Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Spy Society
An AKA Novel

Written by

Robin Benway

Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Chapter 1

I cracked my first lock when I was three.

I know that sounds like I'm bragging, but really, it wasn't that hard. It was a Master Lock, the same combination lock that you probably have on your locker or bike. Anyone with Internet access and too much time on his or her hands can crack a Master Lock. I'm serious. Google it. I'll wait.

See? Easy.

My parents were the ones who gave me the lock. They still swear up and down that they weren't testing me, that I really wanted to play with it and they were just trying to keep me from having some sort of toddler meltdown. But really? I'm not buying it. How many of you had a Master Lock for a toy?

My parents weren't surprised that I cracked the lock. I think they'd have been more surprised if I *hadn't* opened it. It would probably be hugely disappointing for two spies to have a completely inept kid, you know? Even my

name—*Margaret*, ugh—was chosen because it has so many different nicknames: Peggy, Maisie, Molly, Margie, Meg—the list is endless. My parents have called me Maggie since I was born, but I have twelve birth certificates that all say something different.

Maybe I should explain.

My family works for the Collective. You've never heard of the Collective, but you've definitely read about our work. Tobacco executives on trial because of damning evidence? Human smuggling rings being broken up? The fall of that Peruvian dictator? That's us.

I have to admit, I'm still not sure who or what the Collective even *is*. I know only a few details: there are about two hundred spies stationed around the globe, moving to wherever we're needed. Some of us are forgers (more on that later), computer hackers, statisticians, weapons experts, and I think a few assassins, too, but my parents won't answer my questions about them. I don't know how many safecrackers there are, but my family moves a lot because of me. Apparently a lot of safes need cracking.

We don't ever take things that aren't ours. The Collective may be secretive, but we're not sneaky. The whole point is to right wrongs, not create them. When I was little, I thought the Collective was like Santa Claus, giving out presents but never being seen. Now I know, of course, that the Collective is based in London, not the North Pole, but whether it's run by dozens of guilty-conscienced millionaires working toward a noble cause or one crazy Howard Hughes–type dude, I have no idea.

The Collective had stationed us in Reykjavík, Iceland, over the summer. We were getting ready to head to New York tonight after finishing this job, which could not end soon enough for me. The summer had been painfully boring (and painfully bright, because Reykjavík gets twenty-four hours of sunlight during the summer), since my parents were both busy trying to figure out the case, and school wasn't in session. I spent a lot of time practicing my safecracking skills on safes that the Collective sent to our house, but even that got old after a while. I started keeping an eye on the family across the street, even though there was nothing suspicious about them. They were painfully normal, especially their son. Especially their *cute* son. I even managed to mortify myself by having a long-running and completely one-sided "How *you* doin'?" imaginary conversation with Cute Boy.

Where'd we move from? Oh, nowhere you'd know. So what do you do around here for fun?

Ice cream? Yeah, I love ice cream. With you? Of course! No, my parents are totally cool with me dating.

See? Pathetic. As you can tell, I've never had a boyfriend, but whatever. It's cool. After all, most girls who have boyfriends probably can't say that they helped to bring down the Peruvian government, right?

So, after a long and lazy summer spent safecracking and slowly going crazy over Cute Boy, I was ready for New York, ready for a change.

I was ready for something to *happen*.

* * *

The first rule of being a spy: Listen. Our family friend Angelo always says that a good spy never asks questions, that people will always tell you what you need to know.

I've known Angelo my entire life. He was friends with my parents back when they were all in Berlin together, and they've stayed in contact ever since. Angelo works for the Collective, too, but I think he's semiretired now, or at least that's what he says. For all I know, he's getting ready to be knighted by the queen or about to go spelunking somewhere in the Galapagos. He always gives good advice, too, especially about safecracking and lock picking. It's like if Tim Gunn and James Bond had a baby, and that baby was Yoda. Angelo's response? "Who's Yoda?"

I sent him the Star Wars DVDs for Christmas. And a DVD player.

Angelo's a forger. I have twelve passports and just as many birth certificates, and they're all Angelo's handiwork. He handles most of the paperwork for the Collective, including duplicate documents. Like, let's say that someone wants to sell the original Gettysburg Address on the black market and use that money to buy guns for crazy despots. (It's been known to happen.) Angelo forges the document, switches them out, and then the bad guy ends up with no money, and the Gettysburg Address gets returned to its original home. There are probably about a million more steps involved, things like finding the right paper pulp and hiding printing presses, but Angelo doesn't like to discuss details. He can be quite secretive that way, but I understand. We all work in different ways. As long as he keeps using flattering pictures on my passport photos, I'm happy.

As soon as I started writing, Angelo taught me how to forge signatures. In fact, the first name I wrote wasn't mine, it was my mom's, a near-perfect imitation of her signature. And when I was tall enough to reach his front door, Angelo taught me how to pick locks. Once his front door got too easy, we moved on to Gramercy Park, which is in Manhattan. Angelo has a key to that park, but it's no fun when you have to use the key. I love my parents, I do, but neither of them could open a lock if their lives depended on it. And since our lives *do*, in fact, depend on it, that's usually where I come in.

Here's an example of how it works:

At the beginning of the summer, my parents and I got sent to Iceland to investigate one of their largest banks. The CEO's family was suddenly driving imported cars, sending their kids to Swiss private schools, and buying homes in Spain with no money down, yet there wasn't an uptick in the CEO's yearly income.

That usually means someone's hiding something, something like cold hard cash, and let's just say I'm really good at hide-and-seek.

So, my mom gets a job as part of the bank building's cleaning crew, which pretty much gives her access to everyone's office, including the CEO's. She's an amazing computer hacker, which I think sort of rankles my dad. He's useless when it comes to electronics. One time, we were in Boston and they got into this huge fight because my dad thought my mom was taking too long to do her job. She just handed him the TiVo remote and said, "Tell me how this works." And of course he couldn't, so she was all, "Don't tell me how to do

my job," and believe me, he doesn't anymore. He really loves watching *Planet Earth* on Discovery Channel.

Anyway, my mom gets into the CEO's office and, of course, has access to his computer. It's so, so easy to get into someone's computer, I can't even tell you. Password protected? *Whatever.* All you ever need to hack someone's computer is a copy of their birth certificate and, sometimes, not even that. If the person's really famous, they've probably already talked about their mom in the news, so boom, there's the mother's maiden name. Pets, children's names, the street where they grew up, their place of birth? They're all password clues, and most people use the same password for everything.

Including the CEO of this company.

(I think my mom was actually sort of disappointed. She likes when she has to do the serious hacking. She says it keeps her young.)

So my mom goes into his computer and sets up a Trojan Horse virus that lets her look at the CEO's computer from her laptop at home. Sneaky, right? Meanwhile my dad starts looking at the company's financial records and notices that there were a lot of bank accounts being opened with tiny bits of cash in them, which is what money launderers do to avoid being caught.

And judging from the names on the accounts—all female, all young, and not an Icelandic surname among them—there was an excellent chance that this CEO was involved in human trafficking. What a degenerate, right?

There was definitely a paper trail somewhere—all the

e-mails pointed to that—and that paper trail was about to be shredded. My mom hurried up and jammed the shredder the next night, but it meant we had to work fast.

It meant that *I* had to work fast.

I went down the hall toward the CEO's office, the fluorescent lights barely lit overhead as I crept past rows and rows of cubicles. It was almost eleven at night, so the employees were long gone by now—there weren't even any overachieving stragglers. The only sound came from my shoes sliding over the cheap carpet as I stayed close to the walls and turned the corner. I was in total game mode after hanging around for three months; I was ready to play.

Here's the boring part of my job: I don't really get to do a lot. I mean, I open safes and I can forge signatures pretty well, but that usually happens at the very end. I've never had a case that was all mine, that rested on my shoulders rather than my parents'. I had spent most of my time in Iceland admiring the scenery, rather than kicking ass and taking names. It was cool, I guess, but it was sort of like being stuck in elementary school while everyone else goes to college. I wanted something more.

The CEO's office door was open just like it was supposed to be, and I could hear the cleaning crew down the hall. My mother was working with the crew tonight as planned; she was the reason the door was unlocked. Personally, I would have rather jimmied the lock open because hi, let's play to our strengths, but my parents are always about doing things the simple way. It gets annoying sometimes, I can't lie. "If we wanted to do things the right way, then why are we spies?"

I sometimes point out, but I know they're correct. It's not about creating excitement; it's about getting the job done.

That's the second rule of being a spy: Be beige. Be beiger than beige. Be as average as possible. Be like the cashiers in your grocery store. Could you describe them? Chances are, no. Did you see them? Of course. Do you know their names, even if they were wearing name tags? Probably not. It's like that.

I know in the movies, spies always have this really cool look, like Angelina Jolie. I'm sorry, but Angelina Jolie would be the worst spy in the world. Who wouldn't remember looking at someone like Angelina Jolie? My mom always gets really upset whenever we watch movies about espionage. "This is so unrealistic!" she always yells. "Why would you dye your hair pink if you're trying to stay undercover? Why is she using a drill to open that safe? All that noise and time!" (My dad and I sometimes joke that the unofficial third rule of being a spy is: "Never mention *Austin Powers* to Mom." She doesn't know about that joke, but we think it's hilarious.)

But she's right about the drill. You just can't use it any old time you want, not when the clock's ticking and your arm's tired and there's building security ambling around just one floor below you. A lot of safes, at least ones that I've seen, have cobalt shields, and let me tell you, trying to drill through that is the most boring thing in the world and it takes *forever.* I'm sixteen—I don't have that kind of time! And if you miss and hit the wrong spot, then you can trigger a bunch of extra locks, which means that you are never,

ever going to open up that safe. I'll spare you the technical details, but trust me when I tell you that it's bad, very bad. You will not be getting the Safecracker of the Year Award if that happens.

So no drills. Or explosives. Or sledgehammers. Sledgehammers are not beige, to say the least.

The office was dark and hummed with electrical energy, computers and outlets all downloading and backing up hard drives and whatnot. I'm not sure how all that works. I didn't inherit my mom's computer genius. Besides, my experience in this job has taught me that most CEOs don't know how it all works, either. They hire some guy to come in and set up security, but they have no idea if it's actually secure. That's why CEOs are always getting busted.

Well, that, and because of people like us.

I glanced out the windows as I slipped into the office, past empty orange-lit parking lots and homes and shopping centers and the tall steeple of a church. Everything seemed stagnant, running into the horizon with no end in sight. If I squinted hard enough, Iceland appeared to be flatlining.

If I focused my eyes differently, I could see myself in the window, looking out on the Icelandic night. I was wearing black jeans and a black sweater underneath a dark denim coat that had a shearling lining. (It may have been September in Iceland, but it was already getting cold out.) Some spies get to wear cool outfits and change their hair up, but as a safecracker, all that mattered was that I did my job. No one cared about my shoes.

My hair was just as boring as my clothes: long and brown and way past my shoulders. "You need a haircut," my mom kept telling me, sounding like she did when I was four years old. My bangs hung directly across my forehead, and I tugged at them self-consciously, trying to make them hang straight.

When I turned around, I saw Kandinsky's *Composition VII* on the wall, the chaotic bull's-eye of the office. This CEO probably thought it was an original, but I knew it wasn't. I knew this because I had seen the original painting at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. This was two years ago, back when we were doing some research on local elections and their effect on Prime Minister Putin. In Russia. In the winter. Imagine sitting in a tub of ice cubes. That's Moscow in the winter. I still shiver when I think about it.

But I didn't care about Moscow or Kandinsky or even *Composition VII*. I cared about what was behind it. My mom had been cleaning these offices for the past three months, every night during the summer, and every night she would notice that the painting was off-balance in a different direction. No one moves a painting that often.

Not unless they want to get to the wall behind it.

I lifted the painting off the wall, struggling a little with the weight of the glass, and set it down before turning back to the safe that was set into the wall.

"Hello there." I grinned. "Come to Mama."

Okay. I've tried to explain safecracking to my parents several times, but their eyes start to glaze over and finally

my dad says something like, "Sweetie, we're just so *proud* of you," and my mom smiles and nods, so I've stopped trying. But the basics are this: For every number in the combination, there's a corresponding wheel within the safe's lock. Find out how many wheels there are, then find out all the possible notches in each wheel and their corresponding numbers by going through the numbers on the dial in groups of three. Find out where the numbers match up by graphing them, then start trying to open the lock using all the different combinations of those numbers.

As you can imagine, if there are only three numbers in the combination, then it's Easy Street. If there are eight numbers, it's Oh Crap City. And since our plane was due at the airport in less than an hour, I needed Easy Street. Judging from the knockoff Kandinsky, I was about to get there. When the painting's an original, the safe behind it is always difficult. Like the designer Mies van der Rohe said, "God is in the details."

The office was musty from too much paper, dust, and time, and I sort of wanted to cough, but I didn't. The last thing I needed was to blow this whole thing because of a tickle in my throat. Instead, I pulled on gloves (yes, I wear gloves, mostly because I never know who's touched the safe before me and whether or not they had the Death Flu) and got to work.

It was a standard fireproof wall safe, thank goodness. Fireproof safes are always easier to crack, because they're not made of steel. Steel melts too quickly in a fire, as I learned after that unfortunate incident in Prague (that fire,

I would like to go on record as saying, was not my fault), which makes it useless if you want to protect paperwork.

Angelo loves to watch me crack safes. He always presses his lips together and nods his head and says, "Hmmm." He says it's because he's never seen a safecracker remember all the numbers in her head without having to graph them. "How do you do it?" he once asked me, but I didn't know how to explain it.

"I can just see them," I finally said. "Like a picture. Graphing takes up too much time." He thinks I have a photographic memory, which is fine by me. Whatever gets me in and out of there is great.

This particular safe had three numbers in its combination, which is *terrible* security if you're ever trying to hide damning documents, just FYI. I clicked the dial back and forth, listening, listening, listening. The clicks were as soft as a mouse's footsteps, but I could feel them against my fingers. I've been doing this since I was a baby.

The best is when you get into the Zone, as I call it. It's almost like the numbers are singing to me, calling me to them. I don't feel anything except those numbers and my heartbeat, and we work in synchronicity, like the best orchestra in the world. That dial is the baton in my hand, and we're playing toward the final crashing crescendo, to the cymbal sounds of justice.

18-6-36.

It clicked open.

"Gotcha," I whispered.

I swung open the door carefully, just in case it was like

a jack-in-the-box (small traumatic childhood incident, too long to explain), but all that was in there was a large envelope. I picked it up and used the dim lights outside the office to examine its contents.

Jackpot. Dozens of passports were inside, all belonging to young women, along with a Post-it note stuck on top, reading: "TO SHRED."

"Not anymore," I whispered, as I put them back in their manila envelope and tucked it underneath my shirt. I shut the safe, the knock-off Kandinsky went back on the wall, and I was about to leave when a noise stopped me.

At first, I thought that my pulse was so loud I could hear it, but it wasn't my pulse. It was the sound of footsteps in the hall. They were a man's, heavy and assured. Women's shoes make *tap-tap-tap* sounds. Men's shoes go *clunk-clunk-clunk*. They got closer and my heart sped up with them, clunking along at a breakneck pace. There was only one person who would be coming toward the office this late at night, and he was the one person I didn't want to see: the CEO.

I hit the floor, the paperwork still hidden against me as I thought fast. I hate thinking fast like this—there are too many opportunities for mistakes—but I happen to work well under pressure. Still, it's not fun, especially when you're trying to suppress a sneeze because the floor's all dusty and clearly my mom hasn't been cleaning *this* office and . . .

I had an idea.

By the time the CEO came through the door, I had

slammed on the lights and was using a tissue to wipe down the Kandinsky's frame, praying he wouldn't notice that I was shaking a little from adrenaline. "Can I help you?" I said in Icelandic. "Are you looking for someone?" My dad had taught me those sentences, as well as "Hello" and "More coffee, please."

The CEO looked like the most average man in the world, not someone who had conspired to make money off human trafficking. "This is my office," he replied in perfect English, brow furrowing in concentration. (I love to watch them squirm; it's so satisfying.) "What are *you* doing—?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" My mom appeared suddenly, pushing her cleaning cart and wearing her janitorial outfit. "I have a new assistant; we're training her."

I smiled. "There's a lot of dust in here. Have you thought about getting an air filt—"

The CEO cut me off. "I need. My office back." He spoke the same way my dad did whenever he was annoyed with me. Short sentences. Because the effort. Of Talking. Is just. Too much.

"No problem," I said, balling up my tissue and skirting past my mom. "Only three hundred more offices to go, right? The night is young!"

I went out the door, the passports now scratchy and warm against my skin, and took off for the elevator bank while my mom apologized to the CEO once again. I was glad she was busy because she would *freak* if she knew I was taking the elevator. My parents are always like, "Take the stairs!" but to me, the stairs are usually foolish, especially

if you're on a high floor. If you're being chased, you've basically trapped yourself in a spiral, and running down twenty-eight flights of stairs is way too time-consuming. The elevator is best.

Plus elevator music can be very calming. I'm just saying.

The doors were just opening when I heard a *"Psst!"* sound behind me. My mom poked her head around the corner, glaring at me. "Stairs," she mouthed, and pointed at the large EXIT sign hanging over the door.

I took the stairs.

By the time I got into the empty lobby, I was breathing hard but still moving, almost on autopilot. I could feel the security guard's eyes on me as I went toward the revolving doors. "All good?" he asked nonchalantly, sipping at coffee while flipping through the local paper.

"We're good, Dad," I said, keeping my eyes straight ahead. "See you in ten."

"*What* have we told you about taking the elevator?" my mom screeched at me eleven minutes later as my dad pulled our car out of the parking lot, backing over all of the SIM cards from our disposable cell phones and crushing them into smithereens. Another mission accomplished.

"I know, I know!" I said, trying to put on my seatbelt. "I just don't like stairs!"

"You took the elevator?" my dad said, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

"She tried to, but she almost got caught," my mom said. "Seriously, Maggie."

"*Merde*," my dad muttered.

Aside from being a statistician, my dad's also great with languages. He knows how to say "You're grounded!" twelve different ways.

¡Estás castigado!

Tu es privée de sortie!

Ты наказана. Ты не можешь выходить из дому!

あなたは、接地している!

"Yeah, hey, by the way, guess who cracked the safe?" I pulled the envelope out of my shirt and handed it to my mom, ready to change the subject. "Check it out, he's *so* guilty!"

She flicked through the passports, then gave me a smile over her shoulder. "How many numbers in the combination?"

"Three," I said smugly.

"Amateur," my mom and dad said at the same time.

We zipped through the wet streets toward the airport. Our car was a late-model sedan, black exterior, tan interior, just like every third car on the road today. Someday I'm hoping we get a Maserati or something cool like that. My dad taught me how to drive when I was ten, back when we lived in Germany near the autobahn. I'm pretty good at doing 180s and I'm awesome at driving a stick shift, which makes it all the more disappointing when we end up with Toyotas. The speedometer doesn't even go past 160 mph. Not that we'd have to drive that fast, but it'd be nice if the car had *some* power.

We pulled in to the executive airport, and my dad parked the car in the lot. He got our overnight bags out of the car

(even spies like to brush their teeth before bed), and I went to work on the license plates, unscrewing them and handing them to my mom as I took them off the car.

"Plane's waiting," my dad said.

"New York's not going anywhere," my mom replied, but she grinned and followed him into the airport and through the concierge area. She took my hand and squeezed it as we walked, and I let her. My parents always get weirdly overprotective whenever we leave a town. It's best just to let them get it out of their system.

The Collective started using private planes after 9/11, but to be honest, I really miss commercial airports. I hear that airport security is the biggest nightmare in the world, but an airport is a spy's best friend. Disposable cell phones at every kiosk, coffee every ten feet, and international newspapers. (You can use your phone to read the *Washington Post* or *Le Monde*, I know, but sometimes you have to go offline, and a spy without access to information is a cranky spy.) You can even get a delicious soft pretzel. Okay, that last one may be important just for me. I love pretzels.

I grabbed some juice from the concierge area and followed my parents onto the tarmac. The rain was picking up now, a little bit cooler than it had been all summer. Autumn was definitely on its way, and I suddenly felt tired. The adrenaline was leaving now, and when it goes, it's hard to find something else to take its place.

There was one flight attendant and a pilot. We rarely talk to them, but I'm pretty sure they work for the Collective, too. Our whole thing is secrecy, so what are we going

to say? "We just got paperwork to bring down an evil-doer! Booyah!" That definitely wouldn't be keeping in line with the "stay beige" rule.

My mom handed the license plates and the manila folder to the flight attendant. "Thanks, Zelda," she said. They must have worked together before. I wondered where. All I really know about my parents is that they were both orphaned young and met in Paris. Maybe Zelda was with them in Paris, too. Maybe Angelo was, as well. I wondered who my friends were going to be when I got older. Judging from my summer with Cute Boy, they would probably be imaginary.

Great.

Still, I knew I was expected to eventually go out on my own once I turned twenty-one. I hoped that I would meet awesome people, people who wanted to drive Maseratis instead of Toyotas, people who knew how to change the world, like me.

And I also hoped that they were terrible safecrackers. A girl has a reputation to uphold, after all.

I curled up in a seat near the window and stretched out across from my parents, who were sitting at the table. They probably wouldn't sleep, but I was exhausted. "It's late," my mom said. "Get some rest, okay? Busy day tomorrow. Another life ahead."

"Our family is weird," I replied as I took the blanket from Zelda, the mysterious flight attendant. "I'm the only spy in the world who has someone telling them to go to bed."

"We all start somewhere," my dad said. "Catch some winks."

The plane's engines started to rev as the doors closed.

The lights overhead were soft and muted, probably for my benefit, and I pulled the blanket up to my chin and kicked off my shoes. I hoped I had cute shoes waiting for me in New York. I was tired of wearing flip-flops from Old Navy. It had been almost five years since I had last been in New York, but I knew you could get away with a lot, clothes-wise, in Manhattan. I mean, I'm a spy, but even spies watch *Gossip Girl* once in a while. I hoped for boots. I hoped the assignment was good. I was ready for a major change.

The plane started to pick up speed, its force pushing me back into my makeshift bed before lifting us up into the sky. I almost peeked out the window to see Iceland disappear below us, but I didn't.

Because that's the third rule of being a spy:

Never look back.