Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

There's Always Tomorrow

Written by Pam Weaver

Published by Avon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

PAM WEAVER

There's Always Tomorrow

AVON

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2011

1

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2011

Copyright © Pam Weaver 2011

Pam Weaver asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-267-8

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organisation established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

Acknowledgements

To Eve Blizzard, ever there with an encouraging word, my amazing editor, Kate Bradley, and my agent Juliet Burton – Juliet, you're the best!

This book is dedicated to David, my husband, my lover and my best friend, who never stopped believing in me.

One

Dottie glanced at the clock and the letter perched beside it. It was addressed to Mr Reg Cox, the stamp on the envelope was Australian and it had been redirected several times: firstly 'c/o The Black Swan, Lewisham, London', but then someone had put a line through that and written 'Myrtle Cottage, Worthing, Sussex', and finally the GPO had written in pencil underneath, 'Try the village'.

Australia . . . who did they know in Australia?

She picked it up again, turned it over in her hands. Holding it up to the light, she peered through the thin airmail paper at the letter inside. Of course, she wouldn't dream of reading it. It was Reg's letter – but she couldn't help being curious.

There was a name on the back of the envelope. Brenda Nichols. Who was she? Someone from Reg's past perhaps? He never talked about his war experiences, but perhaps he'd done some brave deed and Brenda Nichols was writing to thank him . . .

There was a sudden sharp rap at the front door and Dottie jumped.

Nervously stuffing the letter into her apron pocket, she opened the door. A boy with a grubby face stared up at her. 'Billy!'

'Mrs Fitzgerald wants you, Auntie Dottie.'

Billy Prior wiped the end of his nose with the back of his hand. His face was flushed, a pink glow peeping out from the mass of ginger freckles, and colourless beads of perspiration

trickling from the damp edges of his hairline. He was very out of breath.

Dottie smiled down at him but she resisted the temptation to tousle his hair. She knew he wouldn't like that any more. Billy was growing up fast. He'd take the eleven plus next year and maybe he'd be clever enough to go to grammar school. As he stood there twitching for an answer, she guessed why he'd come. There was obviously some hitch back at the house and he'd run all the way, keen to do an errand regardless of whether he might get a sixpence for his trouble. He was a good boy, Billy Prior. Conscientious. Just the sort of son any mother would be truly proud of.

'She says it's a pair of teef that you come,' Billy ventured again.

Puzzled, Dottie repeated, 'It's a pair of . . . Oh!' she added with an understanding grin, 'you mean it's imperative that I come?'

'S'right,' he nodded.

'You can go back and tell Mrs Fitzgerald I'll be there directly.'

'If you please, Auntie Dottie . . .' Billy began again, as she turned to go back indoors. 'Mrs F said it was urgent.'

Dottie's fingers went to her lips as she did some quick thinking. Should she leave a note on the kitchen table and go back with Billy? Her mind raced over the preparations she'd already made for the wedding party taking place the next day. Everything was under control; she'd left nothing to chance. Whatever Mariah Fitzgerald wanted, it couldn't be anything serious. Dottie smiled to herself. People like her always needed to feel in charge. To Mariah, any slight hitch seemed like a major disaster. Dottie looked down at Billy's anxious face and her heart went out to him. 'Has there been a fire?'

'No.'

'Did you see an ambulance at the house?'

Billy frowned. 'No.'

'In that case, Billy,' she said, 'the message is the same. Tell them I shall be there directly.'

Billy sniffed and wiped the end of his nose with his hand, palm upwards. He seemed rooted to the spot.

'Off you go then.'

He turned with a reluctant step. 'It's urgent,' he insisted.

'I know, I understand that. It'll be all right, Billy. I promise I will come as soon as I can.'

She watched him go back down the path, worried in case he walked too near the old disused well. Even though Reg had put a board over the top, and weighted it down with a stone, she didn't like anyone walking too close.

Billy's shoulders slouched, so as he reached the gate she called, 'Just a minute, Billy.'

He turned eagerly, obviously expecting her to run all the way back with him. Instead, she went back inside and reached up onto the mantelpiece where Reg kept his Fox's Glacier Mints in a tin. She took it down and looked inside. There were still plenty. She'd filled it up the day before, but he'd been busy last night so most likely he hadn't had time to count them yet. Should she risk it? He could so easily fly into one of his rages if she touched his things. She could hear Billy kicking the doorstep as he waited anxiously, scared of getting into trouble. Should she? Yes . . . she'd take a chance. She went back to the door and held the tin out in front of the child. 'A sweetie for your trouble.'

Billy's face lit up. By the time he'd reached the gate again, the treat was already in his mouth.

'And don't throw the paper on the floor,' Dottie called after him. She chuckled to herself as she watched him quickly change the position of his hand and slide the paper into his pocket.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck five. She'd better get a move on. Reg would be back home soon, another ten minutes or so. If she had to go back to the doctor's house, she'd be there half the night. She'd better tidy up her sewing and shut up the chickens right now. Reg would see to the vegetables after he'd had his tea. With all the rain they'd had lately, they might not

even need watering. According to the wireless, 1951 had seen the coldest Easter for fourteen years, the coldest Whitsun for nine years and, with the height of summer coming up, things didn't look so promising for that either. Everybody grumbled and complained – everyone except Reg. He didn't seem to be too worried.

'All this rain is good for the celery,' he said. 'And it'll help keep down the blackfly on the runner beans. Save me buying Derris dust this year.'

Dottie folded away the pink sundress she was working on and put it in her sewing box. The potatoes were beginning to boil. As she grabbed a handful of chicken feed from the tin by the back door, she turned down the gas and hurried down the garden.

Dottie had lived in their two-up-two-down cottage on the very edge of the village for eleven years. At sixteen, she'd come to live with her Aunt Bessie and now, nearly two years on from Aunt Bessie's tragic death, she lived here as Reg's wife. She smiled as she recalled her wedding day. How handsome he'd been in his uniform. He'd been so nervous, his hands had trembled as he put the ring on her finger. If she had been tempted to practice philosophy, Dottie would say that in life some are the haves and others the have-nots and, despite the sadness of the past, she was still one of the haves. She had come from nothing and now she had a nice little home, good health and – if she was careful – Reg was all right . . . Apart from the times when his horrible moods got on top of him, and he couldn't help that, could he? What was it Aunt Bessie always used to say to her? 'You make your bed and you must lie in it.'

She opened the gate leading to the chicken run and closed it behind her, calling as she went. The chickens clucked contentedly around her ankles, clearly recognising her position as provider.

'Chick, chick, chick . . .'

She opened the door of the henhouse and threw in the seed. Most of the hens scrambled inside straightaway. She had only

to coax a few stragglers to go in before she closed and locked the door. They were still noisy and agitated, but they'd soon roost on the perches and quieten down. Satisfied that all was well, Dottie turned back to the house. She saw that Reg had arrived and was putting his bicycle into the shed. Her heart beat a little faster. He had lost some weight since his illness but he still had his good looks and his hair was still as black as jet. She paused, waiting to see what kind of mood he was in.

'Got the tea ready?' he said cheerfully.

With a quiet sigh, Dottie relaxed. Thank God. He was in a good mood tonight.

'Of course,' she smiled.

'What are you grinning about?'

She punched the top of his arm playfully. 'Just pleased to see you, that's all, silly.'

Something flickered in his eyes and she knew she'd gone too far.

'Oh, silly, am I?'

Her heart sank and she chewed her bottom lip anxiously. 'I didn't mean it like that, Reg.'

As she brushed past him, he grabbed her left breast and pushed her roughly against the back door. His other hand was already up her skirt, his fingers pressing into her bare flesh above her stocking top. His breathing became quicker as, with one deft movement, he undid her suspender. She felt her stocking slip. As his urge became more acute, he pressed his body against her and she heard a crinkling paper sound coming from her apron pocket. Her heart almost stopped. She still had his letter! Her mind went into overdrive. He mustn't know. Please, please don't let him feel it. Please don't let him ask, 'What's that noise . . . What have you got in your pocket?' She could feel it getting all creased up. If he found out, what would she say? How on earth would she explain?

He was kissing her so hard she hardly had time to draw breath.

His tongue filled her mouth and she could feel the rough stubble on his chin rasping against her face. She tried to respond to him – he got so angry if she didn't – but she couldn't. Her only thought was the letter.

The door latch was digging into her side and it took all her willpower not to push him away. Another thought came into her mind. He wasn't going to make her do it here, was he? Not here by the back door, out in the open, where anyone could come around the side of the house and see them? What if Ann Pearce looked out of her bedroom window? She'd never be able to look her in the face again.

'Come on,' he said hoarsely, pinning her to the door with one hand and fumbling with the buttons on his trousers with the other. 'Come on.'

'Reg . . .' she pleaded softly. 'Let's go inside.'

He pushed her again, banging her head painfully against the door as he lifted his knee to prise her legs apart. All at once, he stopped fumbling with his flies and slid his hands over her buttocks. Her skirt went up at the back.

'No,' she pleaded. 'Not here, not under Aunt Bessie's window.'

He froze. She looked up and he was staring at her coldly. His lip curled and he punched her arm.

'Oh bugger you then,' he snarled as he walked into the house.

Dottie grabbed the window ledge to steady herself. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. She stayed where she was for a couple of seconds, her knees trembling and her hair dishevelled. Lifting the hem of her skirt, she pulled at her suspender to secure her stocking again. The back of her head was tender but thankfully there was no sign of blood. She glanced into her apron pocket. The letter was completely crumpled. She couldn't give it to him now. He'd go loopy.

Taking a deep breath, Dottie tugged at the front of her dress to pull it straight and held her head high as she walked back inside. She knew what was expected. Business as usual. They never

discussed it when it happened. He didn't like talking. Five minutes later, her apron and the letter hanging on the nail on the back of the door, she placed his plate on the table.

He put down his paper. 'Got plenty of gravy on that?'

'Yes, Reg.'

He got up from his chair and sat at the table.

'I've got to go back to the house,' she said, aware that she was treading on eggshells.

'Oh?'

'She sent Billy Prior up with a message.'

'Won't it keep until morning?'

'I doubt it,' Dottie said, risking a little laugh. 'You know what she's like. She'll be in a right state. Josephine's wedding is the *wedding of the year.*'

'I can't imagine there's anything left to do,' said Reg, pulling up his chair to the table. 'Not with you in charge.'

She wasn't sure what to make of that remark. Was there a note of pride in his voice, or was it sarcasm? She decided not to ask and went to fetch her own plate.

'Well, you'd better get over there right away then, hadn't you?'

'We'll eat our dinner first,' she said, adding her own note of defiance. 'She'll send the doctor with the car before long.'

'How do you know that?'

She shrugged nonchalantly. 'You'll see.'

'I dare say I'll look for any sign of mildew in the strawberry beds,' he said, mashing his potato into the gravy and spilling it onto the tablecloth, 'and then maybe I'll take myself off to the Jolly Farmer for a pint.'

'So it's all right for me to go then?' she said.

He looked up sharply. 'Got any brown sauce?'

Just as she'd predicted, Dr Fitzgerald, a small man with a shock of frizzy light brown hair, walked up the path about twenty minutes later. Pushing his thick-rimmed glasses further up his

nose, he curled his top lip at the same time, something he always did when he was slightly embarrassed.

Dr Fitzgerald had always admired the simplicity of Dottie's little cottage. Reg kept the garden looking immaculate. The neat rows of carrots, cabbages, beans and peas kept the two of them well fed and healthy. He knew from the various occasions when he'd been called out when Reg was ill that the inside of the cottage was neat and tidy too.

Some would say he was nosy but the doctor made it his business to know all about his patients. Taking umpteen cups of tea by the fireside had enabled him to discover that, born and raised a gentlewoman in the last century, Elizabeth Thornton, known to everyone as Aunt Bessie and the original owner of Myrtle Cottage, had incurred the wrath of her father by marrying beneath her station. Cut off from the rest of the family, she and her beloved Samuel had amassed a tidy fortune in the twenties and thirties by running a string of small hotels, but sadly they remained childless. The frequency of the doctor's visits had increased slightly in 1940, when her only living relative, orphaned by the Blitz, had come to live in the village. A terrible thing to happen to a young girl, but he couldn't be sorry: Dottie had brought a very welcome ray of sunshine back into Bessie's life.

He found the back door open. In the small scullery, Dottie's pots and pans gleamed and glinted. He wondered vaguely where she found the time. He was well aware that she was in great demand in the village. On Mondays and Tuesdays, she worked for Janet Cooper, owner and proprietor of the general store in the village, and on Thursdays and Fridays she was at his own house. Dottie wasn't the usual sort of daily help, all frumpy and with wrinkled stockings – she was attractive too. Damned attractive. Her figure was trim and her breasts soft and round. If she had one fault, it was that she wore her copper-coloured hair too tightly pulled back in a rather severe-looking bun, but now and then a tendril of hair would work itself loose and fall over her

small forehead. He wasn't supposed to, but he noticed things like that. And when she laughed, her clear blue eyes shone and she lit up the whole world. He sighed. Oh to have an uncomplicated life like hers . . . to have an uncomplicated wife like her . . . Mariah's agitated face swam before his eyes.

Dr Fitzgerald cleared his throat. 'We sent the Prior boy up, but we weren't sure if you'd got the message,' he began apologetically.

Dottie gave no hint one way or another. Oh dear, oh dear. He dared not return without her. 'Um,' he went on, 'my wife . . . that is . . . we wondered if you could spare an hour or two tonight, Dottie?'

'I told Billy to tell you I would be there directly,' she said in her usual unhurried manner.

'I see . . .'

'I had to take care of my husband first.' Although her tone was mildly reproachful, the doctor envied Reg Cox – not for the first time. When was the last time Mariah put him first in anything?

'Yes, yes, of course,' he said hastily. 'Um . . . I was just wondering . . . . um . . . if you are able to come straight away, I could give you a lift.'

'Well, that's most kind of you,' she said in a surprised tone. 'I'll just do this and then I'll get my coat.' She picked up the bowl and wandered past him to throw the washing-up water onto the garden. 'And,' she added as she walked past him a second time, 'I'm sure you wouldn't mind dropping Reg off at the Jolly Farmer on your way, would you?'

If the doctor was annoyed by her presumption, he wasn't about to make a fuss. He wasn't stupid. He knew that in her quiet way, Dottie controlled all their lives and for the sake of his own sanity and peace of mind, it was important for him to get their indispensable daily woman back to his wife as soon as possible.

* * *

By the time they arrived at the house, Mariah Fitzgerald was in a complete flap. She'd got Keith running in and out of the house and into the marquee (a large ex-army tent set up on the lawn), with the large dinner plates from her best service, as well as some plates she'd found on the larder floor.

'Don't drop them, whatever you do,' she'd screamed at her already nervous son. Keith tripped over the guy ropes and she almost had a fainting fit.

'You forgot the china, Dottie,' she said accusingly as Dottie stepped out of her husband's car. 'It's a good job I went into the marquee to check. The tables were bare.'

Dottie said nothing but she was bristling with anger. Dr Fitzgerald disappeared somewhere in the direction of the surgery and she heard a door closing. She hung her coat on the peg on the back of the kitchen door and looked around in dismay. She'd expected interference to some small degree but not on a scale like this. Her beautifully organised kitchen was in total chaos.

Mrs Fitzgerald had been going through everything, even the tins in the pantry. The lid of the tin containing the strawberry shortcake was on the draining board, the tin containing the brandy snaps had the lid from the love-all cake on the top and vice versa. The tin of butterfly cakes had no lid at all. Dottie couldn't even see it. When she'd left that afternoon, the dinner plates, on hire from Bentalls in Worthing, had been in their boxes under the shelf in the pantry. They had since been pulled out and the shredded paper used as packing was now strewn all over the kitchen worktops and the floor.

With an exaggerated sigh, Dottie set about putting things to rights. The bread bins were open and some of her carefully counted cutlery was missing from the drawer. What was the point of asking someone to do something and then changing it the minute her back was turned? Mrs Fitzgerald usually trusted her implicitly. What on earth had changed, for goodness' sake?

Keith came in and bent to pick up some more plates.

'You can leave them,' Dottie said tartly.

'But Mother says . . .' he began.

'I'll deal with your mother,' she said, her tone a little less edgy. After all, it wasn't the boy's fault. He stared at her with wide eyes. She smiled and said softly, 'You go and have your bath.'

'I told her you wouldn't like it,' Keith muttered as he turned towards the stairs.

Dottie set off in the opposite direction, towards the garden and the marquee.

'I shouldn't have to do this, Dottie,' Mrs Fitzgerald wailed as she saw her coming.

'And you don't have to, Madam.' Dottie's tone made her employer look up sharply. There was no insolence on her face, but she needed to let her see she wasn't happy.

'There'll be so much to do in the morning,' said Mariah Fitzgerald. 'Why didn't you think to put the plates out? It would save such a lot of time, you know.'

'They need to be washed first.'

'Washed?'

'I have no idea who had the plates before us, Madam,' said Dottie. 'I didn't think you would want to use them unwashed so I've arranged for Mrs Smith and Mrs Prior to come first thing in the morning.'

Mariah Fitzgerald's jaw dropped slightly. 'Well,' she flustered, as she strove to recover her composure, 'the cutlery needs sorting out.'

'That's right, Madam,' Dottie agreed. 'And I've arranged that Mrs Prior will bring her little niece Elsie to do that. She'll polish everything for ten bob.'

Mariah Fitzgerald went a brilliant pink. The napkin she was holding fluttered down onto the table. She looked around helplessly. So did Dottie. She should have come sooner. Right now, she was wishing with all her heart that she hadn't bothered to wait for Reg when Billy Prior had knocked on the door. Now

she'd have to collect up all that cutlery, take all the plates back to the kitchen and tidy up at least forty napkins before she could go back home. She might even have to iron some of them again.

Their eyes met.

'Yes, well . . .' said Mariah, patting her hair at the back. 'I have to be up very early in the morning. The hairdresser is coming at nine thirty.'

Dottie didn't move.

'So . . . so I'll leave you to it, Dottie.' Mariah said, mustering what little dignity she could find. 'As usual, you seem to have everything under control.'

Dottie watched her as she crossed the lawn and sighed. It would be at least another hour before she had everything back to the way it was before.

Reg was all set to spend the evening in the corner of the Jolly Farmer with his pint of bitter. Usually there were plenty of people still willing to buy a pint for an old soldier, but tonight the bar was almost empty. He didn't mind. It had been a long day – Marney and the station master had had him running from pillar to post.

Marney's chest was bad again. Too much smoking, everyone said, but Reg reckoned it was something to do with the POW camp he had been in. Germany somewhere. You could pick up some weird germs in those places. Marney probably lived week in week out on the verge of starvation as well, and that couldn't have helped. Reg might not have been in a palace himself, but his 'rest of the war' was nowhere near as bad as Marney's. Even if it *were* the ciggies that made his cough, who could blame the poor old bugger? He probably only smoked them to forget something.

As Reg stared deeply into his pint, Oggie Wilson drifted back into his mind. He'd never forgotten poor old Oggie, and when he heard what had happened to him, he'd felt as sick as a pig.

Reg never spoke of his own experiences of course. Better to let sleeping dogs, and all that, but when he'd married Dot in '42, he knew he'd fallen on his feet. A nice little place right near the sea, two women at his beck and call – what could be better? Dottie had stuck by him all through the war and it was only the thought of coming home to her that kept him sane while he had been stuck in that bloody prison. He'd finally come back in '48. She'd given him quite a homecoming too. Some of his mates had come back from POW camp to find their missus had given up on them. Jim Pearce's wife had presumed him dead and when he came home he found her shacked up with somebody else. A fine how-d'you-do that was, and the woman had no shame. Reg knew what he'd have done if he'd found any woman of his cheating on him. Not Jim. He'd cleared off and she was still living next door, bold as brass.

Dottie wasn't like that. Dottie had waited and she'd been faithful. Reg took a long swing of his beer. Nah, Dottie would never do anything bad. She was perfect. Too bloody perfect, that was her trouble. Taking her on the doorstep would have added a bit of spice to life. Why did she have to go and mention the old trout? Bloody Bessie with her silly hats and passion for cowboy films, she ruined everything. Even the thought of her made his stomach turn.

He'd had the shock of his life when Aunt Bessie had died and he'd never felt the same since. It had done for his marriage as well. He'd tried to get it together but he just couldn't do it any more. Before the war, he could keep it up for hours, especially if he knew Bessie was listening on the other side of the paper-thin walls. He was a bit rough at times but he'd had enough women to know most of them liked it that way. But ever since . . . well, since then he just couldn't do it any more. Not with her, anyway.

Dottie had never reproached him for it. She was too anxious to please. Sometimes he wished she would. He took another

long drink. Trouble was, she never fought back. Whatever he dished out, she just took it. Well, that was no fun, was it? She was beginning to bloody annoy him all the time now.

'Hey up, Reg. You coming outside?'

He put his empty glass down and looked up. Tom Prior from the Post Office was leaning in, holding the door open. 'We're bowling for a pig,' he cajoled.

'A pig?'

'Nice little thing,' Tom went on. 'Fatten him up and he'll be a lovely bit of bacon when Christmas comes.'

Taking in Tom's weedy frame, the thought crossed Reg's mind that he could do with a bit of fattening up himself. Naturally skinny, he and that fat cow Mary looked like Jack Sprat and his wife.

Reg shook his head. 'Nah, I'll settle for a bit of peace and quiet.'

'Peace and quiet!' Tom chortled. 'You'll get plenty of that when you're in your pine box and staring at the lid. Come on, man. Let's be havin' you. I'll stand you another pint and it's only two bob a go. All in aid of the kiddies' home.'

Reg rose from his chair. 'I don't know why I listen to you, Tom Prior,' he grumbled good-naturedly. 'I never bloody win anything.'

Dottie had worked hard and now she was very tired. The marquee was almost back to the way it had been and the kitchen was nearly straight when Miss Josephine, the bride to be, came downstairs in her dressing gown and wearing slippers.

She wasn't exactly a pretty girl. Her nose was slightly too long and her mouth definitely too wide; but Dottie knew that just like any other bride she would look radiant in the morning. Right now the whole of her hair was kiss-curled, each one pinned together by two hair grips crossed over one another. Her face was white, and the Pond's Cream, thick enough to be scraped

off with a palate knife, hid every blemish on her skin. She was wearing little lace gloves so she'd obviously creamed her hands and, to judge by the puffiness of her eyes, she'd been crying for some time.

'Are you making some cocoa, Dottie?'

'I can easily make some for you, Miss.'

Dottie went to fetch the milk and a saucepan. Josephine sat at the kitchen table. 'Oh, Dottie,' she sighed.

Dottie was tempted to ask, 'Excited?' but the tone of the girl's voice led her to believe her sigh meant something altogether different. 'What is it?'

'Can you keep an absolute secret?'

'You know I can,' said Dottie, striking a match. The gas popped into life and she turned it down.

'I'm not sure.'

'Not sure of what, Miss?'

'That I can go through with all this.' Josephine produced a lace-edged handkerchief from her dressing-gown pocket and wiped the end of her nose. 'I tried to tell Mummy, but she just got cross and shouted at me. Then she said she didn't want to talk about it because she'd forgotten to do something really important in the kitchen.'

Ah, thought Dottie, careful not to let Miss Josephine see her lips forming the faintest hint of a smile. Mrs Fitzgerald had sent for her, not to sort out a few stray plates, but to stop her daughter from calling off the wedding.

Dottie reached for the Fry's Cocoa, mixed a little of the powder with some cold milk in the cup, then added the boiled milk. She kept her voice level, unflappable, as she asked, 'What's the problem?'

'I don't know,' Josephine wailed. 'And before you tell me it's just nerves, let me tell you it's not.'

'Do you love Mr Malcolm?' Dottie put the cup and saucer in front of her, still stirring the cocoa.

'Yes, of course I do!' She dabbed her eyes again. 'How can you

ask such a thing? It's just that I don't . . . I can't . . .' Her chin wobbled. 'Oh, Dottie, supposing . . .'

'Every young woman is nervous on her wedding night,' said Dottie sitting down at the table with her. 'But if you love him . . .'

'I do, I do!'

'And he loves you?'

'He says he does. He's so . . . Oh, Dottie, you're a married woman . . .'

Dottie thought back to her own wedding night. All those old wives' tales her friends teased her with. They only did it because they knew her innocence. What they couldn't know was that their teasing fed her fear of the unknown, the fear of failure, the dread of being hurt. But back then, all her worries had been blown away by her feelings for Reg. Poor lamb, he'd never known real love. He'd never even known a mother's love because he'd been brought up in a children's home. When she saw him waiting at the front of the church on her wedding day, her heart had been full to bursting. Now at last, she would be able to show someone how much she cared and as they'd walked into her honeymoon guesthouse, her one and only thought had been that she would be giving him something he'd never had before. Something very precious . . .

'Haven't you ever?' she began, but one glance at Josephine's wide-eyed expression told her what the answer was. Dottie reached out her hand in a gesture of affection. 'Mr Malcolm knows you've never been with anyone else,' she said gently.

'But I won't know what to do,' Josephine wailed. 'Supposing I fail him? Supposing being married doesn't work?'

'Of course it will work,' said Dottie. 'Even if it's difficult to begin with, you'll make it work.' That's what we women do, she thought to herself. Men pretend everything is fine or go down to the pub, but we get on with it and *make* it work.

Josephine leaned forward. 'Dottie . . . . do you mind? I mean . . . would you tell me? What happens when you and

Reg . . .? Oh, I shouldn't ask that, should I? It's not nice. But what happens . . .? I mean, exactly . . .?'

Dottie glanced up at the clock. What should she say? If she told Josephine how things really were between her and Reg, there would be no wedding. Mr Malcolm seemed a nice enough man. A bit of a chinless wonder as Aunt Bessie would say, but he clearly loved her. Reg had been good and kind in the beginning. Her wedding night had been a little . . . rushed . . . but she knew he loved her really. It was only the war that changed him. All that time he was away, she'd dreamed of what it would be like to have him back home again. It wasn't his fault things weren't the same. Aunt Bessie was right. She always said, 'War does terrible things to people.'

'Dottie?'

Josephine's voice brought her back to the present. She leaned towards her employer's daughter as if she were about to whisper a secret. She wouldn't spoil it for her. She wouldn't tell her how it was, she'd tell her how she'd always dreamed it would be.