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The Super Secret Surprise Society

by Gary Miller       illustrated by Mick Reed

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<th>Genre</th>
<th>Comprehension Skills and Strategy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Realistic fiction</td>
<td>• Sequence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Cause and Effect</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Important Ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scott Foresman Reading Street 4.4.3

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PEARSON

Vocabulary

advance
developed
exhausting
headquarters
impossible
intense
messages
reveal

Word count: 2,596
On the walk home from school, Anna and her older brother Robert talked about what to do for their mom’s upcoming birthday. Mom would be forty years old in just two weeks.

“Wouldn’t it be great to do something extra special for Mom this year?” Anna asked.

“It would,” said Robert. “But what can we do? We don’t have a lot of money to buy her an expensive present.”
“I’ve got it!” Anna shouted. “Let’s plan a super, secret surprise party! We’ll invite Grandma and Grandpa and all of Mom’s best friends. We’ll have all of her favorite foods, music, and some games. Mom loves to play volleyball. We could set up the net for everyone to play in the backyard.”

Robert agreed that a party would be a lot of fun. “We can’t do it alone, though,” he said. “When we get home, let’s tell Dad about our idea.”

“Dad’s excited about Mom’s birthday too,” Anna said. “I’m sure he’ll think it’s a great idea.”

When Anna and Robert got home, Dad was in the kitchen making sauce for his famous lasagna. A delicious aroma filled the kitchen, reminding Robert and Anna how hungry they were. For a minute, they almost forgot that they wanted to talk to Dad about their surprise idea, but then Anna remembered.

“Dad, we have a great idea for Mom’s birthday. We want to throw her a surprise birthday party!” Anna said with excitement.

“We can have cake and ice cream, play games, and invite family and friends,” added Robert.

Dad smiled. He thought it was a wonderful idea, but there was one problem. “You may have forgotten, but Mom is impossible to surprise,” Dad said.
Dad reminded Anna and Robert about some past attempts to surprise Mom. Once, they had tried to make her a surprise dinner for Mother’s Day, but Mom had found the hidden grocery bags with her favorite foods inside. On another occasion, Dad tried to surprise Mom with tickets to a Broadway musical for their wedding anniversary, but she saw the expense on their credit card statement. Each and every time they tried to surprise her, Mom had figured it out. It was as if she had her own hidden surprise radar that told her when something was going on.

“Because it’s her fortieth birthday, Mom might be expecting a surprise of some sort. That will make it even harder,” Dad said.

Dad brought up some very good points, but Anna wasn’t about to give up. She was determined to pull off this surprise. Anna decided that Mom needed a surprise party even more than they had imagined.

“If Mom’s never been surprised, she doesn’t know what she’s missing,” Anna said. “We’ll just need to work harder than we have in the past to keep this one a secret. We will need to be like undercover secret agents. This calls for extreme measures.”

Then Anna raised her right hand and asked Dad and Robert to do the same. “Do you promise to be faithful members of the Super Secret Surprise Society and to do your best to surprise Mom on her birthday?”

“We promise,” they said in unison.

“Good,” Anna said as they high-fived one another. “Now we can begin.”
The next day was Saturday. Anna woke up feeling tired and a little anxious. She tossed and turned all night thinking a lot about how to keep the birthday party a secret from Mom, but she hadn’t come up with any good ideas. She was about to get out of bed when she spotted a note pinned to her pillow.

“Meet us at headquarters,” the note read. Anna recognized Robert’s handwriting right away. She didn’t have to guess what he meant by “headquarters.” She knew that Robert and Dad would be waiting in the tree house in the backyard.

When Anna went downstairs, Mom was in the kitchen making breakfast. Anna didn’t want to tip off Mom by rushing out without eating, so she grabbed a plate and helped herself to some waffles with syrup and a banana.

As Anna ate, Mom said, “Your brother was acting very unusual this morning. He didn’t finish his waffles, and then he tore off into the yard. He said something about working on a school assignment.”

“Um, yes,” Anna said. “I have a school assignment I need to work on too.”

Before Mom could say another word, Anna gobbled up her waffles, put her plate in the sink, and dashed out the door.
Anna ran across the yard, climbed the ladder to the tree house, and burst through the door without knocking. Robert and Dad were already inside, waiting for Anna.

“We were wondering when you’d get here!” said Robert.

“We’re in trouble,” Anna said breathlessly. “Mom is already suspicious. And I don’t think I just helped matters by running out here. Why didn’t you finish your breakfast?”

“I was too excited,” Robert said. “I came up with a great idea last night.” He pulled out a book from his school backpack. It was a book about secret codes.

Anna listened as Robert explained his idea. “In order to plan this party, we’ll need to find a way to communicate with one another,” he said. “So, to keep Mom from figuring out what’s going on, we can communicate in code.”

Anna listened, but she worried that the codes would be too complicated. Dad eased her worries.

“Over the years, people have developed simple codes and signals that work,” Dad said. “We’ll use simple ones too. For instance, from now on, we’ll refer to Mom’s birthday as a ‘school assembly.’”
Anna reluctantly agreed that using codes would be a good idea. They just might be able to keep Mom from figuring out what they were up to.

“Now we need to make a list of all the things that need to be done,” said Dad.

Anna wrote everything down as Dad listed their tasks. First, they needed to order a special cake from Mr. Goshen’s bakery. Second, they needed to send out invitations. Third, they needed to buy, wrap, and hide Mom’s presents. Fourth, they needed to decorate the living room for the party.

“I’ll be in charge of coding the messages,” Robert said. “First, we’ll start with a substitution code. We’ll use a number for each letter of the alphabet.”

Robert handed Anna and Dad a sheet of paper with the alphabet written on it. Next to each letter was a number.

“Use this sheet to decode the message,” said Robert.

Then he wrote some numbers on another sheet of paper. When Anna and Dad decoded them, they read “Happy Birthday.”

Next Robert took the list that Anna had written and put the entire list into code. When he was done, he tore up the original list and threw it in the trash. He didn’t want any evidence lying around where Mom could find it.
On Monday morning, Anna, Mom, and Dad were sitting at the kitchen table when Robert came down for breakfast.

“We’re taking a survey in math class to see how well different people can solve equations using long numbers,” Robert said to Anna. “I was wondering if you and Dad might want to try out some of these math problems. Just time yourself and write down how long it takes you to do them.” He handed sheets of paper to Anna and Dad.

“Hey,” Mom said. “What about me?”

“Oh,” said Robert nervously. “I need to test only two people.”

When Mom turned her back, Anna kicked Robert under the table.

When Dad got to work he decoded his message. “Don’t forget to order Mom’s cake,” it said.

Dad knew that Mom liked yellow cake with fresh strawberries. He called the bakery that morning to place the order and would shop for presents on his way home from work.

At school, Anna struggled to decode her message. Finally, she got it. “Please make the party invitations today,” it read. “Be sure to make enough for Grandma, Grandpa, and all of Mom’s friends.”

She made the invitations that afternoon.
After school and before Mom got home from work, the Super Secret Surprise Society met at headquarters. Anna had twenty handmade invitations, and Dad told Robert that he’d ordered a large cake. He also bought the perfume and sweater they had seen at the store last week.

“I think Mom was a little suspicious about the notes this morning,” Robert said. “We’ll need to find a new way to hide our messages.”

“Oh, no,” Anna said. “I’m just getting accustomed to this code.”

“Don’t worry,” Robert said. “My next method will be easier, and a lot of fun. All you’ll need to do is hold the paper up to a hot light to reveal the message.”

“I think you’re just changing the code because it’s more fun for you,” Anna said.

“Well, you’re the one who said we would need to take extreme measures,” said Robert.

“True,” said Anna. Planning a surprise party was even more difficult than she had suspected it would be.

The next morning, Robert came down for breakfast and ate silently.

“Is everything alright?” asked Mom.

“Just tired,” said Robert.

Mom worried that Robert was distancing himself. He was being awfully quiet and secretive lately. He’s probably just going through a phase, thought Mom, trying to reassure herself.

All through breakfast, Anna was waiting for her coded message. Just as everyone was ready to leave, Robert handed her a piece of paper.

“Here’s that drawing paper you asked for,” Robert said.

When Mom turned her back to put her cereal bowl in the sink, Robert tucked a sheet of paper in Dad’s front pocket.

“I’ll see you tonight, Dad,” said Robert.

“Is something going on with Robert?” Mom asked Dad after Robert had left. “It seems as if he’s avoiding me.”

“No, I think he’s fine,” said Dad. “He’s just been really distracted by school lately.”
On her way to school, Anna kept the paper folded in her pocket. When she got a chance to open it, she found it was blank. Robert’s new secret coding system used invisible writing. Robert wrote his messages using a small amount of milk on a paintbrush. When the milk dried on the white sheet of paper, the paper appeared to be blank.

She remembered what Robert told her to do, and she held the paper up to a desk lamp in the library. Suddenly, writing began to appear. The message read, “Please make party decorations.”

During recess, Anna and her friends made colorful signs and used hole-punchers to make confetti.

When Dad came home from work, he found Robert in the living room doing his homework. He handed Robert a “blank” note. Robert knowingly smiled and held it up to a lamp. It read, “The presents are wrapped and hidden at headquarters.”

That night at dinner, Mom looked a little suspicious. “You three have been acting funny. Are you sure you’re not planning something?”

Anna gave Dad an intense look. “Well, as a matter of fact, we are,” Dad said. “We thought it would be a good idea to have a nice family dinner and some cake and ice cream for your birthday.”

“I thought so,” Mom said. “You can’t hide anything from me, you know.”

When Mom looked away, Dad winked at Robert and Anna.

Anna covered her mouth to keep from giggling.
By Friday afternoon, almost everything was ready. Now it was time for Robert to call the guests. Mom was home, but it didn’t matter. Robert used the code words they’d put in the invitation.

“Are you coming to the school assembly?” he asked each guest. Then he made a list of who would attend.

Anna came up with a plan to keep Mom out of the house before the party so that they could decorate. She asked Mom if they could go to the park on Saturday morning to fly a kite. Mom said she’d love to, but then she almost ruined it.

“Let’s ask Robert and Dad to come too,” Mom suggested.

“No!” Anna answered, a little too quickly. “Why not?” asked Mom. “I really wanted us all to be together on my birthday.”

Anna thought quickly. “I mean we have only one kite.”

“OK, that’s fine. It will be just us girls,” said Mom.

*Phew, that was a close one,* thought Anna.

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On Saturday morning, Anna got ready to go to the park with Mom. Suddenly, she started to panic. How would she know when all the guests had arrived and that it was safe to bring Mom back home?

Then she thought of an idea. She found Robert in his room.

“We’re heading to the park. When all of the guests have arrived, wave a flag from the top of headquarters. I’ll be able to see the flag from the park,” Anna whispered.

“That’s a great idea,” said Robert. “You are really getting the hang of this. Next you’ll be writing your own secret codes!”

Anna smiled proudly.

All the while she and Mom were flying the kite, Anna kept one eye on headquarters. After about an hour, she saw a giant green flag waving back and forth. That was her cue.

“I’m getting hungry,” Anna said. “I think we’ve had enough kite flying for one day. Let’s get some lunch.” Mom agreed and they headed home.
When Mom and Anna arrived at the house, everything outside looked normal. The guests had parked their cars around the corner so that Mom wouldn’t be suspicious.

When they opened the door, everyone was waiting.
"Surprise!" they all shouted.
Mom turned bright red. Then a big smile spread across her face. She threw her arms around her family and let out a joyous squeal.
"This is the best birthday ever!" she shouted.

The Super Secret Surprise Society had accomplished its mission!

Everyone had fun at the party. They ate cake and ice cream, sang songs, and even played volleyball. Later, Mom opened her presents.

After everyone had left, Mom asked her family, “So how did you pull it off?”

Robert smiled and handed her one last gift. Mom, who was great at figuring out surprises, knew just what it was.

“It’s a book,” she said, and she was right. But it wasn’t just any book.

“Now that we surprised you,” said Robert, “we thought we would let you in on our secret codes. We can’t use them on you again, anyway,” he added with a grin.

“Thank you,” said Mom. “The party today was the best surprise I’ve ever had.”

“That’s because it’s the only surprise you’ve ever had,” said Robert.

They all laughed as they helped themselves to more strawberries. Next time Mom would be even harder to surprise, but not impossible. The Super Secret Surprise Society knew that keeping secrets was a piece of cake, as long as you knew the code!
The World of Codes

In a code, one number, letter, word, or phrase substitutes for another. Sometimes symbols or even sounds can be used. Often codes are used to keep messages private.

One of the most well known codes ever developed is Morse code. In Morse code, digits and letters of the alphabet are represented by a combination of dots and dashes. Long ago, people used Morse code to transmit messages by telegraph.

People use codes today too. One place people do this is on the Internet. Messages sent over the Internet are translated into code before they are sent. This helps the messages stay private until they reach the recipient.

Morse Code

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Reader Response

1. What things did Anna, Robert, and Dad do to plan Mom’s party? Using a chart like the one below, place the events from the story in the correct order.

   1. 
   2. 
   3. 
   4. 
   5. 
   6.

2. What is an important idea you learned from this story? How does it help you better understand the story?

3. Was Mom really impossible to surprise? Can you think of another word that might describe her better? Use that word in a sentence.

4. Do you think using codes made planning the surprise party more or less fun for Anna? Explain your answer.