



PROVENANCE: A NOVEL

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"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."

Prologue

Park Place, Virginia—Fall 1909

“**H**ANK, RUN!” WAS THE LAST thing he heard Junior say. Deputies struggled to hold and handcuff his two brothers while the sheriff tried to restrain Hank. The old man was no match for the 18-year-old; Hank fought his way free and ran. He could hear the sheriff’s labored breathing behind him, sweat was stinging and clouding his eyes; he needed to reach the safety of Park Place, the black side of town.

“We’re Richard Whitaker’s boys, you know us!” Hank shouted over his shoulder, not slowing to see if his words made a difference.

Angry, red-faced and short-of-breath the sheriff sputtered, “Then you know! No niggers ‘llowed in town after sundown. You look white but you ain’t! For sure, you the Whitaker boy that needs a lesson, and I’m the one to teach—”

Hank turned just in time to see the sheriff grab his chest, drop to his knees and fall face forward onto the unforgiving pavement. Hank stopped, not sure what to do until he heard, “Sheriff, did you git that other nigger?” Hank took off, leaving the sheriff bleeding and gasping for air. He did what Junior told him to do—he ran.



The toe of a man’s boot awakened him.

“What you doin’ sleeping out here, youngin’?” Hank opened his eyes and squinted into the sun blinding his view of the man’s face. Was he one of the sheriff’s men from last night, the one who told him he could fix it so he and his brothers would never see the light of another day?

Hank was where he’d collapsed the night before – legs aching, out of breath, confused, scared, and tired. Damn tired of being treated like a criminal for just wanting to see the end of the Negro League game at Hampton Normal and Agricultural. If they’d just caught the early ferry, he and his brothers would be safe at home in their own beds. He’d needed only a few minutes of rest—but now it was morning and his back was still against the broad oak that hid him last night. Hank’s hand slowly searched the cool damp earth behind him for a rock, a stick, anything to defend himself. The man reached toward him, blocking the sun shining in Hank’s eyes. The outstretched arm was that of an elderly white man, not the vigilantes from last night. He extended an open hand instead of a clenched fist.

“Let me give you a hand up. We shouldn’t be ’round here, that’s Park Place over yonder. I’ll take ya back to our part of town then you git on home from there,” the old man said as he started his truck. To this stranger, Hank’s fair skin, hazel eyes and sandy-colored straight hair made him a white man. People in Llewellyn knew he looked like his mother, who looked like her Scotch-Irish father, not her African mother.

“You don’t wanna be gettin’ so drunk you end up in these parts. I know some of you youngins like those little colored girls. Don’t believe in race mixin’ myself, but you youngins’ gotta satisfy those desires, I understand it. Don’t recommend you keep up that behavior—somethin’ go wrong and you’d be caught up in it, like last night. Sheriff and some of his deputies chased a bunch of niggers out of Llewellyn. Everybody knows this here’s a sundown town. One of ‘em put the sheriff in the hospital. Heard say he’s bad—ain’t gonna make it.”

What the hell? I didn’t touch him, Hank thought.

“Whole of Llewellyn’s jumpy this morning, they lookin’ for that boy. Glad I’m headin’ home and outta these parts, that boy’s gonna swing.”

“What happened to the others? You said there were other... niggers?” The word stuck in Hank’s throat, he was desperate for information about his brothers so he spoke the old man’s language.

“Yeah, a couple of ‘em was already in custody when the other one got away. Heard those two got a beatin’ for good measure and they sent ‘em back over to nigger-town. They’ll get the one that got away, always do.”

Hank swallowed hard. Looking out of the passenger side window, he watched the landscape change from familiar to strange as the truck headed away from Park Place and all Hank knew, and all who knew him. He had no choice now but to keep going.

“Where you from, youngin’?” the man asked.

“Richmond,” Hank said, naming the first city that came to mind.

“Well hell, that’s where I’m headed. Need a ride?”

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Richmond, Virginia—Early Summer 1912

(I)

MAGGIE BENNETT ESCAPED TO THE front porch to avoid the stifling formality of an evening in the parlor with her mother and father. She moved the wooden porch swing back and forth to the rhythm of the cicada chorus, ever grateful for the shadowy solace of the outdoor room and the distance it offered from her mother's withering gaze. She had disappointed her mother once again by failing to attract one of Richmond's eligible bachelors to the Bennett's porch on this prime summer evening. But Maggie had the gentleman caller she wanted in her sights. She watched the not so subtle young man as he pretended to stroll by her house, his hands nervously rolling his cap into a cylinder that would render it unfit for wearing. He was tall and lean; his long legs stretched out to cover the distance between her house and the

intersection in half the time it would have taken her. Walking together, she would have had to run to keep up with him. He walked up one side of the wide boulevard and then crossed the grassy median to stroll past her house again.

This would be the third time he'd passed this evening. He would stop and speak this time, she decided. Maggie got up and walked to the porch steps, "How many times are you going to go by here?" she called out to him. "You lost or something?"

She startled him so that he thought his voice would come out as a squeak. He took a deep breath and managed to lower it.

"Uh, no, Miss, I'm just enjoyin' the cool night air."

"As many times as you been up and down this here block, I suspect you worked up a sweat rather than cooled one down," she said. "Want some sweet tea?"

"I don't want to trouble you, miss."

"No trouble, wouldn't have asked if it were."

"Well, if it ain't no trouble."

Coming home late from his office one evening, he had seen her sitting alone on her porch after first noticing her down at Beal's General Store. Though he knew it was best to keep to himself, there was something about this girl that made him want to ignore all the reasons that he should. Now, after finishing work each day, he often took the route past her house for his evening strolls, always longing for a reason to stop. She looked different up close, nearly a foot shorter than his six feet, delicate and needing to be taken care of. Her voice however, was strong, clear and purposeful, not at all what he expected.

“Come on up and sit,” Maggie said, motioning toward the wicker chair across from the porch swing. “All the ice is melted but I can have Frances chip more if you want.”

“No, no, this is just fine for me. Sweet and wet is all I need.”

“I’m Miss Margaret Bennett. But everyone, except my mother, calls me Maggie. I’ve seen you around town,” Maggie said, placing the glass of tea she poured for him on the table between them. “Seen you with the men cleaning up—”

“I’m not a janitor,” Hank blurted out. “I owns my business.”

“A janitor business?”

“Property Services,” he said.

“Do you have a name, Mr. Property Services?”

“I’m Hank—Henry—Mr. Henry Whitaker of Whitaker’s Property Services. I’m the boss, I owns my business. I got a dozen men workin’ for me. We clean up, make repairs, paint—whatever needs takin’ care of. I got accounts with City Hall, the library, I’m biddin’ on the new hotel downtown and I got a retail establishment, Beal’s General on Main.” *Where I first saw you*, he thought.

“That’s quite the resume, Mr. Henry Whitaker of Whitaker Property Services.” Maggie took a sip of her sweet tea but kept her gaze on Hank. “I go down to Beal’s sometimes to buy a few things. I think I’ve seen you down there.” *Where I went looking for you*, she thought but didn’t say. Maggie had noticed him a couple of months before and several times since. Mr. Beale never allowed Hank and his cleaning crew in the front of the store until all the customers were gone so Maggie began to show up just before closing time. She’d take a seat

at a table in the sewing section pretending to page through the pattern books while watching Hank direct his men as they started their work in the back of the store. Even though Maggie knew Mr. Beale was anxious for her to leave and Mrs. Beale was probably waiting dinner on him, she needed a little more time to surreptitiously study Hank.

She liked the way he took charge, wearing a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up just so, pants crisply creased, shoes shined, his sandy hair neatly slicked back. Even late in the day he looked clean-shaven. *He looks like he has a wife who takes good care of him*, Maggie thought. But she saw no ring on his finger and that made her hopeful.

Maggie liked what she saw from a distance, and even more what she saw up close tonight. He seemed taller and his eyes were beautiful. In the shadows of the porch lights she couldn't see the exact color but they were light-colored, serious and a little sad—like he had lost something or someone. He had high cheekbones and a mouth perfect for kissing—a thin upper lip atop a full bottom lip. She would kiss that mouth one day, she determined.

“I didn't know you worked all those places,” Maggie said, or *I probably would have started going there too*.

“I don't, they's clients. That's what you call them when I work for me and they hire out their property work.”

“Sounds very business-like.”

“Oh it is, it is,” Hank agreed. He picked up the sweet tea Maggie had placed in front of him, hoping she would keep the conversation going. Hank watched her move the porch swing

back and forth, waiting for him to say something. He looked down and away from her intense stare, taking sips of his tea, wanting it to last so he would have an excuse to stay; it would be an insult, he decided, not to finish the entire glass. Here he was on the porch of the woman he had longed to talk to for months, and he wasn't capable of a simple conversation. Hank had no trouble talking to his clients, but he struggled to talk to Miss Maggie Burnett.

"Just sayin' hello to a white woman can end a black man's life," his father had drilled into the Whitaker boys from the moment they were old enough to understand. It was a lesson they learned early and one that their father repeated often. But here in Richmond everyone believed he *was* a white man so black women feared him and he was afraid when white women found him desirable. The dilemma sent the twenty-one year-old Hank to places where identity didn't matter, there were no questions and he could satisfy his physical needs for a price.

But Hank longed for more warmth than a sexual transaction could offer; he wanted the deep emotional connection his parents had – a connection so strong that only death had ever separated them. Because of a careless adventure one night three years ago, the possibility of a life like theirs in his homeplace of Park Place was no longer an option. Hank looked at Maggie, she excited him like no woman, black or white, ever had. He couldn't explain it but he could definitely feel it.

Before the silence of Hank's thoughts and Maggie's gaze reached an awkward stage, the screen door swung open and an elegant, shapely woman stepped onto the porch. She paused for

a few moments under the porch light, as if walking onto a stage. She wore a stylish dress, complemented by several strands of opera length pearls; her attire more appropriate for dinner out than an evening at home. When Hank looked at her face, he saw a mature version of the young woman on the porch swing across from him, both truly beautiful women.

“Margaret, who are you talking to out here?” she asked. When she saw Hank her face went from anticipation to disappointment.

“Oh Momma, this is Mr. . . .”

“Hank Whitaker,” he said, jumping to his feet, nearly spilling the contents of his glass. Maggie saw her mother start to finger the pearls around her neck; the inquisition was about to begin.

“And who are your people, Mr. Whitaker?” Charlotte Bennett asked, as she looked him over - head to toe and back again.

“I’m alone in this world, ma’am. No family,” Hank paused for a second, “here in Richmond.”

“I see,” Charlotte said with a palpable chill. *Strike one.* She looked at his open-collared shirt, rolled up shirt sleeves, no tie or jacket, a worn cap shoved in his pocket. *Strike two.*

“Mr. Whitaker owns his own business, Momma. He has accounts, clients, with businesses all over town.”

“What kind of business, Mr. Whitaker?” Charlotte asked, with a tinge of hopefulness.

“Property management services, ma’am,” Hank said proudly.

Ajanitor, thought Charlotte. *Strike three. Mr. Whitaker has struck out.*

“Margaret, it’s getting late,” she said as she turned her back to Hank. He took her cue.

“Thank you again, Miss Maggie, ma’am,” he said, directing his gaze first to Maggie, then to Charlotte and back to Maggie, where it stayed until he drained his glass. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and handed his glass to Maggie in a deliberate motion that ensured their fingertips would touch. They both felt the electricity. Charlotte felt it too and loudly cleared her throat to put an authoritative damper on the connection.

Hank walked down the wide porch steps to the street and turned to take one last longing look at Maggie. “Well, goodnight, ladies,” he said, wishing he had more time to make an impression. Maggie leaned over the porch railing to watch him walk away,

“Goodnight, Mr. Hank Whitaker of Whitaker Property Services,” she called after him.

Hank was still within earshot when Charlotte opened the screen door, motioned her daughter inside and said loudly, “Come on in, Margaret. He’s not our kind.”

Hank removed his cap from his back pocket, unfurled it and pulled it low over his brow so that the rumpled visor pointed in the direction he knew he was going—forward, always and only forward.

(II)

Maggie knew what her mother was thinking before she spoke the words, "Not our kind." How many times had she heard that about would-be suitors?

Charlotte had bigger plans for her daughter than a man who earned his living cleaning up after other people could offer. "One step above a nigger," was how Charlotte described him while brushing Maggie's hair the nightly hundred strokes that made it shine like patent leather.

"But he's not a nigger," Maggie protested. "He's going places, Momma, I can tell."

"Well, you're not going with him," Charlotte decreed. "I want more of a life for you than that boy could ever dream. We want a college man, Margaret, someone to move us up to a bigger house on Centennial; the son of one of your father's business acquaintances, a graduate of the University of Richmond or Washington and Lee, a southern gentleman."

"They're not really gentlemen, Momma. You know how they are; they think every girl in Richmond, and her Momma, wants them and they take advantage of it. They won't see me, all I'll ever be is a reflection of one of them. I want a man who sees me, Momma, who wants me. Not my family or our money. I don't want to be like you and Daddy."

Charlotte's hand stopped in midair, "Like me and Daddy?"

Maggie knew she had said too much, but it was said, so she might as well go on. "I want more. I want to be beloved. Do you understand, Momma? I don't care about the other

stuff; the house, the clothes and money are nice, but I could be happy without—”

“Without what?” Charlotte demanded. “You have no idea what you can do without. You don’t even know the difference between want and need. You’ve never had to, and if I have anything to say about it, you never will. You certainly don’t know anything about me and Daddy, what we have and what we don’t have. And quite frankly, Margaret Ann Bennett, what’s between your father and me is our business and none of yours. You don’t know anything about what we’ve gotten — no, what *I’ve* gotten for you in this life. Beloved, my ass!” she said throwing the hairbrush across the room and slamming the door as she stormed out of the room.

Maggie had gotten beneath her mother’s pristine veneer; her Mother said “ass.” Charlotte never used coarse language — decorum was an integral part of her carefully crafted image. Maggie was nine years old the last time she remembered her mother using profanity. She overheard Charlotte and her father’s sister, Elsa, out in the yard one afternoon; her mother was using language she had never heard come out of a southern lady’s mouth. Maggie went downstairs to investigate and arrived at the back door just in time to see Charlotte grab Elsa’s arm and pull her within inches of her contorted face. Charlotte, loud enough for Maggie and everyone in the house to hear, called Elsa a bitch. While Elsa desperately tried to extricate herself from Charlotte’s grip, Maggie heard her mother say she would “beat the shit out of Elsa if—” something Maggie could not make out. Charlotte pulled Elsa even closer and whispered in

her ear, her spit landing on Elsa's face and in her hair. When Charlotte finally released her, Aunt Elsa's eyes were wild, her face was even paler than its normal pallid shade and there was a crimson imprint of her mother's fingers on her aunt's arm. Elsa did not even notice Maggie standing by the door as she nearly killed herself falling up the back porch steps to get away from her sister-in-law. When Maggie looked back at her mother, she had fallen to her knees, her head down, her back to the house. Her shoulders heaved—was she crying? Maggie was not quite sure what to do. Should she go to her mother or should she stay a safe distance from the shrew she had seen her mother turn into? Before Maggie could decide, Charlotte was on her feet, moving fast; she strode toward the rose arbor. Pulling pruning shears from her apron pocket, she began to deadhead the climbing roses like she was decapitating more than spent flowers.

Maggie shivered recalling that memory. She could count on one hand, and still have fingers left, the number of times Elsa had visited their home since then—and only when Charlotte was away on one of her excursions to New York, London or Paris.

Maggie still did not know what provoked Charlotte that day. She knew her mother had secrets; a person who controlled her own life and all the lives that touched hers as tightly as Charlotte did, must have secrets. Maggie was determined that her mother's secrets, whatever they were, would not control her. Maggie had always gotten what she wanted in life, she was certain she always would. If she wanted Hank Whitaker, then she would have Hank Whitaker and anything else she chose.

(III)

Charlotte stormed into the bedroom she reluctantly shared with her husband, Walton Wainwright Bennett, III. He sat on the side of their bed in his shorts and tee shirt waiting hopefully for his wife to return from her nightly visit to their daughter's room.

"Walton, either put on some clothes or put your pajamas on and go to bed," Charlotte snapped on her way into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

There will be no sex tonight, Walton thought as he stared at the closed bathroom door. He could hear her running the water for her bath. He imagined Charlotte removing her clothes. *She is naked in there*, Walton lusted, his penis and his mind in sync. He alone knew—at least he hoped—that the woman he married *appeared* soft only when covered by the stylish clothing she insisted on from the department stores on New York's famous Ladies Mile and the expensive shops she'd discovered in Paris. When stripped of all accoutrements, Charlotte naked, was a bold, aggressive, powerful sexual predator. Walton once believed he aroused that passion in her. Looking down at his protruding belly that completely obscured his view of his small feet, he knew Charlotte's passion, like his physique, was a thing of the past. He considered walking in on her, naked, fully engaged; maybe she would reconsider. It had been months since she had let him have her; but he knew better.

Walton reached around his belly and rubbed his penis, "Down boy," he said. Pleasuring himself was his only option

tonight. Covering himself, he ran across the hall to his study, closed and locked the door. While he masturbated, he imagined himself still the man for whom the young girls of Richmond had competed. He could have had his pick – his credentials were the ones Charlotte insisted on for their daughter’s suitors – but he had chosen Charlotte. Or had he?

Walton remembered the first time he met Charlotte Ann Cox, the new stock girl at his mother’s dress shop. Wearing the simple blue cotton shirtwaist dress with a white collar that his mother made all of the girls in the shop wear so that they never outshined their customers, Charlotte managed to outshine everyone anyway. With her long dark hair, piercing hazel eyes and olive skin, she was exotic, or was it erotic? Her sensuality was palpable. He had stopped by the shop to look at the store’s ledgers, something he did once a month for his mother. But after Walton met Charlotte, he visited three times in one week and then every day thereafter.

One day, he walked in on Charlotte in the back room of the store. She was changing out of her uniform. She wore only a thin slip that clung to her curves in just the right places. She stood facing him, making no attempt to cover herself. Through the sheer fabric he could see her as if she were naked – he, and she, knew he had to have her.

That was 20 years ago and this is now, Walton thought after his inadequate climax. He lit a cigarette and studied his reflection in the glass-front bookcases that lined his study, considering how little was left of the man he had once been. *I spend more time in this leather chair masturbating behind a*

locked door than I do making love to the woman I sleep next to every night. After a few more minutes of disappointed reflection, Walton stabbed out his cigarette, walked to the door and peeked into the hall to make sure neither Maggie, nor the maid, Frances, were around. He removed his soiled underwear, wiped his flaccid genitals, and then threw the garment into the laundry chute in the hall. Back in their bedroom, he did as his wife had told him; he put on a pair of pajamas, climbed into bed and fell asleep.

(IV)

What the hell is he doing out there? Charlotte thought as she languished in her bath until she was certain that her husband was asleep. The luxurious warm blanket of bubbles had long ago dissolved into cloudy tepid water. She could no longer hear him lumbering about in the bedroom but she could smell cigarette smoke. How many times had she chastised him about smoking in her house?

“That’s the smell of money,” he always replied and she knew he was right. As long as Virginia’s cash crop was tobacco and Richmond was where tobacco was bought, sold and paid for – her husband’s bank and her family would remain prosperous.

Charlotte stepped out of the tub and admired herself as she patted the thick towel along the curves of her body. Even after the single pregnancy she’d allowed, she held her figure. She was thirty-five but could still turn heads, perhaps not as hard and fast as she once had, but she didn’t need

to anymore. In one generation she had seduced, calculated and cajoled her way from a rural sharecropper shack where tobacco was picked, to a fine city home where she saw how that labor turned into gold; that new perspective courtesy of Mr. Walton Wainwright Bennett III. She knew the day she met him that he was the man she had been looking for. His daddy was president of one of the largest banks in Richmond and Walton III was his handpicked successor. Walton was raised to believe he was the catch of the new century, a lie based on his family's money and stature in Richmond, not on the man himself. Walton at 26 was as unattractive as he was today; squat, balding, plain-faced and perpetually rumped. Even the substantial Bennett family money had not been enough to make him attractive to most of the young women of Richmond. Charlotte overheard them in his mother's shop tittering over how pathetic Mrs. Bennett's son was—but never within his mother's earshot. Walton Wainwright Bennett III was exactly what the 16 year-old Charlotte wanted in a husband; a man who would be grateful for her attention and for whose affection she would not have to compete. Walton had the ultimate criteria—money and standing in the community; Charlotte could have cared less about the man himself.

He had been so easy to seduce and steadfastly impossible to dissuade when his family objected to their marriage. Now after 20 years of having him sweat and smother her with his needy passion the few times a year she allowed him spousal favors, Charlotte still felt it was not too big a price to pay for what his position afforded her in life. She didn't love him;

she wasn't sure she could love any man. He was more like a pet—obedient and loyal and he rarely got in her way. Despite his abundance of inadequacies, Walton had given Charlotte her treasure, her Margaret, and he loved their daughter as much as she did. Charlotte made a calculated risk when she let Walton impregnate her before they were married but her gamble with Mother Nature paid off. Margaret, now 18, was pretty and certainly smart enough to attract a husband from one of Richmond's finer families. *Margaret is headstrong*, Charlotte thought, *but she is no match for me*. Margaret was the southern beauty who would marry them to an even higher social level. It was all Charlotte cared about, all she worked toward and the only thing that mattered.