



**THE
UNIVERSE
VERSUS
ALEX WOODS**



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GAVIN EXTENCE


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For Alix, without whom this book would not exist.



ENTENDER

They finally stopped me at Dover as I was trying to get back into the country. I was half expecting it, but it still came as kind of a shock when the barrier stayed down. It's funny how some things can be so mixed up like that. Having come this far, I'd started to think that I might make it the whole way home after all. It would have been nice to have been able to explain things to my mother. You know: before anyone else had to get involved.

It was 1 a.m., and it was raining. I'd rolled Mr Peterson's car up to the booth in the 'Nothing to Declare' lane, where a single customs officer was on duty. His weight rested on his elbows, his chin was cupped in his hands, and, but for this crude arrangement of scaffolding, his whole body looked ready to fall like a sack of potatoes to the floor. The graveyard shift – dreary dull from dusk till dawn – and for a few heartbeats it seemed that the customs officer lacked the willpower necessary to rotate his eyeballs and check my credentials. But then the moment collapsed. His gaze shifted; his eyes widened. He signalled for me to wait and spoke into his walkie-talkie, rapidly and with

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obvious agitation. That was the instant I knew for sure. I found out later that my picture had been circulated in every major port from Aberdeen to Plymouth. With that and the TV appeals, I never stood a chance.

What I remember next is kind of muddled and strange, but I'll try to describe it for you as best I can.

The side door of the booth was swinging open and at the same moment there washed over me the scent of a field full of lilacs. It came on just like that, from nowhere, and I knew straight away that I'd have to concentrate extra hard to stay in the present. In hindsight, an episode like this had been on the cards for a while. You have to bear in mind that I hadn't slept properly for several days, and Bad Sleeping Habits has always been one of my triggers. Stress is another.

I looked straight ahead and I focussed. I focussed on the windscreen wipers moving back and forth and tried to count my breaths, but by the time I'd got to five, it was pretty clear that this wasn't going to be enough. Everything was becoming slow and blurry. I had no choice but to turn the stereo up to maximum. Handel's *Messiah* flooded the car – the 'Hallelujah' chorus, loud enough to rattle the exhaust. I hadn't planned it or anything. I mean, if I'd had time to prepare for this, I'd have chosen something simpler and calmer and quieter: Chopin's nocturnes or one of Bach's cello suites, perhaps. But I'd been working my way through Mr Peterson's music collection since Zurich, and it just so happened that at that precise moment I was listening to *that* precise section of Handel's *Messiah* – like it was Fate's funny joke. Of course, this did me no favours later on: the customs officer gave a full report to the police in which he said that for a long time I'd resisted detention, that I'd just

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sat there ‘staring into the night and listening to religious music at full volume, like he was the Angel of Death or something’. You’ve probably heard that quote already. It was in all the papers – they have a real boner for details like that. But you should understand that at the time I didn’t have a choice. I could see the customs officer in my peripheral vision, hunchbacked at my window in his bright yellow jacket, but I forced myself to ignore him. He shone his torch in my eyes, and I ignored that too. I just kept staring straight ahead and focussing on the music. That was my anchor. The lilacs were still there, trying their best to distract me. The Alps were starting to intrude – jagged, frosted memories, as sharp as needles. I swaddled them in the music. I kept telling myself that there was nothing *but* the music. There was nothing but the strings and the drums and the trumpets, and all those countless voices singing out God’s praises. I know in retrospect that I must have looked pretty suspicious, just sitting there like that with my eyes glazed and the music loud enough to wake the dead. It must have sounded like I had the entire London Symphony Orchestra performing on the back seat. But what could I do? When you get an aura that powerful, there’s no chance of it passing of its own accord: to be honest with you, there were several moments when I was right on the precipice. I was just a hair’s breadth from convulsions.

But after a while, the crisis abated. Something slipped back into gear. I was dimly aware that the torch beam had moved on. It was now frozen on the space two feet to my left, though I was too frazzled to figure out why at the time. It was only later that I remembered Mr Peterson was still in the passenger seat. I hadn’t thought to move him.

* * *

The moments ticked on, and eventually the torchlight swung away. I managed to turn my head forty-five degrees and saw that the customs officer was again speaking into his walkie-talkie, palpably excited. Then he tapped the torch against the window and made an urgent downwards gesture. I don't remember pushing the button, but I do remember the rush of cold, damp air as the glass rolled down. The customs officer mouthed something, but I couldn't make it out. The next thing I knew, he'd reached through the open window and flipped off the ignition. The engine stopped, and a second later, the last hallelujah died on the night air. I could hear the hiss of drizzle on tarmac, fading in slowly, like reality resolving itself. The customs officer was speaking too, and waving his arms in all these weird, wobbly gestures, but my brain wasn't able to decode any of that yet. Right then, there was something else going on – a thought that was fumbling its way towards the light. It took me for ever to organize my ideas into words, but when I finally got there, this is what I said: 'Sir, I should tell you that I'm no longer in a fit state to drive. I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else to move the car for me.'

For some reason, that seemed to choke him. His face went through a whole series of strange contortions, and then for a very long time he just stood there with his mouth open. If it had been me standing there with my mouth open, it would have been considered pretty rude, but I don't think it's worth getting too uptight about things like that. So I just waited. I'd said what I needed to say, and it had taken considerable effort. I didn't mind being patient now.

When he'd cleared his airways, the customs officer told me that I had to get out of the car and come with him straight

away. But the funny thing was, as soon as he said it, I realized that I wasn't quite ready to move yet. My hands were still locked white on the steering wheel, and they showed no signs of relinquishing their grip. I asked if I could possibly have a minute.

'Son,' the customs officer said, 'I need you to come *now*.'

I glanced across at Mr Peterson. Being called 'son' was not a good omen. I thought I was probably in a Whole Heap of Shit.

My hands unlocked.

I managed to get out of the car, reeled and then leaned up against the side for a few seconds. The customs officer tried to get me to move, but I told him that unless he wanted to carry me, he'd have to give me a moment to find my feet. The drizzle was prickling the exposed skin on my neck and face, and small tears of rain were beginning to bead on my clothing. I could feel all my sensations regrouping. I asked how long it had been raining. The customs officer looked at me but didn't reply. The look said that he wasn't interested in small talk.

A police car came and took me away to a room called Interview Room C in Dover Police Station, but first I had to wait in a small Portakabin back in the main part of the port. I had to wait for a long time. I saw a lot of different officers from the Port Authority, but no one really talked to me. They just kept giving me all these very simple two-word instructions, like 'wait here' and 'don't move', and telling me what was going to happen to me next, like they were the chorus in one of those Ancient Greek plays. And after every utterance, they'd immediately ask me if I understood, like I was some kind of imbecile or something. To be honest with you, I might have given them that

impression. I don't know. I still hadn't recovered from my seizure. I was tired, my co-ordination was shot, and on the whole I felt pretty disconnected, like my head had been packed with cotton wool. I was thirsty too, but I didn't want to ask if there was a vending machine I might use in case they thought I was trying to be clever with them. As you probably know, when you're in trouble already, you can ask a simple, legitimate question like that and end up in even more trouble. I don't know why. It's like you cross this invisible line and suddenly people don't want to acknowledge that everyday things like vending machines or Diet Coke exist any more. I guess some situations are supposed to be so grave that people don't want to trivialize them with carbonated drinks.

Anyway, eventually a police car came and took me away to Interview Room C, where my situation was in no way improved. Interview Room C was not much larger than a cupboard and had been designed with minimum comfort in mind. The walls and floor were bare. There was a rectangular table with four plastic chairs, and a tiny window that didn't look like it opened, high up on the back wall. There was a smoke alarm and a CCTV camera in one corner, close to the ceiling. But that was it as far as furnishings were concerned. There wasn't even a clock.

I was seated and then left alone for what seemed like a very long time. I think maybe that was deliberate, to try to make me feel restless or uncomfortable, but really I've got no definite grounds for thinking that. It's just a hypothesis. Luckily, I'm very happy in my own company, and pretty adept at keeping my mind occupied. I have about a million different exercises to help me stay calm and focussed.

When you're tired but need to stay alert, you really need

something a bit tricky to keep your mind ticking over. So I started to conjugate my irregular Spanish verbs, starting in the simple present and then gradually working my way through to the more complicated tenses. I didn't say them aloud, because of the CCTV camera, but I voiced them in my head, still taking care with the accent and stresses. I was on *entiendas*, the informal second-person present subjunctive of *entender* (to understand), when the door opened and two policemen walked in. One was the policeman who had driven me from the port, and he was carrying a clipboard with some papers attached to it. The other policeman I hadn't seen before. They both looked pissed off.

'Good morning, Alex,' said the police officer whom I didn't know. 'I'm Chief Inspector Hearse. You've already met Deputy Inspector Cunningham.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Hello.'

I'm not going to bother describing Chief Inspector Hearse or Deputy Inspector Cunningham for you at any great length. Mr Treadstone, my old English teacher, used to say that when you're writing about a person, you don't need to describe every last thing about him or her. Instead, you should try to give just one telling detail to help the reader picture the character. Chief Inspector Hearse had a mole the size of a five-pence piece on his right cheek. Deputy Inspector Cunningham had the shiniest shoes I've ever seen.

They sat down opposite, and gestured that I should sit down too. That was when I realized that I'd stood up when they walked in the room. That's one of the things they taught you at my school – to stand up whenever an adult enters the room. It's meant to demonstrate respect, I guess, but after a while, you just do it without thinking.

They looked at me for quite a long time without saying anything. I wanted to look away, but I thought that might seem rude, so I just kept looking straight back and waited.

‘You know, Alex,’ Chief Inspector Hearse said finally, ‘you’ve created quite a stir over the past week or so. You’ve become quite the celebrity . . .’

Straight away, I didn’t like the way this was going. I had no idea what he expected me to say. Some things there’s no sensible response to, so I just kept my mouth shut. Then I shrugged, which wasn’t the cleverest thing to do, but it’s very difficult to do nothing in situations like that.

Chief Inspector Hearse scratched his mole. Then he said: ‘You realize that you’re in a lot of trouble?’

It might have been a question; it might have been a statement. I nodded anyway, just in case.

‘And you know *why* you’re in trouble?’

‘Yes. I suppose so.’

‘You understand that this is serious?’

‘Yes.’

Chief Inspector Hearse looked across at Deputy Inspector Cunningham, who hadn’t said anything yet. Then he looked at me again. ‘You know, Alex, some of your actions over the past hour suggest otherwise. I think if you realized how serious this was, you’d be a lot more worried than you appear to be. Let me tell you, if I was sitting where you are now, I think I’d be a lot more worried than you appear to be.’

He should have said ‘if I *were* sitting where you are now’ – I noticed because I already had the subjunctive on my mind – but I didn’t correct him. People don’t like to be corrected about things like that. That was one of the things Mr Peterson always

told me. He said that correcting people's grammar in the middle of a conversation made me sound like a Major Prick.

'Tell me, Alex,' Chief Inspector Hearse went on, '*are* you worried? You seem a little too calm – a little too casual – all things considered.'

'I can't really afford to let myself get too stressed out,' I said. 'It's not very good for my health.'

Chief Inspector Hearse exhaled at length. Then he looked at Deputy Inspector Cunningham and nodded. Deputy Inspector Cunningham handed him a sheet of paper from the clipboard.

'Alex, we've been through your car. I think you'll agree that there are several things we need to discuss.'

I nodded. I could think of one thing in particular. But then Chief Inspector Hearse surprised me: he didn't ask what I thought he was going to ask. Instead, he asked me to confirm, as a matter of record, my full name and date of birth. That threw me for about a second. All things considered, it seemed like a waste of time. They already knew who I was: they had my passport. There was no reason not to cut to the chase. But, really, I didn't have much choice but to go along with whatever game they were playing.

'Alexander Morgan Woods,' I said. 'Twenty-third of the ninth, 1993.'

I'm not too enamoured with my full name, to be honest with you, especially the middle part. But most people just call me Alex, like the policemen did. When you're called Alexander, hardly anyone bothers with your full name. My mother doesn't bother. She goes one syllable further than everyone else and just calls me Lex, as in Lex Luthor – and you should know that she was calling me that long before I lost my hair. After

that, I think she started to regard my name as prophetic; before, she just thought it was sweet.

Chief Inspector Hearse frowned and then looked at Deputy Inspector Cunningham again and nodded. He kept doing that, like he was the magician and Deputy Inspector Cunningham was his assistant with all the props.

Deputy Inspector Cunningham took from the back of his clipboard a clear plastic bag, which he then tossed into the centre of the table, where it landed with a quiet slap. It was extremely dramatic, it really was. And you could tell that they *wanted* it to be dramatic. The police have all sorts of psychological tricks like that. You probably know that already if you ever watch TV.

‘Approximately one hundred and thirteen grams of marijuana,’ Chief Inspector Hearse intoned, ‘retrieved from your glove compartment.’

I’m going to level with you: I’d completely forgotten about the marijuana. The fact is, I hadn’t even opened the glove compartment since Switzerland. I’d had no reason to. But you try telling the police something like that at around 2 a.m. when you’ve just been stopped at customs.

‘That’s a lot of pot, Alex. Is it *all* for personal use?’

‘No . . .’ I changed my mind. ‘Actually, yes. I mean, it was for personal use, but not for *my* personal use.’

Chief Inspector Hearse raised his eyebrows about a foot. ‘You’re saying that this one hundred and thirteen grams of marijuana *isn’t* for you?’

‘No. It was Mr Peterson’s.’

‘I see,’ said Chief Inspector Hearse. Then he scratched his mole again and shook his head. ‘You should know that we also

found quite a bit of money in your car.' He looked down at the inventory sheet. 'Six hundred and forty-five Swiss francs, eighty-two euros and a further three hundred and eighteen pounds sterling. Found in an envelope in the driver's side-compartment, next to your passport. That's quite a lot of cash for a seventeen-year-old to be carrying, wouldn't you say?'

I didn't say anything.

'Alex, this is very important. What *exactly* were you planning to do with this one hundred and thirteen grams of marijuana?'

I thought about this for quite a long time. 'I don't know. I wasn't planning anything. I guess I probably would've thrown it away. Or maybe I would have given it away. I don't know.'

'You might have *given* it away?'

I shrugged. I thought it would have made quite a good gift for Ellie. She would've probably appreciated it. But I kept this to myself. 'I've got no personal interest in it,' I affirmed. 'I mean, I enjoyed growing it, but that was all. I certainly wouldn't have kept it.'

Deputy Inspector Cunningham started coughing very loudly. It was the first sound that had come from him and it made me jump a bit. I'd thought perhaps he was a mute or something.

'You grew it?'

'I grew it on Mr Peterson's behalf,' I clarified.

'I see. You grew it, then gave it away. It was basically a charitable enterprise?'

'No. I mean, I never really owned it in the first place. It always belonged to Mr Peterson, so I was in no position to give it away. Like I said, I just grew it.'

'Yes. You grew it but you have no *personal* interest in the substance itself?'

‘Only a pharmacological one.’

Chief Inspector Hearse looked at Deputy Inspector Cunningham, then tapped his fingers on the tabletop for about a minute. ‘Alex, I’m going to ask you one more time,’ he said. ‘Do you take drugs? Are you on drugs right now?’

‘No.’

‘Have you *ever* taken drugs?’

‘No.’

‘Right. Then there’s something you’ll have to clear up for me.’ Deputy Inspector Cunningham handed him another sheet of paper. ‘We talked to the gentleman who stopped you at customs. He says that you were acting very strangely. He says that when he tried to detain you, you refused to co-operate. In fact, he says, and I quote, “The suspect turned up the music in his car until it was so loud that they probably heard it in France. Then he proceeded to ignore me for the next few minutes. He was staring straight ahead and his eyes looked glazed. When I eventually managed to get him to leave his vehicle, he told me that he was not in a fit state to drive.”’

Chief Inspector Hearse put the sheet of paper down and looked at me. ‘You want to explain that for us, Alex?’

‘I have temporal lobe epilepsy,’ I explained. ‘I was having a partial seizure.’

Chief Inspector Hearse raised his eyebrows again and then frowned very deeply, like this was the last thing he wanted to hear. ‘You have epilepsy?’

‘Yes.’

‘No one told me anything about that.’

‘I’ve had it since I was ten. It started right after my accident.’

I touched my scar. 'When I was ten years old, I was—'

Chief Inspector Hearse nodded impatiently. 'Yes. I know about your accident. *Everyone* knows about your accident. But no one mentioned epilepsy to me.'

I shrugged. 'I've been seizure-free for almost two years.'

'But you're saying that you had a seizure earlier, in the car?'

'Yes. That's why I'm no longer in a fit state to drive.'

Chief Inspector Hearse looked at me for a very long time and then shook his head. 'You know, Mr Knowles gave us quite a detailed report, and he never once mentioned that you'd had a seizure. And I think that's the kind of thing he would have mentioned, don't you? He said that you sat perfectly still and didn't look at all agitated. He said you looked a little too calm, given the circumstances.'

Chief Inspector Hearse had a real thing about me being too calm.

'It was a *partial* seizure,' I said. 'I didn't lose consciousness and I didn't have any convulsions. I managed to stop it before it spread too far.'

'And that's the full explanation?' Chief Inspector Hearse asked. 'If I run a blood test right now, it will come back clean? You haven't been taking drugs?'

'Only carbamazepine.'

'Which is?'

'It's an anti-epileptic,' I said.

Chief Inspector Hearse looked ready to spit. He thought I was being funny. He told me that even if I was telling the truth, even if I *did* have temporal lobe epilepsy and I *had* had a complex partial seizure, that still didn't go nearly far enough to explaining my behaviour, not to his mind. They'd found one hundred and

thirteen grams of marijuana in my glove compartment and I wasn't taking that fact nearly seriously enough.

'I don't think it's that serious,' I admitted. 'Not in the grand scheme of things.'

Chief Inspector Hearse shook his head for about ten minutes and then said that possession of a controlled substance with probable intent to supply was a Very Big Deal indeed, and if I told him otherwise, then either I was trying to be funny or I was, without question, the most naïve seventeen-year-old he'd ever met in his life.

'I'm not being naïve,' I said. 'You think one way; I think another. It's a genuine difference of opinion.'

Needless to say, they wouldn't let the drugs thing go for ages. It was a strange situation where the more open and honest I tried to be, the more convinced they became that I was lying. Eventually, I told them that I *wanted* to take a blood test: I figured they could argue with me until Judgment Day, but they couldn't argue with science. But by the time I was demanding my right to a blood test, I think they had pretty much decided to move on anyway. The fact is, we still had one more thing to discuss. It should have been the very first item on the agenda, but like I've said, the police can be pretty dramatic if they think it'll get results.

'The final item on the inventory . . .' Chief Inspector Hearse began. Then he rested his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands. He looked down and didn't say anything for a very long time.

I waited.

'The final item,' Chief Inspector Hearse began again, 'is one small silver urn – retrieved from the passenger seat. Weight approximately four point eight kilograms.'

To be honest with you, I'm not sure why they bothered weighing it.

'Alex, I have to ask: the contents of that urn . . .'

Chief Inspector Hearse looked straight in my eyes and didn't say anything. It was pretty clear that he *wasn't* going to ask, despite what he'd said, but I knew what the question was, obviously. And really I'd had enough of all these psychological games. I was tired and thirsty. So I didn't wait to see if Chief Inspector Hearse was ever going to finish his question. I just nodded my head and told him what he wanted to know.

'Yes,' I said. 'That was Mr Peterson.'

After that, they had about a million more questions, as you might imagine. Obviously, the main thing they wanted to know was exactly what had happened over the last week, but, to tell you the truth, I'm not ready to talk about that yet. I don't think there would be much point – and there was even less point at the time. Chief Inspector Hearse told me that he wanted a 'clear, concise and full explanation' of all the relevant circumstances that had led to my being stopped at customs with one hundred and thirteen grams of marijuana and Mr Peterson's remains; but that was a lost cause from the word go. Sometimes when people ask you for a full explanation, you know damn well that's the last thing they want. Really, they want you to give them a paragraph that confirms what they already think they know. They want something that will fit neatly in a box on a police statement form. And that can never be a full explanation. Full explanations are much messier. They can't be conveyed in five unprepared, stop-start minutes. You have to give them time and space to unfold.

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That's why I want to start back at the beginning, where the police wouldn't let me start. I'm going to tell you my story, the full story, in the manner I think it should be told. I'm afraid it's not going to be brief.