

BASED ON TRUE HISTORICAL EVENTS

# THE FILLING STATION

A NOVEL

VANESSA MILLER

"The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is, shockingly, little more than a footnote in history . . . Miller's book, thankfully, reverses that egregious oversight . . . we viscerally learn how this vibrant Black community fought devastation with resilience, faith, and grit."

—JODI PICOULT, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

*The*  
**FILLING  
STATION**

*a novel*

Vanessa Miller



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The Filling Station*

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## *Prologue*

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

—*Wynonia Murray Bailey, Tulsa Race Massacre survivor*

1905

TULSA, OKLAHOMA

**T**hey 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

**D**id 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 or 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 the cape off. "Your turn."

Mrs. Theola stood. "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 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 the dress on. She loved the feel of it on her

skin. Perfect fit. “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.”

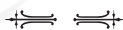
Letting the moment linger before she let go, Margaret was once again reminded of Evie’s kind heart. She didn’t care if her sister gave as good as she got as she drank in the love from Evie’s embrace. Regardless of how the world changed, with its automobiles and kids not being kids anymore, she prayed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

## About the Author



Sean Evans Photography

VANESSA MILLER is a bestselling author, with several books appearing on ESSENCE Magazine's Bestseller List. She has also been a Black Expressions Book Club alternate pick and #1 on BCNN/BCBC Bestseller List. Most of Vanessa's published novels depict characters who are lost and in need of redemption. The books have received countless favorable reviews: "Heartwarming, drama-packed and tender in just the right places" (*Romantic Times* book review) and "Recommended for readers of redemption stories" (*Library Journal*).



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