



# JOURNEY TO MUNICH

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

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## CHAPTER ONE

Holland Park, London, February 1938

The day was bright, the air crisp, with sunshine giving an impression of imminent spring, though as soon as a person ventured out from a warm, cocooned interior, a nip in the chill outdoors soon found its way to fingertips and toes.

Maisie Dobbs – as she preferred to be known, though she was now the bearer of a title through a marriage cut short – opened her eyes and decided it was mid-morning, given the way the sun was shining through a crack in the curtains. No one had disturbed her, no one had come to her room with breakfast or tea, though she supposed Priscilla would bring a tray soon, afraid to leave her friend alone and awake for too long.

Someone – likely the maid – had been in to light the fire, for the room was warm and a gentle heat skimmed across her skin. Upon first waking, she thought she was still in Spain. But the deep mattress, soft pillows, and sheets reminded her that this was not her stone cell; she was not in her plain wooden bed with only a blanket to keep her warm, and there was no one to minister to in this grand house in

Holland Park, a world away from battle, from soldiers who came to her filth-covered and bloody.

From a simple community she had grown to love, Maisie had come home to England – at first to Kent, to be with her father and stepmother, then to share the lingering grief of bereavement with her in-laws, who had lost their only son. How could she ever explain to them that service – tending the terrible wounds of those who fought for freedom from oppression – had lifted her own deep melancholy? How would they feel if she admitted that in becoming a nurse again, she'd found a reason to go on? Only now could she come home to face the landscape of her former life, and find her way through its changed paths and byways.

It was Priscilla who tracked her down in Spain, Priscilla who had brought her home to England, and it was to Priscilla she had come following the muted celebrations of Christmas and New Year at Chelstone, the estate where her husband had grown to manhood. It was Priscilla, she knew, who would leave her alone to do what she needed to do in her own good time – unless, of course, Priscilla had other ideas.

‘Maisie? Maisie?’ The knock at the door was insistent, as if, having waited long enough, her friend would no longer allow the late-sleeping guest any quarter. ‘Time for tea and today’s gossip!’

The door opened, and Priscilla Partridge stepped into the room – now ‘Tante Maisie’s room’, according to her three sons, who had spent their early years in France – carrying a tray with tea, toast, and a boiled egg, her hands steadying the silver platter as she closed the door with her foot. ‘The egg is soft, the toast is hot and crisp, the tea strong, and as you may have guessed – I didn’t do a bloody thing! Thanks must go to Cook.’

‘Sorry – I slept late,’ said Maisie.

‘I’m giving you a bit of a lie-in. Having that checkup yesterday would have taken it out of you. But at least you had a clean bill of health, and all seems to have healed. Tea?’

Maisie sat up. ‘Lovely.’ She raked a hand through her short-cropped hair.

‘I think you ought to see my hairdresser – though heaven knows, you didn’t leave yourself with much for him to work with, did you? Whatever possessed you to cut your own hair, and with a blunt knife by the look of it? I nearly went through that stone floor when I saw you shorn of your locks.’

‘My hair was getting on my nerves, and keeping it short made sense – something less to organise.’

‘Right-ho. I’m going to make an appointment for you in any case – one thing less for you to deal with. Now then, onto juicier things.’ Perching on the side of the bed and resting the tray on the eiderdown, Priscilla poured tea. ‘I have to tell you the latest about the Otterburns.’

Maisie took the cup. ‘Priscilla, I don’t want to know anything about the Otterburns.’

‘Sorry. I don’t blame you for feeling as you do about John Otterburn, but – anyway, this is about Elaine. I just heard the news from Patsy Chambers – I thought you would be interested.’

‘Ugh. When did you begin hobnobbing with Patsy Chambers?’

‘She has her uses. But I must tell you – Elaine Otterburn, delivered of her child just a few months ago, has upped and gone off.’

Maisie felt her skin prickle. ‘What do you mean, upped and gone off?’

‘Well, everyone knew her marriage to that chinless wonder, the Honourable Charles Whitney, was all done in a bit of a rush – remember me predicting the birth announcement would read “born

prematurely”? I confess I was a little shocked at my foresight when I saw those actual words in *The Times*. It seemed that one week she was engaged, the next married, and then in short order a mother.’ Priscilla sighed. ‘Let me tell you, they gave that girl far too much rope her entire life, and it came home to roost. Apparently she has some friends, all young women of her age, you know, early twenties, who are in Germany – Bavaria – having a whale of a time. Her best friend – I’m amazed she has one – was sent there to be finished and stayed on with some other friends. Elaine has been popping back and forth to see them for ages now – you know, a Friday to Monday of parties. Now she hasn’t come back! All I can say is that it wasn’t like that in my day.’

‘You made it something like that, though.’

‘No, Maisie – what I got up to at Girton should be no indicator of what happened when I was in Switzerland. For a start, I was younger and chaperoned when I was sent off to finishing school, and I certainly wanted to come home at the end of it. These girls are in flats of their own, and it’s one party after another.’ She paused. ‘Plus, when I returned to England, I did not run away from my responsibilities. Neither did you. We knew what we had to do when the war came, and we did it. And you lied about your age. How old were you?’

‘Just shy of eighteen when I enlisted.’

‘I rest my case.’ Priscilla picked up her cup, taking a sip of the hot tea.

‘But why Germany? Everything I’ve read, everything Douglas has said about the situation there – it doesn’t sound like it’s a place to have a wild time.’ Maisie paused, musing. ‘Mind you, Elaine Otterburn managed to find a party in the middle of the Canadian nowhere the night before James was killed.’

Priscilla set her cup on the tray but continued to clutch it with

both hands, as if to warm her fingertips. ‘But here’s what’s happened. Elaine’s abandoned her husband and child, and now not even the Otterburns have any idea where she’s to be found. She’s gone to ground.’

‘I don’t believe that. John Otterburn has money. He’ll find her. He’s probably got men searching everywhere for her.’

‘Oh, she won’t come home in a hurry.’

‘It’s not exactly safe there, is it, Pris?’

Priscilla reached for a slice of buttered toast. ‘It is if you have a bit of a thing for Herr Hitler and his raving Nazis.’

Maisie frowned. ‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘You heard Douglas at supper the other night – he’s writing an article on this very thing, though heaven knows who might have the courage to print it.’ Priscilla licked butter from her fingertips and pushed the plate towards Maisie, who took a slice of toast. ‘And you’ve seen it yourself, years ago, before you married James – didn’t you have a couple of cases where you witnessed the Nazi lovers in all their glory? There are people in high places who are enamored of Hitler and his cronies – and, much to John Otterburn’s embarrassment, his daughter has become one of them. Perhaps she became disenchanted with young motherhood – who knows? And remember, you were overseas and missed all the business with the abdication. You know what they call that Wallis in certain circles? America’s gift to the British! That was one way to rid ourselves of a Nazi-sympathising king! Don’t repeat that with my name attached to it, will you, darling?’ She laughed, then smiled at Maisie. ‘How about Bond Street? You’re looking a bit ragged around the edges. A few new garments are in order, if you don’t mind my saying so.’

Maisie shook her head as she finished a last bite of toast. ‘Oh, no, no, no you don’t! I have plenty of clothes – I just need to unpack

properly. Brenda's going to help me when I return to the Dower House next week. In any case, I have a few things to do today.'

Priscilla stood up and reached for the tray. 'Anything interesting?'

'I'm going to look at a couple of flats. The flat in Pimlico is rented, and I don't want to go back there anyway – but I do want my own nest here in London.'

'You could stay here for as long as you like – I would love it.'

Maisie reached for Priscilla's hand. 'And I love being with you, Douglas, and the boys – but I need my own walls around me, Pris.' She went on before Priscilla could counter. 'If I've time, I may go over to Fitzroy Square, just for a walk around.'

'Slaying a dragon?'

Maisie shrugged. 'Perhaps. And I've to see Mr Klein too. I want to find out if I can stretch to a new motor car.'

Priscilla looked up and sighed. 'I don't think that will be a problem, Maisie. But do let me come with you to look – you know I love a new motor car!'

Maisie laughed. 'Oh, Pris, I think my idea and your idea of what to drive around in are two entirely different things.'

After viewing two flats in Chelsea and one in Maida Vale, Maisie decided she had had enough. Taking the Underground to Oxford Circus, she walked along Oxford Street towards the cafe where she had often stopped for a cup of urn-brewed tea and a plate of buttered toast. Though there had been changes along the way, thankfully the cafe was still there. She ordered tea and an Eccles cake at the counter and settled into a seat by the window. Her old contact at Scotland Yard, the Murder Squad detective Richard Stratton, had always referred to the place as 'more caff than café'. She wondered about Stratton, and how he might be faring. He had been promoted



to Special Branch, working with Robert MacFarlane, and had over time found his superior to be a difficult man. A widower with a young son, Stratton had – out of the blue, it seemed – decided to return to the profession for which he had trained before he enlisted for service during the war, when he became a military policeman. Much to the surprise of his colleagues, he accepted a position as a teacher of science and mathematics at a boys' school in the West Country, far from London. His son would receive a free private education, he was given a cottage in the grounds, and – more important – he would be home every day with his boy. Maisie added up the years and decided that the son – what was his name? Had she ever known his name? He must be fourteen years of age by now. Almost a man himself.

The years spent away from England seemed to render everything around Maisie in sharp relief. Memories came and went as she walked towards Fitzroy Square: of people met, of conversations in the street, of events holding little consequence and others that had taken her breath away. She crossed the road when she approached the place where she had witnessed a young man, disturbed by the war that still raged in his mind, kill himself with a hand grenade, filling the air with the terror of a blood-soaked hell that haunted him.

She wasn't sure how long she had been in the square, standing at the edge of Conway Street and looking over towards the former mansion that had housed the first-floor office of Maisie Dobbs, Psychologist and Investigator, but she felt her cheeks growing cold and her eyes watering. She pulled her now somewhat unfashionable cloche hat down farther to keep her ears warm, and snuggled into her winter scarf. It was as she began to walk away that she felt the

nape of her neck prickle, as if someone had run a feather across her skin. At once she was afraid to look around. She had a distinct feeling that she was being watched. She stopped and half turned her head – was that a footstep behind her? Or was it a ghost from her past, reaching out to pull her in? She shook her head and began walking across the square towards Fitzroy Street, but still a wave of anxiety washed over her. She admonished herself: it was early days still, and she had been so afraid of returning to England, so fearful of how she might face the places she and James had been together before she left – before she accepted his proposal, and before their marriage, which was a happier union than either imagined it could be. As her eyes filled with tears, she stopped to reach into her brown leather satchel for a handkerchief.

‘Will this do, lass?’ The Scottish burr was unmistakable. Maisie turned to face Robert MacFarlane, the former Special Branch detective who apparently now operated in the undisclosed realm where Scotland Yard and the Secret Service met.

‘I might have known.’ She took the proffered white cotton handkerchief. ‘Have I no rest from you, Robbie MacFarlane?’

‘You do a pretty good job of escaping my notice, I’ll give you that.’

‘I hope this is an accidental meeting,’ said Maisie.

MacFarlane inclined his head towards the building that had once housed her office. ‘Did you know it’s for rent again? The last tenants moved out at the end of the year.’

Maisie blushed. ‘I didn’t know, but I’m not interested.’ She sighed. ‘How are you, Robbie?’

‘Cold. You would think I’d be used to this weather, being a hardy Scot, but that little sojourn in Gibraltar made my blood run thin, so I’m a wee bit on the chilly side.’ He turned and pointed towards a black motor car idling at the end of the street. ‘If you’re not busy –

and I don't think you are – a colleague and I would like to have a quick word.'

'I'm not interested, Robbie.'

'You might be. Could be just what you need. And I think you owe me a favour, after giving me the slip.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, I'm not interested in cloak-and-dagger assignments any more. I've had enough.'

'You're freezing cold, Maisie. Let me give you a lift somewhere. If I stand here a second longer, I'll turn to stone.'

Maisie looked at the black vehicle again. The driver had emerged and opened the back passenger door, ready to receive them.

'Oh, all right – you can take me to Bond Street.'

'That's the spirit, lass. And we can have a wee chat while we're about it. After all, your country needs you.'

'Who's your friend in the motor car?'

'Well, I think you've met Harry, the driver. And you've met Mr Huntley too.'

'Brian Huntley?'

'Yes, the very man.'

MacFarlane nodded to Harry, who stepped back as MacFarlane held the door for Maisie. She took a seat next to the man who waited inside. MacFarlane climbed in, folded down the extra seat in front of them, and closed the door. He rapped on the glass partition, and the motor car eased away into Warren Street in the direction of Tottenham Court Road.

The man next to Maisie turned to face her. His dark grey pinstripe suit seemed brand new, the creases in his trousers sharp. He wore a white shirt, and his tie, bearing the insignia of a Guards regiment, seemed to stand out even in the dim light. He removed his Homburg and smiled.

‘You’re looking well, your ladyship.’

‘I do not care to use the title, if you don’t mind, Mr Huntley.’

‘As you wish. If *you* don’t mind, we’ll take a little diversion on the way to . . . Bond Street, was it? I am sure Mrs Partridge will still be shopping. In fact—’ He leant towards the window to consult his watch. ‘About fifteen minutes ago, she was still in Selfridges.’

Maisie sighed and closed her eyes, opening them again a few seconds later. ‘How long have you been watching me?’

‘Oh, come now, Maisie – may I call you Maisie? We know each other quite well by now, don’t we?’ Huntley didn’t wait for an answer. ‘There’s something that you can help us with, Maisie. I understand very well what you have endured in recent years, but you are the very person we need for a particular job.’ He looked down at his hands and pushed the signet ring on his little finger back and forth towards the knuckle. ‘Maurice held you in high esteem, Maisie, and he knew our work inside out. He was my mentor as well as yours – and you’ve done good work for us in the past.’

‘I don’t know that I’m up to my old work.’

‘I believe you are. And this is an important task for a woman. It involves a little travel, however.’

Maisie did not respond. She wiped a gloved hand across the window and looked out at people walking along the pavement, heads bent, scarves pulled up, hats tugged down. At tram stops they stamped their feet, and others ran into shops as if to gain respite from the cold. She turned and looked at MacFarlane, who had said nothing.

She met Huntley’s eyes. ‘Where to?’

‘Munich. Of course it is a little cooler there at this time of year.’

She was quiet again. Huntley and MacFarlane allowed her the silence.

Perhaps it was time. Perhaps one small job wouldn't cause any harm. What would she do otherwise? Sit in the Dower House nursing her broken heart? Allow the past to simmer up to a rolling boil again? Perhaps it was the right thing to do.

'All right, Mr Huntley – tell me why my country needs me.' She looked at MacFarlane. He was smiling.