

# *Chapter One*

The small, overworked bathroom was, even on this cold February morning, warm and faintly perfumed by the cheap scents of the soaps and shampoos favoured by the ten land girls who shared its claw-footed bath, washed their smalls and shampooed their hair in its tiny washbasin and sat on the Edwardian wooden seat of the WC whose worn brass chain connected it to a noisy cistern, way overhead.

Alice Todd lay in the hot water, relishing the one event in her crowded day which provided the closest thing to relaxation and even luxury available to her since twelve months ago, when she had become warden of the Land Army hostel that was housed at Lower Post Stone Farm.

During the first, chaotic days following her arrival, Alice had discovered that the early mornings – when the girls were gone and the only sound in the solid old building was a distant clatter from the scullery where Rose Crocker, the cowman’s widow, was washing up the breakfast dishes – belonged to her. The empty bathroom was hers as were the contents of the tank of wonderfully hot water.

By late afternoon, when the land girls came roaring back from the fields, hungry, cold, muddy and irritable, the pressure on the bathroom was extreme. The altercations which arose over whose turn it was to use it, how much water was allowed and how long was too long to spend in possession of each meagre tubful, erupted on a regular basis and had been known to come close to violence. Frequently as many as three girls used the same bathwater, climbing in and out, one after the other, while steam drifted and the pipes spluttered and gurgled as the range in the kitchen below struggled and failed to meet the demand for hot water which the girls imposed on it. But in the mornings, when the girls were absent, the plumbing silent and the water hot, Alice would fetch her sponge bag and her towel, make her way from her bed-sitting room, through the empty recreation room, climb one or other of the narrow staircases that led to the upper floor and take possession of the bathroom.

Her mind, while she lay, for the ten minutes or so which she allowed herself, in the warm, soapy water, seldom wandered as far as any contemplation of the situation in which the breakdown of her marriage had placed her. Instead, her responsibilities as hostel warden dominated her thoughts. She would find herself checking, almost unconsciously, the supplies in her pantry, visualising the rows of labelled tins, the bins of dried peas and lentils, sacks of potatoes, turnips or swedes, the packets of porridge oats, pudding rice, flour and sugar. Occasionally her mind would stray towards more personal concerns. Did she, for instance, need to order any items of school uniform for Edward John, her ten-year-old son? Had she replied to her solicitor's most recent letter regarding the divorce proceedings? But, mostly, she pondered on how best to utilise the small amount of fresh meat the butcher would deliver that day. Then she would get to her feet and with the warm water running from her skin, remove the plug, wrap herself in her towel and step down onto a bath mat which was unpleasantly clammy after its heavy use on the previous evening.

Pale sunlight, thin with February cold, was this morning illuminating the bathroom through a low window, frosted by condensation. Alice cleared the steamy mirror above the basin and peered at her reflection.

Sometimes, particularly since her arrival at the farm,

it had seemed strange to Alice that despite the huge changes that had taken place in her life, her reflection so closely resembled the woman she had been before the progress of the war had so radically altered it. Her marriage had failed. Another woman had taken possession of her husband. Her home in Twickenham remained deserted and boarded-up since a German bomb had struck the leafy, suburban street in which it stood. Her son was at boarding school, spending only his weekends and holidays on the farm, where he shared his mother's attention with the diverse group of young women for whom she found herself largely responsible.

Alice contemplated the oval face reflected in the misted mirror. The grey eyes were steady, the brows fine, the mouth good-tempered and the dark blonde hair, piled onto the top of her head, was luxuriant. Despite the loss of home and husband, the months of unremitting hard work, the pressure of responsibility and the various crises that had punctuated her time at the farm, she was still, recognisably – and slightly surprisingly – herself. Somehow she had survived it all, and perhaps by following the predictable but sound advice of the indomitable Rose Crocker – ‘Just take things one day at a time, my dear’ – she would, she realised, continue to survive for as long as she had to.

At first Alice's task as warden, work for which

she was neither qualified nor temperamentally suited, had overwhelmed her. She struggled to fulfil the huge demands made on her and often came close to giving up and retreating back to the rented room in Exeter which had housed her and Edward John after the London bombing had left them homeless, and where her husband had arrived suddenly, one evening, and told her that their marriage was over. But, needing to provide an income for herself and safety for her son, she had squared her shoulders and struggled on.

It had been obvious to Alice that, initially, her employer Roger Bayliss, the farm's owner, had little or no confidence in her. The Land Army Registrar, too, had doubted her suitability as warden and only appointed her in the absence of anyone more able.

The farmhouse, which had stood empty for years and would, in any other circumstances, have been declared unsuitable for human habitation, was more or less derelict when Roger Bayliss, having lost most of his able-bodied farmhands to the war, had been obliged to utilise it as a billet for the ten young women who were to replace them. A lick of paint and a few partitioned bedrooms on the upper floor had hardly transformed it. Years of neglect and a dozen harsh Devonian winters had left the building so cold and damp that months had passed before constant fires followed by summer weather had made any impression on it.

Although Alice was largely unaware of it, her year as warden at Lower Post Stone Farm had changed her. She had grown stronger and more assertive. No longer simply a submissive, dependent wife, her association with her land girls and her increasing familiarity with their circumstances, some of which had astonished and even shocked her, had broadened her mind and extended her sensitivity. She was protective of them and without being conscious of it, had won their respect and their loyalty. Even her domestic assistant, the sharp-tongued Rose, initially her harshest critic, had been won over and had become a staunch ally.

The lack of confidence, which in her early weeks on the farm had coloured her employer's opinion of her, had developed, without her being aware of it, into an undeclared regard, now bordering on stronger feelings which, possibly, even he did not fully recognise.

Back in her room, Alice had dressed, quickly pulling on the slacks, silk shirt and thick sweater that kept her warm in the draughty farmhouse. She brushed her hair, coiled it onto the nape of her neck and was working a trace of lipstick onto her mouth when Rose's penetrating Devonian voice reached her.

'The boss be 'ere!' she called, 'Rabbits, he's brung. And daffs! Bain't your birthday, be it?' Alice said it wasn't and went to open the door.

Roger Bayliss had ridden down from the higher farm, dismounted, hooked his horse's reins over the

gate post and was approaching the front door of the farmhouse. From one hand three recently snared rabbits swung. In the other he held a bunch of daffodil buds, the tightly furled petals still more green than gold. He stood, his head slightly inclined to avoid contact with the warped oak lintel, a self-conscious smile on his usually grave face.

He was a tall man whose general bearing was slightly at odds with the broad shoulders and well-shaped, leonine head. There was something withdrawn, almost joyless, about him which had always puzzled Alice. She thought his years of widowhood might be its cause, or, more recently, the near-tragedy that had befallen his son.

Christopher, a pilot in Fighter Command, had, a few months after Alice's arrival at the farms, suffered a spectacular breakdown and been discharged from the service. After some time confined in a military psychiatric hospital he had retreated, alone, to manage his father's neglected woodlands, which lay on rising ground between the Post Stone farms and the moor. Roger's reaction to this had baffled Alice, who had expected him to show a fatherly concern for his son's welfare but had instead seen nothing more than a reluctance to involve himself in it.

Alone at Higher Post Stone Farm and preoccupied by the demands the war put on the running of his farms, Roger had possibly been unaware of the depth

or extent of his solitude until Alice's arrival. At first he had regarded her as an incompetent liability and considered that her middle-class background contributed to her unsuitability for the role which her unfortunate circumstances had forced on her. After living for so long alone with his own growing son, his contact with women had, for many years, been restricted to giving instructions to his housekeeper and to the aging wives of the few men who remained on the farm and who occupied his labourers' cottages. He was used to being respected and obeyed but had forgotten how charming the company of an attractive, educated woman could be.

'Happy anniversary!' he announced and when Alice smiled blankly, added, 'It's twelve months to the day since you arrived here! And to be honest, Alice, I didn't think you'd last twelve hours!'

'Neither did I! But to everyone's surprise I did!'

'You certainly did!' He held the daffodils out to her. 'Wild ones,' he said, 'from the orchard.' She thanked him, accepted the flowers and invited him into the kitchen where Rose, who had already poured their cups of morning tea, took the rabbits from him, laid them on the marble working surface at one end of the kitchen and prepared to skin them.

During the early months of her presence at Lower Post Stone, Roger and Alice had met only occasionally and usually in connection with the running of the

hostel or to deal with some personal problem encountered by one or other of the land girls. These meetings between them had initially been formal and slightly stiff. But, as time passed, their association had developed into an amicable working partnership. Roger began inviting Alice out for an evening drink or to modest social events hosted by neighbouring landowners. Their relationship had, as far as Alice's perception of it went, remained platonic and almost professional – a state of affairs which Rose, her sharp eyes and ears tuned to catch any hint of gossip, could neither comprehend nor accept. Now, on the morning of the anniversary of Alice's arrival at the farms, when Roger asked her to celebrate the occasion by having dinner with him, Alice was amused to catch Rose's sharp eyes on her as she smilingly accepted his invitation.

Later, with Roger gone and Rose sweeping the bedrooms, Alice stood at the scullery sink and began to peel vegetables for the rabbit stew. The familiar, monotonous task freed her mind and she smiled ruefully at the fact that she had been so deeply immersed in her responsibilities as warden that an entire year of her life had slipped by, almost without her being conscious of its passing.

Over those twelve months the inmates of the hostel had come and gone. Some of the girls, whose stay had, for one reason or another, been brief, Alice had

forgotten. One had left after a few weeks because her mother had died and she was needed at home to care for her young siblings. Another, a newly-wed, had discovered that she was pregnant and, in accordance with Land Army regulations, had been forced to resign, and one had left the service to become a ferry pilot with the RAF Air Transport Auxiliary. But the others, who had arrived at the farm during the same, freezing February week as Alice, were almost like a family now.

There would, without doubt, be more girls coming and going this year. More squabbling over bathwater and bedrooms. Irritations and jealousies would erupt, often involving the sulky, critical Gwennan Pringle, the oldest of the group, whose spiteful, Welsh tongue and ceaseless, sulky sanctimony provoked regular outbursts from everyone except sweet-natured Hester, whose ability to forgive stemmed from a strictly religious upbringing at the hands of her preacher father. Mousy Hester, who had arrived, dressed in dark colours and black stockings, convinced that the inhabitants of the hostel were conspiring to lead her into temptation but who had, as the months passed, responded to their influence and then fallen in love with a young GI, whose innocence matched her own. Her family had refused to sanction the engagement and had rejected her. But on a snowy January day, only a few weeks previously, Hester, without their blessing, had married

her Reuben at the barracks where he was stationed, after which he had been sent off to train for the invasion of France, practising war on a South Devon beach.

‘Fancy Mr Bayliss bringin’ flowers!’ Rose exclaimed when, dustpan in hand, she rejoined Alice in the kitchen.

‘Nice of him, wasn’t it?’ the warden said lightly, dumping potato peelings into the pig bin. ‘We’ll put them in the recreation room where the girls can enjoy them.’

‘They bain’t for the girls, Alice!’ Rose teased. ‘They’m for you and you knows it! A married woman too! Ought to be ashamed!’

Rose missed nothing. She was shrewd, sharp-tongued, inquisitive and, if it suited her, protective. When the two women had been thrown together, Alice as warden and Rose as her domestic help, Rose had at first been spiteful. She saw only the warden’s obvious lack of confidence in her ability to carry out her work and resented what she perceived as Alice’s unjustified authority. Then she had watched as the warden struggled with her situation, overcoming her initial panic and vulnerability, turning her determination to survive into strengths and then skills. Gradually, as Alice had established respect from the land girls, their employer and the farm hands, she had won Rose’s unconditional support. She had flushed with pleasure

when, after only a few weeks, the warden had put the relationship on Christian-name terms. 'Alice,' she had breathed to herself. 'I am to call her Alice!'

Alice had put the daffodils into a china jug and set it in the centre of the large, scrubbed pine table where the buds soon responded to the warmth of the kitchen. By five o'clock, when the lorry delivered the land girls back to the hostel, they were already unfurling.

Before the girls were allowed into the building they were expected to remove their boots and, if the weather was wet, their waterproofs. Often these were so caked with mud that Rose would insist on the girls taking them into the yard and sousing them under the pump before they could be hung, in a dripping row, under the porch. Damp dungarees, sweaters and even socks would be hoisted up above the kitchen range, where they would steam and then dry, ready for the next morning.

Today, half an hour after they arrived home, some of them already bathed and all of them at least warm and dry, the girls clustered round the kitchen table where Alice and Rose were doling out stewed rabbit, mashed potato and carrots.

The two close friends, Marion and Winnie, both Northerners, had over the months observed Alice's table manners. To begin with they had dismissed them as 'posh' but after a while they adopted them

and now, when they had finished eating, placed their knives next to their forks and no longer pushed away their empty plates.

‘Your roots is showin’, Marion.’ Winnie, with her mouth full, eyed the dark parting through her friend’s bleached hair. ‘I’ll have a go at ’em after, if you want. That’s if there’s any peroxide left.’ Marion did want and was sure there was at least half a bottle of peroxide, which, she said, would be more than enough.

Marion’s ambition, when it came to her appearance, was a simple one. She wished to be – in fact she needed to be – glamorous. Her hair must be as blindingly blonde as Jean Harlow’s, her lashes as thick and dark as Jane Russell’s, her stomach flat, her breasts voluptuous, her fingernails long, curved and crimson. Since joining the Land Army she had been forced to rethink the fingernails but, as a result of an hour or so of hard work, when she was bathed, foundation creamed, eyelashed, powdered, corseted and perfumed and ready to respond to the hooted horn of the army staff car that had arrived at the farm to collect her and Winnie for a night out, Marion would have transformed herself from a plain, scrawny bottle-blonde, with features that were too sharp, eyes that were too small, lips that were too thin and skin that was too coarse, into a being, scented with Californian Poppy, who, in the subdued light of a public bar,

a dance hall, or the back row in a cinema, would pass as beautiful. Knowing she had achieved this gave Marion an assurance which captivated and held the male attention she craved. She would be the life and soul of every party, the loudest voice in a sing-song, the leader of the conga. She jitterbugged and Lambeth-Walked longer and faster than anyone, and when she kissed a bloke, he stayed kissed. Winnie, on the other hand, was basically pretty. It required very little time for her to reach the standard of readiness for a night out which it had taken Marion hours to achieve. Her naturally blonde hair may not have been as brilliant as her friend's but it was lustrous and heavy, curling prettily round her winsome face. Men liked her smile. Marion may have been their first choice but with Winnie they could relax. She would happily spend an entire evening with one young man or another without him feeling threatened, as Marion's conquests would often be, by uniformed rivals, who pulled rank and challenged for her favours.

'You'll ruin your 'air, you will!' Gwennan's comment, as usual, was a negative one. 'Girls as carry on like you do, bleachin' and dyeing and that, are bald by forty! I read it in the paper!'

The land girls, their rice pudding bowls scraped clean, were preparing to leave the table when Rose, not to be outdone by her employer's attention to the warden's anniversary, emerged from the pantry

bearing a sponge cake, decorated with Devonshire cream dotted with strawberry jam. The girls responded enthusiastically to the treat.

‘Is it somebody’s birthday?’ they chorused.

‘Whose?’ several demanded.

‘Nobody’s,’ Rose announced. ‘But ’tis an anniversary just the same! Alice...Mrs Todd to you...’as been ’ere at Lower Post Stone Farm for a whole year!’

‘Never!’

‘We all have, Mrs Crocker!’

‘True,’ Rose grudgingly admitted, ‘but ’tis Mrs Todd’s cake all the same!’

‘Twelve months, already!’ someone sighed.

‘Time flies when you’re enjoying yourself,’ Gwennan murmured, dolefully examining the line of new blisters across her palm, caused by three days of hoeing between rows of brassicas.

‘Cut the cake, Mrs Todd!’

‘Go on!’

‘Make a wish, Mrs Todd!’ Alice took the knife from Annie, the vivacious young Jewess who was smiling up at her.

‘What shall I wish for?’ Alice asked them.

‘For a week’s leave for my Reuben,’ Hester suggested, her Devonian accent matching Rose’s. ‘So us can honeymoon proper!’

‘For someone to put a bullet through Adolf Hitler, so we can all go ’ome!’

‘For that gorgeous GI I met last Sat’d’y to make an honest woman of me and ship me off to the States!’

Alice expertly divided the cake into eleven equal portions. There were eight girls in residence. Then there was Rose, Alice herself and Edward John who, as usual on a Friday evening, had arrived from his boarding school for the weekend. She did not make a wish except in a general way, for the well-being and happiness of all of them.

It was on the evening of that day that the war, which had brought about the situation in which she and her charges found themselves, intruded in a violent and distressing way upon it. This was something that had happened on several occasions over the past year, when the quiet, pastoral routine of the higher and lower farms had been disrupted by disasters which always seemed to take their occupants unawares.

The Post Stone girls were, of course, always conscious of the war, which was rumbling on, far away, in Italy, Greece, Russia, North Africa, in the skies over England and at sea, where the North Atlantic convoys and their Royal Naval escorts were constantly under attack from German U-boats, but the details of the various theatres of operation and the outcome of specific battles mostly escaped them.

Letters from men on active service were heavily censored and when home on leave, boyfriends and

brothers had better things to do than talk about the war.

Alice kept herself informed of the war's progress by listening, when time permitted, to the regular bulletins broadcast by the BBC. She sometimes discussed the news with Roger Bayliss and occasionally with Margery Brewster, who, as village registrar for the Women's Land Army, was responsible for Lower Post Stone and a number of neighbouring hostels. But Alice's girls were, most of them, fully occupied by the struggle to survive their punishing workload, to keep as warm and dry as they could and, on Saturdays, to make themselves as attractive as possible for a weekly outing, when they hitched a ride to Exeter and went to the flicks or a dance, or, if they were lucky, both.

And so it was that on the night of Alice's anniversary, they were again pulled up short and shocked by what happened.

When they recalled it, during the hours, days, even weeks, that followed, no one was ever quite certain who had been the first to hear the weird howling sound as a burning aircraft approached, fast, through the darkness and roared, low, over the farmhouse and its cluster of barns. Trailing smoke and flames, it dropped briefly out of sight before smashing into the stand of elms at the far end of the five-acre paddock, less than a mile from the building in which nine

women and one ten-year-old boy listened, transfixed.

Edward John, engrossed in the latest Biggles book, was already in his bed, which stood at one end of the large downstairs room designated as his mother's bed-sitting room. Rose, the scullery tidy after the meal and the kitchen table set ready for breakfast, had crossed the yard to her cottage and was just about to prepare her bedtime cup of Ovaltine when she remembered she had washing on her line. Scolding herself because the night air would have dampened it, she went out into the total darkness of her back garden to fetch it.

It was then that she heard it and almost instantly saw it. What she heard, and what everyone at the farm became simultaneously aware of seconds later, was a sound like an express train approaching at speed – or a hurricane – or a tidal wave. Everyone had subsequently described it differently but all of them agreed that it was the most terrifying sound they had ever heard.

In the hostel bathroom the bottle of peroxide was almost empty and Marion's hair was standing in pungent tufts as Winnie worked the pad of saturated cotton wool, back and forth across her friend's skull. Both girls heard the noise and reached the window as whatever it was skimmed the farmhouse roof, grazing the ridge tiles of the barn and spraying burning fuel into the darkness. Gwennan, clad in flannelette pyjamas,

curlers dangling from her thin hair, stood aghast at her bedroom window and later described what she saw as looking like an enormous sky-rocket.

It was Annie, from the small window in her room above the porch, who distinctly saw the dark shape of the plane as it dropped below the outline of the barns. Seconds later, they all heard the shuddering thump and tearing of metal as it ploughed into the trees. Alice and Roger, returning to the lower farm in Roger's car, had simultaneously glimpsed, from the lane, the astonishing sight of a plane just clearing the farm roofs before plunging into the ground.

The Dakota had been on a routine exercise with three others. It had dropped its group of trainee parachutists in the designated area some miles west of Bridgewater and all of them had been safely recovered. It was when the three planes turned and headed away from the drop-site that there had been an explosion in the engine of one of them.

As the stricken aircraft began to lose height, the pilot banked, making for the small airstrip at Dunkerswell. He ordered his crew to bale out, intending to follow them once he was certain that if he failed to reach the airstrip he could put his plane on a course that would ensure a crash-landing in open country.

High ground above the Post Stone farms, known locally as The Tops, loomed ahead of him. The

altimeter read six hundred feet and the pilot knew that to deploy his parachute effectively he must jump before he lost any more height. It was at that moment that he saw, between him and the rising ground, the solid outline of a farmhouse and the cluster of barns surrounding it. He forced the stick back, managed to gain fifty feet and then, as he narrowly cleared the buildings, felt the aircraft judder and stall. Seconds later, as it began to drop, he hauled himself away from the controls and leapt clear of the plane, pulling his rip cord as the slipstream took him and spun him, the ground looming rapidly towards him, the useless 'chute barely inflated behind him.

Most of the land girls who were already prepared for bed had pulled sweaters and jackets on over their nightdresses, run down the stairs, shoved their bare feet into the first pair of boots that came to hand, elbowed their way along the cross-passage and pushed out through the porch. Roger, his car lurching from one pothole to the next, wrenched on his handbrake as the girls streamed out of the building, clutching at each other for support as they negotiated the slippery cobbles. Alice, grabbing a pair of rubber boots from the porch, ordered her son, who, his dressing gown over his pyjamas, was heading after the girls, to stop at once and wait for her.

Rounding the barns, the girls emerged into the field that lay between them and the blazing plane and

stumbled forward, increasingly dazzled by the glare of the flames. Edward John kept pace with them until his mother grabbed him by the hand and slowed him. Gwennan, her curlers bouncing as she ran, pulled at Alice's sleeve.

'Don't go too near, Mrs Todd!' she gasped breathlessly, stumbling over the uneven ground, her gaunt face lit eerily by the fire, her sing-song Welsh voice thin with alarm. 'They could be Jerries for all we know!'

The impact had split the plane into two. Fire engulfed the fuselage but the cockpit section, several yards from it, was intact and was not burning.

Roger Bayliss had used the yard telephone to summon the air raid warden on duty that night in Ledburton village and then hurried through the stumbling girls. Moving ahead of them, he stopped, spread his arms and forbade them to go closer to the wreckage.

Annie Sorokova, her dark hair loose and streaming, the flames of the burning plane reflected in her wide eyes, was reminded of the nights in the East End before she had been old enough to join the Land Army. The London Blitz had been at its height and every night the area around the docks, where the Sorokova family had lived since their arrival from Poland in the 1920s, had been set ablaze, the air shuddering as warehouses and factories disintegrated,

crumpling into gritty dust as the shock waves rolled along the streets.

Each morning there had been more gaps in the reeling rows of terrace houses in Duckett Street, more doors and windows smashed in or blown out. There had been empty desks in the schools, shops that didn't open for business-as-usual because their keepers were dead or dying under piles of rubble. Annie stopped and stood, choking on country air that was now fouled by the stench of aviation fuel and burning rubber.

'There's no one in the cockpit!' Marion's sharp North-Country voice rose above the noise of the fire. The towel had slipped off the bleached corkscrews of her hair, giving her, in the light of the flames, the appearance of Medusa.

'Thank the Lord!' Rose gasped, arriving breathlessly, her apron spattered with mud.

'There were parachutes!' Winnie shouted. Several of the girls had seen the 'chutes drifting silently down and being carried eastwards by a rising westerly breeze.

The ARP warden, his tin hat slightly askew, wobbled across the field on his bicycle, looked round anxiously for something against which to lean it and, finding nothing, laid it carefully on the ground. This was by far the most serious incident he had been called upon to attend. Dry-mouthed, he struggled

to remember the procedure he had been taught on the Air Raid Wardens' Induction Course. The sight of half a dozen wide-eyed, scantily dressed young women, clutching at dressing gowns below which flimsy nightdresses were fluttering incongruously in the wind, confused him, but supported by Roger Bayliss, he began moving them back, out of range of possible explosions.

The plane's markings, just visible as the flames blistered the twisted metal, confirmed that it was 'one of ours' and there did not appear to be any casualties scattered on the ground.

'There wasn't no one inside the burning part, Mr Bayliss, sir!' Gwennan informed her boss, irritably shrugging off the ARP warden's hand when he tried to move her further from the wreckage and adding spitefully, 'Don't you pull at me, mister! I've already gone over once on my bad ankle!'

Reassured that no airmen had been visible, trapped and possibly dying inside the shattered fuselage before it was engulfed by flames, and given the fact that parachutes had been seen before the moment of impact, it was assumed that no lives had been lost and the mood of the onlookers lifted. They clustered, shivering with a pleasurable sense of guilty excitement as the heat of the fire began to reach them.

Soon the first of several military vehicles lurched onto the scene and it was confirmed that a training

parachute-drop had been successfully completed before the mishap. With this news the atmosphere became positively jovial and when Marion and Winnie recognised several acquaintances amongst the attending servicemen, a robust banter began.

Roger Bayliss suggested to Alice that it was inappropriate for the girls, most of whom were in their nightclothes, to be engaging the servicemen in small talk, in a field, at what was now past ten o'clock at night, so Alice, despite being labelled a spoilsport, rounded up her charges and with Rose beside her, walked behind them as they picked their way across the wet grass towards the farm, stumbling over tussocks and molehills and protesting sulkily at being packed off, back to the hostel, when there was a good time to be had at the scene of the plane crash.

It was Hester who spotted the pale, undulating shape in the far corner of the field. She stopped in her tracks, clutched at Annie and pointed.

'Look, Annie! Be that a ghost?' Annie peered through the darkness.

'More like a parachute!' she said. 'Come on!' and she started to move off towards the white object which, by then, had caught the attention of the rest of the girls, who changed direction and began loping and stumbling towards it, laughing, tripping and staggering as they crossed the uneven ground.