Books by Iona Rangeley

EINSTEIN THE PENGUIN

EINSTEIN THE PENGUIN: THE CASE OF THE FISHY DETECTIVE

EINSTEIN THE PENGUIN: THE CASE OF THE POLAR POACHERS

CECILY SAWYER: HOW TO BE A SPY

CECILY SAWYER: HOW TO CRACK A CODE

Iona Rangeley

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CECILY SAWYER

HOW TO CRACK A CODE



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To Eve White

‘Adults rarely trust children with classified information.
They also rarely expect children to be in prior
possession of it.’

Melissa Irving the Fifth,
The Little Girl’s Guide to Faking Your Death and
Evading Your Enemies



ONE

Cecily Sawyer had forgotten to eat her breakfast, and it had rattled her.

There were certain things in life that Cecily was prone to forgetting: brushing her hair, perhaps, or where she had left her socks. But breakfast, like how to decode a Caesar cypher and the best way to disarm a lunatic in control of a horde of brainwashed mice, was not among these things.

'I'm getting sloppy,' she said to Mrs Maple-Syrup, her

own pet mouse and an independent thinker who was not remotely brainwashed. ‘There must be something wrong with me.’

Mrs Maple-Syrup squeaked sympathetically from her seat on Cecily’s shoulder and pawed a stray blonde hair behind her ear.

‘You’re right,’ said Cecily. ‘I *have* had a lot on my mind.’ Perhaps it was checking the post that had distracted her. She had written to the editor of *Espionage for School-Aged Children* weeks ago, but no reply appeared in the postbox no matter how many times a day she went to open it.

The world around the tram stop was looking distinctly October-ish. Dirty orange leaves conspired together in crevices, and the pink and yellow houses at the end of the street looked paler than usual, as if someone out of sight was sapping the brightness from a leak at the corner of the universe.

Even the Planetarium was looking empty, with no queue of tourists by the door and a ragged quartet of posters clinging sadly to the noticeboard.

Cecily walked past these posters every morning, and every morning she made a pointed effort not to look at

them. She knew the faces off by heart, anyway: Ida's smile, Douglas's cautious frown, Krause's and Clementine's cold stares.

WANTED, said the posters.

REPORT THESE CRIMINALS TO CITY COUNCIL ON SIGHT.

Cecily preferred not to be reminded that her godparents, Douglas and Ida, were wanted criminals now.



Eventually the tram came rattling down from the Coal Quarter, sending a flock of pigeons hurtling into the air in a whirlwind of black and grey. Cecily hopped on board and sat down beside her best friend, Felix. Back row, far right. He was always waiting there before school.

'Morning, Mrs Maple-Syrup,' said Felix.

'What about me?' said Cecily.

'That was implied,' said Felix. He pulled a bag of pastries from his rucksack and held it open in front of Cecily. 'When are we having our MICE meeting?'

Magnificently Intelligent Coordinated Espionage was Cecily and Felix's spy group, and they had been hosting weekly meetings since August. Most meetings ended with the same conclusion: that something fishy was afoot, that this town was odder than they had ever thought possible, and that frankly it was hard to think straight with villains on the loose.

Other meetings ended with ice cream.

'After school?' said Cecily, helping herself to a chunk of brioche. 'You could come over to the hotel?'

Felix nodded. 'I'll add it to the schedule.'

Cecily's parents lived in a hotel, which they also ran. At least, Cecily had spent most of her life believing that

they ran it, until a few months ago when she found out they were actually spies. Now she didn't know what to think.

But the Hotel de Bonair ran, and her parents seemed to run along with it, whether they were investigating a national security threat or simply having the carpets cleaned.

'Perhaps Miss Virgil will give us something useful to talk about,' said Felix cheerfully, and Cecily made an unconvincing hopeful noise that sounded a bit like *mmmph*.

Miss Virgil's history lessons had been of no use so far this term, and it was starting to feel like that wasn't going to change.

Perhaps, thought Cecily as the tram rattled past the Vegetable Market and through the alley of multicoloured buildings, perhaps no one would *ever* tell them anything about the history of the City. And they would never know the answers to the questions that had pestered them since the summer, like why rival spy organisations roamed every corner of every pavement, or why fake buildings stood empty in their streets, or why a secret system of transportable telephone boxes rocketed people to and fro beneath the concrete.

‘It’s not enough to know that your parents are safe now,’ Felix often reminded her, ‘if we don’t know why they were unsafe in the first place.’

Of course, Felix and Cecily knew perfectly well why Emmeline and Peregrine Sawyer had been unsafe in the first place: they had been betrayed by their friends Douglas and Ida, kidnapped from a dinner party and locked away in a cell at the top of a disused mustard factory for several days. And all because they had caught wind of Admiral Krause and Clementine Drizzle’s evil plan to spread terrible secrets about people using brainwashed mice.

A long time ago, too long ago for Cecily to remember, Krause and Clementine had belonged to Cecily’s parents’ spy organisation, the Intelligent Institute. But they had left, and ever since, they had been doing everything in their power to drive a wedge between the City’s spies. They had also been running the Spymart, the gadget supermarket that provided those same spies with the technology to spy on each other. Somewhere along the way they had convinced Douglas and Ida to join their scheme, and now Douglas, Ida, Krause and Clementine were on the run together.

But Felix used the word ‘why’ in a more abstract sense:

Why do we live in a city where there is such a market for terrible secrets and spy gadgets? he might have asked. Or else, *Why are there so many spies here in the first place, and why is the City Council so poorly run?*

Sometimes questions are so important that there is no need to ask them: they simply hang about in the air, making themselves obvious and tripping people up when they are trying to get to the fridge. The many questions Cecily and Felix had about the City felt that way this morning. Cecily looked at Felix, and Felix looked at Cecily, and Mrs Maple-Syrup looked at a bluebottle that was crawling past on the grubby handrail, and then all three of them turned to look at the clouds sliding by outside the window until they got to school.

The City Preparatory School for Younger Boys and Girls was on the outskirts of town, not far from the District of Tall Towers. A looming concrete building towered over a fenced-in schoolyard, looking ready to swallow it up if it misbehaved.

The tram paused a safe distance from the gates, and Cecily and Felix hopped down on to the pavement, followed by a handful of other children. Cecily didn't like school, but this was mostly out of commitment to the

belief that she could learn far more by herself from books than her teachers could tell her in forty-minute time slots. Whatever she thought, it was the only school the City had to offer – not counting The City Senior School for Boys and Girls Aged Thirteen and Above, but Cecily was only eleven.

Like most school days, this one dragged by slowly. Headmaster Doldrum started the morning with an assembly on the statistical dangers of running in corridors. Madame Tristesse lectured the class on basic French greetings. (Cecily had a knack for languages and would have listened carefully if they ever seemed to move past 'bonjour'.) And Major Mackintosh made them jog twelve laps of the schoolyard in PE. By the time they limped down the corridor to their history class, Cecily and Felix were out of breath and largely out of hope.

Cecily caught Felix's eye as they sat down. 'Remember to ask questions,' she whispered. 'We need something to discuss in our meeting.'

'Settle down, boys and girls.' Miss Virgil shot a smile at Cecily from over by the blackboard.

She had taught them approximately nothing all term, but there was something about Miss Virgil that made

Cecily want to impress her. Perhaps it was her smart outfits and her shiny hair, or the way she narrowed her eyes at boys who misbehaved. Cecily pulled out her pen and prepared herself for note-taking.

'Right,' said Miss Virgil. 'Who can tell me what we learned last lesson?'

'Nothing,' somebody muttered.

Cecily half expected the sound to have come from Felix, but he was right next to her. This voice came from the back of the class. She glanced over her shoulder to see a small girl with curly dark hair and glasses, looking almost as fed up as she felt.

'Thank you, Katie,' said Miss Virgil, smiling. 'You can stay behind after class.'

Katie had rejoined their class this term after a year away. Cecily didn't know where she had been, but she seemed different to how Cecily remembered her from before.

Katie shrugged and crossed her arms as if nothing their teacher said could bother her.

'Now, who else wants to tell me what we learned last lesson?' asked Miss Virgil.

'You were telling us about the City Council,' said Cecily, sticking up her hand. 'And how the current Head

Councillor was elected ten years ago and has improved the local tram network immeasurably.'

'Exactly, Cecily,' said Miss Virgil, scribbling something on the board.

'But, Miss Virgil, I wanted to ask you who was in charge *before* the Head Councillor? When are we going to learn about the history that came earlier?'

'That's not on our module for this term, I'm afraid,' said Miss Virgil simply.

'But does that mean you can't tell us?'

'Not if it interrupts my lesson. You can stay behind with Katie too.'

'But, miss!' cried Felix, leaping to Cecily's defence. 'Cecily isn't trying to interrupt your lesson! She's taking an interest in the subject.'

Miss Virgil raised an eyebrow. 'I didn't realise Cecily needed you to speak for her. Perhaps you had better stay behind and tell me more about her choices later.'

Cecily sighed. She wanted to like Miss Virgil, but the woman was making it hard. By the time the bell rang, the sky outside had turned grey and Mrs Maple-Syrup, growing bored, had clambered out of Cecily's satchel and up her leg to reach the desk. Cecily intercepted her

and dropped her back inside her bag, along with a treat: her mouse had developed a habit of poking her nose and whiskers out at unfortunate moments, and it was starting to draw attention from the wrong people.

Cecily had almost forgotten that she was due a telling-off from Miss Virgil when Felix hissed at her to stay in her seat.

'Well, thank you for staying behind,' said Miss Virgil once the rest of the class had filed out of the door and disappeared. 'And I'm sorry you find yourselves so unsatisfied with your history class.'

'We're not unsatisfied!' protested Felix.

'Not at all,' agreed Cecily. 'It's just that there's a few things we don't know that we'd like to know.'

'Speak for yourselves,' said Katie. 'I think this class is ridiculous and I think this school is ridiculous too.'

'That's a shame,' said Miss Virgil as she gathered a few belongings from her desk into a bag. 'I expect you won't be accepting my invitation for extra history lessons, then.'

Katie didn't say anything.

'Uh – extra history lessons?' prompted Cecily.

'Yes,' said Miss Virgil. 'I was thinking of setting up

a lunchtime history club for particularly talented young historians. I was wondering if you'd like to be my founding members.'

'Will it be more of – you know . . .' Felix began.

'More of the same?' asked Miss Virgil. She smiled in a way that was difficult to interpret. 'It can be. But if you have any questions you'd like to ask me, it would be more appropriate for you to do so then.'

Cecily and Felix glanced at each other.

'Shall we start tomorrow?' asked Miss Virgil brightly. 'One o'clock, here in my classroom? You can bring your lunch.' She pushed a pair of leaflets across the desk. Felix pocketed one and handed the other back to Katie.

'All right,' said Cecily. 'Yes. Thank you, Miss Virgil. We'd love to join your lunchtime history club.'

'And you, Katie?'

Cecily turned around. Katie was already halfway to the door. 'I'll think about it,' she said.