

Chapter One

LINDA STOOD AT THE WINDOW and watched as her husband turned onto the sidewalk and broke into a run. At the corner of the vacant lot he glanced back to wave at her, then cut through the lot to shorten the distance to the depot. As usual he was late. Already she could see the smoke of the train as it came out of the woods beyond the station. She hoped Tony would catch it, but she must remember to ask him tonight. If he missed it, he had to wash the dishes alone that night. It was a game they had played ever since he had been rebuked by his office manager for too frequent tardiness. Tony most decidedly did not like to do dishes, and the game had been a more effective discipline than the manager's displeasure could be.

She waited until the chug-chug of the engine, borne on the autumn air, told her that the train had left the station again, then she pivoted around on her heel, put her hands on her hips, and stared in belligerent fashion at the room. She spoke vehemently, after a few moments of significant silence.

"Right now I am going to do something to this house. I'm not sure what, but it will be drastic, whatever it is. It will probably be a mess when I get through with it, but I don't care. I'm going to make it *my* house instead of my mother-in-law's!"

She looked first at one side of the room and then the other. With its new furniture, its expensive rugs and hangings, its bric-a-brac that a collector would have envied, it was a room to delight the heart of any lover of beautiful interiors. Every

article in it was in harmony with its surroundings. The colorings were deep and rich with just the right amount of contrast. The pictures were few, but each one was exactly the picture needed at that particular spot. The lighting was, even at this bright morning hour, subdued. In all the room there was not one discordant note.

Linda, however, looked at it with acute disfavor. Then she crossed the hall and gazed at the dining room and its furnishings with the same expression of distaste. The kitchen appeared to arouse still more the spirit of rebellion that was building up in her.

She made a tour of the other rooms, tiptoeing past the nursery lest she waken the sleepers within. Returning to the living room she stood in the middle of the floor.

"I *am* going to do something! I hate this place. I *hate* this place! I hate *all* of it! The draperies make me seasick, the rug makes me nervous, and that grand piano gives me 'the willies.' I don't like bedrooms done in early American. I think all these 'just right' things are a pain in the neck."

She was speaking aloud with the abandon that came from a realization that she was alone in the house after weeks of constant surveillance.

"I know what I'd like to do. I'd like to get rid of the whole mess. I'd give the piano to that little church on the corner. They probably don't have one half as good. I'd like to stick the rugs and draperies into the furnace. Then I'd take that imported china in the dining room and practice throwing it at the big tree by the creek. That's what I'd *like* to do. Being half-civilized, I can't, but I'm going to do *something*. I'm going to go right now and throw those overfed flowers as far as I can send them. Then I'll go out in the lot and pick some weeds, some common little hobo weeds that are more suited to my style."

She seized the tall vase with its long-stemmed flowers,

turned with an angry shake of her shoulders, then stood transfixed with amazement and confusion.

"Tony! How did you get here?"

"Walked."

"You're supposed to be at work."

"I'm supposed to be on my way to work. But I forgot my brief case and came back. So glad I did. I wouldn't have missed this dramatic little scene for anything. Is it a habit of yours to go crazy as soon as I get out of the house?"

"I-I-I- was just—"

"You were just having a hate-fest against my mother, weren't you?"

"No. I-I—"

"Don't make it worse by lying! You do hate my mother and you can't deny it. You don't appreciate a thing she's done for us."

"I do so! That's what's the matter. I appreciate fully that she came into our apartment that was all our own, took us away from it, and fixed this monkey house up for us, then expects us to like it."

"Well, who wouldn't like it? It's much nicer than the apartment—nicer than anything I could expect to get for you for many years, if ever. I'd think you'd be grateful."

"Grateful? My eye! The apartment was *mine*. And there isn't one thing here that's mine except the babies, and if she had *her* way, she'd find something to do with them so that they'd get training more suitable for the grandchildren of the exclusive Mrs. Bannister!"

"Oh, be reasonable, Par! Nobody wants to take the babies away from you. If you'd only try to—"

"Try? Haven't I tried? I let her sell all our stuff we had so much fun getting together. I let her drag us out here where—"

"Where it's lots nicer for us. There's fresh air for the kids, and a garden for you—"

"Excuse me! That garden is *not* for me. That's *your* bailiwick. I'd rather have one little cactus plant in my old kitchen window than that 'colonial' monstrosity."

"Oh, shut up!"

"I won't. I've been shut up for four months, and I'm—"

The door slammed, and she stood in amazement. Tony had walked out on her! She ran to the window and again watched him go down the street. The hot, angry tears blurred her vision, but she gazed after him until he had disappeared behind the clump of evergreens on the corner.

What in the world could have possessed her to say all those things to Tony? She would never have voiced her unhappiness had she dreamed of the possibility of his return. In her heart she had intended to get her outburst over and be composed by the time he came from work in the evening. Having kept still under all of the irritations of the past weeks, why should she have to lose control of herself just now when her mother-in-law had gone and she could enjoy life alone with Tony and the babies once more?

"I don't care," she whispered. "He's just too much of a mama's boy for his own good—or for my pleasure. Why doesn't he stand up to her? I wouldn't have let either of my parents interfere in our lives like she has been doing. They wouldn't have tried it though, bless their hearts. If there was any one thing I always had plenty of, it was freedom from parental interference. I guess I could have used a lot more. There ought to be a happy medium between my independence and Tony's—servility, that's what it is! I can't do a thing with him always siding with her."

An imperative call from the nursery put an end to her musing, but all morning as she worked the resentment within her would not be downed.

She and Tony had been happy until his mother came. He hadn't seemed like a mama's boy then. They hadn't had much

money, but they had not missed it. They could always find something to do that didn't cost anything. It had been more fun fixing up the apartment with secondhand furniture than it would have been to go to all sorts of expensive places where folks thought they had fun. Both of them had had too much of that other in their lives already. An evening spent painting an old table was lots more enjoyable. She never would forget the hooked rug they made that first winter, working together over the frame through long evenings and getting a thrill as each detail of the pattern became clear. Where *was* that rug now? Had *that* been sold to a secondhand dealer? Or was it stuck away in a box in the attic with the dishes and cutlery and red enameled pans Tony's mother hadn't considered good enough for the new house? When she had time, she would look for it.

"If it's gone, I'm telling the world somebody had better look out! That was *my* rug. Tony gave me the materials the day we had been married three months, and I said I'd rather have them than an orchid. I wonder how *she'd* like it if I took some of *her* things and junked them."

As she hung the baby-wash in the sunshine of the back yard, she glowered at the neat paths and clipped boxwood borders of the garden that had been carefully planned and was given tender care even yet by a landscape gardener. The trees and bushes on the terrace likewise aroused her dislike.

"I don't like *any* of it. It's like a toy house in a Christmas village. I'd rather live in a grass hut in the jungle or in a sod house on the 'lone prairie!' Oh, *why* didn't she leave us alone?"

Going back to the kitchen to prepare lunch, she remembered that she had burned the eggs for breakfast and that Tony had refused to eat them.

"Before *she* came he ate everything I cooked, even when things were just messes. And when he was so sweet, I tried

harder and harder to learn. But now I feel like burning eggs every morning!"

The open door down the hall revealed the offending bedroom with its quaint wall paper and colonial furnishings. It also reminded her again of the hooked rug. That would have been the logical spot for it, right in front of the little rocker she loved to sit in when she rocked the babies. But Mrs. Banister had banished that rug and bought one not half as pretty.

"It could have been nothing but spite that made her do that. And Tony just gave in like the mama's boy he is. When she's around, he has no more character than a hunk of jello."

She crossed the hall and stood in the middle of the room that Tony's mother had vacated the evening before. Everything was exactly as it should be, the bedspread draped evenly, the shade drawn to just the right point, the exquisitely dainty closet accessories in faultless order.

"How odiously neat! I wonder if anything will ever make me feel as if this room were a part of my house. Even you," she pointed accusingly at the photograph on the dresser. "You look slick and smooth and like a nice, fat, stuffed shirt. Now whyever did she leave you for? Does she think I like that picture? Well, I don't, Madame Mother-in-law! That's *your* Tony. Or rather, it's your *Cherwolde*. My *Tony* is a different guy altogether."

She rushed into the other bedroom and rummaged in a dresser to return triumphantly with a dilapidated billfold.

"Now, just look at the difference! *My* Tony is a *regular* fellow, a husband and dad in a million. Your Chetwolde is just your puppet, jumping around when you pull the strings."

She gazed contemptuously for a few minutes at the photograph in the silver frame, then let her eyes rest on the snapshot in the billfold. The laughing face that looked back at her brought sharp memory of a dear voice saying, "Oh, Pat, I didn't know love would be like this!"

In that instant her mood of rebellion was gone. Whirling on her heel she rushed into her own room and flung herself across the bed.

“Oh, Tony, Tony,” she sobbed, “I can’t stay mad at you. You’re all I have, and I’ll die if anything goes wrong between us.”

Chapter Two

AFTER THE STORM OF TEARS had passed away, she lay quietly thinking over the life she and Tony had had together. She went back even farther than that and realized she had never known what real happiness was until Tony brought it to her. As far back as she could remember, there was the unhappiness that came because of the sharp quarrels between her parents. She could see them now over the breakfast table set up in some hotel room, her mother, lovely and sweet and utterly unreasonable, and her father heavy-eyed, unshaven, and exasperated at her mother's calm uncomprehension of whatever happened to be the point of difference that day. All the reconciliation scenes that came afterward, and the passion of their devotion at other times, never served to blot the memory of the quarrels from the mind of the little girl who often crept away to cry out her hurt in the arms of the wardrobe woman, Aunt Lucy. She used to wonder if husbands and wives always quarreled that way. And she wondered now why such a brilliant man as her father had married a woman who couldn't understand his language even when she used the dictionary. Linda had often helped her mother look up some of her dad's big words after he had slammed the door and left them. Or why had a woman of her mother's charm and beauty fallen in love with a clown? For that was what her dad was. He never denied it. The act that made his name known to theater-goers all over the country was nothing more or less than a piece of delightful clowning. Mother's act was all grace and beauty, while her dad just made laughs for folks.

They seemed as utterly unfitted for each other as a clumsy, lumbering moose and a graceful gazelle. Yet they had loved each other; with a love, however, that did not keep them from quarreling. Did her mother secretly admire and envy her dad his quick wit, and did he adore her for her beauty which was in contrast to his ungainliness? Linda wondered why she, their only child, had not inherited either the wit or the charm.

"I must have been a terrible disappointment to both of them," she mused sadly. "If I had been sweet and lovely like Mother or smart like Dad, maybe I could have held them together. If I had been the kind of child they could exhibit with pride, perhaps Dad wouldn't have fallen for Eloise. I know Mom wouldn't have married Tom if she could have got Dad back. Oh, what a mess it all is, and no wonder I'm the worst part of it. I never had a real family, and now Eloise is all that's left and she hates me. I *can't* let anything happen to Tony and me. It would kill me."

For four years Tony had been the center of her being. It all began the summer after she was a Junior in college. The vacation had started out badly. She had wanted to go with Mother and Tom to California, but Tom said no. Then the day after school closed, while she was waiting to find out what Dad had planned for her, came word of the plane crash in the mountains. She realized that, had she gone, she too, would have been killed. She had wanted Dad terribly then, and he had come to her at the dormitory. They had cried together, she for the mother who had never had time for her child, and he for the beautiful girl whom he had married and lost.

Oh, how she had begged to go with him when he left! But his eyes were sad and his manner nervous as he answered her, "I wish you could, but I don't think it would work out, little girl. Eloise isn't well and has to have quiet. We're going to Canada for two months. I'll arrange for you to go to a good camp this summer, and I'll meet you here late in August to get

ready for school. And, oh yes, there's something else. Listen, Lindy Lou, if anything ever happens to me, there's insurance enough to take care of you. It's all I've ever done for you, but it'll show you your Daddy did love you." Then he was gone. She had been sad and rebellious and very lonely when she had reached the camp in the White Mountains. She was *so* sick of spending her vacations in camps. How she had wished she knew where Aunt Lucy was! It would have been fun to spend another summer with her like the one she had had when the folks were in Europe. But this camp was—just another camp, and she loathed them all.

It was one night when she had been almost ill from moping all by herself, while the other girls played, that they had had guests from across the lake. A half-dozen young men came and gravely presented to the counselors a great stack of identifications, credentials, and references gathered from their bill-folds and such letters as they could produce. With the counselors' consent they had been allowed to stay for an evening of fun.

One of the boys, the big bashful one whom the others called Chetwolde, had sought her out as she stood alone.

"I feel that way, too," he stammered. "May I stay here with you?"

He not only stayed then, but came back the next day, and the next, and the next. Lying now across her bed with lashes wet with tears of loneliness and shame, Linda forgot her grievance at Tony, forgot even the babies asleep in the next room, and remembered only the magic of the days and evenings that followed—the canoe trip up the river, the picnic on the island, the tableaux they put on one rainy night when she and Tony won the prize for the cleverest one. She could still imagine she heard one of the fellows announcing the winners "of this stupendous, colossal, unbelievably magnificent pres-

entation from Shakespeare's immortal drammer *Antony* and *Cleopatra*."

Later as they lingered behind the others in the walk through the dripping woods, the bashful Chetwolde had confessed to her the inferiority complex that made his life miserable.

"I think it started the first day I went to school. The teacher wouldn't believe that I knew my name. And when she tried to pronounce it, all the kids laughed. And everybody's been laughing ever since. Who else ever was named Chetwolde?"

"No one that I ever knew," she confessed. "If you were like my dad you'd laugh with them and make an asset out of a handicap. But you're just not that type. Couldn't you make them call you Chet?"

"I tried it several times, but it didn't go over. I had a second cousin who always managed to keep them reminded of Chetwolde. Whenever kids find out that another kid can be teased, they tease him. And I never had what it takes to bluff it through. Most of the fellows don't laugh anymore, and I'm trying to forget it. But if I ever have a son, I'm going to name him Mike or Pete. And I'm not going to keep reminding him that his mother was a Brewster and his grandfather a Chetwolde!"

He said that so fiercely that she had laughed. "Are the Brewsters and the Chetwoldes so bad?" she questioned.

He laughed with her, then answered soberly, "They aren't bad at all, as ancestors go. All of them had a lot to their credit. And it isn't old John Chetwolde himself that I don't like. It is just his name. If I had to be named after him why couldn't he have been named something that wasn't quite so funny?"

"I won't call you Chetwolde," she had promised soothingly. "I'll call you Antony—no, just Tony. May I?"

"I wish you would. I believe if I were called Tony I could be a different chap, one with some backbone. I think I might even—"

"Might even what?"

"Oh, nothing much. If you call me Tony, may I call you Pat? After all, what is *An-tony* without his *Cleo-pat-ry*?"

"O.K. I like that better than Linda."

"Don't let the other guys call you that, please. I want it to be my name for you."

She had remembered that unfinished sentence and wondered many times what he had intended to say. He might even have —what? Was the old complex still bothering him? Since those days he had married, had done well at his work, and had seemed to be happy. But did the presence of his mother and her constant use of the name "Chetwolde" still have an unfortunate reaction for him?

Shortly after college had opened that fall, he had called to tell her that he had a position with a company in the city near her.

"Oh, how grand!" she cried. "Isn't that luck?"

"Not on your life. There's no luck about it. You see Tony wanted to be near you so he chucked Chetwolde in a corner and came out here and got a job. That's all there is to it."

She hadn't understood then. She had been too happy to think about it. But now she realized he had had to break away from his possessive and domineering mother and had to start in a new position in a strange place. It couldn't have been easy, but out of love for her, Tony had done it. There probably had been quite a scene for, when they were married the next summer, Tony hadn't told his mother until it was over. He had urged that they wait until Christmas before going to see her. A bit more of her anger and rebellion crumbled as she thought of it. Tony had realized how his mother would resent her son's wife, and he knew from a lifetime of experience that he could not stand before her anger.

It had been a wonderful year, that first one. They had only

three rooms, and at first they had hardly any furniture. If they had been wise they would have bought furniture instead of taking that idyllic trip into the north woods. But they weren't wise. They were in love.

Oh, it had been such fun—the building of their nest. Tony had called it the “eyrie” because it was up so high. For a month they had slept with their mattress and springs laid on the floor, before they had money for the rest of the bed. And they had bought their kitchen equipment from the ten-cent store. They had eaten what seemed like a ton of one kind of breakfast food so that they could get some “real silverware.” A wave of hot anger swept over her again as she remembered how that had been replaced by sterling flatware in a colonial pattern. Where was that precious “breakfast-food” silver now? She hadn't even known what had been done with it. Oh, why couldn't *she* have left them alone?

The answer to that was that the stately Mrs. Bannister never left *anything* alone—not if she saw any chance of changing it to suit her specifications of perfection. That first Christmas when they had visited her, she had begun on Linda before they had spent a day with her. She was not sharp nor scolding. Linda could have met open opposition. She was just gentle, sadly patient, and very determined. Linda could not yet look back on that visit, now two years gone, without a shudder of distaste. Had not Mr. Bannister been there to act as buffer, she would have deserted and run long before the week was over. That calm, quiet, stolid-appearing man knew, it appeared, just when to take over a situation and avert “civil war.” Linda thought privately that had Mr. Bannister married Tony's mother ten years earlier when the boy was struggling with adolescent frustrations and psychoses, he might have been able to do victorious battle with even the Chetwolde complex.

“But he did get into the family in time to save that Christmas

visit," Linda mused. "If it hadn't been for him, I probably would have gone crazy or compounded a felony, whatever that is."

The shadow of the visit could not survive in the happiness of their own home, however, and they soon forgot it. Linda, when she looked back, would always see the months that followed through a golden haze. And in May when the baby was born, both she and Tony were so happy that they thought nothing could ever trouble them again. She could close her eyes now and see the room in the hospital where she lay while Tony knelt beside her and tried to tell her what she meant to him. She could see the blue and white of the bit of sky visible through the window, and smell the scent of the roses on the table. And she could feel the tight gripping of Tony's hands on hers as he gulped and said huskily,

"If life gets any better, Pat, I can't stand it."

What had happened to dim that happiness and take away the shine from the love that had been so precious to them? Was it the hard work of caring for a baby in a tiny apartment where there was no place for quiet or privacy? Was it the fact that there never was enough money to do anything but provide the absolute essentials? It could not have been that, for they had laughed over the forced economies together, and the baby had been just fun even when she was cross. Linda had been afraid Mrs. Bannister would come and insist on instructing her in the arts and mysteries of baby care. But Mr. Bannister fell ill just then, and for months his wife was held at his bedside.

"Bless his heart!" she whispered now. "He saved me from her once again. It was almost as if he had that stroke on purpose."

No, that year had been happy in spite of the scarcity of money, in spite of the hard work, the inconvenient apartment,

in spite of everything. Mr. Bannister had died in the spring, but although Tony had really loved his stepfather, it had cast only a slight shadow over their lives.

Could the fact that the babies were only a year apart be blamed for the rift between them. It *couldn't* be that. For Tony had said when he brought her and the new baby home, "Now we're a perfect foursome. Two guys and two gals! I wouldn't trade places with the—the—the chap that gets his weight in gold every year. He's a poor poverty-stricken mortal compared with me!" He had been a dear during those first weeks when she had been frantic with one baby teething and the other crying all the time because no food seemed to agree with it. He had even said one morning after an especially hard night,

"Aren't they sweet and cunning? Fighting through things like this with them just makes you love them till you ache."

No, it wasn't the hard times they had had last summer with the babies. With a cold certainty, Linda knew just exactly when the trouble began. In June Mrs. Bannister had unexpectedly appeared to visit them. Tony had looked from the window one Sunday afternoon and exclaimed, "Oh, no!" in tones of such disbelief that she had rushed to the window just in time to see the driver unloading a vast amount of luggage from a taxi while Mrs. Bannister stood by in her sweet, helpless way. Tony had gone down to help bring the bags and suitcases up the long flights of stairs, and Linda had stood dumbly in the middle of the floor wishing she could take the babies and run some place—any place—to get away from the woman who was even now climbing toward her and surely planning how she could rearrange their lives.

Of course, there hadn't been room for her. Where *could* one put a guest in a three-room apartment that already had four people squeezed into it? She had slept for two nights on the

folding cot Tony had borrowed from a neighbor, then on the third morning had sallied forth from the house with the announcement that she had an idea which would be wonderful for all of them. Linda had hoped it meant she was looking for a small apartment for herself, or better yet, a hotel room that would be only a temporary shelter until she could return to her own home. But at late afternoon she returned with the announcement that she had bought a lovely bungalow in a nearby suburb, and they were all to move in two weeks.

"Just like that!" muttered Linda. "She *would* go out and find a place when other folks have to wait months to get one. I still have my doubts as to what she did to get rid of the former owners. I'll bet they had never thought of selling until she saw the house and decided she wanted it. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to meet their ghosts in the basement some dark day. And she never even asked us if we wanted to move. I most decidedly *didn't*, but we moved anyway. And from that day until ten o'clock last night this has been her house, Tony has been her Chetwolde, the babies have been *hers*. That's why I blew the lid off this morning. I have been boiling for four months, and something just had to blow up."

For another half-hour she lay there turning the problem of these unhappy weeks over in her mind. Tony seemed to have become a different person. Instead of his lighthearted boyishness that had taken all the sting out of hardship and poverty, there had come a moroseness that made her feel all the time as if he were displeased with her. In any difference of opinion between the two women he consistently, with an air of apology to Linda, accepted his mother's plans and ideas. Then in what Linda called his role of "The great appeaser" he would try to persuade Linda that it was for the good of all. In somber parade the events of those weeks passed her in review; the bickerings between herself and Tony in their room at night; the constant supercilious supervision that Mrs. Bannister gave to

every detail of their lives; the great amount of money that she spent on them, making Tony's salary seem not only insufficient for his family's needs, but completely unworthy of notice; the irritation that had become so much a part of her own life that she often feared to speak lest she betray it. But one other picture stood out above them all, the memory of Tony's face as he had gone from her this morning, his eyes sick and shocked, so different from the face that looked out at her from the picture in the wallet.

"You *are* weak, Tony," she whispered. "If you weren't you'd have taken over this situation and beat up both of us women until we learned to live together. But weak or not, you're my Tony, and I'm not going to let things get spoiled for us. I feel like I did when the staff at a hotel once gave me a doll house for Christmas, and then we moved during the next week and left it. Nobody, not even Tony's mother, is going to take my doll house this time. Tony is mine, and the babies are mine, and I'm going to *keep* them. What's the difference whether it's here, or in the little apartment, or in the middle of the Sahara desert? If the foursome is together, nothing else matters."