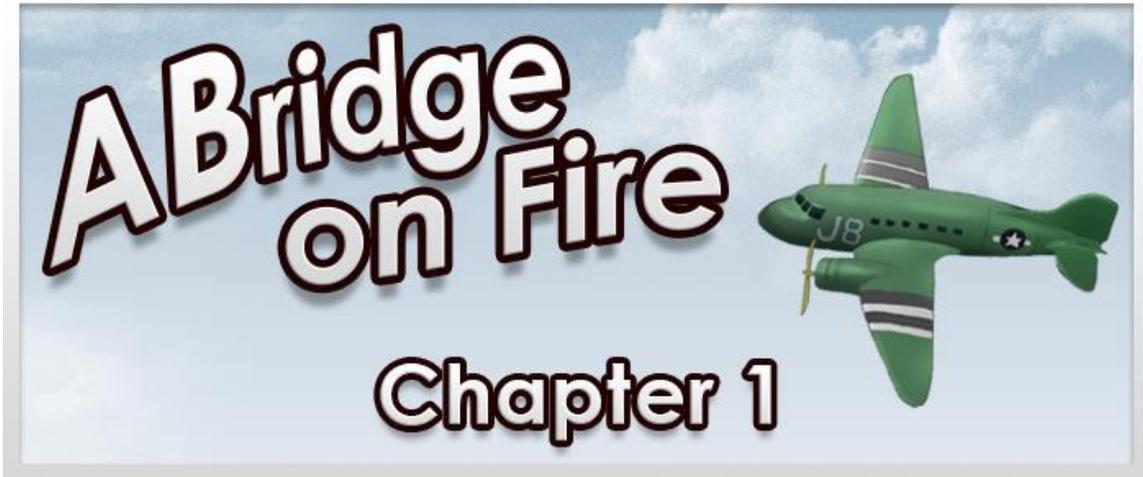




A Bridge on Fire



By Jonny Zucker
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A wiry man with several days' stubble on his cheeks walked over to Kat who was sitting on a wooden bench near the tail end of the Dakota. The cockpit was about twenty feet to her right, the pilot flicking buttons on the complex control panel.

"My name's Oater," said the man above the rumble of the plane's guttural engine. "I'm handling this operation."

"What operation?" demanded Kat sharply, her fierce green eyes glaring at him with a mix of defiance and uncertainty.

A smile flickered over Oater's face. The girl's feisty nature was one of the reasons she'd been chosen for this mission. She'd been watched by the people who counted. She'd been earmarked for something extra special; extra dangerous.

An hour previously, at 10 p.m. on a crisp spring Saturday night - May 15th 1940 - Kat Grimeshaw had been preparing for bed at a weekend of events run by an organization called the Youth Enrichment Programme. Youth leaders had spent all of Friday and Saturday showing Kat and a bunch of other thirteen-year-olds the rudiments of parachuting, writing coded messages and surviving in a hostile territory; using knives, seeing how explosive materials were fitted together and fitness training - running,

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jumping over ditches and finding the best places to hide. A weekend playing at being spies – what could be more fun!

But while the others remained in their dorms, Kat had been called downstairs.

“I’d like you to step onto the plane please,” said Oater.

At first Kat thought he was joking. It was nighttime and this was some sort of youth camp. Why would she be wanted on a plane in the hours of darkness.

She shrugged her shoulders and followed him up a short flight of steps onto the plane.

“Strap yourself in,” said Oater, taking a seat on the side of the plane facing hers. “We’re going on a bit of a journey.:

Fifteen minutes later they were airborne.

“Let me be honest with you,” said Oater, above the hum of the plane’s engine. “The people who ran that weekend weren’t youth leaders. They work for something for an organization called the S.O.E.”

“What’s that when it’s at home?” asked Kat with an arched eyebrow.

“It stands for Special Operations Executive. We work on sabotage and disruption of enemy plans.”

“Er...what’s that got to do with me?”

“My colleagues at the weekend were impressed by your positive attitude, your physical strength and your excellent command of French.”

“So?”

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“So, the Germans are rapidly advancing through France. They hope to reach its northern tip as a prelude to invading Britain. On their way they must pass over the Vascombe Bridge.”

“And?”

“And we want you to blow up the bridge.”

“ME?” cried Kat. “What about you and your S.O.E pals - too frightened to do it yourselves?”

Oater laughed. “If we used an adult and they got caught it would be a bullet in the neck. A child can say she’s simply looking for relatives.”

“But I haven’t the first idea about bombs!” protested Kat, whose lips had gone dry at the thought of such a dangerous mission.

“If you’ll excuse the pun, I’m going give you a crash course in explosives,” replied Oater, producing a blue rucksack and withdrawing several items. He laid them out neatly on the floor of the plane.

He pointed to six cardboard sausage-shaped tubes that contained what looked like green plasticine and smelled of almonds. “That’s your explosive material. It’s called Nobel 808.”

Kat picked up one of the tubes and weighed it in her hand, struggling to believe what she was being asked to do.

“That brass pipe next to it has a copper section at one end which contains a glass vial of a chemical called Cupric Chloride. Below the vial, that long black rectangular unit is called a Striker. It’s held in place by the thin metal wire over there.”

Kat studied the implements with intense concentration,

“To start the timer, you apply force to the copper portion of the tube. That will break the vial and the Cupric Chloride will start eating the wire. The

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wire will release the Striker, sending it down the brass tube. It'll hit a detonation cap on the 808. The 808 will ignite and kaboom, the bridge will be ripped to pieces. You'll attach this whole kit to the underside of the bridge with the white putty in that cardboard rectangle over there."

"How long will I have?" asked Kat, fear simmering inside her.

"Ten minutes," replied Oater. "That'll give you plenty of time to get in and out safely."

"But if the bridge is so important, don't the Germans have advance guards on it?"

"They do, but it's only one guard at a time. We've watched the bridge for six days now and during the 10 p.m. changeover the two guards go inside a little hut for a smoke. They take ten minutes. That's your window of opportunity."

"What if I say no?" murmured Kat. "I've had no warning! And I'm not even fourteen yet!"

"That's your prerogative," replied Oater, "but this could represent a turning point in the war."

Oater stared at her in a way that no one had ever done before. At that second she realised just how vital this mission was.