

> **Catching the internet groomers**

Answers Investigation worked with the BBC News At Six team to investigate approaches made to underage girls in internet chat rooms by creating a mock web identity for a 14-year-old girl.

In a short time the team had approached from 66 men. After revealing 'her' age as 14 only half of the men backed down and one in particular pressed to meet the girl. Extensive planning went into the meet, with one teen detective acting as the girl and a colleague playing a friend who had insisted on coming. With both wearing school uniform, elaborate security was put in place as the



girls had to be watched for an entire train journey in addition to the meeting itself, which took place on a footbridge. The man was on the far side of the bridge next to his motorbike, in earlier discussions he'd promised to take the girl for a ride on the back.

The 'friend' departed, leaving one undercover detective seemingly alone. When he could see the coast was clear, he approached and introduced himself, attempted to gain her trust and then tried to move her towards his motorbike.

At a given signal, a BBC correspondent and cameraman approached the man while the detective kept him in conversation.

After admitting to the reporter he knew the girl's age he left on his motorbike and was followed before being pulled over by officers in a waiting police car.

In Focus

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On the trail of the teen sleuths

Young detectives: The private investigation pendulum is swinging away from men in trench coats and trilbies and towards a new breed of young spies more accustomed to the classroom than the courtroom **BY JAMES DAY**



I spy: Marnie Higgins gathers evidence and, below, Isla MacKinnon and Ailsa Munro go undercover in school uniform

Once upon a time there were six young women about to take a gap year travelling the world before seeking out exciting careers in acting, art, fashion and forensic psychology.

But one man took them away from all that and now they work for him. His name is Nigel and these are his angels.

The women are private detectives for one of the country's most respected agencies and their services are in huge demand.

Aged between 17 and 22 and more familiar with Magnum ice cream than Magnum PI, they are wrapped up in a murky world of web paedophiles, corporate espionage, high-stake internet scams and covert surveillance operations.

'I don't think my school's career adviser believed the job actually existed,' says Isla MacKinnon, 19, a detective since she was 17. 'I mainly do surveillance or undercover work because I can look young or act grown up.'

'Being young and female is very non-threatening so we can blend in and nobody asks questions. If we are approached we can come up with better excuses than a middle-aged guy anyway.'

MacKinnon became involved through Challenge 21, checking whether licensed venues asked for ID if she tried to buy alcohol or cigarettes.

She says: 'I'd already fallen in love with the idea of becoming a detective, then I got a call from Nigel offering me some work during half-term.'

'I spent the week logging results of a computer returned from forensic analysis and I'd got the bug. I started full time a month and a half before my 18th birthday.'

MacKinnon's day began

at 5.30am with a three-hour stake-out of a hotel in Croydon, Surrey, waiting for a man suspected of illicit activities.

'The press call it doorstepping; we call it really boring sitting in a car hoping someone does something.'

'Patience is a virtue and nothing happened this morning but it did last night and it was really exciting.'

MacKinnon's favourite case involved a cosmetics company that was mysteriously losing stock. She says: 'The girls started checking car-boot sale for the missing beauty products and their following the sellers to see where the leak was coming from.'

'We eventually ended up at a warehouse in Bridgend, south Wales, taking fingerprints from all the workers and matching them with prints on the products. Sometimes it's all very CSI and I love CSI.'

But should we be concerned young people are being put into the line of fire? MacKinnon says: 'My dad is ex-Metropolitan Police so he was very worried but once he understood what I was doing and how much I was enjoying myself he was really impressed.'

'If a job is deemed too dangerous a tee detective won't be sent in to do it. For example, we do a lot of process serving [delivery legal documents] but if it's for a non-molestation order



Private investigation firms and detectives are not regulated. The agency we spoke to believes industry regulation should be enforced to clamp down on rogue traders



in a tough neighbourhood, Nigel makes sure he doesn't send in one of his "youngsters", as he calls us.'

Nigel is Nigel Parsons, one of the detectives behind agency Answers Investigation, based in Guildford, Surrey, but with offices across the South-East.

'We're vastly different to anyone else in the industry and we know it,' he says. 'The public still see images of trench coats and trilbies and some of that is still true but our ideas are different.'

'A few years ago we began recruiting young people almost by accident. They absolutely astounded people with their skills and we've been inundated with requests for their services ever since.'

MacKinnon's early morning operation also involved Marnie Higgins, 20, who began at the agency when she was just 14. "'You're just like Charlie's Angels' [left], that's what people always say. Unfortunately we don't have machine guns or a helicopter, although we're working on that one,' she says.'

'My friends all know what I do but usually it's just easier to tell people I work in a supermarket.'

Higgins says the team works closely with the police, especially with crucial background work that forces don't have the resources for.

Famous PIs

Metro spoke to the Answers Investigation team to coincide with the DVD release of movie *Tenderness*. Russell Crowe (below) stars as a semi-retired detective chasing a violent teenager. Plenty of legendary fictional characters have been private investigators but do Higgins and MacKinnon know who they are?

Magnum PI (played by Tom Selleck, far right)

Higgins: 'I've only ever heard older people talk about him. All I know is he has a red car



and a moustache... not that inconspicuous. MacKinnon: 'Sounds like an ice cream.'

Charlie's Angels Higgins: 'I've actually never seen the show or movies. It would be cool to have machine guns, maybe not the catsuits though.'

MacKinnon: 'Love this. Don't love how easy they make it look, or how they manage to look so perfect at all times. It's never that glamorous.'

Jim Rockford (The Rockford Files) Higgins: 'Not a clue. I'm getting images of a failed musician trying a new career.'



MacKinnon: 'Sounds cool. Rockford, Jim Rockford, it works.'

Sherlock Holmes Higgins: 'The absolute stereotype, that's exactly how so many people imagine a PI to look. Never saw the old ones but the new one - I would happily dress in a trilby and trench coat if it meant Jude Law was my sidekick!' MacKinnon: 'Elementary, my dear Marnie.'

Simon Templar (The Saint)

Higgins: 'No idea. The show name suggests he has some sort of super-human power or maybe just a high moral code or gives a lot to charity.' MacKinnon: 'I have no idea.'

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