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Opening extract from
**Alex Sparrow and the Really Big
Stink**

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1

The World According To Me

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

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

First of all, let me explain how it started. I'm Alex, by the way, Alex Sparrow. I live at home with Mum, Dad, my little sister Lauren and our boring pet goldfish. I'm ten, in Year 6 at Cherry Tree Lane School. I've never minded school, and back then, when all this began, I was cruising along nicely. I was pretty much the leader of my group of friends (all boys, no girls, obviously) and

we were really popular. Everyone wanted to hang around with us and people looked up to me, you know? Life was awesome, or at least I thought so at the time, until one night, when everything changed...

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

Alex – Who Can You Trust?

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

Only £19.99 – Accurate Results Guaranteed.

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

What happened next was weirder still. The second I clicked 'Send', the home phone began to ring, which pretty much never happens, because who even uses a home phone these days? When I answered it, what sounded like a recorded message clicked on. A woman's voice said: 'Thank you for your purchase from The Professor's Laboratory. Your lie detector will be with you before you know it. Good luck, Alex.' As the message clicked off, I heard a loud crackle and what felt like a spark of electricity seemed to jump from the phone to my ear. It kind of jolted inside my head, like when you touch a metal door

handle in a shop and get an electric shock, but much worse. It really hurt, but just for a second. I shouted some abuse into the phone but there was nobody there, so I hung up, wishing I'd left it for Lauren.

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