

# THE VAULT

By Karen Lewis

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...Another sleepless night. Liza opened the window, and stared at the night sky. Stars encircled a plump orange moon. She hadn't slept properly all summer. Not since it happened... Even a hefty shot of Scotch at bedtime didn't help.

Two sweltering months of going through the motions of ordinary living, working in the garden, when it wasn't too hot—the begonias were lovely this year, but they needed constant pruning—Bride night on Mondays and the Book Club every second Thursday, while all the time harboring a guilty secret of capital proportions.

She could only imagine how shocked her friends would be, if they only knew.

Could anything be *proven* against her? That was the question that both rankled and tormented. She lit a cigarette—a bad habit that stress had driven her back to. There was such a thing as circumstantial evidence. Heck, there would be precious few convictions without it.

Yet, it had seemed so foolproof at the time... just before the school library closed down for summer break...

“Are you going away this year?” Ellen, the receptionist, locked up her desk and bounded towards the door. Her husband and three kids waited for her in the parking lot. Their old station wagon loaded up for the cottage.

Liza shook her head. She was still paying for the European tour of the previous year. “I may take a few day trips,” she said. The truth was she rather dreaded the holidays. The library was her whole life. She felt cast adrift without it. What she wouldn't miss, however, was the vitriolic Philippa Jervis—nicknamed Pip behind her back—the Head Librarian. That woman had made her life a misery for years.

“It'll be great to get away from *you know who* for a while.” As if reading her thoughts, Ellen jerked her head in the direction of Pip's office. “Thank God, she'll be retiring soon.”

Amen to that, thought Liza. And since she would almost certainly get the job, she greeted the idea with even more enthusiasm than the rest of the staff. It would be nice to run things for a change. She had so many plans. Get the system completely computerized for starters.

After Ellen had left, Pip beckoned to Liza from the vault, where she stacked the rare books and other valuables, usually displayed in glass cases. “I thought you should know before it's announced to the rest of the staff,” she said. “The Board has made a decision regarding my successor.”

This was uncharacteristically thoughtful, thought Liza. Pip liked to embarrass and harass whenever the opportunity presented itself. She was a tyrant, and no one could live up to her expectations.

Pip wiped her hands on the cloth she'd been using for dusting. Tall and bony with eyes like a hawk, she resembled that bird of prey in other ways as well. “I know it's been expected that you would take my place.” She grimaced. “But I vetoed that idea with the Board.”

Liza felt the room heave around her. She grabbed onto the door of the vault—which was held open by a gigantic encyclopedia of music—for support. “I don't understand...” she murmured.

“I didn't feel you were up to the job.” Pip placed a first edition of Emerson's poems on top of an equally sought after Browning. Both donated by a local business in exchange for an honorable mention in the Friends of the Library list. “I've never been satisfied with your performance in your present capacity. So to promote you to the Headship would be irresponsible.”

“Why you rotten, spiteful bitch...” Shock and disappointment turned to fury, which flamed in Liza like a torched oil field.

Pip laughed. An ugly dry cackle devoid of humor. “I always knew you were a guttersnipe,” she gloated.

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Liza warned.

Pip laughed again. “Didn’t you notice?” she taunted. “I just did!”

“Why you...” It proved too much provocation for Liza. She wanted to lunge at this monster, who had had a personal knife in her for years, and scratch her eyes out, but instead, saw an even better solution. With one swift kick she knocked the book/doorstopper away and slammed the vault door on the wickedly triumphant face.

Afterwards, she decided it was a spur of the moment thing. At least, that’s how it started out. She had not intended to actually go away and leave Pip locked in there—although God knows she hated her enough—just give her the scare of her life. But once the deed was done, it became harder to undo. Pip would call the police, and she would be charged with unlawful confinement, perhaps even attempted murder.

“Your temper will be the undoing of you yet,” her mother had always warned. But shouldn’t the fact that she was provoked beyond cruelty count? Either way, as the vital minutes ticked by and she stared at the vault’s heavy door, she began to think what a just punishment this was for one as nasty and deliberately mean as Pip Jervis. If only she hadn’t destroyed Liza’s chances of promotion. That is what had kept her going through years of abuse. She would have gladly put up with the tortures of hell, if the Head Librarianship lay at the end of it. But now...well it was the final straw in a veritable barrel of them. It left her with nothing to lose.

She knew Pip was as alone in the world, as she herself, was. There would be no close family members or friends to question her sudden disappearance. Especially, since it was summer holiday time and Pip usually went on a whirlwind of coach tours. The bus company wouldn’t care if she didn’t show up.

Pip lived close to the library and walked to work. So no telltale car sat outside in the parking lot. Even her purse was neatly locked away in her desk. There were no visible signs that anything was amiss to be noticed by janitorial staff.

It was perfect.

The perfect *crime*...Liza balked at the word. Strange, it didn’t feel at all like a crime, and she didn’t want to acknowledge it as such. After all, it wasn’t premeditated; all she had done was close the vault door...

All through a ragingly hot July and August, the vault was never far from her mind. That she had actually had the audacity to commit such an act shocked her to the core. She regretted it not a bit. Pip had asked for it. And besides, she hadn’t condemned her to an inhumane end; she would have expired quite quickly from lack of air. Wouldn’t she?

Liza got back into bed. She had to at least close her eyes and try to rest. The alarm would be ringing in another couple of hours, and a brutal day lay ahead—September 7 and school reopened. What would happen? Who would be the first to open the vault? And oh my God what a shock...not to mention the smell, that would result. She would have to sharpen her acting skills, and appear suitably shocked and aghast. She would say she had left shortly after Ellen, and that Pip had been working in the vault at the time. It would be assumed that she accidentally locked herself in. The door of the vault had been faulty for quite some time, hence the hefty book used as a stopper.

\* \* \*

The torment of the last two months had taken their toll. Liza peered in the mirror, and did her best to hide the ravages. She had lost weight. Her once cheerful face looked drawn and anxious. Maybe she should have simply walked away on that last day of school? Now, in

retrospect, she wished that she had of done. What had it gained her after all, except for the brief surge of satisfaction when she slammed the vault door? But it was too late for regrets...a whole summer too late.

The drive to work, which she had done so many times before, seemed unfamiliar, foreign. Everything had become jumbled in her sleep-starved brain and dwelled on some surrealistic plain.

“You don’t look well.” Ellen, suntanned and relaxed, noticed immediately.

“I caught a summer bug,” Liza lied. She sat down at her desk, and tried not to look at the vault door. But it drew her eyes like a magnet to steel.

“Maybe *you know who* came down with it too?” Ellen looked meaningfully at Pip’s office. “This is the first time in living memory that she hasn’t been here before everyone else.”

Liza nodded. She felt as if she were unraveling. Being back here at the scene of the crime, so to speak, and knowing Pip’s decaying corpse molted in the vault, was much harder than she’d imagined it would be. She struggled to appear normal, nonchalant. Would she ever make it through this very hardest of days? One thing was for sure, she decided, she could no longer work here. She would hand in her notice at the end of the week. No one would be surprised. They’d simply attribute it to the awful shock about finding Pip. How could one sit facing the vault every day after that grisly discovery?

Liza sipped on a cup of cooling coffee and watched Ellen sift through the mail.

“Here, there’s one for you,” she said. “It’s from the Library Board and I bet I know what it is.” She smiled.

*Oh God no, that’s where you’re wrong,* thought Liza. *It isn’t offering me the top spot as you think, but telling me, as second in the chain of command, who my next master will be. Pip had seen to that. That’s why she had died.*

“What’s wrong, Liza. You look as if you’ve seen a ghost. Are you okay?” Ellen came over and picked up the letter that had fallen from Liza’s hands.

Liza felt shell-shocked, incapable of speech. So either Pip had lied, or the Board had changed their minds?

Ellen scanned the letter. She looked puzzled. She had clearly been expecting bad news to account for Liza’s reaction. “Congratulations, Liza,” she said. “You’ll make a great Head Librarian.”

—The End—