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A NOVEL

THE ALICE NETWORK

KATE QUINN



P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

THE ALICE NETWORK

Kate Quinn



WILLIAM MORROW

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Map





Dedication

*To my mother
The first reader, the first critic, the first fan
This is for you*

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PART I

CHAPTER 1

CHARLIE

May 1947

Southampton

The first person I met in England was a hallucination. I brought her with me, onboard the serene ocean liner that had carried my numb, grief-haunted self from New York to Southampton.

I was sitting opposite my mother at a wicker table among the potted palms in the Dolphin Hotel, trying to ignore what my eyes were telling me. The blond girl by the front desk wasn't who I thought she was. I *knew* she wasn't who I thought she was. She was just an English girl waiting beside her family's luggage, someone I'd never seen before—but that didn't stop my mind from telling me she was someone else. I averted my eyes, looking instead at the three English boys at the next table, who were busy trying to get out of tipping their waitress. "Five percent tip or ten?" a boy in a university tie was saying, waving the bill, and his friends laughed. "I only tip if they're pretty. She had skinny legs . . ."

I glowered at them, but my mother was oblivious. "So cold and wet for May, *mon Dieu!*" She unfolded her napkin: a feminine flurry of lavender-scented skirts among the heaps of our baggage. Quite a contrast to me, all rumpled and cross. "Put your shoulders back, *chérie*." She'd lived in New York since she married my father, but she still sprinkled her phrases with French. "Do stop slouching."

"I can't slouch in this getup." I was crammed into a waist cincher like a band of iron, not that I needed one because I was built like a twig, but my froth of skirts wouldn't hang right without it, so band of iron it was. That Dior, may he and his New Look rot in hell. My mother always dressed right at the crest of any new fashion, and she was built for the

latest styles: tall, tiny waisted, voluptuously curved, a confection in her full-skirted traveling suit. I had a frilly traveling suit too, but I was drowning in all that fabric. Nineteen forty-seven was hell for little bony girls like me who couldn't wear the New Look. Then again, 1947 was hell for any girl who would rather work calculus problems than read *Vogue*, any girl who would rather listen to Edith Piaf than Artie Shaw, and any girl with an empty ring finger but a rounding belly.

I, Charlie St. Clair, was officially three for three. That was the other reason my mother wanted me in a waist cincher. I was only three months gone, but she wasn't taking any chances that my shape might announce what a whore she'd brought into the world.

I stole a glance across the hotel court. The blond girl was still there, and my mind was still trying to tell me she was someone she wasn't. I looked away again with a hard blink as our waitress approached with a smile. "Will you be staying for the full tea, madam?" She did have bony legs, and as she bustled away with our order, the boys at the next table were still complaining about leaving her a tip. "Five shillings each for tea. Just leave a tuppence . . ."

Our tea arrived soon in a clatter of flowered china. My mother smiled her thanks. "More milk, please. *C'est bon!*" Though it wasn't all that *bon*, really. Hard little scones and dry tea sandwiches and no sugar; there was still rationing in England even though V-E Day had been two years ago, and the menu of even a sumptuous hotel still showed the ration-set price of no more than five shillings per diner. The hangover of war was still visible here in a way you didn't see in New York. There were still soldiers in uniforms drifting through the hotel court, flirting with the maids, and an hour ago when I'd disembarked the ocean liner, I'd noticed the shelled look of the houses on the wharf, like gaping teeth in a pretty smile. My first look at England, and from dockside wharf to hotel court it all looked gray and exhausted from the war, still shocked to the bone. Just like me.

I reached into the pocket of my heather gray jacket, touching the piece of paper that had lived there for the past month whether I was in a traveling suit or pajamas, but I didn't know what to do with it. What *could* I do with it? I didn't know, but it still seemed heavier than the baby I was carrying. I couldn't feel that at all, or manage to have a single clear emotion about it. I wasn't sick in the mornings, or craving split pea soup with peanut butter, or feeling any of the other things you were supposed

to feel when you were knocked up. I was just numb. I couldn't believe in this baby, because it had changed nothing. Only my whole life.

The boys rose from the next table, tossing a few pennies down. I could see the waitress coming back with milk, walking as if her feet hurt, and I looked up at the three English boys as they turned away. "Excuse me," I said, and waited until they turned back. "Five shillings each for tea—a bill of fifteen shillings gives a total five percent tip of ninepence. Ten percent tip would be a shilling and sixpence."

They looked startled. I was used to that look. No one thought girls could do figures at all, much less in their heads, even *easy* figures like this. But I'd been a math major at Bennington—numbers made sense to me; they were orderly and rational and easy to figure out, unlike people—and there wasn't a bill anywhere I couldn't tot up faster than an adding machine could do it for me. "Ninepence, or one and six," I repeated wearily for the staring boys. "Be gentlemen. Leave the one and six."

"Charlotte," my mother hissed as the boys left with sour looks. "That was very impolite."

"Why? I said 'Excuse me.'"

"Not everyone tips. And you should not have inserted yourself that way. No one likes pushy girls."

Or girls who major in math, or girls who get knocked up, or— But I let the words go unspoken, too tired to fight. We'd been six days crossing the Atlantic in a single stateroom, longer than expected because of rough seas, and those six days had passed in a series of tense squabbles lapsing into even more uncomfortable civility. Everything underlain by my shame-filled silences, her incandescent silent rage. It was why we'd seized the opportunity to get off the boat for a single night—if we didn't get out of that close-confined stateroom, we were going to fly at each other.

"Your mother's always ready to fly at someone." My French cousin Rose had said that years ago, when *Maman* had subjected us to a ten-minute tirade for listening to Edith Piaf. *That's not music for little girls, it's indecent!*

Well, I'd done something a lot more indecent now than listen to French jazz. All I could do was turn my emotions away until I stopped feeling them, fend people off with a sharp-jutted chin tilted at an angle that said, *I don't care*. It worked well enough on rude boys who didn't tip

their waitress, but my mother could get behind that shell anytime she liked.

She was chattering away now, complaining about our passage. “—knew we should have taken the later boat. That would have brought us direct to Calais without this silly roundabout stop in England.”

I remained silent. One night in Southampton and then tomorrow straight on to Calais, where a train would take us to Switzerland. There was a clinic in Vevey where my mother had scheduled me for a certain discreet appointment. *Be grateful, Charlie*, I told myself for the thousandth time. *She didn't have to come with you at all*. I could have been packed off to Switzerland with my father's secretary or some other indifferent paid handler. My mother didn't have to miss her usual vacation in Palm Beach just to bring me to my appointment herself. *She's here with you. She's trying*. I could appreciate that even in my stew of fogged, angry shame. It wasn't as if she was wrong to be so furious with me, to think I was a troublemaking slut. That's what girls were, if they got themselves in the fix I was in. I'd better get used to the label.

Maman was still talking, determinedly cheerful. “I thought we'd go to Paris after your Appointment.” Every time she said it, I heard the capital letter. “Get you some proper clothes, *ma p'tite*. Do something with your hair.”

What she was really saying was, *You'll come back to school in the fall with a chic new look, and no one will know about your Little Problem*. “I really don't see that equation balancing out, *Maman*.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

I sighed. “One college sophomore minus one small encumbrance, divided by six months' passage of time, multiplied by ten Paris frocks and a new haircut will not magically equal one restored reputation.”

“Life is not a math problem, Charlotte.”

If it was, I'd have been a lot better at it. I'd often wished I could work out people as easily as I did arithmetic: simply break them down to their common denominators and solve. Numbers didn't lie; there was always an answer, and the answer was either right or it was wrong. Simple. But nothing in life was simple, and there was no answer here to solve for. There was just the mess that was Charlie St. Clair, sitting at a table with her mother, with whom she had *no* common denominators.

Maman sipped her weak tea, smiling bright, hating me. “I shall inquire as to whether our rooms are ready. Don't slouch! And do keep