



Motive: An Alex Delaware Novel

By Jonathan Kellerman

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • Don't miss the excerpt of Jonathan Kellerman's *The Murderer's Daughter* in the back of the book!

Jonathan Kellerman writes razor-sharp novels that cut to the quick. Now comes *Motive*, which pits psychologist Alex Delaware and homicide cop Milo Sturgis against a vicious criminal mind—the kind only Kellerman can bring to chilling life.

Even having hundreds of closed cases to his credit can't keep LAPD police lieutenant Milo Sturgis from agonizing over the crimes that don't get solved—and the victims who go without justice. Victims like Katherine Hennepin, a young woman strangled and stabbed in her home. A single suspect with a solid alibi leads to a dead end—one even Alex Delaware's expert insight can't explain. The only thing to do is move on to the next murder case—because there's always a next one.

This time the victim is Ursula Corey: a successful, attractive divorcée who's been gunned down—not a robbery but an execution, a crime that smacks of simple, savage revenge. And along with that theoretical motive come two strong contenders for the role of perp: the dead woman's business partner/ex-husband and her divorce lawyer/secret lover. But just as Alex and Milo think they're zeroing in on the most likely suspect, a bizarre new clue stirs up eerie echoes of the unsolved Hennepin murder. And the discovery of yet another crime scene bearing the same taunting signature raises the specter of a serial killer on a mission, whose twisted method is exceeded only by his manipulative and cunning madness.

Praise for *Motive*

“Jonathan Kellerman has mastered the art of lean, evocative prose [in] a series that grows stronger with each volume.”—*New York Journal of Books*

“One of [Kellerman's] best works to date . . . *Motive* is wonderfully made, equally well-driven by plot and character, and shouldn't be missed.”—*Bookreporter*

“[*Motive*] will even keep genre veterans guessing. . . . The twists are both shocking and logical, and the byplay between the leads entertaining.”—*Publishers Weekly*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Jonathan Kellerman is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of more than three dozen bestselling crime novels, including the Alex Delaware series, *The Butcher’s Theater*, *Billy Straight*, *The Conspiracy Club*, *Twisted*, and *True Detectives*. 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 first book of a new series, *The Golem of Hollywood*. 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.

From the Hardcover edition.

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CHAPTER 1

My closest friend, a homicide lieutenant, refuses to add up how many murders he’s investigated, claiming nostalgia is for losers. My rough guess is three hundred.

Most of those have been a sickening mix of tragic and mundane.

A pair of drunks pounding the life out of each other while equally besotted witnesses stand around hooting.

An errant knife-flick or gunshot putting the period on a domestic spat.

Gangbangers, some of them too young to shave, wielding firearms ranging from explode-in-your hand .22s to military-grade assault weapons, as they blast away through the open windows of scruffy compact cars.

It's the "different" ones that bring Milo Sturgis to my door.

Katherine Hennepin's homicide easily qualified but he'd never mentioned her to me. Now he stood in my living room at nine a.m. wearing a dust-colored windbreaker and brown poly pants from another era, his olive vinyl attaché dangling from one massive paw. Pale, pockmarked, paunchy, black hair limp and in need of trimming, he sagged like a rhino who'd lost out to the alpha male.

"Doctor," he grumbled. He uses my title when amused or depressed. That covers a lot of ground.

I said, "Morning."

"Apparently it is." He trudged past me into the kitchen. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"Offering you a tall glass of warm skunky beer." Stopping short of the fridge, he sank into a chair, rubbed his face, clicked his teeth, and avoided eye contact while unlatching the green case. Out came a blue binder identical to so many others I'd seen.

Hennepin, K. B. had been opened two months ago.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, still looking away. "Didn't think I needed to bug you, 'cause it was obvious." He growled. "Don't take any stock tips from me."

He waited. I read.

Katherine Belle Hennepin, thirty-three, a bookkeeper at a mom-and-pop accounting firm in Sherman Oaks, had been found in the bedroom of her West L.A. apartment, strangled and stabbed. The blowup of her driver's license photo portrayed a thin-faced, fine-featured woman with shoulder-length light-brown hair, a sweet smile, and freckles that managed to assert themselves with the DMV camera. Sad eyes, I thought, but maybe I was already biased.

I knew why Milo had included the shot: wanting me to think of her as a person.

Wanting to remind himself.

Rosiness and pinpoint blood dots around the ligature mark but far less pooling and castoff and splashes than you'd expect with thirty-six stab wounds suggested the killer had choked first, slashed second.

A few blood drops and a tamped-down section of carpeting indicated the murder had begun in the hallway just outside the kitchen, after which Katherine Hennepin had been dragged to her bedroom. The killer then positioned her atop her twin mattress, lying faceup, head propped on a pillow. She was found covered, head-to-toe, with a blanket taken from her linen closet.

The pose the killer had chosen—arms pressed to her sides, legs close together—suggested peaceful repose, if you didn't consider the gore. No obvious sexual positioning and the autopsy confirmed no sexual assault. Milo and Detective 1 Sean Binchy had gone over the apartment with customary thoroughness and found no evidence of burglary.

An empty slot in a knife-block in the kitchen fit the heaviest butcher blade in the set. The dimensions of that high-quality German utensil synced with the coroner's description of the murder weapon. A careful search of Katherine Hennepin's apartment and nearby garbage bins failed to turn up the knife. The same disappointing result followed a canvass of the quiet, middle-class neighborhood where the victim had paid rent for two years.

No fingerprints or blood were lifted that couldn't be traced to Katherine Hennepin. The lack of foreign blood was another letdown; knife-murderers, particularly those engaging in overkill, often lose their grips on blood-slicked hafts and cut themselves. Despite the apparent frenzy of this attack, there'd been no slip.

I turned the page to a new set of photos.

In the dinette off the kitchen, the table was set with dinner for two: a pair of lettuce side-salads, later determined to be dressed with olive oil and vinegar, plates bearing grilled salmon fillet, rice pilaf, and baby string beans. An uncorked bottle of medium-grade Pinot Noir stood to the right of a small floral centerpiece. Two glasses held five ounces of wine each.

Everything about the crime scene—no break-in, theft, or rape,

obvious overkill postmortem attack, shrouded victim, opportunistic weapon—suggested a killer well known by the victim, and driven by nuclear rage.

Milo's interview of Katherine Hennepin's employers, an octogenarian pair of CPAs named Maureen and Ralph Gross, uncovered a stormy relationship with a boyfriend, a chef named Darius Kleffer.

Someone with excellent knife skills.

I read on.

Katherine was described by the Grosses as "lovely," "sweet," and "shy." Ralph Gross termed Darius Kleffer a "damn maniac" and his wife concurred. Twice the ex had "barged in" at the office "ranting at poor Katherine." The first time, he obeyed the Grosses' command to leave. The second time he didn't, hovering around Katherine, trying to convince her to leave with him. The Grosses called the police but "the lunatic" left before the black-and-white arrived.

Research into Kleffer's background revealed two arrests for battery on fellow drinkers in Hollywood clubs, both charges eventually dismissed. His volatility, the notion of a chef cooking dinner for two, and the fact that Kleffer had lived close by in North Hollywood seemed to wrap it up and I understood Milo's confidence in a quick close.

He drove to Kleffer's apartment, but Kleffer hadn't lived there for three months and had left no forwarding. A week of searching failed to locate him and Milo was surer than ever he'd targeted the right quarry.

Obvious.

Until it wasn't.

I got up and poured my third cup of coffee. The first two had been savored at six thirty a.m. with Robin, before she took our dog to her studio out back and resumed carving a guitar top. I offered a cup to Milo.

"No, thanks."

"All of a sudden you're into self-denial, Big Guy?"

"For Catholics it's a genetic trait," he said. "Atonement must at least be attempted."

"The big sin being .??.?"

"Failure."

I said, "I would've come to the same conclusion on Hennepin."

"Maybe."

"I digest facts the same way you do."

He didn't answer.

I said, "You can beat yourself up all you want but Kleffer looked perfect."

"Until he didn't."

I pointed to the blue folder. "There's nothing in here about why you scratched him off."

He said, "Haven't done the paperwork, yet." His smile was sadder than tears. "Okay, I'll sum up .??.? confession being good for the soul and all that. I'm looking for him everywhere, no dice, finally his name pops up as a little yellow stripe on a Google search. He was on a video, pilot of a show that never actually ran called Mega-Chef. Working on the team of some Michelin-star Chinese genius. The filming was in Lower Manhattan, and months before that, Kleffer was living in New York. No airline has a record of him flying out of there, same for car rental companies. Borrowing a friend's wheels is a possibility but I never found evidence of that. Amtrak was also a consideration if Kleffer paid cash for his ticket, except that for five days before the murder and three days after the murder, he's verified present and accounted for, taping. Nights he bunked at a hotel where the show put up contestants. One of those dorm situations, three roommates who didn't like him but still vouched for him. So did the show's producers and everyone else I spoke to. This guy's got an army of alibi-confirmers."

I said, "Did you speak to Kleffer himself?"

"I tried, got no callbacks. I know that's weird, his girlfriend is slaughtered and he's not curious. But unless you can find some way to alter the laws of physics, he's not my guy."

"Does he have any evil friends? Someone in L.A. who'd do him a favor?"

"I thought of that but so far, no pal willing to do something like that comes up. No one who considers

themselves Kleffer's friend, period. He is not Mr. Popular."

"Unlikable and a knife pro," I said. "How often have you seen thirty-six wounds with no slippage?"

"I know, I know .??. any further insights?"

"Even if the killer wasn't Kleffer, the crime scene's still worth reading."

"Someone else she knew."

"And planned to have dinner with. Any idea if she prepared the meal?"

"No evidence of cooking in the apartment but it could've been cleaned up. You're thinking she had a thing for chefs, followed Kleffer with another culinary psychopath."

"Or just one of those guys who likes to impress women by cooking for them. A new man in Katherine's life would explain why Kleffer showed up at her work irate."

"Mystery boyfriend? I checked and rechecked with the neighbors, and Kleffer's the only man anyone ever saw. Binchy and I went through the place and you know how OCD Sean is. We found no indication of romance in her life."

"When's the last time she and Kleffer talked on the phone or emailed?"

"Way before the murder—he left for New York six months ago and they stopped talking before that. The rest of her records didn't say much, either. Mostly she emailed her employers about work-related stuff—a lot of it after hours, poor thing was a diligent type, they really loved her. The rest of her calls and emails were to her family. Lighthearted stuff, happy birthday, anniversary. She's from a big clan in South Dakota. Parents, grandparents, a great-grandmother, five sibs, nieces, nephews. A whole bunch of 'em came down to take care of the body and to get educated by me. There I am, facing a room full of well-mannered, decent folk and giving them zilch. And they were nice about it, which made me feel shittier."

He raised his arm and brought his fist crashing toward the table. Stopping just shy of contact, he dangled his fingers a millimeter above the surface. "If there is no secret boyfriend, maybe you're right and a buddy of Kleffer was dispatched to carve her up." He got to his feet. "Okay, thanks for the coffee."

"You didn't drink any."

"It's the thought that counts." He paced a few circuits, returned. "What do you think about the meal being staged postmortem? Some sort of sick joke?"

I thought about that. "Sure, why not? If Kleffer did contract the killing, a mock meal could be a way of putting his stamp on it."

"I cooked for you, you dumped me, now you're dead meat."

"You do have a way with words."

He rubbed his face, like washing without water, loped to the coffeemaker, poured, took a sip, dumped his

cup in the sink. “Nothing wrong with it, sorry, my gut’s raw.”

I said, “How many Hail Marys for wasting caffeine?”

“Add it to the tote board. How’s Robin?”

That sounded obligatory. A kid trained to say the right things.

“She’s great.”

“The pooch?”

“Charming as ever. How’s Rick?”

“Putting up with my foul temperament since I began working Hennepin.” Dropping the murder book back in the green case, he left the kitchen, paused at the front door. “I should’ve come to you sooner. Don’t know why the hell I didn’t.”

“I haven’t come up with much,” I said.

“Maybe if you’d been to the scene—”

“Doubtful.”

“Whatever. See ya.”

I said, “Hope something develops.”

Nothing did.

Two weeks later, he phoned to say the case was officially back-burnered, no trace of anyone or anything linking Katherine’s death to Darius Kleffer, no other suspects.

I didn’t hear from him for another twenty days when he phoned, sounding adrenalized.

“Progress on Hennepin?”

“New case, amigo. This time you’re on it from the git-go.”

CHAPTER 2

The crime scene was the bottom level of a subground Century City parking lot. Eighteen story building on Avenue of the Stars. One of the older ones, built before developers managed to convince zoning boards that genuine skyscrapers made sense in seismic territory.

Easy drive from my house atop Beverly Glen and by the time I arrived the body was covered with a white cloth and the techs were finishing up photographing and scraping blood from the splotches spreading under the cloth. Red spray speckled a pillar to the left of the victim’s silver Jaguar sedan.

A white lizard-skin purse and a set of keys, including one bearing the snarling feline Jag logo, lay on the ground near the corpse. Loops of tire tracks crisscrossed the concrete, creating an overlay that defied interpretation. All the coils and swirls I could see looked dry and grayed by time. Not a single fresh oil spot, no sign of a skid or a sudden stop.

Milo, gloved up and wearing a brown suit and skinny black tie, stood away from the forensic activity. He held a small white rectangle in one hand, pressed his cell phone to his mouth with the other.

The area smelled of gasoline. Dusty frigid air forced from overhead ducts turned the tier into a meat locker. I stood around until Milo nodded at the unseen person on the other end of his phone conversation, clicked off, walked to the body, squatted, lifted the cloth, and drew it back gently.

You are hereby invited .??.

The woman had fallen facedown. Her hair was the blond of raw oak, styled in one of those bobs cut high in back to reveal the nape of the neck. Long smooth neck. She'd probably been proud of it.

No wounds to the back of her tall, slender frame. She wore fitted jeans with spangled seams, a red leather jacket that ended mid-buttocks, medium-heeled white pumps. Her right leg twisted awkwardly, partially dislodging its shoe and offering a view of the pump's interior. Manolo Blahnik.

Platinum and gold glinted at two knuckles on each of her hands. The ear I could see was graced by a sizable rose-gold disk surrounded by pinpoint rubies.

Milo motioned to a male tech who looked like a high school junior, the kind of eager introvert who'd volunteer for Audio Visual Lab. "Okay if I flip her partially?"

The kid said, "C.I.'s come and gone and we're finished, far as I'm concerned you can flip her completely."

Milo shifted the woman as if she were made of spun sugar, lifting her just enough to give me a view of what had once been a lovely face: full-lipped, heart-shaped, clean-jawed. Expertly made up but no attempt to hide the fine lines earned by experience. My guess was early to midforties, extremely well tended.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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