# The Alice Network

By Kate Quinn

I was sitting opposite my mother at a wicker table among the potted palms in the Dolphin Hotel, looking 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.

"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.

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."