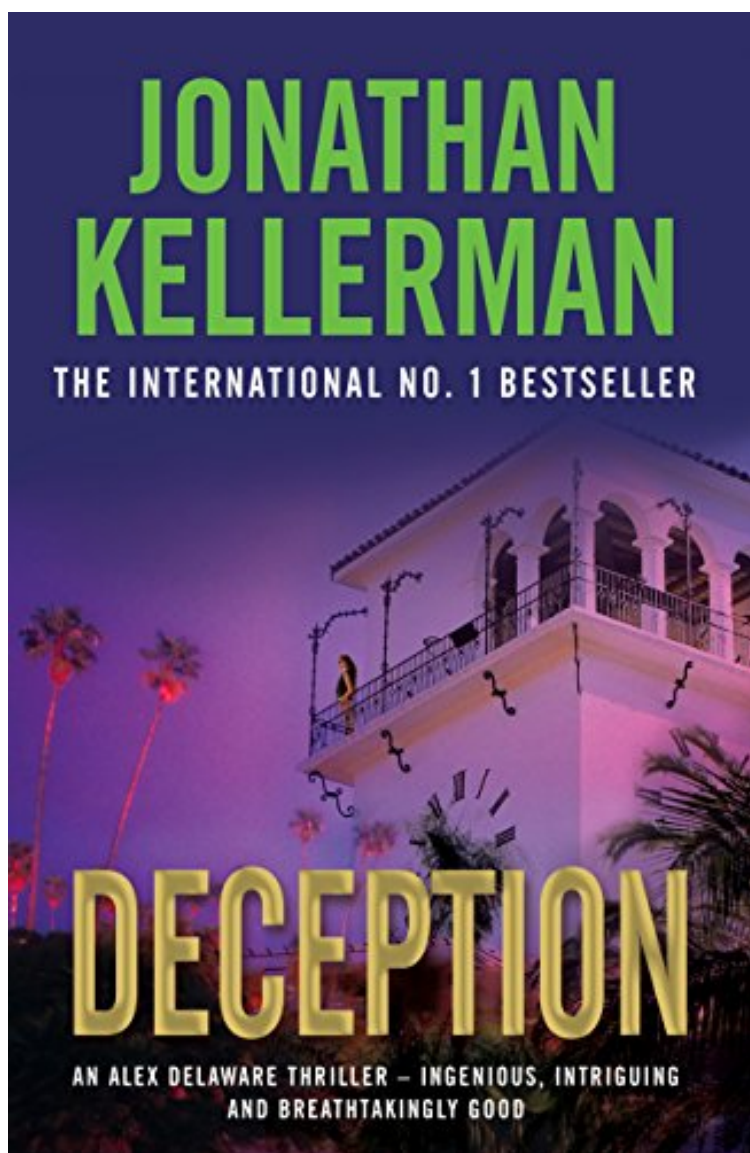


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Deception (Alex Delaware series, Book 25): A masterfully suspenseful psychological thriller



Par Jonathan Kellerman
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur The ivy clad walls of an elite school hold dark secrets... Deception is at the heart of this shockingly intriguing novel, showing that privilege can be a front for evil, from New York Times No. 1 bestselling author Jonathan Kellerman. Perfect for fans of Harlan Coben and Michael Connelly. 'All you could ask for in an LA thriller' - Daily MailOn a DVD found near her lifeless body, Elise Freeman chronicles a year-and-a-half-long ordeal of monstrous abuse at the hands of three sadistic tormentors. But even more shocking than the lurid details is the revelation that the offenders, like their victim, are teachers at

a prestigious LA prep school. If ever homicide detective Milo Sturgis could use Dr Alex Delaware's psychological prowess, it's now. From the start, this case promises to be an uphill climb for truth and a down-and-dirty fight for justice. Alex and Milo must penetrate the citadel of wealth and scholarship to expose the dirty secrets and deadly sins festering amongst LA's elite. But power and position are not easily surrendered, and Alex and Milo may well be walking into a highly polished death trap... What readers are saying about

Deception: 'Excellent - humour with twists and turns and great plot' Edge of the seat tension 'Five stars' Extrait The woman had haunted eyes. Pale, drooping at the outer edges, they stared into the unseen camera with an odd combination of defiance and defeat. She didn't move. Neither did the camera. The wall behind her was brown-blue, the color of an old bruise. The couch on which she perched was gray. She was a pretty woman, made less so by fear. Her shoulders were bunched high, her neck tendons taut as bridge cables. A black, sleeveless dress showcased soft white arms. Too-blond hair fell limply to her shoulders. Moments passed. Nothing happened. In another situation I might've cracked wise about it being one of Andy Warhol's old anti-films: interminable, static studies of the Empire State Building, a man sleeping. When a homicide lieutenant brings you something to watch, you keep your mouth shut. Milo stood behind me. His black hair and raincoat were rumpled. The coat was cheap, green, wrinkled past the point of salvation. It gave off a not unpleasant vegetative odor. He'd placed a massive breakfast burrito in a take-out box on my desk, hadn't touched it. When he drops in, he usually beelines for the fridge, empties a quart of something, raids the shelves for bad carbs. This morning, he'd marched to my office, loaded the DVD with a flourish. "For your consideration." Blanche, my little French bulldog, sat next to me, uncharacteristically serious. She'd tried her usual smile, had figured out something was different when Milo didn't stoop to pet her. I rubbed her knobby head. She looked up at me, returned her attention to the monitor. The woman's lips moved. Milo said, "Here we go." More silence on the screen. "So I lied." The woman said, "My name is Elise Freeman. I'm a teacher and tutor at Windsor Preparatory Academy in Brentwood." Her voice was throaty. She knotted her fingers, flopped them onto her lap. "I'm making this recording to document sustained abuse I have received at the hands of faculty members at Windsor Preparatory Academy in Brentwood. Which I will hereon refer to as Prep." Deep breath. "For the past two years at Prep, I have been subjected to repeated, unwarranted, aggressive, and distressing sexual harassment from three individuals. Their names are." Her right hand rose. A finger pointed upward. "Enrico Hauer. H-A-U-E-R." Two fingers: "James Winterthorn." More slow, enunciated spelling, then a trio of digits. "Pat Skaggs." The hand dropped. "For the past two years Enrico Hauer, James Winterthorn, and Pat Skaggs have made my life a living hell by engaging in brutal, unsolicited, and threatening sexual behavior. I am making this recording so that in the event something violent happens to me, the authorities will know where to look. I do not know what else to do as I feel trapped and frightened and have nowhere to turn. I hope this recording never needs to come to light but if it does, I am glad that I made it." Her eyes clenched shut. Her lips moved soundlessly and she slumped. Suddenly her jaw jutted and she was sitting up straight. More defiance than defeat. Staring hard at the camera. "Thanks for listening." The screen went blue. Milo said, "Talk about a D-movie plot device." I said, "But you're here. She was murdered?" "Maybe. She's on ice." "Backlog at the coroner?" His laughter was harsh. "Nope, this morning I'm Mr. Literal. Ice of the dry sort. Frozen CO2. She was found in her home, lying in a bathtub full of the stuff." I tried to picture the blond woman as a frozen corpse, didn't like the image that flashed in my head, and reverted to Doctor Helpful. "Someone trying to mess up the time-of-death estimate? Or maybe a psychopath coming up with a new way to showcase his handiwork." He winced, as if all contingencies were painful. Removing the disc, he slipped it back into a clear plastic jewel box. Not bothering to glove up; the DVD had already been printed, matched only to Elise Freeman. I said, "Where are you going with this?" He rotated his neck. "Got coffee? Maybe some toast?" Chapter Two We left my house with black coffee in travel-cups and six slices of lavishly buttered sesame-rye. When Milo wants to think, phone, text, or sleep he sometimes asks me to do the driving. It's against LAPD regs but so are lots of things. He makes up for my mileage cost with bar tabs and such. The toast was occupying his attention so I offered to take my Seville. He shook his head, scattering crumbs, continued to his latest unmarked, a bronze Chevy Malibu with a phlegmy ignition. Heading north on Beverly Glen, he steered with one hand, stuffed rye bread into his mouth with the other. The police radio was switched off. The burrito rested in the backseat and filled the car with eau de frijole. He said, "In answer to your question, too messy." "That was low on my list of questions. Where are we going?" "Where she died, Studio City." "Not a West L.A. case but you're on it." "Not an official homicide but I'm on it." The difference between an experienced psychologist and a novice is knowing when not to speak. I sat back and drank coffee. Milo said, "Maybe there'll be a microwave and I can heat up the

burrito. "Elise Freeman had resided in a green-sided, tar-roofed bungalow on a spidery, tree-shaded lane east of Laurel Canyon and north of Ventura Boulevard. Close enough to the thoroughfare to hear Valley traffic, but mature vegetation and larger houses blocked any urban visuals. The little green box sat at the terminus of a long dirt driveway split by a strip of concrete. A gray sedan was parked near the front door. Full-sized car but not big enough to hide the bungalow's blemishes as we drew close: worn and ragged siding eroded to raw wood in patches, curling shingles, a noticeable listing to the right due to a sinking foundation. No crime scene tape that I could see, no uniforms on watch. I said, "When was she found?" "Last night by her boyfriend. He says he talked to her on the phone three days ago but after that, she stopped returning his calls. A forty-eight-hour time frame fits the coroner's TOD guesstimate. Probably at the tail end-early morning. Apparently, dry ice doesn't melt, it sublimates-goes straight into the atmosphere-so there's no water residue forecasting degradation. In an ice chest, the rate of sublimation is five to ten pounds every twenty-four hours, but it's faster under normal room temperature." "Any empty ice bags left behind?" "Nope. Exactly." "Someone had cleaned up." "The scene's still intact?" He scowled. "I never got a chance to see the scene because my involvement began at five thirty a.m. today when Deputy Chief Weinberg woke me from a rare good dream. The DVD, the key to the house, and what's passing for a file were messengered to my house ten minutes later." "High intrigue and an egregious break in procedure," I said. "Sounds like orders from on high." He continued slowly up the drive, checking out the surroundings. Layers of greenery to the left, a two-story Colonial mansion to the right. The big house was wood-sided like the bungalow, but what I could see of it was painted white and adorned with black shutters. It sat on a generous lot partitioned from Freeman's skimpy ribbon of real estate by a ten-foot stucco fence topped with used brick. Bougainvillea topped areas of brick, amping up the privacy quotient on both sides. The smaller structure might've begun life as an outbuilding of the manse, back when multi-acre estates spread across Valley hillsides. A guesthouse, servant's quarters, maybe tack storage for one of the cowboy actors wanting proximity to the Burbank film-lots that passed for Wild West badlands. Milo rolled to a stop inches from the Crown Vic. No one at the wheel, but a man in a cream-colored suit emerged from behind the bungalow. A hair over Milo's six three, he was broad, black, bespectacled. The suit was double-breasted and tailored to nearly conceal a gun bulge. He gave a cursory nod. "Milo." "Stan." "And this is..." "Dr. Delaware." "Your psychologist." "That makes it sound like I'm in therapy, Stan." "Therapy's in fashion now, Milo. The department looks kindly on self-awareness and insight." "Must have missed that memo." A big hand extended. "Stanley Creighton, Doctor." "We shook." Milo said, "What brings you down from Olympus, Stan?" "More like Bunker Hill," said Creighton. "I'm here to keep an eye out." "New clause in the captain's job description?" Creighton said, "One does what one is told." He returned to me. "Speaking of which, Doctor, I appreciate what you do but you shouldn't be here." "He's cleared for takeoff, Stan." Creighton frowned. Cool morning but the back of his neck was moist ebony. "I must've missed that memo." "Probably buried under a pile of wisdom from His Munificence." Creighton flashed beautiful teeth. "Why don't you call him that to his face? Doctor, you really need to absent yourself." "Stan, he really doesn't." Creighton's smile degraded to something cold and menacing. "You're telling me you got papal dispensation for his presence at this specific crime scene?" "Why would I improvise about that, Stan?" "Why indeed," said Creighton. "Except for the fact that rationality doesn't always figure into human behavior. Which is why my wife, who has an M.D., still smokes a pack and a half a day." "Feel free to call the Vatican to verify, Stan." Creighton studied me. "Can I assume that Lieutenant Sturgis has informed you of the need for exceptional discretion here, Doctor?" "Absolutely." "Exceptional," he repeated. "I love exceptions," I said. "Why's that, Doctor?" "They're a lot more interesting than rules." Creighton tried to smile again. The result fit him like panty hose on a mastiff. "I respect what you do, Doctor. My wife's a neurologist, works with psychologists all the time. But now I'm wondering if Lieutenant Sturgis relies on you so not because of your professional skills, maybe it's more of a personality thing." Expanding his chest. "As in wise ass loves company." Before I could answer he wheeled on Milo. "How much time are you going to need here?" "Hard to say." "I'm after a little more precision." "C'mon, Stan-" "You've already seen the crime scene pix, the body's long gone, the prints and fluid swabs are at the lab, and your vic's computer was lifted, so what do you expect to accomplish?" No mention of the DVD. Milo said, "Hell, Stan, why even bother to work when we can go on detective.com?" "Yuk yuk yuk, ka-ching, rim shot," said Creighton. "Bottom line: There's nothing this place can tell you. Unless you're one of those paranormals, think you can feel vibrations." "You were in my place you wouldn't do a walk-through?" "Sure, cover your ass. But walk quickly. I've been here since six a.m., which is an hour after Weinberg woke me up and gave me my orders. Morning's aren't my fun time. This particular morning, my knee's being a nasty bitch. So what I'm gonna do

right now is go for a nice, loose walk and when I get back, I strongly prefer to see you the hell out of here so I can get the hell out of here and do the job they officially pay me for." Favoring me with a contemptuous glance. "Be careful, Doctor." We watched him stride off, limping slightly. I said, "Who'd he play for?" "U. Nevada, didn't make the big-time." "What do they officially pay him for?" "He used to work Sex Crimes. Now he pushes paper and attends meetings." "And occasionally plays watchman." "Funny 'bout that." We continued toward the green house. I said, "If it's all so hush-hush how'd you get the chief to approve me?" "I'll answer that once you're approved." The bungalow's front porch creaked under our weight. A hummingbird feeder dangling from the overhang was empty and dry. Milo pulled out a tagged key and unlocked the door and we stepped into a small, dim living room. Blank space atop a TV table. I said, "Her video gear's at the lab?" "Nod." "Where was the DVD found?" "Stuck in the middle of a stack of her favorite movies. Or so the file claims." "Creighton didn't mention it." "Like I said, it got messengered." "By who?" "Guy in a suit." "And a badge?" "That, too." "A note in the envelope said it was found in a stack of the victim's DVDs." "But not cataloged as evidence." "Funny 'bout that." "Who took the initial call?" "Two North Hollywood D's who have absolutely nothing to say to me." "Are you planning to tell me what got the gears grinding?" "It wasn't her," he said. "They couldn't care less about her. That's the point, Alex." I said, "The suspects are the point. Where they're employed." "You never heard that from me." "A school has that much clout?" "It does when the right people's kids are enrolled. You ever have patients from Windsor Prep?" "A few." "Any pattern you'd care to share?" "Affluent, attractive kids. For the most part, bright, but under lots of pressure academically, athletically, and socially. In other words, no different from any other prep school." "This case makes it real different." "Because of one student in particular." Silence. "College applications go in soon," I said. "Here's a wild guess: The chief has a kid aiming for the Ivy League." He shoved a coarse shock of hair off his brow. Fuzzylight advertised every pock and knot on his face. "I never heard that from you." "Son or daughter?" "Son," he said. "Only child. Another Einstein, according to his mommy, the Virgin Mary." "Talk about a mixed metaphor." "What the hell, they were both nice Jewish boys." "Graduating senior?" "Graduating with honors and aiming for Yale." I said, "It's the toughest year ever, huge upsurge of applications, lots of honor students are going to be disappointed. A couple of patients I saw as little kids have come back for moral support and they say the most trivial factor can nudge the scales. A big-time scandal would energize the Rejection Gods." He bowed. "O Great Swami of the East, your wisdom has pierced the miasma." He began circling the room. "Ol' Stanley was wrong. Why I rely upon you has nothing to do with personality." Creighton might've been off about that but to my eye he was right about the house yielding nothing of value. The miserly space had already taken on an abandoned feel. The front room, carelessly and cheaply furnished, sported a U-build bookshelf full of high school texts, SAT and ACT practice manuals, a few photography volumes featuring pretty shots of faraway places, paperbacks by Jane Austen, Aphra Behn, and George Eliot. The plywood-and-Formica kitchenette was a sixties bootleg. Wilting fruit and vegetables moldered in the mini-fridge; a couple of Lean Cuisine boxes sat in the freezer compartment. A kitchen cabinet was crammed full of liquor mini-bottles and some full-sized quarts. Budget gin but Grey Goose vodka, no mixers prettying up intentions. Revue de presse Kellerman doesn't just write psychological thrillers she owns the genre. Detroit Free Press Jonathan Kellerman's novels are an obsession; once started it is hard to quit. Orlando Sentinel Entertaining . . . Kellerman masterfully keeps readers guessing. Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star The combination of Alex Delaware and Detective Milo Sturgis make for the most original whodunit duo since Watson and Holmes. Forbes