

Chapter One

The dressing-table mirror, like everything else in the boarding house, was old, of poor quality and dimly lit.

Alice Todd peered at her reflection and was disturbed. She still half expected to see the self-confident, pleasantly attractive face with which she was familiar and which, framed and in studio-portrait form, stood on one side of her husband's desk at the Air Ministry, depicting the winsome, contented, middle-class young matron Alice was. Had been. But the eyes that now met hers bore traces of anxiety. The lips of the mouth in the mirror were compressed. The skin, possibly due to the poor quality of the looking glass, lacked lustre. Observing herself carefully, she rearranged her features, composing them as she watched and attempting to achieve the look of confidence and calm which today would demand of her.

The hat would not do. Its half-veil, softening the small, feathered pillbox, suited her but was, she decided, too pretty, too frivolous for the business in hand. She replaced it with a less becoming fawn felt with a heavy brim. The effect reminded her of Celia Johnson in a film that she had recently seen and through which her young son had fidgeted. He appeared now at her elbow, neat in his school uniform, gas mask over shoulder, cap – embellished with his prep school’s insignia – slipping slightly to one side on his crisp, curly hair.

‘I’ll be late for prayers,’ he said, searching her face in the mirror, watching it soften as she smiled at him. Snatching up handbag and gloves, she propelled him towards the door, turned off the low-wattage, overhead light and left the room. As they descended the stairs a door opened below them.

‘Good morning, Mrs Bowden,’ the boy said cheerfully, moving forward to the front door.

‘Mornun’, Edward-John.’ Mrs Bowden edged out into the hallway, effectively blocking it. She had an apron over her frock, a scarf over her curlers, a duster in one hand, a half-smoked Woodbine cigarette in the other. She spoke with the rounded accent and sharp tone of a true Devonian. ‘Tis Friday, dear,’ she announced to Alice, making a pass at the banisters with her duster.

Alice, still unfamiliar with such approaches where money was concerned, looked blank.

‘The rent,’ said Mrs Bowden, lowering her voice.

‘Oh. Yes. Of course...’ Alice balanced her handbag on the

hall table, opened it and searched it hurriedly. ‘My cheque book’s here...somewhere...’

‘I’d rather have money...if it’s all the same to you.’

‘But a cheque is...’

‘Mr Todd always paid cash, dear.’ Mrs Bowden stood, implacable.

Edward-John was at the front door, holding it open, the cold February morning blowing in.

‘Very well. I’ll go to the bank.’

‘That’s it, dear,’ said Mrs Bowden, melting like an ogre in a fairytale into the shadows of her room.

‘Oh, Mrs Bowden?’ Alice called, her voice, she realised, sounding slightly shrill as Mrs Bowden’s face loomed back.

‘I should be here by the time Edward-John gets home from school, but if I’m delayed...’

‘I’ll see to ’im. Don’t fret yourself.’

‘You’re very kind...’ Alice smiled uncertainly.

As the front door closed behind the mother and son, Mrs Bowden exhaled, smoke wreathing about her curled head.

‘Poor girl,’ she wheezed. ‘I dunno... These days...’

Alice withdrew money from the bank and somehow managed to arrive in Ledburton village square at the appointed time. Edward-John, delivered to the gates of his prep school, had hurried through them with the last of the latecomers.

The mid-morning bus from Exeter had been full of

village women returning from their regular excursion to the market. Laden with the week's rations and struggling to control squalling babies and noisy toddlers, they had stared at Alice, the only stranger amongst the otherwise familiar faces. When the bus drew up at the Ledburton stop they watched her as she scanned the village square and saw her react to the beeped horn of a small saloon car, parked in front of the post office. She was seen to approach the car and speak to its occupant through the wound-down window.

'Get in, Mrs Todd!' The speaker was a solidly built woman, dressed severely in a grey coat and skirt. 'If you are Mrs Todd!' she added jovially, grasping the gear-stick as Alice settled into the passenger seat. 'Margery Brewster,' the woman announced. 'Land Army rep for this neck of the woods! We'll be seeing a lot of each other if you take this job!...Ye Gods!' she added as the car protested. 'Mind of its own, this beast!' Then, as they moved erratically forward, she thrust a piece of paper at Alice. 'Can you follow these directions? Not easy with all the signposts gone!'

Occupied by the navigation that took them away from the village into a network of lanes, Alice peered at the scribbled instructions.

'Left at the big willow tree...then down the hill and through the ford...' Margery Brewster crouched over her steering wheel, scanning the muddy surface of the lane in an attempt to avoid the worst of the potholes.

'Understand you've been living in Exeter,' she bellowed.

‘Yes,’ said Alice, wondering whether the thatched roof she could see on her right was the barn that was to be her next landmark.

‘To avoid the London blitz no doubt,’ Margery Brewster continued. ‘Wise of you. In the forces is he? Your chap?’ Had she been observing Alice, Margery would have seen a reaction to this assumption. As it was she missed it, her attention focused on negotiating the crossing of the shallow ford. She pursued her enquiries. ‘Which?’ she asked bluntly. Alice decided that the thatch was not a barn but a haystack.

‘He works at the Air Ministry,’ she said. ‘His department is being evacuated to Cambridge.’

‘Aren’t you going to join him there?’ Margery’s shrewd mind had homed in on something. A sideways glance at Alice’s face confirmed her suspicions. Here was an irregularity, a complication.

‘Things are...’ Alice hesitated miserably, ‘...a little uncertain.’

‘Well, I hope they’re not too uncertain, Mrs Todd! We like our hostel wardens to commit themselves for at least twelve months. The last thing Mr Bayliss wants is to find himself with ten land girls on his hands and a warden who goes off to Cambridge to join her husband!’ She emphasised this with an abrupt and noisy gear change which flung her passenger forward in her seat.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t!’ Alice said, her eyes scanning the wintry landscape for the elusive barn. ‘When I said uncertain,

I meant...well...my marriage...' Margery, embarrassed, interrupted her.

'My apologies,' she said, almost gently. 'Didn't mean to pry or sound hard. But one must have ones priorities, you know. Oh, dear! This war! So many casualties, don't you find?'

Alice was, she supposed, a casualty of the war, having, until recently, been happy enough with her life; for, although deprived of her parents at an early age, she had been cushioned from the hard facts of her loss by affectionate relatives. She remembered, or had been told that she remembered, waving goodbye to her mother and father when she had been left in the care of her Aunt Elizabeth while her parents set off to tour the Black Forest in their new motor car. After the accident she had been surrounded by grave-faced people who ensured that it was several years before the word 'orphan' had entered her vocabulary. When it did, time had blunted the fact of her parents' absence and they had become mythical beings, endowed by her vague memories with invented virtues. It was not an unpleasant situation. Alice barely deserved the sympathy and compassion which her relatives lavished on her but she nevertheless enjoyed it and grew into a well-adjusted young woman with whom James Todd, in his final year at university whilst she was in her first at a domestic science college, had fallen in love. With his degree and his foot confidently on the first ladder of a career in the Civil

Service, he married her. A son, Edward-John, was born the year Adolf Hitler took power, a fact that, together with other signs of an approaching war, discouraged James from adding to his family. Alice had wanted more children and was prepared to take the risk but James had been firm and Edward-John remained an only child.

‘Left! Left here!’ Alice almost shouted as they passed a gateway through which the elusive barn had become briefly visible. Margery hauled the car round, inserted it into what was hardly more than a track between steep banks topped with hazel bushes and negotiated a slithering descent to the valley floor where the lane levelled and ran pleasantly north, beside a water meadow, for half a mile or so. Then, suddenly, they came upon a cluster of farm buildings.

Alice felt her heart lift. From a distance Lower Post Stone Farm looked idyllic. A classic Devon longhouse with a central porch, pale, pink-washed walls, small, square windows beneath an undulating thatched roof, all of it held protectively between two massive chimneys. The scene suggested a serenity which, since the onset of the war and the disruption it had caused in Alice’s previously pleasant life, she had thought had vanished from the world.

Margery Brewster glanced at her passenger’s rapt expression.

‘Don’t like the look of that thatch,’ she muttered, searching for firm ground on which to park her car. She

had been bogged in mud before now, when visiting remote farmhouses.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Looks damp. And there are things growing on it. Always a bad sign.’ Margery brought the car to a stand and pulled hard on the handbrake. She was a worthy woman. Daughter of a clergyman, wife of a solicitor and mother of two girls, both grown up and gone from her, she had, at the outset of the war, offered herself for voluntary work. Shortly afterwards and rather to her surprise, she had found herself face to face with Lady Denman, director of the Women’s Land Army. An hour later she had accepted the role of local representative, known officially as a Village Registrar, for that organisation. Her husband, previously unaware of her organising skills, had been astonished to witness the transformation of his wife from docile partner into spruce, committed businesswoman and, although he joked to his friends about her newly discovered vocation, was secretly uneasy, feeling sometimes almost neglected. Margery had never in all her life been happier. From dutiful daughter she had, in her twenties, become a devoted wife and mother. Assuming that this should be enough she had put moments of restlessness down to various time-of-life difficulties. Now, to her surprise, she had discovered that she had a talent for organising and for delegation, for assessing skills, judging character and, as she had already demonstrated on more than one occasion, for dealing with a crisis. She was,

however, slightly ashamed of how much she was enjoying the war and tried to compensate for these feelings by being sensitive to those, like the young woman seated beside her now, whose experiences of it were less happy than her own. She switched off her engine and opened her door.

A scatter of clucking fowls approached the car, peering inquisitively at its unfamiliar occupants. More distantly, sheep bleated on the hills that rose behind the roofs of outbuildings visible beyond the farmhouse itself and from the inside of which the sound of hammering was audible. To one side of the farm buildings was a neat, stone cottage. Smoke drifted from its single chimney.

The farmhouse was, Alice could now see, in a neglected state. Great swags of honeysuckle, tangled with a leafless Albortine, swamped the porch and had hauled themselves up over the thatch and towards the chimneys. The pink-wash was sullied with a greenish mould and the window frames were dark with rot. The small, walled front garden was overgrown with rank grass, straggling lavender and unpruned roses, now bereft of leaves but still sporting last year's hips, which shone red as blood in the thin February sunshine. The air in the sheltered valley felt almost warm. Margery heaved herself from her car, her rubber boots sinking a good inch into the mud. She reached into the back seat.

'Better borrow these,' she said, waving a spare pair of muddy boots at Alice.

The porch extended into the garden. It was floored with small cobbles, polished smooth by centuries of use. The disused nests of swallows and house martins clustered where the underside of the thatch butted onto crumbling walls. As Alice and Margery ducked their heads under the lintel of the low door the air inside the house struck cold and the sound of hammering intensified.

The wide hallway – known as a cross-passage – was, like the rest of the ground floor, paved with slate. From it, one on either side, narrow and dark staircases wound upwards. At the far end was a window beside a solid wooden door that, Alice correctly guessed, led into the yard. A door on the right stood open to a gloomy kitchen. Alice could make out the shape of a wooden table, stained with mould. On the other side of the cross-passage a third door revealed a large room, low-ceilinged and beamed, its windows set close to the slate floor. The interior of the farmhouse had been recently whitewashed by someone whose work appeared to have been rushed, for although there were splashes of paint on the beams and on the floors, corners remained cobwebby with signs of mould where the paintbrush had not quite reached.

Someone was descending the right-hand staircase. Someone in stout boots, thick lisle stockings, an apron over her dark, woollen dress and thick cardigan. Rose.

Her face, once pretty, was overlaid now with early middle-age and the strains that five years of widowhood had put

on her. The eyes were direct and steady. She had a hardness about her, inherited from her antecedents, generations of farmworkers whose lives had been little more than a losing battle against poor wages, rudimentary accommodation and relentless exposure to elements that were mostly less than kind and often cruel. She stood squarely before them, reddened hands smoothing her apron.

‘You’ll be Mrs Brewster,’ she said, eyeing Margery and ignoring Alice. Her accent was rounded, edged with a sharpness common to Devonians.

‘And you are?’ Margery asked imperiously.

‘Rose,’ said Rose. ‘Crocker. Mrs. Widowed. I lives in the cottage. My Will were cow-man here. Then my son Dave was. Till he were called up. There be girls doin’ ’is work now!’ she said derisively. ‘I’m to ’elp ’ere, Mr Bayliss says. With the domestic work. Assistant to the warden.’ She turned to Alice, ran her eyes over the good suit, the fine gloves held loosely in a well-shaped hand, the soft leather handbag and the diffident expression. ‘But you ain’t never the warden!’ she exclaimed. Alice blanched.

‘This is Mrs Todd,’ Margery announced, firmly. ‘We are here to see your employer.’

‘Says ’e’ll be five minutes. ’E’s busy with the carpenter. I’m to show you round down here. This way.’ Rose preceded them into the kitchen, turning to catch Alice’s reaction to it for, despite the newly painted walls and whitened plasterwork between the overhead beams, it was gloomy.

‘Scullery’s through there,’ Rose said, indicating a door in the far wall. ‘Two sinks it’s got and beyond it there be a room where us used to make cheese. Reckon that could serve as a laundry.’ Rose noted with obvious pleasure that Alice was clearly taken aback by the kitchen and appeared unwilling to inspect either scullery or potential laundry.

‘Of course the bed linen, towels and the girls’ overalls will be laundered in Ledburton,’ Margery announced comfortingly, but Alice hardly heard her.

‘This here’s the range,’ Rose continued sweetly, pointing to a looming lump of black metal, the doors to its ovens sagging from their hinges. ‘And Mr Bayliss has ordered a paraffin stove with four burners. Now, if you’ll follow me...’ She led them back through the cross-passage and into the room opposite the kitchen. ‘This here’s the parlour,’ she said. ‘Leastways ’twas the parlour. Mr Bayliss says it’s to be a recreation room for the girls now. He’s getting in a piano and a gramophone and there’ll be easy chairs and a sofa I daresay...’ The room was large and square. Two low windows faced south and through the swags of creeper, sunlight speckled the stone floor. Two other windows, facing north, looked out onto the yard. It had the same low beams as the rest of the ground floor and a wide fireplace in the chimney wall. ‘And this through here will be the warden’s room,’ said Rose, opening a door through which a second, smaller room was visible. It too had a double aspect. The bulk of the chimney breast intruded into it, producing an

interesting effect of two areas, each with its own window, one south, one north, and with a small fireplace where the room narrowed. Alice was immediately taken with this room. A divan bed at either end. One for her, the other for Edward-John. Her mother's desk opposite the fireplace. An armchair on either side of it. It was possible. Someone entered the room behind her.

Roger Bayliss was a gentleman farmer. An educated man whose family had owned its acres for several centuries, living a mile away from this building in the modest but comfortable farmhouse known as Higher Post Stone, to which each generation had added various extensions. Elizabethan solidity had been succeeded by Georgian elegance and Victorian affectation, the result being more interesting than architecturally significant. The man was tall. Alice's first impression of him was of strong shoulders and a face that, although lacking any particularly distinctive feature, was acceptable, even handsome. His greying hair had once been dark and his eyebrows were showing the first signs of eccentricity. He wore riding breeches, a lightweight waterproof jacket and well-polished leather boots. He held a riding crop in his right hand and stood tapping it irritably against his left palm. It occurred to Alice that he might have been using it on the carpenter. She was dismissing the thought as unworthy while Margery greeted him.

'Roger!' she said, extending her hand. 'Haven't seen you since the Blatchfords' Christmas bash! How the hell are

you?’ Alice suspected that for a split second Roger Bayliss was unable to place Margery but he recovered quickly, said that he was well and enquired, not however by name, after the health of her husband. Now it was her turn to look blank. ‘Gordon? He’s fine as far as I know,’ she said, laughing. ‘I’m so damned busy these days I hardly see the man!’ This reminded her of the purpose of her visit. She turned to Alice. ‘May I introduce Mrs Todd?’

In Alice’s hand Roger’s felt large, rough and warm. Hers in his struck him, although her grasp was firm, as cold. Her smooth, narrow fingers slipped through his as she withdrew them. Margery was talking.

‘As I told you on the telephone, Mrs Todd hasn’t quite as much experience as we would like, but she does have a Certificate in Domestic Science and before her marriage took a cordon bleu cookery course in Paris.’ Alice saw one of Roger Bayliss’s eyebrows lift. ‘She has, until the outbreak of war, run her own home, of course, and raised her son...’ It sounded weak. Behind them, Rose cleared her throat, eloquently suggesting her own lack of confidence in Alice. Without looking at her, Roger asked Rose to show their visitor over the upper floor. He did not say please. There was a silence as Alice and Rose left the room. Roger waited until their footsteps had faded. Margery smiled.

‘Your Mrs Crocker seems a bit hostile!’ she said. Roger shrugged.

‘You know these Devonians, Margery. Distrustful of

strangers to a man.’ He peered out of the north window, checking on the horse he had tethered to the yard gate. ‘This Mrs...’

‘Todd,’ Margery finished for him and waited.

‘Isn’t she a bit...’

‘Genteel?’ Margery ventured, hoping he would not bring up the matter of Alice’s lack of experience, confidence or natural authority.

‘Some of these girls are going to be pretty rough characters. Will she be able to handle them?’ Margery avoided giving him a direct answer by flicking through the notes she had attached to Alice’s application form.

‘She’s not quite what we’re looking for, I know. But there’s absolutely no one else I can offer you! Beggars can’t be choosers, Roger!’

Upstairs, Rose’s tour was almost complete. Alice was paying little attention as she had already decided that the prospect of running a hostel in this building was not only beyond her but that her prospective employer shared this opinion.

At one end of the upper floor partitions were already in place, transforming the available space into one large bedroom containing three beds, two slightly smaller rooms, each housing two beds, and a fourth rather cramped room which would also accommodate two girls. Each bedroom had its own low, square window and, as well as its beds, just enough space for the dressing table and wardrobe that would

shortly be moved into it. At the other end of the building, studs were in position for another room, which would make provision for a further two land girls who might be required either to join Roger Bayliss's workforce, or whose labour could be hired out to one or other of his neighbours. There was also, above the porch, a small space with a tiny, high window, which Rose described as a boxroom, and next to this a bathroom equipped with a stained, white enamelled bath with claw feet, its brass taps bright with verdigris. In one corner was a hand basin, in the other a lavatory.

'Only one bathroom!' Alice breathed.

'One more'n I've got!' Rose snapped. 'The range heats the water but there'll not be enough in the tank for separate baths. Reckon they'll have to share. Still, 'tis better than a tub in front of the kitchen range, which is what I 'as to make do with!' she finished virtuously.

At the foot of the stairs they encountered Roger and Margery. Roger dispatched Rose to unpack a box of crockery that had arrived that morning.

He stood, regarding Alice, making her feel as though she might be an item of livestock he was considering bidding for at a cattle auction and she wished, more fervently than she had ever wished before, that James was here. That he would put a protective arm round her and explain that it was all a misunderstanding. That she was, of course, to accompany him to Cambridge. But she knew that this was not going to happen and she had recently guessed why.

When Penelope Fisher had first been assigned to James as his secretary and personal assistant, he had mentioned her quite freely and frequently to Alice. My secretary thinks this, says that, has been reading this or that novel, liked this or that film. One evening, before the move to Exeter, he had brought her home for dinner. She was a nice-looking, soberly dressed girl. Rather thin. Rather quiet. Slightly humourless. Harmless enough, Alice had thought. But as the months passed, James had spoken less and less of her to Alice. In fact he had spoken less and less to Alice about anything. Apart from brief discussions of the day's news of the war and any domestic matter that needed his attention, they communicated very little. When she had asked, over supper one night, whether Miss Fisher would be going with him when his department moved to Cambridge, James had hesitated a touch too long before answering, yes, of course she was going, adding that she was a valued member of his department. Roger Bayliss had begun to speak.

‘Not too daunted, I hope, Mrs Todd?’

Alice hesitated. She wanted to say, yes, she was daunted. She wanted to look helpless. To apologise for wasting his time. To be aboard the bus, travelling back to Exeter. To re-enter the depressing safety of the rented room. She cleared her throat and forced herself to meet his eyes.

‘I hadn't realised quite how...’ she hesitated.

‘Primitive the place is?’ he finished for her.

‘You’ll think me foolish. But I didn’t know. Wasn’t told... that this building was not already in use as a hostel.’

‘I need more labour,’ he said. ‘Lower Post Stone has been lying idle. Seemed sensible to use it as a billet.’

‘I understand that. But I’d expected to be taking on an establishment that was—’

‘Up and running?’ Margery cut in brightly, attempting to ease the tension between the woman who needed work but not this work and the man who needed a warden but not this warden.

‘It’s a valid point, Margery,’ he conceded, glancing at his wristwatch. Margery launched into a spiel.

‘Most of our smaller hostels are very much like this one, Mrs Todd. We’ll see you get all the standard equipment – a bread-slicer for the sandwiches and so on. There’s a telephone in the barn across the yard – for emergencies – and a generator for the lights so you won’t be dependent on oil lamps – at least not downstairs.’

‘If you feel it’s going to be too much for you, Mrs Todd...’ Roger Bayliss sounded dismissive. He had looked at her, listened to her and found her wanting. She felt insulted.

She asked for the weekend to consider, but he shook his head and said it was out of the question. Then he said he had to leave them. That running his farm almost single-handed meant that his time was short. He asked Margery to give Alice his telephone number. ‘Ring me by noon tomorrow if your decision is positive, Mrs Todd. Otherwise I’ll assume

it's not. All right with you, Margery?' Margery glanced at Alice and nodded. He excused himself and left them. Rose came into the room with an armful of the old newspapers in which the crockery had been packed. She dumped them in the fireplace, straightened and wiped her hands on her apron. She saw Alice flinch as the yard door slammed noisily behind her employer.

'That's Mr Bayliss for you!' she said, enjoying the effect of her words on Alice. 'On a bad day you can hear his door-slams two fields off.'

Buses from Ledburton into Exeter were infrequent and it was dusk by the time Alice arrived back at the boarding house. She hurried up the stairs, anxious to confirm that Edward-John was safely home.

He was in the rented room, sitting at the table playing Happy Families with his father. He smiled at his mother as she entered but the looks that passed between his parents reaffirmed what he already knew and he sat looking gravely from face to face.

James seemed thinner than Alice remembered. His face was almost gaunt. Guilt perhaps. Or maybe simply the strain of wartime London. His suit was a new one. His appearance was altogether sharper, more suave than when she had last seen him. The bones of his face were as familiar to her as her own and yet he seemed almost a stranger now that she did not share or even know his plans. She wished she could tell

him about the awful farmhouse and the impossible job but she could not. She felt her son's eyes on her.

'Have you had your tea, Edward-John?' When he shook his head Alice took two pounds and fifteen shillings from her purse and told him to give the rent money to Mrs Bowden and to ask her if she would very kindly make him some beans on toast for his tea. He protested, appealing to his father to be allowed to stay.

'Off you go, there's a good chap,' James said. Edward-John sighed and left them.

'This is so awful for him!' Alice began. 'I don't know how you—' She stopped. Reproach was useless and James did, to his credit, look as wretched as she felt. 'Why are you here?' she asked. 'I wasn't expecting you until Edward-John's half-term.' James got to his feet and walked about the room, making the loosened floorboards creak. His shoes were new and well polished.

'This situation...' he began.

'So your wife and your child are "a situation", are we?' James sighed and sat down. After a moment he began again.

'Penny thinks...' So it was 'Penny' now. He paused. 'No...I think...' He wasn't going to blame his lover or hide behind her feelings. Alice hated him for being so considerate, so noble. 'I think it's best if I remove the rest of the stuff I have here and...'

'And leave us?' Alice completed the sentence for him and stood, searching his face. 'Just...leave us, James? Here?'

The scene which followed, conducted in lowered voices so that neither the other tenants, Mrs Bowden or Edward-John should get wind of it, was bitter. As they argued James packed a suitcase with the clothes he had previously left in Exeter. He took several of his books from a pile that was stacked against a wall. Since bomb damage had forced the family from the house they owned in Twickenham, their furniture had been stored. Exeter had been thought of as a temporary refuge until a more permanent home, safe from the bombings, could be arranged. As a result of this, James's personal belongings had been scattered between a warehouse, rented rooms in Exeter and the small flat in Finchley that he was currently sharing with a young colleague. He was closing the suitcase as his son came back into the room. Edward-John looked at the case and then from one parent to the other.

'Say goodbye to your father, Edward-John,' said Alice and she went to the door and stood, holding it open. Edward-John and his father shook hands. Then James took the weight of the suitcase and went out through the door.