

Chapter 1

I heard footsteps on the stairs, the pitter patter of familiar 10-year-old feet. The feet belonged to a little boy, Timmy, who lived just next door. Timmy never seemed to be deterred by the fact that we lived in one of the few buildings on the block that did not yet have a hydraulic lift. In truth, he often seemed to enjoy the climb up to the second floor where I was currently located.

He also consistently did not understand that I meant it when I repeatedly told him that my office was only open to myself, my personal visitors and the cat. Timmy, however, more or less, continued to come and go as he pleased.

Of course, I could have locked the door that led up to my office, but as I was trying to run a business, keeping potential clients out would probably be a bad practice.

I suppose it was a good thing I was not actually doing anything related to work when his knock came upon my door. In fact, I had been staring at funny cat photos on the glass-plastic hybrid screen in front of me as I sat at my desk. The shiny computer display was newly bought, thanks to a suggestion made to me by my favorite computer expert and IT consultant, Harry McDonald.

As soon as Timmy knocked, I reached up to touch the screen and swiped my finger across, bringing up something that looked much more official. Unfortunately, it was my billing and invoicing program and I had been putting off that work since the day before. I quietly groaned, as I certainly did not want to look at it now. But things being as they were, I settled on it for Timmy's inevitable visit.

Even as Timmy knocked a second time, I briefly thought about sinking below the desk in front of me and pretending not to be there. However, for some reason, instead, I said "Come in."

I guess I was a sucker for kids. Just don't tell anyone I ever admitted to that. And Timmy was actually a pretty good kid. I think maybe I also felt a little sorry for him. His parents were virtually non-existent in his life and his grandparents were raising him.

After I spoke, the doorknob turned and in bounced a blonde messy-haired child with bright blue eyes dressed in jeans and a non-descript red hoodie. On his feet were his favorite pair of black Kicks.

"We gotta' make this quick," I told him, as he moved towards my desk. I thought maybe if I looked and acted busy that it would tide the wave of questions that were soon to emit from his forever curious lips.

I placed my hands on the desk, attempting to seem more business-like, and tried to put on my best impatient face that I could come up with. Silently, I was praying that his visit would be short because I was already feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on.

Sure, maybe I sort of liked kids, and even this one in particular, but I never could tolerate them for long periods of time.

"Hey, Miss Grosjean," Timmy said in that annoying way 10-year-olds have. He leaned over across the desk, his hands reaching for the magic 8-ball I kept there.

I recoiled at the use of the word "Miss," as I always do. Damn it, but leave it to a kid to make me feel so old. "Hey, Timmy," I replied, still attempting to seem busy and

distracted, using my best adult voice.

Timmy shook the magic 8-ball a few times, never seeming to understand the antiquated technology involved with it. He stared at it intently, his eyebrows almost coming together in concentration, almost as if he believed that a toy could so easily predict his future. Once satisfied with an answer from the ball, he returned it to its previous position on my desk and asked the question I had been waiting for. Because all of our conversations began the same way.

"Whatcha' doing?"

"Working," I lied and furrowed my forehead, looking down at my desk as if there were a million things there that needed my attention. Unfortunately, my desk was clean because in this day and age, technology generally prevented the use or need for things like actual paperwork. So instead, I focused my attention on the invoicing program on my new display, which caused me to involuntarily cringe again.

"Whatcha' working on?" he asked, the next question in what was to become a barrage of questions that I usually deal with when he arrives.

"Something important," I answered, which is usually my answer during this little exchange that we always share.

"Can I see your gun again?" He asked, which was usually the \$10 million question of the hour.

I was actually surprised that he had managed to get to that part of the inquisition so early on. Usually, I have at least 20 more queries that lead up to that one.

I had to ask myself a serious question about his fascination with my weapon. Sure, kids did not see real guns much since they were banned from the general public nearly 45 years ago. And I carried an old-fashioned .38 Smith & Wesson Special, something most kids would never have the opportunity to see outside of a museum. With the advent of laser weapons, my gun was pretty much unique.

"Now is not really a good time, Timmy," I replied and shook my head at him. "Besides, your grandmother would kill me if she knew I was showing off my gun to you." I wasn't sure this was the truth, but I guessed that most people raising kids would have issue with them seeing firearms, being that they were technically illegal.

Not that my gun, in particular, was illegal. I had a permit to carry it. Being an ex-cop did come with its perks.

I motioned towards the door and hoped he would take a hint. I reached up and rubbed my temples because I felt the headache I had been nursing beginning to build. "I really need to work. Sorry," I told him and hoped that would be the end of it.

"Oh," he said, in a very dejected 10-year-old voice.

Damnit. That one gets me. Every time. "Oh, alright," I caved, "but we have to make it quick, agreed?"

"Yep!" He nodded excitedly.

I reached up and touched the display, pulling up a number pad. I tapped in a code that involved a series of numbers and letters that included my cat's name, and the top right desk drawer popped open with a quiet "click."

By the time I reached into the drawer, Timmy had already come around the edge of the desk and was leaning over me.

"Whoa... this isn't a toy, remember?" I reminded him as I reached in and carefully

took out the unloaded pistol.

The .38 was a real beauty, a throwback to a more elegant period of time. Its silvery finish and white pearl grips were gleaming. I had to admit, looking at the weapon through Timmy's 10-year-old eyes made it seem pretty darn cool.

Timmy was grinning from ear to ear as I turned it over carefully in my hand, showing it off. "See? There it is... happy?" I asked him, realizing I was grinning, too.

Timmy giggled and then clapped his hands together, and in that moment, I felt like the most amazing grown-up alive. Even my headache was soon forgotten.

"Now, scram!" I told him, still smiling as I put the gun back in the drawer and reset the lock. "Your grandmother is going to kill me," I reiterated as he made his way towards the door. At least his curiosity was sated for the day and he seemed willing to go.

I stood up, stretched my legs and followed him out of my office door and down the steps to the back door.

"See 'ya later," he yelled out, not waiting for a response, as he ran outside to go do whatever it is kids do these days.

My name is Alex Grosjean and I am a real modern-day private investigator. And no, it is not as glamorous as it sounds.

Of course, I have not always been a private jane. I actually started my career path at the bright age of 18 at the local university, hoping to be something that I had not fully decided upon yet. In fact, at college, I changed my major almost as much as I changed my underwear. No matter what I studied, I never seemed to be able to find my way.

Fortunately, a mistake made on my course schedule landed me in an American Criminal Justice class. There, I found my calling. I dropped out of college and joined the police academy instead. Obviously, my family and friends thought I was crazy, but once I put on that blue uniform and started working the beat for the Memphis Police Department, they knew I was set on that path.

My decision had been a very personal one. Finally, for the first time in my life, I felt that I was doing something good. I was making a difference.

Being a cop was the one thing I felt I was good at. I had a way of sniffing out details and eventually worked my way up from being a beat cop to a full fledged detective. The last unit I worked in was Missing Persons. But what I really wanted? I wanted to work homicide.

That didn't happen. And now I'm a private eye. Sure, maybe the work isn't as important as finding a kidnapping victim or busting a drug ring, but what I do still matters, just on a smaller scale.

For example, my first private client was 8-year-old Rebecca Jacobs. Rebecca's mother had come to me, practically in tears, having inadvertently let the family dog out of the house. The dog had then gone missing. Rebecca was heart-broken and I was the only person willing to help. For the right price, of course.

Now I know what you're thinking. How could I charge a little girl to help her find her dog? I'll tell you how: I had bills to pay and I had to eat. In the end, it was a living.

I scoured their neighborhood for the dog, interviewing anyone who would bother to answer the door when I knocked. I eventually found a family who had taken the animal in, thinking it a stray, and reunited Rebecca with her companion.

This, of course, led to some great word-of-mouth advertising and my new life as an investigator was born. I was licensed, got a civilian permit to carry a weapon (just in case) and got myself a new high-end computer system that let me hack and search into people's lives without them even knowing about it.

I handled most cases that were thrown my way, but mostly I dealt with cheating husbands and wives. You would be surprised at how married couples seem to miss out on understanding that whole fidelity thing. In fact, my own marriage suffered from adultery. Fortunately for me, I had learned the signs of cheating and knew what to look for.

Once I had proof, I called the lawyer, made a date with the court and got the hell out of dodge.

Which is why I now live here, in this house, in Olympic City, with my mother. Sure, go ahead, make fun of the middle-aged woman who lives and works out of her mother's house. But at 80 years old, Mom began to need me around, not that she would care to admit it. And on most days, I actually like the company. Being a divorced PI can get pretty lonely.

There is one downside, though, of being one's own boss. Working for myself means that the work is never steady. And although I often appreciate the down-time, sometimes it means I end up stressing out about how I am going to manage to pay the bills on time.

On the day of Timmy's visit, as I was staring at the billing software on the screen before me, I realized that the past few weeks had been entirely too quiet. I tried to tell myself that work would pick up because it always does, but that never seems to get me over the initial panic of not having enough money.

So I sat there, in my office, not really doing much about anything, commiserating about the lack of dollar signs in my bank account and surfing the internet for funny pictures of cats.

I suppose in this day and age, it should be surprising that a private investigator still manages to eke out a living of some sort. With advances in technology, information is generally easy to be found. The trick, though, or so I have discovered, is in knowing where to look. And with so much information out there, getting to the heart of the facts can often be challenging.

I had a knack for uncovering the right questions to answer and the right searches to explore. I also understood good old-fashioned legwork, the sort of thing that many modern investigators fail to grasp.

Many times, though, it just seems like the truth finds me. I'm lucky like that. I have that kind of face that people want to talk to and confide in, sort of like a truth magnet. This gift, though, can be both a blessing and a curse.

Working from home does allow me to help take care of Mom. She is still fairly independent, especially considering her age, but she has started showing tendencies of confusion and short term memory loss. I am around the house more often than not, and even though looking after her isn't necessarily a 24/7 job, I am somewhere near her, if needed.

My previous gig had ended several weeks ago. I had been hired by international corporation Zeus, Inc., to check on an employee who was suspected of abusing a company health insurance policy. Zeus was my largest client and always paid well. Add that to corporate espionage generally being easy work, and I was not about to refuse.

My investigation only took a little over a week and I soon had damning evidence against the employee in question who had tried to claim his two dogs as dependents on his insurance policy. He was fired and I was handed a nice big paycheck.

I subsequently spent this new money on having Harry help me upgrade my computer, which had needed a serious update.

So now, I was getting tapped out again. I still had a little left over from that assignment, but most of it would go towards getting caught up on the bills and putting a little back for a vacation I probably would never take.

I stared blankly at the computer and let my mind wander as I stared at the door, almost as if willing a new client to walk through.

Instead, the display in front of me started flashing and its internal speakers began ringing as a phone call came in.

I jumped, startled, and it rang again. The ID of the caller flashed in front of my eyes and came up as "Zeus, Inc." Well, maybe it was my lucky day, I thought, as I tapped my finger on the screen.

"Alex Grosjean Investigations," I answered in what I hoped was my most professional voice.

The screen came to life and I was a little surprised that the caller was not Aleisha Brentwood, my usual Zeus contact and best friend since childhood. Aleisha's father owned the company and she currently served as vice president.

Aleisha and I had practically grown up together and had been close since the day we met at a playground when we were still in diapers and playing with digiblocks.

Instead, Marcus Stephens' face appeared. Absently, I reached up and tried to re-arrange the mop of blonde curls atop my head and wished that today had not been the day I had decided to go without make-up.

Marcus was handsome in that way that older men sometimes are. He had the salt and pepper hair, the chiseled cheekbones and grey eyes that a gal could get sucked right into.

He was also the right-hand man of Zeus' CEO, Joseph Brentwood, and although no one seemed to know Marcus' official title, he was pretty high up on the corporate food chain.

I leaned a little away from the display so that maybe his sight of me on the other end did not look as horrible as I imagined.

"Hey, Marcus."

His tone and manner seemed hesitant before he spoke. "Alex."

When I did not reply, but to offer a nod, he continued. "Aleisha told me to contact you as soon as possible."

Aleisha had sent me referrals before, sure, but something about Marcus' behavior made me ill at ease. I found myself beginning to worry and hoped that everything with Aleisha was alright.

I straightened in my chair and finally allowed myself to lean in a little closer. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

His answer was direct. "It's Mr. Brentwood. He's gone missing."

I had to take a moment to digest that because it did not somehow feel right. Mr. Brentwood was not one of those men you would ever expect anything bad to happen to. I had not seen a lot of him when Aleisha and I were children, but from what little I knew

and had seen, he had always been a force to be reckoned with.

"Wouldn't that be a job for the police?" I asked.

Marcus nodded and replied, "We have contacted the police, of course, but Aleisha believes you might be able to offer your assistance."

I swallowed hard, remembering the last missing persons case I had handled with the police department. The memories were entirely too clear in my mind's eye and I immediately turned down the offer. "I'm sorry," I said, "But I'm just a PI and this is definitely something left to the police." Because the last thing I wanted was to have to tell my best friend that her father was dead. Or worse. Because when someone went missing, it was rare when they were found, at least alive. Or even in one piece. I had learned that the hard way.

"Aleisha is really counting on you here, Alex," he said, matter-of-factly.

"I'm sure she is... but..." I attempted to reply.

I was interrupted, "We would pay you, of course. But this is about helping out your friend."

Damn him, I thought. Damn him to hell. It was the guilt card and it worked too well with me. I could not tell my best friend no, even if the idea of what was to come scared the shit out of me.

So I sighed and gave in. What other choice did I have?

"Have Aleisha get in touch with me with the details," I told him, feeling a sinking sort of feeling deep within my gut.

"Will do," he replied as I frowned and ended the call.