



THE
LOCKED
ROOM
LIBRARY



AN IMPOSSIBLE CRIME
SHORT STORY

GIGI PANDIAN

“The Locked Room Library”

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THE LOCKED ROOM LIBRARY

AN IMPOSSIBLE CRIME SHORT STORY

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ENID MADDUX GRIPPED THE CREAM-COLORED ENVELOPE TIGHTLY BEFORE pressing it into Tamarind's hand. Embossed with the image of an oversize skeleton key on the front and sealed with a hearty dollop of thick, blood-red wax on the back, this was no ordinary envelope.

"Hold onto this carefully," Enid said with an enigmatic smile as she let go of the mysterious letter, "and break the seal of the envelope once you're home."

Tamarind laughed, but Enid didn't join in.

The expectations of her new job confounded Tamarind Ortega. As a big-boned woman who sported a different color hair every couple of weeks and was equally comfortable at a midnight show at the Bottom of the Hill or giving a lecture on the history of public libraries to high end donors, Tamarind was used to people being bewildered by her. Not the other way around. It was a disconcerting feeling. She'd been hired to be the head librarian at San Francisco's new Locked Room Library, a small private library and museum devoted to classic mystery novels, but hadn't yet figured out the mystery of her new boss.

Dressed in a cream-colored blouse with puffy sleeves, plaid A-line skirt, and peep-toe pumps, Enid looked as if she'd stepped

straight out of one of the library's many novels from the early 1940s. Her brown hair was even tied in a colorful headscarf with a bow on top. Tamarind knew this wasn't how Enid dressed in normal life. Not that Tamarind would admit to internet-stalking her new employer. Though really, wasn't it a perfectly sensible course of action when considering a new job?

"Guard the envelope carefully," Enid whispered. "Keep it safe until you arrive at home."

Right.

"Sure." Tamarind forced a smile. Or maybe it was a real one. She couldn't be sure. "Have a good night, Enid."

Enid returned the sentiment before turning on the heel of her peep-toe pumps. Tamarind caught a glimpse of two more envelopes tucked into the book in Enid's hand. She was strangely disappointed that she wasn't the only person to be receiving the skeleton key envelope.

Tamarind grabbed her plaid coat and tucked the envelope into one of its oversize pockets. Wait until she got home? Hell no. As soon as she rounded the corner on her walk to the bus stop, Tamarind ripped open the blood-red seal on the envelope's flap.

For the unveiling of a once-in-a-lifetime discovery, the cryptic missive in her hands stated, arrive promptly at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning.

A once-in-a-lifetime discovery? She peeked into the envelope again. That was it. A single sheet of paper with one vague sentence. Tamarind groaned. She wished Enid would spend as much time learning the importance of a functioning card catalog as crafting mysterious messages and looking for evidence of a library ghost she swore she'd seen. The library hadn't yet opened to the public, and there were dozens of logistical items on their list to finish in the next few days.

Tamarind couldn't stay upset, though. The owner of San Francisco's new Locked Room Library was being generous with her new inheritance. Enid could have turned her passion for classic mystery novels and stories into a museum and charged an entrance fee, or scrimped on hiring enough people to help run the library. Instead, in addition to hiring more out-of-work contractors than necessary to renovate the ground floor of the Victorian home she'd inherited, she created three full-time staff positions help her run the modest 1,500-square-foot library. In a few days, the library would open its doors to the public.

Those were going to be a very long few days.

By 9:10 the next morning, Quentin still hadn't arrived, and Enid insisted they wait for him. Tamarind wished she hadn't skipped coffee to arrive on time.

"Let's do some rearranging while we wait for him," Enid said to Tamarind and Piper. "What do you two think of putting the raven in this spot?" She placed a stuffed black bird, which looked eerily alive, atop a centuries-old oak bookshelf she'd found at a consignment shop. Stepping back, she nodded in satisfaction.

"Shouldn't a talking raven be in the Poe section?" Tamarind asked. The librarian side of her cared about consistency, and the post-punk post-feminist side of her didn't like the creepy bird perched where you couldn't escape his cold eyes watching you. Either way, the beady-eyed bird didn't belong in such a prominent spot.

Piper shook her head so furiously at Tamarind that her blonde ponytail flicked her nose. "The Poe section is too far in the back. Enid is right that Voldemort needs to be centrally placed."

“Valdemar, dear,” Enid corrected gently. “This raven’s name is Valdemar.”

Piper was not a librarian. Nor, Tamarind learned, had she taken a single library science course in college. She’d gotten the job because she was Enid’s niece. The newly graduated Piper had been an American Lit major. Apparently not a very good one at that, if she didn’t know the name of one of Poe’s characters.

“That’s what I said,” Piper sputtered, her face turning crimson.

Enid tilted her head and scrutinized the raven. “Perhaps we should let Quentin cast the deciding vote.”

“How about an experiment,” Tamarind suggested. She doubted Quentin would turn up for hours. “Turn on Valdemar’s motion detector in this spot and see if it drives us mad to have him say *nevermore* a gazillion times a day in this thoroughfare.”

“Good point.” Enid snatched the bird and marched it to the Poe section.

Piper scowled at Tamarind, then stomped after Enid.

Great. Tamarind did not need a 22-year-old nemesis in her life. Or maybe she did. She hadn’t had enough excitement lately. That’s why her friend Sanjay Rai had suggested she apply for this job in the first place. He knew Enid through his fan club, the “Hindi Houdini Heartbreakers,” the first two words taken from the stage name he used for magic act, the last referring to his devotees. But that’s not how Tamarind knew him. Sanjay was the best friend of their mutual friend Jaya Jones. He was a delicious human being, both physically and intellectually. Tamarind was spoken for, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t appreciate his brilliance. He’d pieced together rational explanations for several mysteries that Tamarind had been convinced were unsolvable. It was nothing short of miraculous. No, who was she kidding? That was all well and good, but

she mostly appreciated his exquisite thick black hair, and might have occasionally fantasized about running her hands through it.

Tamarind grinned at Piper's swaying ponytail as the new graduate stomped away, and surveyed the cozy space where she'd be spending many of her waking hours for the foreseeable future.

The Locked Room Library occupied the ground floor of a converted Victorian house in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Enid's vision for the library went far beyond books. It was meant to be a haven for people who loved classic mysteries. Two gargoyles greeted visitors as they walked through the front door and were ushered into an entryway where a replica of a knight's suit of armor stood next to an information desk. The visor on the helmet was down, making it look eerily like a person was inside it.

Beyond the front desk, the largest of the three public rooms was a functional library where people would be able to browse and check out classic mystery novels and related reference books. A narrow room to the side had been constructed to look like the lounge car of a vintage train. The lounge car included a small bar on one end, built-in seating for eight people along the sides, and a narrow gate-leg table that could be raised when the space was used for private meetings. The back room was a mini museum devoted to rare books and miscellany related to locked-room mystery authors stretching from Poe (1840s) to Paul Halter (the present). Most of the collection, however, fell into the Golden Age of detective fiction of the 1930s and '40s that Enid so adored. Thus her choice of attire for the workplace. Tamarind drew the line at changing her own post-punk aesthetic while on duty at the library, even though these days it didn't amount to much more than dying her short hair frequently and wearing her comfy purple combat boots that were perfect for both standing at a concert all night or working on one's feet all day.

The decor featured nods to Enid's favorite novels and short stories. The raven was obvious, but many of her other flourishes were not. In the museum room, for example, a faux doorway had been built out of old bricks and extra molding. Enid insisted that nothing should block that doorway that led to nowhere, because the fake door was based on a key scene from one of Enid's favorite John Dickson Carr novels, *The Burning Court*. The book, first published in 1937, was the only one of the famous author's mystery novels to suggest a supernatural rather than purely rational ending. Maybe that's why Enid was obsessed with the idea of a ghost appearing in her Locked Room Library.

The door-to-nowhere was creepy, but not as creepy as the beady-eyed raven or the numerous book covers that featured illustrations of knives dripping in blood. Yet, Tamarind had to admit there was something oddly comforting about the posters of vintage book covers framed on the walls. For the most part, graphic detail was avoided in favor of a mysterious, almost ghostly atmosphere, in contrast to many of the visual images from the entertainment of the modern world.

"Aren't you going to help us?" Piper called out.

Help with what? Tamarind wondered. How hard was it to find a spot for a stupid bird?

She dragged her pre-caffeinated legs toward the sound of Piper's annoying voice and found Enid and the perky Piper not in the section of the library where Poe was shelved, but further back in the museum room.

"I wanted to show you the pièce de résistance of the museum." Enid beamed at a glass case that had previously been empty. "It arrived only yesterday."

Piper frowned. “Volde—I mean, *that raven* wasn’t the once-in-a-lifetime thingy you were excited about?”

Enid laughed. “He’s fun, but *this* is what will bring in locked-room mystery aficionados. I was hoping Quentin would be here too, but I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“We’ve already seen that antique case,” Piper said.

“Look inside.” Enid said tapped on the glass case that sat a few feet in front of the bricked-up faux door. “It’s a letter from John Dickson Carr to Frederic Dannay—half of the Ellery Queen writing duo, you know—in which Carr admits that he wrote another ending to *The Burning Court*. It was by far his most controversial mystery novel, you know. One that ended completely unexpectedly. And to think there’s another alternate ending that Carr actually wrote?” The look of glee on Enid’s face was contagious.

“How exciting!” Piper’s enthusiasm was on the verge of patronizing, but Enid didn’t seem to notice.

“I believe,” Enid said, “this letter is a clue to finding those long-lost manuscript pages Carr wrote. In the letter he says he saved the type-written page with his unpublished ending.”

“Shut. Up.” Tamarind was impressed. That did seem like the type of thing that would be a draw for classic mystery aficionados. Ellery Queen and John Dickson Carr were two of the writers people immediately thought of when they thought of the Golden Age of detective fiction. Even Tamarind had heard of them before she began her job here.

“There’s no need to be rude,” Piper snapped.

Tamarind sighed. She was only five years older than Piper, but they were so clearly from different generations. Different planets as well, Tamarind expected.

“Besides myself and the collector,” Enid said, “you two are the first to see this piece of paper in this century.” She exhaled wistfully.

“Should we scoot the case against the wall here?” Piper asked. “Where it’ll be more secure?”

Enid shook her head. “We need to leave room behind it for people to see the door that’s been bricked up, mirroring the door in *The Burning Court* a supposed witch used to escape after committing murder.”

“So we’re not blocking those fake bricks?” Piper glanced uneasily at the doorway.

“The bricks are real,” Tamarind said. “Only the door is fake, since there’s nothing but a solid wall behind the bricks.”

“The case is one of the vintage display cases I found at an estate sale,” Enid said. “Don’t worry, Piper. It’s solid, not flimsy like so much modern construction. It’ll be—”

Thud.

Enid stopped mid-sentence. Piper stifled an exclamation. Tamarind, however, was unfazed. She knew that distinctive thump well. It was the sound a hard-bound book made when it hit a hardwood floor.

“Quentin?” Enid called out. “Is that you?”

“No,” Tamarind answered automatically. “It came from closer to us. Somewhere in this room. Not the main library.” She glanced around the museum room. With dozens of items, all with explanatory placards, the little library’s museum room was bursting at the edges already.

Piper snorted. “I don’t think so. We’re the only ones in here. It’s not like there’s a ghost.”

Enid gasped and clasped her hands together, a look of utter delight on her face. “Do you think the ghost has returned? I’ve always

wanted a library ghost, you know.”

“It’s not a ghost.” Tamarind pointed to a rogue hardback book lying face down on the floor. “A book simply fell...” Her voice trailed off as she reached the novel and picked it up. An orange dust jacket, quite worn around the edges, covered the hardback edition. “*The Burning Court*,” she murmured. “That’s weird.”

Enid snatched the book from her hands. “That’s not supposed to be in here. It should in the library.”

“Someone didn’t do their shelving properly.” Piper looked pointedly at Tamarind.

Tamarind resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Enid opened the book to the front flap. “This isn’t one of my copies. It hasn’t even been catalogued. Maybe it’s Quentin’s.”

She flipped through the pages.

“We can ask him when he gets—” Enid broke off and she looked like she was about to drop the book. She choked out a laugh, but it was clearly forced, as if she were trying to convince herself of the amusement.

“What is it?” Piper asked.

“I’m glad this isn’t one of my books,” Enid said. “Somebody has defaced it. ‘*Do not attempt to revise my true story*’ is scrawled in black ink on the inside of the back cover.”

Tamarind looked over Enid’s shoulder. The words were written in an uneven hand. The nib of the pen had pressed so firmly that it looked more like an etching than normal writing.

“Oh, God,” Enid moaned, snapping the book shut. “People are going to deface my library books, aren’t they?”

“That’s why we’ve only made mass market reprints available for loan,” Tamarind assured her quickly, before Enid began hyperventilating. “Not your collectables.”

“But how did *this one* get here?” Piper asked. “And with such an uber-creepy inscription? I didn’t sign up to work in a haunted library.”

“*The Burning Court* involved witchcraft,” Tamarind pointed out, “not ghosts. So if you’re looking for a supernatural explanation, it’s more likely a witch dropped it off and vanished.”

Now it was Piper’s turn to moan. “I was supposed to be backpacking through Europe, and instead I’m stuck here with a witchy ghost.”

Thump.

This time, they all jumped.

“The front door,” Enid said with a laugh. “Quentin is here.”

Whenever Tamarind looked at Quentin, she felt a disquieting urge to mother him. The feeling was perplexing, both because she didn’t think of herself as possessing maternal instincts (except concerning books), and because Quentin must have been at least a decade older than her. He stood 6-and-a-half-feet tall, yet didn’t look like he weighed much more than 100 pounds. Didn’t he know how much good food could be found on any block in San Francisco? He was all skin and bones, from his cavernous eye sockets down to bony ankles jutting out above his tan boat shoes.

“Sorry I’m late.” He attempted to tamp down an unruly mop of brown hair as he crossed the threshold into the museum room. “I didn’t open my skeleton key invitation until this morning over coffee. What did I miss?”

Typical Quentin. As far as Tamarind could tell, he was a stereotypical computer guy, programming late into the night and not surfacing until at least 10 o’clock in the morning, usually later. He was in charge of the computer systems and working with the building’s security company. In spite of Enid insisting upon a physical card

catalog to supplement the online catalog, along with old fashioned rubber stamps to record the checkout date on a card in the front of each book, she felt strongly about modern security. When Enid learned Quentin was also into woodworking, she asked him to work with the security company to make sure the locks on the antique cases didn't ruin the original cabinetry.

Enid grinned and handed him the book. "We've got ourselves a ghost."

"Um...what?" He turned his gaunt face from Enid to Piper and Tamarind.

"Don't look at me." Tamarind held up her hands. "I just work here."

"Is this your book?" Enid pointed at the hardback edition of *The Burning Court* with the creepy handwriting.

"I repeat," he said, tugging at his hair with his free hand, "um... what?"

"Did you leave this book hanging about when you were doing a security check?" Enid asked.

Quentin blinked at the cover and shook his head. "I don't own any mystery fiction. Um... not that there's anything wrong with that. But I prefer fact to fiction. Nonfiction is more—"

"What was that noise?" Piper whipped her head around so quickly her ponytail whipped her nose again. You'd think she would have learned by now to forgo the perky hairstyle for something less hazardous.

"I didn't hear anything," Tamarind said. She might have, but why not take the opportunity to annoy Piper?

"I heard it." Enid was no longer smiling. "It sounded like a whisper."

“Um...” Quentin blinked at each of them. “A ghost? You guys were serious?”

“It came from over there.” Piper pointed at the brick doorway. The doorway where in *The Burning Court* a woman who was supposed to have been dead for hundreds of years reappeared—and then vanished through the bricks after committing murder.

An inspection of the bricks revealed neither a ghostly nor a physical presence. Thankfully, there were no dead bodies on the premises either. Though if Piper continued to work at the library, Tamarind wasn't so sure one of them wouldn't be driven to murder the other.

“This phantom copy of *The Burning Court* had to come from somewhere,” Enid insisted.

“How about we check the coffee maker,” Tamarind suggested. “I bet there are some clues there.”

“Why would there be—” Piper began.

“Ha,” Enid barked. “I can take a hint. Let's talk in the lounge car.” She swept the book into her hands and led the way to the train car meeting room, where the bar was equipped with a coffee station.

Quentin volunteered to make coffee in the vintage coffee pot. “I'm confused,” he said once it was brewing. “If you really believe it's a ghost, isn't that the answer to where the old book came from?”

“None of you has seen this book before?” Enid asked.

They each shook their heads.

“And you all heard that whispering, didn't you?”

Tamarind grudgingly nodded along with Piper and Quentin.

“Maybe we really *do* have a ghost.” Enid grimaced. “I can't decide whether I like that possibility or not.”

"It's more likely," Tamarind pointed out, "that one of the workers who's been here lately collects vintage mysteries, and that the sound we heard came from outside."

Enid smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I know. But that doesn't make much sense either. I can't stop thinking about that writing scrawled in the book. *Do not attempt to revise my true story.* It's like it *knew* about the John Dickson Carr letter saying he had an alternate ending to the book. The witch who could walk through walls and make a body disappear from a sealed crypt doesn't want me to find that new ending."

No more books fell or whispers were heard by the time they'd finished their coffee, so the library crew went back to their actual work.

The day was a whirlwind of activity as they made progress on their list to be set up in time for their grand opening. Even in her comfy boots, by 5 o'clock Tamarind's feet ached and she was in no mood for the envelope she found sticking out of her jacket pocket once she'd left the library.

Enid must have run out of the fancy envelopes from the day before, because this one was a standard white envelope. The image stamped on the front was a skull and crossbones.

Tamarind stared at the ominous skull and crossbones for a few moments before ripping open the envelope. Like before, a single sheet of paper was tucked inside. This message was typed. Really typed, on an actual typewriter. She could tell because the letters left minor indentations on the paper, and the "n" was half broken, making it look almost like an "r." There were three vintage typewriters in the museum, so she wasn't surprised Enid had used one.

Return to the Locked Room Library's train car room at 9 p.m. tonight, it read, and you will be rewarded with a mystery of the highest magnitude.

p.s. This is a strict instruction, not an invitation. Do not attempt to revise my true story.

Tamarind glowered at the note, her frustration rising. How dare Enid think she could interrupt her employees' evenings? And why did the last sentence sound so familiar?

Her bus pulled up to the curb with an excruciating squeak of its ancient breaks, so she hastily folded the note and shoved it back into her pocket. There was no way Enid could fire her for having a life. Besides, the note had been left in her pocket, not handed to her face-to-face. She could always claim she hadn't seen it in time, like Quentin had done that morning.

She forgot all about the note until an hour later, when she walked into the restaurant where she was meeting a group of friends for dinner. She hadn't realized Sanjay would be one of the people attending, but he was the first one there, sitting at the head of a table for five.

"How's the new job?" he asked as she sat down next to him. He was overdressed in a tuxedo, as usual. That meant he'd been practicing his magic act in full costume. He lived in the city and he could have easily changed clothing before dinner, but Tamarind suspected he liked the attention.

"Don't ask." She took a bite of the warm bread on the table.

"That bad? I know Enid can be eccentric, but when she told me she wanted to turn that old Victorian house she inherited into a library for her beloved classic mysteries, it seemed like a good fit."

"Eccentric is definitely the word for it. We've got an old-fashioned card catalog system, and all of the bookshelves and display cases are vintage pieces so aside from adding locks she won't let us modify them to make them easier to use. And check this out." She handed him the wrinkled note. "You'll get a kick out of this."

He studied the note as she told him about the book that fell from nowhere and the whispering ghost.

When he looked up, the words he spoke weren't what she was expecting. "I'm coming with you."

"That would be a pretty good magic trick," she said, "seeing as I'm not going myself."

He gaped at her. "You have to go."

"She's not going to fire me."

"That's not what I mean. How can you resist this invitation-that's-not-really-an-invitation?"

"I'm having dinner with friends tonight, if you hadn't noticed."

"It's not going to take us more than two hours to eat."

"You weren't summoned."

"Have you already forgotten that I'm the one who recommended you for the job?"

Two minutes after 9 p.m., Tamarind unlocked the front doors of the library with her key card to let Sanjay and herself inside.

"This place is nicer than I thought it would be," Sanjay said as he flipped his bowler hat from his head into his hands. "Nice suit of armor."

"She went all in."

Enid, Piper, and Quentin were already seated around the narrow table, with Piper next to Enid and Quentin across from them. Enid's hair was now scooped up into a bun on top of her head with two pencils holding it in place. She'd swapped her peep-toe pumps for knee-high brown boots, but otherwise was still dressed in her 1940s garb. Piper had changed into a yoga ensemble of a baggy sweatshirt over black leggings. Or maybe it was for Pilates, or simply her paja-

mas. Only Quentin was still clad in his earlier attire, except that he looked even more gaunt. Tamarind wondered if he'd eaten dinner.

"Sanjay!" Enid exclaimed. "Piper and Quentin, this is Sanjay, whom you might have seen perform as the Hindi Houdini."

"I didn't know we were allowed to bring a date." Piper glared at Tamarind.

"He's not my date," Tamarind said hastily, overlapping with Sanjay's, "It's not a date."

"Sanjay was one of the inspirations for this Locked Room Library," Enid said, as if that explained his presence.

Piper frowned. "So you gave him an invitation, too? How many other people are coming?"

Enid didn't answer. Instead she looked expectantly from Piper to Tamarind and Quentin.

"If we're all here," Quentin said when her gaze reached him, "why don't we get started?"

"Great." Enid beamed at him. "Go ahead."

"Um, go ahead and do what?"

"Whatever you had in mind."

"Me?" Quentin's Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"Do whatever you had in mind with your note," Enid prompted.

"Wait," Tamarind cut in. "Wasn't it you who left these notes in our pockets?"

Enid shook her head. "I love that one of you took the initiative to do something similar. It's so much in the spirit of the library! Over my dinner tonight, I came up with a list of ways I can incorporate this sort of thing—but that's a discussion for another time. For now, I'll be quiet so the instigator can speak."

Nobody spoke.

“Did I miss a clue?” Her brows pressed together and she pursed her lips. “Is there something else we need to do before the mystery kicks in?”

She pulled out her pristine note and placed it on the narrow table. Tamarind took her crumpled note and placed it next to Enid’s.

“Weird,” Quentin said. “My note said to go into the museum room.”

“Why did you come into the train car with us, then?” Piper asked.

“Because you two were in here.”

Piper added her note to the table. Aside from Tamarind’s being wrinkled, three women’s notes were identical. Only Quentin’s was different.

Return to the Locked Room Library’s museum at 9:15 tonight, it read, and you will be rewarded with a mystery of the highest magnitude.

p.s. This is a strict instruction, not an invitation. Do not attempt to revise my true story.

“According to the time listed on your invitation,” Enid said, “you’re early.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I felt bad that I was late this morning, so I came early tonight.”

“It’s 9:13,” Sanjay said. “How about we—”

Enid leapt up before Sanjay could finish his sentence.

She wove through the library’s low shelving, her head staying within sight at all times. Quentin was the last out of the train car meeting room. He swore as he knocked his forehead on the low train car door frame. Enid was the first to reach the door that led from the library to the museum room, with Sanjay and Piper close behind.

“That’s odd,” Enid muttered as she grabbed the handle. “It’s sticking.”

“Let me try,” Sanjay offered. “I can pick a lock—”

“That wouldn’t help,” Tamarind said. “Everything here is on key card security.”

“Got it!” Enid pitched forward as the door pushed open into darkness, but steadied herself with the handle before she fell over.

Piper’s piercing scream cut through the dim light.

Her mouth hung open in the harsh shadows between the lighted library and the dark shadows of the museum room. She raised her right arm and pointed at the brick doorway to nowhere—where a translucent figure stood. Flowing white robes covered the apparition.

“I will not believe in ghosts!” Piper screamed at the figure in the brick doorway as she ran toward it.

Seeing the ghostly presence, Tamarind was too stunned to move, even after Sanjay jostled her elbow and hissed, “Lights?” He fumbled blindly for the light switch while Tamarind kept her eyes on Piper. Kudos to the kid. Tamarind didn’t think she had it in her. Perhaps she’d reevaluate her nemesis stance.

“Whoever you are,” Piper continued, “you can’t—ouch!” She crashed into the case a few feet in front of the bricks, and then the brick wall itself.

Sanjay found the light switch and a soft light illuminated part of the museum room. Only one set of lights came on, though. It was darker than usual.

“Where did she go?” Piper cried, cradling her right hand with her left. “Did she slip back into the library?”

“I’ve been in the doorway the whole time,” Sanjay said. “Nobody came through.”

"One of the windows, then." Piper scowled at him as if it was his fault.

Enid shook her head. "They're all barred, remember?"

"You all saw her too, right?" Piper's frightened eyes scanned the group.

Tamarind reached her side. She pressed her hands against the bricks. Nothing had changed since the faux door was installed. These were shallow bricks cemented in place over the plaster wall, with decorative molding in place to make it look like a door.

She stepped back. There was no real door. No opening for the ghost to have escaped. Yet the ghostly figure had disappeared. Tamarind bit her pierced lip. The only way for it to have vanished was if it was a real ghost.

"We saw *something*," Enid agreed. Her expression hovered between excitement and fear.

"Um, ghosts don't exist," Quentin said. "Shouldn't we be looking for hiding places in this room?"

Tamarind swore. Of course. In the darkness the person must have hidden.

"I need medical attention," Piper whined. "My hand is bleeding."

Tamarind glanced at the minor wound. "A creepy trickster can do a lot more damage to you than a little scrape on your hand."

"It's more than a—" She broke off as Tamarind's words sunk in. "You think she's dangerous?"

Enid gasped. "No. This isn't happening."

"Um, Enid..." Quentin placed an awkward hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"No. No, no, no!" Enid stood at the glass case with the letter from John Dickson Carr to Frederic Dannay, only a few feet from

where Piper and Tamarind were standing at the brick doorway.

Piper stepped around the case and relieved Quentin from his awkward half-hug, giving Enid a proper hug. "Quentin is right. Let's search the room for the person playing a joke on us."

"You don't understand," Enid moaned. She pointed a shaking hand at the securely locked case with the pièce de résistance to her new Locked Room Library. Or rather, she pointed at the case that had previously held her John Dickson Carr cherished letter.

The case was empty.

The letter that gave a clue to an alternate ending to *The Burning Court* had vanished.

Two of the puzzles from the book had come to life: a figure who disappeared through a brick wall, and a vanishing through a sealed object. They were lucky, Tamarind mused, that it was only a letter that disappeared from a locked case rather than a body vanishing from a sealed crypt like in the book.

"Should we call the police?" Piper asked.

"San Francisco police have more important priorities than a missing letter," Sanjay said from the doorway. "Nobody was hurt, so they won't show up in time."

Only then did Tamarind realize Sanjay had been observing from the doorway the entire time. He knew from the beginning that something serious was going to happen.

"Hello, brick wall injury here." Piper held up her arm to show them the scrape on her palm.

"Um, but you did that do yourself," Quentin said.

Piper opened her mouth, but Sanjay began speaking before she could protest.

“You’re all under a lot of stress,” he said in a soothing voice. “Your library has been violated. Why don’t you let me help? The joker is probably hiding in here. We need to find them. And I’d like to see what they stole. Can you show me a photo of the missing letter?”

“Why is it so dark in here?” Enid said as she showed him a scan on her phone. “Can someone hit the lights?”

“Someone removed the bulbs in the lighting in this half of the room,” Sanjay said calmly.

Tamarind gaped at the track lighting. Damn, he was right. A ghost wouldn’t have had to remove light bulbs.

“This room and the display cases are tiny,” Piper said. “How can a person be hiding in here?”

“You’d be surprised how small a space the human body can fit into,” Sanjay said. “Let’s take a few minutes to make sure. Tamarind, can you stay in the doorway to make sure nobody hiding slips out?”

Tamarind suspected that wasn’t the real reason he wanted to search the room. She’d known him long enough to guess his true motive. Sanjay suspected one of them was the guilty party. He wasn’t searching for a person in hiding—but for the missing letter. Why else would he have asked to see a photo of it?

“Look for a witch’s ladder,” Enid said.

“What?” Sanjay snapped his head up from the back of an oak case containing a set of Clayton Rawson’s Merlini mysteries.

“It’s a piece of string with knots,” Enid explained.

“Um... are you feeling okay, Enid?” Quentin asked.

“*Do not attempt to revise my true story.*” Enid repeated the phrase softly, as if in a daze. “A witch’s ladder is the magical object what was left behind at the scene of the seemingly supernatural killing in

The Burning Court. The witch doesn't want us to find another ending to her story. That's why she's taken the letter."

Tamarind thought back to those words scrawled in an otherworldly hand in the back of the phantom copy of the novel and shivered. *Do not attempt to revise my true story.*

"There's nobody here," Sanjay declared five minutes later, "and neither is there a witches knot. I checked the windows as well as this false door—which is indeed still just a wall."

"I didn't think you'd find anyone," Enid said, holding up her key card. "I've got the only key card that opens the locked display cases in the museum. Anyone else would have had to smash the glass. Which they didn't. That's why it has to be *her*. She doesn't want her story changed. I really thought a ghost would be the perfect addition to the library, but I don't like this one bit."

Sanjay frowned and jogged to the case. He crouched down in front of the latch.

"You really think it was a ghost?" Piper asked.

Enid's shoulders slumped. "I don't know what to think."

"I'm sure Sanjay has a rational explanation," Tamarind said. "Right?"

Instead of his usual look of confidence, Sanjay's eyes looked like those of a deer in headlights. "All signs point to the work of a ghost," he said.

"You can't be serious," Tamarind said.

"Is that letter valuable?" Sanjay asked.

"Not really. Only to me and other classic mystery enthusiasts." Enid's voice was flat, spoken almost entirely in monotone, as if she was still in shock.

"Who did you tell about your acquisition?" Sanjay asked. "I mean before you showed it to your staff today."

“None of the public outreach mentioned it. I only told my sister. And before you ask. We’re close. She wouldn’t have done this.”

“Why don’t you make tea for everyone,” Sanjay said, “and meet us in the train car meeting room?”

She snorted, but Sanjay’s suggestion seemed to snap her out of her distraught stupor. “I’m done playing games.” She pulled the pencils out of her hair as she strode through the library toward the train car. Tendrils of hair escaped from the bun and her hair cascaded over her back.

When she emerged in the train car doorway a few moments later, she held a bottle of bourbon and a stack of plastic tumblers. “I’m not Miss Marple. I don’t need tea. I need a stiff drink. Anyone care to join me?”

The five of them gathered around the narrow table in the train car and Enid poured generous splashes of bourbon into their cups.

Sanjay took a sip, and with a faint smile on his lips sat back to observe the group.

“Shut. Up.” Tamarind said, watching his face.

He widened his eyes into an innocent expression every bit as false as the brick doorway. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You know what happened,” Tamarind said. “I can tell. You were only pretending to believe it was a ghost.”

“Um, you know what happened?” Quentin blinked at him.

“I have a theory,” Sanjay answered.

“Does it involve a ghost?” Piper asked. She made a face as she sampled the bourbon.

He shook his head. “Only one of the oldest of magicians’ tricks.”

Quentin inched away from Sanjay. “Um, what kind of magician did you say you were?”

"I'm not implying anything supernatural," Sanjay said. "I'm talking about misdirection. What we saw tonight was smoke and mirrors."

"I didn't see any smoke and mirrors," Piper said.

Tamarind sighed. "It's an expression."

"The 'ghost' was only a distraction," Sanjay said, "to distract us from the robbery."

"I wish that could be the case," Enid said, "but that's impossible. I told you how the locked cases can only be unlocked using a key card. We all have key cards that open the various doors, but I'm the only person with a master key card who opens the cases of valuable items. Not only that, but I checked on the letter before I went upstairs for dinner. It was there when I left." She finished her bourbon and poured herself another splash.

"Right," Sanjay said. "You live above upon the second floor. It's a solid old house with thick walls and floors. You can't hear everything happening down here, can you?"

Enid considered the question. "I suppose not. But like I said, I'm the only one who could have opened the case without smashing it or otherwise damaging it."

"Are you?" Sanjay asked calmly.

"You can test our keys," Tamarind suggested. "I've never tried mine on anything besides the doors."

Sanjay shook his head. "That won't matter. The person who did this wouldn't keep the offending card. That would be too easy to discover. They only had to *borrow* it."

"Enid would remember someone borrowing her key card," Piper said.

"I didn't say they borrowed it with her knowledge," Sanjay said. "But for someone sitting close to Enid in the close quarters of the

train car this evening, and for that same person to give Enid a hug after the letter was stolen... And when you think about the fact that this was the very same person who conveniently 'bumped into' the case with the letter when she went chasing the ghost..."

All eyes fell to Piper.

She gasped and stepped back. "You can't mean you think I had something to do with this?"

"You used sleight-of-hand to get her key card," Sanjay said, "and to unlock the case and slip the letter out while we were all focused on the fake 'ghost' you conjured."

Piper stammered by couldn't form words.

"Um, maybe we should call the police now," Quentin suggested.

"No," Tamarind blurted out.

"No?" Sanjay repeated. "I'm all for stepping in to solve a mystery when I can help, but at this point—"

"That's not what happened," Tamarind said. Surprising herself, she was even more sure as she spoke the words.

Piper gaped at her. "You mean it was *you*, Tamarind?"

Tamarind rolled her eyes. "Of course not. But there's a problem with your logic, Sanjay. The brat couldn't have done it."

"Hey!" Piper said. "Who are you calling a brat?"

"I'm defending you, you little brat!" Tamarind scrunched her eyes shut. "Be quiet, everyone. I'm trying to think. I saw something... Okay, I can't remember exactly what I saw, but I know it was important."

"You could hypnotize Tamarind," Enid suggested. "Then she'll remember whatever she thinks she saw."

Tamarind's eyes popped open. "Nobody is hypnotizing me."

Sanjay shrugged. "I'm not a mentalist anyway. Though I appreciate your faith in my abilities, Enid."

"You're all so weird!" Piper shouted. "I'm going home." Her hip bumped against the side of the narrow train car table as she scooted out.

"That's it," Tamarind said, the memory coming back to her. "When Piper bumped into the display case, I was looking directly at *her*, not the ghost. There was no time for her to have opened the case and stolen the letter."

"There was time," Sanjay insisted.

"Maybe if she was a sleight-of-hand expert like you, but there's no way Piper could have done it."

"You don't know that."

"I *do* know," Tamarind said, "that misdirection is about the magician making sure you're looking in the right place, isn't it?"

Sanjay gave her a cocky nod. "That's exactly why we were all looking at the prop of the ghost that was conveniently hidden in darkness."

"Nope," Tamarind said. "Not all of us. I was more interested in Piper than the ghost, because I was impressed she was brave enough to charge at a ghost. She didn't steal the letter."

"Um, what about the key card?" Quentin cut in. He scratched his head awkwardly as everyone's attention snapped to him. "There's no sense debating whether or not Piper is a pick-pocket expert if there's no pocket to pick. Enid, don't you wear your key card around your neck?"

She removed a lanyard from around her neck, lifting the key card she wore under her blouse along with a locket on a chain. "Nobody got a hold of this without my knowledge. It was a nice theory, Sanjay. Straight out of one of the books surrounding us. But it doesn't translate to real life."

Everyone watched the lanyard with the key card dangling from her fingertips as it swayed from side to side. Before it came to a standstill, Sanjay snatched it from her hand.

“New theory,” he snapped. “Everyone, come with me.”

They tested each of their key cards on the doors and case locks. As Enid had explained, they could all move freely from room to room with their key cards, but only Enid’s master key opened the display cases.

After the test was complete, Sanjay sulked in the doorway of the lounge car. His bowler hat was back on his head, serving as a security blanket. Enid refilled tumblers of bourbon for her, Tamarind, and Quentin’s. Piper hadn’t taken more than a sip of her first glass.

“Don’t look at me like that, Houdini,” Quentin said. “Just because I don’t read mysteries in my free time doesn’t mean I don’t know the tropes. Your first guess was wrong and you don’t think your friends are guilty. That leaves me. I’m the last man standing.”

“Did you do it?” Enid asked him. Her newly refilled glass was already empty. “Please just tell me. At this point, I rather hope you did. Because it would mean a ghost, or a witch—a ghost-witch—hadn’t stolen my letter.” She plopped down next to Quentin and gripped his forearm. “I thought it would be fun to have a ghost, but it isn’t. Tell me it was a test of the library’s security system. I’ll believe you.”

He attempted to slide away from her on the seat, but she held firm.

“Please,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Quentin said. “I wish I knew what happened to your letter, but I haven’t seen it since the last time I was in here earlier this evening.”

Sanjay gripped the edges of his bowler hat and groaned. "I can't believe I didn't put the pieces together earlier. I was thinking of how I would have accomplished it. But every magic trick has multiple executions."

Piper crossed her arms. "So what? Are we really going to sit around this lopsided table all night playing Clue?"

"I was wrong about you, Piper," Sanjay said.

"Thank you."

"You didn't steal the letter at 9:15 tonight."

"I told you I didn't—"

"You stole it *earlier*." Sanjay turned from Piper to Enid. "When was the last time you saw the letter?"

"This evening, before dinner."

"Hours ago?" Sanjay asked.

Enid nodded.

"That left you plenty of time." Sanjay turned his attention back to Piper.

"Plenty of time for what?" Piper shouted. "You're all crazy."

"Shut. Up." Tamarind said. "I *knew* I was right about you being my nemesis."

"What are you talking about?" Piper snarled. "I don't have to stand for this treatment. Isn't this workplace harassment?"

"Not if she's unmasking a thieving ghost," Enid said. She tilted her head and studied Piper, as if seeing her for the first time. "You're certainly smart enough to pull off an impossible theft. I've always known you were far smarter than you acted. But why would you—"

"I wouldn't," Piper said, "and I didn't. I couldn't have done what he said anyway. Like we proved, my key card couldn't have gotten into the case—"

"You didn't need a key card," Sanjay said. "Tamarind told me that Enid insisted no changes be made to any of the vintage cases aside from adding locks."

"So what?"

Tamarind raised her index finger high into the air. "Back to the museum room!" She'd always wanted to do that. She smiled to herself as she led the charge through the library to the museum room.

Sanjay slid his arm underneath the case where the letter had been displayed. It only took him a few seconds to snap out a board along the bottom.

"So what if this antique is a piece of junk?" Piper said. "Why would I steal the letter?"

Enid faced Piper. "My sister told you about it before you saw it this morning, didn't she?"

"About your stupid letter? Sure. Mom mentioned how you blew more of your inheritance on that stupid letter."

"You're bitter," Sanjay said. His voice was so soothing that it wasn't an accusation, just a statement of fact.

"Of course I'm bitter," Piper snapped. "Great aunt Norma's inheritance should have been mine. I'm the one starting out my adult life during a recession and drowning in student loans. I couldn't even take a year backpacking in Europe like I was supposed to. I had to start working at your stupid library."

"Hey," Tamarind cut in. "Your aunt hired you even though you have zero experience. And this isn't a stupid library. It's the coolest job ever." To her surprise, she believed her words.

"Whatever," Piper said. "I'm only guilty of being rightfully upset at this unjust accusation. Either a ghost or someone else stole the John Dickson Carr letter. It wasn't me. How could I have been in

two places at once? We all saw the ghost. Unless you think I had a disappearing accomplice?"

"Oh, that part of the trick I knew right away," Sanjay said. "The ghost wasn't a person."

"We all saw her," Piper said. "The ghost from *The Burning Court* who vanished through the bricked-up doorway. You can't have it both ways. It was a ghost or a person."

"Or a ghost made of gauze that swayed with the burst of air from the door opening," Sanjay said. "It's a good trick. Simple, but if it's set up well, quite effective. Which it was in this case, because you'd already planted the idea of a ghost earlier in the day by dropping a book with a ghostly inscription—probably using a thread, but there are other methods—and then whispering when your back was turned, or maybe you used a recording on your phone. Whatever your methods, you made sure everyone was prepared to imagine that a ghost from a book had come to life."

"Technically it was a witch," Tamarind mumbled.

Sanjay grinned at her. "All she had to do was plant the suggestion of a supernatural being when we saw the translucent white fabric in the darkness. Remember, Piper is the one who screamed and pointed at the ghost."

Tamarind groaned. "And the one who attacked it. I thought that made you a bad-ass! Really it makes you the thief."

"A thief wearing a baggy sweatshirt," Sanjay said, "with plenty of room to hide a ball of gauze."

"Get away from me, pervert." Piper wriggled away as Sanjay reached for her wrist. Her ponytail flicked in his face as she darted toward the door. She didn't make it there. Her head snapped back as Enid caught hold of her ponytail with a firm grip.

They found an extra pocket sewn into Piper's baggy sweatshirt, which held the silk fabric used to create their ghost.

The following morning, Quentin showed up earlier than either of the remaining skeleton crew of the library. He brought a container of donuts and carafe of coffee from Tamarind's favorite local coffee shop.

"A small token of appreciation for helping catch the wolf in our midst," he said as he held a plate of mouthwatering donuts under Tamarind's nose.

Tamarind accepted a jelly-filled donut with thanks. "Where's Enid?"

"Haven't seen her yet."

"Huh." Tamarind knew from the night before that after Piper returned the stolen letter, Enid had decided not to involve the police. She told her sister—Piper's mom—the truth, and fired Piper on the spot, but asked them all not to reveal Piper's guilt publicly. Piper admitted that she wanted to get back at Enid by ruining her perfect opening, but swore she wasn't planning on keeping or destroying the letter. She returned it in perfect condition.

Enid arrived as Quentin and Tamarind were each finishing a second donut. Tamarind was happy to see that the man did eat, and that Enid was smiling and humming a tune as she walked through the front doors.

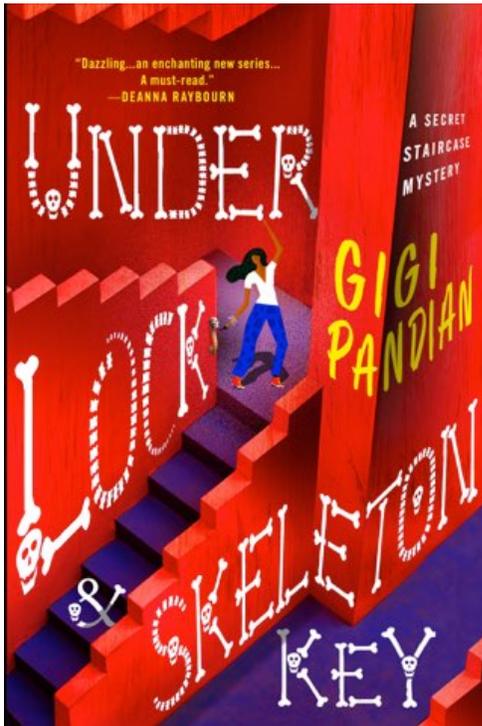
"Sorry I'm late," she said, swinging the door shut with her hip. She was dressed again in a vintage outfit, and her makeup and hair were styled more than the previous day. "I just came from an interview that ran long. It turns out that having a locked room theft at our new Locked Room Library is a great news hook. We're going to

be even more crowded when we open, so put down those donuts and let's get to work."

THE END



The Locked Room Library makes its next appearance in [Under Lock & Skeleton Key](#), coming from Minotaur Books in March 2022.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gigi Pandian is a *USA Today* bestselling and award-winning mystery author, breast cancer survivor, and accidental almost-vegan. The child of cultural anthropologists from New Mexico and the southern tip of India, she spent her childhood traveling around the world on their research trips. She now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and a gargoyle who watches over the backyard vegetable garden. A cancer diagnosis in her thirties taught her that life's too short to waste a single moment, so she's having fun writing quirky novels and cooking recipes from around the world. Her debut novel, *Artifact*, was awarded the Malice Domestic Grant, and she's won Anthony, Agatha, Lefty, and Derringer awards. Her books include the Accidental Alchemist Mysteries, the Jaya Jones Treasure Hunt Mysteries, and the Secret Staircase Mysteries

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