Alex Sparrow and the Really Big Stink

For my family: Stanley, Teddy, Mia, Helena, Luis and Dean, with all of my love.

Jennifer Killick

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Also in the Alex Sparrow series:

ALEX SPARROW AND THE FURRY FURY
ALEX SPARROW AND THE ZUMBIE APOCALYPSE

Also from Firefly
Jennifer Killick

MO, LOTTIE AND THE JUNKERS
CRATER LAKE
CRATER LAKE, EVOLUTION



1

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ME

Have you ever wanted to be a secret agent? A bad-A, undercover, villain-busting super spy, like Nick Fury, the top dog at Marvel's S.H.I.E.L.D. agency? Well, don't get your hopes up – it takes a special kind of person and years of training to get that job. I've been working on it since I was four and up until a couple of months ago being accepted into S.H.I.E.L.D. still seemed a long way off. Sure, you can do a hundred star jumps a day to make you strong, and keep chasing the

scabby cat from next door out of your garden to make you quick, but some spy skills are a bit harder to come by. For example, how can you tell if someone is lying? People lie all the time. Especially grown-ups – mums, dads, teachers – all of them. And I'm not just talking about the obvious lies, like pretending the battery is dead when you're stuck in a boring queue and want to play games on their iPhone, or saying you did really well at sports day when you fell on your face and came last. No, this stuff goes *way* deeper. Grown-ups tell lies that you would never guess about: not in a million years. Maybe you're thinking, 'Well neither can you, bigmouth, so shut up and go back to your push-ups'. But I actually can. You want to know how? It's classified information, Top Secret Agent Business, but if you promise to keep it to yourself, I'll tell you.

First of all, let me explain how it started. I'm Alex, by the way, Alex Sparrow. I live at home with Mum, Dad, my little sister Lauren and our boring pet goldfish. I'm ten, in Year 6 at Cherry Tree Lane School. I've never minded school, and back then, when all this began, I was cruising along nicely. I was pretty much the leader of my

group of friends (all boys, no girls, obviously) and we were really popular. Everyone wanted to hang around with us and people looked up to me, you know? Life was awesome, or at least I thought so at the time, until one night, when everything changed…

It was a warm September Friday and Mum and Dad were on one of their Date Nights (it's an embarrassing, old-married-people thing). They got Donna to come over and babysit Lauren, and I had a nag-free evening to myself. I thought I'd take the opportunity to watch some hardcore PS4 gameplay clips on YouTube – the ones made by American dudes who swear all the time. My mum's well hysterical about stuff like that and legs it across the room to slam down the lid of the laptop if anyone says anything even slightly bad, like 'jeez' or 'shizzle'. *So* annoying. Anyway, I was halfway through a super-intense walkthrough when, randomly, Superman's theme song started playing and this pop-up appeared, surrounded by shooting stars and about a hundred emojis:

Alex – Who Can You Trust?

Find out with The Professor's Amazing Lie-Detector.

Only £19.99 – Accurate Results Guaranteed.

Now, I'm no idiot. I know these things are just cheap plastic rubbish, made in China. A complete rip-off. But for some reason, maybe because I was wired on Coke and Tangfastics, maybe because I'd been listening to too many American swear words, maybe because the Superman tune was making me feel like doing something daring, I had this urge to get it. I swiped Mum and Dad's emergency credit card from its not-so-secret hiding place (they really need to re-think their kid-proofing techniques), agreed to the terms and conditions and bang. It was done.

What happened next was weirder still. The second I clicked 'Send', the home phone began to ring, which pretty much never happens, because who even uses a home phone these days? When I answered it, what sounded like a recorded message clicked on. A woman's voice said: 'Thank you for your purchase from The Professor's Laboratory. Your lie detector will be with you before you know it. Good luck, Alex.' As the

message clicked off, I heard a loud crackle and what felt like a spark of electricity seemed to jump from the phone to my ear. It kind of jolted inside my head, like when you touch a metal door handle in a shop and get an electric shock, but much worse. It really hurt, but just for a second. I shouted some abuse into the phone but there was nobody there, so I hung up, wishing I'd left it for Lauren.

I did think it was all a bit strange, but then I started to get a headache so bad that I actually wanted to go to bed, which *never* happens. I tucked myself in with some teacakes and a packet of ham, and fell asleep before I even had a chance to hide the wrappers under my pillow. That was the last time I went to sleep feeling like a normo; the final sleep before the start of the Really Big Stink.



2

STUFF HAPPENED THAT IS TOTALLY W-EAR-ED

The next morning I went about my business as usual. Mum and Dad like a lie-in after their Date Nights, and when they finally come down, they're all kissy, which is disgusting. I made Lauren some Cheerios and did myself some toast so I could be back in my room on the PS4 before they appeared.

Next thing, Mum walked in and said to Lauren, 'Good morning, poppet, did Alex get you your breakfast?'

Lauren put on her baby face and said, 'No, Mummy, he only maked his own breakfast.'

This is the weird part. As she told this flipping outrageous lie, something happened. I heard a low, buzzy noise, and the inside of my right ear kind of vibrated. It was like my ear was farting, I swear. Mum didn't frown and Lauren didn't do her usual 'Urgh – disgustering!' so I came to the conclusion that nobody else had heard it, though I thought I could detect a faint eggy whiff. I was a bit surprised. My ear had never farted before, in fact, my earholes were the only bodily openings which never made a peep. So I did what anyone would do – stuck my finger in and had a root around. Nothing there but wax.

Mum gave me her huffy look and poured Lauren a bowl of cereal. Lauren smirked. No respectable agent would let that sort of behaviour go unpunished, but as Mum was there, I'd need to be extra-sneaky in my quest for revenge.

I walked casually up to the tank where Lauren's pet goldfish lived. I gently tapped the glass. 'Don't you think Miley looks a bit different, Mum? Sort of bigger, and oranger?' Miley – the original Miley – had died. I knew this because it was sort-of-

accidentally my fault: a science experiment gone wrong. Apparently, Red Bull doesn't give goldfish wings. But nobody knew that I was responsible. I hadn't seen the point in coming clean, as I'd learnt my lesson, was a better person for it, and nothing was going to change the fact that Miley was belly-up. But the next day, Miley was swimming around in her tank, though she didn't look quite the same.

Mum shot a look at Lauren who was peering into the tank.

'Why does Miley look different, Mummy?'

'I don't think Miley looks different … she's just got a bit fat. Fish often get fatter in the winter, because they eat more to keep them warm.'

On hearing this frankly rubbish attempt at a lie, my ear trumped again – louder and with a definite pong. Just like before, nobody seemed to notice, though Mum and Lauren were very distracted by the goldfish catastrophe I was cleverly constructing.

'Really?' I asked, with my most innocent face on. 'Do they change colour in the winter, too?'

'Yes!' Mum said, in a squeaky voice. 'Goldfish are very festive. It's their version of wearing a Christmas jumper.'

Once again my ear rumbled.

'It's only September though, Mum.' I felt quite sorry for her; Lauren was squinting at Miley and Mum was starting to panic.

'This may sound crazy,' I said, 'but to me it looks like someone replaced Miley with another fish. Is that even possible?'

I looked at Mum. Lauren looked at Mum. Mum looked like she'd wandered into a nest of velociraptors.

'No. Of course not. No. No. Not at all.'

A big, bubbly fart echoed inside my ear and the smell of poo filled the air. Lauren was looking from Miley Mark 2 to Mum and back again like she really wasn't buying it. As she started screwing her face up for a full-on screaming fit, I took a brief moment to enjoy the results of my stealth-revenge-attack and then ran up to my room to think. I had a sneaky suspicion that something was up, but I needed expert assistance. I needed Google.

After fifteen minutes of thorough research on the web I had ruled out pretty much every ear-related lurgy I could think of. There was no pain or 'discharge of mucus' (yuck) which ruled out

the worst ear illnesses. And there was no ear disease on the whole of the world wide web that involved a nasty stink. It was a bit freaky and, I'm not going to lie, I was scared. I even thought about calling an ambulance. Something stopped me.

My ear had farted every time someone told a lie. How was that possible? And was it just for today, or would I be able to keep doing it forever? For an agent-in-training, it was the perfect skill. It wasn't even a skill. It was almost like a power. A slightly disgusting superpower.

I thought about the origins stories for all my favourite superheroes; many of them were normal guys, living boring lives, until the day a chance meeting or unfortunate accident gave them their powers and changed everything forever.

But I was already Agent Alex Sparrow, an epic bad-A with added swag. If anyone deserved a superpower, it was me. I really had to find out what was going on.

So, that's how it started. No lie. Since then, a lot has happened. I was an idiot with it at first, swaggering around, thinking I could do anything I wanted. I had to learn the hard way that it isn't so simple. 'With great power comes great

responsibility.' In my case, with a bit of power comes a lot of stink. And the trickiest thing about it all? Knowing that somebody is lying is not the same as knowing the truth.