

The Otvos Inquisition

Part I: Alex Sigell

Chapter 1

My name is Alex Sigell. I'm twenty-three, five-foot-six, blond and blue, am of a semi-athletic build, and have dimples on my face; all of which, I'm told makes me cute as a button. I'm told that I look young for my age (people think I'm in the sixteen to seventeen ballpark) and innocent as a child. I don't take kindly to such accusations, and I'm certainly not as innocent as I look. I've been shot at countless times and shot pretty seriously three of those.

I'm a private investigator of sorts. I have no formal training in law enforcement or anything like that and in fact, more times than less, law enforcement works against me. But early on in life I found that I had a knack for being nosy. I could dig up anything on anyone. Sure, social networks and the idiots that spent every waking hour on them made my job hundreds of times easier but even before all that I somehow knew where to go, who to find, and how to get them to talk. Believe me, I always got an A for persistence. And then, in high school, I bought my first computer. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I work the same way a freelance photographer, freelance journalist, or freelance designer works. I'm there when you need me. I work with what you give me. I finish the job, having done a damn good one. You pay me. And then you never see me again.

I have about ten alter egos, complete with false social security cards, passports, and ID's. I'm a purebred American, English, German, Swedish, Scottish, and sometimes a mix of the above. I'm a citizen of over twenty countries. My name could be Damien, Marshall, or Torsten. But my real name is Alex.

Some call me a liar, some call me a cheater, others simply call me a loser. I'm a college drop out, I don't have stable work, I drive a standard issue minivan, and I share an apartment with a friend. And I make over eight-hundred thousand a year. If you think that's a loser, then I guess I'm a loser. But I don't really think so.

My parents are both dead. I tell people that and they give me these sympathetic puppydog looks and reach out to touch my arm or my hand. "I'm sorry." They usually say. It bothered me, but I was ten when they were killed and it was then that I learned how to process grief and emotion much faster and much more efficiently than the average human being. It holds people back, I think. My roommate is like that. You'll meet him soon.

And to top it all off, I don't really know what I like. As in, I don't really know what kind of reproductive organs I like. You see, I don't love anyone. Love complicates things and takes

time and that's just not what I need in life right now. Maybe someday. So without love, you're left with just sex. And sex without love is perfect. But the problem I face is that I like boys and girls. I can't seem to choose between them. I don't know if it's a problem since I'm not trying to choose who to commit my emotions to. Like I said earlier, I don't have any. It's all about efficiency.

That's just about everything that you need to know about me. Now you probably want to know about my work.

Chapter 1

“You were aware of my price and terms when you signed the contract to bring me onboard. You signed the contract. I have a copy in a guarded fireproof safe, locked vault. The original is someplace even more untouchable by you.”

I sat across the man. The little sweating man. The little sweating man in his tweed suit with its suede elbow patches. His glasses were perfectly round and teetered on the edge of his nose. His hair, what little of it there was, was as white as snow and the scalp trying to hide beneath it the way a child hides behind his hands was like a liver spot farm.

“Alright. I’ll pay.” He man replied, grudgingly. “To whom shall I make out?”

“Alex Sigell.” I replied, “That would be who you would make it out to — if I accepted checks.”

“It’s cash only.” I eyed the checkbook. I never took checks. Checks could always be traced. Much less so than credit cards but certainly still as much.

“But—,” The man started, “I don’t think I have that much in cash.”

“You do you have about sixteen thousand in cash in your vault.” I replied. I wasn’t bullshitting him.

“And you would know that how?” The man demanded, becoming indignant.

“By doing my job well.” I sat back and crossed my legs. “To know everything about your daughter I had to know everything about you. And to give you a brief preview of the report you’ll have in hand after I’ve been paid, your wife has been accessing it to finance her affair.”

“What?” The man demanded, standing up.

“You can read it for yourself once you pay me.” I stood up. I was a good five inches shorter than the man across the desk but it didn’t intimate me. I’d taken on men way bigger than him before.

“Look. You have things to do, I have things to do so if you’d just pay me out, I’ll get out of here and you can read all about your wife’s double lives,” I paused, “Emphasis on the plural; and I’ll leave and we’ll never speak again.”

The man pursed his lips, glared at me for a moment, then turned to face the painting behind his desk. He pressed delicately along the edge of the frame. A quiet whirring sound filled the higher frequencies in the air and the painting swung forward.

The man turned to him, “Turn around.”

“I know the code. I’ll put it in if you’d like.” I returned to my seat. I tilted my head as I spoke.

Before the man could utter a word, I answered the question that we both knew was coming up next. “Your wife has it saved on her BlackBerry. Along with the combination to the safe in the garage that you think she doesn’t know about.”

The man began to sputter. He whirled around, tapped in the code on the metallic keypad, and yanked out a silk bag.

I rolled his eyes. It couldn’t get more cliché than that.

The man quickly counted out bundles of hundred dollar bills and handed them to him.

I smiled wanly, dropping them in his backpack.

“Thanks.”

The man rolled his eyes.

“Everything you need to know is in here.”

Alex placed a three inch binder on the desk. He picked up his bag and turned to leave. As he placed his hand on the cold metal door-handle, he turned around.

“Just one last thing,” I paused, eyeing the man up, “There’s a DVD of a file of your wife and a lover having sex on the backseat of your Bentley at night on the marina. Just thought I’d warn you.”

Chapter 2

My bank in downtown Los Angeles looked like something out of a Raymond Chandler film. It was in one of those restored historic buildings with magnificent architecture and tons of marble and dark mahogany inside. It came right out of the age of film noir. Maybe that was why I liked it so much. You walked in and almost felt as though you'd stepped back half a century. You wished you had a fedora and a trench coat on.

I tried to go during the off hours when there wasn't a line, or people to see the fat stack of cash I'd have to take out and pass over to the teller. I didn't trust the tellers, so of course I wouldn't trust anyone in front of the counter.

I often wondered what went through the minds of the bank tellers when I'd take in thousands of dollars in cash for deposit. Maybe that I was a stripper at a top drawer club that only accepted tips in hundreds? Or better, that I was a prostitute? Or maybe that I was an assassin. Paid to execute a few vendettas, take out a few people who knew too much. Those all sounded like so much fun.

Whatever they thought, they never asked. They'd only make small talk, hoping, I imagined, that I would fill in the blanks. I never did.

"The money will be available in you account within an hour, Mr. Sigell. Thank you for banking with us." The woman gave me the standard thank-you-now-get-out-of-my-line smile.

I returned it then turned on my heel and left the building.

I looked around outside. The early afternoon sun was blinding. It was as clear as it ever gets in Los Angeles. I wanted to leave this city with more urgency than a five year old that had to take a piss. Maybe move to San Francisco. But I didn't have anyone to move there with and all the corrupt bastards that kept my bank account fat were here. I mean, I could move to New York and survive there too but at least in Los Angeles you could be miserable and get a tan.

I looked down the street. The iconic Toyota logo was slowly revolving. I'd been thinking about a new car. Everyone that knows me and knows how much I take home always asks me why I don't get something fancy and worthy of what I do. I'm a private investigator. Why don't I get an Aston Martin? Or a Bentley? Or even just a simple E65AMG?

I don't know, really. The truth is that I treat my cars like shit. I put on thirty thousand miles a year and often find myself in shady parts of town. I frequent my body shop as often as an alcoholic frequents the bar. Scrapes, dents, bullet holes. That and I've always thought, especially in this city, a fancy car doesn't mean you make a lot of money. I suspect that eighty percent of the luxury import drivers lease and that at least fifty percent of them are up to their necks in

hock. I, meanwhile, in my economical unpretentious family van pay for my cars in one payment before I even drive off the lot.

The man walked out of the dealership with a smile on his face. I was as amused as I was disgusted by it. When I was a teenager (I looked like I was ten), I worked at Bloomingdales. I made decent money. But it was there that I learned two things: one, I was never going to put on a fake smile and sell (read: beg forcefully) customers overpriced products that they didn't need; and two, I needed to make a lot of money to sustain my lifestyle.

“Good afternoon, sir! Welcome to Toyota! My name's—,”

I cut him off. Whether he believed it or not, I was about to make his job much easier and give him a nice chunk of commission.

“You don't have to pitch anything to me. I know what you sell, I know what I want, I know I'm going to buy it. I'm going to pay cash. And I'd like to be out of here within the hour.” I said in one breath.

My smile filled the silence that had fallen between the two of us.

“What were you interested in today?” The salesman asked.

“A Sienna. Fully loaded. Top trim, all the packages. Charcoal grey or whatever's closest to it.” I replied.

I wasn't bullshitting him. I knew what I wanted. I'd done all the research. I'd gone online and extracted every piece of data from the site until it was as limp and empty as a used prostitute thrown to the gutter.

The salesman hesitated for a moment. I knew he was wondering if a sale could be this easy. I hated to make his day but I wanted a new car and he could give it to me.

“Trading in the old one?” The man asked, eyeing up the 2008 Odyssey I'd come in.

“Yeah. I think I've gotten everything I could out of it.” I replied.

“What bank will you be financing the loan through?” He asked.

“No bank. No loan.”

“Buying outright?”

“Yup.”

“Parents' checking account?”

“Nope.”

I hated that part. I was always asked if my parents were going to help me pay for things. I knew it was because I looked sixteen but fucking hell, I was twenty-three. And

“We just have to verify the check with the bank—,” T

“Call them.” I cut him off. I knew the drill. “There should be more than enough to cover the entire price.”

Twenty minutes later, the salesman handed me the keys along with his card. I dropped it into my pocket. I'd forget it was in there. The jeans would go through the wash. The card would get shredded and rendered unreadable. That was okay. I'd never actually be calling him again anyway.

"Thanks." I replied. I rolled up the window and turned out of the lot, scraping the underside as I did. Not even five minutes with the car and I'd already incurred some damage.

Understand why I don't drive anything fancier?

Chapter 3

“Hey there, pretty boy.” My roommate grinned when I opened the door to our apartment. He was listening to some kind of light jazz and had his work spread out all over the drafting tables he’d set up in the living room. It was kind of like our war room.

Spencer Martin Otvos stood up. He was a good four inches taller than me and filled out his designer clothes well. Today’s ensemble was a white and grey pinstriped tailored dress shirt, sleeves rolled up his defined arms, a magenta tie hanging loosely around his neck, slim-cut dark denim jeans with Ferragamo loafers and the ever-present Tag Hauer watch on his wrist. I suspected there was a grey sports coat lying around somewhere. I knew his wardrobe pretty well. And when it came to putting together outfits, he was pretty predictable.

Unlike me, he had mature looks that often made people think he was a few years past his twenty-six. Part of that was because at twenty seven, he was already the chief operating officer of an incredibly successful international creative firm and carried himself as such, but also because he had the distinguished good looks of a young Kennedy. When you put us side by side, at first glance you’d hesitate and wonder if perhaps he was my father.

“Did you get your new soccer mom car?” He asked.

“Shut up I like it.” I grunted. He loved to tease me about my minivan.

Spencer Otvos was the perfect example of the men in this town that thought that owning a black BMW with dual chrome-rimmed exhaust pipes made them sports car enthusiasts. But I loved him nonetheless. And there had been a time much earlier in our friendship that we’d both been the damn proud owners of fifteen-year-old jalopies.

“Did you already eat?” He asked.

“Yeah.” I replied, “I stopped by the BK on my way home.” I replied. I knew what was coming next.

I walked into the kitchen and dropped my backpack to the floor, opening the fridge for a bottle of Coke. I don’t drink alcohol. I’ll tell you this much: it makes me a completely different person. A scary person.

“I know you have a fast metabolism and that you don’t gain weight and all that crap but you can’t keep eating like that.” He said, coming over and putting his hands on my shoulders.

“Yes I can. I have for the last twelve years of my life.” I replied.

“You’re going to get diabetes and have a heart attack and I’m going to completely freak out and lose it. Thanks a lot.” He playfully slapped the back of my head.

I smirked as he shook his head and walked back into the living room. I liked Spencer. He was the closest thing I had to a partner of any sort. We both incredibly busy with our lives but somehow still found time to keep our friendship afloat.

“Hey, listen, kid,” Spencer turned around in the white leather office chair that he’d spent nearly two thousand on, “Think you can run a background check on a kid that’s applying for a job?”

I nodded, “E-mail me his name, phone number, and e-mail?”

“Already done.” Spencer replied, tapping his iPhone.

“Give me an hour.” I replied.

“You’re awesome.” He grinned, then turned back to the mess of papers on the desk.

I was in high school during the MySpace era. Everyone had profiles and I was constantly stalking people that interested me. Then MySpace crashed and burned and like a phoenix out of the ashes rose Facebook and as its user base grew, so did the amount of information I was able to grab just by navigating through people’s profiles. Then as the developer world opened up, “working the system” shall we say, became easier than ever with the tools that companies willingly opened up to developers. Inside access was only a ten minute job.

On paper I was an IT contractor and platform developer for OE (Otvos Exposition), Spencer’s company. I was on his payroll and I earned a descent sum. Or so it said. The arrangement we worked out was that he’d pay me the standard salary all of their developers, around sixty thousand a year. That, however, I used to pay the rent on our apartment. Any extra was fun money for me.

It was a good arrangement and it worked. Technically, Spencer was paying the rent for the entire apartment but he asked favors enough that I didn’t feel guilty. Plus, his salary was over three million a year and he had over ten million in his four bank accounts. At twenty-seven. He didn’t know that I knew that. I just happened to be curious about his finances one day and getting around banks’ online security is a piece of chocolate mousse cake. Easy and delicious.

I pulled out my laptop and opened up the email. I pulled the kid’s name and immediately set to work. The first stop nowadays was always Facebook. Shit, everyone posted everything on Facebook. In the worst cases it was like you might as well not even wear clothes since everyone already knows what the hell you look like naked, drunk, covered in glitter, and passed out on someone’s couch.

My fingers flew over the keyboard and in seconds I’d pulled up the kid’s profile. He was a graduate of one of the local art schools in town. I pulled up his photos, skipping past the ones of him drinking, with friends, on vacation, with his girlfriend, with his cat. All normal college kid stuff. I pulled up his info page. That was where the fun stuff came in. I knew a little more

than the average Joe when it came to dissecting people's sites and how to pull more info on them. It was part of how I'd made money as a teenager. I'd developed a piece of software that could run a root around most security codes in websites. I wasn't "friends" with this kid but with my little hack I could instantly get around any privacy barrier and pull up all of his personal information.

I pulled up everything he'd ever posted, deleted stuff included. That was the downfall of social networks. They never actually deleted anything. Every character the kid had ever typed, photographed, linked, pinged, whatever, I could find.

I pulled up his cell phone number from his contact sheet.

I ran it through a program a fellow *blackhat* developer had crafted. It gave me access to all of his text messages and calls. I ran those through a few filters. Nothing out of the ordinary came up.

The last thing I did was run a criminal background check on him. He'd been drug tested at his last job. Clean every time. I hadn't seen anything else to disprove it. A lot of times I don't even run drug test checks. You can pass with flying colors as long as you hadn't smoked or dosed within three days. Social network photos were the more common tattletales. He didn't have any of those so I assumed he either hid it well or was sober.

I turned to Spencer who had his back turned to me and was scratching his head.

"He's clean, in my opinion."

"Hygienic and legally sound."

Spencer nodded, "I guess I'll be giving him a call in the morning then. Thanks."

I closed the profile.

Congratulations, Kevin Dreyfus.

That was what I did for a living. Running people through the wringer, collecting every bit of data on them, revealing their innermost secrets. And as you can probably tell now, it doesn't take long when you know what you're doing. I knew Kevin Dreyfus' entire life story and it only took me an hour to find it all. So imagine now, when I'm working for some executive and the job takes me a month or more to complete, how much I find, how much I learn; all of which then gets passed on to my employers.

Your secrets are never safe.

Just saying.