel By Jonathan Kellerman if you can select the simpler one? This site will ease you to pick as well as select the very best cumulative books from the most wanted vendor to the released book recently. It will always update the collections time to time. So, link to internet and also see this website consistently to obtain the brand-new book each day. Now, this Heartbreak Hotel: An Alex Delaware Novel By Jonathan Kellerman is your own.

## Review

“Easy to dive into for mystery fans unfamiliar with the series, and a welcome treat for readers who have been with Officer Sturgis and Dr. Delaware since the beginning.”—Booklist

## Praise for Jonathan Kellerman

“Jonathan Kellerman’s psychology skills and dark imagination are a potent literary mix.”—Los Angeles Times

“Kellerman doesn’t just write psychological thrillers—he owns the genre.”—Detroit Free Press

“A master of the psychological thriller.”—People

## About the Author

Jonathan Kellerman is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of forty-one crime novels, including the Alex Delaware series, *The Butcher’s Theater*, *Billy Straight*, *The Conspiracy Club*, *Twisted*, *True Detectives*, and *The Murderer’s Daughter*. With his wife, bestselling novelist Faye Kellerman, he co-authored *Double Homicide* and *Capital Crimes*. With his son, bestselling novelist Jesse Kellerman, he co-authored *The Golem of Hollywood* and *The Golem of Paris*. He is also the author of two children’s books and numerous nonfiction works, including *Savage Spawn: Reflections on Violent Children* and *With Strings Attached: The Art and Beauty of Vintage Guitars*. He has won the Goldwyn, Edgar, and Anthony awards and has been nominated for a Shamus Award. Jonathan and Faye Kellerman live in California, New Mexico, and New York.

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## CHAPTER

1

I lead a double life.

Some of my time is spent using the doctorate I earned: evaluating the mental health of injured, neglected, or traumatized children, making recommendations about parental custody, providing short-term treatment. My own childhood was often nightmarish and I like to think I’m making a difference. I keep my fees reasonable

and bills get paid.

Then there's the other stuff, initiated by my best friend, an LAPD homicide lieutenant. Once in a while my name leaks into a news story. Mostly I keep out of public view. I doubt any of the families I see are aware of the murders I work on. They've never commented on it and I think they would if they knew.

When my invoices finally make their way through the LAPD bureaucracy, I may get paid at an hourly rate far below my office fee. Sometimes those bills are ignored or rejected outright. If my friend finds out, he makes noise. His success clearing homicides is first-rate. Getting me paid for my time, not so much.

Business-wise, the other stuff doesn't make much sense. I don't care.

I enjoy seeing bad people pay.

What began on a Monday morning in early June seemed to have nothing to do with either half of my life.

Go know.

The answering service operator was a new hire named James, with a shaky voice and a way of turning statements into questions that implied self-esteem issues. Either he hadn't been trained in handling non-emergency calls or he was a poor student.

"Dr. Delaware? I've got someone on the line, a Ms. Mars?"

"Don't know her."

"That's her name? Mars? Like the candy bar?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Um????I don't know, Dr. Delaware? She does sound kind of????weak?"

"Put her on."

"You bet, Dr. Delaware? Have a great day?"

A faint voice as dry as leaf dust said, "Good morning, Doctor. This is Thalia Mars."

"What can I do for you, Ms. Mars?"

"My guess is you don't do house calls but I'll supplement your fee if you see me at my home."

"I'm a child psychologist."

"Oh, I know that, Dr. Delaware. I'm well aware of the wonderful work you did at Western Pediatric Medical Center. I'm a great fan of the hospital. Ask Dr. Eagle."

Ruben Eagle worked with Western Peds' poorest patients as head of outpatient services and was routinely ignored by hospital fundraisers because the day-to-day maladies of the uninsured couldn't compete for

headlines with heart surgery, kidney transplants, and whiz-bang cellular research.

Had he sent this woman to me as a way of stroking one of the few donors he had? It wasn't like Ruben to politick without asking me first.

"Dr. Eagle referred you to me?"

"Oh, no, Doctor. I referred myself."

"Ms. Mars, I'm not clear about what you want—"

"How could you be? I'd explain over the phone but that would take up too much of your valuable time. Once we get together, my check will include whatever charge you decide is appropriate for this call."

"It's not a matter of billing, Ms. Mars. If you could give me a basic explanation about what you need—"

"Of course. Your work suggests you're an analytic and compassionate man and I could use both. I'm not a nut, Dr. Delaware, and you won't need to travel far. I'm at the Aventura Hotel on Sunset, a short drive from you."

"You're visiting L.A.?"

"I live at the Aventura. That's a bit of a tale, in itself. Would an initial retainer of, say, five thousand dollars set your mind at ease? I'd offer to wire it directly to you but that would require asking for your banking information and you'd suspect some sort of financial scam."

"Five thousand is far too much and there's no need for a retainer."

"Don't you take retainers when you work for the courts?"

"Sounds as if you've researched me, Ms. Mars."

"I try to be thorough, Doctor, but I promise you there's nothing ominous at play. The hotel's a semi-public place and the front desk knows me well. Is there any way you could meet me today, say at three p.m.? You'd avoid rush-hour traffic."

"What if I told you I had a prior appointment?"

"Then I'd request another time, Doctor. And if that failed, I'd beseech you." She laughed. "There is an issue of time. I don't have much of it."

"You're ill—"

"Never felt better," said Thalia Mars. "However, on my next birthday I will be one hundred."

"I see."

“If you don’t believe me, when we get together I’ll show you my last active driver’s license. Flunked the test when I turned ninety-five and have depended, since, on the kindness of others and their internal combustion engines.”

My turn to laugh.

“So we’re on for three, Dr. Delaware?”

“All right.”

“Fabulous, you’re analytic, compassionate, and flexible. The front desk will direct you.”

## CHAPTER

### 2

As soon as the line cleared, I phoned the Aventura.

Miss Mars is here. Would you care to be put through?

No, thanks.

My next call was Ruben. At a conference in Memphis. The Internet had nothing to say about Thalia Mars. No surprise, I supposed. She’d lived most of her long life before techno-geeks decided privacy was irrelevant.

I spent the rest of the morning writing reports, broke at one p.m., slapped together a couple of turkey sandwiches and brewed iced tea, brought a tray out to the garden. Pausing by the pond, I tossed pellets to the koi, continued to Robin’s studio.

Two projects occupied her workbench, a gorgeous two-hundred-year-old Italian mandolin restored for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and an electric contraption that resembled a giant garden slug.

The grub-like thing was part cello, part guitar, and dubbed the Alienator by the aging British rocker who’d commissioned it. Forced to learn classical violin as a kid, the invariably drunk Clive Xeno wanted to try his hand at bowing heavy metal. Per his insistence, the instrument was finished in metal-flake auto paint the color of pond sludge. An enamel-tile portrait of Jascha Heifetz protruded below the bridge, showing the maestro looking skeptical.

Robin, hair kerchiefed, wearing a black tee and overalls, was holding the monstrosity up to the skylight and shaking her head.

I said, “The customer’s always right.”

“Whoever coined that never met Clive. Ah, lunch. You’re a mind reader.”

Blanche, our little blond French bulldog, rose from her basket, waddled over, and rubbed her head on my ankle. I put the sandwiches on a table and fetched her a stick of jerky from the treat bag.

Robin gave the slug another look. “Five hundred hours of my life and I end up with this.”

“Think of it as an avant-garde masterpiece.”

“Isn’t ‘avant-garde’ French for ‘weird’?” Washing her hands, she kissed me, tossed a drop cloth over both instruments, untied her hair, and let loose a cascade of auburn ringlets. “This is after I convinced him to tone it down.”

“No more penis-shaped headstock.”

“That and Heifetz doing something gross. How’s your day going?”

“Finished some reports and heading out in a couple.”

“Milo beckoned?”

“I’m going to see a woman who claims to be nearly a hundred and wants to talk.”

“Claims to be? Like she’s only ninety-eight and is being pretentious?”

I laughed. “No reason to doubt her.”

“She introduced herself that way? I’m almost a hundred.”

“She worked it into the conversation.”

“Why not?” she said. “Last that long, you’d want to strut your stuff. My great-aunt Martina lived until ninety-eight and advertised it in every conversation. ‘Canned green beans, anyone? Been eating them for ninety-eight years and I’m still breathing.’?”

She picked up a sandwich, nibbled, put it down. “Delicious, you’re the perfect man??.?.??so why would a hundred-year-old chick call you?”

“She didn’t go into details.”

“But you agreed to do a house call?”

“She’s one of Ruben Eagle’s donors.”

“So you do a good deed and get to escape the office. It has been a while since the Big Guy called. I’ve been wondering when it would get to you.”

“I’ve been restless?”

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