

ACCLAIM FOR VANESSA MILLER

“With bright threads of faith, resilience, and finding a way forward where there seems to be no way, Vanessa Miller weaves together the lives of three women in a beautiful tapestry of redemption and hope, friendship and found family. A story that shows, even when we think we’ve bolted all the doors, something good can find a way in.”

—LISA WINGATE, #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*, ON *SOMETHING GOOD*

“Vanessa Miller’s *Something Good* warms the heart with a vivacious tale of faith, redemption, and renewal. She masterly creates a sisterhood of unlikely friends who realize that there is something good, absolutely wonderful, in accepting people as they are and believing they can be better.”

—VANESSA RILEY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ISLAND QUEEN*

“*Something Good*, by Vanessa Miller is a literary treat that captivated me from the first page. This story of three women drawn together by the unlikeliest of circumstances had me sitting back and realizing that no matter our backgrounds, no matter our struggles, when it’s for God’s purpose, we can come together. With characters that I could relate to and women who I wanted to win, I enjoyed *Something Good* from the beginning to the end.”

—VICTORIA CHRISTOPHER MURRAY, *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE PERSONAL LIBRARIAN*

“Vanessa Miller’s thoughtful and anointed approach to crafting *Something Good* made for a beautiful page-turner full of depth and hope.”

—RHONDA MCKNIGHT, AWARD-WINNING
AUTHOR OF *UNBREAK MY HEART*

“Vanessa Miller’s latest novel is a relevant and heartwarming reminder that beauty for ashes is possible. This page-turning read inspires understanding, connection, and hope.”

—STACY HAWKINS ADAMS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“This real-to-life story doesn’t shy away from some hard issues of the modern world, but Miller is a master storyteller, who brings healing and redemption to her characters, and thus the reader, through the power of love and faith. I thoroughly enjoyed this book.”

—RACHEL HAUCK, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“*Something Good* is much better than good. It’s great! Vanessa Miller always delivers, and you know you will get unforgettable characters and a redemptive, heartwarming story that readers will find unputdownable. Get ready to laugh and to feel all the feels.”

—MICHELLE LINDO-RICE, HARLEQUIN SPECIAL EDITION AUTHOR

“Vanessa Miller’s *Something Good* unveils the reality of living with guilt, shame, and the weight of unforgiveness through the lives of three women. This story will offer readers a beautiful perspective of redemptive healing and the measure of peace that comes with a forgiving heart.”

—JACQUELIN THOMAS, NATIONAL BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF THE JEZEBEL SERIES AND *PHOENIX*

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GOOD

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<i>Family Business I</i>	<i>Her Good Thing</i>
<i>Family Business II</i>	<i>Long Time Coming</i>
<i>Family Business III</i>	<i>A Promise of Forever Love</i>
<i>Family Business IV</i>	<i>A Love for Tomorrow</i>
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<i>Family Business VI</i>	<i>Forgotten</i>
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Praise For Christmas (Praise Him Anyhow series)
His Love Walk (Praise Him Anyhow series)
Could This Be Love (Praise Him Anyhow series)
Song of Praise (Praise Him Anyhow series)

SOMETHING GOOD

A Novel

VANESSA MILLER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Something Good

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To my niece, Diamond Underwood, whom I love dearly

And to all those who thought dreaming was a luxury
you couldn't afford. It's time to dream again . . . believe
God will bring something good into your life.



PROLOGUE

SIX MONTHS AGO

Glancing at the clock on her dashboard, Alexis Marshall bit down on the back of her lower lip. She had exactly twenty minutes to get across town to pick up the twins. Traffic was always terrible on Pineville-Matthews Road. She would be cutting it close. When she was a kid, this road had nothing but trees as far as the eye could see. Now, shopping centers and one eatery after another lined the street, and cars and more cars.

A car cut in front of her. She almost didn't have enough time to put her foot on the brake. Pressing hard on the horn, she yelled, "What are you doing?"

When she stopped at the red light, her phone beeped, indicating she had a text message. It read: Your mother is missing. We can't keep doing this.

"No! No! No! Not again." She slammed her hand against the steering wheel. Her mother was always pulling stuff like this. This was the third in a year. Alexis picked up her phone and called her husband. He wouldn't like it, but he'd have to pick up the kids. She had to go find her mother.

"Hey, hon, can you make it quick? I have a meeting to get to."

Okay, she was going to make it really quick. "I need you to pick up the kids because my mother has left the nursing home and they don't know where she is."

"Again?"

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She heard the contempt in his voice, but she didn't have time for it. "I've got to go. Don't forget about the kids." Hanging up, she texted her mother's nurse. On my way.

She put on her left signal, needing to move into the left lane to make a U-turn. A black Audi beeped at her as she merged into the lane. She waved at the driver as she pulled over one more time to get into the turning lane. Traffic was coming and going so fast that she had to wait for the light to turn yellow to make her turn. She made sure that there was a safe gap between the oncoming cars. After checking her blind spot she turned the steering wheel all the way to the left, made the U-turn, and headed back to the nursing home she had left not more than ten minutes ago.

She was speeding, and her heart felt like it was trying to jump out of her chest. She needed to slow it down, but the last time her mother pulled her disappearing act, they didn't find her for twenty-four hours. It wasn't until the hospital called, letting them know she had been admitted, that they found out where she was.

Her cell phone beeped again. Had they found her mother that fast? She picked up the phone, but it slipped out of her hand. Trying to catch the phone before it hit the floor, she bent over to grab it.

Her car swerved.

Oh no! She straightened in her seat, but the steering wheel jerked. She tried to grab hold of it and right the car again, but as she tried to put her foot on the brake, she accidentally pressed down hard on the gas. The car jumped the median, and she went spinning and spinning into oncoming traffic.

Her eyes darted back and forth in horror, watching as she spun past the Pineville shopping mall, Red Lobster, and Wells Fargo Bank. Her foot got entangled between the gas and the brake. Her twins flashed before her eyes. She still remembered the day she gave birth to them. They came out all wrinkly and red, but the biggest surprise of

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all was that she delivered not just a son but a daughter. They were only ten years old now, too young to live without their mother.

The car in front of her tried to swerve. Cars were on every side. There was nothing she could do and no way to clear a path. She screamed.

Bang!

Her head jerked back, and the air bag exploded as she felt the impact of the crash. Eyes fluttering. Head hurting. Then . . . nothing.



CHAPTER 1

These gluten-free, avocado-toast-eating, green-smoothie-drinking, bougie country folk got on Marquita Lewis's last nerve.

"Um, excuse me, but did you just roll your eyes?"

That Britney Spears song, "Oops! . . . I Did It Again," popped into Marquita's head. She wasn't trying to get fired from another job. She just got this waitress gig six weeks ago and had already been late five times. The last thing she needed was some bougie customer complaining about her because of some dumb breakfast order.

And it wasn't really her fault anyway. She didn't roll her eyes to be rude. It was an involuntary condition, brought on whenever she was in the vicinity of stupid. I mean, come on. How you gon' ask for all these extra accommodations, then get mad because it costs more?

"I don't think I rolled my eyes," Marquita said back to the woman. "I'm not sure what you saw, but I'm just trying to get your order right."

The woman's friend lifted a finger to get Marquita's attention. "Oh, and make sure there's no pesticides in my smoothie. I only eat organic greens."

"You did it again! How dare you roll your eyes. Is my order too difficult for you?" Bougie jumped out of her seat, grabbing her purse. "Come on, Lisa. We are not eating here. I have never in my life dealt with such a rude waitress."

"Wait. Sit back down. I'll put your order in. I'll even throw in a gluten-free nut bar. And they are yummy." The last thing Marquita

needed was to cause a scene. She had already been put on probation because of her tardiness.

But now, all of a sudden, they didn't care about the gluten-free extras. The woman got up, and the two of them three-inch heeled it out of the restaurant.

Marquita yelled, "It's like that, huh? Y'all probably weren't going to tip anyway. Go on to Burger King and get a sandwich you can afford."

It wasn't until she heard the gasps at the surrounding tables that she thought, *I shouldn't have done that*. Rent was due next week. She was already behind and expecting an eviction notice any day now. She just hoped her manager was outside on another one of his gazillion smoke breaks and didn't see what she'd done.

"Can I speak with you in my office, Marquita?" the manager said as he came up behind her.

Dog and double dog. Her nosy coworkers turned their heads—all up in her business. "Ain't none of y'all's name Marquita, so there's no need to look this way. Mind your business. Take orders."

"Marquita!" the manager snapped. "Now!"

"I'm coming. I'm coming." She sullenly walked behind him, taking note of the shirt sloppily hanging from the back of his pants as he slue-footed his way to the office. Marquita wanted to kick herself. She had just messed things up again for her and her son, Marcus. Since she was fourteen years old, Marquita had been working and taking care of herself. She'd had Marcus two months ago, a week before her nineteenth birthday.

They stepped into her manager's Cracker Jack–box size office. Marquita took some boxes off the chair in front of his desk and then sat down. She'd been through this drill a dozen times since she took on her first job five years ago because her mother was in rehab again, trying to kick a habit she never should've had in the first place. So it became Marquita's responsibility to make sure her younger sister and brother were able to eat.

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“I’m letting you go, Marquita.”

He said those words with such calm, as if no check for Marquita didn’t mean eviction and that she and her son wouldn’t be on the street with no place to go.

“You can’t. I need this job.” She was close to tears as she stood. *Why does this keep happening?*

He shook his head. “We can’t afford to lose customers. I’ve had too many complaints about your behavior, and now you’re causing customers to walk out the door. You’ve got to go.”

“Look, I’m sorry about those customers, but they were too bougie for me.” She snapped her fingers. “I couldn’t help how I responded to them, but I promise I’ll do better. Just give me another chance.”

“I’ve given you too many chances. Most of you young girls weren’t raised right. I know y’all don’t know how to act on a job, so I try to work with y’all.” He stood, walked around his desk, and opened the door.

Marquita’s neck rolled as her hand went to her hip. “Who don’t know how to act? You don’t know nothing about how my mama raised me.” But her mother, Gloria Lewis, hadn’t trained Marquita for much of anything, unless teaching her children how to protest evictions and then how to quickly pick up all their clothes and pack them in their cars once the sheriff showed up to throw them out counted as some type of skill.

The manager backed up a bit and conceded. “I don’t know your mother, but I’ve witnessed how you act at work. It’s obvious that you have a lot to learn.”

Marquita’s eyes brightened with a thought. “What about a warning? You can’t just fire me without a warning first, right?” She’d received warnings on all her other jobs before getting booted out the door. It wasn’t fair not to get one here as well.

“Girl, bye, what did you think you were getting all those times you showed up late and I told you that couldn’t continue?”

“But you never said you were going to fire me. How am I supposed to pay my rent? Me and my son don’t have nowhere else to go.” She was talking loud and knew that the customers and coworkers heard her begging for her job, but what else could she do? She just had to find a way to keep a job so she could pay her bills.

Why did she have to roll her eyes at those customers? Didn’t she know better than that? Or was it like her manager said? She wasn’t raised right. If so, how could she possibly know how to act on a job?

“Do I need to call the police and have them cart you off my property?”

She scoffed at that. “It’s not *your* property. You up in here collecting a check just like the rest of us.”

“Oh, okay, but I’m the only one of us”—his finger wagged from her and then back to him—“who’s still collecting a check, because you fired, boo. And I will call the police if you don’t take that apron off and get out of here.”

The last thing Marquita wanted was for the police to come in here and drag her out like they’d done to her mother on multiple occasions. Marquita still had nightmares about neighbors watching them being thrown out of one place after another. Those were scary times, but things got even scarier when Child Protective Services took them away from their mother when Marquita was eleven. They spent an entire year in foster care, waiting for their mother to get out of yet another rehab and find a place they could move into. When Marquita had her son, she promised him that no one would ever take him away from her.

“No, no. You don’t have to call the police.” She snatched off the apron. “If you don’t want me here, then I don’t need to be here. It’s not like I can’t find another waitress job.”

As she walked through the eating area, making her way to the front door, she turned and shouted to the customers, “Don’t order the chili. Bugs fall in it all the time, and my wonderful manager feeds it to unsuspecting customers anyway.”

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He ran toward her, trying to chase her out of the restaurant, while simultaneously providing the customers a nervous smile. “We don’t have bugs. Don’t believe a word she says.”

Marquita opened the door and ran out. Her manager was a smoker. No way would he catch her.

“Don’t think you’re going to get a reference from me. You can forget that!” he yelled as she made her way to her 2003 Chevy Cavalier.

Snapping her fingers and twisting her lip as she got in the car, she forgot about needing a reference. She’d been on this job for less than sixty days. Her last job had been almost ninety days because she’d worked up to two weeks before giving birth to Marcus. She’d experienced back pain on that job and had to take a few days off. She probably couldn’t get a reference from them either because she’d showed out when they fired her too.

Sighing deeply, Marquita pulled out of the parking lot and headed to her mother’s apartment to pick up her son. He was the bright spot of her day. She hated having to leave him at her mom’s place while she worked, but day cares were too expensive. Marquita didn’t know how people could afford childcare and be able to eat too. It was all just too much.

When she arrived at her mother’s place and saw the eviction notice on the door, she was outdone. Marquita lived on her own, so her mother’s constant evictions didn’t affect her like they used to. But her brother, Mark, was sixteen and her sister, Kee Kee, was thirteen. Where were they supposed to sleep once Gloria was kicked out of yet another place?

Marquita already didn’t like bringing Marcus over here because she never knew what kind of drama might be popping off. She didn’t have the money for day care, but if her mother went to another women’s shelter, she’d have to find it because she was not letting her son step foot into a place like that.

Rolling her eyes, she snatched the notice off the door and entered

the apartment. "Why aren't you in school?" she asked Kee Kee, who was sitting on the sofa, bouncing Marcus on her lap.

"Mama wasn't feeling well so I stayed home to take care of my little man." Kee Kee made cooing sounds. She kissed Marcus's cheeks. "Isn't that right, Moochie?"

Moochie was the nickname Kee Kee had given Marcus. Marquita thought it was cute, but there was nothing cute about her sister skipping school. "You are too smart for this, Kee Kee. Out of the three of us, you have a real chance to get a scholarship, go to college, and get out of here. You are not going to mess that up just because I had a baby."

"I'm just trying to help. I didn't want to leave Moochie with Mama today." Kee Kee nervously cut her eyes toward Gloria's bedroom. Then she plastered that same don't-want-no-trouble smile on her face that appeared whenever Gloria got to acting like she needed Iyanla to fix her life.

Marquita figured that her mother must have gone into a rage, for God knows what, and scared Kee Kee so bad that the girl feared for Moochie. Marquita didn't get why Kee Kee wasn't immune to Gloria's antics by now. The girl was just too soft, too good-hearted to be in this family.

Marquita went into her mother's bedroom. Gloria was lying in bed with a heating pad on her head. The heating pad normally came out after Gloria ranted and raved through the house about some perceived injustice. The whole world always against her.

"What happened now?" Marquita asked.

Gloria lifted the heating pad from her head. "Why are you back so soon? Get fired again?"

Marquita tossed her mom the eviction paper she'd taken off the front door. "Yeah, I got fired and you got evicted again. Let me know when I'm saying something that sounds like a surprise."

"You getting fired sure isn't a surprise. It happens all the time."

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Gloria sat up, legs dangling from the side of the bed as she turned off the heating pad.

“And you getting evicted certainly isn’t a surprise. It’s been happening every five months like clockwork since I was a kid. When will you realize that you have to pay rent if you want to keep a roof over your head?” Marquita had no room to talk, since she was a month behind on her own rent and had just lost her job. But she was new to this. Her mother was true to her eviction game.

“I told that landlord that he had to give me another month to come up with the money. He can’t just evict me without getting a court order.”

Marquita pointed to the eviction notice. “Isn’t that from the court?”

“Don’t get my blood boiling again, Marquita. They not just gon’ throw me out on the street without a fight.” Gloria’s hands went to her head.

Marquita didn’t want to give her mother another headache, but she wasn’t finished. “Don’t let Kee Kee miss school to keep Marcus anymore, Mama. It’s not fair to her.”

“I wasn’t feeling well after talking to the landlord. Kee Kee asked to help with Moochie, and she did her school assignments while the Mooch slept.”

“Kee Kee is smart, Mama. You can’t be acting like a raving lunatic around her. That stuff makes her nervous. That’s why she stayed out of school. She was afraid to leave you with Marcus.”

Gloria waved that comment off. “She’s heard me talk to these slumlords a thousand times. She ain’t never missed no school because of it before.”

She wasn’t trying to disrespect her mother, but Marquita’s eyes did that thing they do whenever she heard ignorance.

“Roll your eyes at me again, Marquita Ann Lewis, and I’ll knock them in the back of your head.”

"I'm going home." Marquita walked out of her mother's bedroom, packed up Marcus's diaper bag, and then took her baby out of Kee Kee's arm. "Don't miss school to sit with my kid no more. You are better than that."

Gloria came out of her room. "If you don't like the way we keep Marcus, then why don't you go find his daddy and tell him to watch his own kid. But then again, you won't even tell us who the daddy is."

"I'll watch my baby myself, so Kee Kee can go to school. I can't have her falling behind in school on my conscience."

Marquita put the diaper bag on her shoulder and walked out of the apartment with her baby on her hip. Her mother followed her and started screaming, "Go find that baby's daddy!" for all the neighbors to hear as she made her way down the stairs.

"Go back in the house," Marquita shot back at her.

"Why don't you want Moochie to know who his daddy is? Maybe he can take care of that baby, because you sure can't."

"I take care of Marcus better than you ever took care of us. That's for sure."

"We'll see about that." Gloria went back into her apartment and slammed the door.

Marquita opened the back car door and strapped Marcus into his car seat. She got in the car and sat behind the steering wheel. Taking several deep breaths didn't help her calm down. She screamed. Marcus started crying. Then Marquita hit the steering wheel and screamed again, as if screams could change the world.

The baby cried louder.

"I'm sorry, Moochie. Stop crying." She turned and rubbed his belly to soothe him. "And I'm sorry about your daddy. I'd like to take you to meet him, but I just don't see what good it would do. Anyway, he's got his own problems. Don't see how telling him about you is going to change anything."

CHAPTER 2

Pulling herself out of bed, Trish Robinson stretched to get the kink out of her neck and glanced over at her husband's snoring form. He used to give good massages, good hugs, good everything, but that was before everything went left. Rolling her neck from side to side, she looped her fingers together to give her arms and back a stretch, then took a long, deep, do-I-have-to-start-this-day-already sigh.

"I will sing a fruitful song in a barren land." Every morning since the day her precious son was told he might never walk again, Trish sang those words to encourage herself to keep on fighting, keep getting out of bed every morning so she could see how God would turn her midnight into sweet, sunshiny days.

"Mama!"

"I'm coming, Jon-Jon." They lived in a ranch-style home with nine-foot-high ceilings, so sound traveled. Even though their master bedroom was on the opposite side of the house from Jon-Jon's room, she heard him holler her name.

Jon-Jon rarely hollered for her first thing in the morning, but when he did, Trish knew what that meant. She rushed into the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth, towel, wet wipes, and a Depend for her precious twenty-year-old. Long, deep sigh. "I will sing a fruitful song . . ."

Before stepping out of her bedroom, Trish made sure to plaster that same generic smile on her face that she hoped said to her son, "All is right with the world," even though it wasn't. Picking up her

smartphone, she pulled up YouTube and put on some praise music. She danced to “You Deserve My Praise” by Tamela Mann as she entered Jon-Jon’s room.

“Hey, handsome.” He was a younger version of his father, with skin the color of a russet potato. He and his father both sported goat-ees, but Jon-Jon hadn’t brushed his hair in a month. So, where his dad had a low-cut fade, Jon-Jon had a matted, coming-to-America-straight-out-of-Africa untamed afro sitting on top of his head.

“Turn it off, Mama. I’m not in the mood for that this morning.”

“Boy, you better give God some praise.” She continued dancing, trying to change his mood. The room smelled foul, like soiled diapers mixed with sweat, but she resisted the urge to cover her nose.

“For what?” Jon-Jon flung the covers off his bed, revealing soiled sheets. “Who in their right mind would praise God for this?”

Trish’s heart went out to her son. Her only son. A son she had expected to be in his second year of college and on his way to the NFL the following year. At least that’s what the scout had told them.

She had expected to attend her son’s wedding and welcome grandchildren into her home one day. But life had dealt them such a low and sneaky blow that it was hard to get back up. Trish refused to give up, refused to stop believing that God could change their circumstances.

Trish placed her phone on the dresser and let the music fill the room as she rolled her son to the left so she could unhook the sheets from his mattress. Then she rolled him to the right and unhooked the other side. “What happened to you isn’t fair, son. But you woke up this morning and every morning since that horrible accident. That’s something to thank the good Lord for, isn’t it?”

“You’re changing the boy’s diaper, Trish. At least let him be angry at God while you’re cleaning his behind.” Dwayne wiped the sleep from his eyes as he stood in the doorway.

“Tell her to turn the music off, Dad. I’m not in the mood.”

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Why couldn't Dwayne have just stayed asleep? Why'd he have to come in here, getting Jon-Jon worked up with all his foolish talk about being mad at God? She waved him into the room. "Come help me lift Jon-Jon's waist so I can pull this Depend off."

"It's a diaper," Dwayne snarled.

That deep baritone voice of Dwayne's used to give her that come hither feeling, with fluttering all up in her stomach. Now she just wanted to stuff a rag in his mouth so he would shut up. "Just help me, or get out of here and leave us alone. I'm not doing this with you this morning, Dwayne."

He came into the room, went straight to the dresser where her phone was, and stopped the music from playing. He then put his shirt over his nose as he lifted Jon-Jon's waist.

Snatching the shirt from his nose, Trish wanted to scream at her husband. How dare he treat his own son this way? She side-eyed him, daring him to put that shirt back over his nose as she cleaned Jon-Jon. She then pulled the new Depend up to cover her son.

Dwayne helped her take the sheets off the bed, holding Jon-Jon to one side and then rolling Jon-Jon to the other side while she moved the sheets.

She took a laundry bag out of Jon-Jon's closet, put the soiled sheets in it, and tried to hand it to Dwayne. "Can you take this to the laundry room?"

"Have you lost your mind?" Turning his nose up, Dwayne scurried out of the room like he smelled smoke and needed to put out the fire. Although he had no problem lifting Jon-Jon out of the bed or helping with his physical therapy, he rarely helped her clean Jon-Jon. He said he didn't have the stomach for it. Trish just wished he wasn't so mean about it.

Turning back to Jon-Jon, she playfully nudged his shoulder. "All better. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

She took the dirty linens to the laundry, then came back to

Jon-Jon's room and vacuumed the floor. She wiped off his table and then held out a hand to Jon-Jon. "Now let me get you out of that bed."

He shook his head. "Not today, Mom. Just leave me alone. I just want to be left alone."

She started to object. The doctor said it wasn't good for Jon-Jon to lie in bed all day. He didn't want his muscles to atrophy. But as he turned his head away from her, she saw the tear roll down his cheek. "I'll fix you some pancakes."

No response.

Trish went to her master bathroom, brushed her teeth, took the headwrap off, and let her hair fall on her honey-toned shoulders. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror brought on a sigh. Trish's eyes were so puffy that it looked as if she had gone five rounds with Floyd Mayweather and floated like a feather with every jab and uppercut to her face. Exhaustion hung on her shoulders like an old friend. If Jon-Jon didn't need her, she would climb back in bed and sleep as if sleep was money and she was trying to get paid. But sleep was a luxury she couldn't afford, so she made her way to the kitchen to take care of breakfast.

Pancakes were her son's favorite breakfast, guaranteed to put a smile on his face. When he was younger he'd told her that he didn't want his dad's pancakes because, as he put it, "Nobody fixes pancakes like you, Mama." Ever since then, Trish made sure to sprinkle a little extra cinnamon in the pancake mix.

As the cinnamon mixed into the pancake batter, the color change was just a shade darker than her walls. These days, a lot of interior walls were being painted gray, but Trish liked warmer colors. She had picked a color called golden rod, which was a mix between yellow and brown, for her interior color. Because of the high ceilings and the open floor plan, the color worked and didn't darken the house much at all.

Mixing her batter, she added vanilla extract and melted butter, but the cinnamon she had already added was the key to great pancakes.

SOMETHING GOOD

That, and the extra butter she slathered on the cakes while they cooked in her special pancake-making skillet, like every good Southern mother worth her cooking apron would.

“Make me a few of them cakes.” Dwayne sat down at the kitchen counter.

Lip curled, displaying her disgust, she responded, “I know you didn’t just ask me to fix you nothing after the way you treated my son this morning.”

“He’s my son, too, Trish. And if he would put forth a little effort during physical therapy, he’d be able to get himself out of that bed and into his wheelchair. Then he could get to the bathroom on his own.”

“He’s trying, Dwayne. You just don’t care what any of us are going through.” She was married to a man who didn’t open his eyes to see anybody’s needs but his own. He hadn’t always been like this though. Jon-Jon’s accident had changed him, turned him into someone she barely recognized.

“I’m hungry, Trish. I don’t have time to argue with you this morning.”

She turned to give him a preview of the cold shoulder he’d be receiving all day long, but that’s when she realized he had his work shirt on. He’d just gotten off work at eleven last night and was now going in for another shift.

He’d been working extra shifts as a forklift driver ever since he found this job about three months ago, after being fired from a job he’d held for fifteen years. The company had a no-tolerance policy when it came to attendance and didn’t care if Dwayne was at the hospital as his son fought for his life.

While Dwayne was losing one job and searching for another, Trish had taken family medical leave from her fourth grade teaching position. Dwayne had been fine with that, but when Jon-Jon didn’t get better and the pay checks stopped coming after two months, he told her to go back to work. But how could she go back to school and teach

other kids when her son couldn't even get out of bed without help? So she handed in her resignation.

Dwayne had been smoking mad when he discovered that she quit her job without discussing it with him. Still, he had asked for extra hours on his job so they could catch up on some bills. So if he wanted to eat, she would feed him. "You want sausage links and eggs too?"

"Naw, pancakes are good enough. I got to get going."

Trish put some butter in the skillet and turned her back to Dwayne as she prayed he wouldn't ask . . . *Don't ask. Don't ask.*

"Heard anything from that blood-sucking attorney?"

She put the mix in the pan and turned up the fire a bit. The sooner she got him on his way, the easier her day would be. "Not since he told us that the court case has been postponed again."

"You still think them people aren't trying to pull a fast one? They won't even give us our day in court. Haven't even given our boy an 'I'm sorry,' or a 'Hey, let me pay those hospital bills.'"

Flipping the pancakes and buttering the smooth side, she turned to him. Jon-Jon's room was just off the kitchen, about fifteen feet from where she stood, so she whispered. "If you would let Jon-Jon accept the money from the insurance settlement, we could get some of these bills paid."

"Jon-Jon's injuries and lifetime loss of income is worth way more than that insurance policy they got."

"Yeah, but at least we'd have something."

"Something that didn't cost them nothing. You think rich people like that lose sleep over their insurance premiums going up? What about what my boy lost? They owe us, and all they've done is try to get out of paying for what they did." He slammed his fist against the counter.

She put his pancakes on a plate, handed it to him, and held out the syrup. "Not saying they don't owe Jon-Jon more, but the bills are piling up. You're working all this overtime, trying to cover hospital bills and household bills, like a hamster on a spinning wheel."

SOMETHING GOOD

Snatching the syrup from her outstretched hand, he said, “That’s why you shouldn’t have quit your job. Who does that?”

Hands on hips and neck rolling, she fired back, “A woman whose son has been paralyzed for six months, that’s who.”

Stabbing his fork into his pancakes, Dwayne swirled them around the plate to soak in the syrup and then stuffed them in his mouth.

She sighed, ready to throw in the towel. “Why can’t we stop fighting and being so angry? We can’t pay for the next surgery Jon-Jon needs. And if he doesn’t get it, he has even less of a chance of walking again. Maybe it’s time to just take the money and move on with our lives.”

Dwayne’s lip drew into a snarl. His eyes held disdain for her words. “Forgiveness runs deep with you, don’t it? Too deep.”

She wished that was true. Since she was a little girl sitting in the church sanctuary, listening to Pastor Greenwald talk about forgiveness like it was the answer to all the ills of the world, Trish had made up her mind to forgive. But, for the life of her, she couldn’t find a way to forgive her husband for becoming as mean and surly as a coiling rattlesnake.

She wanted out of this marriage, but every time she decided enough was enough, she’d hear Pastor Greenwald’s message ringing in her head. Why had she attended church that day? Pastor Greenwald’s words had sounded so reasonable, so just and full of grace. But that was before her son lost the use of his legs and his football scholarship, before she had to give up hope of all the grandchildren she thought she’d have, and before her husband turned into Hannibal Lecter—without the cannibalism, just all the evil.

Wiping his mouth, Dwayne stood and put his plate in the sink while leering at her. “Now you acting like you don’t hear nobody. You good at that silent game until you need my money for these bills. You talk real good then.”

Why wouldn’t he just divorce her already? This misery that crept

up on her every gut-wrenching day was becoming too much to bear. Whenever she thought things might be getting better, she'd go to sleep and wake up to the same misery, like that movie *Groundhog Day*.

Slamming the spatula on the counter, nostrils flaring like a lioness who'd found her prey, she attacked. "I have put up with your mess for months now. You want to be hateful for the rest of your life, fine. But here's what you ain't gon' do . . ." Yeah, she was a teacher by profession and was speaking all types of ebonics, but as she got in Dwayne's face, she didn't care about proper English. "You are not going to pull me into your darkness. I don't want to have this conversation with you ever again. You want to know what the lawyers are doing about Jon-Jon's case, then call them yourself."

Leaning back like he wanted to put space between him and Trish, Dwayne said, "You're the one at home. I'm working extra hours, so I don't have time to make those calls."

"I don't care!" she shouted at him, hands flailing in the air.

"Mom, stop yelling!" Jon-Jon called out from his bedroom.

"Oh, so it's like that now?" Dwayne whispered.

Lowering her tone, while still rolling her neck from side to side, she said, "You better believe it's like that. Either tell Jon-Jon to accept the insurance settlement or deal with the attorneys yourself." She plated Jon-Jon's pancakes as she gave Dwayne an I-wish-you-would-say-something-else-to-me staredown.

"You done changed Trish." He shook his head but didn't say anything else.

Trish picked up the syrup and left her husband in the kitchen to fix his own lunch and go on about his business.

When she and Dwayne first married, Trish thought she'd found her little piece of heaven on earth. He'd been good to her, and she'd loved him for it. When the doctors told her she wouldn't be able to have any more children after Jon-Jon was born, Dwayne didn't trip. They were grateful that they had a son, and they made him their world.

SOMETHING GOOD

Maybe they were wrong for doing that because their world was now crumbling around them, and neither of them knew what to do about all the broken pieces. The only thing it seemed they knew to do was to keep waking up so Jon-Jon would have somebody to take care of him.

She and Dwayne had once been lovers, friends, and confidantes. They were now only civil with each other in front of Jon-Jon, but this morning they couldn't even manage that. She was sure Jon-Jon felt awful and blamed himself for her and Dwayne's problems. She hated the thought of that more than anything.

She heard Dwayne slam the garage door as he left the house. Trish came back into the kitchen, rested her hands on the counter, and shook her head as her eyes watered. Tears in the rain, too many reasons to name, just pain, pain, pain.

CHAPTER 3

Alexis Marshall could hardly believe that her twins, Ella and Ethan, had just turned eleven. The years were moving way too fast. Before she knew it they would be off to college and treating her like an afterthought.

But today they were only eleven, and she was having the time of her life spoiling them. For their birthday party, she and Michael hired face painters, a juggler, a magician, and a Justin Bieber impersonator. With their forty-five-hundred-square-foot open floor plan, they could have just moved some furniture around and hosted the twenty-three kids in the space between the living room and kitchen.

But Ella and Ethan wanted to show off the new pool their dad had installed in the backyard. The pool was a true work of art, so she could understand why the kids wanted to show it off. There were three components to the pool: a circular hot tub, connected to the oval twenty-eight foot pool, and—the third and most eye-catching of all—the mountainous wall that surrounded it.

Alexis put her long auburn hair in a bun on the top of her head. Then she remembered the terrible sunburn she got on the back of her neck last year in this Carolina heat. Today was the eighth day of June and the sun was beaming, so she went to her bedroom and put on the straw hat Michael purchased for her during one of their travels to the Caribbean.

Looking in the mirror, her green eyes smiled back at her. *This is*

SOMETHING GOOD

perfect for keeping the sun off of my neck. She rushed out of the room and back to the kitchen; she had hungry kids to feed.

Michael had grilled the hot dogs and burgers for the party before retreating into his home office to take care of some important business—on his kids' birthday. You'd think business could wait. She tried not to complain. Michael was a wonderful provider, neither the kids nor she wanted for anything. He was in the middle of a deal to sell the tech business he and his business partner started thirteen years ago, and then life would be even sweeter.

So she cut him some slack as she filled bowls with chips and put the hot dogs and burgers in buns. Then she put the food on a tray and headed outside to feed the hungry munchkins in her backyard.

The Justin Bieber look-a-like was standing by the pool, microphone in hand, singing, "Love Yourself." Some of the kids were singing along. Others were swimming and a few were dancing. She caught the looks on Ethan's and Ella's faces and knew she'd done good. They were smiling. They were happy.

Ethan started climbing the wall to dive into the pool. The first level of the structure was built of beautiful rocks and stones. The second level had a waterfall with several stones sticking out of the rock work. There was no diving board because the protruding stones were used for that. At the top of the structure was a thick stone, wide enough to stand on.

"No diving today, Ethan." Alexis pointed downward and Ethan complied. She didn't want the other kids climbing on that wall and possibly hurting themselves.

That structure was the only thing Alexis didn't like about the design. She often admonished Michael to make sure those stones were wiped clean. With the water falling onto them, she worried that they could become slick and someone might slip and fall, but Michael accused her of worrying too much. So she let it go and just let the kids enjoy themselves.

“Come and get it!” She set the food on the picnic table and then moved out of the way as the kids rushed the table. The plates, cups, and juice had already been laid out, so Alexis stood back and watched them fix their plates and then sit or stand around the pool, eating and chatting amongst themselves.

It was a carefree life—the kind Alexis hadn’t known until she met and married Michael. Her American prince stepped into her life and opened her eyes to a world of possibilities. She and her children were blessed, and Alexis didn’t take that for granted.

Michael walked up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. He had grayed prematurely, reminding her of a younger Michael Douglas from the movie *Wall Street*. Her Michael had even said the movie’s catch phrase, “Greed is good,” when he and his business partner joked about the money flowing into their business.

“You hanging out with us?”

“Not yet.” He waved a hand, getting the kids attention. “Okay, kids, the juggler and the magician are here. Have a seat around the pool so we can start the show.”

“Yay!” The kids got excited.

Ethan came up to his father. “Dad, you said you were going to race me in the pool, remember?”

Michael grinned and gave him a playful punch. “You don’t really want me to embarrass you on your birthday, do you?”

Ethan flexed his eleven-year-old muscles. “I’ve been practicing. I beat Ella last week, and I’ll beat you too.”

Turning to Alexis, Michael said, “You hear your son? He actually thinks he can beat me.”

She shrugged. “He has been practicing.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you what, son. You take over for your mom for a few minutes. Make sure everyone sits down and watches the show. Then, after the party I will show you why I was a champion swimmer in college.”

SOMETHING GOOD

Alexis elbowed her husband and gave him the not-again side-eye. “You’re not going to watch the magic show?”

“Can’t right now. And I need you to come into my office with me.”

Alexis extended her arm toward the kids in the yard. “I’m kind of busy hosting a party for our children right now.”

“Can’t one of the other moms take over for a few minutes?”

Her husband had come out to the pool area wearing black slacks, black leather shoes, and a white shirt with the two top buttons undone. Next to him she looked underdressed in her bright-yellow sundress, straw hat, and flip-flops. “And why are you dressed like this on a Saturday afternoon?”

He looked down at himself. “I took my tie off.”

She laughed. “That makes it all right then.”

“I need you, Alexis.”

When she didn’t respond, he pulled her into his arms. She purred and snuggled up to him. Alexis loved being in Michael’s arms. She felt safe, secure, and fully satisfied. Being with him felt like home, like she was always meant to be with this man. And that cologne—a mix of mint, lemon, vanilla, and cedarwood—tore down her resolve. “You’re not playing fair. You know I can’t resist your hugs.”

“Then stop resisting. Come with me.” He kissed her neck and then became serious. “I wouldn’t interrupt the party if it wasn’t important.”

“I don’t like being in your office.”

Michael lifted his hands, backing up a bit. “It’s okay. You can pick up my stapler or touch anything else you want. I promise.”

Michael was so protective over every little thing in his office. Alexis still remembered an incident that occurred about seven years ago when she was searching through his desk for a notepad and pencil so she could help Ethan with a drawing project.

She had come across a wallet-size picture of a beautiful African-American baby. The baby looked like a cherub with a tiny black beauty mark next to her nose. When she asked him about the photo, Michael

had become agitated. He'd said the baby belonged to a friend of his. Alexis hadn't questioned his honesty about the picture, she just didn't understand why he was so upset that she had found the photo.

She didn't want to go to his office, but the kids were seated, watching the magician. The show would take at least twenty minutes, and then the juggler would dazzle them with his skills. Two of the moms volunteered to chaperone for a few minutes, so she left the backyard.

Michael's office was toward the back of the house. His window overlooked the backyard, so she followed him to his office and then opened the blinds. "Before I listen to whatever you need from me, you have to make me a promise."

Sitting on the edge of his desk, he said, "You know I never agree to anything without all the details."

Ever the businessman. She admired that about him, but there were times when she needed him to just be Michael—her husband and the kids' dad. "I just want you to promise to be present for the kids' next birthday party. Not just in body but all the way in." She folded her arms across her chest. "I mean it, Michael, if I have to put a lock on your office door, I will. They will be grown and gone before we know it. Don't you want to spend more time with them?"

"Babe, I'm sorry about today. But Peter and I are having issues with the sale of the company, and you know that we'll be set for life if this deal goes through."

Alexis nodded. Michael and Peter had been college roommates who created apps that helped users add funny videos and emojis to their texts. Users flocked to the app and now a major player in the business wanted to buy the company. If Michael needed her help, then she was here for him. "What can I do?"

"I just got off the phone with Peter, and he's nervous about our upcoming court case. He thinks if those people go shooting their mouths off about you getting into an accident while texting and driving, that our deal might go up in smoke."

SOMETHING GOOD

Alexis' heart rate sped up as her mind's eye flashed back to that terrible accident. She rubbed the left side of her chest as she exhaled. "I feel so bad for that young man, Michael. I'm usually a good driver. I should have never reached for my phone like that."

"Don't beat yourself up, babe. Accidents happen. But that kid's father won't go away. He wants his day in court, and we just can't allow that."

"But I thought you said our insurance was more than enough to cover the accident? You told me that you would take good care of that young man." Alexis bit her lip so hard she touched it to make sure she didn't draw blood.

"The insurance money is enough, but the boy you hit was in college on a football scholarship, and those people think his earning potential is higher than the insurance policy. Basically, they know we have money and are trying to cash in."

Those people . . . She didn't like the way Michael said that. "The father's name is Dwayne John Robinson. And the young man I hit is John Robinson."

Michael shrugged. "I'm trying to make this go away. But if they won't be reasonable, I may need you to step in."

She sat down in front of his desk. It was a big mahogany desk, the kind that spoke of wealth and importance. He knew how to make things go away. Just like how he put her mother in a nursing home so he wouldn't have to see or deal with her. And how he got Ethan's kindergarten teacher to promote Ethan to the first grade even though their son hadn't been ready. But Michael couldn't deal with Ella moving to the next grade without her brother, so presto, no more problem. But what did Alexis know about making things go away?

"I would contact them myself, but Peter thinks I should lay low. The last thing we need is to end up on the news with some nosy reporter connecting this accident with my company while we're in the middle of selling the business."

She put her hands in her lap. “John was hurt really bad in the accident. I don’t know how to make that go away.”

“Hon, I know you don’t like dealing with these kind of things, but you talk people off ledges all the time. You’re good at dealing with other people’s drama. I just need you to convince those people to drop this court case and go to arbitration.”

Alexis worked with mentally ill people who were transitioning from one difficult phase of life to another. She had never worked with a family whose child’s life had been destroyed in an accident—and one she had caused, no less—but her husband didn’t seem to recognize the difference. She got up and headed for the door.

Michael wasn’t finished. “This needs to be handled quickly, Alexis. And if those people ask you to confirm that you were texting and driving, don’t.”

“The police already know what I was doing, Michael.” She bit her lip again. “I don’t know. You said you would handle this.”

“What do you think our lawyer has been trying to do? Look, I tried to get it done quietly. But those people are being difficult, and I may need your help. That’s all I’m saying, okay?”

She was about to say something else, but she could tell he was getting agitated with her. Yes, the accident had been her fault, but she needed Michael to take care of it and help that kid get better because she just couldn’t deal with the fact that she had ruined someone else’s life.

Leaving his office, she headed for the kitchen. Cut the cake. It was a half-white, half-chocolate cake, since Ella liked white and Ethan liked chocolate. Instead of taking it outside for the kids, she put about three pieces of the chocolate cake in a bowl, grabbed a spoon, and ate the cake so fast that her stomach protested.

Alexis scurried off to the bathroom, holding her mouth with one hand and her quivering stomach with the other. She made it to the bathroom, kicked the door closed with her foot as she lowered her head into the toilet, and threw up.

SOMETHING GOOD

Her hat fell on the floor as she continued emptying the contents of her belly. When she finally stood, she took a moment to settle her breathing. She turned on the sink and splashed water in her mouth, straightened, then looked at herself in the mirror. She closed her eyes and breathed as if she were in a Lamaze class practicing breathing techniques. She then opened the bathroom door and headed back to the party.

In the kitchen again, guilt pricked her heart as one of the moms rushed over to her. “Someone ate some of the cake. I’m so sorry. I tried to watch the kids. But one or two of them must have slipped past me.”

Alexis had destroyed the twins’ beautiful cake. But she had also destroyed a young man’s life. The sugar rush helped her to cope. She waved off the comment. “Ethan and Ella won’t care.” She picked up the cake plates and asked, “Can you help me get this delicious cake out there so the kids can enjoy it?”