

THE
Real
LADY
DETECTIVE
AGENCY

A TRUE STORY

GUILTY
CONSCIENCES
BEWARE...

REBECCA
JANE



Rebecca Jane

**The Real Lady Detective
Agency: A True Story**

«HarperCollins»

Jane R.

The Real Lady Detective Agency: A True Story / R. Jane —
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Why won't he ever let you use his phone? Why is he always going on about that girl from work? Is he cheating on you? Why won't he ever let you use his phone? Why is he always going on about that girl from work? Is he cheating on you? There's one way to find out – ask him. Then (when he lies) call Rebecca Jane, founder and owner of the Lady Detective Agency. The Agency is one of the UK's most successful female private detective services. It exists for one purpose: to find the truth. Whether that means trailing a transsexual prostitute through the streets of London, following suspected cheats on stag parties, tracking down someone's beloved pet ferret or uncovering famous people's affairs, Rebecca and her elite team will help. Whatever it takes. Their extraordinary dedication stems from first-hand experience of deception. Here Rebecca not only reveals her clients' fascinating stories, but her own rollercoaster journey too – from early success to crushing failure, scandal, abuse and affairs, and ultimately to finding true love. At times heartbreaking, hilarious and eye-opening, this vibrantly-written compilation of stories introduces us to a sparkling and witty new voice in Rebecca and her crack team of female detectives who are always ready to solve any case, no matter how big or small. For the first time, the Agency is opening its doors and revealing its secrets. Guilty consciences beware.

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REBECCA JANE

HARPER

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Rebecca Jane started The Lady Detective Agency in 2009 at the age of twenty-four, after being cheated on by her husband. With her highly trained team of ladies, she now helps hundreds of people solve their problems. She was a finalist for Business Woman of the Year 2011 and was nominated for Inspirational Woman of the Year 2012. She also made the top 100 UK Mumpreneur list.

For Ben, Paris and Peaches

PRELUDE

'Is it eight yet?' Steph asks me.

'Not even close!' I tell her.

'I feel like I've been sitting here a lifetime; my bum is numb. I need a walk.'

All of a sudden I hear the jolly sound of a child-like jingle. It's an ice-cream van!

'Here you go, perfect opportunity for you,' I say to her, handing over some coins and sending her off in search of ice cream.

'Amazing! Surveillance is always made easier when an ice-cream man turns up ...'

Steph isn't wrong. We've been sat outside the same house for eight hours straight, and we've another three to go. I'm pretty sure it could be classed as a torture technique.

My life is crazy. There's no two ways about it. Every day when the phone rings I never know what's coming next. I think I've heard it all, and then someone new enters my life. They have seriously bizarre tales and, more importantly, problems that need solving.

When I say problems, I don't mean things like: 'Who's going to make tea tonight?' or 'What shall I wear for my date on Saturday?' The sorts of problems I hear about, and end up deeply involved with, are: 'Is my husband having an affair?' (that's a very common one); 'Is the man I met online who tells me he's a multi-millionaire with boats and bodyguards real?' (not every day, but that one's blatantly another fraudster), or 'Is my girlfriend's house secretly being used as a brothel during the day?' (that may sound ludicrous, but you'd be surprised how often it occurs).

My personal life used to be filled with drama, but when the need for drama in me went away, it manifested itself in a different form – a detective agency!

A new client picks up the phone and tells me their tale of woe. I sit and listen. If they go down the emotionally distraught route, I put myself in their position. The same position I once found myself in – and I had nowhere to turn. Am I shocked or surprised? Not at all. These tales they tell sound crazy and dramatic, but they're all true. This is my life. My *real* life. Every day I find myself trying to complete the largest jigsaws known to man, putting together all the tiny pieces to help make some sense out of them on my client's behalf. We create a picture, and it forms the truth. The scariest part for me is that I think this is all perfectly normal.

Sometimes I wonder if morally I'm doing the right thing ... You're either in Camp Yes or Camp No.

Camp Yes: They're the people I do this for. They believe in every aspect of our work. They appreciate the need for the truth and an agency like ours to turn to. They totally believe my life motto: 'If you've nothing to hide, you've nothing to be scared of.'

Camp No: They pretty much hate me (and our agency), and they make it known. They tell me that we entrap people, that we ruin relationships and look for things that aren't there. I think *they* have something to hide!

Don't get me wrong, I'm very firm in my beliefs: that we provide a good service to the general public and are helping anyone who asks for it. There are days, though, when Camp No get into my head. They make me question all my morals and beliefs. I'll have a little battle with myself about the rights and wrongs, but then I have to let it go. I don't believe I'm a bad person for doing what I do.

I created this dream and I'm standing by it. To help other people who are in need, to give them somewhere to turn when they have nowhere else, that's the reason why, right now, today, I find myself sat in a car with a fellow lady and friend who got roped into this crazy plan with me. She's one of many, and we sit with binoculars in hand ready to catch the cheaters – or the long-lost loves, transsexuals, missing relatives or, occasionally, a household pet or two. Every once in a while you can't help but ask yourself, how on earth did my life come to this?

THE MAKING OF ME

Back in 2009 I was faced with a choice that would change my life forever. I'd been unhappy for years, pretty much since I married my husband. Life had always been on the edge and drama found me no matter where I hid. I was twenty-four and the mother of a little angel, Paris, who was about to be three. Did I really want to become a divorce statistic at such a young age? Certainly not – it was my worst nightmare. I'd been fighting for three years to keep my marriage together, even though I knew the week before the wedding that I should have called it off.

Don't get me wrong; in the beginning James, my husband, was fantastic. But after we got engaged and I became pregnant, he changed. I'd met him in a nightclub and always knew that he liked to have a good time but I warned him that he needed to keep it under control if he was to hang onto me. So for a while he did. He stopped seeing his best friend Martin, who had the same party ethic, and didn't even take his calls for a while.

Life was great for about a year but after I got pregnant the best friend was back on the scene. When James decided I was being 'too boring', he'd simply pick up the phone and call Martin. Then came the disappearing acts. He would go to work and not return home for three days. These weren't just any random trips; he would go to Italy, Spain and often Ireland. I'd come home from work and check if his passport was still there, just to get some indication whether he would be returning any time soon. He ignored my calls and texts while he was away, then on his return he acted as if nothing had happened. As if this crazy life we were living was normal. Eventually he mentally broke me, and I became convinced every man did the same thing and every woman put up with it. I thought it was just the way things were.

Next came other women. Rumours would circulate around my home town, the small Lancashire village of Barrowford. It's the type of place where everyone knows each other, and houses look like cottages from postcards. All the things I loved about it – the close-knit community and the pubs that were so gorgeous on a sunny summer afternoon – I began to hate. The pubs became places where everyone whispered behind your back, and the people I'd hung out with for years were feeding me information about my so-called 'wonderful' marriage. I'd hear that James had been seen with his arms around the local trollop, or texting random girls. It was horrible. The place I'd held so close to my heart was now filled with doom and gloom.

One day James announced he was moving out of our home. I was seven months pregnant with our daughter, and we'd been married for two months. It made no sense.

'Why are you doing this?' I asked.

'I don't like the house any more.' That was his sole explanation.

What did he expect me to do?

'You stay here, and I'll move back in with you when you find somewhere else to live. In the meantime, I'm moving in with Martin.'

So I found myself living alone in a three-bedroom detached farmhouse, totally isolated. I was miles from the village, and the nights were cold, dark and very lonely. It felt as if I had nothing but silence for company. I could have moved back home to my parents', but did I really want to do that? I was married, had a child on the way, I had bills and a house of my own. Why would I just up sticks and move back in with them?

The rumours around the village got worse. Now that my husband had moved out, I questioned everything. Was he really at his friend Martin's? Had he moved out because of me? Did he want someone else? No one moves out simply because they don't like their house; there must be another reason. My paranoia became so great I couldn't function. I went to sleep every night with questions swirling around my head, like a song on repeat.

James and I were still talking, and had no intention of splitting up, but I was hitting rock bottom without even realising it. I'd ring his phone on a Friday after work to see what we were doing that weekend, and it would be off. First time I'd let it slide; second, I'd start to worry; and after an hour I knew what the score was. He'd done it again – vanished. Where he had gone was anyone's guess. I'd crash to the floor, sobbing my heart out.

I was seven months pregnant. I couldn't cope any more. I needed to do something about my paranoia and find out what he was up to. I dived into the *Yellow Pages*. Scared and nervous, I picked up the phone and rang some private investigators. I'd tell them the situation, explain why I had suspicions and say that I wanted my husband followed for a period of time.

I telephoned three altogether, and felt far worse than I had before I'd spoken to them. They were the classic investigators, cold and hard. They didn't care whether my suspicions were valid. They didn't care how traumatised I was, or give any thought to my feelings. They all had the same attitude: they wanted to sting me for a ridiculous fee and get me off the phone as soon as possible. Some would only work for me if I hired them for a minimum of a day, some the minimum of a week. Either way, when they were charging close to £100 per hour, it was looking like a costly exercise. There were no guarantees I would get any information. I might even decide to have him watched on one of the days he came straight home. I felt more paranoid than ever, but I wasn't stupid. I wasn't going to throw nearly £1,000 down the drain with no guarantee of a result.

In desperation I called one of my best friends, Jess. We'd known each other for six years at that time, and had been through a lot together. When we met, I was working in my first job out of college as a marketing coordinator for the local nightclub, and I saw Jess there almost every night because she loved to party. Then one Sunday when I walked in to work, Jess was sitting on a sofa. As always, I was happy to see her friendly face, but the light in her eyes had gone. I said hello in my best cheery voice and asked how she was, but Jess shook her head. I sat down next to her.

'My mum's dying,' she said.

I honestly thought it was a weird joke. 'Yeah, right!' I replied.

'No, seriously. She went in for a little operation two days ago, and there've been complications. Me and Adrian [her brother] have just been at the hospital. They've said we need to turn off her life support.'

Jess's mum was a wonderful woman. She made me laugh and her house was always open to any of Jess's friends. Her father wasn't around and the whole time I'd known her, it was just Jess and her mum. They were inseparable and best friends. She was only in her forties and Jess was only eighteen, so her sudden illness was very shocking.

The next day Jess and Adrian went to the hospital to say goodbye to their mother and turn off the machine. A week before she'd been fighting fit and well, zooming around the house with the vacuum. Now, she was gone.

Next came the funeral, and every part of the aftermath. There was no one left to take care of Jess. She was on her own except for her brother, who was married. One thing was certain: a bond formed between us during that period that won't ever be broken.

Anyway, back to my call to Jess.

'I need your help. Where are you?' I asked. She'd been roughly kept in the picture about my marriage for the past few months, but she didn't know the full extent of it.

'I'm at a football match. It's brilliant! We're winning 2-0!' She was clearly inebriated, but I couldn't have cared less.

'I'm coming to get you – now,' I said.

Jess was confused but after a short debate, she was told I wasn't taking no for an answer, and one way or the other she was leaving the match early.

Fifteen minutes later I was parked up outside the football ground in my black Range Rover, which was my pride and joy. In my wing mirror I could see her running as fast as she could down

the pavement. She threw herself into the car, asked what was wrong, and the whole sorry tale came bursting out. What I wanted to do was go to the pub where I suspected James was, and find out what he was up to.

‘Let’s go catch the bastard then,’ she agreed.

Jess was always there for me, and there would be plenty more times like this to come. In the following weeks we often sat outside pubs, peering through the windows to see if James was there. Our first attempts were totally unsuccessful, though. It was time to raise our game.

Jess wasn’t the only person roped in to help with the DIY detection plan. Stephanie and long-time friend Helen were also thrown in at the deep end. Stephanie and I met when I was a student, aged seventeen. We both worked a part-time job together at a call centre. The girl’s beauty makes me sick! I’ve seen her at her worst and still she looks perfect: a total natural beauty with long blonde hair and blue eyes. Very small, and slim too! Lots of girls know they’re good-looking, and use it. Steph doesn’t. There’s no part of her appearance that’s fake. She even refuses to wear fake tan on her face (which I simply don’t understand!). Men swoon over her. There aren’t many natural beauties around any more and they lap it up.

Helen is a couple of years younger than me. She’s a cross between a sassy type of cool-looking girl and a traditional lass. When we met some seven years ago she was working in a call centre. If you had to sum up Helen in one word, it would be ‘complex’. Although definitely young at heart, she loves to entertain and behind closed doors she morphs into something else. In a former life, she was Delia Smith – I kid you not! The woman is a total home-maker, which is not what you would expect from her appearance. Helen lives on her own and has done since she was eighteen. There’s no real reason for it; she’s just highly independent.

Over the next few weeks we girls got up to lots of things we shouldn’t. Nights were spent outside pubs in Barrowford with the car’s DVD replaying episodes of *Friends*, bags of Doritos on hand, and the obligatory pair of binoculars. Six times out of ten we found James. We would watch him snuggling up to girls at the bar, putting his arms around them, whispering in their ears – and when he kissed one in front of us I flipped.

‘That’s it, I’m going in,’ I said pulling on my stilettos when I was already halfway out of the car. By this point I was eight months pregnant and, if I’m being honest, it probably wasn’t a pretty sight. I didn’t care. I’d just had enough. How much more proof did I need? I’d heard the rumours and now I’d seen it. What he was getting up to behind closed doors, I didn’t need to guess.

I pushed through the doors of the pub with a very frantic and disturbed bunch of friends in tow. James greeted me like I was something stuck on his shoe. He always gave me a look in those days that I read as one of disgust. Was it just my paranoia? I’ll never know now.

I asked him what he thought he was doing, and he simply told me he was having a drink with his friend. The girl next to him was shooting me daggers, as if I was the one in the wrong.

‘Are you going to go now?’ he asked coldly.

It was as if I was living in the twilight zone. Didn’t he realise I’d seen him kissing her? Did he care if I had? I don’t think he did.

‘Are you coming with me?’ I asked, still getting daggers from the girl. How could she do that when she could see my huge bump? So much for sisterhood ...

‘No, but *you’re* going,’ he told me, standing up and ushering me towards the door.

‘He’s not worth it,’ Stephanie told me, taking a gentle hold of my arm.

I wasn’t going to embarrass myself any further, so I turned around without a word and walked out, leaving my husband with the girl.

When I was on my own, I questioned everything. If he was so unhappy, why did he not just end it with me? Why keep pretending it wasn’t happening? What was I doing that was so wrong? Should I leave, and admit failure? How could I bring up a child on my own? I wasn’t prepared for

it when I found out I was pregnant, and now I was a month away from having the baby I still didn't feel prepared.

James and I had decided to start trying for a family six months before our wedding. I'd been on the contraceptive pill for years and we both thought it would take a good while to conceive. We were wrong. On holiday I started to feel sick very quickly, and I missed a period.

Coincidentally, the weekend before that had been James's first-ever vanishing act. He went on the Friday and returned on the Monday as if nothing had happened. It distressed me. He'd been at a concert and purposely ignored every call I made and text I sent. For all I knew he was dead under a bus somewhere. Was this a sign of things to come? I didn't know, but it caused a blazing row. I am normally a pretty calm and laid-back person but it scared me.

Now I was faced with the prospect of having a baby. Was it the right time, and was this still the right path for me? When I thought there was a chance it could be true, I wasn't excited or happy the way I should have been. I was scared. I went to Sainsbury's and bought a pregnancy test. I couldn't wait for the result so I went into the public toilets and took the test, then as I walked back to the car I nervously looked at the result. It was positive. What did I do? I rang Stephanie. Not my soon-to-be husband. I didn't do a little dance for joy in the car park. I rang my best friend. The whole process of this life-changing discovery was wrong.

Stephanie knew I wasn't very happy. If it hadn't been for the vanishing act the previous weekend, I'm sure it would have been a different story. Alarm bells were screaming in my head, but what do you do in that situation?

Steph said I didn't have to go through with it. I didn't have to tell him if I didn't want to, but if I did she was happy for me.

When I hung up the phone I sat for ten minutes in silence. But there was no question. I wanted this baby and I was having it.

I went to tell James, who was at work at the time. We both sat down, I showed him the test and ... nothing.

'Great news,' he said after a while. He hugged me, and went back to work. Life-changing moment – over.

Looking back, nothing in our relationship had been right. So many little alarm bells rang. The DIY detective spell came to a very abrupt halt one late night in March. Our daughter was due in three weeks, and I was larger than a house. We were still living in separate houses, and life was getting no better.

Stephanie and I had been outside a pub watching James for a couple of hours. A taxi turned up at the door and he got in, with his best friend Martin. We set off in pursuit. After ten minutes we got the feeling something was wrong. The taxi had led us in a big circle through the village. It went down some back streets for no apparent reason. When it started to gain rapid speed, we knew we had been caught. Did I stop following, as I should have done? What was I going to achieve now? I didn't know, but equally I didn't stop. We were driving at 50mph down tiny streets with a 30mph speed limit, and it was crazy. Stephanie was scared. She was pleading with me to stop, but something had taken over me.

The taxi drove onto my parents' estate, where they were waiting outside their house in their dressing gowns. James must have phoned ahead to warn them what was happening. The taxi pulled up and I came to a halt behind it. I told Stephanie to get out and stay with my parents. A very heated argument then took place between my parents and James, while I refused to get out of the car. I knew he would leave again, and I was ready to follow.

James and friend got back in the taxi and sped off again. So did I. The pursuit continued, but not for long. The taxi lost control and slammed on the brakes so hard I couldn't avoid crashing into the back of it.

James sat in the taxi but the taxi driver got out and yelled, 'What have you done to my taxi?' Neither car would start up again.

James rang Mum and Dad and told them what had happened. They came straight away, still in their dressing gowns. As I stood by the roadside watching my car being towed away, I vowed that was the last time I would follow him. From then on, he could do whatever he wanted. This whole situation had gone way beyond my control and I'd had enough. I wondered if the constant need to know where he was had turned me psychotic. Did I need psychiatric help? Was his behaviour normal while mine was irrational? I didn't know, and I didn't want to know. My marriage was doomed. It should never have gone ahead.

James and Mum didn't talk to each other again until I was in the delivery room, having our daughter. Compared to pregnancy the labour was easy, and Paris was born in spring 2006. I'd found a new house by that time, and James moved back in.

For a couple of weeks, life was OK. Not brilliant, but OK. I didn't understand Paris. To me she was just a little ball of energy that had turned up in my life and I simply had to care for her. She didn't feel like she'd come from me, or even that she belonged to me. It all made no sense. Mentally I was struggling. Now I look back and think all the drama while I was pregnant contributed to my feelings. I'd been emotionally battered and instead of recovering, I was getting worse. I didn't even realise it.

When Paris was eight weeks old James vanished again, and this time it seemed to be for good. I didn't actually care. A handwritten note from him was posted through my parents' front door telling me that he loved me and Paris but couldn't live with us any more.

At first I was devastated, but that only lasted a day. Next I decided to apply for a divorce, but the solicitor told me you can only do that once you've been married for a year. I changed my phone number, and told my parents not to take any calls on my behalf.

Then James's mum began to pester me constantly, and after three weeks I caved in and met her. She told me James wanted to talk to me. It turned out he was in Spain. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt – mainly to find out why he'd done this – and I rang him.

I remember that day so clearly. It was at my parents' house. Jess and Mum were in the lounge. I was in the hallway on the stairs. We talked and I interrogated James. His master plan was that Paris and I should go out to Spain and live with him. I won't disclose the expletives that followed. I've always been a big believer that swearing doesn't get your point across any better, but that day the words all flooded out. My short answer to his solution was 'no'.

The next I knew, Dad was upstairs in the office on the phone to easyJet and he'd booked me on the first flight leaving in the morning.

'You're going out there, and you're going to get him back home and sort this mess out. I've already paid for the flight, so you've got no choice.'

I tried in vain to put up a fight, but in the morning I was on my way. Paris stayed with Mum and Dad.

It took me three weeks to convince James to come back, and when he did he refused to live in our home town. He wanted a fresh start, and to be honest I thought it would be a good way to help us move forward with our marriage. We didn't know where we would live exactly, but we packed up the car and set off. First it was Scotland, next was the Lake District. I went into estate agents and told them we were in holiday accommodation, and wouldn't be leaving until we found somewhere permanent.

At the time I was well into a property development career, so moving wasn't too difficult for me. I found a barn in the middle of a field and began transforming it bit by bit into a dream house. On the surface, it looked as though I had it all: a reformed husband, an excellent career, the best cars money could buy, a beautiful daughter and everything in between.

But inside I was empty. The thought of death grew more appealing to me with each day that passed. When they visited my family saw straight through the façade and realised I had severe postnatal depression.

I couldn't cope any more. I knew I needed help, and fast. If I hadn't got it, it wouldn't have been long before I did something drastic. I wrote lots of letters to Paris telling her how sorry I was for being her mother. That I'd brought her into such a messed-up life was getting beyond any kind of joke.

I did two things to help myself. First I saw my doctor, who prescribed antidepressants. But when I told James, he threw them out of the window. He didn't want me taking them, because he believed they would make me worse than I already was. I spoke to the doctor again and told her what happened. She re-prescribed and I started taking the medication.

The second thing I did was a bit more twisted and irrational. Instead of ending my marriage, because I thought failure wasn't an option, I turned to a man whom I'd adored since I was seventeen. He was a married man called John. We'd had an affair previously but I'd finished it after I met James, and we'd not spoken since.

Eighteen months later, when Paris was still a tiny baby, I picked up my phone and texted him: 'Fancy meeting up?'

He was surprised to hear from me but said 'yes' straight away and the next day I went to meet him. He couldn't stop smiling, and he soon made me feel desirable again. I'd forgotten what that feeling was like. He wanted to know everything I'd been up to so I told him the basic outline of the story, but I left out my true emotions. I said that James had been cheating on me, and he was sympathetic and understanding. He listened and actually cared about what I was saying. It had been so long since I'd felt listened to by a man that I was instantly, once again, hooked on him.

Not surprisingly, we ended up back in a 'version' of a relationship that continued for the next few years. How clever was that? I had a husband who was unreliable and cheated on me, and what solution did I come up with? Yes, clever clogs started cheating on him. When it came to relationships, I still had a lot to learn.

FREEDOM

Fast-forward to 2009. My life was a mess. I was still married. I'd stopped looking for clues of James's infidelity, because sadly I no longer cared. I didn't want to know. Instead, when James hurt or upset me I turned to John. John listened, he understood, and together we led double lives. I had my life with James, and he had his life, then we had our time together.

For years I pretended that it was a carefree relationship, but the more my marriage deteriorated the more I realised how strong my feelings for John actually were. People may say they detach themselves from affairs, but I don't believe they do. I knew I had no right to feel like this, since he wasn't mine. Trying to swallow the hurt and pain of not being able to have him, while staying in a torturous marriage, hurt me even more.

Eventually it became clear that I'd fallen madly in love with John, and didn't love my husband at all any more. I needed John and couldn't imagine life without him at the end of the phone. He was the one person I thought I could always count on. Really, I was a mess.

My postnatal depression shifted and I began to love my daughter as I should have from the start, but I felt guilty for the lost time. I had a lot to make up to her.

Next, my career began to suffer with the economic downturn. My speciality was renovating houses worth over £500,000. I was halfway through my latest development – a beautiful Georgian manor house in a village hamlet. The ceilings were high and vaulted and it had real character. I knew every single inch of the development. I spent the whole summer stripping back layers and layers of wallpaper, which is quite an achievement for a girl who wears heels 99 per cent of the time. I researched Georgian colour schemes, and what would have been traditional colours for the different rooms. Red for the lounge. Duck-egg blue for a bedroom. Gold for the dining room, and so on.

My mother was convinced it was haunted. One day she was lighting a candelabra in the dining room to take pictures and the candles kept blowing out. Later that day when she was relaying the story to Dad over dinner, candles blowing out miraculously turned into ... 'Candles blowing out ... and then a white lady brushed passed me ...' Bless the mother – so dramatic! (You just have to meet her for half an hour to understand why I turned out so crackers!)

The development house wasn't my home, but I stayed there when I could. I loved it, with its ghosts and history. When my finance company announced they were going bankrupt, they dealt me a blow I wasn't expecting. I had twelve weeks to finish the Georgian property, even though it still had no kitchen or bathrooms. Sorting out bedrooms and living rooms had been my priority. That was a big mistake. I had no option but to sell it or they would repossess not only that house, but my home too. James was with me when the news broke and we knew we had a serious task on our hands. His solution to the problem? He ran away and left me to it.

That was it. I was sick of the James saga. During this particular vanishing trip towards the end of 2008, he called with the usual 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again' routine, but this time I'd had enough. Through medication and my love of my daughter and John I'd grown strong. The kind of strong I should have been before my wedding. I told James not to come home. Our marriage was over. It really was that simple.

I filed for divorce and didn't look back. I wasn't even upset about it by that stage. People kept expecting me to break down, and I'd hear them whispering about me, worrying that I was bottling it up, but all I felt was huge relief. I didn't have to walk on eggshells any more. I could be myself and do what I wanted, when I wanted. I looked at my friends who were in relationships and was glad I wasn't them. I felt nothing but carefree about the loss of my marriage.

However, my affair with John became a problem next. The game was up when rumours began to surface around our circle of friends. We'd been seen together a few too many times, and people began to put two and two together. It was only a matter of time before our secret was out. All my

conversations with John now consisted of ‘Should we be together, or should we not?’ He’d say yes, he’d say no. I felt he was basically leading me on.

I tried to draw a line. I told him it was time to leave me alone. I’d got rid of my no-good husband, and now it was time for him to go too. I just wanted a happy, normal life with my daughter but John was having none of it. I kept warning him that if he didn’t leave me alone I would out our secret myself, but he didn’t believe me.

Then one night when Paris was three she shoved a necklace bead up her nose and it got stuck. I took her straight to hospital at 10pm and we stayed up all night while the hospital tried everything possible to remove the bead. I wasn’t allowed to let her sleep in case it slipped down and blocked her airway so it was a traumatic night. Nothing worked, and she was booked to go for surgery. I was frantic to say the least.

Paris was released from hospital the following day, minus the bead! As I pulled up on my parents’ driveway, after having no sleep for nearly thirty-five hours, my phone was ringing. It was John. We had a huge blazing row. If I hadn’t been so sleep-deprived I don’t think I would have done what I did next, but I wasn’t in my right mind.

‘I’ve told you we’re over,’ I said. ‘Just leave me alone.’

It certainly didn’t seem like he believed me, and I needed to do something drastic to make him listen. We’d gone round in a merry circle for what seemed like forever, going backwards and forwards. It would never end. We would have a break, and then everything would resume again. The writing was on the wall. I wanted to be strong and not go back to him. My stubborn side kicked in. I needed to make him hate me, to take the decision out of my hands.

‘This is the last time I’m going to say this. If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll tell everyone about us.’

‘Go ahead then – you do it,’ was his reply.

With that, I hung up and logged onto Facebook. It possibly doesn’t come any more immature, but how else can you tell an almighty secret to a vast number of people in the space of a few minutes?

All the time John and I had been having an affair, I’d protected our secret and gone to serious lengths not to have it exposed. Now I was doing the one thing I knew would make him hate me forever.

I turned off the computer, left my phone by the side of it and went out. I didn’t want the temptation to delete my comments to overcome me. Knowing I had hurt the one man I truly loved in the worst way possible tortured me, but I honestly didn’t see any other way out. It was the only thing left to do. Otherwise, we might have continued for the next seven years. It would never have ended.

I returned home and my phone was full of messages from various people and from John. I was too terrified to look at it. I instantly wished I could take back what I’d done, but the secret was out, and this was the beginning of the end.

He was devastated and utterly furious with me. I was devastated, but it was over. I deleted my comments because the damage had been done. I didn’t need to hurt him any more. The scariest thing was that in making the decision to make the past public knowledge, I knew I was taking a final step from which there would be no turning back. For a long time I’d felt like he’d always be there for me at the end of a phone or email and now that could never happen again. I felt like a small child who’d had her comfort blanket taken away.

Afterwards I began to feel bad about how lightly I had taken the sanctity of John’s marriage. My own marriage was different. When I started the affair, I knew what I was doing and why I was doing it, but I simply didn’t take his marriage into account. I knew I should have – and he should have too. I’ll never have a chance to put that right.

All I could do was look back and reflect on all the hurt and upset, and use the experience to become a better person. I would analyse the past seven years until the cows came home, then I’d mentally dig a massive hole and bury all the crap. That way I could learn from it. That way I could move forwards. All in all, I’d be making myself a better person for Mr Right when he did finally come along. And I truly hoped I’d be able to have a normal relationship one day without all the lies and

paranoia James had led me to believe were part and parcel of a normal marriage. But in the meantime it was just me and my princess. And to be honest, that was all I needed.

I managed to finish the house I was developing by the skin of my teeth, thirteen weeks after I'd been given the ultimatum. I was a week over deadline, but somehow got away with it. I made no profit and my career in property development was officially over. I was down to my last house – the one I bought as a barn in the middle of a field in 2006 and turned into a home from nothing. It was secluded, isolated and still needed some work doing. I utterly loved it though. Paris and I moved into it, and lived between there and my parents' home. It was fantastic to have my parents' support at that time because, if I'm being honest, the barn was a lonely place where the two of us just had a few dozen sheep for company. I actually ended up spending most of my time at my parents' house, which meant they could help me out looking after Paris.

Next, I needed to find a new job and there was an idea that had been ticking over in the back of my mind for some time. I wanted to open a private investigation company. I had a strong feeling there was a market for it. Our company would be understanding and affordable. When people picked up the phone, just as I had, it meant they were going through one of the most traumatic periods of their lives. They needed someone who understood and could relate to them rather than someone who was trying to rip them off. People don't phone investigators for fun. When you reach that point, it's deadly serious.

As I'd found, it wasn't possible to hire a private investigator for an hour. Instead a big institution rips you off for at least a day's fee plus expenses at a time when you are at your most vulnerable. I wanted people to turn to us because we understood how they felt and would do what was needed at minimal cost. And there was no question that I understood what it felt like to be cheated on. I could have written a book on the subject!

The only problem was that after the property crash and my divorce taking every last penny I had, I was left with almost nothing. Even though I still had my barn home, an impending lawsuit with my soon-to-be ex-husband meant it could and most likely would be taken away from me at any second. I was prepared to fight to the bitter end to stay there and retain the beautiful house I'd made, but I knew it wasn't very likely. I may not have had the million-pound home or the fancy cars any more but I didn't care. I felt nothing but freedom and happiness. Mum pleaded and begged me to get a proper job, and I know I could have walked into most estate agencies and earned £30,000 a year as a sales agent – enough for Paris and me to live a reasonably comfortable life ... But it wasn't my dream.

Dad understood. He said to Mum: 'Rebecca won't listen to anyone. When she decides she's doing it, she's doing it. Now hush up and support her.'

I had mountains of passion and determination. I just had to figure out a way to make my new venture work.

FINDING OUR FEET

‘Hi, girls, how do you fancy starting our own detective agency?’

Steph, Helen and Jess look at me as though I’m bonkers but – to give them their due – they go along with it, even if at first I can tell they’re just humouring me. We start throwing ideas back and forth, exploring the concept, and gradually they seem to start believing in it. There was never any question in my mind that they would be part of it.

I know that starting a brand new business venture with no capital isn’t going to be fun. Let’s face facts, though – when you hit rock bottom, there’s nowhere else to go, right?

‘Let me get this straight: we’re literally going to watch people?’ Jess asks me.

‘Well, that’s the idea!’

Back in primary school, I used to spend weeks writing scripts and putting on miniature pantomimes with my friends. We’d have ‘big’ ideas of putting them on the school stage and performing to fellow classmates, but they never actually took off. I know that the detective agency could be really good – no, *amazing* – work. Making it a reality was another thing. It could go the same way as *The Wizard of Oz*, very quickly!

‘Seems too good to be true, doesn’t it?’ I say to the ladies, tapping my pen on the table.

‘It does a bit, yeah,’ Steph agrees.

‘But we have to give it our best shot. Something tells me it will work. People need the help, and we’re the perfect people to give it. We know where they’re coming from, and we’ve all been there.’ I look at the ladies, and it’s true. We’ve all been cheated on at some point. They’re nodding!

‘I totally agree. If it doesn’t work, then at least we know we tried,’ Jess says with conviction.

‘That’s more like it.’

‘I just think it’s really darn cool. Will people really pay us to watch their other halves? ... I’m so excited!’ Steph squeals.

It’s hard work getting it off the ground. I spend several months producing a website and designing lots of marketing flyers. And I have to give Steph, Helen and Jess credit – they are genuinely amazing. They pound the pavements delivering flyers to anywhere and everywhere, identify key areas for us to market and help with the optimisation of the website. We all read anything and everything we can find about methods of detection: surveillance, background checking, DNA testing – you name it. We call experts and pick their brains. We spend hours on the Internet, getting excited about every new discovery. We live and breathe the subject and it’s all we talk about between the four of us.

I have a gut instinct I am going to find this work fascinating. I never felt I entirely fitted in when I was doing property development or working for big companies, but a little business like this sounds like my dream job.

By rights this master plan of ours shouldn’t work. For some strange reason, though, I feel it might just come off. We’ll each work from home to start off with, and mine will be the main number to call, but I’ll bring in the others as and when I need them. And we’ll call it ‘The Lady Detective Agency’. For years ‘Lady’ has been my nickname. Even my car registration plate says ‘Lady’ – something I’ll have to change, actually, because it’s a little too obvious for surveillance missions. The only flaw is that it sounds like we only help women, when really we want to help anyone. Men are just as insecure as women, and women are unfaithful just as much as men – I should know. But my gut instinct tells me the name is right for now anyway!

When we can’t possibly do any more research, or read anything else about investigation, and our lives have become totally engrossed in the new business, we start doing some surveillance work for friends, without charging, and that helps us to hone our methods and work out where the pitfalls might lie. But still we haven’t had a paying job.

I am almost losing the faith, when one day about four weeks after we first start planning the agency ...

The phone has finally started to ring! I'm spinning round on my new revolving chair when the *Mission Impossible* soundtrack – my new ringtone – begins to emit from my mobile. I wonder if this whole 'private detective' thing is going to my head? I'm loving the training, and I'm loving everything surrounding it, but have to keep reminding myself that I'm supposed to be a serious businesswoman.

It's a lovely summer day in 2009, pleasantly warm but not too hot. I've spent the morning with Paris, who is now at playschool. One of the huge benefits of having free time is that I'm getting to spend proper mothering time with her.

Anyway, when I hear *Mission Impossible*, I dive off the chair, realise I'm feeling dizzy from all that spinning, and wobble my way, giggling slightly, to the phone. I don't know the number off by heart and answer with my usual bright and breezy 'Hello!'

'Hello, is this the detective lady?'

Suddenly I sober up out of my dizzy state and am on high alert.

'It is. How can I help?' I walk through to the office, taking my place at my desk and becoming a little more serious. Pen is ready in hand!

'I'm worried about my husband. I don't think he's being faithful.' It's said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

I take her name – Jane – then put on my best 'I care' voice and ask, 'OK, is there any reason you think that?'

'There are a few reasons, but mainly it's because I just have that gut instinct.'

That sounds scientific! Although I am a huge believer in gut instinct, I need something else to go on.

'He took fourteen minutes to get to work two days ago, and it should only have taken him eight!'

Oh dear! This doesn't sound like it's going to be good, I'm thinking to myself, while rolling my eyes. How can she be timing him so precisely? She must be calling him constantly to check where he is. I let it pass, though.

'And then, I checked out his car mat, and there was mud on the one behind the driver's seat.'

I wonder if this is the point when I need to tell her she's crackers? Everyone gets mud in their car, for all kinds of reasons. But this is our first client so I go along with it.

'Do you have any idea what you would like us to do or shall I talk you through our services?' I ask, trying to get a little more normality back into this conversation.

'I thought of surveillance, but I'm not too sure.'

'We can do surveillance. We charge £40 per hour, but if you're too far out of Manchester we would have to charge travel expenses.'

'I'm in Norwich,' she informs me.

'That's too far out of our remit to be included, but we could come to you for a charge of 60p per mile,' I say, making it up on the spot! 'It sounds as though surveillance would be a good idea if you're worried about where he is. Do you think he's going somewhere apart from work? Or do you think he could be straying at other times of day?'

'His work does worry me, and there's one girl in particular I have concerns about. Muriel. She works with him in the same office. There've been rumours before. His Christmas party last year was riddled with gossip that they'd been up to no good.'

'Who said that?' I ask, thinking to myself that she should have a conversation with the people spreading the rumours.

'Lots of people. One woman in particular I know well; she's a friend of mine. Although, that being said, she is also a friend of my husband's. She says they're flirty in the office. I know he is a very flirty person, and one of those touchy-feely types. Just not with me.'

‘The thing to do is stay calm, and try not to let anything be blown out of proportion. People say lots of things, for lots of different and very strange reasons. Quite often they’re not true. Until there’s evidence one way or the other, you really need to stay level-headed for your own sake.’ I try to instil a little bit of sense back into this situation.

Don’t get me wrong – she could be totally right. With my experience of relationships, I’ve got every reason to feel cynical about men and their ability to be faithful. But her ‘evidence’ doesn’t seem enough to get worked up about – yet.

‘I know, I know. It’s just he is *such* a horrible man. He actually hates me, I know he does. He would have some kind of affair just to get away from me.’

I begin to think we should talk to a charity or self-help association that will help us to compile a list of symptoms we can tick off to work out when a client is crazy and needs professional help, rather than a bunch of female detectives. Surely we need some kind of insanity clause?

‘What is the most important thing for you to find out, if you can?’ I ask her.

‘If he is being faithful or not,’ she replies, very certain.

‘How sure of his whereabouts are you? Does he go to work at the same time every day? Come home at the same time? What are his weekend patterns like?’

‘He goes to work and comes home at almost the same times every day. Like I said, though, the other day it took him fourteen minutes, when it should have taken eight. And he sets off thirty minutes before he needs to. He could be up to lots of things in that time.’

‘Right, and what about weekends and evenings?’

‘Most are spent with me or our son. Our son is very close to him, although he hates him too! He’s eighteen, and he tries to get out of the house when my husband is home. They’re more like friends than father and son.’

This sounds a bit contradictory but I leave it. ‘Does he walk a dog? Or have a hobby?’ I ask.

‘No, neither.’

‘Alright, so the main problem is work?’ Firming up the situation.

‘Yes. I think, because of the mud behind the driver’s seat, that he picks up this Muriel he works with and drops her off. I’ve been to the garage to have his car cleaned, so the mud is gone, and if it turns up another day, I’ll know!’

‘That’s not a bad idea,’ I tell her, thinking it’s a total waste of time and Googling ‘relationship charity helplines’ while we speak. I’m going to talk to a professional about this problem. I don’t think she’s sane, and I’ve had enough craziness to last a lifetime. ‘Would you want surveillance on him going to work? What about at work? What does he do for a living?’

‘He works for an Internet provider in their offices, but you need passes to get inside. I wouldn’t be able to get one. He once took me there, and they wouldn’t let me in.’

‘Alright, so surveying him at work isn’t possible. Jane, would you mind if I have a think about it and consider if there’s any equipment we could get you?’

‘No, that sounds like a very good idea.’

We finish the conversation and immediately I ring the charity I’ve just Googled. I explain to them that I’m an investigator with a new client, and I’m not entirely sure about her mental stability. Timing his journey to work by the minute, thinking he’s been up to no good in the space of six minutes and obsessing over some mud in the back of the car ... I may have been paranoid during my time with James, but I don’t think I was ever quite that bad. The lady at the charity is very nice, with a lovely tone of voice, and she pretty much comes to the same conclusion as me. My very first client at my brand new detective agency is crazy. But what should I do?

In bed that night I feel rather uneasy. Do I bother to ring her back, or hope she just finds someone else to do her work? Or do I get a grip, realise we’re running a business and get on with it?

I can’t tell her where to go! I’d once been that person. I’m sure when I rang the investigators about James that they thought I was barking mad too – but I wasn’t. Is this lady the same? Or is it

the case that she simply can't describe her problem to me convincingly? She is living with this man and only she knows what he is really like. Maybe there are other situations and problems that she isn't telling me and the story is all true. Or maybe she is obsessing over nothing.

Mission Impossible ringtone sounds. It's 11pm! Who the heck could it be? I reach over to the bedside table and look at the flashing bright blue screen. Jane's number is showing up! Oh dear ...

'Hello?' I answer.

'Hi Rebecca, it's Jane.'

'Hi, Jane.' Trying not to sound too unimpressed that she is calling just as I am dropping off to sleep. We had advertised that we were open for business and accessible twenty-four hours a day, so this was going to be the downside. Maybe we'll have to revisit that idea in the business plan.

'I'm so sorry to call you this late, but I needed to tell you something,' she begins in a rushed manner.

'Of course, it's no problem,' I lie.

'You know Muriel, that girl I was telling you about? The one people are suspicious of? Well, she's just changed her profile picture.'

'What do you mean by "her profile picture"?'

'You know, on Facebook. Did I not tell you she was on Facebook?'

'Er, no. I don't think so.'

'Well, she is. I don't have her as a friend, but I can see lots of things she puts up. She's changed her profile picture, and I'm sure she's trying to tell me something.'

I want to *scream*! I really want to help Jane, but she's making it very difficult. Is she honestly trying to tell me that some girl she doesn't know, who works with her husband, about whom there have been a few rumours, has changed her profile picture to send her a sign? Really? How can I possibly work for this woman? I can't take money from the mentally insane! Sorry ... I'm no psychiatrist so I can't diagnose that officially, but from what I can tell, the woman is about ten sandwiches short of a picnic!

'I really don't think it's a sign. People change their profile pictures a lot. It's very common,' I tell her, trying my hardest not to be irritated or annoyed.

'But I've never changed mine in the whole time I've been on Facebook,' she says, sounding genuinely bemused by the situation.

'What I can do is add Muriel and your husband to one of our fake Facebook profiles. We use them to monitor people, for lots of reasons. I'll have a look around both of their pages and see what is on there. How's about that?' It seems the best solution to get her off the phone.

'Oooo, that sounds like a very good idea.' Yay! She's happy!

'Excellent, I'll sort it out in the morning. Don't worry – I won't charge you if I find anything. We'll just see what comes up.'

'Lovely. Oh, thank you so much. I'll speak to you tomorrow, yes?'

A momentary feeling of dread comes over me. Answering yes to this question guarantees we'll have further contact and I'll have to talk about this daft situation some more.

'Of course, speak then.' Damn it! I hang up the phone and write on the notepad next to the bedside table: Befriend Jane's husband on Facebook!

I roll over, turn out the light and I'm asleep in five minutes.

I'm in my own little dream world, walking along a white beach. Paris is dancing around in the shallow water at my side, giggling as she always does. Waves are lapping the pure white sand, and a fabulous cool breeze is blowing in our faces. The sun is beating down rays on to the shore, and I've never felt more relaxed ...

'DUN ... DUN ... DER DE ... DUN ... DUN ... DER DE ... DE DER DERRR ... DE DER DERRR ... DE DER DERRR... DE DE ...'

I sit bolt upright in bed! *Mission Impossible* is on again! I glance quickly at the alarm clock to see it's 9am. I can't have heard my wake-up call at 7.30am, and Mum and Dad have taken Paris to playschool today so the house is quiet. I'm scrabbling towards the phone, exactly the same as last night. Funnily enough it's Jane's number flashing up. Now I'm thinking it's either *déjà vu* and I dreamt our conversation last night, or it's happening again ...

'Rebecca, good morning!' Jane says in a very upbeat tone.

'Morning, Jane!' I'm trying not to sound the most unprofessional sleepy woman that ever existed.

'Have they accepted your requests yet?' Jane asks, and then it dawns on me. No, it's not *déjà vu*, not a dream and yes, it is happening again.

'Sorry, Jane. I've not had a chance to check,' I tell her while slowly placing a foot on the cold wooden floor, praying the bed doesn't make creaking noises.

'Oh. Oh, dear. Sorry, have I disturbed you?' I wonder why she didn't ask herself this question earlier, before picking up the phone at silly o'clock?

'No, of course not. I'm just starting on some paperwork and you're next on my list.' Now I'm doing a cross between climbing out of bed and a limbo dance. My bed is far too creaky.

'Oh lovely, so I'll speak to you in an hour then?'

'Not too sure what my diary is like. Have you got email so I can keep you updated that way?' I'm praying she says yes and we can get over the silly 'phoning me every ten minutes' phase. That's an exaggeration, but it's how it feels.

'We can't do that. I'm not sure if my husband can check my emails or not.'

My heart sinks. 'No problem, I'll give you a call shortly. Someone's just turned up, must go.' Lying through my teeth. On the other hand if the kettle and toaster were real people needing my attention, it would be true. Either way, she's off the phone and my morning coffee and toast ritual has commenced.

I wipe the sleep from my eyes, take the steaming coffee cup and walk towards the computer. It takes me ten minutes of staring mindlessly out of the window in front of my desk to waken up. It may not be the world's greatest view I have before me – a generic suburban close on the outskirts of Manchester where my parents live that my brother calls 'God's Waiting Room'. Basically, all the residents are over the age of seventy and live in large, exceptionally well-kept houses. They have money and refuse to go into old folks' homes. Their gardens are simply perfection and wouldn't look out of place on an American sitcom.

BING BONG! Snap back to reality. The emails have started ... Best get on with work.

I have a browse through Facebook and choose three of our fake profiles. One is a very attractive brunette lady in her mid-twenties and the pictures lifted from Google images look rather provocative. That will appeal to men. Another one is a business – I always wonder if people are more accepting of businesses because they look 'proper'. The third is a man, again good-looking but not *too* good-looking. Women are scared of really good-looking men with perfect styling, so our guy looks down-to-earth. And then I wonder, since when did I become an expert in psychology?

Next I start adding people from Jane's husband Tom's friend list to my fake profiles, and lots more people as well to make it seem more authentic. I do the same with Muriel, the girl that Jane is suspicious of.

A couple of hours later, after catching up on the day's events via email, text and phone calls, I check again. Lots of Tom's friends have accepted our friend request, and so have Muriel's. What kind of name is Muriel? After some very basic snooping through their profiles, and a few Internet data checks, basically using Google and the electoral roll, I know a little more about Tom and Muriel.

I highly doubt Tom was ever good-looking. He is overweight, by quite a bit, with a huge belly, a lot like Santa's. His face is grey and gloomy, he has greying black hair and his smile is missing a few teeth. His nose is certainly crooked, and his eyes are almost black. He's as far from good-looking

as you can imagine. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but surely no one ever accused him of it. Age: fifty-two.

Muriel. Well, she looks dirty! Not in an unclean way, but she looks as though she loves herself and will flaunt all she has got. Her profile picture, which Jane thought was 'a sign', shows her half-draped over a bed, sort of upside-down, with her fingers combing through her hair. Oh, and her ample chest accessories are on view, but not completely exposed. She's got sandy hair, dark brown eyes and a slight tan. Either way, sad to say, she is good-looking. Dirty, but good-looking! Age: twenty-four.

So we have a good-looking twenty-four-year-old and a dreadful fifty-two-year-old, combined with a seemingly lunatic wife. There's no way this can actually be happening, I sigh.

I click the exit button on the browser. It's time to speak to my equipment suppliers and see what we can do in terms of other options for Jane. I can't charge her a sheer fortune for surveillance when I'm 99 per cent sure this man isn't having an affair with the fabulously dirty Muriel! Surely a girl like her wouldn't take a second look at someone like him?

My equipment expert, Chai, is based in China. In the beginning I contacted lots of companies based in China, where all the best equipment comes from, but Chai seemed the best. He is truly an expert. He never gets tired of all my phone calls, asking about various bits of equipment and what would be most useful to us. He has great patience, which is what I need. I've always had a problem understanding accents, to my shame, so this stage of ordering products is always problematic for me. Chai understands me, but I still make the poor man repeat himself what seems like a million times. I already know the basic details of what I want for Jane's job but I run it past Chai anyway.

First we discuss hacking Tom's phone, which in reality is a lot less controversial than it sounds. 'Hacking' is basically a name for getting some software onto his phone, just like any other app you would use. We could send a link to our client, in this case Jane, who could then install it on his phone. After that we could get a copy of every text, phone call, photo, email, calendar entry and even his location from the phone. The problem with this plan is that by law the client must inform the person whose phone they're hacking before they install it and get permission. Or, if they own the phone, they must prove it to us by showing us the receipt. Jane couldn't convince me that she would be able to supply a receipt, or that she would tell him. So forget that option ...

Computer hacking is exactly the same as phone hacking but for a computer. It carries the same problems with legality, so again not an option.

Chai and I have a chat about audio bugging. I honestly think this is the best option for Jane. She needs to know what's happening in his workplace but can't get in the building itself. If we somehow got an audio bug in there, we'd have no problems.

The other line starts to ring again, so I make my excuses to Chai and hang up.

'There's a stain on his trousers!'

'Hi, Jane.' No prizes for guessing this time.

'There's a stain on his trousers! It's semen!'

Her voice gets more and more high-pitched every time I talk to her.

'Do you know that for certain? Or is it a guess?' I'm trying to be a calming influence.

'Errrrr ... well ...'

Thought as much! 'We have testing kits, if you want to check if it is semen. Although it depends how much it bothers you.'

'Oh, it bothers me! I'm furious! This proves it!' Yep, still ranting.

'If the test is positive then you'll have some proof, but it may not be semen and even if it is, it could have got there a different way.' I really care about people, honestly I do, but this is a very big test of my patience. I want to shake her and tell her to get a grip. I thought I was psychotic when I was checking up on James but I certainly never went as far as to analyse odd stains on his clothing.

'I'll get the kit sent to you today, Jane. Try to stay calm until it gives you a result. It will tell you in the space of thirty minutes, so you don't have to wait for ages. Do you think you can do that?'

‘I can. I’ll keep calm and pretend nothing’s wrong until then.’ Then she launches into a whole barrage of stories about how much Tom hates her.

It turns out that they’ve had a very troubled marriage for a while – and when I say a while, I actually mean years. It appears the whole ‘he hates me’ business has some credibility. According to her, he tells her how much he ‘hates her’ every day, and has done for the last four years. He despises everything about her: the way she talks, the questions she asks, the clothes she wears and just about every other part of her personality. They’ve not slept in the same bed for the past seven years, and basically live separate lives.

Neither of them has any hobbies, and they spend all their free time trying to avoid each other in the house. Jane says she has tried to improve her appearance, and even bought some skinny jeans, but Tom told her she looked like ‘mutton dressed as lamb’.

How can people live like this? Why do they do it? Tom has told her every day for years that he wishes he could divorce her, but he hasn’t. I wonder why? Is she financially a lot better off than him, or is she hiding a secret of his? And why doesn’t she walk out on him? Either way, it’s very strange.

On the other hand, my own divorce is still an immense battleground. I’ve tried the polite and civil route for the sake of Paris. When I first decided to divorce James, I had visions of my future life. I would live on my own with Paris in a nice home, not extravagant like I’ve been used to – but normal, easy to manage and lovely. Think picturesque cottage with roses around the door! I’d work a normal job, he’d come and pick her up and spend time with her. All would be friendly and amicable. No hard feelings, just a marriage that didn’t work and we could both move on like adults. Wrong!

He won’t agree to the divorce, legally or financially, and we keep going round in circles with solicitors and courts. In my opinion he’s certainly not kept up his duties to his daughter either.

So I know from my own experience that divorce is traumatic but I really think that, rather than hire a private investigator, Jane and Tom would be better off just spending the money on divorcing each other. For some reason, though, neither of them has taken any steps towards this, so here I am, involved in this messy situation. After over ninety minutes on the phone, Jane has utterly drained me.

After I hang up, I log back onto Facebook and see that Tom has accepted our friend request. I have a look through his profile, all the way back to when he joined. There’s absolutely nothing of any interest. Not a single clue. There are only a few odd status updates: ‘I love my wife so much, I am very lucky’; ‘My family mean more to me than anything’; ‘Jane has been the making of the man I am’.

Clearly Jane herself wrote these status updates! He’s definitely not written them off his own back given what she’s told us about their marriage. Why would she do something like that? If he is up to anything, and was using Facebook to conduct an extramarital affair, he certainly won’t be using it now that he knows she has access to it! This is why clients’ DIY detective stuff is simply a pain. It does nothing but raise suspicion and make our jobs harder. If she hadn’t done that, he would be a lot less suspicious and we could perhaps have found out something interesting through his profile. I huff, puff and place the order for the body fluid detection kit – something else I had found by Googling. Then I slam the laptop lid down and retreat back to the kitchen, and particularly the kettle ... I need a cup of tea!

A couple of days later, I’m sound asleep in my bed. This time in my dreams I’m up in the Scottish Highlands, staying in a beautiful castle hotel. The spa facilities are amazing, and I’m sat by the tranquil pool while Paris is splashing in the children’s pool, giggling away to herself. I’m even smiling in my sleep, this little scene makes me so happy. I hear a buzzing, a bit like a fly but bigger than that. I can’t put my finger on what it is, but it’s getting louder. It’s ruining my happy place. I’m flapping my hands around my ears, trying to swat the fly. But it’s not a fly. Now it’s sounding almost like a song. A tune. I can’t make it out ... and then it clicks. I grab the pillow from the cold side of the bed and hold it tightly over my ears. If I ignore it, it will go away ... But it’s not going away. It stops and starts again. It’s my stupid *Mission Impossible* ring tone. Boy, do I need to change it!

Huffing, I sit up in bed, a bit like a princess having a very pathetic princess-style strop. My arms are crossed, and I don't want to answer the phone ... but I do anyway.

'Hello.' I'm sounding a little grumpy about answering, considering it's (have a look at the clock) 7.30am! *What on earth!*

'Rebecca? It's Jane. I have the kit. What do I do now?'

Oh my goodness. How do I tell her politely to go away?

'There are instructions in the box. What do they say?' Reading instructions would be far too easy for her. Instead she picks up the 'let's piss off Rebecca hotline'. I fall sideways onto the pillows and close my eyes. Jane may be on the other end of the phone, but if I block her out this could all be part of a bad dream. Squeeze my eyes shut ...

'They say to run the stick over the item, followed by some liquid stuff that's got to go on it.'

My eyes are wide open and, nope, she's still there! She's on the end of a phone, but she may as well be sat at the bottom of my bed poking my feet for how annoying she is.

'OK, so do that then.'

'I've done that already. Now what?'

'How long does it say the test will take?' If I stay matter-of-fact, these conversations could possibly last less than an hour. I don't need a repeat of the ninety-minute marathon one.

'Thirty minutes.'

'How long has it been on?'

'Two minutes.'

'OK, so wait another twenty-eight minutes and see how it goes. Any problems, ring me back, OK?'

'Of course, thank you.' And she hangs up. I can breathe a sigh of relief.

My eyes close again and I'm being transported once more. I'm on an aeroplane, on my way to New York. A boy from school is sat next to me, and I wonder if that's a sign?

The phone ... ringing ... *Mission Impossible* ... again ... and it dawns on me. Mission impossible. I've jinxed myself. This is mission impossible.

'It's negative,' Jane tells me, and I'm not surprised.

'Ah,' I say. Very productive.

'I know. But how accurate are these things? I was so sure.'

Oh dear no, please no, don't let me have to go into an hour-long conversation about how accurate the tests are. There's no pleasing the woman; she won't believe me.

'Very accurate. I spoke with my equipment supplier yesterday,' I tell her, dodging the question neatly.

'Oh really, what did he suggest?'

'He said that the best thing would be an audio device, and I'm inclined to agree. You can't get into Tom's office, and neither can we, but if you place this item somewhere you'll be able to hear everything that goes on in the vicinity. Or else you can leave it entirely up to us and we'll monitor it for you and document the findings.'

'That sounds like a good idea.' After that she was on the phone for at least an hour wanting to know how the audio device works, how long it works for, how much it will cost. Followed by what a miserable life she has because of him, and all the rest of the things we've gone through a thousand times since I took on her case. Suddenly it dawns on me why solicitors charge for phone calls.

The same constantly needy Jane calls me goodness knows how many times over the next three days, which is how long it takes for her audio equipment to get to me. Chai, thankfully, is amazing at shipping quickly. Goodness knows how I'd have coped with this woman if he wasn't.

At this stage I can honestly say I think she's crazy and that her husband isn't up to anything. The things she's worrying over are, for want of a better word, pathetic. Still, as our new motto goes, everyone needs help, regardless of finances or circumstances. If this is helping her, who am I to

argue? Without any doubt, where I've gone very wrong is in letting her use me as a counsellor. That's something I'm not. She's been telling me so many horrible things, I honestly believe she is suffering some form of mental torture from her husband. I've told her speak to a professional and get help but she doesn't seem to take it in. Instead she rings me at the stupidest hours of the day and night and tells me everything. Very sad really. As much as she cheeses me off, I do have a soft spot for her.

We've had lots of conversations over the last couple of days. I made it very clear to her that if she was going to use the device she needed to tell him, otherwise, as I advised her, it would be illegal. Initially Jane was going to put the device in his car, but then she changed her mind. Then she decided on the garage, because he takes all his phone calls in there, but then she changed her mind. Next, she was going to put it in the lounge and go away for a few days, but then she changed her mind. Finally, we settled on a place. Jane was going to take the matchbox-size device and sew it into his laptop bag. That way it would be with him in the car, and in his workplace. No way would he be able to find it.

Two days later, at 8am in the morning, I start to listen in, typing up notes on what I hear.

8am – ‘And you are gold – GOLD – Always believe in your sooooooooouuulllllll ... You got the power to know!’ Nope, singing. Not up to anything.

9am – all quiet. He was in a morning briefing.

10am – still in the briefing.

11am – tap tap tapping away. He's typing.

12pm – chatting to a co-worker (male) about what sandwich to have for lunch. Yawn.

1pm – chatting to another co-worker about a PowerPoint presentation for tomorrow morning.

2pm – tap tap tapping away again.

3pm – OH ... MY ... GOD! Er, what I'm listening to is very rude! Don't want to type it, so I switch to record. Dirty sex noises are all I can hear. Lots of 'oh my's, 'wow, do that some more' and the list goes on ... and then I hear 'Come on, Muriel, now, now ...' Well, that confirms who it is. I'm sat at my desk, quite close to throwing up. My hand is over my mouth, and my head is bowed. I'm literally stunned to silence. The one problem about these audio bugs is that I've got no visuals, so I have no idea where on earth they are! They could be in his office, in a hotel room or even in a broom cupboard. All I know is that his wife will not be happy!

I have to carry on listening though. I need to hear the whole thing, and hopefully get some confirmation this is still him. Then it happens ...

‘Please can we not leave it so long next time, Tom? I really miss you when I can’t see you,’ says the female voice.

'I know. It's just Jane's been really suspicious lately. I need her to chill out for a bit. She seems to be getting better just the last few days.'

Thank you, Tom. Everything is confirmed and I've got it recorded. They continue their conversation, but not for long. It ends with Muriel telling Tom he should leave his annoying, pathetic wife, to which he gives a non-committal grunt.

I try to detach myself from the situation and not think about what's happened. I pick up the phone and dial Jane's number. I feel horrible. He really is everything she's said. He is a dreadful man, who's mentally torturing her. He's having an affair with a girl young enough to be his daughter, and it seems he truly does hate his wife. Jane shouldn't have to live with this awful reality.

I break the news to her, and even though I feel sick to the stomach and deeply distressed about it, Jane takes it all very well. She's been totally crazy the whole time – but now she is calm? It's very bizarre, but she seems at peace by the time our conversation ends. You can literally hear the sound of relief in her tone as she says, 'It's not just me then?'

A little bit of my heart breaks, and I struggle to swallow the lump in my throat.

'No, Jane, it's not you. You were right.'

Jane thanks me, and as we end our conversation, I tell her I'll call her in a few days to see how she's doing.

I sit in the same place I did just a few days ago, looking out at God's Waiting Room, watching the world go by. I had been utterly convinced Jane was a total fruitcake. She'd driven me to the brink of distraction and I'm sure she was doing the same to her husband. I was 100 per cent, totally, massively convinced beyond any doubt that her suspicions were all in her head. What does that say? Does it mean that her husband is a typical nasty horrible man, a serial cheater and the type of person no one should have anything to do with? Or is the result, and my problem with this case, based on guilt?

I feel dreadful for not believing Jane. My gut instinct was wrong. This was the classic woman I'd set out to help, and every step of the way I'd doubted her. Had it ever shown in my voice? Did she know I believed she was crazy? I put my hand on my heart and hoped she hadn't.

It makes me even more determined to stay open-minded and non-judgemental when our next job comes along. And I'm hoping that will be soon. Because despite all the long hours on the phone and the many irritations, I feel I am cut out for this role. Just a bit more practice and I hope I'll even get good at it. After all, I have the credentials from my life experience. I know what it feels like – on both sides of the fence.

THE LADIES VERSUS THE CSA

I've got strong moral values – but there are times when they have to go out of the window. I've always been the type of person to hold a firm opinion – but on the other hand, I'll do what it takes to get a job done. If you ask me how ruthless I am, my automatic reply would be: 'I'm lethal. I will literally do anything to get to where I want to be.'

Being a Lady Detective, even for the short time I've been doing it, has taught me a lot about myself that I never suspected. One: I want everything my own way. Two: I'm a serious control freak, and the hardest thing for me is delegating my precious clients to other people. Three: my moral boundaries are still being developed. I thought I knew who I was and what I believed in, but almost every day I have to re-evaluate. Four: I am seriously fascinated by people; I have a burning need to understand the world and why people do what they do. Five: I never realised how judgemental I was! Six: I care too much (hmm, most of the time, anyway!). Seven: I'm really not very 'lethal' at all – in fact, it's highly possible I'm a total pussycat pushover ... I'm still working this point out. Eight: I get infuriated with the Child Support Agency ...

It's 11am and God's Waiting Room is as lively as ever. Mrs Jones is weeding her garden. Mr Thomson across the road is mowing his lawn, and Albert is talking to his cat. Quite a remarkable sight, three people outside all at once! I'm in a thoughtful mood. How can I expand the work we're doing? What other avenues can we pursue? So far we've only had business from women who want us to follow their menfolk and find proof of infidelities, and mostly we've succeeded. It seems women's instincts about this are often spot-on. Maybe they don't ring us until they are pretty certain, but all this sordid stuff could quite possibly mash my brain after a while. We need to use our services for good purposes, but I'm lost as to what exactly. The percolator has finished making my morning coffee, and tapping my pen on the notepad isn't getting me very far. I stand up in a huff, mainly with myself. Like a flashing beacon, the phone sounds. I've now moved on to the James Bond theme tune, mainly because I couldn't find *Cagney and Lacey*.

'Good morning, the Agency,' I say, in my business tone.

'Hello. I have a problem I need some help with.'

This is the point at which I'm listening hard. It could be a perfectly normal person with a very normal problem or we could be taking a step on the crazy train, and dealing with the utterly bizarre. We get both in equal measure, I've found. What is today bringing me?

'Of course, and we're the right place for that,' I tell the lady on the end of the phone. My non-judgemental (cough, cough) summing-up, based on her voice alone? I reckon she's in her mid-forties with blonde highlighted hair.

'Excellent. I need to hire a private investigator to catch out my ex-husband.'

'Really? OK, how's about you give me some background information and I'll tell you if I can help.'

'Of course. My name's Sarah. I left my husband three years ago and we're now divorced. We have a child – she's now six – and he's never paid child support. I don't want millions from him, I just want something. I don't understand why he thinks that my paying for everything is acceptable when we created her together. Not only that, I'm a single mother and I do actually need help. I don't have a money tree in the garden or anything.'

'I understand. It certainly doesn't seem very fair. Have you got the CSA involved?' I ask, wondering if she has a genuine case.

'Yes. I first asked them to look into it two years ago, and they put him through assessment. He never replied to any of their letters, so they based the amount of money I was owed on some chart or scheme or something.'

‘I’ve heard about that. It’s a survey they look at if they can’t get information from the non-resident parent, or can’t find a tax return. The survey tells them what the person is expected to earn, based on their job title. The judgment is based on this.’

‘Exactly. It said I was owed £50 per week, which was fine by me. Only problem was that when they started to pester him for money, he suddenly replied. He said he wasn’t working, and that he lives with his parents.’

‘Is that true?’

‘No. He lives with his new girlfriend, and I know he works. He has his own business.’

Over the years I’ve heard a lot about people struggling to get maintenance payments from non-resident parents. Maybe this is an interesting new avenue for The Lady Detective Agency. Just what I was looking for!

‘Sounds familiar. What do you know about his work, and what evidence do you have?’

‘I don’t have any evidence. That’s my problem, because the CSA needs it. I know he’s a builder and has two builders who work for him. The whole operation is cash-based, and the CSA tell me they can’t do anything about that. They’ve read his bank statements and they show there’s nothing going through, but that’s because he puts it all in his girlfriend’s accounts. I know where he lives, though.’

‘Excellent,’ I tell her, relieved we have a lead. ‘It sounds simple. First things first. I’d advise surveillance to start off with. We’ll follow him from that address to work and compile some evidence about what he’s up to. Does he work every day?’

‘Oh yes, every day, he leaves between 7am and 9.30am, depending on where he’s working.’

‘No problem. I’ll email you a quote in the next half an hour. You have a think about it, and if you want to go ahead you just have to suggest a day and we’ll take it from there,’ I tell her, winding up the conversation.

‘Wonderful! Oh, thank you so much. I’m so relieved I’ve found someone who can help! I felt lost with it all.’

Aw, I like this lady! I thank her, get her details and hang up, moving straight on to the quote, which I compile and send through to her. I feel as if the morning has been productive now and decide to wander down to the village shop, pondering this possible new direction for the business.

As soon as I’ve returned, had some soup for lunch and read the paper, I check my emails. Sarah, the new CSA client lady, has instantly replied and even paid through PayPal! Crikey, she’s keen.

Hi Rebecca,

I’d love to go ahead with your services. Any weekday will be fine. I know it’s going to be a case of hit and miss, although I am confident he will do exactly as I’ve said. I can honestly say I’m not bitter, but I know him. He did the exact same thing with his first wife. He didn’t want to pay support for the two children he had with her, so he used to do everything in cash and put it through my account. When they got divorced, she ended up with a judgment on him for over £50,000, so now he has even more reason to hide everything he’s doing. I suppose this is karma calling, but either way, I need to do something. The whole thing seems so unfair. Anyway, I’ll leave it in your very capable hands; just let me know when you have any info.

Best of luck,

Sarah

Oh dear, this certainly seems like karma. Either way, this man is a serial child-maintenance dodger. Who on earth thinks they can have children and not support them? I am infuriated by this man. Hey ho, we’ve nothing else on for tomorrow, so I’ll book it in, and ask Steph to come along with me.

The alarm shrieks at a terrifying pitch. I’ve never been a morning person. I hit out to shut it up, but what I really want to do is throw it at a wall. My legs flop over the side of the bed, and I raise my upper half like a zombie. In fact, I probably look like a zombie too – yes, a quick check in the

mirror affirms this. Wonderful. I hobble into the bathroom. I'm in my twenties but I'm moving like my grandma. No, maybe not; grandma moves better than I do.

The shower is lukewarm – any warmer and I'd fall asleep standing up! Did I mention it's 5.30am? In my book, when the hands of the clock are anywhere before 7am, it's classed as 'holiday time' – only an acceptable time of day to be awake if you're catching a plane somewhere warm and sunny! But I suppose this is the reality of being a private detective.

I throw on the war paint, going far too heavy on the blusher – but who cares? I'm not supposed to be seen. Hair is just wrong, and it makes me feel stressed, but I need to get over that. Walk out to God's Waiting Room and realise it's a beautiful day. One of the first days of autumn, when you really notice the temperature changing. The leaves are just starting to turn and the sky is bright blue and clear. Ah, I do love God's Waiting Room on days like today. Mrs Timson across the path waves at me as I'm loading up the car: 5.50am and she's up, ready to face the day. What's that all about? I wave back to the happy old dear. She's lovely, really; slightly unhinged – calls me every name but my real one (Sarah, Judith, Joan ...) – and is always up and awake at what I consider crazy times of day, but she's lovely.

Time is moving on and I'm pulling up outside Steph's house. She's equally as prepared as I am: her hair is wet through and she hasn't a scrap of make-up on. 'Wrong, this time of day, wrong!' she moans, getting in the car with a pillow and blanket in tow.

'Morning, Steph.'

'Hello, love,' she says, leaning over for half a hug. 'Where we rocking off to today?' she asks, sticking on a pair of sunglasses like the diva she is.

'Some dude hasn't been paying child maintenance for his kid. Says he's not working but he is. We're off to get the evidence.' I try to stifle a yawn, thinking that as an agency we should just refuse to work before 10am.

'Rock on then, bird.'

'Are you stealing my lines now?'

'Yep, deal with it!'

We've clearly been working together too much lately.

We pull up outside the house where we've been told the target is living with his girlfriend. The new 4x4 he's supposed to drive is parked outside. The estate is rather lovely. Certainly doesn't look as if he's struggling. The house is detached with possibly three bedrooms, and there are neatly kept gardens. A very family-orientated estate – which is ironic considering why we're here. There's a stirring from under the blanket. Steph pops half her head out and lifts her sunglasses only slightly, as if she's a vampire trying to protect herself from the light.

'Arghhhh,' she says, like she's actually in pain. 'Where are we?' She has a puzzled look on her face and I can tell she's going to be highly useful today.

'We're here, and that's his house,' I say, pointing at the brightly painted red door.

'So he's well on the breadline then!' she remarks in her usual sarcastic tone.

'Exactly!' I open a newspaper and sit back while Steph stares out of the window like a puppy looking for its mother. Time to relax. It's 6.45am, which could mean he might not move for the next two and a half hours. We're parked a short distance away, where we have a good view. At first we used to worry that we'd get busybody neighbours and general passers-by coming out to ask who we are and why we're there, but it's never actually happened. This is just another one of the times that prove this job isn't as glamorous as the world might think. After all, Steph has been wakened from the dead, I look like a drag queen and we've both got hair that birds could nest in.

It's 9.25am and Steph is snoring. Not even quiet piggy snores, but loud foghorn ones. I've read the paper three times (even the sports section), picked the varnish off all my nails (fingers and toes), cleaned the car interior with a baby wipe (or ten), played poker, Scrabble, Monopoly and virtual Jenga on my phone, rung my daughter, rung my cousin, rung my nan (I never ring her; must do more

often), taken off my make-up and reapplied it (so I look like a normal person) and now I've got my feet on the ceiling, recreating yoga poses. I'm also utterly dying for the toilet – yet another hazard of an investigator's job. I wonder if we should carry potties with us when we're on surveillance work?

Just as the boredom is getting too much to bear, his front door opens. A midget of a man emerges, with a massive head of hair and so much stubble it looks like he hasn't shaved for three weeks. He gets into his car. This is our man! I start the engine so I'm poised and ready to go. He takes off at normal speed (thank you). I wait until he gets round the first corner and ever so slightly out of sight and then ... Full throttle! We're off! I feel all my weight pushing back into my seat, and Steph wakes with a start.

'It's murder!' she yells, as she jumps up in her seat and bangs her head on the roof, scaring me half to death.

'What the hell?' I shout.

'I don't know. Is this guy a murderer?' she asks, looking lost. Our abrupt getaway has obviously interrupted a dramatic dream.

'No, stupid! What are you talking about? We're following that 4x4, two cars in front. Keep your eyes open.'

'Sorry, must have nodded off. Maintenance guy, right?' She is perched sideways on the passenger seat, half-resting on the dashboard of the car.

'Yes, Steph. Maintenance guy. Watch him.' Bless her, she looks like a toddler who's just seen the bogeyman!

'On it. He's two cars in front.' Suddenly it feels as though the *Benny Hill* theme tune should be playing in the background. It's a good job our clients don't see us at work or they'd think we were pretty darn incompetent.

There are traffic lights approaching. An investigator's worst nightmare. I once read a private investigation manual that addressed the problem of speeding and traffic lights. In basic terms, it said that whatever you do, don't speed and don't go through traffic lights. Your driving licence is part of your golden investigator's work tools. You need it desperately because without it you simply don't have a business. Well, if any police officers are reading this, I'm sorry ... but there are times you can't play by the rules – and when the lights change after the guy you're tailing has gone through is definitely one of them.

'It's RED!' Steph screams. I approach with caution.

'Keep your eyes on him, and only him,' I tell her firmly. There are two lanes, and a car at the side of me. I look carefully, and, holding my breath – I'm even tempted to shut my eyes – I go for it! Yes, I know it's wrong, but I do it very carefully. I promise. OK, I'll go to church tomorrow and say sorry, but if we lose him, the whole morning has been a waste.

'You'll frigging kill me one day,' Steph shrieks.

'Let's hope not,' I say calmly. 'Can you see him?'

'Yes,' she sighs, her relief tinged with disapproval. Next up, we face roadworks. For God's sake! It's just not funny. He is five cars in front, which is a recipe for disaster.

'Can't see him,' Steph tells me.

Wonderful! The traffic comes to a standstill.

'Screw this,' I say.

'What are you doing now?' Steph asks with concern as I pull into the hard shoulder to overtake the traffic on the outside. Yet another illegal move but if I hadn't done it, we'd have lost him because somehow he's managed to get as far as thirteen cars in front. There's a gap in the perfect spot, which I zip into just before he can see us.

'Rebecca, you don't pay me death money!'

'Sorry. No more illegal moves,' I promise with my fingers crossed.

Thankfully, about a mile further down the road the subject pulls into a building site. We slump back in our seats and breathe a sigh of relief. Honestly, I feel as if I've been holding my breath since he emerged from that front door.

'I hate traffic,' I say, reaching for the video camera. Steph is grabbing the stills camera, ready to snap away. The subject goes into one of those horrible Portakabins – made of some kind of metal, and not only plain ugly but also depressing. He emerges wearing a hard hat and a fluorescent jacket.

'What a spoon,' I remark. 'Not working, my foot!'

Steph shakes her head in disapproval.

Our subject proceeds to direct men on the building site, waving his arms to show them where to go and what to do, and we video him for the next hour from behind a wall, and through some side railings.

'Think that's what we call a result,' Steph says.

'Correct. Let's go get something to eat. And have a pee!'

We take off and have lunch. Later on, when Steph has safely been returned to her bed, I review the footage. What we have is the car-camera, which is set up on the front dashboard of the car, showing him leaving for work from his girlfriend's house. I run a search and find she rents it. Also, the film footage and photos of him on the building site show that he's clearly in a position of authority. I throw together my report, based on all the timings and factual evidence, and send it off to Sarah.

'You are absolutely wonderful,' she telephones to tell me, sounding ecstatically happy.

'Aw, you're welcome.' I leave out all the parts about the red lights, hard shoulder and general law-breaking.

'I'm sending it off to the Child Support Agency straight away. I can't thank you enough for what you've done. I knew this is where he was, and what he was up to, but now I actually have the evidence.'

I feel really happy for her and just hope she gets some justice.

Two months go by and to my surprise I see 'Sarah CSA Case' flash on my phone.

'Hi, Rebecca, it's Sarah.'

She must have an update for me.

'I sent off all the evidence to the CSA, and they interviewed my former husband again. He came up with a cock-and-bull story that this was a one-off, and that he isn't in full-time work. He says he got offered a job managing a site for a week, and took it, but now he's unemployed again.'

'Oh dear,' I tell her. 'This is not good.'

'I know. He's so slippery! I'm furious. I know what he's doing, but it's just proving it!'

'It's such a shame that when we get proof he can so easily lie his way out of it.' I feel genuinely disheartened for her.

'There's only one thing for it. I know it's going to cost a lot, but it needs to be done because I'm not letting him get away with this. Can you do exactly what you've already done, but once a week for the next twelve weeks?'

Crikey! 'Of course we can,' I tell her. Thankfully, because he doesn't live too far away, we can have it done in less than three hours each time. The bill's not going to be thousands, but it's still going to be significant.

'Great. Thank you. Send me an invoice and I'll get it sorted for you. Mercifully, my dad's offered to pay!'

That makes me feel a little better, at least. I'd offer to work for her for free, but that's my heart taking over my head again. Mustn't let my personal feelings about dads who don't pay maintenance get in the way of my professionalism! Time to get a grip.

Over the course of the next twelve weeks, we do exactly as Sarah asks. Her ex-husband goes to work from his girlfriend's house every single time. Different building sites, but the same job. We also manage to track down his website, on which he touts his services as an 'independent project manager'. That will do nicely. I print off the pages and send them to Sarah. You can't simply send

a web link to the Child Support Agency and ask them to look at it – it's against their rules – so we have to print off each page and send them. The client will get a full package from us that they can submit directly to the CSA – all part of the service!

After the twelve weeks are up, Steph and I catch up over skinny lattes.

'I'm still worried they're going to turn round to Sarah and say it's not enough,' she frets.

'I know what you mean: he could invent an explanation for everything. What else can we do, though?' I sit back, large white mug in hand, staring into the foamy milk for inspiration. Thankfully, it doesn't take long before it dawns on me. 'We sting him!'

'With a bee?' Steph is confused.

'No, silly! We set up a honey trap. But instead of trying to seduce him and seeing if he responds, we lure him to work for us. We pay for his services. He says on his website he's a project manager – so let's find something for him to project manage!'

'Ooooh!' Finally, pennies are dropping all over the place. 'I get it! Nice thinking, brains!'

Smugly, I sit back in my chair and dream up a way in which we can perform this little exercise.

'Yes, this will do perfectly,' says Steph, whom I'm currently hoisting up so that she can peer over a six-foot-high brick wall.

'Can you see the way in, though?' I ask, getting impatient as her heel digs into my thigh.

'Possibly. Get me down,' she says, brushing the dust from her all-black ensemble. 'Come around this way.' And she walks – no, teeters – in her heels, towards some trees.

We squeeze through a gap between the trees and the wall. Following the path round leads us to an opening at the opposite side, revealing a plot of land with the foundations of a house poking out. It's a Sunday morning, the time of day when the residents of God's Waiting Room will be out in force, wearing their fanciest hats to swan around the village church. All in the name of religion, of course.

'Let me handle this one,' Steph says, digging out her phone from her Louis Vuitton handbag. She looks pleased with herself, and is clearly loving this case, as she dials the number our subject gave on his website. 'Hello, my name is Jennifer Hall. I develop properties. I'm sorry for ringing on a Sunday but we've had a minor emergency. The project manager on one of our properties handed in his notice this morning and is leaving us in the lurch. We need someone to manage our site a.s.a.p, and I found your details on the Internet.'

She's made a good start, but it's a little risky. What if he is fully booked for the next few weeks? Steph clearly didn't think of that possibility, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

'Oh really? OK, that should be fine with me. How would it work?'

I rub my hands together to ward off some of the chill in the air. It's sunny but the summer warmth has gone. I hop from one stiletto to the other, realising we are highly inappropriately dressed for the occasion. As always.

'Sorry, I'm going away tomorrow, but we really need someone to start next week. Is there by any miracle a possibility you can come now?'

I smile a big cheesy grin, still hopping, giving her a thumbs-up!

'Oh, thank you, that would be amazing. Don't worry. If you take the job, you can bill us for Sunday hours,' Steph tells him, joining in my hopping.

The conversation ends. 'He's on his way.'

Exceptionally chuffed with ourselves, we dance through the mud and puddles back to the car.

Some forty-five minutes later and we're in position. We drive round to the site and set up the video camera in the car window. I'll take some snaps from my post in the car.

'You ready?' I ask her.

'Rock and roll ready.'

'Good job. Looks like he's here.'

His 4x4 drives around the corner. Steph opens the car door, and bounces out with her usual cheery attitude.

‘Hellooooo! Thanks *sooo* much for coming. I’m sorry for dragging you out today.’ She gives him her sparkliest smile. Sat in the car, I hardly hear anything else that’s going on. There’s lots of nodding and walking around the foundations, but finally they part with a handshake. Somehow she has convinced him she knows about construction!

Steph gets back into the car. ‘Drive, quick, round there,’ she says, pointing just past the trees. I pull up in a spot where we can still watch him but he won’t be able to see us.

‘What did he say?’ I ask her.

‘He said that he’s contracted to another job for the next nine months, something he’s been working on for over a year. He can’t leave his current job, but he has other men on his books who he can employ and manage for us. It will cost around £1,000 per week, because they’re specialists or something.’

Steph has a triumphant grin on her face and I’m not only relieved but also exceptionally happy.

‘But why’s he still there, though?’ Steph has a good point. What’s he doing now?

‘I’m not sure,’ I say, shuffling into a position where I can see better. He walks around the site a bit more, poking his nose into an outhouse. Very strange.

‘Oh my God!!!!’ We both sit there, stunned. ‘Is he doing what I think he’s doing?’

‘I think so,’ Steph says, staring in amazement. ‘*He’s stealing the boiler!*’

The dirty-dog of a project manager/child-maintenance dodger/fraudster/outright thief loads the boiler into his 4x4, along with some copper piping, before finally driving off!

The video is pretty good, and Steph writes up a full witness statement about their conversation.

I speak with Sarah once again to tell her what’s happened, then send her our full report. The CSA orders her ex to pay maintenance, but still it’s not the end of that slippery guy trying as many ways as he possibly can not to pay for his child. He’s the type that will always find a way to get out of it. You’d think Sarah would be angry, very angry, but actually she is just sad and disappointed. I’m sure that over time the sadness will pass and the anger will return. Maybe we’ll be called back to film him again when that happens. He’d better watch his step ...

THE DATING GAME

Gradually we get more business at The Lady Detective Agency and it begins to seem as though we might actually make a living from it one day. I'm over the moon because – all modesty aside – I think I have a natural talent for it. I'm getting better at asking the right questions on those initial phone calls, and we're gearing up with lots more useful detective gadgets all the time. I've got to admit, some are quite fun, making us feel like female James Bonds, but I've learned you can't rely on them. Technology always fails when you need it the most. It's a bit like phone reception: when you need to call someone, and it's a matter of life or death, you will have no reception. Happens every time!

I like to be a traditional investigator. Hiding behind a computer and a bunch of technology is the cheat's way out. I prefer to feel I've used my brain and done some proper detective work to get results.

Paris and I are splitting our time between living in God's Waiting Room with the parents and in our actual home in the barn. The divorce case isn't getting any prettier, but otherwise life is good and I'm happy. Except that everyone seems to think I should start dating again, so I can look for 'true love'. Pah! What's that when it's at home? Does it even exist? Or is it just a fairy tale invented by marketing types?

You know what I'm hating? Other people's relationships. I'm absolutely sick and tired of them. They argue and bicker all the time, and it's stressful to listen to my friends complaining of this or that about their other halves. Very worryingly, I think I'm becoming a 'relationship basher'. I just have to read the newspaper to see all the horrors of cheating, wife-beating and general lies to wonder – what is the point? Why do people actually get together? When I look around me, I realise I don't know any couples who are truly happy ... or at least I don't think they are. Even the friends who are getting married have issues. I think back to my own wedding day, when I knew in my heart of hearts I shouldn't be doing it. What if everyone out there is the same? What if everyone is unhappy? What if relationships are a serious figment of fairy tales? The thought that true love is a total myth is highly disturbing but I've come to the conclusion it's true. I don't think real love between couples exists. There – see? – I said it!

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