

‘The best thriller
writer alive’ Ken Follett

John Grisham



Camino Island

Someone is about to make a killing . . .

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HODDER &
STOUGHTON

CHAPTER ONE

THE HEIST

1.

The imposter borrowed the name of Neville Manchin, an actual professor of American literature at Portland State and soon-to-be doctoral student at Stanford. In his letter, on perfectly forged college stationery, “Professor Manchin” claimed to be a budding scholar of F. Scott Fitzgerald and was keen to see the great writer’s “manuscripts and papers” during a forthcoming trip to the East Coast. The letter was addressed to Dr. Jeffrey Brown, Director of Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Firestone Library, Princeton University. It arrived with a few others, was duly sorted and passed along, and eventually landed on the desk of Ed Folk, a career junior librarian whose task, among several other monotonous ones, was to verify the credentials of the person who wrote the letter.

Ed received several of these letters each week, all in many ways the same, all from self-proclaimed Fitzgerald buffs and experts, and even from the occasional true scholar. In the previ-

ous calendar year, Ed had cleared and logged in 190 of these people through the library. They came from all over the world and arrived wide-eyed and humbled, like pilgrims before a shrine. In his thirty-four years at the same desk, Ed had processed all of them. And, they were not going away. F. Scott Fitzgerald continued to fascinate. The traffic was as heavy now as it had been three decades earlier. These days, though, Ed was wondering what could possibly be left of the great writer's life that had not been pored over, studied at great length, and written about. Not long ago, a true scholar told Ed that there were now at least a hundred books and over ten thousand published academic articles on Fitzgerald the man, the writer, his works, and his crazy wife.

And he drank himself to death at forty-four! What if he'd lived into old age and kept writing? Ed would need an assistant, maybe two, perhaps even an entire staff. But then Ed knew that an early death was often the key to later acclaim (not to mention greater royalties).

After a few days, Ed finally got around to dealing with Professor Manchin. A quick review of the library's register revealed that this was a new person, a new request. Some of the veterans had been to Princeton so many times they simply called his number and said, "Hey, Ed, I'll be there next Tuesday." Which was fine with Ed. Not so with Manchin. Ed went through the Portland State website and found his man. Undergraduate degree in American lit from the University of Oregon; master's from UCLA; adjunct gig now for three years. His photo revealed a rather plain-looking young man of perhaps thirty-five, the makings of a beard that was probably temporary, and narrow frameless eyeglasses.

In his letter, Professor Manchin asked whoever responded to do so by e-mail, and gave a private Gmail address. He said

he rarely checked his university address. Ed thought, "That's because you're just a lowly adjunct professor and probably don't even have a real office." He often had these thoughts, but, of course, was too professional to utter them to anyone else. Out of caution, the next day he sent a response through the Portland State server. He thanked Professor Manchin for his letter and invited him to the Princeton campus. He asked for a general idea of when he might arrive and laid out a few of the basic rules regarding the Fitzgerald collection. There were many, and he suggested that Professor Manchin study them on the library's website.

The reply was automatic and informed Ed that Manchin was out of pocket for a few days. One of Manchin's partners had hacked into the Portland State directory just deep enough to tamper with the English department's e-mail server; easy work for a sophisticated hacker. He and the imposter knew immediately that Ed had responded.

Ho hum, thought Ed. The next day he sent the same message to Professor Manchin's private Gmail address. Within an hour, Manchin replied with an enthusiastic thank-you, said he couldn't wait to get there, and so on. He gushed on about how he had studied the library's website, had spent hours with the Fitzgerald digital archives, had owned for years the multivolume series containing facsimile editions of the great author's handwritten first drafts, and had a particular interest in the critical reviews of the first novel, *This Side of Paradise*.

Great, said Ed. He'd seen it all before. The guy was trying to impress him before he even got there, which was not at all unusual.

2.

F. Scott Fitzgerald enrolled in Princeton in the fall of 1913. At the age of sixteen, he was dreaming of writing the great American novel, and had indeed begun working on an early version of *This Side of Paradise*. He dropped out four years later to join the Army and go to war, but it ended before he was deployed. His classic, *The Great Gatsby*, was published in 1925 but did not become popular until after his death. He struggled financially throughout his career, and by 1940 was working in Hollywood, cranking out bad screenplays, failing physically and creatively. On December 21, he died of a heart attack, brought on by years of severe alcoholism.

In 1950, Scottie, his daughter and only child, gave his original manuscripts, notes, and letters—his “papers”—to the Firestone Library at Princeton. His five novels were handwritten on inexpensive paper that did not age well. The library quickly realized that it would be unwise to allow researchers to physically handle them. High-quality copies were made, and the originals were locked away in a secured basement vault where the air, light, and temperature were carefully controlled. Over the years, they had been removed only a handful of times.

3.

The man posing as Professor Neville Manchin arrived at Princeton on a beautiful fall day in early October. He was directed to Rare Books and Special Collections, where he met Ed Folk, who then passed him along to another assistant librarian who examined and copied his Oregon driver's license. It was, of course, a forgery, but a perfect one. The forger, who was also the hacker, had been trained by the CIA and had a long history in

the murky world of private espionage. Breaching a bit of campus security was hardly a challenge.

Professor Manchin was then photographed and given a security badge that had to be displayed at all times. He followed the assistant librarian to the second floor, to a large room with two long tables and walls lined with retractable steel drawers, each of which was locked. Manchin noticed at least four surveillance cameras high in the corners, cameras that were supposed to be seen. He suspected others were well hidden. He attempted to chat up the assistant librarian but got little in return. He jokingly asked if he could see the original manuscript for *This Side of Paradise*. The assistant librarian offered a smug grin and said that would not be possible.

“Have you ever seen the originals?” Manchin asked.

“Only once.”

A pause as Manchin waited for more, then he asked, “And what was the occasion?”

“Well, a certain famous scholar wished to see them. We accompanied him down to the vault and gave him a look. He didn’t touch the papers, though. Only our head librarian is allowed to do so, and only with special gloves.”

“Of course. Oh well, let’s get to work.”

The assistant opened two of the large drawers, both labeled “This Side of Paradise,” and withdrew thick, oversized notebooks. He said, “These contain the reviews of the book when it was first published. We have many other samples of later reviews.”

“Perfect,” Manchin said with a grin. He opened his briefcase, took out a notepad, and seemed ready to pounce on everything laid on the table. Half an hour later, with Manchin deep in his work, the assistant librarian excused himself and disappeared. For the benefit of the cameras, Manchin never looked up. Even-

tually, he needed to find the men's room and wandered away. He took a wrong turn here and another one there, got himself lost, and eased through Collections, avoiding contact with anyone. There were surveillance cameras everywhere. He doubted that anyone at that moment was watching the footage, but it could certainly be retrieved if needed. He found an elevator, avoided it, and took the nearby stairs. The first level below was similar to the ground floor. Below it, the stairs stopped at B2 (Basement 2), where a large thick door waited with "Emergencies Only" painted in bold letters. A keypad was next to the door, and another sign warned that an alarm would sound the instant the door was opened without "proper authorization." Two security cameras watched the door and the area around it.

Manchin backed away and retraced his steps. When he returned to his workroom, the assistant was waiting. "Is everything okay, Professor Manchin?" he asked.

"Oh yes. Just a bit of a stomach bug, I'm afraid. Hope it's not contagious." The assistant librarian left immediately, and Manchin hung around all day, digging through materials from the steel drawers and reading old reviews he cared nothing about. Several times he wandered off, poking around, looking, measuring, and memorizing.

4.

Manchin returned three weeks later and he was no longer pretending to be a professor. He was clean shaven, his hair was colored a sandy blond, he wore fake eyeglasses with red frames, and he carried a bogus student card with a photo. If someone asked, which he certainly didn't expect, his story was that he was a grad student from Iowa. In real life his name was Mark and his

occupation, if one could call it that, was professional thievery. High-dollar, world-class, elaborately planned smash-and-grab jobs that specialized in art and rare artifacts that could be sold back to the desperate victims for ransom. His was a gang of five, led by Denny, a former Army Ranger who had turned to crime after being kicked out of the military. So far, Denny had not been caught and had no record; nor did Mark. However, two of the others did. Trey had two convictions and two escapes, his last the year before from a federal prison in Ohio. It was there he'd met Jerry, a petty art thief now on parole. Another art thief, a onetime cellmate serving a long sentence, had first mentioned the Fitzgerald manuscripts to Jerry.

The setup was perfect. There were only five manuscripts, all handwritten, all in one place. And to Princeton they were priceless.

The fifth member of the team preferred to work at home. Ahmed was the hacker, the forger, the creator of all illusions, but he didn't have the nerve to carry guns and such. He worked from his basement in Buffalo and had never been caught or arrested. He left no trails. His 5 percent would come off the top. The other four would take the rest in equal shares.

By nine o'clock on a Tuesday night, Denny, Mark, and Jerry were inside the Firestone Library posing as grad students and watching the clock. Their fake student IDs had worked perfectly; not a single eyebrow had been raised. Denny found his hiding place in a third-floor women's restroom. He lifted a panel in the ceiling above the toilet, tossed up his student backpack, and settled in for a few hours of hot and cramped waiting. Mark picked the lock of the main mechanical room on the first level of the basement and waited for alarms. He heard none, nor did Ahmed, who had easily hacked into the university's secu-

rity systems. Mark proceeded to dismantle the fuel injectors of the library's backup electrical generator. Jerry found a spot in a study carrel hidden among rows of stacked tiers holding books that had not been touched in decades.

Trey was drifting around the campus, dressed like a student, lugging his backpack, scoping out places for his bombs.

The library closed at midnight. The four team members, as well as Ahmed in his basement in Buffalo, were in radio contact. Denny, the leader, announced at 12:15 that all was proceeding as planned. At 12:20, Trey, dressed like a student and hauling a bulky backpack, entered the McCarren Residential College in the heart of the campus. He saw the same surveillance cameras he had seen the previous week. He took the unwatched stairs to the second floor, ducked into a coed restroom, and locked himself in a stall. At 12:40, he reached into his backpack and removed a tin can about the size of a twenty-ounce bottle of soda. He set a delayed starter and hid it behind the toilet. He left the restroom, went to the third floor, and set another bomb in an empty shower stall. At 12:45, he found a semi-dark hallway on the second floor of a dormitory and nonchalantly tossed a string of ten jumbo Black Cat firecrackers down the hall. As he scrambled down the stairwell, the explosions boomed through the air. Seconds later, both smoke bombs erupted, sending thick clouds of rancid fog into the hallways. As Trey left the building he heard the first wave of panicked voices. He stepped behind some shrubs near the dorm, pulled a disposable phone out of his pocket, called Princeton's 911 service, and delivered the horrifying news: "There's a guy with a gun on the second floor of McCarren. He's firing shots."

Smoke was drifting from a second-floor window. Jerry, sitting in the dark study carrel in the library, made a similar call

from his prepaid cell phone. Soon, calls were pouring in as panic gripped the campus.

Every American college has elaborate plans to handle a situation involving an “active gunman,” but no one wants to implement them. It took a few dumbstruck seconds for the officer in charge to push the right buttons, but when she did, sirens began wailing. Every Princeton student, professor, administrator, and employee received a text and e-mail alert. All doors were to be closed and locked. All buildings were to be secured.

Jerry made another call to 911 and reported that two students had been shot. Smoke boiled out of McCarren Hall. Trey dropped three more smoke bombs into trash cans. A few students ran through the smoke as they went from building to building, not sure where exactly the safe places were. Campus security and the City of Princeton police raced onto the scene, followed closely by half a dozen fire trucks. Then ambulances. The first of many patrol cars from the New Jersey State Police arrived.

Trey left his backpack at the door of an office building, then called 911 to report how suspicious it looked. The timer on the last smoke bomb inside the backpack was set to go off in ten minutes, just as the demolition experts would be staring at it from a distance.

At 1:05, Trey radioed the gang: “A perfect panic out here. Smoke everywhere. Tons of cops. Go for it.”

Denny replied, “Cut the lights.”

Ahmed, sipping strong tea in Buffalo and sitting on go, quickly routed through the school’s security panel, entered the electrical grid, and cut the electricity not only to the Firestone Library but to half a dozen nearby buildings as well. For good measure, Mark, now wearing night vision goggles, pulled the

main cutoff switch in the mechanical room. He waited and held his breath, then breathed easier when the backup generator did not engage.

The power outage triggered alarms at the central monitoring station inside the campus security complex, but no one was paying attention. There was an active gunman on the loose. There was no time to worry about other alarms.

Jerry had spent two nights inside the Firestone Library in the past week and was confident there were no guards stationed within the building while it was closed. During the night, a uniformed officer walked around the building once or twice, shined his flashlight at the doors, and kept walking. A marked patrol car made its rounds too, but it was primarily concerned with drunk students. Generally, the campus was like any other—dead between the hours of 1:00 and 8:00 a.m.

On this night, however, Princeton was in the midst of a frantic emergency as America's finest were being shot. Trey reported to his gang that the scene was total chaos with cops scrambling about, SWAT boys throwing on their gear, sirens screaming, radios squawking, and a million red and blue emergency lights flashing. Smoke hung by the trees like a fog. A helicopter could be heard hovering somewhere close. Total chaos.

Denny, Jerry, and Mark hustled through the dark and took the stairs down to the basement under Special Collections. Each wore night vision goggles and a miner's lamp strapped to his forehead. Each carried a heavy backpack, and Jerry hauled a small Army duffel he'd hidden in the library two nights earlier. At the third and final level down, they stopped at a thick metal door, blacked out the surveillance cameras, and waited for Ahmed and his magic. Calmly, he worked his way through the library's alarm system and deactivated the door's four sensors. There was a loud clicking noise. Denny pressed down on the

handle and pulled the door open. Inside they found a narrow square of space with two more metal doors. Using a flashlight, Mark scanned the ceiling and spotted a surveillance camera. "There," he said. "Only one." Jerry, the tallest at six feet three inches, took a small can of black paint and sprayed the lens of the camera.

Denny looked at the two doors and said, "Wanna flip a coin?"

"What do you see?" Ahmed asked from Buffalo.

"Two metal doors, identical," Denny replied.

"I got nothing here, fellas," Ahmed replied. "There's nothing in the system beyond the first door. Start cutting."

From his duffel Jerry removed two eighteen-inch canisters, one filled with oxygen, the other with acetylene. Denny situated himself before the door on the left, lit a cutting torch with a sparker, and began heating a spot six inches above the keyhole and latch. Within seconds, sparks were flying.

Meanwhile, Trey had drifted away from the chaos around McCarren and was hiding in the blackness across the street from the library. Sirens were screaming as more emergency vehicles responded. Helicopters were thumping the air loudly above the campus, though Trey could not see them. Around him, even the streetlights were out. There was not another soul near the library. All hands were needed elsewhere.

"All's quiet outside the library," he reported. "Any progress?"

"We're cutting now," came the terse reply from Mark. All five members knew that chatter should be limited. Denny slowly and skillfully cut through the metal with the torch tip that emitted eight hundred degrees of oxygenated heat. Minutes passed as molten metal dripped to the floor and red and yellow sparks flew from the door. At one point Denny said, "It's an inch thick." He finished the top edge of the square and began cutting straight

down. The work was slow, the minutes dragged on, and the tension mounted but they kept their cool. Jerry and Mark crouched behind Denny, watching his every move. When the bottom cut line was finished, Denny rattled the latch and it came loose, though something hung. "It's a bolt," he said. "I'll cut it."

Five minutes later, the door swung open. Ahmed, staring at his laptop, noticed nothing unusual from the library's security system. "Nothing here," he said. Denny, Mark, and Jerry entered the room and immediately filled it. A narrow table, two feet wide at most, ran the length, about ten feet. Four large wooden drawers covered one side; four on the other. Mark, the lock picker, flipped up his goggles, adjusted his headlight, and inspected one of the locks. He shook his head and said, "No surprise. Combination locks, probably with computerized codes that change every day. There's no way to pick it. We gotta drill."

"Go for it," Denny said. "Start drilling and I'll cut the other door."

Jerry produced a three-quarter drive battery-powered drill with bracing bars on both sides. He zeroed in on the lock and he and Mark applied as much pressure as possible. The drill whined and slid off the brass, which at first seemed impenetrable. But a shaving spun off, then another, and as the men shoved the bracing bars the drill bit ground deeper into the lock. When it gave way the drawer still would not open. Mark managed to slide a thin pry bar into the gap above the lock and yanked down violently. The wood frame split and the drawer opened. Inside was an archival storage box with black metal edges, seventeen inches by twenty-two and three inches deep.

"Careful," Jerry said as Mark opened the box and gently lifted a thin hardback volume. Mark read slowly, "The collected poems of Dolph McKenzie. Just what I always wanted."

“Who the hell?”

“Don’t know but we ain’t here for poetry.”

Denny entered behind them and said, “Okay, get on with it. Seven more drawers in here. I’m almost inside the other room.”

They returned to their labors as Trey casually smoked a cigarette on a park bench across the street and glanced repeatedly at his watch. The frenzy across the campus showed no signs of dying down, but it wouldn’t last forever.

The second and third drawers in the first room revealed more rare books by authors unknown to the gang. When Denny finished cutting his way into the second room, he told Jerry and Mark to bring the drill. This room, too, had eight large drawers, seemingly identical to the first room. At 2:15, Trey checked in with a report that the campus was still in lockdown, but curious students were beginning to gather on the lawn in front of McCarren to watch the show. Police with bullhorns had ordered them back to their rooms, but there were too many to handle. At least two news helicopters were hovering and complicating things. He was watching CNN on his smart phone and the Princeton story was *the* story at the moment. A frantic reporter “on the scene” continually referred to “unconfirmed casualties,” and managed to convey the impression that numerous students had been shot “by at least one gunman.”

“At least one gunman?” Trey mumbled. Doesn’t every shooting require at least one gunman?

Denny, Mark, and Jerry discussed the idea of cutting into the drawers with the blowtorch, but decided against it, for the moment anyway. The risk of fire would be high, and what good would the manuscripts be if they were damaged. Instead, Denny pulled out a smaller one-quarter drive drill and began drilling. Mark and Jerry bored away with the larger one. The first drawer

in the second room produced stacks of delicate papers handwritten by another long-forgotten poet, one they'd never heard of but hated nonetheless.

At 2:30, CNN confirmed that two students were dead and at least two more were injured. The word "carnage" was introduced.

5.

When the second floor of McCarren was secured, the police noticed the remnants of what appeared to be firecrackers. The empty smoke bomb canisters were found in the restroom and the shower. Trey's abandoned backpack was opened by a demolition crew and the spent smoke bomb was removed. At 3:10, the commander first mentioned the word "prank," but the adrenaline was still pumping so fast no one thought of the word "diversion."

The rest of McCarren was quickly secured and all students were accounted for. The campus was still locked down and would remain so for hours as the nearby buildings were searched.

6.

At 3:30, Trey reported, "Things seem to be settling down out here. Three hours in, fellas, how's the drilling?"

"Slow," came the one-word response from Denny.

Inside the vault, the work was indeed slow, but determined. The first four opened drawers revealed more old manuscripts, some handwritten, some typed, all by important writers who didn't matter at the moment. They finally struck gold in the fifth drawer when Denny removed an archival storage box identical to the others. He carefully opened it. A reference page inserted

by the library read, “Original Handwritten Manuscript of The Beautiful and Damned—F. Scott Fitzgerald.”

“Bingo,” Denny said calmly. He removed two identical boxes from the fifth drawer, delicately placed them on the narrow table, and opened them. Inside were original manuscripts of *Tender Is the Night* and *The Last Tycoon*.

Ahmed, still glued to his laptop and now drinking a highly caffeinated energy drink, heard the beautiful words: “Okay, boys, we have three out of five. *Gatsby*’s here somewhere, along with *Paradise*.”

Trey asked, “How much longer?”

“Twenty minutes,” Denny said. “Get the van.”

Trey casually strode across the campus, mixed in with a crowd of the curious, and watched for a moment as the small army of policemen milled about. They were no longer ducking, covering, running, and dashing behind cars with loaded weapons. The danger had clearly passed, though the area was still ablaze with flashing lights. Trey eased away, walked half a mile, left the campus, and stopped at John Street, where he got into a white cargo van with the words “Princeton University Printing” stenciled on both front doors. It was number 12, whatever that meant, and it was very similar to a van Trey had photographed a week earlier. He drove it back onto campus, avoided the commotion around McCarren, and parked it by a loading ramp at the rear of the library. “Van in place,” he reported.

“We’re just opening the sixth drawer,” Denny replied.

As Jerry and Mark flipped up their goggles and moved their lights closer to the table, Denny gently opened the archival storage box. Its reference sheet read, “Original Handwritten Manuscript of The Great Gatsby—F. Scott Fitzgerald.”

“Bingo,” he said calmly. “We got Gatsby, that old son of a bitch.”

“Whoopie,” Mark said, though their excitement was thoroughly contained. Jerry lifted out the only other box in the drawer. It was the manuscript for *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald’s first novel, published in 1920.

“We have all five,” Denny said calmly. “Let’s get outta here.”

Jerry repacked the drills, the cutting torch, the canisters of oxygen and acetylene, and the pry bars. As he bent to lift the duffel, a piece of the splintered wood from the third drawer nicked him above his left wrist. In the excitement, he barely noticed and just rubbed it for a split second as he removed his backpack. Denny and Mark carefully placed the five priceless manuscripts into their three student backpacks. The thieves hustled from the vault, laden with their loot and tools, and scampered up the stairs to the main floor. They left the library through a service entrance near a delivery ramp, one hidden from view by a thick, long hedge. They jumped through the rear doors of the van and Trey pulled away from the ramp. As he did so, he passed two campus security guards in a patrol car. He flicked a casual wave; they did not respond.

Trey noted the time: 3:42 a.m. He reported, “All clear, leaving the campus now with Mr. Gatsby and friends.”

7.

The power outage triggered several alarms in the affected buildings. By 4:00 a.m., an electrical engineer had worked his way through the school’s computer grid and found the problem. Electricity was restored in all buildings except the library. The chief of security sent three officers to the library. It took them ten minutes to find the cause of the alarm.

By then, the gang had stopped at a cheap motel off Interstate 295 near Philadelphia. Trey parked the van beside an 18-wheeler

and away from the lone camera monitoring the parking lot. Mark took a can of white spray paint and covered the “Princeton University Printing” on both of the van’s doors. In a room where he and Trey had stayed the night before, the men quickly changed into hunting outfits and crammed everything they’d worn for the job—jeans, sneakers, sweatshirts, black gloves—into another duffel. In the bathroom, Jerry noticed the small cut on his left wrist. He had kept a thumb on it during the ride and noted that there was more blood than he’d realized. He wiped it clean with a bath cloth and debated whether to mention it to the others. Not now, maybe later.

They quietly removed all their stuff from the room, turned off the lights, and left. Mark and Jerry got into a pickup truck—a fancy club cab leased and driven by Denny—and they followed Trey and the van out of the parking lot, onto the street, then back onto the interstate. They skirted the northern edge of the Philadelphia suburbs, and, using state highways, disappeared into the Pennsylvania countryside. Near Quakertown, they found the county road they had chosen and followed it for a mile until it turned to gravel. There were no houses in the area. Trey parked the van in a shallow ravine; removed the stolen license plates; poured a gallon of gasoline over their bags filled with tools, cell phones, radio equipment, and clothing; and lit a match. The fireball was instant, and as they drove away in the pickup they were confident they had destroyed all possible evidence. The manuscripts were safely tucked between Trey and Mark on the rear seat of the pickup.

As daylight slowly crept over the hills, they rode in silence, each of the four observing everything around them, which was very little. An occasional vehicle passing in the other direction, a farmer headed to his barn and not looking at the highway, an old woman collecting a cat off the front porch. Near Bethlehem,

they merged onto Interstate 78 and headed west. Denny stayed well under the speed limit. They had not seen a police car since leaving the Princeton campus. They stopped at a drive-thru for chicken biscuits and coffee, then headed north on Interstate 81 toward the Scranton area.