

PARKER^{The} **INHERITANCE**

VARIAN JOHNSON



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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.