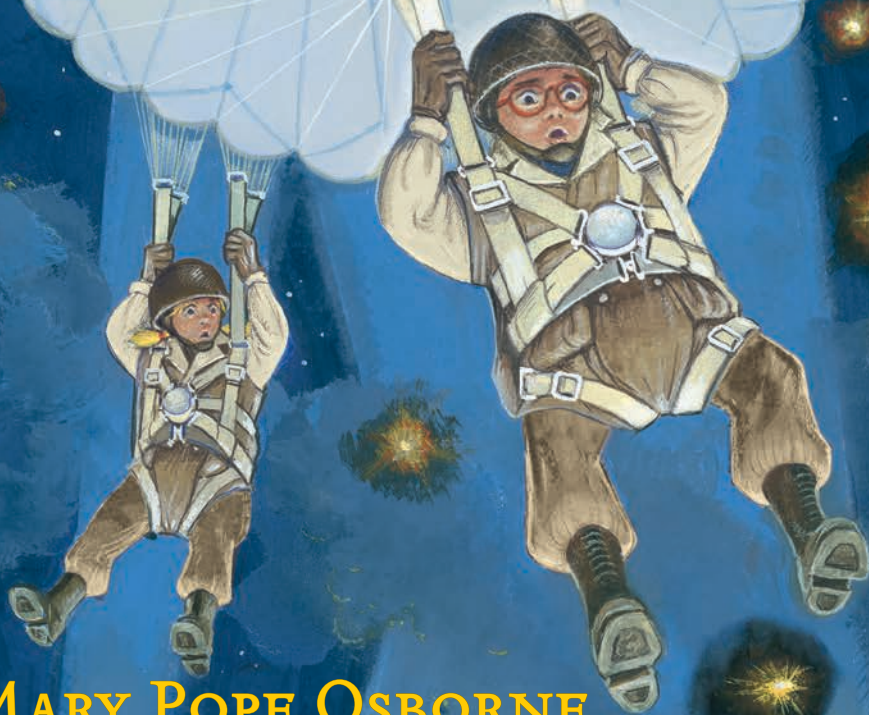


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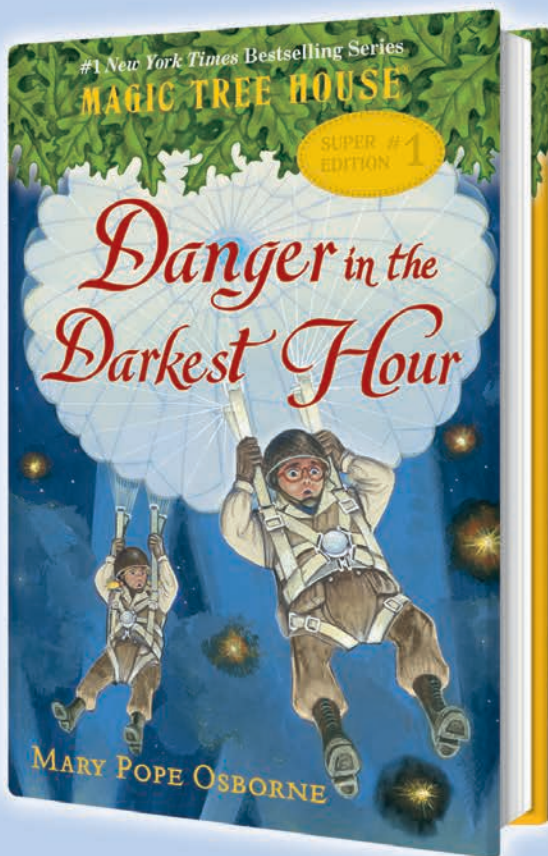
Danger in the Darkest Hour



MARY POPE OSBORNE

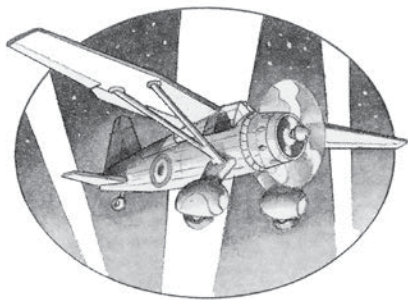
Chapter Sample

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ONE

COMMANDO

“Jack!” Annie shouted from the front yard.

Jack looked up from his book. Tired from a soccer game, he was lying on his bed, reading about volcanoes on Mars. Late-afternoon shadows stretched across his room.

“Jack! *JACK!*”

Jack stood up and crossed to the window. Annie was standing by her bike. A towel was draped around her neck; her hair was wet from swimming in the lake. She was looking up at the sky as if she was searching for something.

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“What do you want?” Jack called through the screen.

“Come down!” she called. “Help me look.”

“Look for what?” said Jack.

“Just come! You won’t believe it!” said Annie.

Jack sighed. He marked his place in his book and went downstairs to the front porch. “This better be good,” he said. “I was in the middle of a book.”

Annie was still looking up at the sky. “Where did he go?” she said.

“Where did *who* go?” said Jack.

Annie didn’t answer. She walked to the edge of the yard and kept looking. “Oh, darn, I don’t see him!”

“See who?” said Jack. “What are you talking about?”

“The pigeon!” said Annie.

Jack stared at Annie for a moment. “Seriously?” he said. “You’re looking for a *pigeon*?”

“Yes!”

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“You called me away from my book to see a *pigeon*?” said Jack.

“Yes! Help me find him!” Annie said.

Jack rolled his eyes and stepped into the yard. He looked up at the hazy sky.

“He was following me. He swooped down near my head,” said Annie, still looking in every direction. “I don’t see him now. Where could he have gone?”

“What’s the big deal?” said Jack. “We see pigeons every day.”

“Not like this one,” said Annie. “When I was getting on my bike at the lake, I heard a loud cooing. I looked up—he was sitting on a branch, and he looked straight into my eyes. He was super-intelligent, I could tell.”

“Are you sure you weren’t out in the sun too long?” asked Jack.

“I’m serious,” said Annie. “He had these intense staring eyes. I talked to him, like I said ‘hi,’ and then he took off. I thought, *okay, so much for*

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that. But then I started riding home and he flew in front of me—right across my path!”

“How do you know it was the same pigeon?” asked Jack.

“I just know. He circled above me all the way home!” said Annie. “He even swooped down a couple more times. But I don’t see him now. . . . I don’t see him at all. . . .” Her voice trailed off as she looked up at the sky and around the yard.

“Well, that’s enough pigeon-hunting for me,” said Jack. “I’m heading back to my book.” He turned to go inside.

“Ahh! I see him! I see him!” Annie whispered.

Jack stopped. “Where?”

“There!” Annie pointed to a plump pigeon perched on a bird feeder that was hanging from a maple tree. She stepped toward him. The pigeon didn’t move. She stepped closer and closer. The bird still didn’t move. “Oh, wow, Jack. You won’t believe this—I didn’t see it until now.”

“What? See what?” said Jack.

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“Oh, wow, oh, wow,” Annie whispered.

Jack walked slowly toward Annie. When he reached her side, he stopped and stared at the bird, too. It was an ordinary-looking pigeon: smoky gray with black stripes on his wings and iridescent-green neck feathers. His amber-colored eyes stared at Jack.

“Look at his leg,” Annie whispered.

Attached to one of the pigeon’s spindly legs was a tiny red canister. “Whoa,” whispered Jack. “I think he’s a carrier pigeon.”

“A carrier pigeon?” said Annie.

“Yeah, they carried messages to people a long time ago,” said Jack. “There used to be lots of them, but not anymore.”

“Why not?” Annie asked.

“They’re not needed anymore,” said Jack. “Not with technology like the Internet and cell phones.”

The pigeon made a low cooing sound.

“Why did he follow you?” said Jack. “And where’d he come from?”

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Annie took a deep breath. “I know where he came from. I just figured it out,” she said.

“Where?”

“Another time,” said Annie. “A time before the Internet and cell phones.”

Jack’s heart skipped a beat. “You think?”

“I *know*,” said Annie. “And the message is for us!” She moved a step closer toward the pigeon. But the bird flapped his wings and took off from the feeder. Then he soared out of their yard and up the street, disappearing into the trees of the Frog Creek woods.

“Let’s go!” cried Annie.

“Wait, I’ll get my pack.” Jack bolted into the house, grabbed his backpack from the hallway, and hurried outside.

Jack and Annie raced up the sidewalk. They crossed the street and ran into the woods. As they weaved in and out of dark-green shadows, the late-summer air smelled of sun-dried wood and fallen pine needles. Birds called lazily from the treetops.

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Finally they stopped at the base of the tallest oak.

“Of course,” said Annie.

She grabbed the rope ladder that dangled from the treetop and started up. Jack followed and they both scrambled inside the magic tree house. Golden sunlight lit the stacks of books and the shimmering *M* in the floor.

“Of course,” said Jack.

A soft cooing sound came from the window. The carrier pigeon was pacing on the windowsill.

“Of course a million times,” said Annie, laughing. “Don’t fly away. I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

The pigeon stopped pacing and stared at her with his amber eyes.

“I can take that message from you now,” Annie whispered, “if you don’t mind.”

“He doesn’t mind,” said Jack. “He’s a professional.”

“Right,” said Annie. The pigeon was very still as Annie reached out and gently opened the lid of

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the red canister attached to his leg. She pulled out a tiny scroll. Then she snapped the lid shut and unrolled the piece of paper.

Annie and Jack looked at the writing together. It wasn't elegant like Merlin's or Morgan le Fay's writing—it was the scrawl of a kid's handwriting. Jack looked at the signature. "It's from Teddy," he said.

"Uh-oh," said Annie. "What happened? Did he goof up again?"

"I'll bet he did," said Jack. They both laughed. The apprentice sorcerer from Camelot often made them laugh. Sometimes he made big mistakes when he tried to do magic. Many of the mistakes were funny, but a few had been terrible.

Annie read the letter aloud:

*Dear Jack and Annie,
I sent Commando to find you.*

"Commando?" Jack interrupted. "That's a funny name for a Camelot pigeon."

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“Yeah, it sounds like a tough army guy,” Annie said. She kept reading:

Kathleen and I are working with the
forces of good in one of the darkest
hours of history. And we need your help.

Please come to Glastonbury,
England. Right now.

Your friend,
Teddy

“I can’t wait to see Teddy and Kathleen,” said Annie.

“Yeah,” said Jack. He was especially excited to see Kathleen, a brilliant and beautiful young enchantress from Camelot. “But what does Teddy mean—‘one of the darkest hours of history’?”

Annie shrugged.

The pigeon made a low cooing sound.

“Commando wants us to hurry,” said Annie.

“Okay. Let’s go,” Jack said. He took another deep breath and pointed to the words *Glastonbury*,

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England on the tiny piece of paper. “I wish we could go there.”

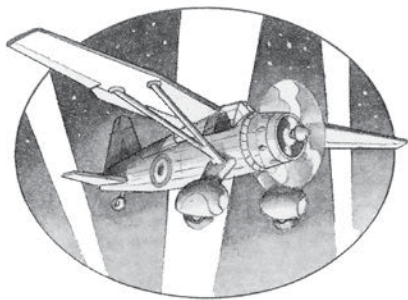
The wind started to blow.

The tree house started to spin.

It spun faster and faster.

Then everything was still.

Absolutely still.



TWO

TOP-SECRET

Commando cooed as if saying good-bye. Then he flapped his wings and flew out of the tree house. He disappeared into the misty gray twilight.

“Thanks, Commando!” Annie called after him.

“Well, I guess we’re here,” said Jack, shivering in the chilly air. “But our clothes didn’t change. I wonder why.”

The tree house had landed in the branches of a tall maple tree. Through the haze, Jack and Annie could see ducks floating on a pond and sheep

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grazing in a meadow bordered by hedgerows. Beyond the hedges were broken-down buildings—stone pillars and crumbling archways. There was no sign of people.

“It looks ancient,” said Annie. “Is Glastonbury part of Camelot?”

“I don’t know,” said Jack.

“This looks sort of like Camelot,” said Annie.

“Yeah, the *ruins* of Camelot,” said Jack.

“Teddy! Kathleen!” Annie called.

There was no answer.

“Let’s go look for them,” said Jack.

Jack grabbed his backpack. He and Annie climbed down the rope ladder. They stepped onto the wet grass and started across the meadow. Rounding a hedge, they came upon the remains of what had once been a huge church. The roofless building had tall ivy-covered walls and grand arches made of stone blocks.

“Cheerio, friends!” A teenage boy strode through one of the arches. The boy wore an old-fashioned flight suit, gloves, and a tight-fitting

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leather helmet. He carried a khaki duffel bag.

“Teddy!” cried Annie. She and Jack hurried to the young enchanter of Camelot. Teddy put down his bag, and they all hugged.

“I am glad Commando found you!” said Teddy. “He is quite a smashing soldier, you know.”

“Who? The pigeon?” said Annie.

“Yes. Commando is a member of the National Pigeon Service,” said Teddy.

Jack and Annie giggled. “You’re kidding, right?” said Jack.

“Not at all,” said Teddy. “Pigeon breeders have given over two hundred thousand pigeons to the British military to carry messages throughout Europe. Commando has been on dozens of missions. The missions were all in *this* time, of course. He needed the tree house to take him to *your* time.”

“So what *is* this time?” asked Jack.

“It is June fourth, 1944,” said Teddy. “And you have landed in Glastonbury, England. It is the site of one of the great monasteries of Europe.





"Teddy put down his bag, and they all hugged."

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You can still see an ancient tower on the sacred hill of Glastonbury Tor.” He pointed to a conical hill overlooking the flat countryside. “Eventually all the sacred buildings fell into ruin, but legends of King Arthur still surround this area. For that reason, I thought it might be a good place to meet you—a living midpoint between our worlds.”

“Where’s Kathleen?” asked Annie, looking around. “We thought she would be with you.”

“Well, that is why I called for you,” said Teddy. “But first, how much do you know about World War Two?”

Jack gasped. “Did we come to the time of World War Two?”

“I am afraid you have. The war has been going on for almost five years,” said Teddy.

“Oh, man,” said Jack.

“So you know about World War Two?” said Teddy.

“Some,” said Jack. “I know that America fought Germany and Italy and Japan. And a man named

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Adolf Hitler was the leader of Germany. And his political party was called the Nazis.”

“And we also know that three of our great-grandfathers fought in World War Two,” said Annie.

“The people of England are grateful for all the help the Americans are giving them fighting this war,” said Teddy. “At this point, Nazis have taken over most of Europe. They have killed countless innocent civilians, including millions of Jewish people.”

“That’s terrible,” said Annie.

“Really terrible,” said Jack. “But what does this war have to do with you and Kathleen?”

“When Merlin looked into the future, he saw this frightful time,” said Teddy. “He saw how important it was to bring hope to British leaders. So he sent Kathleen and me to London.”

“The leaders actually met with you?” asked Jack.

Teddy smiled. “Indeed they did,” he said.

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“Kathleen used a bit of magic to make us both appear older than we are. We were quite brilliant, wearing the right disguises and using the right manners and speech. We seem to have inspired everyone, including the prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill.”

“Really?” said Jack.

“Oh, yes,” said Teddy. “In fact, Sir Winston inducted Kathleen and me into the SOE.”

“What’s that?” asked Annie.

“SOE stands for Special Operations Executive,” said Teddy. “It is a top-secret organization that Sir Winston formed. It conducts undercover missions in countries occupied by the Nazis. In the short time since Kathleen and I completed the required training, we have both been sent on many secret assignments.”

“Is Kathleen away on an assignment now?” asked Annie.

“Yes. Kathleen left for a mission in France more than three weeks ago. And now . . .”
Teddy stopped.

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“And now what?” asked Jack.

“Now it seems she has disappeared,” said Teddy.

“Oh, no! What happened to her?” asked Annie.

“I do not know,” said Teddy.

“What was her mission?” asked Jack.

“I do not know that, either. She could not tell me,” said Teddy. “Secret agents must keep their missions secret even from each other. All I know is that two weeks ago, I was asked to fly behind enemy lines to a location in Normandy, France, to pick her up.”

“Fly behind enemy lines?” said Jack.

“Yes. I have done that many times,” said Teddy.

“But when I arrived at the meeting place, she was not waiting for me. I was frantic, and then yesterday I received a message from her, delivered by a French carrier pigeon.”

“So she’s okay?” asked Annie.

“Well, at least I know she is alive,” said Teddy.

“The problem is—she wrote her message in a code, in case it fell into enemy hands. But I have had no success trying to make sense of certain

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parts of it.” He pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket and read Kathleen’s message aloud:

Come to me in the darkest time.
A wand I need, and a magic rhyme.
Three miles east of Sir Kay’s grave,
Cross a river to find a cave.
Look for knights, and small, round cows—
A crack in a rock beneath the boughs.

Teddy sighed. “You see why I cannot share this with anyone in the SOE?” he said. “Even if they could decipher the code, others would not understand her request for the wand and magic rhyme.”

“But why *does* she need them?” asked Jack. “Her magic is amazing. Remember when she turned us all into seals?”

“Yes, but these are very, very dark times,” said Teddy. “I am not surprised that she may need extra magic. I have found my own powers very limited. That is why I sent for you.”

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“So . . . do you have something we can take to Kathleen?” asked Jack.

“Oh, yes,” said Teddy. “I have the Wand of Dianthus and the rhyme to unlock its magic.”

“Great!” said Annie.

“The next two lines of her message I *do* understand,” said Teddy. He read on:

Three miles east of Sir Kay’s grave,
Cross a river to find a cave.

“The secret burial places of Arthur’s knights are revealed in one of Merlin’s books,” said Teddy. “Kathleen knew I would know that the burial place for Sir Kay is Caen, a town in Normandy, France.”

“Wait, I’d better write this down,” said Jack. He pulled his notebook and pencil out of his backpack. “Spell that, please?”

“*C-A-E-N*,” said Teddy. Jack wrote the town’s name in his notebook.

“So we go to Caen,” said Annie. “We travel

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three miles east, cross a river, and look for a cave.”

“Yes,” said Teddy. “But I cannot imagine what the next two lines could mean.” He read from the note:

Look for knights and small, round cows—
A crack in a rock beneath the boughs.

Teddy looked up. “Do you understand this?”

“Not really,” said Jack. “There weren’t any knights fighting in World War Two.”

“Indeed not,” said Teddy. “And small, round cows? A crack in a rock? Boughs? What does all that mean?” He folded the note and handed it to Annie. “Well, I trust you to figure this out. I know you are expert decoders.”

“You’re kidding,” said Jack. “Us?”

“Of course,” said Teddy. “When Kathleen and I went with you to New York City, you figured out the secret poem to free the unicorn from the museum tapestry, remember? And Morgan’s missions for you were often written as riddles.”

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“Yes, but—” started Jack.

“We have to find Kathleen,” said Teddy. “I cannot lose her. So many people have been lost in this war. It really is the darkest time—truly a terrible time.”

“It’s okay, Teddy,” Annie said. “We’ll help you.”

“Of course we will,” said Jack. “We’ll do our best.”

Teddy took a deep breath, then smiled. “Thank you, my friends,” he said. “I am most grateful, and sorry that I cannot be with you in France.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Jack asked.

“No, tonight the SOE is sending me on an urgent mission to rescue downed airmen in Holland and Belgium,” said Teddy. “I must do so before daylight.”

“Wow,” said Annie.

“It is the sort of thing the SOE does every day,” said Teddy. Then he clapped his hands together. “All right! Let us roll up our sleeves and get moving! It is time you put on your parachutes.”

“Parachutes?” said Jack.

“Yes!” said Teddy. “You cannot jump from

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a plane without parachutes!" He picked up his duffel bag and strode off.

"Wait, did he say we're going to jump from a *plane*?" Jack asked Annie.

"He did," said Annie. "But don't worry, he said he'd give us some magic." She hurried after Teddy.

"I know. But—" began Jack.

"Come along, Jack!" Teddy called to him. "The moon is rising over Glastonbury Tor!"



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Mary Pope Osborne is the author of the popular Magic Tree House® series. She works with her husband, Will, and her sister, Natalie, on the nonfiction companion series, Magic Tree House Fact Tracker. Many of her books have been named to best-books lists.

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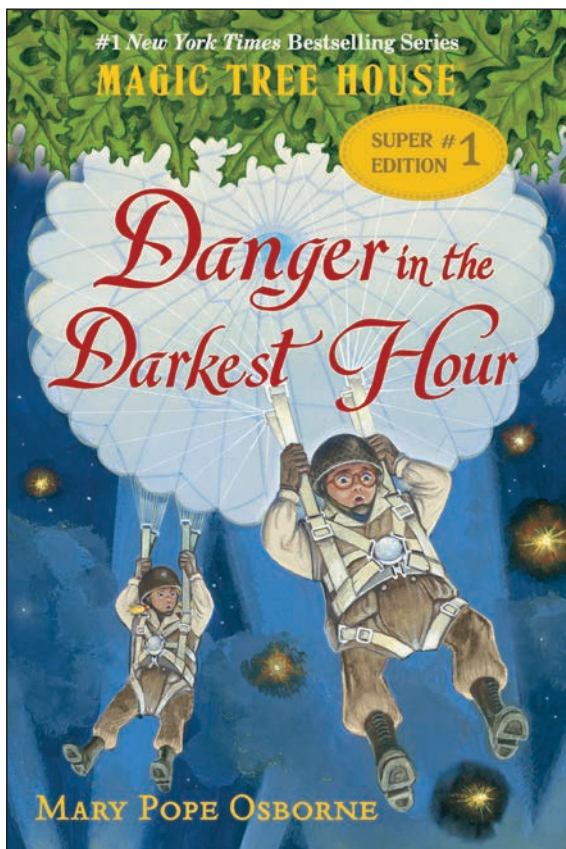
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