

The
FILLING STATION

ALSO BY VANESSA MILLER

The American Queen

The Light on Halsey Street

What We Found in Hallelujah

Something Good

The
FILLING
STATION

a novel

Vanessa Miller



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Filling Station

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This book is dedicated to my sister, Debra Clark,
who rescued me a few times in our youth.

And to the people of Greenwood, Oklahoma,
who had to rescue themselves from the toll
of death, destruction, and despair after the
1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.



This is a fictional account of actual events that occurred in Oklahoma between 1921 and 1926.



Letter to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I am writing this letter in June 2024, exactly fifty years from the day I almost died. I had gone to a river with my cousins. I was just six years old, and I was amazed at how my cousins walked on the green moss and crossed over to the other side of the riverbank.

I tried to do the same but slipped into the river. My sister and my cousins ran toward the street and began screaming for help. One man, Sergeant John Clark, stopped his car and asked my family what they were so upset about. My sister, Debra Clark, told him, “My sister’s drowning.”

He ran down to the river, jumped in the water, and pulled me out. They said I had been underwater for about ten minutes. From the newspaper account, it took Sergeant John Clark about thirteen minutes to get me to breathe again.

Here’s the thing that got me to thinking this week: I was in dire straits; I couldn’t help myself if I wanted to. I thank God that someone came to my rescue. But in the story you are about to read, the Greenwood residents were in dire straits when a white mob came into their community and burned it down and shot hundreds of people as they tried to flee. Why didn’t anyone come to their rescue that night? Where were the police? Where were the firefighters?

Where were the city officials who were supposed to help them rebuild after such a disaster caused by hateful humans? Where was the justice system when Greenwood needed it? As you read *The Filling Station*, I need you to keep in mind that this vicious massacre occurred during a time when Black bodies didn't matter.

So please understand that when I use the N-word in my historical novels (a word I would never use when writing a contemporary novel), it is not for shock value. It is to be authentic to the time period and to let the reader step into the shoes of those Black bodies that didn't matter much to those who would use and misuse them. Please also note that during this most unfortunate time in our history, some white residents in Tulsa regularly referred to Greenwood as "Little Africa," so you will see that term as well.

I hope you enjoy *The Filling Station*. I pray it fills you with not just historical truths but a deep appreciation for a resilient group of people who would not be destroyed.

This novel may leave you with questions—for example, after going through the most traumatic experience of your life and being emptied of everything you thought you knew, what will fill you up again? What will you turn to in order to keep moving forward in this thing called life? If you have questions like these, please go to my website, vanessamiller.com, for resources.

This book was a labor of love and honor. I hope you enjoy it.

Vanessa

Part 1

HOME NO MORE



Prologue

Greenwood! Lest you go unheralded, I sing a song of remembrance.

—*Wynonia Murray Bailey, Tulsa Race Massacre survivor*

1905

TULSA, OKLAHOMA

They stood on dried-up land that the authorities in Tulsa deemed good for nothing, worthless enough to sell to Negroes. As far as the eye could see, there was only open land cut by dust-ridden roads.

“I just don’t understand it, Ottawa. What can we do out here that we can’t do in Noble County?” Emma asked, putting a hand over her eyebrows and looking out at the expanse of the land, trying to see just how far down the way forty acres could be.

Taking his flat cap off his head, Ottawa Gurley, or as most people called him, O. W., tapped the short brim of the cap against his wool pants, breathed in the humid air, then blew it back out into the world. “I can be somebody here. Done run my course in Noble County.” O. W. Gurley had taken part in the Cherokee Outlet Land Rush in Indian territory

back in 1893 when the white folks in Oklahoma decided they needed money more than the Indians needed all the land that had been promised to them.

He felt bad for the way the Indians had been treated, but not too bad, since they had owned slaves just like the white folks before emancipation. He staked his claim in Perry, Noble County, Oklahoma, like a lot of others who'd come to these parts from the South.

He'd run for treasurer in the town where he'd purchased a plot of land and lost. Then opened a general store and became principal of the town's school. But the prospect of owning more land than he'd ever imagined led him eighty miles from Noble County. To the land that nobody wanted. Well, he wanted it and would gladly take it off their hands.

Still looking out at the land before them, Emma asked her husband, "But why so much? We don't need more than an acre."

"Use your imagination." He angled his foot toward the ground and used the tip of his shoe to etch an X in the dust. "Right here is where the boardinghouse you've been dreaming of will be." He pointed down the way. "I can build another grocery store right over there."

"My goodness, you are just full of grand ideas. But I still don't know what we gon' do with the rest of these acres you done bought."

Scratching his head, O.W. planted a gleeful smile on his face as dust kicked up from the ground and swirled around them in the light breeze. "The white folks don't want this land, but there's a whole heap of Negroes migrating from the South looking for land to buy. I s'pose we got enough to sell."

Emma held on to her long skirt as the wind threatened to lift it. Her eyes lit with the dawning of a new day, a new way

of life. “You talking ’bout building our own community, with folks just like us?”

He put his arm around her shoulders and turned her so they were both gazing out toward the vast land before them. “That’s exactly what I’m thinking on. Every inch of this land will be sold to colored folk. We’re going to build businesses and homes that will be the envy of Tulsa. You just wait and see.”



Chapter 1

There had been rumblings on the night of May 31, 1921, that there was going to be trouble in Little Africa. But we hadn't paid much attention to the rumors.

—*Veneice Dunn Sims, 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre survivor*

SIXTEEN YEARS LATER
MAY 31, 1921
GREENWOOD, OKLAHOMA

Did you hear about—”
“I don't like telling tales, but—”

Gossip flowed like a mighty river through Mrs. Mabel B. Little's beauty parlor. Margaret Justice and her younger sister, Evelyn, sat by the picture window, waiting to get dolled up for Evelyn's graduation from Booker T. Washington High School, taking place the next day.

They had been waiting for an hour, but Margaret was thankful they were at the parlor on a Tuesday afternoon rather than Thursday, when most of the housemaids who worked for the white folks in Tulsa had their day off and spent their weekly pay in the business district of Greenwood.

Mrs. Mabel's beauty parlor was a madhouse on Thursdays. But in truth, it was pretty busy five days of the week since she received her certification from Madam C. J. Walker, framed it, and nailed it to her wall for all to see.

"Okay, Evelyn, go over to the washbowl," Mrs. Mabel said as she took the shoulder cape off an older woman who was seated in her styling chair.

Margaret playfully shoved her sister. "I don't know why you get to go first. I'm the one paying."

"That's only 'cause Daddy gave you the money." Evelyn sat down in front of the washbowl and stuck her tongue out at Margaret.

"Maybe I won't pay for your style this week. Leave you here to help some of Mrs. Mabel's stylists wash hair and sweep up the floor."

"You two stop being silly before I tell your daddy." Mrs. Mabel slung a towel across her shoulder, then leaned Evelyn's head back toward the washbowl. "Your sister has a special day tomorrow. When you graduated from college a few months back, I took you first, 'member?"

Margaret laughed. "I was just messing with Evelyn. She should go first since she has to get back to school for the graduation rehearsal."

Mrs. Theola and her daughter, Brenda, were seated next to Margaret. Mrs. Theola's husband owned a diner and a boardinghouse on Archer Street. They lived on Detroit Street a few blocks down from them. Evelyn and Brenda had been the best of friends right up until high school.

Mrs. Theola touched Margaret's shoulder. "Do you mind if Brenda gets in Mrs. Mabel's chair after Evelyn? She has to get back to the school for graduation practice too."

Margaret had been away at Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston, Oklahoma, since her sister began high school. But Evelyn had written several letters, telling Margaret how Brenda had turned on her. "If I didn't have to meet up with my daddy directly after this, I'd let Brenda take my place in the chair, but I simply can't spare an extra minute today."

Brenda rolled her eyes, then turned her back to them. Margaret almost felt bad for denying Mrs. Theola's request, but she was right fine with it now.

Margaret glanced out the window as a farmer in a horse-drawn wagon loaded down with produce passed by, then within the space of a minute a Ford Model T with the top pulled back came down the street. The man in the automobile waved at some folks who were walking near the dress shop across the street.

Seeing the wagon and the car share the same road seemed like a conundrum. Like the world was bewitched and between the past and the present. But Margaret wasn't fazed by any of it. Since she graduated from college, her mind was set on what would be and all that she would accomplish before settling down to marry and have a few babies.

Much to her daddy's chagrin, Margaret had accepted a teaching position at Booker T. Washington High School. She would be teaching history when school started up again in the fall.

"I don't believe it one bit. Just some more lies being told," one of Mrs. Mabel's stylists said while putting rollers in her customer's hair.

"He shouldn't have gotten in that elevator with that white woman in the first place. What was he thinking?" another woman in the beauty parlor added.

Margaret turned from the window and listened as the women discussed the latest scuttlebutt. Her daddy was up in arms last night about Dick Rowland's arrest. Said it wasn't no way that boy touched that white woman. Just maybe fell into her when the elevator jerked and whatnot.

Mrs. Mabel lifted Evelyn's head from the washbowl and put a towel around her hair to soak up the water. Evelyn joined in the conversation. "I went to school with him before he dropped out. Seemed like a nice boy to me."

"Never should've dropped out. Just wasting his life out here shining shoes," Mrs. Theola said.

Margaret didn't know the kid, but she hoped he would not soon be hanging from a tree, like her daddy said. "Well, I'm praying for him," she told the group.

Mrs. Mabel lifted a hand to the heavens as she and Evelyn walked to her styling chair. "Keep it up. That boy needs all the prayers he can get."

The other women kept chatting on about Rowland's predicament while Mrs. Mabel heated up the Marcel curling iron after drying Evelyn's hair. Her sister wanted the Marcel waves, which were similar to finger waves, but instead of forming the waves against the scalp, the Marcel curling iron was used to crimp the waves and allow women with longer hair to let their hair hang loose.

When Evelyn turned toward her, Margaret was struck by an overwhelming sense of days gone by and things changing all too fast, kind of like the horse-and-buggy riders and automobile drivers being on the same street.

"What?" Evelyn patted the waves. "You don't like it?"

Margaret's voice caught in her throat. The edges of her eyelids glistened with wetness, blurring her vision. Her sister normally got her hair washed and pressed, with no extra frills.

Evelyn's long hair would hang straight, or she'd pull it into a ponytail.

"She's probably used to you looking so plain Jane that you've rendered her speechless," Brenda said with a smirk.

Margaret bristled at that smirk. Evelyn turned away from the insult without giving as good as she got. How many times had her sister let this turncoat of an ex-friend disparage her? The letters Evelyn sent were always complaints about how terrible Brenda was but never anything about how she set the girl straight. "I love it. But you're beautiful with your hair straightened or crimped." Margaret eyed Brenda, let her lip curl a bit, then turned back to her sister. "You just looked so much like Mama when you turned around, I . . . I . . . You're beautiful, Evie."

Evelyn grinned like a Cheshire cat as she got out of the chair and took off the cape. "Your turn."

Mrs. Theola stood, soon followed by her daughter. "I don't think Brenda and I can wait much longer."

Margaret sat down at the washbowl and loudly announced, "I think I want pin curls this time."

Brenda rolled her eyes again. Threw up her hands. "We'll never get out of here."

Mrs. Mabel pointed to the other workers in the parlor. "I have three other stylists. Brenda can sit in one of their chairs and get her hair done, probably before I'm finished with Margaret."

Brenda sat back down, pulled her mother with her. "We'll wait."

After getting her certification, Mrs. Mabel became so busy that she had to hire three other stylists. But her regular customers refused to sit in any other chair in the parlor. Mrs. Mabel had the touch. People in Greenwood swore that their

hair grew long and thick due to Mrs. Mabel's personal connection with the Lord and that Madam C. J. Walker certification.

An hour later, Margaret and Evelyn left the beauty parlor, headed home to change for their evening activities. Margaret breathed in the fresh scent of lilacs and the herbaceous peonies as they walked toward Mount Zion Baptist Church at the corner of Easton and North Elgin. She waved at Pastor R. A. Whittaker as he stood at the front entrance of the church.

"Hey, Miss Margaret. Hey, Miss Evelyn. I sure hope to see y'all at church this Sunday. We'll be having our own reception for all of you graduates."

Evelyn waved while Margaret said, "Of course we'll be at church this Sunday. Will you be able to make Evelyn's graduation tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Pastor Whittaker told them.

Passing the church, Evelyn said, "My hair will never hold up all the way to Sunday. Guess I'll be plain Jane again."

Margaret's chest heaved as hot indignation blew out of her nostrils. She grabbed Evelyn's arm and pulled her to a stop. "Why do you regurgitate the words of a clown?"

"Brenda said—"

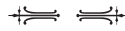
"Don't you dare let that girl's words slip from your mouth again." Margaret looked into her sister's beautiful brown eyes, then touched the caramel skin that was so much like their mother's. Evelyn not only looked like their mother; she had the same gentle spirit.

"Listen to me and listen good: You are beautiful, and you are something special. You will set this world on fire one day, and don't you let anyone tell you different."

Evelyn lowered her head. "Since I was a little girl, all you've told me is how special and strong I am, but I don't feel that way at all."

At five seven, Margaret was nearly a foot taller than Evelyn. She lifted her sister's chin with her index finger. "Evie, don't you know how sweet, loving, and caring you are? You can sew like nobody's business. You and Mama . . . y'all the only two I ever seen that can take a piece of scrap material and make it into something chic and fashionable. That's pretty special, if I have to say so myself."

"Speaking of that. I need you to try on the dress I made for you to wear to my graduation." Evelyn grabbed Margaret's hand, and they ran all the way home.



Evelyn and Margaret both had desks in their bedrooms. Whereas Margaret kept her books and papers on hers, Evelyn kept their mother's Singer sewing machine on her desk. The sewing machine had been a prized possession for Velma Justice. She'd tried to teach Margaret how to design and sew her own clothes, but Margaret hadn't been able to get the hang of it, nor did she have the desire to learn.

Evelyn, however, was born with their mother's gift for sewing and clothing design. Glancing around Evelyn's room, Margaret saw dresses hanging from curtain rods, strewn across chairs, laid out on her bed, and stuffed in her closet. "When do you find the time to make all these clothes?"

Evelyn shrugged. "I don't know . . . I sew when I have free time." She giggled. "And I'm graduating tomorrow, so you no longer have to worry that my designs are getting in the way of my studies."

The girls' mother had passed away nine years ago. They'd been devastated and heartbroken. Even though Margaret was only four years older than Evelyn, she had been thirteen at the time and had instantly taken on a mothering role. Someone had to look out for her sister while their dad was working.

“Here. Try this on.”

Evelyn handed her a white knee-length sundress with a high waist. Margaret tried on the dress. She loved the feel of it on her skin. Perfect. “How you manage to get my fit just right every time, I’ll never know.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “I have your measurements, silly.”

“Thank you. I am going to look lovely in this beautiful airy dress tomorrow.”

“The white of the dress looks good next to your brown skin tone.”

Margaret smiled her agreement. She’d taken her complexion from her daddy, who was only slightly darker than the brown paper bags they used at the grocery store. “Well, I love it.”

Evelyn hugged her sister. “I’m so glad you’re back home.”

“I’m home, and you’ll be leaving soon.” Margaret shook her head.

Evelyn took her cap and gown off the bed and put them on. “We have the whole summer before I leave, so let’s make sure to spend lots and lots of time together.”

Stepping back, Margaret gave Evelyn the once-over. “I can hardly believe you’re old enough to graduate.” Margaret wrapped her arms around her sister. “I’ll miss you dearly when you leave.”

Hugging Margaret back, Evelyn said, “I have the best big sister in the world. I love you so much.”

Letting the moment linger before she let go, Margaret was once again reminded of Evie’s kind heart. She didn’t care if her sister gave as good as she got as she drank in the love from Evie’s embrace. Regardless of how the world changed, with its automobiles and kids not being kids anymore, she prayed that Evie’s heart would remain the same.

Chapter 2

With joy, we once did greet you, but with sadness, we depart, and though we are to leave you, we go with an aching heart.

—1921 class poem for graduation, Booker T. Washington High School

After changing into the ankle-length African-print dress Evelyn had made for her, Margaret left the house, heading for Justice for All Grocery Store to meet up with her daddy.

Mr. John Clifton was in his driveway, bent over in front of his drop-top Ford T with a sudsy towel in his hand.

Margaret waved at him. “Getting your car all spiffed up, I see.”

“Got to take care of the things that matter,” he told her while wiping down his driver’s side door.

Mr. Clifton owned the dry cleaner’s next door to her daddy’s grocery store, and he kept things spiffed and clean as a whistle over there too. Daddy said he was thankful that Mr. Clifton cared about his property.

A little farther down the street, Margaret saw Mrs. Johnson chasing behind one of her five children. The two older boys tried to help, but the three younger were too fast for them.

“Don’t y’all want to go out to supper with Daddy this evening?” Mrs. Johnson tried to cajole them.

The Johnsons had a white house with black shutters. She grew red roses in her front yard, which ran up the trellis on the porch. The three-year-old pulled off a petal as she escaped, opened the gate of the wooden fence, and ran out onto the sidewalk, right into Margaret. She wrapped her arms around Margaret’s beautiful dress.

Mrs. Johnson’s hand went to her mouth. “Oh, my dear Lord, I’m so sorry.”

Margaret picked up the rambunctious child and handed her to her mother. “Good evening, Mrs. Johnson.” With a giggle she added, “I hope you make it to supper.”

“I probably should stay home, but Mr. Johnson has the day off and wants to take us to Huff’s.”

Mr. Johnson was a delivery driver for C. B. Bottling. He worked long hours, but Mrs. Johnson said he brought home enough money to keep the family in clean clothes and buy new shoes for the children each year, so she was content.

Opening the screen door wide, her husband called out to them, “What’s all this fuss out here? Get back in this house and let your mama clean y’all up.”

Mr. Johnson was a tall, imposing man. The children stopped running around and “yes, sirred” themselves back into the house.

Margaret continued on her way. She was only a few blocks away from the grocery store. She had worked with her daddy at the store in the evenings and during the summer months before going off to college.

She’d had designs on taking over the grocery store or opening one of her own. But while in college, she began thinking on other businesses like real estate. Mr. O. W. Gurley and Mr.

J. B. Stradford owned buildings in Greenwood, and they leased them out to business owners. That sounded like a good model to follow. But she also liked the idea of owning a place where she could work and be able to help members of the community with their needs.

Confusion had set in so strong that she'd finally told her daddy she would just teach for a spell. That's when her daddy got her a summer job working with Mrs. Loula Williams at her confectionery shop. He thought being mentored by a businesswoman such as the renowned Mrs. Williams would change her mind about "teaching rather than doing," as Daddy put it.

Like many of the business owners in Greenwood, Daddy had taken out a loan from Mr. Stradford to open the grocery store but had paid back every dime a few years ago. Now that he owned the store free and clear, Daddy was expanding the building since he had unused land behind it.

The contractors and the supplies had cost him a boatload of money, but he was confident he'd have the funds for Evie's school fees once the investments he'd made with Mr. Stradford paid off.

A few customers were milling around the store when she arrived. One was in the canned goods section, another in produce, squeezing all the fruit for ripeness. Margaret shook her head. Mrs. Pearl would never change. She was their next-door neighbor and made sure to do her grocery shopping at Justice, but she'd told Margaret time and time again that she wasn't going to be cheated by nobody, not even Henry Justice.

Margaret waved. "Hey, Mrs. Pearl."

Mrs. Pearl waved back at her. "Well, aren't you just the bee's knees. Love that dress."

Margaret twirled around. The dress swung and swayed this way and that, showing off her long, shapely legs.

“Just you be careful not to attract some of the riffraff running in and out of that billiard room down the street,” Mrs. Pearl told her.

Since their mother passed, Mrs. Pearl had taken it upon herself to look after them. Margaret loved all the smothered pork chop meals and especially the mac and cheese and fried chicken. But sometimes . . . “I’m headed out with Daddy today, so I’m sure he’ll keep the riffraff away.”

Mrs. Pearl turned to Margaret’s father, who was standing behind the counter, eyes focused on the newspaper. “Good,” she said. “I’m glad Henry will be keeping an eye on you tonight.”

Shaking her head, Margaret walked over to her daddy. She looked down at the *Tulsa Tribune* to see what had captured his attention so.

The headline on the front of the paper read, “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator.” They’d put that Rowland boy’s business in the paper before investigating the incident. What if he wasn’t guilty of what they said? But in white folks’ minds, colored folks were always guilty.

The *Tulsa Tribune* was not the preferred newspaper in Greenwood. She fancied the *Tulsa Star*, which was published weekly by A. J. Smitherman. That newspaper had warned Blacks of a possible lynching if a Black man was arrested and taken to the Tulsa jail.

Looking into her daddy’s transfixed eyes, Margaret figured he, too, was recalling A. J. Smitherman’s words after a white mob had forced their way into the Tulsa jail, taken Roy Belton out, and hung him for killing a taxi driver just last year. Smitherman said that if they could so easily exact mob justice and hang a white man, a Black man didn’t stand a chance.

Turning the newspaper over, Margaret waved a hand in front of her daddy's face. "Don't think what you're thinking. Lightning won't strike twice in the same place."

Rubbing his eyes, Henry Justice turned to his daughter. "Wish you was right. But that lightning will strike as many times as it wants. And believe me, them white boys are going to hit hard on this one."

"I don't want to think about things like this. Evelyn is graduating tomorrow, and you promised to take me to the Dreamland Theater this evening."

Henry nodded. Put a hand on Margaret's cheek. "You and I haven't been to Dreamland together in over a year." His eyes brightened. "Yes, let's go."

Grinning, Margaret backed away from the counter as her daddy threw a set of keys to the clerk who was restocking the grocery shelves. "Lock up. I'm going to take in a movie with my oldest."

The clerk put the keys in his pocket. "Yes, sir."

The sun sparkled like diamonds as Henry and Margaret walked down Archer, headed for Greenwood Avenue. Margaret wiped the sweat from her brow while passing by fine establishments like Satisfactory Tailoring, Jackson Undertaking, the Earl Real Estate Company, Nails Bros. Shoe Market, and Liberty Plumbing. The businesses in Greenwood supplied needed services to its residents.

The white folks on the other side of the Frisco tracks didn't want Negroes shopping in their fine and upstanding establishments. Their bigotry only fueled the success and growth of Greenwood as colored folks shook the dust off their feet and spent their money with business owners who were only too happy to take their hard-earned dollars. "It's such a beautiful day," Margaret declared.

Glancing up at the sky, Henry nodded in agreement. "Right fine week for a graduation."

"Oh, and, Daddy, don't be shocked when you see Evelyn. She has a new hairdo, and it makes her look so much like Mama that I almost cried."

"Your sister has always favored Velma."

"Yes, but now she looks like the grown-up version of Mama, and I simply wasn't ready for it."

He stopped walking. "Do you think I was ready for you to grow into the woman you are?" Putting a hand to her cheek, he said, "You used to be my little Maggie-Pie. Now . . ." His hand dropped, and they continued down the street. "Things just been happening so fast; I can't keep up with it. Next thing I know you'll be married and off with your own family."

Margaret wondered about marriage . . . and babies . . . and George Martin. They had gone steady all through high school. He promised to marry her when they finished college. But George hadn't bothered to attend her college graduation and had enrolled in the advanced degree program at Straight University in New Orleans, Louisiana. How was she supposed to build a life with a man who preferred being six hundred miles away from her?

"You needn't worry about those wedding bells anytime soon."

Henry put an arm around Margaret's shoulders as they continued down Greenwood Avenue. "I'm gon' have a talk with George. His daddy tells me he'll be in town tomorrow for his annual backyard barbecue."

Lifting her stubborn chin, Margaret said, "I haven't heard from George, so I wouldn't know."

"I'll make George hold up his end of the bargain, you can be sure of that." Henry patted her on the back as if forcing a

man to marry his daughter was the grandest thing he'd ever thought of.

Margaret was about to speak her mind on the subject, but they'd arrived in front of the Stradford Hotel. "I need to speak with J. B. about one of my investments. I won't be long."

J. B. Stradford was one of the wealthiest men in Greenwood. He owned a hotel, boardinghouses, and billiard halls. But mostly, he liked seeing colored businesses prosper, so he loaned out money to start-up businesses. Daddy liked that about J. B. Stradford; she guessed that was why he'd started investing with him.

A soft wind blew, billowing her dress behind her. Margaret touched a hand to her head, making sure the pin curls were staying in place. Looking to the sky, she wondered where the wind had come from. It was almost June; wind didn't blow like that when the sun beat down so hot and humid.

She entered the Stradford Hotel with her daddy, taking in the sight of the chandeliers hanging from the twenty-foot ceiling, the waxed hardwood floors, and the flowers that adorned tables in the corridor. People came from all around the country to experience the opulence the Stradford offered.

"Well, well, well." J. B. Stradford stood in the entryway with arms outstretched. His booming voice carried the weight of a man of importance. "I haven't seen Miss Margaret in a month of Sundays. Where you been keeping her?" he asked Henry, then put an arm around Margaret's shoulders and brought her in close for a hug.

"I've been around," she answered for herself. "Just haven't been this far into the business district lately."

O. W. Gurley walked over and gave her a hug also. "It's good to see you, Margaret. You're a credit to Greenwood."

"High praise indeed, coming from you, Mr. Gurley."

A.J. Smitherman entered the lobby of the hotel and approached them with a newspaper folded under his arm. “Gentlemen.” He then nodded in her direction. “Margaret.”

“Hi, Mr. Smitherman.”

He turned away from her, looking hurried, like he needed to get the news out and couldn’t abide any distractions.

Her daddy pointed toward a chair just outside of the dining hall. “Have a seat there, Margaret. Let me speak with these men, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Margaret took a seat as her daddy continued into the dining hall and sat down at a table with three of the most important men in Greenwood. By the way Smitherman threw the newspaper on the table and jabbed a finger at it, Margaret figured they were up in arms about that Rowland boy.

Trying not to poke her nose in her daddy’s business, Margaret adjusted her seat so she was looking toward the entrance. That’s when she caught sight of Gayle Johnson entering the hotel. She was wearing a pale pink day dress with cap sleeves and a pleated skirt. Margaret stood and hugged her. She hadn’t seen her friend since they graduated from college a few months ago.

“I can’t believe you’re in town. What’s the occasion?”

Gayle answered, “Meeting my fiancé’s folks this week. I’ll stay at the Stradford tonight, then have breakfast with them in the morning.”

“I wish I’d known you were coming to town. You could have stayed at our house.”

Gayle’s eyes danced with delight. She lifted her head toward the chandeliers. “I couldn’t resist checking into the Stradford. This place is swanky. I had to experience it on my first trip to Tulsa.”

Booker T. Washington had dubbed Greenwood “Negro Wall Street” due to the flourishing business district. Many people

traveled to Greenwood just to see how colored folks supported each other and prospered.

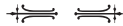
There were plenty of working-class folks in Greenwood. But the travelers didn't come to see the washerwomen or the housemaids. They wanted to rub elbows with men like her daddy, O. W. Gurley, and J. B. Stradford and women like Mrs. Loula Williams.

Gayle glanced around the foyer with a stepping-in-high-cotton smile planted on her face. "Just look at this place. Have you ever seen a hotel this fine for Negroes?"

The Stradford was a vision indeed. With fifty-four sleeping rooms, a dining hall, a gambling room, a saloon, and a large hall for events such as live music, it was the grandest hotel for Negroes in all of Oklahoma. Margaret nodded as her daddy walked back over to her. "It's a fine place, indeed."

Henry held out his left arm to Margaret. "You ready to go?"

Looping her arm with her daddy's, Margaret said, "Yes, sir." She waved goodbye to Gayle. "Hopefully I'll get a chance to see you again before you leave town."



"It's hot out here, and this cap and gown is making it worse," said Glenda Jones, Evelyn's best friend since the ninth grade. She wiped the sweat that had gathered on her neck just above the collar of her blouse.

Evelyn laughed at her friend. "I'm savoring every moment. I worked hard to get this diploma, and I can't wait to show it to Margaret."

Evelyn and Glenda were standing outside of Booker T. Washington High School with the other graduating students. They were lined up by the entrance, waiting to practice their march into the auditorium where they would receive their diplomas the next day.

Anna Goodwin, the class president; John Claybon, the class secretary; and Phineas Thompson, the class treasurer, stood at the front of the line. They would lead the procession as all eighteen graduates marched into the school auditorium.

“You act like you’re valedictorian. That diploma isn’t going to impress Margaret, not when she just graduated with her bachelor’s degree,” Glenda said.

“Margaret stayed on my case about sewing when I should be studying. My grades have never been good enough for her. But she’ll be so happy to see my diploma, she just might cry.”

Clarence Jones, Glenda’s cousin, was standing in front of them. He turned toward Evelyn. His eyes sparked with a last-chance desperation. “My mom is going to cry when she sees my diploma,” he said, then quickly added, “I think the two of us need to grab an ice cream at Williams’ Confectionery to celebrate.”

Evelyn shook her head. “No can do. My daddy isn’t home right now, and I would need to ask his permission before going anywhere.”

“She’s such a baby.” Brenda had been lined up behind Evelyn and Glenda, but the moment Clarence started talking to Evelyn, Brenda hopped out of line and came to stand next to him. She looped her arm around his. “I can go for ice cream.” Rolling her eyes heavenward, she added, “I don’t have to ask for permission to hang out with friends.”

Evelyn’s lips twitched and itched to tell Brenda that she was hateful to her for no good reason. She had never wanted anything to do with Clarence Jones. Brenda could have him. But instead, she turned back to Glenda and said, “Tomorrow can’t come fast enough. I’m ready to be done with this school.”

The door opened, and Principal Ellis Walker Woods, along with a few of the teachers, stepped out. They had been smiling

earlier when they first helped everyone line up, but now, worry lines etched their faces.

“What did we do?” Evelyn glanced around. Everyone was lined up, just as Principal Woods requested—well, everyone except Brenda, who still had an arm wrapped around Clarence’s.

“I don’t know,” Glenda whispered out the side of her mouth. “Maybe someone didn’t pass the final exam, and they’re about to remove them from the line.”

Evelyn wasn’t the slightest bit worried about that. She may not study as hard as Margaret, but she knew she passed her exams.

Principal Woods raised a hand to get everyone’s attention. “Thank you for cooperating with us and lining up as we asked. I am sorry to inform you that we will not be able to continue with the graduation rehearsal. I need everyone to go straight home. There is trouble in downtown Tulsa, and we don’t want any of you to get hurt.”

Restless teenagers yelled out their complaints.

But Principal Woods was not moved. “Go home. We’ll see you all back here in the morning.”

Chapter 3

It was reported among white people to go to the county courthouse and lynch the boot-black. This report spread over “Little Africa” and . . . crowds of Negroes began forming.

—*Tulsa Daily World*, June 1, 1921

A little ways down Greenwood, Margaret entered Williams’ Confectionery with her daddy. It was a three-level building. Mrs. Loula rented out office space on the third level. She and her husband and son lived on the second level, and the confectionery shop was on the first level. Candy, popcorn, ice cream, beverages, and many more sugary treats were sold here. It was a top hangout for teens and young couples wanting to grab an ice cream cone or a cool drink on hot summer days.

“What flavor do you want?” Henry asked Margaret once they reached the front counter.

Margaret’s eyes roamed from one side of the shop to the other. “I don’t know if I want ice cream anymore. There’s just too much to choose from in here.”

“What about some popcorn? You can eat it while we watch the movie.”

Henry requested one scoop of vanilla ice cream in a cone while Margaret decided against the popcorn and loaded up on candy.

“Margaret Justice, it is so good to see you, my dear.” Loula Williams entered the confectionery shop adorned in a bright red dress that moved back and forth with every step. Several strands of pearls sparkled around her neck. Her long brown hair was pinned up into a bun on top of her head. She was the picture of excellence.

“Hey, Mrs. Loula. How’ve you been?” The two women hugged.

“You know I’m always right as rain.” Loula hugged Henry then turned back to Margaret with hands planted on her hips. “And what’s this I’m hearing about you taking a teaching position?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve accepted a teaching position at Booker T. I begin in the fall.”

Loula wagged a finger in her face. “Don’t forget what I told you.”

How could she ever forget? Margaret had asked how Loula had been able to do so much in this day and age. Just as she’d done back then, Mrs. Loula stood in front of her like a force to be reckoned with. Her daddy stepped aside as she looked heavenward with an outstretched, open hand and said, “Margaret, you can’t catch some of that magic dust that falls from the sky if you’re not aiming for the stars.”

Then she snapped her hand shut as if some of the magic had just fallen. She took Margaret’s hand, opened it, and released the magic dust into it. “Keep reaching, my young protégée. Don’t settle for what the world will give you. Take what you will and leave the rest for them.”

Grinning at this force of a woman who stood regal and immovable before her, Margaret made a show of unclamping her purse and putting the magic dust inside. "One thing at a time, Mrs. Loula. We're out for a movie tonight. I have plenty of time to take over the world. Just wait . . . I'll make you proud soon enough."

Loula patted her on the back. "Enjoy your evening. I'm also planning to head to Dreamland to check on things over there." As she was about to walk away, she added, "I pray it will be uneventful with the menfolk getting all stirred up." Shaking her head, she moved on to greet other customers.

"What's she talking about, Daddy?" Then she thought back to seeing her dad huddled together with the men back at the hotel. "What were you talking about at the Stradford? Mr. Smitherman seemed really upset."

Henry frowned. Slapped his hat against his pants. "Sometimes Loula talks too much." He took Margaret by the arm. "Come on. Let's get to this movie."

They left the confectionery and went next door to the seven-hundred-seat theater. The Dreamland was the pride of Greenwood. They were able to see live musicals, theatrical revues, and silent movies. Margaret had spent many afternoons at this theater with George or some of her school friends.

Popping a piece of candy in her mouth, Margaret and her daddy took their seat, marveling at the silent movie on the big screen. Margaret savored her candy and giggled at the funny scenes, then leaned in for some of the other scenes that simply took her breath away.

But in the midst of a giggle, the projectionist stopped the movie and turned on the lights. Margaret turned to her daddy; he shrugged.

A few people yelled, "Turn the movie back on."

Mrs. Loula and her husband, John Williams, the owner of the local auto body shop, stepped onto the stage. Mr. John had been the first Black man to own a car in Greenwood. Now it seemed cars were everywhere.

“We’re closing for the night,” John Williams yelled out to them. “There’s trouble down at the courthouse.”

Mrs. Loula clutched her pearls tightly with one hand and shooed them with the other, fear dancing in her eyes. “All of y’all, go home and don’t come back out for the rest of the night.”

People pushed and shoved to get out of the theater. Margaret lost her shoe and almost toppled over as someone pushed her from behind when she stopped to put it back on. “Hey! Watch out,” she yelled, then turned to push back.

Her daddy grabbed hold of her hand. “We gotta go.”

Adrenaline raced through her as the two of them scurried down the street. Her mind was scattered as she tried to make sense of what was happening. They had been seated in the theater, laughing and taking in a movie. Before that, her dad had enjoyed an ice cream cone. They held conversations with friends. Now the street was filling with Greenwood residents, running and shouting, trying to get anywhere—everywhere—but there.

“Mommy, I’m scared,” a little girl said as her mother picked her up and ran down the street with her.

A man ran out of the billiard hall brandishing a gun. “They done it now. Them white folks ’bout to get the fight they been asking for.”

Margaret heard another one say, “They thought they was gon’ lynch that Rowland boy without us saying a word about it. Now they know.”

Margaret’s hand slipped out of her dad’s. The air was thick with fear. She spun in circles, her dress billowing around her

like a vibrant kaleidoscope of colors. Bits and pieces of words wafted around her as angry and tired-of-being-tired men passed by like bullets being shot out of a gun.

“What’s happening?” Margaret’s eyes got big. She put her hands over her head, not sure which way to go or what to do next.

Her daddy shook her. “Listen to me. I need you to snap out of it. Go home and check on your sister.”

Go home? “Yes! Yes! Let’s go home.”

The Stradford Hotel was in front of them. Mr. Stradford was standing outside holding a shotgun, looking like he was chewing on nails and ready to spit them out at any trouble coming his way. “Just let ’em try to destroy my property. I got something for ’em.”

Her daddy shooed her forward. “Go on home. I got things to do.”

Margaret reached for him. Clawing at his arm, she screamed, “No! No! You can’t stay out here. Let’s go home together.”

“Henry, come on! Grab a gun inside and help me hold down the fort.” Mr. Stradford waved her daddy over.

“Don’t help him, Daddy. Come home with me.” Margaret tried as she might to pull her daddy forward. Away from Greenwood Avenue. Away from men with guns . . . away from outrage and “we’ll show them.” “This isn’t your fight. Don’t go with them.”

Fear crept up Margaret’s spine and lodged there like a cancer. Her eyes shifted this way and that. She’d never seen Greenwood in the state it was in tonight. If she let go of her daddy, would she lay eyes on him again?

Slipping away from her, Henry shouted, “I said go. You do as I tell you. Go on home and see about your sister.”

He turned his back to her as he obeyed Mr. Stradford’s command. “You don’t owe him nothing, Daddy. You already paid every dime Mr. Stradford loaned you, so don’t be a fool.”

In the midst of all the tumult in the street, with people running past her, yelling and screaming, Margaret lost sight of her daddy. She touched her hand to her heart as pain shot through it.

Tears burned Margaret's eyes. Should she follow her daddy into that hotel? The sound of gunfire rang out. Margaret wiped her eyes as the crowd pushed her forward. She wanted her daddy, but her mind turned to Evelyn and the state her sister might be in. She pressed her way through the crowd, made it to Archer Street, then turned right onto North Detroit Street.

The cacophonous chaos outside was suffocating as people rushed around and pushed each other, their voices a deafening blend of noise that she desperately wanted to drown out. Every shouted word felt like a physical blow, each one a reminder of the cruel reality she was trying to escape.

It was as if they were preparing for a war. Men were stationing themselves at the end of her block and around the corner. They all had weapons. And in a way, the sight of the menfolk on patrol in her neighborhood gave her a bit of comfort.

She ran home and unlocked the front door. "Evie?"

Evelyn opened her bedroom door and ran into her sister's arms. "They sent us home from Booker T. We didn't get to practice our graduation march or anything. They say a riot broke out downtown."

"It's terrible out there. I'm glad you're home and safe."

But as Margaret said those words, she could hear the sound of her heart pounding. Her stomach churned and twisted in knots. Was her daddy safe? Were any of them truly safe?

Chapter 4

The wholesale destruction of property, life and limb in that section of the city occupied by negroes testifies to a one-sided battle.

—Maurice Willows, *Red Cross Disaster Relief Report*

Margaret and Evie huddled in the living room for hours. Margaret thought about picking up a book to kill some time, but the only books on the coffee table were *The Talented Tenth* by W. E. B. Du Bois and *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, and she had read both books numerous times.

A framed photo of her mother and father sat on the mantel, just above the fireplace. Where was her daddy? Why hadn't he come home by now? All the commotion outside was straining her nerves.

Shuffling footsteps and shouts of "Go this way," or "Check behind that house," could be heard outside as the men worked to secure Greenwood. By midnight, the noise quieted down. Things were calm once again. Her sister glanced over at her with hope lighting her eyes. "Daddy should be home soon."

"Things have settled down out there. Maybe you should get some sleep."

Evie pointed toward Margaret's hair. "What are you going to do with that? You've sweated your hair out."

Margaret touched the bouffant puff on top of her head. It was thick and coarse from all the running and sweating. "I guess I'll be a plain Jane and put my hair in a ponytail."

Evie *tsk-tsked* her. "None of that negative talk. You are special and beautiful no matter how you wear your hair."

The first giggle since the lights came on at the movie house escaped Margaret's lips. "Don't feed my own line back to me."

A small laugh escaped from Evelyn. But the night had been too stressful to hold much merriment. Evelyn glanced toward the front door. "Everything's going to be okay, right?"

Margaret nodded. "It has to be." Margaret's eyes drooped, and she yawned. Evie went into her bedroom and brought back blankets for both of them.

"I was trying to stay awake for Daddy."

"Well, I'm plum tuckered out." Evie curled up on the settee.

Margaret's head flopped against the arm of the sofa as sleep won the battle. Late into the night she sniffed, rubbed her nostrils. Turning over, dreaming . . . She smelled barbecue on that ancient firepit Mr. Martin used for his annual backyard gatherings. Margaret's multicolored sundress fluttered in the light breeze of the sun-drenched day.

"Fire! Fire!"

The covers were ripped off. Margaret shot up. She turned her head, eyes blinking, looking for the backyard barbecue. She sniffed the air again.

"Get up, girls. We got to get out of this house before that fire latches on and burns us to ashes."

What fire? Margaret rubbed her eyes. Why was Mrs. Pearl in their house? What was burning? Did she smell smoke?

Evelyn peeped out the front window. “People running around outside like the devil chasing ’em.”

“It’s that green-eyed devil, alright. They out there looting and burning down our homes like thieves in the night.” Despair rested on Mrs. Pearl’s shoulders and weighed them down.

“Where’s Daddy?” Margaret slipped on a pair of shoes and ran through the three-bedroom house, eyes scanning each room for Henry Justice. Her daddy would know what to do.

Mrs. Pearl bit down on her lip. “He must still be out there trying to handle this dustup. A lot of our men been out all night.”

Margaret’s eyes lit with fire and fear. She ran back into her room. If the house was about to burn down, she couldn’t leave her purse. It would be too much of a hassle to replace her passport.

After the war ended in 1918, the government instituted a policy on passports for European travel, and Margaret was saving her money to make such a trip. How else could she teach the children in her class about the world if she didn’t experience a bit of it?

She heard Evelyn scream, “I need my clothes.”

“You girls better get out here this instant.”

“I’m coming, Mrs. Pearl.” Margaret pulled the purse strap over her head, letting it rest on her right shoulder while the purse pressed against her left hip, then rushed back to the living room.

Evelyn had a paper bag in her hand. She peeked behind the curtain in the living room again. “I see men with guns.” She pulled the curtain closed, eyes bulging, looking like she’d just seen the boogeyman. “What are those white men doing in our neighborhood with guns?”

As if in answer, gunfire went off like rockets going to the moon. Mrs. Pearl ducked and then pulled Margaret and Evelyn down on the floor with her.

“Oh, my sweet Jesus.” Mrs. Pearl steepled her hands and called on the Lord.

“What’s going on?” Evelyn scooted closer to Margaret.

“Why are they shooting?” The noise outside sounded like firecrackers pop, pop, popping. Margaret’s ears perked to screams and folks stampeding past their house. Her eyes went wild as she tried to make sense of the nightmare playing out while they were awake. “We can’t go out there.”

Mrs. Pearl coughed as smoke billowed like clouds around them. “We can’t stay in here either.” She pointed toward the ceiling.

Evelyn’s pretty brown eyes widened with alarm, her hand jutting upward. A guttural scream escaped her lips, piercing the air like a sharp blade. “Fire!”

“Grab your sister’s hand.” Mrs. Pearl gripped Margaret and crawled toward the front door, while Margaret kept a tight grasp on Evelyn’s arm.

With each movement, the smoke grew thicker and the flames drew closer. The three of them crawled toward the front door like chain links, desperate to escape the inferno that surrounded them. Margaret’s heart raced as Mrs. Pearl reached for the doorknob, unsure if it was safe to leave. Should they wait for help or risk facing the unknown dangers outside?

With trembling fingers, Mrs. Pearl opened the door. Margaret prayed they were making the right decision. Mr. Clifton ran over to them when they pulled the door open. “Let me help you get these girls out of here. Them white boys trying to kill us.”

“This is crazy.” Mrs. Pearl’s eyes grew wide as she looked around. “Why they destroying our homes like this?”

Still clad in her multicolored African print dress, Margaret's mind spun wildly. She turned and turned and turned. A white man ran out of Mrs. Marley's house, holding her prized fur coat in the air and yelling, "I'm giving this to my wife."

Should she have brought some items with them? Should she have let Evelyn bring more? What if these thieves took all of Evelyn's beautiful dresses? As her mind mulled going back to the house and sidestepping the flames to get more of their items, a white man kicked in the door of one of her neighbors' homes and threw a fiery torch inside.

Another white man with a torch in one hand, a gun in the other, and evil swirling in his eyes cackled, "We're burning Little Africa down."

It was no secret that the white folks on the other side of the Frisco tracks had been calling Greenwood Little Africa for as long as she could remember. Even though all of the residents had been born right here in America. But being associated with Africa didn't bother Margaret one bit . . . It was the association with hateful men who would do harm to them for the least infraction that left a sour taste in her mouth.

Fear gripped her community as people ran down the street, some holding their hands above their heads, others holding as many of their possessions as they could carry. With trepidation guiding their way, Margaret, Evelyn, and Mrs. Pearl followed their neighbors as white men with guns chased them down the street, away from their homes . . . away from everything they knew.

Mr. Clifton ran back across the street as a white man broke the window on his car and threw a lit torch inside.

Margaret glanced down the other side of the street as the same chaotic scene played out no matter which way she turned.

“Please . . . please don’t burn my house!” a woman yelled. “I beg you, don’t do this.”

The woman’s pleas fell on deaf ears. Her house was burning, Margaret’s house was burning, Mrs. Pearl’s house was burning, and on and on the fire went. Licking its destructive path, taking away everything Margaret held dear. She pulled at her hair as her normally calm and quiet street went up in flames.

“What’s happening?” she cried, heart racing, palms sweating. Were they all going to die? Would anyone come to save them? She heard airplanes. Looking into the sky, Margaret prayed that the firefighters had deployed airplanes to drop water from the sky . . . something . . . anything.

But instead of the water Margaret prayed for, black birds fell from those airplanes. They looked like black birds, but fire sparked from them as they hit the ground or punctured the roofs of homes.

Margaret’s eyes went wide with stark terror as she realized that no one was coming to save them from this unimaginable horror.

Mrs. Pearl grabbed her arm and pulled her farther down the street. They ran and ran as fast as they could. They were almost in front of Dr. Andrew Jackson’s home when he came outside, holding his hands above his head. A couple of white boys, who didn’t look to be more than fifteen or sixteen, ran over to the doctor, yelled, “Nigger,” then fired shots at him.

Evelyn screamed like terror had a vise grip on her. Dr. Jackson fell to the ground clutching his chest. Staring at one of the boys who shot Dr. Jackson, Evelyn stood transfixed. “Why! Why! Why!” Her screams flowed like a mighty rushing river from her lips.

The boy turned his gun on Evelyn. “You’re next,” he said, then pulled the trigger.

Margaret shoved Evelyn to the ground, then jumped on top of her sister. Wrapping her hands around the back of her head, she prepared herself for the pain that would surely come when that bullet cut through her flesh.