

GOLD

The PARKER INHERITANCE

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VARIAN JOHNSON

SCHOLASTIC

Praise for
**The
PARKER
INHERITANCE**

“Powerful. . . Johnson writes about the long shadows of the past with such ambition that any reader with a taste for mystery will appreciate the puzzle Candice and Brandon must solve. . . Their adventure is also a quest for dignity and justice and a journey to understand each other. In a novel marked by scenes of pain and rage, their friendship, genuine and sustaining, is a great achievement.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

★ “Johnson’s latest novel holds racism firmly in the light. Candice and Brandon discover the joys and terrors of the reality of being African-American in the 1950s. Without sugarcoating facts or dousing it in post-racial varnish, the narrative lets the children absorb and reflect on their shared history. The town of Lambert brims with intrigue, keeping readers entranced until the very last page. A candid and powerful reckoning of history.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**

★ “Johnson’s *Westing Game*-inspired tale is a tangled historical mystery, a satisfying multigenerational family story, and an exploration of twentieth-century (and contemporary) race and racism. . . His protagonist is intelligent, endearing, and believable; scenes with her father, especially, have both humor and poignancy. Well-placed textual clues keep historical context and race relations at the front of readers’ minds—and examining those constructs, ingeniously, provides the key to solving the mystery.” —*The Horn Book*, **starred review**

★ “Part historical fiction, part critical problem-solving exercise, part suspenseful mystery, this story weaves through the past and present of one town’s struggle with hatred and racism. . . The characters are varied,

authentic, and well developed. . . . The present day isn't sugarcoated, showing readers that racial equity is still an unresolved problem. Appended author notes offer additional context, making it an excellent link to social studies or history units. A must-purchase."

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ "Johnson takes his readers on a whirlwind expedition with two exceptionally bright kids as they connect the dots of this mystery and gain insights into their own families' secrets. . . . He creates a narrative that's both a compelling mystery and a powerful commentary on identity, passing, and sacrifice. Fans of *The Westing Game*, which gets several textual shoutouts, and other puzzling mysteries such as Balliett's *Chasing Vermeer* will appreciate the twists and turns of this meaningful tale."

—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, starred review

"A clever puzzle, a hidden treasure, and a couple of kids you'll wish were your friends . . . Dive in!" —Sara Pennypacker, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pax*

"Varian Johnson delivers once again with this rewarding mix of relevant history and challenging mystery!" —Kirby Larson, Newbery Honor-winning author of *Hattie Big Sky*

"With a nod to *The Westing Game*, Varian Johnson has penned a smart mystery that deftly explores the history of racial segregation in the South, modern-day discrimination, friendship, love and bullying. . . . beautifully written, this complex story will captivate an adult audience as well."

—*BookPage*

"A dazzling and emotional read that deals with serious topics such as bullying, racism, and divorce." —*Booklist*

"*The Parker Inheritance* is a clever puzzle wrapped in an urgent and compassionate novel that will capture readers from the first chapter."

—*Shelf Awareness*

The
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VARIAN JOHNSON

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Arthur A. Levine Books hardcover edition designed by Nina Goffi, published by Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., April 2018

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ISBN 978-0-545-95278-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

This edition first printing 2019

Book design by Nina Goffi

“I, Too” by Langston Hughes from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* edited by Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, Associate Editor.

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CHAPTER 1

Abigail Caldwell

October 17, 2007

Abigail Caldwell stared at the letter.

The letter stared back.

The paper was bright. Crisp. Smooth. Like the pages of a new book that had yet to be cracked open. The letter, with its small, black, single-spaced words and sharp edges, spoke of a great injustice. It was written by a man who did not exist. And it promised an incredible fortune to the city of Lambert, South Carolina—*if* its puzzle could be solved.

Abigail refolded the letter, then placed it in her purse. Dusk was beginning to set, and apart from the handful of teens playing basketball, Vickers Park was empty. She sat on a bench outside of the Enoch Washington Memorial Tennis Courts. A small crew had already

removed the rusted fence surrounding the courts and was now carrying over jackhammers. A large yellow backhoe loomed in the distance.

“Ms. Caldwell, you sure you want us to start tonight?” the chief of maintenance asked, handing her some earmuffs. “We’re gonna have to pay overtime, and the noise alone will—”

“I know,” she said. “I’ll deal with any fallout tomorrow.” She couldn’t risk starting the operation during daylight hours. It would draw too much attention.

The chief adjusted his hard hat. “Which court do you want us to start with?” he asked.

“That one,” she said, pointing to the one on the left. It sat directly across from her park bench. From what she hoped was the final clue.

“And it would be mighty helpful if I knew what we were looking for,” he said.

“I agree, Odell.” She rose from the bench. “Maybe a chest? A crate? I don’t know. But I’m sure we’ll recognize it when we see it.”

Once the lights had been erected, the crew began jackhammering, breaking up the green tennis court into chunks. Then came the backhoe, its engine groaning through the night.

Abigail stood nearby, flashlight in hand, watching as the machine scooped out pile after pile of rubble and dirt. With each dump, she reminded herself of all the clues from the letter. The photos.

The money *had* to be here.

The chief paused the backhoe after a few hours, then waved over Abigail. “I’m sorry, Ms. Caldwell, but we’re not finding anything. How much deeper do you want us to go?”

She checked her watch. Time was passing too quickly. It would be dawn soon. And with the sunrise would come a flurry of questions and accusations.

“Maybe just a little deeper.” She glanced at the bench. “And can you have a few of your guys start jackhammering the base below there too?” He followed her eyes to where she was looking. “But don’t tear up the bench. It’s important.”

He frowned. “But Ms. Caldwell, the work order said we’re only supposed to—”

“Don’t worry about that,” she snapped. “I signed the order, and I’ll handle any problems with the paperwork.” Then she sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s just . . . a lot’s riding on this.”

As he went to give new instructions to his crew, she peered into the deep, dark hole. Abigail had wagered her reputation, her job, and perhaps her overall career on a hunch. She hadn’t even considered that she could be wrong.

A newbie from the *Lambert Trader* showed up around four o’clock that morning, followed by more experienced reporters an hour later. And then, as the sun rose over the park’s majestic oak trees, a black sedan pulled up in front of the basketball courts. Abigail was a little surprised the mayor had arrived in person. But then again, he was up for reelection next year. It was probably time for him to make his annual trek to the Vista Heights neighborhood.

Abigail checked the small hole where the bench had been, then walked back to the larger hole. She didn’t know it yet, but it didn’t matter what, if anything, she discovered that morning. The mayor had already suspended her. She would be forced to resign by the end of the day.

The letter would remain a mystery, its secrets hidden for ten more years, until someone came along who was brave enough—or perhaps foolish enough—to take up the challenge again.

That someone was Abigail’s granddaughter.

Her name was Candice Miller.

CHAPTER 2

Of course, twelve-year-old Candice Miller didn't know anything about a secret letter or hidden fortunes. She was just a girl trying to get through a horrible summer.

She sat at the kitchen table, finishing a book she'd read twice before. Then she closed the book, walked to her room, and flopped down on the carpeted floor.

Well, technically it wasn't *her* room. Her *real* room was in her *real* house in Atlanta.

This room, small and cramped, sat at the rear of a house unfamiliar to Candice, a house in Lambert, South Carolina, a city she had no desire to be living in. The house had belonged to her grandmother, Abigail Caldwell. Her grandmother had been dead for two years, but being surrounded by all of her things had brought a dull ache back to Candice's heart.

Candice's parents had been divorced for about six months, and separated even longer. Her mother had been trying to sell their house in Atlanta since the divorce, yet no one had shown any interest in buying their "cozy" bedrooms and "classic" kitchen. Candice's father eventually convinced her mother to let him bring in a contractor buddy to do a remodel.

Instead of staying in the house or finding a nearby apartment, Candice and her mother had moved to Lambert for the summer. Candice's grandmother had only owned her house there for a few years before she moved to Atlanta, but she kept the house as a furnished rental property. It had recently become vacant.

"It's a sign," her mom had said when she'd sprung the news on Candice. "This way, I won't be tempted to pop into the house every day to see how Daniel is destroying my kitchen. And we'll save a little money." Candice remembered how tightly her mother had hugged her. "As much as I hate that city for what it put Mama through, we could both use a change of scenery."

Candice didn't want to move—but not because of her grandmother. It was everything else happening that summer that Candice didn't want to miss. Natalie Thompson's birthday pool party. Trips to the mall with DeeDee and Courtney. Summer baseball games with her dad.

And their house was in a perfect location. Her friends lived in the same neighborhood. The library was down the street. Her father's apartment was only a couple of miles away.

Candice had thought her father would push back against the move. She saw him every other day—sometimes more. Surely he would demand that Candice remain in Atlanta. Maybe she could even live with him for the summer.

But her dad never offered to let her stay at his apartment, and she never asked. And before she knew it, she was saying her good-byes, leaving the only home she'd ever known.

Still lying on the floor, Candice ran her fingers along the thin, battered aluminum bracelet circling her wrist. The bracelet used to belong to her grandmother, but she had given it to Candice almost five years ago. The letters *MS*—for Mississippi, her grandmother's home

state—were engraved on the outside of the bracelet. On the inside was the word *Love*. Candice had begun wearing it again two weeks ago, after their move to Lambert. It just felt right.

The back door opened a few moments later, and Candice left her bedroom and returned to the kitchen. Her mom stood at the sink, filling a glass with tap water.

Candice was still getting used to her mom's small afro—it had barely been a month since her mother had cut off all her hair in order to go natural. It looked good, but it was strange after the long, straight hair her mother had had all of Candice's life. Still, the big chop was about number 117 on the list of life-changing things that had happened over the past couple of years.

"Sorry I was gone for so long," her mother said. "I lost track of time talking to Juanita across the street. What have you been up to?"

Candice smirked. "Just rereading my books. *Again*."

"Walked into that one, didn't I?" Her mom sighed. "I promise, I'll take you to the library today."

She had been saying that for the past two days.

"Maybe you should check the attic," her mother continued. "I bet Mama's got a whole bunch of old books up there. Maybe even some puzzle books or board games." She finished her water then placed the glass in the sink. "I need to get up there as well and sort through all of Mama's stuff."

She had been saying that for the past two *years*.

Then her mother nodded toward Candice's wrist. "I'm glad you're wearing Mama's bracelet again. It looks good on you." Her mother paused, and Candice could almost hear the echo of sadness between them. The house even seemed to smell like her grandmother—like fresh lavender. Candice's grandmother had died suddenly after her second heart attack. They hadn't had a chance to

say good-bye. “Maybe we could take it to the jewelry store. Buff out some of those scratches.”

“Grandma used to say that the scratches are what made it lucky.”

Her mother rolled her eyes. “Mama wasn’t really blessed in the luck department, especially when it came to Lambert.”

“What does that mean?” Candice asked. She had heard her mother make comments like that throughout the years, even when her grandmother was still alive. Grandma would always nod and counter with, “Just because you don’t see the path doesn’t mean it’s not there.” If Candice was nearby, she would turn to her and wink—like it was a shared secret between them. Not knowing how to respond, Candice would just smile back.

Her mother took a deep breath, then sat down at the table. “Since we’re going to be living here for a while, there’s a few things you need to know about your grandmother.” She motioned for Candice to sit as well. “Technically, Mama resigned from her job here. But she was really fired. It was a pretty big deal. She could have gone to jail.”

Candice’s eyes widened. *Her grandmother? A criminal?* “What did she do?”

“She acted a fool,” her mom muttered, almost to herself. “Your grandma somehow got it in her head that there was a buried treasure hidden somewhere in the city. She talked to the mayor about it. He told her to drop it. It seemed like one big con job.”

“But I guess she didn’t let it go.”

Mom shook her head. “She spent months doing all this research about God knows what. Then she decided to dig up one of the old tennis courts. Forged city paperwork to pay a crew and rent a backhoe. Dug all night.”

Candice leaned forward. She pictured her grandmother with a shovel, digging up a pirate’s chest full of gold. “Did she find anything?”

“Nothing but dirt,” she replied. “Mama was lucky. The city didn’t want a scandal. They agreed not to press charges if she signed a confidentiality agreement and destroyed all her research.”

Candice had to sit on her hands to stop from bouncing. Lambert suddenly seemed a lot more interesting. A mystery like this was more exciting than any of the logic and strategy games on her old iPod touch. “What if Grandma was right? What if there really was a hidden fortune?”

“I can already see the gears turning in your head,” her mother said. “Let me stop you now. This isn’t one of your computer games. There is no buried treasure.” She crossed her arms. “That was what, almost ten years ago? If there really was a pile of money hidden around the city, I’m sure someone would have found it by now.”

“But—”

“I don’t think you understand. Your grandma was the first woman, and the first African American, to serve as city manager for Lambert. This was supposed to be a stepping-stone to other things. Columbia. Greenville. Savannah. Who knows—maybe she could have ended up running a big-time department for the City of Atlanta. But because she refused to let that one thing go, she torpedoed her career. And she made herself the laughingstock of the city. Of the entire state. It was all over the Internet—Crazy Lady Caldwell. Alzheimer Abigail. The Mole Lady. And of course, she never got another shot at being a city manager.”

The excitement that had been bubbling up inside Candice began to simmer down. “I never knew that.”

“No one likes to talk about their failures. Especially your grandmother.” She tapped the table. “I know you love a good mystery, but the last thing I need is you drumming up all this old stuff about a buried treasure. The past is the past. Mama’s legacy is tarnished enough. I don’t want you making it worse.”

“Just because Grandma made a mistake doesn’t mean she’s a failure,” Candice said.

“Trust me, you don’t know all the facts.”

Candice stared at her knees. Slivers of brown skin showed through the shredded fabric. Her father had been begging her to toss the jeans for almost a year, but they were more comfortable than anything else Candice owned.

“A mistake isn’t a failure,” Candice said, pulling at a loose thread. “It’s just an opportunity to try again.” That was another of her grandmother’s sayings. Candice could recite by memory the story about how her grandmother had put herself through college while raising two kids. She had to repeat a few classes, but she eventually graduated with a master’s degree.

“Good lord, what it is with you and your grandmother? She thought you walked on water, and would correct anyone who said anything different. Now here you go, doing the same for a woman who’s not even here anymore.”

Candice tugged on another thread. It was true—her grandmother has always been protective of Candice, but not overprotective like her dad. More like, she took up for Candice when people—usually adults—said she couldn’t do something. When adults said she wasn’t old enough. Or when they said she shouldn’t do something because she was a girl. And even when Candice made a mistake, her grandmother would tell her it was just a learning experience, and to keep trying.

After a few moments, her mother reached across the table and took Candice’s hand. “Your grandmother was many things. Strong. Dynamic. And stubborn too.” She sighed. “But she also made a big mistake. Maybe that doesn’t make her a failure in our eyes, but the world doesn’t always see people in the way we want.”