

# THE PELL HEIST

*Book 1 in the Jack Legare Series*

NORB VONNEGUT



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## PROLOGUE

### TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

The .38 grinds into Woody's skull. He smells Hoppe's No. 9 on the barrel, a spicy odor like sweet glue. The tang clings to the roof of his mouth.

Boss nuzzles the trigger with his index finger.

A thousand volts rip through the white utility van. The nerves of four men arc from expectation, and Woody's pounding heart rattles in his ears. But he watches the road. His grip stays easy on the steering wheel as they continue straight and steady across the narrow causeway.

Click.

Nothing happens. No deafening explosion. No sound until Boss snorts. He is cold, rigid. He blows make-believe smoke from his empty Smith & Wesson and hopes the driver has pissed himself.

Woody is ice.

"The kid's got promise." Boss nods at his two men in the cargo hold.

"Told you. He's connected."

"Shut up."

No one says anything more till the van arrives at Pell College. There are stone walls and thick arborvitae hedges ringing the oceanside campus, just east of Newport, the school a safe harbor on the rocky shores of New England.

Until now.

Once again, Boss repeats his instructions. "We get in. We get out. We drill these girls before they know what happened."

He is the oldest of the four men, the biggest by thirty pounds. The pouches under his eyes make him look tired and lumpy, like he crawled out of bed four hours after last call and a Percocet to make it through the night. Despite appearances Boss is fast with his hands, and his two regulars fear him.

Woody knows he is a huge asset to these men. The vehicle he boosted from Newport Tree Service is perfect cover for a lazy Friday afternoon in the fall. But he is new to the crew and realizes Boss does not trust him.

*I don't trust that Southie prick either.*

"Keep the engine running, kid. When we come outside, I don't want to find you pulling your pud."

"I got it."

"You packing?"

Woody swallows his irritation and answers, "No," for the third time that day. But the "no" chokes in his throat.

"Say it again."

"No."

Boss turns to his two men in back. "Show me your guns."

They open the cylinders of their revolvers.

"See, no bullets," says one.

"Are you kidding me?" Woody speaks in a monotone, but his blood pressure is soaring.

Boss blackens. "You ever shoot anybody, dumbass?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I'm not taking the fall if you go stupid on me." Boss grows bigger and bigger inside the cabin.

No response.

"You wanna get paid?" He spits the question.

"Yeah."

"Shut up and drive, dumbass. My action. My deal."

*Next time I negotiate.*

The moment passes. Woody steers down the road, past Hazard Court and Osgood Hall, the massive stone dormitories built in the 1920s. It's almost closing time when the four men pull into a parking lot outside Channing House on the far corner of campus.

Boss and his regulars tear into thin packages and yank ladies' stockings over their heads. Their eyes, noses, and chins melt under the sheer black nylon. ID is impossible, the effect terrifying.

The coast is clear. No one in sight. The three men pile out of the van, hoist a telescoping ladder from the roof, and lug it to the front of Channing. Boss climbs to the spot where a telephone line enters the weather-beaten red-brick building.

He opens the jaws of an industrial-strength bolt cutter and snaps the cable. The wire plops to the ground with a muffled thump.

No sirens. No confused cries from inside the building. Everything on plan.

Behind the wheel, Woody watches the others disappear through massive oak doors. His job is to wait. He gasses the engine just to hear it rumble.

One minute. Two. He knows what is happening. Their man is on the second floor, covering the flank. Boss and the other guy are sweeping the ground floor, raining hell and poking the girls with their gun barrels.

*No bullets.*

The plan infuriates Woody. Sooner or later, stuff happens. Stuff that requires 158 grams of lead. He stewes about his cut of the money, wonders when he'll get paid. An errant sound makes him flinch.

*Somebody coming.*

An old man turns the corner. His hair is wispy. His gray slacks fit twenty pounds ago, and mustard stains sully the Pell College crest with the word "security" embroidered on his blue blazer. He stubs out a cigarette with his heel, spots the ladder, and notices the telephone line drooping from a pole on the street.

*Boss said, "No guards."*

Woody shuts off the engine and hops out of the van. Holding an unlit cigarette, he ambles toward the old man. "Hey there."

"Did you see what happened?"

"The phone guy said he'd be right back."

"Phone guy?" The security guard frowns, alert. "Who are you?"

"Newport Tree Service. You got a light?"

"Oh...yeah." Satisfied, the guard fishes through his pocket.

A scream breaks from Channing, and with surprising speed the security guard goes Dirty Harry. He whips out a pistol, rushes to the entrance of the museum.

Woody bolts in the opposite direction. "I'll get the cops."

"Hurry," the guard calls.

Inside the van, Woody grabs the last stocking and reaches under his seat. “Screw that.”

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Established in 1823, Pell College had been sending proud women into the world longer than Smith, Wellesley, or any of the Seven Sisters. Pell students were not the brightest scholars. Nor the dullest. Most came from wealthy families. The undergraduates were go-getters, the alumnae elegant, all generations united by their disdain for SATs.

The community was a curious mix of the pearls-and-pink-bubble grace at Sweet Briar and the “bloodless absolutes” that John Updike found in the hearts of New Englanders. Some were liberal, some right wing. Most were Protestant but not exclusively so. Whatever their differences, all Pell women revered one of their own from the Class of 1920.

Abigail Channing was a legend, an active suffragette even as an undergraduate. She donated her entire collection of twentieth-century art to Pell, which included paintings by Picasso, Modigliani, Monet, and Matisse, among other greats. All were proudly displayed on the ground floor of Channing House in a room named for her only son.

Thoughtful and pragmatic, Abigail also gifted enough money to maintain the three-story museum into perpetuity. There was only one stipulation. Nothing in the John H. Channing Room could ever be moved, sold, or travel on exhibition. Otherwise the entire collection was to be auctioned by Sotheby’s and all proceeds donated to Brown University, her late husband’s beloved alma mater.

Pell honored Abigail’s wishes, and from one class to the next, students took sanctuary at Channing. Undergraduates whiled away the hours among carefully curated exhibits on the first two floors. Or they retreated to the third-floor library, studied at long knotty-pine tables, and found inspiration in the views of Newport’s historic mansions across Easton Bay.

Maybe it was by accident. Maybe by unspoken consent. But Channing was free of the usual campus distractions: booze, acid gossip, and horny boys who skulked through the dormitories and sexiled aggrieved roommates. The museum was a private jewel that belonged to Pell women.

A vulnerable jewel.

The security guards were a collection of favorite grandpas. There were no cameras, no detection devices, no elaborate bolts locking paintings to plaster walls. The doors and windows kept out the breeze. But they were useless against thieves with a plan.

The ground floor was much as it had always been. High ceilings. Herringbone floors. There was a large sitting room to the left, the John H. Channing Room to the right, and a mahogany staircase in the rear of the foyer where a wooden organ grinder’s monkey sat a precarious vigil on the rickety old bannister.

Generations of Pell women touched the monkey’s fez for good luck as they glided up and down the burnished stairs. And if you happened to say “cheeky monkey,” everybody on campus knew where you meant.

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“Let her go.” The security guard is a stone wall. He crouches in a two-handed firing stance and locks on Boss with his Walther PPK.

“We cool?” hollers the flank man from the second floor.

“I got it.” Boss coils a terrified undergraduate in his arms. The nylon stocking covering his face makes him look like a python.

“Drop your weapons,” says the old man, no trace of the retiree supplementing his pension. “We can all walk away in one piece.”

Boss coos in the girl’s ear, lingers in her scent. His breath is hot, moist even through the mesh. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Audy.”

“Wanna suck my barrel, Audy?”

No answer. Her sobs are primal.

"Drop your gun, cancer dick." Boss grabs the girl's hand. "Or I break her fingers."

"No," says the guard, half command, half plea.

Crack goes the ring finger.

"Next time she eats a bullet." Boss crushes the freckle-faced blonde, and she wails for mercy.

"I got backup coming."

Hinges shriek. The doors fly open behind the guard. Woody lunges into the foyer, wearing the last nylon stocking. "Game over, grandpa."

The old man whirls around.

A jacketed hollow point blows his mind. Literally. The old man's head splatters calamari across the waxy oak floors. He caves backwards, blood and gore gurgling from an eye socket.

Woody gapes at his smoking .45 and muddles from the adrenaline rush of his first kill. He looks up and sees young women frozen in horror. Under different circumstances, he could be dating any one of them.

Boss yells at the top of his lungs. "Move. Now."

The flank man barrels down the stairs and follows the other two into the John H. Channing Room. Boss walks quickly and thumps paintings with the flat of his hand. "This one. This one. This one." And so on.

Woody is motionless, his expression vacant, his gun hand limp. He fixes on the stairway and appears to be deep in calculation.

One man yanks two Picassos from the wall. Another pulls down a couple of Matisse nudes. Boss jerks the Monet and Modigliani so hard they leave gaping craters in the horsehair plaster.

The men shuffle-step their way to the entrance, scraping canvases and banging heavy frames against the floor. Boss wedges through the door. "Get your brass."

"Oh, yeah." His driver starts from the contact, like he's lost in another world, which of course, he is. He's thinking about the cheeky monkey on the brittle wooden bannister, not about the shell casing from his shot.

"Move it, dumbass." Boss's face wrinkles underneath the stocking.

Woody waves his .45. "I'll be right out."

## CHAPTER ONE

### WEDNESDAY

The wind was blustery, the sun half-hearted, and the skies heavy with snow on a chill January day during her first year as a college president. The red oaks, Norway maples, and copper beeches had long since dropped their leaves. Now they appeared upside down, as though their spindly branches were exposed roots thirsting for water.

Dozens of these trees dotted the grounds surrounding Pell's administrative center. Ruggles was a new structure with boxy Scandinavian lines, blond wood, concrete foundations, and stainless steel accents. Its windows were mirrored on the outside, an architectural tribute to the gothic revival gems on either side.

Older alumnae bristled at the mention of Ruggles. Shook their heads and muttered "good Lord" with righteous indignation. And every spring, when the campus blossomed with white reunion tents, soft tulip medleys, and whiskey sours in acrylic cups, they would natter among themselves that Ruggles looked like "Ikea without the meatballs."

With less than seven months on the job, Pell's seventeenth president avoided discussions about Ruggles with anyone except her husband and, even with him, confined her opinions to the safety of their home. During their private moments, which were growing fewer and farther between, she sometimes confided that the tittle-tattle was a "distracting rabbit hole of quirks and personal tastes," a description she abbreviated to "Kardashian Light," by the time he handed her a second white wine spritzer. She believed Pell's well-heeled graduates owed it to themselves, they owed it to the world, to concentrate on more important matters.

Fylicia Jenkins was a sturdy woman. Her eyes were piercing. Her hair was careful, her nails meticulous. When she smiled, students forgot the pensive manner of speaking, the way she lingered on verbs a little too long, the whisper of a Southern accent. They felt safe, like "Away Mom" would make everything better.

The president turned in to her corner office on the third floor of Ruggles, thinking about her duty to the future, preoccupied with a vision far more ambitious than bricks and mortar, more audacious than anything she had ever imagined possible as a kid hell-bent on escaping her two-blink town and living a bigger life. That first January in Rhode Island, Fylicia Jenkins's big dreams were just around the bend.

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Nine months after the Pell heist, a young swimmer found a .45 in the surf at Easton's Beach, a sandy strip just outside the historic district of old Newport. Ballistics matched the gun to the dead

guard, and the discovery looked like a huge break at first. But salt had pitted the steel and corroded any chance of fingerprints, and the case went cold.

There were few clues, no insurance, no trace of the paintings, and no contact from the thieves. For all the theories among the country's foremost profilers, there was also no agreement about why the shooter had marched back into the foyer and snapped the wooden monkey off the Channing House bannister.

Staff members retired. Students graduated and moved away. When carpenters repaired the handrail, they installed a rather bland knob because Pell's grief counselors warned against a reproduction monkey. All that remained from the robbery were six empty spaces in the John H. Channing Room, a plaque in the library honoring the security guard, and a web page posting the \$5 million reward.

There would always be a dull ache in the hearts of Pell women. But as memories of the violent heist faded, the college moved on. Faculty members kept their heads down, focused on their mission, and trumpeted it with renewed vigor: "We help women make a difference."

They used expressions like "near idyllic" and "world class" to describe their seaside campus with a marine biology program ranked eighth in the nation and modern language facilities ranked seventh. The endowment, once a major question mark, now exceeded \$1.2 billion—enough money to attract top educators from around the world.

Twenty-five years after the robbery, Pell wasn't "Club Pelvis" anymore, a safety school where rich girls trolled for husbands at nearby Harvard, Yale, or Brown. It was red hot, a modern campus widely touted as one of the "new Ivies."

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Fylicia closed the door and sipped coffee from a go cup. The heat seeped through her slender brown fingers. The scent of roasted beans and caramel filled her lungs. There were few sensations quite so sweet as the surge of caffeine on a windy, gray afternoon when the barometer was dropping like a rock.

The president flipped on the lights. She spotted a pyramid of mail on her desk and a much larger package on her chair. The parcel was wrapped in coarse brown paper and measured about three feet by four. But lost in a thousand details—press releases, phonathons, launch parties across the country—she found the clutter irritating.

Today's meetings had started with a 7:00 a.m. breakfast. Over poached eggs and whole-wheat toast points, Bobbi Lenehan said, "I'll shake five figures out of Mike."

At a working lunch, chips and lobster BLTs, Eileen Houghton promised to do something in the "mid sixes."

*All this on my first day back.*

During the previous three weeks of planes, trains, and automobiles, Fylicia had visited alumnae across the country. The trustees called it a "road show," though she preferred "listening tour." And emboldened now by the meetings with graduates dripping in disposable income, she was on the cusp of introducing Pell's most important capital campaign ever:

"Women Owe Women."

If successful.... And it was a big if, because deep down the new president was scared. One wrong move and she'd be back in the sticks of Alabama, her childhood home, her nightmare memory of mosquitoes, swamp-grass bigots, and dead ends for a black girl growing up in the sixties. But if successful, Pell would offer a free ride to any student who came from a home with less than \$50,000 in annual income.

*WOW is right*, thought Fylicia. Pell would pay tuition, housing, and all the other expenses, even travel, that put college out of reach for smart, motivated girls who viewed every moment in class as a miracle.

WOW was more than a scholarship program. It was hope. Kids born into fragile circumstances, scratching to make ends meet, could find a way out.

*Like I did.*

Fylicia considered the large parcel, her overflowing desk. There was no place to work. She fingered her chunky, gray pearls, the rosary beads preferred by women in fundraising. And she placed her coffee on the credenza.

No return address on the package. The anonymous sender had spelled her name right, “F” instead of the more common “Ph.” And “handle with care” was penned everywhere in large, black letters.

The president swept the magazines and letters off to the side. She would deal with all that later. For now, she needed the space.

Bit by bit, Fylicia tore the wrapping around the edges, careful to avoid the scatter of bright stamps. The postmark appeared to be from Maryland, the red ink faded from its bruising journey courtesy of the postal service. She peeled back brown paper, taking her time, working methodically, and fussing through sheaths of corrugated cardboard and bubble wrap.

For all the “handle with care” warnings, Fylicia doubted the contents were valuable. No return address meant no insurance. And who in their right mind would trust big-ticket items to the vagaries of U.S. mail? But the president, who attributed her career success to the cautious instincts she developed as a little girl, eased a narrow board through the right side of the package.

No. It wasn’t a board. It was a painting. And not just any painting. Three sticks, sweeping G, and dot flourish, the signature was a masterpiece unto itself.

“It can’t be.”

Fylicia dropped into her chair and bellied up to the desk. She tried to pull the painting from its mummy-like sleeve. But the packaging clutched the frame and played tug-of-war every inch of the way.

Frustrated, the president paused to contain her excitement, to quell her urge to claw through the layers. Like an archeologist unearthing an ancient treasure, she removed the packaging bit by bit. When the painting finally emerged, it was breathtaking.

*Anna Zborowska is home.*

Fylicia had earned her PhD in medieval literature. As Pell’s president, however, she knew the story of Modigliani’s *Portrait of Anna Zborowska* by heart. It was knowledge expected of Pell women and, importantly, knowledge they expected of each other.

Anna was the wife of Modigliani’s primary art dealer, the subject of many paintings including an unsigned version sold to Abby Rockefeller. This portrait was one of seven items stolen from Channing House in 1991, six paintings and a wooden monkey head.

Alone in Modigliani’s embrace, Fylicia marveled at his brush strokes. They were controlled yet messy. He painted like a falling-down drunk trying to walk a straight line. Maybe it was Anna’s bearing. Or the curve of her long slender neck. Or the stretch of her head, the way Anna twisted at an angle that asked, “What gives?” Something about the portrait told Fylicia she was staring at opportunity. Anna Zborowska was what she needed to kick off the capital campaign of a lifetime.

*We have exciting news.*

The seventeenth president of Pell College could already hear the cha-ching of alumnae donations. She reached to call Louisa Coddington, the alumna who chaired Pell’s board of trustees and coined the slogan Women Owe Women.

Fylicia so desperately wanted to blurt out, “Anna Zborowska is back.”

Back, after how many years.

Back, after all the unanswered questions.

Back, after Pell had written off any chance of recovery.

Anna Zborowska was exquisite. Unscathed. She would inspire Pell graduates to open their wallets and lure the country’s best and brightest young women, no matter what their resources, to Pell College. Unless....



The president stopped cold.

*Who's claiming the \$5 million reward?*

Rooting through the trash, through shreds of bubble wrap, brown-paper packaging, and sudden misgivings, Fylicia found a note. It was folded in thirds. The message, to her growing concern, was pieced together with stickers.

Her face clouded. Her joy turned to horror. She read the note once, twice. She tugged at her pearls as angry tears rolled down her cheeks.

*Not now. Oh my Lord, not now.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *The Pell Heist*. This is my fourth novel and Book 1 in the Jack Legare Series. Jack and Helen will return during 2019 in *Windfall*, a story about two winning lottery tickets. The problem is, only one of the tickets is real, and the person with the fake ticket will do whatever it takes to claim the \$450 million lottery prize.

The New York Times describes my novels as “money porn,” “a red-hot franchise,” and “glittery thrillers about fiscal malfeasance.” I think of them as stories about unassuming heroes who stumble into dire situations and rise above their personal limitations to take on really creepy adversaries.

In addition to being an author, I'm an independent wealth manager. I spent much of my career in New York City with several well-known brokerage houses, and you'll see the impact on my writing. Wall Street makes great fodder for fictional characters, people like Jack Legare. He traded Wall Street for a seaside village in New England, where he's going broke running a small marina and tackle shop.

I send news about upcoming books, events, and OMG experiences (like the time hornets broke through the wall of my office and buried the redlined edits of *Top Producer* in dead bodies and gak). If you want musings and book updates please visit my website and subscribe to my email list. I promise not to flood your inbox.

Happy reading and all my best,

Norb

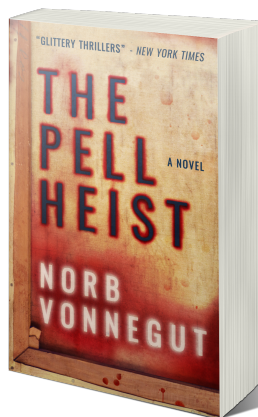
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## WINDFALL (2019)

*Book 2 in the Jack Legare Series*

Winning “PowerMoney” tickets expire worthless if the lottery prizes are not claimed within twelve months. One week before time runs out on a \$450 million jackpot, which would be the largest purse ever to go unclaimed, two people present winning tickets. One of them is an unfiltered actor from B-grade slasher movies known for her screams. The other is Pink Pinckney, husband, father of five, and Jack Legare’s best friend since high school. Evidence mounts that Pink is running a scam, but Legare says no way. His girlfriend Helen Chan and he are soon battling a sinister jump pilot and a brilliant coder obsessed with privacy. *Windfall*, book two of the Jack Legare series, gives a fresh twist on the old adage, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”