



ing loneliness of a crowded apartment house—to look across an empty breakfast table—to long for the family they'd not been able to have—to live again. Bill would have his pension, and with her small salary as a filing clerk they could get by.

Laurie went past the car and walked quickly up the gravel drive, rutted and lined with weeds. The little house with the old-fashioned gables was just as beautiful to her eyes as ever—perhaps even more so now that Charles Drummond was trying to buy it out from under her.

As she got to the corner of the porch, Pete Stinson's cracked voice came to her. "I tell you I can't do any different, Mr. Drummond," Peter was saying. "Them young folks need the place and I already told her they could have it. It isn't the money with me—I'll have enough for what I need—but I want to live the years I got left with a clear conscience, and I sure couldn't if I turned around and sold the place to you just because you offered me more money!"

Drummond harrumphed in reply, then his deep rumble overrode the trembling voice of the old man. "You're being downright stubborn,

Stinson. Think of all the added comforts the extra money will buy you, and besides, those young people can find a better place at substantially the same price."

In her mind, as she unwillingly eavesdropped, Laurie could picture the shake of the shaggy white head. "No use to argue with me, Mr. Drummond. She's to be here this morning to close the deal, and a deal it is. I've always been a little man in the affairs of the world, Mr. Drummond, but one thing I've prided myself on is keeping my word. Maybe this is the last time I'll have a chance to be stubborn and lose something by it, but by Harry I'll do it!"

Laurie saw a bulky figure bearing down on her from the rickety porch, then Drummond was past with a snort and a glare in her direction, but not a word. She raced up the steps and into the house with the world all alive around her again. That Peter Stinson would do such a thing—

Peter grinned self-consciously and swiped at the moist, lipstick imprint on his leathery cheek. "I saw you coming and thought I'd say it loud enough for you to hear. Some men think all they've got to do is open their pocketbooks and folks like me will do anything. Now, Mrs. Harwood, if you have the bank draft, here are all the papers clean and clear . . ."

AFTER PETER STINSON had gone, Laurie stood in the middle of the front room and gazed about her, at the remnants of a once-fine interior. Her head was filled with plans for restoring it as fully as work and love could manage. She leaned her head against the mantel and closed her eyes in a prayer of thankfulness for people like Peter Stinson.

At that moment she heard the steps crunch up the gravel drive and onto the porch. It was Drummond, his face sour and defeated. "Well, young woman," he growled, "I suppose you're quite satisfied with yourself!"

Laurie found it impossible to be angry, happy as she was. "I am, Mr. Drummond. I wanted this place more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, and now I have it. I'm truly sorry if you wanted it as badly, but you must remember I did see Peter Stinson first and he had accepted my offer before you came to see him."

"I know—I know," Drummond brushed past her into the front room, then wheeled to stab a sausagelike forefinger at her. "I wonder if you could possibly understand why I want it." He stopped, thought a moment, then shook his head. "No, I don't think you could. Well, I might as well tell you."

He turned and stomped to the far wall, where he took a white handkerchief from his breast pocket, moistened

the corner of it, and rubbed gently at the dull oak paneling that covered two walls of the room. "Come here," he ordered gruffly.

"Look at that," he said softly, with something close to reverence in his tone. "Only years can do that to wood. I found out too late that this paneling existed, and you beat me here."

Laurie looked at Drummond in surprise: the harsh lines of his face had softened and he was seemingly a different person. Where he had rubbed off the soot and grime, the wood grain stood out in rich tones. He gently passed his fingers over it as he shook his head regretfully.

Laurie realized that she had completely misjudged the man—there was something about The Little Place he loved, too. Her hand went to his arm impulsively.

"I didn't know—it isn't that I wanted to be mean about it, but Bill and I—" She stopped, unable to go on.

Drummond's other hand came over to pat hers. "We do what we feel we have to," he said, then added, "Don't think I'm a collector of things like this, or that I wanted it so I could sell it to some millionaire and make a profit on it."

His eyes went again to the glowing spot of rubbed wood. "I wanted it for myself, and still do."

He turned to her decisively, his brusque self again. "Young woman, to impress a man like Stinson so deeply, you must really have something on the ball. Don't mind telling you I'm a bit impressed myself."

Laurie stood helpless and embarrassed, not knowing what to say.

"Now I'll tell you what I'll do," he said briskly. "Your main object is the house as a whole, right?" When she nodded, he went on. "Going to take a lot of fixing up. So that's where I come in, if you'll listen to reason. I want the paneling for my own house down on the Sound, and if you'll let me have it I'll have expert workmen take it out, replace it with a reasonable imitation, and fix up the rest of the place the way you want it. What do you say?"

Laurie could say nothing. The long years of saving, the skimping, the despair at the slowness with which the house money piled up—now by the grace of God and the intense love of an old man for something even older to live with, there would be money enough and to spare. As for the paneling, there was still time for her and Bill to have some cut from their own oak trees and grow old with it.

"You can look for my workmen tomorrow," Drummond said, then rumbled a soft laugh. "Here—Here, now! Crying women always shrink my lapels." Laurie hiccuped, nodded, and went on crying against the rough tweed of his coat.

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