THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MADEMOISELLE ALLIANCE ATASHA ESTER

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

'A remarkable Australian talent'
THE AGE

'A master storyteller'
DAILY TELEGRAPH

PRAISE FOR THE MADEMOISELLE ALLIANCE

'Lester writes with razor-sharp research and admiration for a woman whose name deserves to be blazed across the pages of history' KATE QUINN, author of *The Alice Network*

'Deeply researched and gorgeously written' **KERRI MAHER**, author of *The Paris Bookseller*

'Written with heart, passion, and impeccable historical research' MADELINE MARTIN, author of *The Last Bookshop in London*

'An incredible story of courage, devotion and daring during the French Resistance, Natasha Lester's compelling novel celebrates the extraordinary life of Marie-Madeleine Méric Fourcade. Extensively researched and filled with vivid prose and rich detail, *The Mademoiselle Alliance* is a moving, powerful homage' CHANEL CLEETON, author of *Next Year in Havana*

'The Mademoiselle Alliance is a masterfully crafted novel that captivated me from the very first page. I was immediately drawn into this gripping story, my heart pounding as I followed the indomitable Marie-Madeleine, a spy for the Resistance, through the perilous twists and turns of Nazi-occupied Paris. With more than just strength and determination, Marie-Madeleine possessed a defiant grit that kept me riveted, wondering with every turn of the page how she would navigate and escape the dangers she faced. This is a beautifully woven story of love, intrigue, courage and resilience. Marie-Madeleine is an unforgettable heroine who will remain with readers long after the last page is turned' VICTORIA CHRISTOPHER MURRAY, author of The Personal Librarian and The First Ladies

Also by Natasha Lester

A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald
Her Mother's Secret
The Paris Seamstress
The French Photographer
The Paris Secret
The Riviera House
The Three Lives of Alix St Pierre
The Disappearance of Astrid Bricard

MADEMOISELLE ALLIANCE NATASHA LESTER





Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2025 by Hachette Australia (an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited) Gadigal Country, Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney, NSW 2000 www.hachette.com.au

Hachette Australia acknowledges and pays our respects to the past, present and future Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our head office is located on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

Copyright © Natasha Lester 2025

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be stored or reproduced by any process without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 5168 7 (paperback)

Cover design by Alex Ross Designs
Cover images (gold, switchboard) courtesy of Shutterstock
Map by Laurie Whiddon, Map Illustrations
Author photograph courtesy of Stef King/stefking.com.au
Typeset in 13.5/16.5 pt Centaur MT Std by Kirby Jones
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

To every man, woman and child who's fought against oppression for their freedom, and especially those who've lost their lives in the struggle. To those who are fighting still. Above all, to Marie-Madeleine Fourcade. Hero.



She first made contact with the outside world when she emerged, paralysed with cold and cramp, from a sealed diplomatic bag. This had been carried in the boot of a car to Madrid by a compliant Vichy courier who had crossed the Pyrenees in mid-winter. Reports to London that her Nefertiti-like beauty and charm (she was then thirty-two, mother of two children) were equalled by her total dedication and executive capacity proved unexaggerated. Fact had outpaced fiction in producing the copybook "beautiful spy". This was Marie-Madeleine.

-Commander Kenneth Cohen, MI6

Prologue

Uncatchable

AIX-EN-PROVENCE, FRANCE, JULY 1944

hear their boots first. Ack-ack, like machine guns firing in the stairwell. Then the roar: "Gestapo! Aufmachen!"

That's when I remember – I forgot to lock the door.

I've run so often these past four years that I think I can make it; that if I fling the bolt into place, I'll have time to escape out the back. And I do make it. The bolt is in my hands, but the door is bulging from the force of the bodies trying to break in, and my fingers are hysterical with adrenaline and can't make the lock catch.

The wood cracks. The door shudders.

It flies open.

Two dozen Nazis burst in.

This is the moment everyone in London warned me was coming. Capture. Torture. Death – but only if I'm lucky.

In front of me is a wall of submachine guns and menace. I should back away, far away, but my feet are ready to charge straight through the guns and out the door and toward my three children so I can hold their innocence and their love right up against my body for what could be the very last time.

It's not his intention, but a plainclothes *gestapiste* saves me from that mad act. He demands, "Where's the man?" rousing me back to sense.

The man. He's here for one of my three thousand agents, then. Not me. Not yet.

Which means I have to take hold of myself, become the name on my papers: Germaine Pezet, a provincial housewife. Hérisson, the little hedgehog I take my codename from, must scuttle away. If this performance is anything less than my best, they'll find the agent they're looking for. And I'll never see my children again. Or Léon.

Where are you, Léon? Please God, let me find him.

The gestapiste's gun clicks. I make myself step toward it, cackling.

"Where's the man? Oh please find me a man. With a face like mine, they're in short supply." I gesture to my jutting chin, thankful that I let MI6's dentist make me a prosthetic disguise to alter my face so completely that I'm unrecognisable as the woman on the *Wanted* posters who leads the Alliance network.

It's the only weapon I have, so I wield it, winking at the Nazi and pointing to a cupboard where, six days ago, stacks of documents couriered across France from my agents were hiding. "Perhaps he's in the armoire."

When the soldiers fling open the armoire, they find nothing. All the papers stashed there have long since been coded and sent to London.

I expel adrenaline with another cackle. "Make sure he's a good one."

The leader glowers. But doubt flickers in his eyes like the match I hold to a nonchalant cigarette and I start to hope: maybe I'll get away with it. Perhaps I won't even be taken to prison this time but will be overlooked as an ugly peasant woman who has nothing whatsoever in common with so-called beautiful spy Marie-Madeleine.

The Nazis fan through the apartment, probably hunting for Lucien, head of my Provençal sector, who was here earlier, both of us part of a network the Germans call Noah's Ark because of our animal codenames.

Probably also hunting for the stack of intelligence reports Lucien delivered, which is sitting in plain sight on the table.

I inhale smoke, exhale fear. I have to hide those papers. But there are five machine guns still trained on me. I leer stupidly, call out, "I prefer brown hair. Brown eyes too."

Léon's eyes are grey-green jasper. Forever, I told him the last time I saw him, ten months ago.

Thankfully, my guards join the search, leaving just one SS officer in the room. The second his attention shifts to his companions, who have the fun of hunting out Resistance quarry rather than the bad luck to be stuck with me, I snort revoltingly into a handkerchief. The guard shudders, turns his back, and I leap forward, scoop up the papers and toss them under the sofa just before the plainclothes gestapiste returns.

"Have you seen a tall man with fair hair? He's part of a network of terrorists. We were told he'd been here." The officer speaks politely, but I know this is the moment before his temper breaks.

I have to stop it from breaking on me.

I heave my shoulders into a witless shrug. "The only blonds here are your soldiers."

"Then why did you try to bar the door against us?" he shouts.

Spittle and frustration punctuate the air like angry stars.

My hands tremble.

I shove them in my pockets, cast a sly eye at the furious Nazi. "If I'd known you were all so handsome, I'd have flung the door wide open – and my chastity belt too."

I want to be sick. The *gestapiste* wants to hit me. But his soldiers have found nothing. He hits the table instead.

I swallow, breathe, swallow again as, miraculously, incredibly, the Nazis shoulder their guns and walk away from the leader of the largest Resistance network in France.

Two minutes more and I can drop to my knees on the floor.

But . . .

One of them sweeps the room a final time and, as if the devil has control of them, his eyes fall to the space beneath the sofa where piles of coded messages wait like traitors. Now I do almost drop to my knees and cry out that deaf and futile word, *Non!*

"Lügnerin!" the Nazi screams as he pulls out fistfuls of paper.

Now I stumble. I'm so tired, don't think I can do this anymore. Defend myself and my agents, pretend and perform, rescue myself every time. Where's the damn D'Artagnan the storybooks promise you, the rebel trickster who saves both the day and honour too?

Six soldiers advance, machine guns pointing at my head, my chest, my throat. Others tear the sofa to pieces, the footstools too, which are crammed with more intelligence reports. Rifle butts smash tables into splinters of bone.

The ringleader seizes me by the shoulders. "Who are you?" he rages, shaking me so viciously I'm terrified my prosthetic will fly out, revealing both my disguise and the answer to his question: I'm the woman you've been bunting since 1941.

I'm the D'Artagnan. And no matter how scared I am or how tired of fighting and mourning my murdered friends and the children I never see, I have to fight some more. There's time for despair only when I'm lying alone in my bed at three in the morning and no one can see how I have to grip my hands between my knees to stop them from trembling.

I fling out my last-chance dice.

"I'm a spy," I say, the guise of silly housewife lain aside, the self of Hérisson still hiding. "London sent me."

The *gestapiste* tries to interrupt, but I keep talking the way Marie-Madeleine, the aeroplane-flying, car-rallying daredevil iconoclast, would have spoken five years ago.

"I'm the stag you catch when you were just out hunting rabbits. And I'll only speak to the master of the house, not his gamekeeper. Find me the most senior Gestapo officer in Provence, rather than his underling," I sneer.

My heart is a maniacal drumbeat. My common sense is screaming

at me to find a better solution than to let them arrest me. But I need to get away from the guns. If I'm taken to a prison to await a Gestapo commandant I have no intention of facing — because a commandant will know exactly who I am and he won't be so kind as to shoot me—then maybe I can escape. Guns kill, but prisons can be escaped from; that's a fact I've learned firsthand.

The officer frowns, worried. What if he lets his men kill me, but then discovers I had valuable information that could have been tortured out of me?

He pushes me toward the stairs. "The regional commandant will be in Aix-en-Provence tomorrow morning."

The boneless relief of being allowed to live for a little longer almost makes me stumble again. But what hellish prison will they take me to? And how will I get away before I have to face a Gestapo commandant or before they serve torture for breakfast?

I'm driven to the Miollis barracks and shoved into a punishment cell. The men occupying it are ordered out, leaving behind the stench of urine and sweat. I brace one hand against the wall, but it isn't enough to ward off the stink and the terror, and three seconds later I'm retching into the bucket so violently that perspiration drenches my body and I want to claw my skin off my bones.

Empty and exhausted, I sag against the wall, close my eyes, draw on the memory of Béatrice's and Christian's faces the last time I saw them, over a year ago. I picture the tiny baby, Léon's child, whom I had held for only a week before I had to give him up.

He will have just turned one.

How many more birthdays will I miss?

It's the kind of question you should never ask yourself when you're alone in a prison cell with a capsule of cyanide hidden in a locket around your neck. Not when the man you love is missing. Not when the lives of your three thousand agents, as well as the freedom of your country, are at stake.

By morning, the Gestapo will have read enough of my papers to know who I am, and they'll punish me in ways so cruel I can't even imagine them. If I'm to swallow the cyanide MI6 gave me, it has to be now. Back in London, the priest told me that God would forgive me.

But will I forgive myself?

If nobody warns Lucien that the Gestapo are onto him, he'll be captured. His sector, almost all that's left of the Alliance network after the last brutal months, will be torn to shreds. And France, fighting with everything she has for her freedom now that the Allies have finally landed, will feel the Nazis' guns press right into her skull.

So I pull myself up, remind myself that I'm a little hedgehog wearing a dress of spikes.

It's five hours until dawn.

I start at the window. It's up high, one metre wide and perhaps double that in height. No glass covers the opening, just a heavy wooden board with a gap at the top through which I can see thick metal bars.

A gap.

An opening.

A space where the light gets in.

My breath comes faster. I'm balancing on the thin line that exists between madness and hope when I shove the cot beneath the window and empty the bucket, gagging again from the stench.

I upturn the bucket on the cot.

In Shanghai, where I lived in the French Concession as a child, my father told me about burglars who greased their bodies so they could slip easily into houses at night. It's summer. The cell is an oven. My body is drenched in sweat. Rationing and running from Nazis for four years means I'm as thin as a needle.

But am I slick enough and thin enough to slide into the gap between the board and the bars and then through the bars to freedom?

I slip off my dress, grip it between my teeth. Then I climb onto the bucket, reach up to the window and try to believe that I'm like a ray of moonlight, able to crack open the darkness and pass through anything – uncatchable.

PART ONE

ADVENTURER

1928-1941

... what chiefly struck me was the apathy of the younger women. I asked them if they had a garden, and they shook their heads wistfully, saying that there were no gardens in Old Fez. The roof was therefore their only escape: a roof overlooking acres and acres of other roofs, and closed in by the naked fortified mountains which stand about Fez like prison-walls.

-Edith Wharton, In Morocco

One

I Never Want to Leave

MOROCCO, 1928

'm eighteen years old and I'm standing in a street with my husband of just two days beside me and I wish my eyes were cameras and could capture everything I see. The turquoise domes that crown the buildings, the white cloths that helmet the heads of the men. The veiled women who are permitted only a thin net strip to look out onto the world. Do they revel in the anonymity or do they want to tear off those claustrophobic skins and expose their faces to the bright, hot sunshine of Tangier?

Above me, perpendicular streets cascade through a tangle of houses with filigree balustrades wreathed like lace around them. To my right are laden donkeys and motorcars, a bazaar selling silk and leather, olives and guns. Guards with stories engraved on their sword belts stand in the niches of temples. Naked men wail incantations to a worshipful crowd. Through it all, a descant melody hums: the muezzin calling in tongues I don't yet understand, but that make my musician-trained body shiver as if I've just heard Bach for the very first time.

"Can we explore?" I'm already lunging toward the scent of cinnamon and saffron, wanting to taste it on my tongue.

"There's more than enough heat, dirt and poverty waiting for us in Rabat."

The voice of my husband, Édouard Méric, is brusque and I stop.

It's the first time he's spoken to me with anything other than amusement, affection or pride. He's eight years older, an army officer working for the French Intelligence Service in Morocco. His dark eyes and brooding air made me think of a breathtakingly real Heathcliff the first time I saw him, but right now he looks more glowering than gothic. He's the man some might say I've given up my dreams of being a concert pianist for, but I can barely recollect that now that I'm in Morocco, and the adventurous spirit born within me years ago as I explored Shanghai with my amah is quivering like the plucked string of a cello.

"We need to get there before dark," he says, tone conciliatory now.

I climb into the car. The driver punches the accelerator and we lurch, stall, restart.

I almost whisper that I'm a much better driver and could probably take on the task, but my sister advised me to introduce Édouard to my unconventionalities one by one. So I settle for peeling off my gloves and discarding my shawl and hat, which isn't proper in public, but layers are meant for a less tropical climate.

Through the Spanish zone, the roads are so brutal it feels like our car is being tossed from trough to crest of a twelve-foot wave. Édouard's expression is grim, so I take his hand and his frown recedes. Such is the power of love — one hand woven into another's banishes all unhappiness. I smile and his lips turn up in response.

When we reach French Morocco and the roads level out, it's easier to speak. Édouard flaps a handkerchief back and forth. "God, it's hot."

It is warm, but not in the humidly oppressive way of Shanghai or even Marseille, where I was born. This heat sparkles like diamonds.

"Take off your jacket," I say, glad of my sleeveless dress, which allows my bare arm to bask on the sill of the open window. Jacket gone, I undo Édouard's cufflinks and roll up his sleeves. "Better?"

"Better," he agrees.

I rest my head contentedly on his shoulder until Rabat rises up before us, like a crown atop a cliff the colour of fire, having burned down everything in its path to reach this place of triumph.

"Look!" I cry, thrusting my head through the car window.

Then I turn around and seize my husband's hands. "I love you," I tell him, a vow more urgent than anything I said on our wedding day. "And I love it here. I never want to leave."

When I lean over to kiss him, he shakes his head. "Not here." Then he winks. "But definitely later."

I don't think I've ever smiled the way I do now at the foot of Rabat, ready to throw myself into my next two adventures — one that will take place in this country, and one that will take place in our home, between the two of us, wife and one very handsome husband whom I'd give my heart to, were it possible to pluck it from my chest and hold it out in the palm of my hand.

Two

How Lucky I Am to Be French

PARIS, 1936

hird place!" I cry, bursting into my apartment in a way I never would have dared had I still been in Morocco. It's taken four years for my body to learn not to check itself. But anger never greets me here. Instead, my children do, and they're eager to know if I won the Monte Carlo Rally.

"Maybe you'll do better next time," my six-year-old son says, and I laugh, as does my mother, who's been looking after Béatrice and Christian.

"Do you know how many people wish they'd come in third?" I crouch down to my children's level, hugging them close.

"People with small dreams," Christian says as Béatrice winds her fingers into my hair.

I look up at my mother, trying to hide the furrowing of my brow. Have I given them great expectations when I should be encouraging a less constellated outlook?

No. That's why I left Morocco. So my children could grow up believing they could reach not just for the moon, but for universes longed for and unknown.

I grin at Christian. "Next time I won't come home unless I win."

I tickle his sister, who looks momentarily worried that I mean it. But these two are the North Star of my existence. I would *never* abandon them.

"I left before breakfast so I could see you before bedtime," I tell her.

"Before breakfast?" repeats my four-year-old daughter, eyes like dinner plates. Breakfasts at the Monte Carlo Beach Hotel are her idea of paradise, and only the most unswerving devotion would make someone skip such a feast.

"That's how much I love you," I tell her, and she giggles.

When I stand, my eye falls on the headline of the newspaper on the table: Le Chancelier Hitler Dénonce Versailles – Les troupes allemandes sont entrées en Rhénanie.

Yes, Hitler has all but torn up the Treaty of Versailles and occupied the Rhineland, right on the border of France, an act akin to war. "That's also why I left Monte Carlo early," I murmur to my mother, exuberance gone.

She squeezes my hand.

Perhaps it was silly not to stay for the awards ceremony because of something happening hundreds of kilometres away. But while my marriage vows might be all but shattered, the one vow I'll never break is the one I made when I fled Rabat — that my children matter more than anything. I need to be in Paris with them.

"Let's get ice cream," I say. "Race you!"

We dash out the door as fast as if the police are chasing us. Christian wins, whooping, and Béatrice and I come in equally last; we both suffer from a congenital hip condition. Mine worries at me like a mistrustful husband if I don't venerate it enough, and hers has always been worse, making running difficult.

"Really, we came in second," I tell her, and she beams.

Soon our hands are sticky; Béatrice's face is pink and Christian's chocolate-stained. Mine is smeared with love.

My sister, Yvonne, hosts an evening salon that attracts artists, journalists like me, military intelligence officers and men of influence. They'll all be talking about Hitler and the Rhineland, and if I want to find out what it might mean for my family, then I need to attend. So I pull out a red silk dress, something to lift my spirits, dimmed by France's and Britain's responses to Hitler – gutless shrugs. Since when do you allow a bully to keep what he's stolen?

I'm too familiar with tyrants not to know they never reveal their true ambitions until it's too late to stop them.

My hip spasms, dampening my mood further, and I know I'm going to have to work hard to hide my limp tonight. But the cure for that is to step into the dress and make up my face with lipstick and a smile.

"Maman!" Christian says when I stop to kiss him good night. "You look so pretty."

His words see me out the door with barely a hitch in my step.

Yvonne greets me with kisses before taking my arm, which means I'm not disguising my limp as well as I'd hoped. But it's a relief to lean on her for a moment. Until she deposits me with a group of women discussing why it's essential to own a country home so their busy husbands have a place for repose.

"Let's see how long you last." She grins before slipping away.

If only it were possible to commit siblicide with a champagne coupe.

Thankfully, after my only having to pretend to listen for a few minutes, my brother-in-law beckons me over to the fireplace. As I slip away from the wives, I hear them whisper, "Separated."

I wear the scarlet letters of that word like a scar. Édouard does not. He's a man in the military, whereas I'm just a blonde. Of course our separation must be my fault, meaning some of the women see me as a threat, the men as an invitation. I haven't helped matters by daring to become a journalist here in Paris in defiance of the view that mothers should be at home with their children. But I love my job at Radio Cité,

spinning tales about the latest Chanel gowns or interviewing fascinating women I find on the margins of parties like these, women who'd otherwise be ignored by the conservative French newspapers. All of which makes me an excellent party guest: I bring scandal, conflict and never a dull moment. I have no idea which of these entertainments Georges hopes I'll add to his group, but judging by the yawn he's smothering, I'd say all three.

"My sister-in-law, Marie-Madeleine Méric," he announces. "And the family daredevil. Just returned from a third placing at the Monte Carlo Rally."

"What do you drive?" the man introduced as Navarre inquires.

I know Navarre by reputation; he's a military intelligence officer and hero of the Great War. I'm surprised he's bothering to speak to me at all, let alone about cars. But then, not all military officers are like Édouard.

"Just a Citroën Traction Avant," I say.

He almost looks impressed.

There follows a debate about whether I might have won in a Peugeot. All yawns are forgotten as I describe the thrill of the last white-knuckle charge into the town square, where I was, in fact, beaten by a Peugeot, until another man smirks. "You're welcome to drive my Peugeot any time."

Ah, he's hoping for scandal. But I'm good at this; I've had to learn to be. "I always find Peugeots disappointingly lacklustre," I say with innocent eyes. "No staying power."

Georges guffaws, as does Navarre. The flirt takes it on the chin and laughs too.

Soon the conversation shifts to Hitler and our group expands. Navarre gestures furiously as he explains how much information he's all but scribbled inside the prime minister's eyelids over the past few years, outlining Hitler's unabating preparations for what can only be war. Our government has ignored it all, he says.

My stomach twists. Hitler's taken the Rhineland. What will he do next?

Tempers flare over that very question.

"It will never work," Navarre blazes as Lieutenant Colonel Charles de Gaulle, another military man of a similar age to Navarre – about fifteen years older than me – proposes assembling a French strike force to push the Nazis back into Germany. "Hitler's army is too strong."

"You want to keep hiding behind the Maginot Line," De Gaulle shoots back. "It's time to stop relying on ideas conceived two hundred years ago."

Navarre nods sharply. "That's one thing we can agree on – the French military is decades behind. Unless we act quickly, France will be wiped off the map."

"But is the France we have now worth fighting for?" the flirt from earlier asks with world-weary cynicism, and I say adamantly, "Bien sur!"

Everyone turns, faces expressing amusement or condescension. I'm the only woman in the group and I should be over in the delicate chairs discussing my husband's needs. But Navarre, who looks curious rather than patronising, indicates that I should mount my defence of France.

A good journalist knows how to spin a story. So spin I do, because my children's futures depend on everyone's believing in France like I do.

"I grew up in the French Concession in Shanghai," I begin, "and I've lived in Morocco too." I keep my voice soft to match the fire-lit air and the cherry-red Beaujolais and the lilting notes of Satie's "Gymnopédie No. I" drifting from the gramophone. "I've spent seventeen of my twenty-six years standing on different ground than that beneath our feet right now. Maybe that should have made me love France less. But . . ."

I pause. Everyone is listening, perhaps because they've never been to such places as I've been lucky enough to know. So I continue.

"The expatriates in Shanghai and Rabat all spoke of France as a place of romance and heroes, a country so epic that it meant something. It meant people who'd endured invasion since the beginning of time. People who'd fought off every attack. People whose language is a synonym for poetry, who've created a culture admired all over the world,

who've built cities that everyone longs to visit just once before they die. Living away taught me how lucky I am to be French, and how blessed I am to call this resilient and beautiful land my home."

My throat is suddenly too tight for speech. I lift my glass to my mouth, trying to swallow down the tears that have come from a strange sense of loss – but what am I losing?

"We are blessed," Navarre says quietly.

But De Gaulle says, "Blessings don't win wars."

The next day, the children are at school and I'm making notes for an interview with Édith Piaf, but I can't sit still. It's not my legs but my soul that's restless — as if it wants to be let out of the prison of Parisian quotidian life I didn't know I'd trapped it in. I thought I was keeping myself alive with flying lessons and car rallies and working at a job rather than on my manicure; adventure, but not enough to taint my children. But this morning I can feel — like the night before I met Édouard, the dawn of the day Christian was born — that change is raising a hand to knock on my door. Where once I would have flung it open, now I hesitate.

When did I become so fearful?

Hitler, who at the very least is a liar, a thief and a murderer, is invading land just over the border. That's why I'm jumpy. But what can *I* do about Hitler?

Except – isn't that what cowards say?

What if Gustave Eiffel had never believed that one man could build a tower so famous the whole world would know of it? What if Coco Chanel had told herself that women preferred wearing cages to letting their bodies move freely? What if Joan of Arc had sat in her salon with her door tightly shut?

But while I love a fine dress, I'm no visionary or saint.

The phone shrills, startling me.

"Allo?"

"Madame Méric," a voice says. "Navarre. We met last night. There's something I'd like to speak to you about. Something I'd prefer to keep between the two of us."

I almost groan aloud. An affair isn't an adventure. It's a mess.

At least I can hang up; it's the propositions at parties that are harder to shake. So many men interpret *non* to mean *oui*. I'm now good at finding the tenderest part of a man's foot with the heel of my shoe.

But something stops me from disconnecting the call. Navarre and my brother-in-law were deep in conversation when I left the party, and I find it hard to believe Georges would have given Navarre encouragement to call me with an indecent proposal. And while Navarre had shown himself to be a passionate man compared to the dour De Gaulle, he was enamoured of his country, I'd believed, not me. So even though his words are suspicious, I relent and invite him to visit. But I take the precaution of changing into a plain grey suit, something nobody could mistake for an invitation.

It seems I've finally learned to judge a man correctly, because Navarre's first words are, "This meeting must seem irregular and quite possibly dishonourable. I assure you it's the first, but not the second."

I smile. "Well, I'm intrigued now."

He sits with the air of a king installing himself on a throne. Indeed, his carriage and tone tell me he's used to having power. But his face is avuncular, rather than handsome or regal.

"If you let me know why you're here, then I can decide whether to throw you out or offer you a cup of tea," I say.

He laughs and I relax. Navarre might be an imposing figure, but his laugh comes from his belly. Édouard spat his from his mouth like rancid meat.

As though summoned by my unwanted recollection, Navarre starts talking about my husband. "Georges told me you helped your husband with his intelligence work in Morocco. That you . . ." He considers his words. "You gathered information from those your husband was less skilled at talking to."

I hold his gaze but don't reply. I might have told Yvonne and Georges that I helped Édouard, but I have no idea why it interests Navarre. Then he says, "You paid close attention to the conversation last night," and I feel change crack open the door.

Now I decide to step through it.

"What's happening in Europe frightens me," I tell him. "But when I'm frightened, I prefer to do something about it, rather than hide. In Morocco, I wanted Édouard to understand the other side to the story of brutal tribes who hated one another and the French most of all. But I don't know what to do about Hitler."

Navarre's reply is, "I want to tell the other side to the story of Hitler and the Nazi Party. I want people to join me on a crusade for truth."

A shiver flickers along my spine. Crusades are both deadly and noble. One takes part only if one believes. But in what?

The other side to the story. It exists somewhere. Everything I've witnessed living in colonised countries where power is held on to by force and fear tells me it does.

"The situation in Europe is worse than I could say last night," Navarre explains. "To force our government into taking action, I need everyone to understand what Hitler is capable of and what he plans to do next."

He leans toward me, intent and magisterial; if ever anyone could lead a crusade against Hitler, it's this man.

"I'm starting a newspaper. You're a journalist and you understand something of the intelligence business. I need those skills. And when I tell you what I need above all else, then you can finally decide" — his smile is brief but contagious — "whether to throw me out or make me that cup of tea."

My laugh is cut short by his next words.

"A friend of mine has some secret dossiers that prove the intentions of the German high command. I need you to drive to Brussels and collect them. We'll publish them. And our government will finally have to act against the Nazis."

On the mantelpiece behind Navarre is a framed photograph of my children. For their sake, I should refuse to collect papers someone has smuggled out of Germany – papers the Nazis could be looking for. But it's because of my children that I don't even consider saying no.

When you've spent your formative years somewhere like Shanghai, then you grow up fascinated by the world. While other people might think of the danger, I think of standing on the banks of the Whangpoo River, agape at the sampans and junks weaving their way through the freighters, emerging on the other side fast and free, sails filled by the wind. I think of how that moment was the first time I'd felt the immenseness of the world and its inexorability—dynasties might end and kingdoms fall, but the ocean connecting us all endures.

Hitler wants to keep the junks in the harbour, wants to close the oceans and trap the winds, wants to stretch out his arms and crush it all to him so there is no wonder left, only possession.

I refuse to let him.

The Jewish journalist I meet in Brussels is more ghost than real. His eyes dart like startled birds and I only know he's the right person because he's standing where he said he'd be — outside the antique shop in the Saint-Hubert Galleries with a red umbrella under his arm. We don't even speak; he just pushes a folder into my hands, then hurries away.

"Wait!" I call.

He looks back and shakes his head furiously. There's sweat on his brow – and I suddenly understand exactly what it means to flee Nazi Germany with incriminating documents.

He's spectral because fear has eroded his flesh. He's learned to slip like a shadow into a crowd because to flee a place implies a chase.

This crusade I've embarked on is more than politics, land and ambition. It's people running, turned into phantoms.

It's Nazis hunting for the documents under my arm.

I sit on the folder and speed as if I'm in another rally all the way back to Paris.

A fortnight later, Navarre's newspaper, L'Ordre National, is published with the information I collected, which shows, chillingly: Hitler is preparing for war. He's making tanks and guns and warplanes in quantities that suggest Europe will soon be overrun.

Then the man I met with is kidnapped by the Nazis.

At last, people begin to talk. And worry. And send us more information.

One dossier leads to a discussion leads to a movement. I help it swell, certain the government will no longer ignore Hitler, that a crusade has truly begun.

This is the world of intelligence and I am hooked.