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THE AMERICAN AGENT

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

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The radio will be for the twentieth century what the press was for the nineteenth century. With the appropriate change, one can apply Napoleon's phrase to our age, speaking of the radio as the eighth great power. The radio is the most influential and important intermediary between a spiritual movement and the nation, between the idea and the people.

FROM A SPEECH BY JOSEPH GOEBBELS GIVEN ON
18TH AUGUST 1933, AT THE TENTH ANNUAL RADIO EXPOSITION

AGENT. *Noun: a person who works secretly to obtain information for a government or other official body. A person or thing that takes an active role or produces a specified effect.*

DEFINITION FROM THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY



PROLOGUE

I am going to talk to you three times a week from a country that is fighting for its life. Inevitably I'm going to get called by that terrifying word 'propagandist'. But of course I'm a propagandist. Passionately I want my ideas – our ideas – of freedom and justice to survive.

VERNON BARTLETT, 28TH MAY 1940, DURING THE INAUGURAL
BROADCAST OF THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION'S
NORTH AMERICAN SERVICE

The RAF's brilliantly successful week raised the public's spirits enormously. It was hoped that the number of German planes destroyed by the British fighters would be duly noted by a section of the American press which appears to people here to act as though mesmerised by the achievements of the Luftwaffe. Many astonished

Britons, taking time off from the war to read how American editors think it's going, have felt like protesting, like Mark Twain, that reports of their death have been greatly exaggerated.

THE NEW YORKER'S LETTER FROM LONDON BY
MOLLIE PANTER-DOWNES, 12TH AUGUST 1940

Each time I entered a new shelter people wanted to know if I'd seen any bombs and was it safe to go home. At one shelter there was a fine row going on. A man wanted to smoke his pipe in the shelter; the warden wouldn't allow it. The pipe smoker said he'd go out and smoke it in the street, where he'd undoubtedly be hit by a bomb and then the warden would be sorry. At places where peat is available, it's being consumed in great quantities at night. I have seen a few pale faces, but very few. How long these people will stand up to this sort of thing I don't know, but tonight they're magnificent. I've seen them, talked with them, and I know.

LONDON CALLING BROADCAST BY EDWARD R. MURROW
TO AMERICA, 26TH AUGUST 1940

In September 1939, the talk was of the Navy, the ring of steel that was to starve the Germans. Today the Royal Air Force has captured the respect and admiration which has traditionally been given to the Royal Navy. On the day war was declared any man who predicted that after a year of war, including only ten weeks of battle, Britain would be without effective allies and faced with the prospect of invasion would have been considered

mad. Invasion is now one of the favourite topics of conversation. These Londoners know what they're fighting for now – not Poland or Norway – not even for France, but for Britain.

LONDON CALLING BROADCAST BY EDWARD R. MURROW
TO AMERICA, 3RD SEPTEMBER 1940

BLITZ BOMBING OF LONDON GOES ON ALL NIGHT
Two buses hit: hospital ringed by explosions

EAST END AGAIN: MORE FIRES

Goering restarted his great Blitzkrieg on London last night promptly at blackout time – one minute to eight. Half an hour before that time he made a gloating, boasting broadcast to the German people. 'A terrific attack is going on against London,' he said. 'Adolf Hitler has entrusted me with the task of attacking the heart of the British Empire.'

THE DAILY EXPRESS LONDON,
MONDAY 8TH SEPTEMBER 1940

London still stood this morning, which was the greatest surprise to me as I cycled home in the light of early dawn after the most frightening night I have ever spent. But not all of London was still there, and some of the things I saw this morning would scare the wits out of anyone.

HELEN KIRKPATRICK, REPORTING FOR
THE CHICAGO DAILY NEWS, 9TH SEPTEMBER 1940



CHAPTER ONE

REPORTING LONDON, BROADCAST BY CATHERINE SAXON, LONDON,

10TH SEPTEMBER 1940

Tonight I joined the women of the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service as they rushed to the aid of civilians caught in the relentless bombing of this brave city. Herr Hitler's bombers have been swarming in for the past three nights, raining down terror on the men, women and children of London as if to pay the country back for the success of Britain's Royal Air Force as they fought the Luftwaffe over England's south-eastern counties throughout the summer. Resilience and endurance have been the order of the day and night for the citizens of this country – an experience we Americans should be grateful we have not yet encountered on our soil. Pray to God we shall never see the shadows of those killing machines in the skies above Main Street.

I was aboard an ambulance with two women – both

Mrs P and Miss D served their country in the last war: Mrs P with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, and Miss D as a nurse at a casualty clearing station close to the front line. I later discovered Miss D is, in fact, a titled member of England's aristocracy, a sign that everyone's pulling together on Britain's home front. As Miss D drove through the streets at speed, her way lit only by fires either side of a thoroughfare strewn with scorched and burning rubble, the flames threatened to take us with them. When we reached our destination, a street I cannot name and would not know again, Miss D braked hard, and before the ambulance came to a stop, Mrs P had leapt out and was gathering the kit needed to aid bombed-out families. The men of the fire service were hard at work, directing wide arcs of water into houses destroyed by the bombing. Flames rose up as if to spike the heavens, the remaining walls like broken teeth leading into the mouth of hell. Beyond I could see searchlights as they crossed each other scouring the skies for bombers – and many of those searchlights were 'manned' by women. The constant ack-ack-ack of anti-aircraft guns added to the ear-splitting sounds of a night with London under attack. Within minutes an injured boy and a girl were made stable and placed in the ambulance. I'd watched their grandmother pulling at fallen masonry even as it scorched her hands. 'My girls, my girls,' she cried, as she tried to move bricks and mortar away from the untimely grave that had claimed her two beloved daughters. Miss D gently put her arms around the wailing grandmother and led her towards the ambulance, where she bandaged her hands and reminded

her that two small, terrified children were counting on her strength. Minutes later, firemen carried away the bodies of the deceased, the grandmother's 'girls' – the mother and aunt of the two children. This report cannot include a description of the remains of those two women.

The Civil War is still remembered by the elders in our American hometowns. Those men and women were children during a terrible time in our country's history, and some saw what trauma cannon fire and machine guns will inflict upon the human form. The volunteers who fought with our Lincoln Brigade witnessed Hitler's Blitzkrieg in Spain – they too know the terror of a bombing raid. We who have seen war know the children in that ambulance will never forget this night – it will be branded into their young minds for ever. And it will be branded into the memory of those two women of the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service, and into the heart of this reporter. The children's father is at war. If he comes home, it will be to what's left of his family – as will many men who believed they were fighting for the safety of their loved ones.

This is Catherine Saxon, courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation in London, England, on the night of September tenth, 1940. God bless you all, and may peace be yours.

Well, Miss D – what do you think of that?' Priscilla Partridge leant towards the wireless set and switched it off, then reached for her packet of cigarettes and lighter. 'I thought she was quite good. That broadcast went out live last night – New

York is five hours behind, so I daresay they heard it at dinner time over there – carefully planned to tear at the hearts of happy families as they sit around the table.’

‘I wish she’d held back on that bit about the aristocracy. It was rather much, and I’d like to tell her, “See these streets? I know my way around Lambeth because I was born here!”’

‘She would probably have missed the irony, Maisie,’ said Priscilla, drawing on her cigarette. She blew a smoke ring into the air. ‘Americans don’t quite understand the many distinctions between one person’s station and another here in Britain, as I am sure we don’t understand theirs – though they know rich and poor. We’re a mystery to each other, if truth be told.’

‘Anyway, I’m just glad she didn’t give out our full names. She must have whipped over to Portland Place and recorded that report immediately she left us last night. Apparently she had been pursuing an opportunity to broadcast for a while. In fact, she told me it was an uphill battle because reporting is a boys’ game.’ Maisie stifled a yawn. ‘Oh dear, I’m worn out, Pris. It was a long night and I’m going home to bed for a couple of hours before I start my day.’ Maisie Dobbs pushed down on the arms of the chair, stood up and leant towards her friend, kissing her on both cheeks. ‘What Miss Saxon didn’t say was that we all need a bath.’

‘I thought she was a good sport,’ said Priscilla.

‘She was,’ said Maisie. ‘She didn’t get in the way and helped when she could. I would imagine she has to walk a narrow line between telling Americans what she’s observed, and not scaring them so much they don’t listen.’

‘You’re right – you wouldn’t hear her describing the poor baker who went out to find out why his drain was blocked, only to find

a decomposing foot in it.’ Priscilla paused. ‘It’s only eight in the morning and already I would like a drink.’

‘Do me a favour, Pris – settle for another cup of tea. And some toast. I’m going home now.’

‘All right, Maisie. We’re both fit to drop – it’s just as well you only live up the road.’ She paused. ‘I wonder about those children – the ones we picked up on that run with the Saxon woman.’

‘The girl will pull through, but I wouldn’t put money on the boy’s chances,’ said Maisie. ‘Miss Saxon rather understated their wounds.’

‘Douglas says that truth is always a victim of war.’

‘“No kidding,” as our new friend from the Colonies might say. I’ll see you later, Pris,’ said Maisie. ‘We’re on duty at five.’

Maisie had just begun to draw back the blackout curtains at her Holland Park flat when the telephone in the sitting room began to ring.

‘Blast!’ She had a mind to ignore the call, but thought better of it – she had not been able to return to her property in Kent for several days, and as much as she would like nothing more than to sink into a bath filled with hot water, the call might be about Anna – and there were many things to concern her about Anna.

‘Good morning,’ said Maisie.

‘Busy night?’ The voice was unmistakable.

‘Robbie MacFarlane, you should know better than to ask, and in that tone – it was a terrible night, and it’s not a bloody joke you know.’ Maisie knew her reply was uncharacteristically short, but at that moment she was too tired to deal with Robert MacFarlane.

‘My apologies. Yes, you’re right. I heard you were out on more

than a few runs to the hospitals last night. I'm sorry.'

Maisie chewed her lip. It wasn't like MacFarlane to request forgiveness. She knew him only too well, and if he was rude, it was generally by design, not an error.

'Why are you calling me, Robbie? You've let me know you're keeping tabs on me, but I am bone-tired and I want to rest my weary head before I try to get some work done today, and then take my ambulance out again.'

'It's about an American. One of those press people over here on a quest to keep our good friends on the other side of the Atlantic informed about the war. Name of Catherine Saxon. In fact, Miss Catherine Angelica Saxon, to give the woman her full moniker.'

'Angelica?'

'No accounting for the Yanks, Maisie.'

Maisie rubbed her neck, following the path of an old scar now barely visible, and shivered. 'No, it's just that . . . well, she was with us in the ambulance last night, just for a couple of runs because she had to make her first broadcast – she told us that she had previously only had her reports printed in the newspapers. I can't remember which papers she's working for. More than one. Anyway, I was just listening to her on the wireless at Mrs Partridge's house – her report was broadcast for the Americans last night. In fact, she told us she was very excited because it was also going out in London this morning, and she hoped she would get to be as popular as Mr Murrow, who is as well known here as he is over there in America. I've heard him a few times myself. Anyway, it's just that she didn't strike me as an Angelica, that's all, even if it's only a middle name.' Maisie was aware that she was rambling, staving off whatever news MacFarlane had called to

convey. She'd wanted to escape war and death if only for the time it took to wallow in a hot bath.

'Well, hold on to your seat, Maisie, because she's with the angels now.'

'Robbie? What's happened? Was the poor girl caught in the bombing on her way home? Or were her lodgings hit?' Maisie felt a chill envelop her. She knew the gist of MacFarlane's response even before he spoke.

'No, lass. She's been found dead in her rooms at a house on Welbeck Street this morning. And we can't lay this one at Hitler's feet – she was murdered. Twenty-eight years of age and someone saw fit to slit her throat.'

Maisie felt her own throat constrict, her voice cracking as she spoke. 'And why are you involved, Robbie?' Robert MacFarlane worked in the opaque realm between Scotland Yard and the Secret Service. 'Why not someone like Caldwell – murder is his job.'

'Maisie, I know you can hear me, even if you've almost lost your voice. Get yourself some sleep, then go to your office. I'll see you there at two this afternoon and we'll discuss the matter. There will be plenty of time for you to find your way to the ambulance station before tonight's blitzes start. And they will come back again, those bastards. They won't leave us alone until we've beaten them. See you this afternoon.' Maisie stood for a moment, holding the receiver, the long tone of the disconnected call echoing into the room – MacFarlane was known to dispense with a formal 'goodbye'.

She slumped into an armchair and thought about the young woman who had joined them in the ambulance when they'd reported for duty at five o'clock the previous evening. Saxon was

almost the same height as Maisie, with shoulder-length, sun-kissed hair – she looked as if she'd spent the summer sailing. At one point she'd twisted it back and pinned it in place with a pencil. Maisie could see her now, laughing. 'Gotta use the tools at hand,' she'd said. She'd worn a pair of dark khaki trousers, with a fawn blouse tucked into the waistband – both seemed freshly laundered. And she had brought a brown tweed jacket, though she soon took it off. Her worn but polished lace-up boots were a choice Priscilla had seen fit to comment upon. 'No one could accuse her of overdressing, could they? That girl could be a mannequin with those looks, yet look at her – she's almost ready for the trenches!'

Maisie remembered the scuffs of ash and dirt across the blouse as Saxon clambered over hot bricks to talk to a fireman, and later she explained to Maisie and Priscilla, 'My mother always says that no matter what happens, one should always make a good first impression – hence the pressed blouse, which is now fit for the rubbish! I never told her how I'd let everything go when I was in Spain – there wasn't time to look as if I'd just returned from a shopping expedition to Bonwit Teller!' And Maisie had told her that she too had been in Spain, but they'd let the words hang in the air, as if neither wanted to recall or discuss – and there was no time anyway, because now Saxon was reporting on Hitler's blitzkriegs in another country, and Maisie was drawing upon skills she'd honed in two wars. Saxon had only mentioned that, while her mother seemed to admire her choice of occupation, her father did not approve. 'In fact, he doesn't want me to be occupied at all – he'd rather I just sort of languish until a good man finds me. My mother, though, is secretly proud, I think – and sometimes not so secretly, to my father's chagrin.' Maisie had shaken hands with Catherine

Saxon – Catherine Angelica Saxon – only nine or ten hours ago, bidding her farewell and expressing hope that her first broadcast went well. She'd added that she also hoped her parents were indeed proud of their intrepid daughter. And now she was dead.

'Miss, you look all in,' said Billy Beale, Maisie's assistant. 'Terrible night, wasn't it? What time did you get home this morning?'

'Just after seven, but then I stayed and had a cup of tea with Mrs Partridge. I suppose I climbed into bed at about half past eight.' Maisie rubbed her forehead. 'And now it's past noon. How about you, Billy? You must have been out there on patrol too.'

'Wish I could go back to the Bore War, when all I had to think about as an Air Raid Precautions man was knocking on doors and telling people to make sure their curtains were closed properly during the blackout. Anyway, I'm going to make a cuppa.'

'Wait a minute.' Maisie reached into her desk and pulled out a small brown bag, twisted at the top and secured with a clothes peg. 'I think I would like a very strong coffee, Billy. Just put a couple of heaped teaspoons into that other pot I brought into the office last week, add two cups of water and strain it like tea after it's brewed for a few minutes.'

'That sounds a bit too strong, miss. That bad, is it?'

'MacFarlane will be here later on, so I need to be awake.'

Billy took the bag of coffee. 'What does he want?'

'It's about a young woman who came out in the ambulance with us last night. An American correspondent – a reporter. Apparently, she had been given a stab at doing a broadcast by that man – oh dear, I'm so tired, I've forgotten his name again. You know – the American.'

‘Mr Murrow?’

‘Yes, that’s it. Anyway, she had been writing for various newspapers in America – some quite important ones, by all accounts – and had been invited to see Mr Murrow. She said something about becoming one of “Murrow’s Boys” – the American reporters based here in London.’

‘She’s not a fella though, is she?’

‘Apparently there was already one woman working for him, and I’ve remembered her name – Mary Marvin Breckinridge. She was married in June, so she’s not working for the broadcaster any more, which led Catherine Saxon to hope that if she made a good account of herself, she would be in the game, reporting from a woman’s point of view. That’s what she said. “In the game”.’

‘So, what’s happened?’ asked Billy as he opened the bag and lifted it to his nose.

‘She’s dead, Billy. Murdered. And MacFarlane wants to see me about it.’

‘Sounds like she got into the wrong game.’ Billy closed the bag. ‘Mind if I have a cup too, miss?’

‘Not at all – I think we’re going to need all the energy we can get.’

‘Why do you think MacFarlane wants to talk to you about it? Sounds more like Caldwell’s alley to me.’

‘My thoughts exactly, Billy. My thoughts exactly. Now then, let’s get that coffee down us and have a look at the cases in progress.’

At exactly two o’clock, the doorbell rang.

‘That’ll be him, Billy.’

‘I’ll go down. Do you want me to make a pot of tea?’

‘No – if he has tea, he’ll be here longer than he needs to be and

half of it chatting. Let's see what he wants first. Probably a statement from me.'

Billy stopped by the door. 'Miss – don't kid yourself. He'd have called you down to his gaff and had a clerk take a statement. Nah – be prepared. He wants you working for him again.' He grinned. 'I've told you before – he's sweet on you.'

'I wish you'd stop nibbling on that bone, Billy.'

'Your Ladyship. Looking in fine fettle, all things considered – though a little powder under the eyes might not have gone amiss.'

'Robbie, Billy is quite capable of throwing you out of my office, you know.'

'Aw, just pulling your leg, Maisie. Just pulling your leg. In dark times, a bit of light never hurt anyone. English rose you are – an English rose.'

'All right, stop there,' said Maisie. 'Let's sit down and you can tell me what's going on and why you want to talk to me about something the Murder Squad should be investigating.'

'In your office, Maisie. With doors closed.' Robert MacFarlane turned to Billy. 'Ah, the faithful Mr Beale. Couldn't rustle up a cuppa, could you? No sugar – easier to give up than cut down, if you ask me.'

'Right you are, sir.'

As Billy left the room, MacFarlane followed Maisie into her private domain. She closed the doors leading from the outer office.

'Shall we get down to brass tacks?' said Maisie, taking a seat at the long table where she would usually sit with Billy to discuss a case. She pulled out a chair for MacFarlane.

MacFarlane unbuttoned his jacket, and sat down.

‘The American woman was murdered, Maisie, and I want you to play a part in the investigation.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you’re qualified.’ He held up his hand, as if to prevent Maisie interjecting, but sat back when Billy knocked on the door, entered the office and placed cups of tea in front of his employer and MacFarlane.

Maisie nodded her thanks, then turned to the Scot as Billy left the room.

‘How am I qualified for this case in particular? You’re going to have to work hard to persuade me, Robbie.’

MacFarlane drank the entire cup of hot tea in several gulps, placed the cup on the saucer, pushed it away from him on the table and brought his attention to Maisie.

‘You’ll scorch your gullet if you keep doing that.’

MacFarlane waved away the comment. ‘It’s like this. We have a delicate situation – American correspondents in Britain, citizens of another country telling their fellow countrymen about our war over here. They’re walking a fine line, taking what we’re going through with Hitler and his bloody blitzkrieg, and putting it into the homes of their fellow Americans.’ He lifted his tie and rubbed at an invisible stain. ‘You could say that Murrow and his ilk are probably the best propaganda tool we have to get the Yanks on our side.’

‘But they are on our side,’ said Maisie.

‘You’re being deliberately obtuse. You know very well what I’m talking about. Yes, they are on our side – but they don’t want to be in any wars over here or anywhere else in the world. It’s not that we want to twist anyone’s arm, but a little support from the citizenry for the help the American president wants to give

us would be handy. Money, materiel, that sort of thing. A bit of sugar.’ He sighed. ‘Their reporters are doing a good job, and so are ours. Anyway, back to the delicate situation. Catherine Saxon was murdered. She had been reporting here for a press concern in the USA, and she was about to be a lot better known than she was – Murrow had her pegged to do more broadcasts to appeal to women, and as you know, she was pretty good at that. Didn’t gloss over anything, but as you no doubt heard, she went to the heart with that broadcast last night.’

‘You still haven’t answered my question,’ said Maisie. ‘Why me, and why the secrecy?’

‘We’re keeping the lid on the story inasmuch as there will be a limited announcement in the press, and though her death will be reported in the USA it will be very low down in the papers. Here are the problems. Her father is a politician. A senator. Last thing he wanted was a daughter running towards trouble – and that’s what Miss Saxon did. France, Spain, Berlin. You name it, she’s been there. Now London. The good senator is what they are calling an “isolationist” – he’s built a following by pointing out that one hundred and twenty-five thousand doughboys were lost in the last war, and saying enough is enough, and that Americans want to stay out of foreign wars. The second thing is the way we have to play this one. The American embassy is involved, so is their Department of Justice. They want someone on the investigation from their team, and we don’t think Caldwell or anyone at the Yard can quite do what is really a job requiring the skills of a detective and an ambassador.’

‘Of course they can, Robbie – they know what they’re doing,’ said Maisie.

‘They do, but we – and the Yanks – want to know there’s absolute confidentiality, and we want someone who can work with their investigator.’

‘What makes you think I can work with one of their investigators?’

‘You’ve worked with him before.’ MacFarlane stared at Maisie. ‘In fact, you almost killed him.’

Maisie was silent. She met MacFarlane’s gaze.

‘Well, that did the trick,’ said MacFarlane. ‘Never thought I’d be the one to strike you dumb.’

‘There are other investigators you could call upon,’ said Maisie.

‘But he doesn’t want to work with the others. He wants to work with you. He’s a lot more important now than he was in Munich, and he’s here, in London. And it’s not a flying visit.’ MacFarlane looked at his watch. ‘In fact, any minute now—’ He was interrupted by an insistent ringing of the doorbell. ‘As I was about to say, any minute now he’ll be here in your office.’

Maisie was silent. She heard Billy leave the office, followed by voices in the entrance hall and on the stairs, and then a knock on the door of her private office.

‘Robbie,’ she whispered. ‘It’s Anna’s adoption panel in a week’s time – I can’t put a foot wrong. I cannot get into any trouble, and I cannot be mentioned in the press.’ She felt tears rise.

‘Don’t worry,’ said MacFarlane. ‘I know. I won’t put you in any situation that would risk little Anna’s future.’

Maisie nodded, then called out, ‘Yes, Billy?’

The door opened, and Billy entered, followed by a tall man of about forty-five years of age. At over six feet in height, with dark hair and pale blue eyes, he wore a charcoal grey suit, a white shirt, and a tie with diagonal stripes of black and grey. His black shoes were

polished, and he carried a grey fedora with a black band, along with a well-worn nutmeg brown briefcase.

‘Thank you, Billy,’ said MacFarlane. He turned to Maisie. ‘I believe you know Mr Scott.’

Mark Scott smiled as he held out his hand to Maisie. ‘I hope you’re not going to hold a gun to my jugular this time, Maisie.’

She took his hand. ‘Hello, Mark. Lovely to see you again.’ Feeling the colour rise in her cheeks, she turned away and took up the file that MacFarlane pushed towards her. She drew a hand across her forehead. ‘Well then, we’d better get on with business. Gentlemen, please sit down.’