

## Readers Guide



# Cast of Characters



## Alix St Pierre

Director of Publicity for the just-launching House of Christian Dior. A trouser-wearing, outspoken redhead who's been fired from more jobs in her life than there are dresses in her wardrobe. She has a penchant for French 75s, chocolate tart – and never talking about what she did during the war. She's come to Paris to find someone – and needs to do it before he finds her.

## Anthony March

Blue-eyed, vermouth-drinking newspaper editor – and Alix's nemesis. Lives at the Ritz. As eager to forget the war as Alix is, although the strategies he uses to shut out the past have earned him something of a reputation. But his best friend is a woman who also happens to be a friend of Alix's – so maybe there's another side hiding beneath the arrogance.

## Esmée Archambault

Esmée was once the undisputed queen of the Swiss school she attended with Alix, who hid frogs in Esmée's bed rather than befriend the seemingly indolent heiress. But war changes everything and the two former schoolgirls find they have more in common than they'd thought – and that during and after the war, they make for an odd but very effective team.

## Fortunée

Gun-for-hire who's done everything from working as an informant to working between the sheets. Sees everything, knows everything and isn't afraid to be brutally honest. Intensely loyal to Anthony, deeply suspicious of Esmée and has made it her mission in life to provoke Alix. Until the two of them find themselves with a common interest ...

## Chiara Romano

Waitress at the Bellevue Palace Hotel in Bern, and also Alix's friend and informant – until she returns to Italy to act as a staffetta for the Italian partisans fighting the Fascists and the Nazis in Italy's north. She'll do anything for her family, especially her brother Matteo, and she expects Alix to be similarly loyal – and to never, ever let the partisans down.

## Matteo Romano

An Italian partisan who smuggles himself across the Swiss border to ask Alix for the American government's help. He has a delicious smile, espresso-dark eyes and perhaps more courage than is good for him. All Alix knows is that, no matter how much she wants to, she can't let herself to fall in love with Matteo – he needs to give everything he has to the cause of Italy right now.

## Christian Dior

Believer in fortune tellers and lucky charms. A shy and unassuming man who's unlike any boss Alix has ever had – he likes to work on the staircase for a start. He's an upstart new designer who's holding his first show late in the season and he needs Alix to convince the press to stay on in Paris to see it. Luckily Alix likes challenges – and her new boss.

## Allen Dulles

Alix's boss in Switzerland during the war. He calls her 'kid', thinks she's an incompetent schoolgirl and can't wait for her to slip up so he can send her back to New York. He's the kind of man who's spent so much time dealing with the devil that he isn't the least bit afraid of hell.



# The Dresses!



**I know readers love the dresses in my books as much as I do so here's some more information about some of the gowns Alix adds to her wardrobe.**

## Compiègne

Yes, the dress Alix wears to the ball is real. I just altered time a little and had it travel back to 1947. It was actually designed for the Fall/Winter 1954-55 collection. As Dior explains to Alix, *velours au sabre* is the technique used to make the flowers bloom out of the fabric – and bloom they do, in silvery-blue perfection.

## Jungle

This is a leopard-print dress from 1947. Very few photographs of the dress exist, and I've never seen one in a museum collection. Madame Bricard is credited with bringing leopard-print into Dior's life, and making it one of the House codes, which is why she's the one who gives the dress to Alix in the book.

## Diablesse

This is the beautiful red shirt-dress Alix wears at the photo shoot for Anthony's newspaper. In a touch of sheer brilliance, it has a green belt, and the scarlet and green together create a stunning contrast. The skirt is knife-pleated and made for twirling!

## Chérie

One of the things I love about Dior's gowns is the richness of the fabric colours. Diablesse isn't just red, but a dazzling crimson. Similarly, Chérie isn't just dark blue, but a cross between Prussian blue and sapphire. And the lavishness of the skirt is quite something. No wonder Alix – and all the seamstresses at the couture house – covet it.

## Soirée

This is an unusual dress for the original 1947 collection. It's very long, and the double skirt sets it apart from the traditional New Look style, while still retaining its heritage. Rita Hayworth would definitely have owned the red carpet in Soirée!



# Follow In Alix's Footsteps Around Europe



## Pont Alexandre III, Paris

As Alix says, it's the most romantic bridge in Paris with its orb-shaped Art Nouveau lamps, its cherubs and nymphs, its flying horses and lions and seashells. Take a stroll along it at night when the lamps are lit and see if you can't help but fall in love with someone!

## The Ritz, Paris

One of Paris's most iconic hotels, go just for a drink if you can't afford to stay the night. Alix's favourite watering hole, the Little Bar, no longer exists, but there are other places to enjoy a French 75. Afterwards, stroll through Temptation Walk or see if you can sneak up to the Suite Mansart, which I've used as the inspiration for Anthony's suite in the book.

## Brasserie Lipp, Paris

A legendary Parisian bistro in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district. It's been part of the city's life since 1880 and patronised by everyone from Picasso to Marcel Proust. Don't go up to the second floor; the downstairs seats where you can be seen by passersby are the most coveted.

## Piscine Deligny, Paris

Alas, the swimming pool floating on a wooden barge on the Seine was burned in the 1950s, and then finally sank in 1993, so you can't go there and either swim or dance the night away like Anthony and Alix do. But you can go down to the Quai Anatole and see where the piscine was once located.

## Bern, Switzerland

Bern is a beautiful city, from the gingerbread-style houses adorning its streets, to the six kilometre trail of medieval covered shopping arcades, or Lauben, where you can wile away the hours. But don't forget about the Kindlifresserbrunnen, or Child-Eater fountain, a macabre sculpture dating back to 1546 that sits in the centre of Bern, reminding you, as it does Alix, that even fairytale cities have their demons.

## Northern Italy

Piedmont is a beautiful, mountainous region in Northern Italy, bordering Switzerland. Lakes, valleys, mountains, skiing, truffles, cheese and vermouth – this area has it all. Although there are some splendid walks, I don't recommend hiking across it at night like Alix and Matteo do, but hiring a car and savouring it slowly.



# Fun Facts



1. Christian Dior relied on fortune tellers. In fact, he wasn't going to go ahead with starting his couture house until a fortune teller told him it was going to be successful. That same day, his foot knocked against a metal star that had been dropped in the street. He took that, plus the fortune teller's prophecy, as auspicious, and decided to open the House of Christian Dior! Who knew fortune tellers could be so accurate?
2. Being a mannequin at the House of Christian Dior was physically draining. The girls worked such long hours that, one day during an interminably long fitting, Dior found himself holding onto just a set of falsies as the girl who owned the padding slipped to the floor in a dead faint.
3. The first showing of the House of Christian Dior in February 1947 was so much talked about that tickets were sold on the black market. A couple of enterprising Parisiennes stole a builder's ladder from the neighbouring townhouse, propped it against the walls of 30 Avenue Montaigne and climbed it, trying to peek through the windows of the couture house to see the gowns before the show began!
4. Monsieur Dior, or *le patron* as he was known to his staff, was very informal. He used to work on the grand staircase because his studio was so small. And in the early days before he was well known by the staff, his unassuming demeanour often caused them to mistake him for one of the builders and they'd huffily demand that he leave the room while they were getting ready for a fitting.
5. Dior's first showing on 12 February 1947 created a 'New Look' in fashion but it was almost a disaster. The renovations to the building weren't finished and the carpet was still being hammered down on the morning of the show. The first model to go out tripped and was so upset that she refused to go out again. Another went out wearing one brown shoe and one black. Luckily, the clothes were so spectacular that no one noticed the details.
6. Carmel Snow, one of the characters in the book, used to hold meetings from her bathtub! She'd stay at the same Parisian hotel every year for the collections and was so busy that she'd make sure the tub was well filled with bubbles and then continue her meetings while submerged in the water – or else in her bed wearing just a robe and her pearls.



# Book Club Menu - Eat and Drink Like Alix!



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## French 75 - best served in a proper French champagne *coupe*!

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### INGREDIENTS

1tbsp of lemon juice  
1tbsp of sugar syrup  
Champagne  
50ml gin  
Lemon zest

### METHOD

1. Take out your cocktail shaker and pour in the lemon juice, sugar syrup and gin. Give it all a good shake.
2. Strain into a champagne coupe, then fill the coupe with champagne.
3. Decorate with a strip of lemon zest if you like. *Santé!*

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## Chocolate Tart - Simple, decadent and delicious!

If you're a super-chef, you might prefer to make your own pastry,  
but I usually just buy a pre-made tart shell and use that.

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### INGREDIENTS

300ml of whipping or  
pouring cream  
100ml milk  
50g butter  
400g of dark, good quality  
chocolate  
1tsp vanilla  
2 eggs, beaten

### METHOD

1. Blind bake the tart shell as per the instructions on the packet.
  2. Pour the milk, cream and vanilla into a saucepan and bring to the boil.
  3. Remove from the heat, then add the butter and chocolate.
  4. Stir until everything has melted.
  5. Whisk in the beaten eggs until the mixture looks glossy and smooth.
  6. Pour into cooled tart shell.
  7. Place tart into oven on 130 degrees celsius and cook for around 30 minutes until the tart is set.
  8. Eat and enjoy!
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# Discussion Questions



1. 'Alix is asked (or told) to go to Switzerland while the world is at war and she's only in her early twenties. How might you have reacted to this request at a similar age? Do you think her life might have turned out differently if she'd found a way to decline, or do you think adventure and its consequences would have found her anyway?
2. Mary says to Alix – 'power is the opposite to love'. Do you agree or disagree? How does this idea play out over the course of the book in Alix's life and the lives of others?
3. Both Anthony and Alix battle with the morality of war – whether any action that harms another person can ever be seen as 'right', if there even is a 'right' side or a 'better' side to be fighting on during a war, or if war makes everyone equally guilty. What do you think?
4. Dior's New Look was controversial at the time and seen by many as an affront to a world still suffering the after-effects of war. Alix argues that the dresses represent something very different – hope at a time when, for many women, there wasn't much hope to be found. What's your view? Do you like the New Look style or not?
5. There's a large cast of female characters in the book: Chiara, Alix, Esmée, Fortunée, Suzanne, Carmel, Mary, Becky, Madame Bricard and many more. Who did you most relate to? Who didn't you like? Could you understand why each woman behaved the way she did? Who would you like to see a happy ending for?
6. Were you surprised by some of the points about women and financial independence that Alix makes, such as women not being allowed to have credit cards and make credit applications in their own names, and single women not being allowed to open bank accounts at that time? How would you survive without your own credit card and bank account today? What else needs to change for women?
7. Did Alix do the wrong thing in not telling Anthony about Lillie? Should she have known it was relevant? And did Anthony treat Alix poorly by embarking on a relationship with her without considering the effect on her reputation? Would you have forgiven him, or her?

# About the Author



**NATASHA LESTER** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Paris Seamstress*, *The Paris Orphan* and *The Paris Secret*, and a former marketing executive for L'Oréal.

When she's not writing, she loves collecting vintage fashion (Dior is a favourite!), practicing the art of fashion illustration, learning about fashion history – and traveling to Paris. Natasha lives with her husband and three children in Perth, Western Australia.

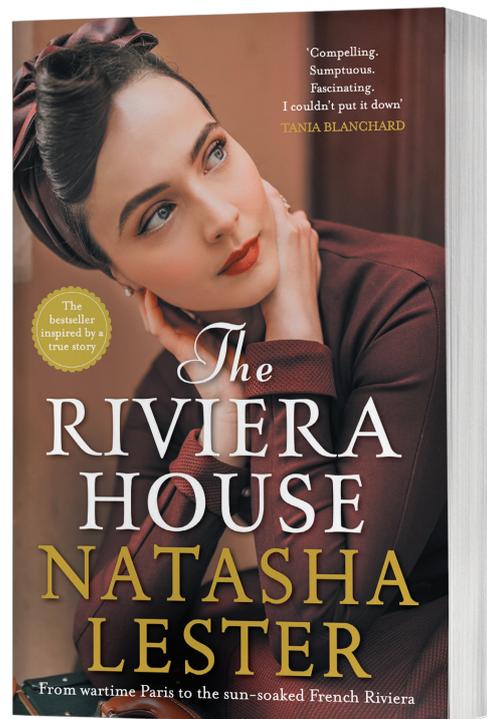
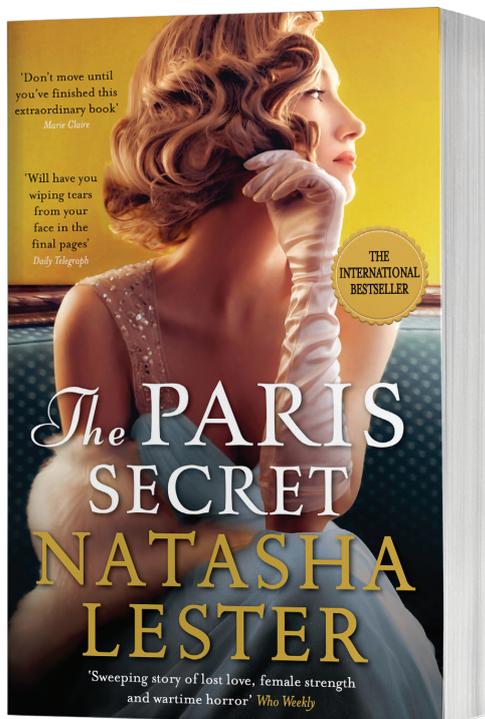
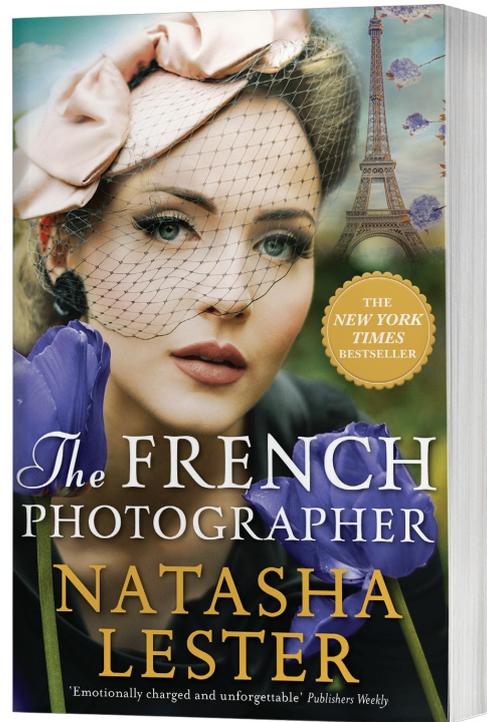
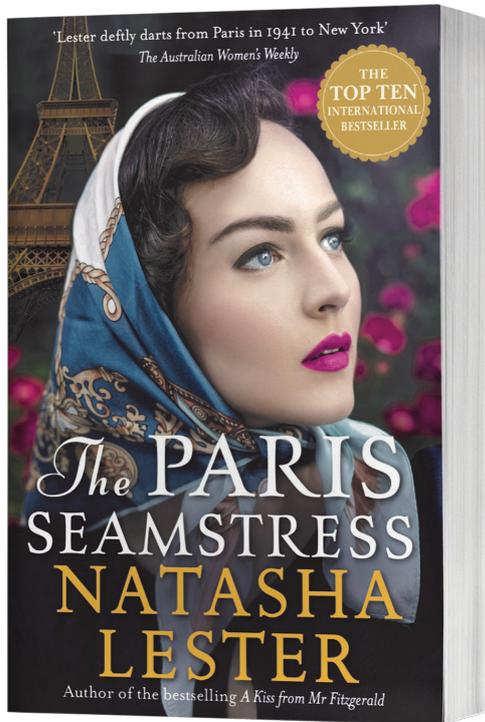


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