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New York Times bestselling author of *America's First Daughter*

A NOVEL

THE ALICE NETWORK

KATE QUINN



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



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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 your case close by; you've got your grandmother's pearls in there."

She floated off toward the long marble counter and the bustling clerks, and I reached for my traveling case—square and battered; there had been no time to order me smart new luggage. I had half a pack of Gauloises tucked under the flat box with my pearls (only my mother would insist I pack pearls for a Swiss clinic). I'd happily leave the baggage *and* the pearls to get stolen if I could just step outside for a good smoke. My cousin Rose and I tried our first cigarette at the respective ages of thirteen and eleven, snitching a pack from my older brother and disappearing up a tree to try some grown-up vice. "Do I look like Bette Davis?" Rose had asked, trying to exhale smoke through her nose. I nearly fell out of the tree, laughing and coughing together after my single puff, and she stuck her tongue out at me. "Silly Charlie!" Rose was the only one to call me Charlie instead of Charlotte, giving it a soft French lilt. *Shar-lee*, emphasis on both syllables.

It was Rose, of course, who I saw gazing at me across the hotel court now. And it *wasn't* Rose, it was just an English girl slouching beside a pile of luggage, but my brain stubbornly told me I was seeing my cousin: thirteen, blond, peach pretty. That was

how old she'd been the last summer I saw her, sitting in that tree with her first cigarette.

She'd be older by now, twenty-one to my nineteen . . .

If she was still alive.

"Rose," I whispered, knowing I should look away, but not doing it. "Oh, Rose."

In my imagination, she gave an impish smile and a toss of her chin to the street outside. *Go.*

"Go where?" I said aloud. But I already knew. I thrust my hand into my pocket and felt the scrap of paper I'd been carrying for a month. It had been stiff and crinkly, but time had worn it soft and pliable. That piece of paper bore an address. I could—

Don't be stupid. My conscience had a sharp, condemning voice that stung like a paper cut. *You know you're not going anywhere but upstairs.* There was a hotel room waiting for me with crisp sheets, a room I wouldn't have to share with my mother's brittle fury. A balcony where I could smoke in peace. Another boat to catch tomorrow, and then the Appointment, as my parents euphemistically referred to it. The Appointment, which would take care of my Little Problem, and then things would be All Right.

Or I could admit that nothing was All Right, and nothing would be All Right. And I could just go, right now, down the path that started here in England.

You planned for this, Rose whispered. *You know you did.* And I had. Even in my passive, blunted misery of the last few weeks, I'd pushed for the boat that would take my mother and me the roundabout way through England, not the later passage that would have borne us right to France. I'd pushed for it without letting myself think about *why* I was pushing for it: because I had an English address in my pocket, and now, without an ocean in the way, all I lacked was the guts to go there.

The unknown English girl who wasn't Rose had gone now, headed for the hotel stairs behind a bellboy laden with luggage. I looked at the empty place where Rose had been. I touched the scrap of paper in my pocket. Little jagged pieces of feeling poked me through my numbness. Fear? Hope? Resolve?

One scribbled address plus one dash of resolve multiplied to the power of ten. Work the equation, Charlie.

Break it down.

Solve for X .

Now or never.

I took a deep breath. I pulled out the scrap of paper, and with it came a crumpled pound note. Recklessly, I slapped it down on the table next to mine where the braying boys had left their measly tip, and I walked out of the hotel court clutching my traveling case and my French cigarettes. Straight out through the wide doors of the hotel, where I asked the doorman, "Excuse me, but can you direct me to the train station?"

Not the wisest idea I've ever had: strange city, girl on her own. I'd spent the last few weeks in such a daze from my endless bad luck—the Little Problem, the screaming in French from my mother, the icy silence from my father—I'd been willing to go anywhere I was led. Straight off a cliff I'd march, blank and obedient, and not wonder or care why I was falling till I was halfway down. I'd been halfway down the hole my life had become, turning endlessly in the air. But now I'd grabbed a handhold.

Granted, it was a handhold in the shape of a hallucination, a vision I'd been seeing on and off for months as my mind insisted on painting Rose's face on every blond girl who passed me by. It had frightened me badly the first time, not because I thought Rose was a ghost, but because I thought I was going crazy. Maybe

I *was* crazy, but I wasn't seeing ghosts. Because no matter what my parents said, I didn't entirely believe Rose was dead.

I held on to that hope as I hurried down the street toward the train station on the high cork soles of my impractical shoes ("always high heels for a girl as short as you, *ma chère*, or you'll never look like anything but a little girl"). I pushed through the crowds, the rough, swaggering laborers headed toward the docks, the smartly dressed shopgirls, the soldiers lingering on street corners. I hurried until I was short of breath, and I let that hope bloom, rising through me with a pain that made my eyes burn.

Go back, the sharp voice of conscience scolded. *You can still go back*. Back to a hotel room, to my mother making all the decisions, to my insulating cotton-wool fog. But I kept hurrying. I heard the hoot of a train, took in the smell of cinders and billows of steam. Southampton Terminus. Hordes of passengers were disembarking, men in fedoras, children red faced and fretful, women lifting crumpled newspapers over their waved hair to protect it from the faint drizzle. When had it started to drizzle? I could feel my dark hair flattening under the brim of the green hat my mother had chosen for me, the one that made me look like a leprechaun. I pushed on, running into the station.

A train conductor was crying out something. A departure in ten more minutes, direct to London.

I looked again at the piece of paper clenched in my hand. *10 Hampson Street, Pimlico, London. Evelyn Gardiner.*

Whoever the hell that was.

My mother would already be looking for me at the Dolphin, launching imperious monologues at the hotel clerks. But I didn't really care. I was just seventy-five miles from *10 Hampson Street, Pimlico, London*, and there was a train standing right in front of me.

“Five minutes!” the conductor bawled. Passengers scurried aboard, hoisting their luggage.

If you don't go now, you never will, I thought.

So I bought a ticket and climbed onto the train, and just like that I was gone into the smoke.

As afternoon dropped toward evening, the train car turned cold. I shrugged into my old black raincoat for warmth, sharing my compartment with a gray-haired woman and her three sniffing grandchildren. The grandmother gave my ringless, glove-less hand a disapproving glance, as if wanting to know what kind of girl was traveling to London on her own. Surely girls traveled on trains all the time, given wartime necessities—but she clearly didn't approve of *me*.

“I'm pregnant,” I told her the third time she tutted at me. “Do you want to change seats now?” She stiffened and got off at the next stop, dragging her grandchildren with her even as they whined, “Nana, we're not supposed to get off till—” I set my chin at the *I don't care* angle, meeting her final disapproving glance, and then sagged back into my seat as the door banged and left me alone. I pressed my hands to my flushed cheeks, giddy and confused and hopeful and guilty. So many emotions that I was nearly drowning, missing my numb shell. What on earth was wrong with me?

Running off into England with an address and a name, my sharp inner voice said. *What do you think you can do? You're such a helpless mess, how are you supposed to help anyone else?*

I winced. *I'm not helpless.*

Yes, you are. The last time you tried to help anyone, look what happened.

“And now I'm trying again,” I said aloud to the empty compartment. Helpless mess or not, I was *here*.

Night had fallen by the time I staggered, weary and starving, off the train in London. I trudged out into the streets, and the city rolled out in front of me in one huge dark smoky mass; in the distance I saw the outline of the great clock tower over Westminster. I stood there a moment as cars splashed past, wondering how London would have looked just a few years ago when this fog would have been scythed by Spitfires and Messerschmitts, and then I shook out of my reverie. I had no idea where 10 Hampson Street might be, and only a few coins left in my pocketbook. As I hailed a cab, I prayed it would be enough. I really didn't relish having to yank a pearl off my grandmother's necklace just to pay for a taxi ride. *Maybe I shouldn't have left that waitress a whole pound . . .* But I wasn't sorry.

The driver took me to what he said was Pimlico and dumped me at a line of tall row houses. It had started to rain in earnest. I looked around for my hallucination, but there was no flash of blond hair. Just a dark street, the spitting rain, the worn steps of number 10 climbing to a dingy peeling door. I hoisted my case, clambered up, and banged the knocker before my courage deserted me.

No answer. I banged again. The rain was falling harder, and despair rose in me like a wave. I pounded and pounded until my fist ached, until I saw the minute twitch of the curtain beside the door.

"I know someone's in there!" I wrenched the door handle, blinded by rain. "Let me *in!*"

To my surprise the handle turned, and I flew inside, falling at last off my impractical shoes. I hit the floor of the dark hallway on my knees, tearing my stockings, and then the door banged shut and I heard the click of a pistol being cocked.

Her voice was low, graveled, slurred, ferocious. "Who are you, and what the bloody fuck are you doing in my house?"

The streetlamps sent a blurry light through the curtains, half-illuminating the dark hallway. I could see a tall gaunt figure, a straggle of hair, the fiery end of a lit cigarette. The gleam of light off a pistol barrel, pointing straight at me.

I should have been terrified, recoiling from the shock and the gun and the language. But fury had swept aside the last piece of my feel-nothing fog, and I gathered my legs under me to stand, torn stocking snagging. "I'm looking for Evelyn Gardiner."

"I don't care who you're looking for. If you don't tell me why I've got a damned Yank breaking into my house, I'll shoot you. I'm old and I'm drunk, but this is a Luger nine-millimeter P08 in excellent condition. Drunk or sober I can take the back of your skull out at this range."

"I'm Charlie St. Clair." Pushing the wet hair out of my eyes. "My cousin Rose Fournier went missing in France during the war, and *you* might know how to find her."

Abruptly the electric wall lamp switched on. I blinked in the rush of harsh light. Standing over me was a tall gaunt woman in a faded print dress, her graying hair straggling around a time-ravaged face. She could have been fifty, or she could have been seventy. She had the Luger in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other; she kept the pistol steadily trained on my forehead as she raised the cigarette to her lips and took a long drag. Bile rose in my throat as I saw her hands. Good God, what had happened to her *hands*?

"I'm Eve Gardiner," she said at last. "And I don't know anything about this cousin of yours."

"You might," I said desperately. "You might—if you'll just talk to me."

"That's your plan, little Yank?" Her hooded storm-gray eyes surveyed me like a contemptuous bird of prey. "Burst into my house at nightfall, no plan, and I'm betting no money, on the chance I'd know something about your m-missing friend?"

“Yes.” Faced with her gun and her scorn I couldn’t explain *why*, why the chance to find Rose had turned suddenly all-consuming in my wrecked life. I couldn’t explain this strange savage desperation, or why I had let it drive me here. I could only state the truth: “I had to come.”

“Well.” Eve Gardiner lowered her pistol. “I suppose you’ll want t-tea.”

“Yes, tea would be—”

“I don’t have any.” She turned and made her way back down the dark hall, walking long-strided and careless. Her bare feet looked like an eagle’s claws. She weaved a little as she walked, the Luger swinging freely at her side, and I saw she still had a finger through the trigger. *Crazy*, I thought. *The old cow is crazy*.

And her hands—they were monstrous knobbed lumps, every knuckle misshapen and grotesque. They looked more like lobster claws than hands.

“Keep up,” she said without turning, and I scurried after her. She struck a door open and flicked on a light, and I saw a cold sitting room—a mess of a place, grate unlit, drapes drawn so no chink of light could come in off the street, old newspapers and dirty tea mugs lying everywhere.

“Mrs. Gardiner—”

“Miss.” She flung herself down in a shabby armchair overlooking the whole messy room, tossing her pistol down on the table beside it. I winced, but the thing didn’t go off. “And you can call me Eve. You’ve f-forced your way into my house, so that’s a level of intimacy I’m already disliking you for. What’s a name?”

“I didn’t mean to force my way—”

“Yes, you did. You want something, and you want it badly. What is it?”

I struggled out of my wet raincoat and sat down on a hassock, suddenly uncertain where to start. I’d been so focused on *getting*

here, I hadn't thought how exactly I should begin. *Two girls times eleven summers, divided by one ocean and one war . . .*

"G-get on with it." Eve seemed to have a faint stutter, but I couldn't tell if it was drink or some other impediment. She reached for a crystal decanter sitting beside the pistol, unstoppering it with some clumsy maneuvering of her mangled fingers, and I smelled whiskey. "I've got limited hours of sobriety left, so I suggest you don't waste them."

I sighed. Not just a crazy old bat, but a *drunk* old bat. With a name like *Evelyn Gardiner*, I'd been picturing someone with privet hedges and a rolled bun, not a decanter of whiskey and a loaded pistol. "Would you mind if I smoked?"

She tilted her bony shoulder in a shrug, and as I hauled out my Gauloises, she hunted for a glass. Nothing in arm's length, so she sloshed a measure of amber liquid into a flowered teacup. *God*, I thought as I lit my cigarette, half fascinated and half appalled. *Who are you?*

"It's rude to stare," she said, staring back at me just as frankly. "Christ, all that ruffly stuff you've got on—is that what women are wearing these days?"

"Don't you ever get out?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Not much."

"It's the New Look. Modeled after the latest from Paris."

"It looks b-bloody uncomfortable."

"It is." I took a grim drag on my cigarette. "All right. I'm Charlie St. Clair, well, Charlotte, just arrived from New York—" My mother, what would she be thinking right now? She'd be furious and frantic and ready to scalp me. But I thrust that aside. "My father's American, but my mother's French. Before the war we spent summers in France, with my French cousins. They lived in Paris, and had a summer house outside Rouen."

"Your childhood sounds like a Degas picnic." Eve took a slug

of her whiskey. “Make this m-more interesting, or I’m going to drink a lot faster.”

It *was* like a Degas painting. I could close my eyes and those summers blurred into one long hazy season: the narrow twisting streets, the old copies of *Le Figaro* lying about the big rambling summer house with its stuffed attics and worn sofas, the haze of greenery with the sun filtering through and lighting up all the dust motes.

“My cousin Rose Fournier—” I felt tears prick my eyes. “She’s my first cousin, but she’s like my older sister. She’s two years ahead of me, but she never shut me out. We shared everything, told each other everything.”

Two little girls in grass-stained summer dresses, playing tag and climbing trees and waging furious battle against our combined brothers. Then two older girls, Rose with the beginning of a bosom and me still scrape kneed and gangly, both of us warbling along with jazz records and sharing a giggly crush on Errol Flynn. Rose the daring one with one outlandish scheme after another, me the devoted shadow she shielded like a lioness when her schemes got us into trouble. Her voice came at me, so suddenly it was like she was standing in the room: “Charlie, hide in my room and I’ll stitch your dress up before your mother sees that rip. I shouldn’t have taken you climbing over those rocks—”

“Please don’t cry,” Eve Gardiner said. “I cannot stand crying women.”

“I can’t either.” I hadn’t cried a drop in weeks, I’d been too numb, but now my eyes burned. I blinked fiercely. “The last time I saw Rose was the summer of ’39. Everyone was worried about Germany—well, except us. Rose was thirteen and I was eleven; we just wanted to sneak out to the movies every afternoon, and that seemed a lot more important than anything happening in Germany. Poland got invaded right after I went back to the States.

My parents wanted Rose's family to come to America, but they kept dithering—"Rose's mother, convinced she was too delicate to travel. "Before they could make the arrangements, France fell."

Eve took another sip of whiskey, her hooded eyes unblinking. I took another steady drag on my cigarette.

"I got letters," I said. "Rose's father was important, an industrialist—he had connections, so the family could get word out now and then. Rose sounded cheerful. Kept talking about when we'd see each other again. But we had the news, everybody knew what was happening there: swastikas flying over Paris, people getting carted off in trucks and never seen again. I'd write her begging to know if she was really all right, and she always said she was, but . . ." In the spring of '43, we'd traded photographs since it had been so long since we'd seen each other—Rose had been seventeen and so pretty, striking a pin-up pose and grinning at the camera. I had the photograph in my pocketbook now, worn and soft at the edges.

"Rose's last letter talked about a boy she'd been seeing on the sly. She said there had been *much excitement*." I took a shaky breath. "That was early in '43. I heard nothing from Rose after that, nothing from any of her family."

Eve watched me, her ravaged face like a mask. I couldn't tell if she pitied me, had contempt for me, or didn't care at all.

My cigarette was almost down to the nub. I took a last deep drag, and stubbed it out in a tea saucer already overflowing with ash. "I knew it didn't mean anything, Rose not writing. Wartime mail is hell. We just had to wait for the war to be over, and then the letters would start getting through. But the war ended, and—nothing."

More silence. It was harder than I'd thought it would be, saying all this. "We made inquiries. It took forever, but we got some answers. My French uncle had died in '44, shot while trying to

get black market medicine for my aunt. Rose's two brothers died in late '43, a bomb. My aunt's still alive—my mother wanted her to come live with us, but she wouldn't, just walled herself up in the house outside Rouen. And Rose—”

I swallowed. Rose sauntering ahead of me through the green haze of trees. Rose cursing in French, yanking a brush through her unruly curls. Rose at that Provençal café, on the happiest day of my whole life . . .

“Rose vanished. She left her family in '43. I don't even know *why*. My father put out inquiries, but Rose's trail after the spring of '44 came to a dead end. Nothing.”

“A lot of dead ends in that war,” Eve said, and I was surprised to hear her gravelly voice after speaking myself for so long. “Lots of people disappeared. You surely don't think she's still alive? It's been two years since the bloody w-war ended.”

I gritted my teeth. My parents had long concluded Rose must be dead, lost in the chaos of war, and the odds were they were right, but— “We don't know for sure.”

Eve rolled her eyes. “Don't tell me you'd have *f-felt* it if she died.”

“You don't have to believe me. Just help me.”

“Why? What the hell has all this got to do with m-me?”

“Because my father's last inquiry was to London, seeing if Rose might have emigrated here from France. There was a bureau helping to locate refugees.” I took a deep breath. “You worked there.”

“In '45 and '46.” Eve tipped more whiskey into her flowered teacup. “I was fired last Christmas.”

“Why?”

“Maybe because I came to work sloshed. Maybe because I told my supervisor she was a spiteful old cunt.”

I couldn't help recoiling. I'd never in my life heard anyone swear like Eve Gardiner, much less a woman.

“So—” She swirled her whiskey. “I’m guessing the file on your cousin crossed my desk? I d-don’t remember. As I said, I came to work sloshed a fair amount.”

I’d never seen a woman drink like this either. My mother’s drink was sherry, two tiny glasses at most. Eve was knocking straight whiskey back like water, and her voice was starting to slur. Maybe the faint stammer *was* just drink.

“I got a copy of the report on Rose,” I said desperately before I lost her for good, either to disinterest or whiskey. “It had your signature. That’s how I got your name. I telephoned pretending I was your niece from America. They gave me your address. I was going to write you, but—” Well, my Little Problem had seeded itself in my belly right about then. “Are you sure you don’t remember if there were any other findings on Rose? It could be—”

“Look, girl. I cannot help you.”

“—anything! She was out of Paris by ’43, the following spring she went to Limoges. We got that much from her mother—”

“I said, I can’t help you.”

“*You have to!*” I was on my feet, but I didn’t remember standing. Desperation was building in my middle, a solid ball far denser than the insubstantial shadow that was my baby. “You have to help! I am not *leaving* without help!” I’d never shouted at an adult in my life, but I was shouting now. “Rose Fournier, she was in Limoges, seventeen years old—”

Eve was on her feet too, far taller than I, jabbing one of her unspeakable fingers into my breastbone, her voice deadly quiet. “Do not shriek at me in my own house.”

“—she’d be twenty-one now, she’s blond and beautiful and funny—”

“I don’t care if she was Saint Joan of Arc, she’s not my business and neither are you!”

“—she was working at a restaurant called Le Lethe owned by a Monsieur René, and after that no one knows—”

Something happened to Eve’s face then. Nothing in it moved, but something still *happened*. It was like something moving at the bottom of a deep lake, sending the very faintest surge to the surface. Not even a ripple—but you still knew something was moving down there. She looked at me, and her eyes glittered.

“What?” My chest was heaving as though I’d run a mile, my cheeks hot with emotion and my ribs pressing against the iron grip of my waist cincher.

“Le Lethe,” she said softly. “I know that name. Who did you s-say owned the restaurant?”

I scrambled for my traveling case, pushing aside the spare clothes, seeking the pocket in the liner. Two folded sheets of paper; I handed them over.

Eve looked at the short-form report on top, her own name across the bottom. “There’s nothing here about the restaurant’s name.”

“I found that out later—look at the second page, my notes. I telephoned the bureau hoping to talk to you, but you were gone by then. I talked the clerk into hunting down the original tip in their files; it gave the name Le Lethe, owned by a Monsieur René, no last name. It was hopelessly garbled, so maybe that’s why it wasn’t typed into the report. But I assumed if you *signed* that report, you’d have seen the original tip.”

“I didn’t. If I had, I wouldn’t have s-signed off.” Eve looked at the second page, and kept looking. “Le Lethe . . . that’s a name I know.”

Hope was such a painful thing, far more painful than rage. “How?”

Eve turned and scabbled for the whiskey bottle again. She

sloshed more into her teacup and drank it all down. She filled the cup again, and then she stood there with her eyes staring past me at nothing.

“Get out of my house.”

“But—”

“Sleep here if you haven’t anywhere else to g-g-g—to go. But you’d better be gone by morning, Yank.”

“But—but you know something.” She picked up her pistol and moved past me. I grabbed her bony arm. “Please—”

Eve’s maimed hand whipped up faster than I could follow it, and for the second time that night I had a gun pointed at me. I recoiled, but she advanced half a step and pressed the barrel right between my eyes. The cold circle of it made my skin tingle.

“You crazy old cow,” I whispered.

“Yes,” she rasped. “And I will shoot you if you are not gone when I wake up.”

She moved off unsteadily, out of the sitting room and down the uncarpeted hall.

CHAPTER 2

EVE

May 1915

London

Opportunity walked into Eve Gardiner's life dressed in tweed. She was late for work that morning, but her employer didn't notice when she slipped through the law office doors ten minutes after nine. Sir Francis Galborough rarely noticed anything outside his racing pages, Eve knew. "Here are your files, m'dear," he said as she came in.

She took the stack in slim unmarked hands: a tall girl with nut-brown hair, soft skinned, deceptively doe eyed. "Yes, s-s-sir." S was a hard letter to get out; only two stops on it was good.

"And Captain Cameron here has a letter for you to type in French. You should see her rattle away in Frog," Sir Francis said, addressing the lanky soldier sitting across his desk. "She's a gem, Miss Gardiner is. Half French! Can't speak a word of Frog myself."

“Nor I.” The Captain smiled, fiddling with his pipe. “Entirely over my head. Thank you for the loan of your girl, Francis.”

“No trouble, no trouble!”

No one asked Eve if it was any trouble. Why should they? File girls, after all, were a kind of office furniture, more mobile than an umbrella fern, but just as deaf and dumb.

You're lucky to have this job, Eve reminded herself. If not for the war, a post in a barrister's office like this would have gone to some young man with better recommendations and brilliantined hair. *You are lucky*. Very lucky, in fact. Eve had easy work, addressing envelopes and filing papers and typing the occasional letter in French; she supported herself in relative comfort; and if the wartime shortage of sugar and cream and fresh fruit was starting to pall, well, it was a fair exchange for safety. She could so easily have been stuck in northern France starving under German occupation. London was frightened, walking about now with its eyes trained on the sky, looking for zeppelins—but Lorraine, where Eve had grown up, was a sea of mud and bones, as Eve knew from the newspapers she devoured. She was lucky to be here, safe away from it.

Very lucky.

Eve took the letter silently from Captain Cameron, who had been quite a regular visitor to this office lately. He wore rumpled tweeds rather than a khaki uniform, but the straight spine and the soldierly stride shouted his rank better than any bank of ribbons. Captain Cameron, perhaps thirty-five, a hint of a Scottish lilt in his voice, but otherwise so entirely English, so utterly lanky and graying and rumpled he could have appeared in a Conan Doyle serial as the Quintessential British Gentleman. Eve wanted to ask, “Do you have to smoke a pipe? Do you have to wear tweed? Must you be *that* much of a cliché?”

The captain leaned back in his chair, nodding as she moved toward the door. "I'll wait for the letter, Miss Gardiner."

"Yes, s-sir," Eve murmured again, backing out.

"You're late," Miss Gregson greeted her in the file room, sniffing. The oldest of the file girls, inclined to boss the rest, and Eve promptly turned on a wide-eyed look of incomprehension. She loathed her own looks—the soft, smooth face she saw looking out of her mirror had a kind of blank unformed prettiness, nothing memorable about it except a general impression of youth that had people thinking she was still sixteen or seventeen—but her appearance served in good stead when she was in trouble. All her life, Eve had been able to open her wide-spaced eyes and blink her lashes into a perfect breeze of innocent confusion, and slide away from consequences. Miss Gregson gave an exasperated little sigh, bustling away, and later Eve caught her whispering to the other file girl. "I sometimes wonder if that half-French girl is a bit simple."

"Well"—a whisper and a shrug replied—"you've heard her talk, haven't you?"

Eve folded her hands around each other, giving two sharp, precise squeezes to stop them from forming fists, then bent her attention to Captain Cameron's letter, translating it into impeccable French. It was why she'd been hired, her pure French and her pure English. Native of both countries, at home in neither.

There was a kind of violent boredom about that day, at least as Eve remembered it later. Typing, filing, eating her wrapped sandwich at midday. Trudging through the streets at sunset, getting her skirt splashed by a passing cab. The boardinghouse in Pimlico, smelling of Lifebuoy soap and stale fried liver. Smiling dutifully at one of the other boarders, a young nurse who had just got herself engaged to a lieutenant, and sat flashing her tiny dia-

mond chip over the supper table. “You should come work at the hospital, Eve. That’s where you find a husband, not a file room!”

“I don’t m-much care about finding a husband.” That earned her blank looks from the nurse and the landlady and the other two boarders. *Why so surprised?* Eve thought. *I don’t want a husband, I don’t want babies, I don’t want a parlor rug and a wedding band. I want—*

“You’re not one of those *suffragettes*, are you?” Eve’s landlady said, spoon paused in midair.

“No.” Eve didn’t want to check a box on a ballot. There was a war on; she wanted to *fight*. Prove that stuttering Eve Gardiner could serve her country as capably as any of the straight-tongued thousands who had dismissed her throughout her entire life as an idiot. But no amount of suffragette bricks through windows would ever get Eve to the front, even in a support role as a VAD or an ambulance driver, because she had been turned down for both posts on account of her stammer. She pushed back her plate, excusing herself, and went upstairs to her single neat room with its rickety bureau and narrow bed.

She was taking down her hair when a *mrow* sounded at the door, and Eve smiled as she let in the landlady’s cat. “Saved you a bit of l-liver,” she said, fishing out the scrap she’d taken from her plate and wrapped in a napkin, and the cat purred and arched. He was kept strictly as a mouser, subsisting on a sparse diet of kitchen crumbs and whatever he could kill, but he’d spotted Eve as a soft touch and had fattened up on her supper scraps. “I wish I were a cat,” Eve said, lifting the tabby onto her lap. “Cats don’t have to sp-sp—have to speak except in fairy tales. Or maybe I should just wish to be a man.” Because if she were a man, she could at least *hit* anyone who mentioned her stuttering tongue, not smile at them with polite forbearance.

The tabby purred. Eve stroked him. “Might as well wish for the m-m-moon.”

A knock sounded an hour later—Eve’s landlady, so tight-lipped her mouth had almost disappeared. “You have a caller,” she said accusingly. “A *gentleman* caller.”

Eve set the protesting tabby aside. “At this hour?”

“Don’t give me those innocent eyes, miss. No male admirers to visit in the evenings, that is my rule. Especially soldiers. So I informed the gentleman, but he insists it is urgent. I have put him in the parlor, and you may have tea, but I expect you to leave the door *ajar*.”

“A soldier?” Eve’s puzzlement increased.

“A Captain Cameron. I find it most irregular that an army captain would seek you out, at home and in evening hours!”

Eve agreed, rolling up her loosened nut-brown hair and sliding her jacket over her high-necked blouse again as if she were going to the office. A certain kind of gentleman looked at any shopgirl, or file girl—any woman who *worked*—and saw her as entirely available. *If he’s here to make advances, I will slap his face. Whether he reports me to Sir Francis and gets me fired or not.*

“Good evening.” Eve struck open the door of the parlor, deciding on formality. “I am most surprised to see you, C-C-C—” Her right hand clutched into a fist, and she managed to get it out. “C—Captain. May I be of ass—assistance?” She held her head high, refusing to let the embarrassment color her cheeks.

To her astonishment, Captain Cameron replied in French. “Shall we switch languages? I’ve heard you speaking French to the other girls, and you stammer much less.”

Eve stared at this consummate Englishman, lounging in the stiff parlor chair with his trousered legs loosely crossed, a faint smile showing under his small clipped mustache. He didn’t speak French. She’d heard him say so, just this morning.

“*Bien sûr*,” she replied. “*Continuez en Français, s’il vous plait*.”

He went on in French. “Your eavesdropping landlady hovering in the hall will be going mad.”

Eve sat, arranging her blue serge skirts, and leaned forward for the flowered teapot. “How do you take your tea?”

“Milk, two sugars. Tell me, Miss Gardiner, how good is your German?”

Eve glanced up sharply. She’d left that skill off her list of qualifications when she was looking for a post—1915 wasn’t a good time to admit to speaking the language of the enemy. “I d-don’t speak German,” she said, passing him his cup.

“Mmm.” He regarded her over the teacup. Eve folded her hands in her lap and regarded him back with sweet blankness.

“That’s quite a face you have,” the Captain said. “Nothing going on behind it, nothing to show, anyway. And I’m good with faces, Miss Gardiner. It’s mostly in the tiny muscles around the eyes that people give themselves away. You’ve got yours mostly under control.”

Eve stretched her eyes wide again, lashes fanning in innocent perplexity. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“Will you permit a few questions, Miss Gardiner? Nothing beyond the bounds of propriety, I assure you.”

He hadn’t leaned forward and tried to stroke her knee yet, at least. “Of course, C-C-Captain.”

He sat back. “I know you are an orphan—Sir Francis mentioned it—but would you tell me something of your parents?”

“My father was English. He went to Lorraine to work in a French bank; he met my mother there.”

“She was French? Doubtless that explains the purity of your accent.”

“Yes.” *And how would you know if my accent is pure?*

“I would think a girl of Lorraine would speak German as well. It’s not far from the border.”

Eve cast her lashes down. “I did not learn it.”

“You really are a rather good liar, Miss Gardiner. I would not like to play cards with you.”

“A lady does not play c-cards.” Every nerve she had sang in warning, but Eve was quite relaxed. She always relaxed when she sensed danger. That moment in the reeds, hunting ducks, before squeezing off a shot: finger on the trigger, the bird freezing, a bullet about to fly—her heartbeat always slowed at that moment into utter placidity. It slowed now, as she tilted her head at the captain. “You were asking about my parents? My father lived and worked in Nancy; my mother kept house.”

“And you?”

“I went to school, home for tea every afternoon. My mother taught me French and embroidery, and my father taught me English and duck hunting.”

“How very civilized.”

Eve smiled sweetly, remembering the roaring behind the lace curtains, the coarse slurs and vicious arguments. She might have learned to put on gentility, but she'd come from something far less refined: the constant shrieking and throwing of china, her father roaring at her mother for frittering away money, her mother sniping at her father for being seen with yet another barmaid. The kind of home where a child learned quickly to slide unseen around the edges of rooms, to vanish like a shadow in a black night at the first rumble on the domestic horizon. To listen to everything, weigh everything, all the while remaining unnoticed. “Yes, it was a very instructive childhood.”

“Forgive me for asking . . . your stammer, have you always had it?”

“As a child, it was a trifle more p-p-p—more pronounced.” Her tongue had always hitched and tripped. The one thing about her that wasn't smooth and unobtrusive.

“You must have had good teachers, to help you overcome it.”

Teachers? They’d seen her get so hung up on words that she was red faced and close to tears, but they’d only moved on to someone else who could answer the question more quickly. Most of them thought her simpleminded as well as hitch tongued; they could barely be bothered to shoo the other children away when they circled around her taunting, “Say your name, say it! G-g-g-g-gardiner—” Sometimes the teachers joined in the laughter.

No. Eve had beaten her stutter into submission with sheer savage will, reading poetry out loud line by faltering line in her bedroom, hammering on the consonants that stuck until they unspooled and came free. She remembered taking ten minutes to limp her way through Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* introduction—and French was her *easier* language. Baudelaire had said he’d written *Les Fleurs du Mal* with rage and patience; Eve understood that perfectly.

“Your parents,” Captain Cameron continued. “Where are they now?”

“My father died in 1912, of a heart b-blockage.” It was a kind of blockage, getting stuck in the heart with a butcher knife wielded by a cuckolded husband. “My mother didn’t like the rumbling from Germany, and decided to bring me to London.” To escape the scandal, not the Boche. “She died of influenza last year, God rest her soul.” Bitter, vulgar, and haranguing to the end, flinging teacups at Eve and swearing.

“God rest her soul,” the captain echoed with a piety Eve didn’t buy for one moment as genuine. “And now we have you. Evelyn Gardiner, orphan, with her pure French and pure English—you’re sure about the German?—working in an office for my friend Sir Francis Galborough, presumably passing time until she marries. A pretty girl, but she tends to slide from notice. Shyness, perhaps?”

The tabby wound his way through the open door with an inquiring meow. Eve called him up to her lap. “Captain Cameron,” she said with the smile that made her look sixteen, tickling the tabby under the chin, “are you trying to seduce me?”

She’d succeeded in shocking him. He sat back, coloring in embarrassment. “Miss Gardiner—I would not dream—”

“Then what are you doing here?” she asked directly.

“I am here to evaluate you.” He crossed his ankles, recovering his aplomb. “I’ve had my eye on you for a number of weeks, ever since I first walked into my friend’s office pretending to speak no French. May I speak plainly?”

“Have we not been speaking plainly already?”

“I don’t believe you ever speak plainly, Miss Gardiner. I’ve heard you murmuring evasions at your fellow file girls, to get out of the work you consider boring. I heard you tell a bold-faced lie when they asked why you were late this morning. Something about a cabdriver who delayed you with his unwanted attentions—you’re never flustered, you go about cool as cream, but you faked fluster beautifully. You weren’t late because of an amorous cabdriver; you were staring at a recruitment poster outside the office door for a good ten minutes. I timed it, looking down from the window.”

It was Eve’s turn to sit back and blush. She *had* been staring at the poster: it had showed a line of stalwart-looking Tommies, soldierly and identical, with a blank space in the middle. *There is still a space in the line for YOU!* the headline above it blared. *WILL YOU FILL IT?* And Eve had stood there bitterly, thinking, *No*. Because the lettering inside that blank space in the line of soldiers said in smaller script, *This space is reserved for a fit man!* So, no, Eve could never fill it, even though she was twenty-two and entirely fit.

The tabby in her lap protested, feeling her fingers tighten through his fur.

“So, Miss Gardiner,” Captain Cameron said. “Can I get a straight answer out of you if I ask a question?”

Don't count on it, Eve thought. She lied and evaded as easily as she breathed; it was what she'd had to do all her life. Lying, lying, lying, with a face like a daisy. Eve couldn't remember the last time she'd been completely straight with anyone. Lies were easier than the hard and turbulent truth.

“I am thirty-two,” the captain said. He looked older, his face lined and worn. “Too old to fight in this war. I have a different job to do. Our skies are under attack from German zeppelins, Miss Gardiner, our seas by German U-boats. We are under attack every day.”

Eve nodded fiercely. Two weeks ago the *Lusitania* was sunk—for days, her fellow boarders dabbed at their eyes. Eve had devoured the newspaper accounts dry-eyed, enraged.

“To stave off further such attacks, we need people,” Captain Cameron went on. “It is my job to find people with certain skills—the ability to speak French and German, for example. The ability to lie. Outward innocence. Inward courage. To find them and put them to work, ferreting out what the Boches have planned for us. I think you show potential, Miss Gardiner. So, let me ask: do you wish to stand for England?”

The question hit Eve in a hammer blow. She exhaled shakily, setting the cat aside, and answered without thinking. “Yes.” Whatever he meant by *stand for England*, the answer was yes.

“Why?”

She began to pull together something pat and expected about the vile Fritzes, about doing her bit for the boys in the trenches. She let the lie go, slowly. “I want to prove myself capable, to everyone who ever thought me simpleminded or weak because I cannot speak straight. I want to f-f-f—I want to f-f-f-f—”

She hung on the word so badly her cheeks heated dully, but

he didn't rush to finish her sentence in that way that most people did, the way that filled her with fury. He just sat quietly until she slammed a fist against her skirted knee and the word broke free. She spit it out through clenched teeth, with enough vehemence to startle the cat out of the room.

"I want to *fight*."

"Do you?"

"*Yes*." Three straight answers in a row; for Eve it was a record. She sat under his thoughtful gaze, shaking, close to tears.

"So, I ask for the fourth time, and there won't be a fifth. Do you speak German?"

"*Wie ein Einheimischer*." Like a native.

"Excellent." Captain Cecil Aylmer Cameron rose. "Evelyn Gardiner, would you be interested in entering the Crown's service as a spy?"