

two keys to a cabin

by
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CHAPTER I

The bright disc of flashlight moved over the rough pine paneling of the door, found and illuminated the key-hole under the latch. Gabriella Graham, fitting the key into the lock, knew that her fingers were trembling.

"It works," she said with forced composure, then, expectancy in her voice and oddly, too, a muted note of reluctance, she added a little breathlessly, "Kate, we're here!"

"So I presumed." There was no expectancy in Kate Oliver's pleasantly drawing voice, only weariness, characteristic humor, a casual acceptance of life's little surprises. "I agree with you, though," she continued. "It does, at the moment, appear to be a notable achievement. Like scaling the Alps, for instance. I feel as though I had scaled an Alp. I'm practically paralyzed all over."

"Poor Kate!" Gay said, but the words, absentmindedly, held more of personal preoccupation than sym-

pathy for her companion. "Never mind," she added, still absentmindedly, but in a tone of warm affection. "We'll have a fire and food pretty soon."

"I can use both," Kate said feelingly. "How are the beds?"

Kate was aware of her hesitancy. "Give me the flashlight," she said. "I'll go ahead."

Gay's glance turned quickly, resentfully. "Why should you?" she asked a trifle sharply.

"No reason," Kate replied with unshaken good humor. "Just trying to be helpful. It's an irritating habit. I didn't mean to imply that you might be frightened."

"Of course you did," Gay's low, clear laugh was a plea for forgiveness. "I'm not, though," she added. She would not admit misgivings, not even to Kate, who, during this tiring trip to the cabin in Maine had been disarmingly incurious, resourceful, amusing. People got at you if you let your defenses down. She pushed the door wide open and stepped inside. The temperature of the room was warmer than the air outside, as though there'd been a fire, she thought fleetingly and dismissed the idea as absurd. The cabin had been closed for three years, since Uncle John died. Not very securely closed, though. The pale rectangles in the wall were windows. Shouldn't there have been something—shutters, boarding, perhaps? A question, starting in implication, just touched the edge of her mind—

"Is that a wood-range?" Kate asked.

"Yes," Gay replied. "Do you think we can manage it?"

"Certainly," Kate said with confidence. "On second thought, though, who cuts the wood?"

"We'll buy it cut or have a boy out from the village."

"That relieves my mind. I'm not

so good with an ax."

Kate pressed against Gay's shoulder to look into the room. "What's the apparatus for?" she asked in an interested voice.

The flashlight disclosed a table with a porcelain top on which were jars, test-tubes, an object which might be an alcohol stove, an assortment of bottles. The built-in bed was neatly spread with blankets. There were no other furnishings except a straight wooden chair.

"Strange odor," Kate said, sniffing. "Smells like a hospital or a chemist shop."

"Something Uncle John left, I suppose," Gay said entirely at random. "Fluids for developing films, perhaps," she added slowly. "He was interested in photography. He had a great many hobbies."

The explanation appeared to satisfy Kate. She made no further comment. It did not satisfy Gay though on the surface it was plausible. Uncle John had been interested in photography. But would the odor have remained in the room for three years? Wouldn't the fluids in the bottles insecurely covered with circles of gauze have evaporated during the time that the cabin had been closed? And what had test-tubes to do with kodak films? Again, and with greater insistence, the question starting in implication forced its way into her mind.

"These are the living quarters," Gay turned the light through a second door opening from the kitchen at right angles to the first. The notion was absurd, she told herself steadily. The cabin was her personal property free from restrictions or reservations. "Compact and convenient. No elevators, no stairs to climb. Living-room, drawing-room, dining-room all in one," she concluded.

"What, no breakfast-nook?" Kate asked in mock-dismay.

"We'll have our meals on the porch if it isn't too cold. Do you suppose it will be?" Gay's voice rippled on, not waiting for Kate to reply. "The weather was beautiful in September. I wasn't here this late in the month, though. That was the fall Mother put me in school in Switzerland while she was in Paris. It was lovely here when I left. The leaves were just beginning to turn and the air was like wine."

She had thought—Her expectancy, the strength of her desire to return, seemed absurd, now, romantic, incredibly naive. Gay stood, conscious of fatigue, acknowledging disappointment, in the frame of the open door. Uncle John was dead. She was no longer fifteen, a tall, ardent child with dreams and half-glimpsed realities mingling to veil her perceptions in a roseate mist. Six years separated her from the summer she had spent at the cabin, six crowded years filled with complexities of which she had, then, been unaware, the six important years which had produced the Gabriella she was at twenty-one. She should have known. It was futile to attempt to recapture a lost emotion, sad to go back . . .

"Are there lights?" Kate asked.

"Of course." The mist of introspection cleared. Gay felt Kate watching her, knew that Kate was aware of some preoccupation withheld and unshared. Her fingers groped against the wall beside the door. Then she laughed, a clear amused laugh of candid surprise.

"There's no electricity," she said. "Kerosene lamps, my friend."

"Will there be kerosene? We should have gotten a supply at the store."

"I forgot the light situation," Gay moved away from the door. "Keep your fingers crossed and I'll see."

There was oil in the lamp on the table. A box of matches lay conveniently at hand. Gay placed the flashlight on the table so that its beam cut in a horizontal shaft across the room. As she removed the shade from the lamp her eyes traveled along the bar of light, saw in the clear circle against the hearth a pair of muddy boots.

"There's oil," she said when the sudden quick beating of her heart had quieted a little. The clearing mist of abstraction vanished. Though her attention was fixed upon the difficult business of striking a match, she still saw very clearly the boots upon the hearth.

"Good!" Kate said from the darkness near the door.

"Better luck than we deserve," Gay tipped the chimney, applied the flame of the match to the wick. They were high boots with laces, the sort that woodsmen wore, and the mud that caked them was fresh. It had been raining all day. The lane had been soft with mud.

"The wick is trimmed, too," she said, playing for time in which to adjust her mind to this unexpected situation, searching for an explanation, not wanting, just yet, to share her discovery with Kate.

"Hmmm!" Kate said with curious emphasis. "The bridegroom cometh!"

"What?" The china shade, striking the chimney, made a clattering sound very loud in the quiet room. Gay set it securely in the thin branching prongs. "Bridegroom?" she repeated.

"There's something in the Bible about bridegrooms and wicks and oil," Kate said in casual explanation. "Never mind. My rectory past will pop up now and then. Tactless of me to have mentioned bridegrooms. I'm sorry."

The circle of flame in the lamp steadied and brightened. Gay raised her head. Through the mellow light she saw Kate walking toward her, an amused expression in her eyes under the brim of a dark felt hat which, on Kate, looked both disreputable and debonaire. She turned away, puzzling over Kate's comment, not quite understanding the skeptical expression deepening the lines around Kate's twinkling eyes. Did Kate think—?

"There's a fire laid ready for lighting," she knelt on the hearth, deliberately ignoring both the comment and the ready explanation. "We won't need more wood tonight. Will you hand me the matches, please?"

"Sheer magic," Kate said dryly. "Alice-in-Wonderland and the Arabian Nights. Oil in the lamps, a fire laid—or maybe wish-fulfillment did it. Anyway, I'm not kicking."

Gay took the box of matches without meeting Kate's glance. The implication, now, was perfectly clear. Kate thought—Astonishment sharpened into indignation. She resented having her motives questioned. A denial sprang to her lips. She forced back the words. Never deny or explain. People got at you if you let your defenses down, she reminded herself again. In affronted silence she ignited the shavings beneath the pyramid of wood.

"Our guardian angel has slipped up, though," Kate said still in a tone of skeptical amusement. "These boots certainly won't fit either you or me." Her voice altered. "Who is it, Gay?" she asked with a directness which could no longer be evaded.

"I don't know."

"Someone is living here."

"Obviously."

"Who is it?" Kate repeated.

"I told you I didn't know." Gay watched small active flames licking up against the logs.

Was she telling the truth? Kate watched Gay rise, swiftly, gracefully, from her kneeling position on the hearth. She had no reason to doubt her, she thought, backing up to the warmth of the fire. In the roster of Gay's short-comings, a disregard for the truth was not listed. Still—

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked more casually than she felt.

(Continued next week)

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