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A photograph of a person standing on a large rock in the foreground, looking up at a waterfall. The person is wearing a bright yellow hoodie and dark pants. The waterfall is cascading over a rocky ledge into a pool of water below. The background is a dense forest of green trees. The image is framed by a black border with white text at the top and bottom.

***THE BRASS KEYS
OF KENWICK***

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The Brass Keys of Kenwick

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CHAPTER I

ENTER AUDREY

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It had been a day of rain. Torrents had fallen since early morning, and the little town of Chestersmith lay drenched and sodden in the spring twilight. Just about sunset, however, the clouds had broken in the west and shafts of golden light had tipped the budding trees and set millions of pendent raindrops atwinkle.

A breath of warm, sweet-scented spring air was wafted through the window of an appallingly muddy little sedan car, as the driver lowered the glass on entering the town. And immediately on its opening, the beautiful red-brown head of an Irish setter poked itself out of the aperture and sniffed with keen appreciation. The setter occupied the space beside the girl who was driving, and a mound of miscellaneous baggage was piled in the rear of the car.

"Here we are, Susan!" announced the girl, snapping off the windshield wiper. "Thought we'd never get here, didn't you, old dear?" The dog turned to lick her face in exuberant delight of arrival and the girl pushed her off with one hand, while she swung the car in a left turn around a street corner with the other.

"Have a heart, Susan!" she admonished. "I can't wash my face yet awhile. We've got to find the whereabouts of these two addresses first. Better ask at one of the stores, I reckon." The girl often amused herself by talking to the dog as if it were another person. Susan made as suitable a reply as possible by thumping her plumed tail on the seat. They

turned into the one street that looked to be the business section of the sleepy little Maryland town, and the girl alighted and disappeared into a grocery store. When she emerged and had hopped back into the car, she chuckled:

"We're aiming straight for Miss Jenifer Kenwick's, old pal—five streets farther along this road. It's just on the edge of the town and the Newkirks are right around the corner from it. But he remarked something that sounded rather odd—said he advised me to wait till morning before seeing the old lady. Wonder why? Well, anyway, let's go!"

They sped down the street in the deepening twilight. There was a scent of blossoming things in the air, and some forsythia bushes in a front yard had flowered into rich bloom.

"My, but it smells fine!" exclaimed the girl, sniffing luxuriously. "And it's pretty different from what we left up around chilly old Pennsylvania this morning!" The thump, thump of a plumed tail and another attempt at a slobbery kiss was Susan's reply.

"Calm yourself, my dear!" cried the girl. "We arrive at Kenwick!" and she drew to a sudden halt across the road from an odd-looking yet stately old brick mansion. The dog shifted about restlessly on the seat and made an effort to get out of the car.

"Wait a minute," half-whispered the girl, laying a soothing and detaining hand on the glossy brown coat. "Let's just look this proposition over first." They both sat quiet for several moments, the girl staring out across the road at the dim façade of the house, not a window of which showed a

light in the deepening darkness. Presently she drew a long breath.

"It's worth while, all right, Susan, my love! It's a *peach*! Look at that marvelous doorway—look at those semi-octagonal wings!—look at the perfect carving of that circular window at the top!—look at the simple but beautiful lines of the whole thing! The only question is, can I do it justice? . . . But Dad was right, I couldn't have a lovelier subject. I wonder why there aren't any lights lit? Maybe 'old Miss Jenifer,' as the grocer called her, is away. He said she wasn't, but he might be mistaken. Anyhow, the place looks deserted. I suppose, according to the Book of Etiquette, we ought to call on 'old Miss Jenifer' first, but I'm going to take a chance and hunt up the Newkirks instead. Just this minute I'm more anxious to see what our boarding place for the next few months is going to be like than anything else. It must be that house just around the corner. Let's go!"

She switched on the car lights and whirled around the corner toward the only other house near by—a small, sloping-roofed, dormer-windowed cottage down a narrower side road. In contrast to the mansion's complete darkness, this house was attractively lit, with soft-shaded lamps in several rooms. In the glare of the car's headlights, the girl could also discern a pleasant garden at the side, sloping down to the river's edge not far away.

"This must be the Newkirks'. There's no other house around," commented the girl. "Looks good to us, though—hey, Susan? Now you just remain on that seat while I go and attack the Newkirk stronghold!"

She shut the car door firmly on the impatient dog and ran up the walk to thump half-timidly at the brass knocker. Almost immediately a young girl of fifteen or sixteen opened the door.

"Is Mrs. Newkirk at home?" asked the newcomer. "I think she is expecting me. I'm Audrey Blake."

"Oh, yes! Come right in. Mother's been expecting you all afternoon. She'll be down in a minute." And then, a little shyly: "I'm Camilla Newkirk, but I'm always called 'Cam.' You—you're quite different from what I—expected." She did not confess that she had been watching with concentrated though secret eagerness all afternoon for the newcomer's arrival.

"Yes, I'm used to being a great disappointment," half-chuckled Audrey. "But just how was it this time? D'you mind telling me what you expected?"

"Why, I—thought," stammered Cam, a little embarrassed, "that you'd be quite grown-up—a grown woman, probably—and horribly dignified—and all that. And you're just a girl—only a little older than I am. I—I'm terribly glad!"

"Well, I'm glad too, if you are," admitted Audrey. "I can't claim to being exactly 'grown-up'—I won't be nineteen till November. And as to being 'dignified'—I've given that up for life—as hopeless!" She grinned cheerfully at Cam, and they both stood for a silent moment surveying each other while waiting for Mrs. Newkirk's appearance.

What Camilla saw was a rather tall, thin girl in a well-cut though mud-bespattered sport suit, a blue beret covering the thick, wavy dark hair brushed back boyishly—dark grey eyes in which lurked a friendly, confiding look—a row of

white, even teeth, and a mouth whose almost impish grin betokened a keen and well-developed sense of humor.

While Audrey saw a girl only a trifle shorter than herself, dark-haired and slight whose chief claim to attractiveness lay in a pair of lovely and wistful blue eyes. And Audrey, who was training herself to read faces, traced loneliness and boredom and eagerness to be understood in those eyes, and was drawn the more to Camilla because of it. But the moment of mutual scrutiny passed as Mrs. Newkirk descended the stairs to greet the guest.

"So you're Audrey Blake," she said cordially, when her daughter had made the introduction. "We're very glad to welcome you, my dear. I hope you'll be happy and comfortable here. Miss Kenwick has told us a little about you—what little she knew. She never has seen you, of course, but I believe she said your father was a distant cousin of hers. But let me show you to your room. And where, by the way, did you leave your luggage?"

Audrey explained that she had driven down from her home in Pennsylvania in her car, which was now standing out in the road. And she added doubtfully:

"I'll have to confess—I've brought my dog Susan along. I'm terribly fond of her and we're never parted for very long. She's well-trained and won't be any trouble, and I'll feed her and all that myself. I do hope you won't mind!" She looked appealingly at Mrs. Newkirk, across whose face a troubled expression had flitted at the mention of the dog.

"I don't mind a dog a bit—rather fond of them myself," admitted that lady, "but I'm wondering how the creature will get along with Lorry's cat. Lorry's my little seven-year-old

son, Loring," she added in explanation. "And the cat is a dreadful, fighting old tomcat, but Lorry adores it, and we all put up with the old pest as well as we can, for his sake. But I'm doubtful how your dog is going to get along with old 'Battle-Axe', as we call the cat!"

She laughed, and Audrey thought she had never encountered a more attractive personality than this tall, beautiful, stately, yet utterly simple and friendly Southern lady. "She's *beautiful*," she thought, "with that prematurely grey hair and lovely eyes! I'd like to make a portrait of her." But what she said aloud was:

"Oh, I think it will be all right, Mrs. Newkirk, if you really don't mind. Susan is very obedient, and I'll keep her with me most of the time. Dogs and cats generally get used to one another after a while, anyway, don't they? And now I'll go and fetch in Susan and my luggage, if it's all right."

"And I'll come and help you," chimed in Cam. "We've only old Mandy, our cook, to help, and she's busy with dinner now. If there's anything heavy to carry up, she can help with it this evening."

The two girls ran down the path to the car, where Susan and Camilla made immediate and demonstrative acquaintance.

Audrey thought she had never enjoyed a meal more than her first dinner that evening with the Newkirk family. They gave her at once the feeling of being, not a stranger, but a family member with her own folks. Mrs. Newkirk had the rare and delightful faculty of putting one instantly at ease. She seemed unruffled by any circumstance, even when her

seven-year-old son Lorry came in late, tousled and grimy, after they had sat down to dinner, and had resented loudly being sent up to wash and brush his hair. When later he suddenly produced a hop-toad from his pocket, in no wise embarrassed, she had laughingly but firmly removed him and his unwelcome pet from the scene and returned, serene and smiling, to serve dessert. While they were still sitting comfortably and idly over after-dinner coffee, she turned to Audrey:

"Tell us, won't you, about what you're going to do at old Miss Jenifer's, as we always call her. We're all awfully curious about it and she has given us only the vaguest notion. You know, she's a very eccentric old lady, and quite touchy about having her affairs 'pried into,' as she calls it. So we're always very careful never to ask personal questions. Do enlighten us, if you care to. She was quite mysterious about it all."

"Why, there isn't anything mysterious about it in the least!" smiled Audrey. "The whole thing's just this: I've been for a couple of years an art student at the National Arts School in New York. I intend to specialize on portrait work in the end, but I'm dabbling in several other branches, just to try 'em out—caricatures, clay-modeling, water-colors, and that sort of thing. But there's one thing I've been fairly successful with, and that's making models of houses.

"I copy every detail, you know, on a tiny scale. It seems to be quite a fad for wealthy people who have very attractive houses, especially if they're restored Colonial or that kind of thing, to have a model made. And they pay quite a lot for it, too. I made two models for two different

society women last year, and what I got for it helped a lot with my art course.

"Then I heard, just recently, of a wonderful prize that's being offered by the National Historical Society in Washington for the best model of a pre-Revolutionary house, to be completed by next November. It seemed too good a chance to miss. The prize is five thousand dollars, and if I won it, I could take a two-years' course abroad—and I'd give my head for *that!*" She grinned her charming, boyish grin.

"My work at the Art School was just about over for the season, so there seemed no reason why I shouldn't go in for this. Then came the question of what house I was to model. And it was a mighty important question, too! I knew two or three others who were going in for it, but they had chosen to make models of sort of obvious and well-known places like Mount Vernon or the House of the Seven Gables or Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge, or some such thing. But I wanted something different—something less well-known but perhaps more beautiful and unusual. I'd thought of several places, but it isn't easy—it's almost impossible, really—to get permission to do a thing like that, especially if the house is privately owned. You have to be allowed to *live* in it, almost—at least, you have to go about inside and poke around and take the most accurate measurements and make sketches, and all that, because it has to be done to scale, both inside and out. And very few private house owners would allow that.

"I'd begun to feel sort of discouraged about the whole thing, when Dad suddenly thought of that place called Kenwick. The reason he remembered it was that Miss

Kenwick is a sort of distant cousin on his mother's side. He remembered being taken there to visit several times when he was a boy. He said Miss Kenwick was quite fond of him and always made a fuss over him when he was brought there. He'd always remembered the old house as being very lovely and unusual. And when he described it to me, I felt it would be just the thing I wanted.

"So he wrote to Miss Kenwick and told her about me and what I wanted to do. She and his mother had always been friends and he counted on that, too, to help along with my case. He even said he thought she might possibly invite me to stay there with her while I was making the model, as he'd heard she was living all alone in that big old house now and might be glad of company." At this point Audrey noticed Camilla and her mother exchange a swift glance. But as they made no comment she continued:

"Well, we got a reply from her at last, written in queer, cramped handwriting and on paper that looked as if it had been torn out of a blank book. She was very kind about allowing me to do the house, which she seemed awfully fond of, and said I could use the old office-wing for my workshop—'studio' she called it! But we thought it rather strange when she said she was sorry she couldn't invite me to stay there, as she didn't entertain any company nowadays and kept very quietly to herself. But she said she could recommend a very pleasant house near by where I could board with friends of hers and spoke of you folks. So that's how it all came about. I guess she must have fixed it up with you right away, for she wrote us again soon after and said it

was all settled and would I please come not later than the twelfth. So here I am!"

"That's all tremendously interesting," commented Mrs. Newkirk. "I think it's quite wonderful that you can do an unusual thing of this kind. And we're delighted to have you with us. We're a rather quiet family, and you'll find this a rather dead little town. So your advent is all the more thrilling to us. And I'm especially glad for Camilla that anyone so interesting and so near her age is going to be with us. I hope you'll get to be good friends. But, by the way, I take it that you haven't seen Miss Jenifer Kenwick yet."

Audrey said no, and explained that she'd been so late getting into town. "We had two punctured tires on the way down," she grinned, "and I seem to be a scandalously poor car mechanic! I stopped at the Kenwick house, though, but it was all dark and I thought she must be away."

"Oh, no, she wasn't out. She's *never* out at this time of night!" exclaimed Camilla. And Mrs. Newkirk's handsome face assumed a slightly troubled expression as she added:

"My dear, we suspect you're going to have a bit of a difficult time with old Miss Jenifer, and perhaps it's only right to warn you to be prepared. She's very eccentric, you know. She's liable to make things rather difficult for you, I'm afraid."

"Why, how do you mean?" asked Audrey, looking considerably disturbed. "She seemed awfully nice in her letter—very glad to have me do the house. Why should she make it hard for me?"

"I have an idea," explained Mrs. Newkirk, "that she thinks of your work as being done in quite a different way from what you've described—like simply painting a picture from what you see on the outside, or something like that. What you say about going around inside and taking all sorts of measurements and poking about, as you *must*, to be able to get things accurately, is going to disturb her mightily.

"You see, poor old Miss Jenifer is really our town 'character.' She used to be perfectly all right and normal, I suppose, but she's quite old now, and as long as I can remember she's been queer, and growing queerer all the time. No one knows definitely what started her off that way—it's all quite a mystery—but she gets worse as the years go on. We're all used to her now and don't think much about it, but I imagine she'd strike a stranger as most surprising. Wait till you see her with the *brass keys*! She——"

But the rest of the tale Audrey was not to hear at that time, for, interrupting Mrs. Newkirk, there arose the most frightful bedlam from the region of the kitchen—the keen, alarmed howling of a dog, the hissing, spitting, and yowling of a surprised cat, the shrill scolding of old black Mandy, and the furious shouting of Lorry, leaning over the banisters in the upper hall, whither he had been banished from the table.

Audrey guessed in a moment what had happened. Susan, who had been lying obediently in a corner of the dining room all through the meal, had doubtless become weary of waiting and slipped unnoticed into the kitchen while they were talking so earnestly. There she must have surprised

the redoubtable tomcat, who had become properly enraged and had flown at her with disastrous results!

They all rushed into the kitchen and the ensuing half-hour was spent in separating the combatants and smoothing over the situation with grumbling Mandy and excited Lorry, who had joined the scene in his pajamas. The remainder of the evening passed for Audrey in unpacking and getting settled in her pleasant little room and in writing a note to her mother. Camilla hovered about shyly, offering what assistance she could render and commenting to Audrey on the exceeding dullness of the town and how glad she was to have a new friend.

It was not till Audrey, quite healthily tired out, had slipped into bed near midnight, with Susan on a rug close by on the floor, that a sudden thought popped into her weary brain:

"Singular—about old Miss Jenifer! What was that about the *brass keys*, I wonder? I never got a chance to ask."

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST MORNING AT KENWICK

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But there was no opportunity to investigate the matter of the brass keys next morning, for when Audrey came down to breakfast she found the Newkirk household much occupied in getting started on its daily routine. Camilla was drifting about, collecting her books for departure for high school and groaning that she'd be late for the school bus. Mrs. Newkirk was distractedly endeavoring to get Lorry off to primary school in the village, and Lorry was complaining loudly to the world at large about the conduct of Battle-Axe, who had appeared that morning with his ear half chewed off, after some midnight *mêlée* with other feline friends. Mrs. Newkirk saw them both off with a sigh of relief, but turned a smiling face to Audrey, who was waiting about a little uncertainly.

"Do you suppose it would be all right for me to call up Miss Jenifer and ask when she would care to see me to-day?" Audrey asked. Mrs. Newkirk stopped on her way upstairs and chuckled.

"My dear child, do you suppose old Miss Jenifer has anything so modern as a *telephone* in that house of hers? Why, she hasn't even a gas stove or a bathroom or an electric light! You don't realize the situation at all, I'm afraid, and I can't think whether it's wiser to tell you all about it or let you go and see for yourself. Perhaps I ought to tell you, so that you'll be prepared and won't be too much bowled over when you come in contact with the situation there."

She turned into the living room and beckoned Audrey to follow her.

"I'll be darning some stockings while I talk," she added, "and so won't be losing any time. I have a rather busy day ahead of me. You see, it's this way about poor old Miss Jenifer:

"She is very eccentric, as I've said before. She has this beautiful old Colonial mansion, which, by the way, contains some marvelous specimens of antique furniture besides, and she possesses quite a number of pieces of rare and valuable jewelry also. Yet she's absolutely impoverished as far as money is concerned. Sometimes we suspect that she actually doesn't have enough to eat. But she's so proud that she'd never acknowledge the fact, nor will she part with a single thing she owns to get ready cash. We worry about her quite a lot in town here, and we even try to invite her to lunch or dinner every once in a while, to be sure she has a square meal occasionally. But we'd never dare let her suspect the reason or she wouldn't come. And I'll admit it's something of a trial to have her, as she's so peculiar in her ways.

"But what I'm thinking most about in connection with your problem is whether she's going to allow you the freedom you'll need to go about the house. I don't mind telling you that we think there must be some mystery about that house. She's always guarded it rather carefully, never allowing anyone to roam through it freely or see some parts of it. But of late years no one who goes there is ever admitted to any but one of the two front reception rooms each side of the central hall. She makes the excuse that the

others are not in order, that she keeps the furniture draped to preserve it, and all that sort of thing, but we think there must surely be some other reason. That is why I think you are going to find things a bit difficult."

Audrey's expression had been growing more and more worried as Mrs. Newkirk's explanation went on. At this point she asked:

"This does all sound rather serious for me. What would you advise me to do, Mrs. Newkirk?"

Her companion sat silent, thinking it over for two or three moments. At last she said:

"There's just one hopeful feature in the situation, I think. Poor old Miss Jenifer has rather a soft spot in her heart for young people. I don't mean small children, but girls and boys nearly grown—like yourself. It's rather pathetic, too, because the young people around here are all afraid of her or have rather a dislike for her peculiarities and won't go near her. Camilla can't bear the sight of her and usually manages to be out when I ask her to meals. The only one who's willing to bother with her is my son Wade. He's at St. John's College, in Annapolis, but whenever he's home here he always makes it a point to run in and see her and have a chat, and she fairly adores him.

"But what I'm getting at about you is this: If you are nice and friendly to the old lady and try not to notice her oddities too much and don't seem to want to explore all over the house just at first, but let it come gradually, there's a possibility that she may let down the bars for you later. Otherwise I'm afraid you——"

At this point, a grey woolly head crowned with a white turban was poked into the doorway, and the querulous voice of old Mandy interrupted:

"'Scuse me, Mis' Newkirk, but how yo' gwine hab de chicken to-night? Ah done got it picked and Ah been waitin' roun' to fin' out."

Mrs. Newkirk rose and excused herself to Audrey with a smile. "I'll have to go and pay some attention to Mandy now, but I think I've given you enough of a hint to work on. You might as well run around right away to see Miss Jenifer. She's probably expecting you any time. There was no use to tell her last night, as she usually goes to bed about dark to save lamps and candles, I imagine. Good luck to you!"

Accompanied by Susan (who had spent an uninteresting morning thus far, incarcerated in the bedroom), Audrey set out a few moments later, her heart a bit heavy with misgivings. She had never counted on encountering any obstacles to her work and resented having to give the time to placating a cranky and obstinate old lady.

"What possesses her to act that way?" she demanded indignantly of Susan (whose only reply was to caper the more wildly about her feet in the renewed joy of freedom). "I see where I'm going to have my hands full! And at that, I never thought to ask again about the *brass keys*! Well, here we are."

She turned the corner and the old mansion stood before her, the golden morning sunlight on the rich mellow brick façade, the exquisite carvings of window and doorway standing out in clear relief. High, glossy green magnolia trees shaded the front entrance, and in the rear, as she had

rounded the corner, she had caught a glimpse of a garden enclosed by a low brick wall sloping down to the river where enormous old box bushes had been planted in a curious design. Audrey heaved a big sigh in sheer appreciation of it all, gathered her courage together, and ascended the front steps. Before she raised the tarnished old brass knocker, she whispered a few admonitory commands to Susan.

"You're not to go in with me—you understand? The old lady probably doesn't like dogs, especially on first acquaintance. Sit right here on the steps till I come out—and don't you dare chase a cat or a chicken or another dog! You hear me?" Susan looked at her mistress with great, reproachful brown eyes and sat down resignedly, as Audrey thumped twice with the old knocker.

It seemed a long, long time before there was any reply. Then light uncertain footsteps were heard inside, and after a great wrestling with the huge brass lock, the door opened.

In thinking it over afterward, Audrey wondered how she had managed to maintain as much calmness as she mustered during that first encounter. Nothing that Mrs. Newkirk had told her had quite prepared her for the astounding appearance of old Miss Jenifer Kenwick. She had expected something rather quaint and curious and out-of-date in the eccentric old lady, but she was utterly taken aback at what now met her gaze. The little, wizened creature, with brown, deeply wrinkled skin, and thin, straggling white hair, stood before her in the doorway, at ten o'clock in the morning, arrayed in what appeared to be an elaborate *evening gown* from far back in the 'eighties or 'nineties. The crushed and wrinkled tulle and silk and lace