

"A SMASHING SUCCESS."

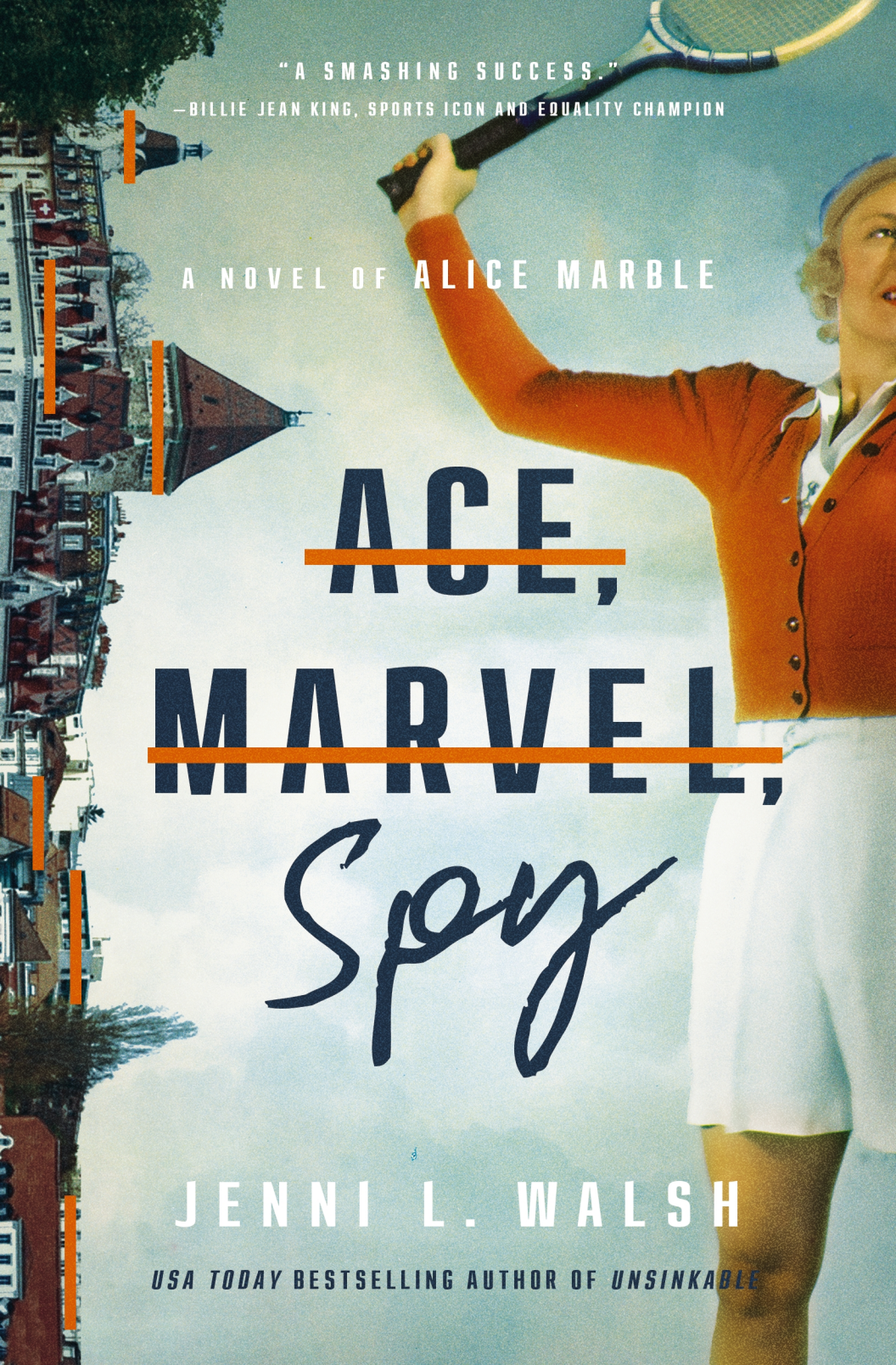
—BILLIE JEAN KING, SPORTS ICON AND EQUALITY CHAMPION

A NOVEL OF ALICE MARBLE

ACE,
MARVEL,
Spy

JENNI L. WALSH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *UNSINKABLE*



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Ace, Marvel, Spy

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CHAPTER I

NOW

SAN FRANCISCO GAZETTE

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 1940

HAS TENNIS'S "BEST IN THE WORLD" GONE AS FAR AS THE WORLD WILL LET HER?

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif.—It's been quite the impressive few years for our hometown girl, Miss Alice Marble. Only days shy of twenty-seven years old, she has racked up an impressive list of accolades. Winning eighteen Grand Slam championships. Holding a place in the World Top Ten. Becoming the top-ranked US women's player. Earning the title of the Associated Press Athlete of the Year. Being named the "Best Dressed Woman in Athletics." Gracing the cover of *LIFE* magazine, donning the tennis shorts she designed, to boot.

Marble is at the peak of her game on and off the court, stretching her vocal cords as a nightclub singer while maintaining an unbroken string of twenty-eight tournament victories, which most recently included making quick work of Helen Jacobs in two sets (6–2, 6–3) in the National Championships in Forest Hills, New York.

But what comes next for San Francisco's own? With

the war knocking at our door and competitive tennis on hiatus until further notice, Marble may be all dressed up in one of her designs with nowhere to go.

Alice licks her finger and forcefully turns the page.

A SHIFTING AMERICA

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif.—With the war ongoing overseas for over a year, America is shifting. President Roosevelt has declared a state of national emergency. Embargoes are in place for scrap iron and steel exports for all destinations other than Great Britain and Western nations. Plants across the country are changing their assembly lines from trousers, cars, and toys to uniforms, planes, and ammunition.

Churchill's impassioned "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" speech may not have been directed at us Americans, but we've unofficially answered the call. Which, as of today, includes the passing of the Selective Training and Service Act. All men between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five are now under conscription. This marks the first peacetime draft in our great country's history.

Will our fathers, sons, and uncles cross the pond to officially aid our Allies in the war? We pray the answer is no and Hitler's troops will meet their end soon. But for now, our men are required by law to prepare.

With a sigh, Alice lowers the newspaper. She knew the war was coming. Hadn't *he*—she won't think his name and drudge up all those memories—predicted it? But now to see the state of the world so clearly in black and white . . . It takes the wind out of Alice, while also igniting a fire inside of her.

“What is it?” Alice’s coach asks, eyes never lifting from her nails, transforming them with each swipe from bland to a tasteful mauve.

The women sit across from each other at their kitchen table, two mugs of steaming coffee between them.

Swiftly Alice folds paper once, twice. “I feel as if I should be doing something.”

“We have practice in”—her coach checks her watch—“Two hours.”

“No, that’s not . . .” Alice shakes her head and starts again. “I’ve just read about myself.”

“Is that so?” The question is said facetiously, eyebrows lifting, leathery forehead crinkling.

Alice goes on, ignoring her coach’s mockery. “And I’ve read more about the war.”

Still, her coach’s eyes remain trained on her nails.

Alice raises the intensity of her previous sigh to a huff. “I feel like I should be doing something of greater importance than hitting a ball back and forth over a net. Seems I won’t even be able to do that anymore.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

Alice’s coach shrugs.

“I’m serious.”

“Fine.” Her coach screws the cap onto her polish. Her short blonde hair has grown grayer in recent years. Most likely on account of Alice. “I understand the war has disrupted tournament play. Wimbledon isn’t happening this year. But the real question for you is what could be more important than keeping your tennis game sharp while you wait for it to resume?”

“Well,” Alice says, licking her lips. Her mind and heart careen back to years ago when there’d been *him*, someone she’d almost fought for. But right now? “I’m not certain. But an act passed today.” She taps the newspaper, as if needing this proof. “Men are required to sign up for the draft.”

“I read that too.”

“Okay, well, America joining this war feels inevitable. Helen Jacobs said she’s enlisting in the WAVES.”

Alice’s coach smiles. “Was this before or after you whupped her butt on the court at Nationals?”

What’s louder than a huff? Sticking to one’s guns. “I’d like to do my part. Serve, you know.”

“You *do* serve your country. Every time you step onto a court, even if it’s during a meaningless exhibition match, you take people’s minds off the war. You give them a show. A great one, if I say so myself. You belong on the court. Entertaining. It’s what you do best, Alice.”

It *is* what she does best. Alice can recognize that, and how her name being chanted on the courts is a currency for her. A way to feel valued.

Seen.

Respected.

A way to belong.

Tennis is all she’s known for the past decade—since she was seventeen, a face ripe with acne, built like a fireplug, no tennis skills beyond hitting the ball as hard as she could, and a desire to prove herself so strong folks couldn’t help but sit up and take notice of her.

CHAPTER 2

THEN

JULY 19, 1930

British Columbia Clay Court Championships

Alice growled deep in her throat, from both pain and frustration. She'd won the first set of the match. Her opponent had taken the second, which swayed the game's momentum in the other player's favor. Now they were going into a third and final set after a ten-minute break.

At a limp, Alice followed her opponent off the court and toward the dressing room. She didn't know the other player's name. Not because Alice thought herself above the girl. In fact, it was the opposite. Alice's opponent was spit and polish. Wearing a uniform Alice drooled over, which made her own middy blouse and long white pleated skirt appear frumpy. The other girl was likely born with a silver spoon in her mouth and a top-of-the-line racquet in her hand. Alice didn't know her opponent's name, because whether it was Jane or Judy or Jennifer, it wouldn't have meant a lick to Alice. At only seventeen years old, but more importantly, having played for only two years, Alice was too wet behind the ears to know the who's who of tennis.

In fact, she was too new to know much of anything about tennis. She only picked up a racquet to begin with because her oldest brother, Dan, insisted it was more ladylike than playing baseball with the boys.

"You can hit a tennis ball just as hard as a baseball," Dan rea-

soned.

Alice could.

With her first swing, she fell in love with tennis. She became obsessed with the satisfying *thunk* of the ball striking her racquet. How rewarding it was when her timing was on and she hit it perfectly. Or when the ball went exactly where she wanted it to go.

More than anything, Alice coveted being in control.

She glanced again at her opponent. The other girl was chatting with her coach, strategizing while changing into a new game blouse.

Alice sat alone. Her shirt stuck to her with sweat.

Feeling inferior was an emotion all too real to Alice off the court. But put her on a court . . . now, that was the great equalizer. It didn't matter that Alice's background was humbler. Both girls had a racquet, the same out-of-bound lines, and a net to hit the ball over. At the end of the match, whoever played best won.

Alice so badly wanted that to be her. The biggest problem she faced going into the third set: her heels were on fire. Which, frankly, made being the better player damn near impossible. She blew out a breath and tucked her short blonde hair behind her ears, repositioning on the bench, seething in pain. A moment later, another person dropped beside her.

"Miss Marble?"

She nodded to the man.

"Let me have a look at those feet of yours."

"You're a doctor? You look like one."

It was the white hair, bushy eyebrows. The stethoscope around his neck also helped.

"Thank you, I suppose," he said with a smile. "Now, off with your shoes."

"It won't be pretty," Alice warned him.

"I once drained an abscess as big as my hand."

Gingerly she removed her battered shoes. Alice's socks already had holes from overuse. Now they were also bloodied. While she removed them, the doctor made a clucking sound. When he set his

eyes on her bare skin, he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

“Sweetie,” he started, stopped. He shook his head. “You’ve been playing for days with blisters, haven’t you?”

At this point, the days had run together. But it was the finals of the British Columbia Clay Court Championships, and Alice had played three rounds, a quarterfinal, and a semifinal to get there.

Frankly, she still couldn’t believe the Northern California Tennis Association invited her to go as their representative. Yes, she’d won a few junior tournaments to get on their radar. But she was just a kid. A kid without a coach or tennis club. Without a sponsor and all the fancy equipment. Without any real tennis knowledge besides to hit the ball as hard as she could when it was blasted over the net at her.

Originally Alice almost had to reject the invitation. An answer she would’ve delivered through tears. Her family, now that Dad had been gone a few years, barely had the money to buy new socks, let alone send her to another country, even with the tennis association giving her a stipend of seventy-five dollars to go toward her expenses. She didn’t have the heart to ask her ma for the rest. Instead, Alice did the odd job. Jobs, really. And she sold her old glove and bat. Still, she’d come up short.

Then a mysterious envelope arrived in the mail—no sender, hence the mystery—with three twenty-dollar bills inside. With that very generous donation, the measly amount Alice had earned, and the association’s stipend, she’d been able to make the trip north.

And now that she was at the Jericho Club, she couldn’t blow it. She’d come too far and still had so much to prove. There was just that little problem that she could barely walk, let alone run.

“Can you fix me up, Doctor?”

He pressed his lips together. “Miss Marble, your blisters are infected, badly. I’m surprised you’ve made it this long. And as a medical professional, I am bound to tell you that it’s unsafe to continue playing.”

“I just need enough bandaging to get me through this last set.

Can you do that?”

To prove a point, he gently pressed gauze to her heel. Alice cringed and tears sprang to her eyes.

Someone shouted a warning that the match would resume in two minutes. She rolled her neck, feeling defeated, feeling angry, feeling like she was going to let down everyone who believed in her.

Truth be told, Alice didn't know where the idea came from—a stroke of brilliance, perhaps—but she asked the good doctor if he had any scissors in his bag of tricks.

He did.

Without a minute to spare, she hacked at the heels of her shoes, cutting out a square shape in both.

The doctor's bushy eyebrows were sky high.

“Tape?” Alice asked him.

It was the best she could think of to keep on her backless footwear.

“Well, I'll be,” the doctor said, shaking his head as she wrapped the tape in figure eights around her ankles and the bottoms of her shoes. Alice hoped that response meant respect as opposed to thinking her a foolish kid.

All she could think was, *Well, I'll be finishing these games, this set, and this match.*

Alice jogged back to the court. She could do that now without wincing. That was already a victory. So was the fact it was her turn to serve. That gave her an advantage as she'd much rather be the one slamming the ball over the net than the one receiving it. And slam she did, taking the first game. She even won the second game, despite her opponent whacking the balls at her. Four more to go.

Alice could run, jump, stop, and start better now. Back in Golden Gate Park, she always played on dusty asphalt courts, the only courts available to her in the public parks. This was her first time on clay, and she didn't hate it. Despite the surface being slicker and it being harder to find her footing on the gritty surface—hello, blisters, as she slipped around—the game moved slower. And now,

with her modified footwear, she was making it to most balls pain-free.

Someone shouted her opponent's name. Henderson. Alice's attention caught on it. No one knew her name. No one was shouting it. No one was in her corner. Maybe someday that would all change.

If she worked hard enough.

The ball came off Henderson's racquet. Alice zeroed in and ran, sliding over the clay, feeling it move under her feet as if she were skating, trying to time her swing perfectly to return the shot.

Henderson handled it, approaching the net.

So did Alice.

They exchanged a series of rapid-fire volleys until Henderson unexpectedly lobbed the ball at Alice, sailing over Alice's head, forcing her backward. She leaped up and connected with the ball with an overhead that cracked like thunder.

Men were the ones who smashed the ball. And in the short amount of time Alice had been playing, she hadn't seen a lot of women leaving their feet.

"It's unladylike," she'd heard a stuffy older lady say at one of her early tournaments.

Did Alice care?

Nope.

Why wouldn't Alice jump if it meant reaching the ball and winning a point?

The ball zoomed over the net, much to the crowd's delight. Maybe things were changing and tennis was becoming less stuffy.

Alice's point.

Alice's game.

Henderson won the next.

Then Alice.

Eventually they were tied 6-6. And tennis had a pesky rule of winning by two.

In the end, Alice did.

She fell to her hands and knees, her ridiculous bare, bloody

heels pointing to the sky. But she'd done it. She'd won her first tournament on foreign soil. And all she wanted was more, more, more.



HARPER
MUSE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JENNI L. WALSH worked for a decade enticing readers as an award-winning advertising copywriter before becoming an author. Her passion lies in transporting readers to another world, be it in historical or contemporary settings. She is a proud graduate of Villanova University and lives in the Philadelphia suburbs with her husband, daughter, son, and various pets.

Jenni is the *USA TODAY* author of the historical novels *Becoming Bonnie*, *Side by Side*, *A Betting Woman*, *The Call of the Wrens*, and *Unsinkable*. She also writes books for children, including the nonfiction She Dared series and historical novels *Hettie and the London Blitz*, *I Am Defiance*, *By the Light of Fireflies*, *Over and Out*, and *Operation: Happy*. To learn more about Jenni and her books, please visit jennilwalsh.com or [@jennilwalsh](https://www.instagram.com/jennilwalsh) on social media.