

Feels like
Heaven
a novel

VANESSA MILLER



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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

FEELS LIKE HEAVEN
My Soul to Keep ~ Book One

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DEDICATION

To my daughter, Erin Miller...for love that feels like heaven. It's in your future, so keep holding on to God's hand as He leads you to it.

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I have written a lot of books and have never run out of people to thank for their love and support. It is true that no man is an island unto himself; we all need someone if we are ever to see our dreams come to life. So, I would first like to thank Bob Whitaker Jr. and Christine Whitaker for seeing the potential in my writing and giving my books a place to call home. I couldn't have found a nicer editor to work with than Courtney Hartzel, so I want to thank her for her patience and all the work she puts in to my projects in order to create the masterpieces that go out to my readers. Each person I have worked with at Whitaker House, from the marketing department to the publicity department, has been wonderful to work with, so I must give a heartfelt thank-you to everyone at Whitaker House.

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—Vanessa Miller

PROLOGUE

Attorney Solomon Harris put on his Dolce & Gabbana shades and stepped outside the courthouse with Dwight Blackshear, fitness instructor to the stars. The media was waiting to pounce. No one had expected Dwight to walk out of the courthouse a free man—not when he'd been accused of murdering a Hollywood legend in her own home. But Solomon had been convinced of his client's innocence from the very beginning and had fought a good fight in order to secure his acquittal. "Be cool as the reporters approach," Solomon whispered in his client's ear as the media circus surrounded them. "Don't say anything. Let me do the talking."

"Mr. Blackshear, how do you feel after getting away with murder?" one reporter asked, holding a microphone in Dwight's face.

"No comment," Solomon said, pushing the mic aside.

"Did the jury get it right?" another journalist asked.

"What's your next move, Dwight? Do you think anyone will ever let you into their home again to train them?"

On and on, the questions kept coming. But Solomon was feeling pretty good about his chances of getting inside the waiting car without his client opening his big mouth and ruining any chances of rebuilding a career in the City of Angels. But then came the question that Dwight's ego couldn't let slide—the question that would send months of Solomon's hard work up in smoke.

"What happened, Dwight? Did Victoria Price want to trade you in for a younger instructor?"

Dwight grabbed the reporter by the throat as he declared, "I'm the best at what I do. I'm fifty-three and in the best shape of my life. No one could ever replace me."

Solomon pried Dwight's hands off the reporter and rushed him to the car. The instant the doors closed and his driver sped away from the courthouse, Solomon laid into Dwight. "You want to tell me what that was all about?"

Dwight shrugged. "He insulted me. I'm no washed-up has-been. I helped build this town."

"Those reporters and their viewers believe that Victoria Price helped build this town, with all of the movies she starred in. And none of them will appreciate the man accused with her murder being acquitted and, on the same day, trying to strangle someone before making it past the courthouse steps."

"I don't care what they think," Dwight grouched. "Victoria deserved everything she got. That hag went around telling everyone who'd listen that I was responsible for her ten-pound weight gain."

Solomon leaned back in his seat, and as his eyes swept across Dwight, he realized for the first time that he was staring at a killer. When Dwight had first come to his office, he'd told Solomon that he would swear on a stack of Bibles, if necessary, to convince the jury that he hadn't strangled Victoria Price. He'd told Solomon that he adored Victoria and that she had been one of the first people to hire him as a personal trainer. But now that he had been acquitted, Dwight didn't have a problem expressing his true feelings about the late actress.

"Instead of training actors, you should have been one yourself," Solomon told him. "You really had me fooled, and that's not easy to do."

"I came to this town to become an actor, but fitness ended up being my ticket to stardom," Dwight said. "That's why I couldn't let Victoria ruin my reputation. You understand, don't you?"

Oh, he understood alright. He had been duped by a sociopath. Dwight couldn't make himself care about another human being other than himself if he wanted to, but he sure could pretend to care. Solomon had always prided himself on his ability to read people—to know when he was being lied to—but he'd missed this one.

“Don't look so disheartened, Solomon,” Dwight told him. “You did a bang-up job in the courtroom. If I ever need help like this again, I'll be sure to call on you.”

When they pulled up to Dwight's house, Dwight opened the door, but Solomon grabbed his arm before he could step outside. “You might not want to go on a killing spree, because I quit. I will not represent you again.”

Pulling his arm away, Dwight laughed as he got out of the car.

Solomon slammed the door shut. “My office,” he told his driver.

During the drive, Solomon leaned back in his seat and did a mental analysis of how he had come to represent a killer—something he had always said he would never do. He was well aware that as a defense attorney, he was within his legal rights to represent the guilty as well as the innocent. But he never liked dealing with people who threw rocks and then hid their hands.

During his years of law school, Solomon had asked God to bless his mind and anoint him as an advocate for his clients. He had promised in return that he would not aid the guilty to get away with crimes against humanity but would use the wisdom with which God endowed him only to help the unjustly accused.

Too bad the law firm of People, Smith, and Harding didn't care about the bargain Solomon had made with God.

As he got out of the car and headed into his office, Solomon was left to wonder what this would mean for his career with the firm. Would God still bless his mind so that he could help the innocent? Or had

he burned his own house down by his inability to discern evil when it looked him in the face?

“Good morning, Mr. Harris,” his secretary greeted him, then handed him a few slips of paper. “Here are your messages. And your mother is waiting for you in your office.”

His mother rarely visited him at the office. She always told him how proud she was of the important work he was doing, and said that she wouldn’t dream of disturbing him during the day over trivial matters that could be discussed later in the evening. So, Solomon knew that something was troubling her.

When he opened his office door, he saw the nervous look in her eyes. “What’s wrong?” he asked, closing the door behind him.

She patted the seat next to her. “Come sit with your mother.”

Solomon joined her on the black leather sofa, but he didn’t get comfortable. He couldn’t, with the way she was looking at him. “Tell me.”

His mother took a deep breath and put her hand over his. “It’s your father.”

Solomon furrowed his brow. “My *who*?”

“Don’t play coy with me. You know you have a father...and he’s dying.”

CHAPTER 1



Sitting in the hospital room while his half sisters and their mother fussed over the great senior pastor of the Worship Center of God, Solomon was out of his element. He felt like a lurker and didn't know how much longer he could continue witnessing this spectacle from the back of the room. David Davison's wife, Alma, and their daughters fretted over him as if he was something precious and necessary.

The door opened, and Solomon's half brother, Adam, rushed in. Solomon recognized him from the family portrait he'd seen on the church Web site. Solomon had never been formally introduced to anyone in this room...never been invited to dinner or allowed to spend holidays or summer vacations with this family. That was why he was truly puzzled as to the reason why he'd been summoned to his father's

bedside. David Davison had never wanted anything to do with him before.

“I brought some documents for you to sign, Dad,” Adam said. He placed a stack of papers on the tray in front of his father and handed him a pen.

“Church business must go on, huh, Son? Even when I’m in the hospital fighting for my life.”

Hearing this man call Adam “Son” was more than Solomon could take. He’d thought he’d gotten over his anger about having a father who sent checks to him and his mother but admonished them to keep their distance. So much distance that his mother had left North Carolina when Solomon was still in diapers and moved them back to California, where she had a few family members.

As David signed the papers, one of the sisters asked Adam how things were going at the church.

“Everything is fine,” Adam assured her. “The members are excited for Dad’s return, but they are still being fed the Word of God while he’s here in the hospital.”

“Thank you for everything you’re doing, Son. God’s work must go on.”

Enough already. Solomon got up and headed for the door without saying anything to anyone. None of them had spoken two words to him, anyway.

“Wait a minute, Solomon. Don’t leave,” David said. “I need to introduce you to your family.”

Solomon stopped and turned around. He wanted to tell him that the only family he’d ever known—his mother—was at home in California. But he was curious as to how the old man would explain himself to his children, so he held his tongue and waited.

David handed the papers back to Adam and then clasped hands with his wife, as if they were joining forces. He looked at her with so much love in his eyes that Solomon had to wonder why he cheated on a woman he seemed to love so much. Alma nodded at David, and he turned to face his children, who eyed him curiously.

“Adam, Tamara, and Leah, I was trying to wait for Larissa, but I can’t put this off any longer.” He swallowed hard, then nodded toward Solomon. “I want to introduce all of you to your brother. His name is Solomon Harris.”

The moment the words were out of his mouth, the room erupted with shouts and confusion, to the point that a nurse came in and asked everyone to settle down.

Tamara glared at Solomon. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-two,” he answered quickly, then waited for them to put it all together.

Adam turned to his father. “I’m thirty-three, Dad. Are you telling me that you had another son while married to Mama before I was even out of diapers?”

David lowered his head. “I did, Son. You are correct.”

To Solomon, David Davison looked like a man who was truly ashamed of his actions. But that didn’t comfort Solomon. It made him feel as if he should be ashamed to be alive. Thanks to the love and guidance of Sheila Harris, Solomon had never been ashamed of who he was...until now. He didn’t need this. Shaking his head, he left the room of his so-called father and strode down the hall. He wanted no part in the family drama that was playing out in that hospital room right now.

As he rounded the corner, his mind was so set on getting out of there as fast as he could that he didn’t notice the woman headed his way until he had bumped into her and watched her fall to the ground. “I’m so sorry,” he said, reaching down to pull her up to her feet again.

“What’s the hurry?” She grabbed hold of his arm and eyed him with confusion.

Solomon almost dropped her on the floor again, so startled he was by her beauty—especially her eyes, a gorgeous light gray with a hint of brown. Her features were movie-star quality, and Solomon had seen his share of movie stars. But he couldn’t think of a single star whose presence he would have rather been in at this very moment. “Sorry again. I wasn’t paying attention.” He released her. “Are you okay?”

Dusting off the back of her pants, she told him, “I’ll live. I just had no idea that hospitals were so dangerous.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to hang around here. Hospitals are the worst places for anyone, sick or well.”

“And how would you know that? Are you a doctor?”

“I’m a lawyer, and the firm I work for sues doctors and hospitals on the regular.” Solomon shook his head. “Too many mistakes. Makes you wonder if any of the ‘medical professionals’ were paying attention in class.”

“Is that right?” The woman folded her arms across her chest.

“I could tell you stories.” Solomon took a business card out of his pocket and handed it to her. “I’m in a hurry right now, but I’d love to take you to dinner this evening. We can trade stories if you make it out of this place alive.” He was giving her the grin that showed off his dimples, and he hoped she saw them. Women liked his dimples.

Glancing at his card, she said, “Thanks for the offer, Mr. Harris, but I don’t think so.”

His face fell, but then he smiled at her again. Women were always telling him how infectious his smile was. Maybe she’d missed it on the first go-round. “I know I knocked you down and all, and you might be holding that against me, but I’m really a nice guy. Honest.”

Before she could respond, Alma Davison rounded the corner. “Thank God you’re here, Dr. Wilkinson,” she said to the woman. “I think he needs you now.”

“You’re a doctor?” Solomon wished he could just put his foot in his mouth and shut up already. He’d messed up with this beautiful woman, all because he’d insulted her profession. But how could he have known she was a doctor? She wasn’t wearing one of those white coats most doctors paraded around in.

Dr. Wilkinson walked off without answering. Then Alma turned to Solomon. “I came looking for you.”

“And why is that?” All of the good-natured humor Solomon had tried to display moments ago was gone.

“Your father needs you with him. He’s not well, and if you leave now, I just don’t know what might happen.”

“Don’t try to guilt-trip me.” Solomon pointed down the hall toward his father’s room. “Where was he when I needed him? All those years of growing up without a father in my life...he certainly didn’t care about that.”

“He cared, Solomon.” She looked away and then back at him. “If anyone is to blame for the absence of a father in your life, it’s me. David sent money to your mother every month and paid everything that scholarships didn’t cover for your schooling, but I refused to let him have a relationship with you.” She bit her lip. “I see how much I hurt him—and you—because of my bitterness. But I don’t want my husband to die. And right now, I truly believe that you’re our best hope of getting him out of this hospital.” Tears were running down her face as she continued. “I know I have no right to ask you for anything, but please...don’t leave. Please stay and talk to him.”

“Your kids don’t want me here. They knew nothing about me until today.”

"I know. But if you give them a chance, I think you all will become great friends."

Solomon scoffed. "I already have enough friends."

Alma looked distressed. "Blame me, Solomon. It's my fault that you don't know your family. But don't punish David. Please don't walk out on him."

"How is everything your fault when he's the one who slept with my mother?" Solomon saw Alma flinch at his words, but he was so angry, he didn't care. He didn't even care about the people passing by. As a matter of fact, he wished he could go down to his wonderful father's church and tell the entire congregation what the good pastor had been up to all these years.

Alma glanced up and down the hall and then whispered, "The sleeping around was David's fault. But that happened a long time ago, and I'm tired of making you and him pay for a thirty-year-old indiscretion. So, you can be mad at me all you want, but your father wants to see you. And I hope you won't deny him this request."

Solomon had never heard those words before. Not once in his entire life had anyone come to him and said, "Your father wants to see you." A part of him wanted to ask her to say it again. But he reminded himself that he was a full-grown man and was well past the time when he needed to come running when his father called.

"Please," Alma begged.

If her words were to be believed, this woman had denied him a father for over thirty years, and now she was pleading with him to do her a favor. Solomon could have given her a dose of her own medicine, but he wasn't that cruel. "Let me make a call, and then I'll come back to see what he has to say."

She patted his shoulder. "Thank you."

Solomon stepped outside to get better reception on his cell phone. He leaned against the building and called his mother. She answered on the first ring.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” she asked before he could get a word out of his mouth.

“I don’t know about these people.” If he had been seven years old on a visit to his father’s house, he would have been saying something like, “I want to come back home.” But he wasn’t seven, and he didn’t have to ask for permission to leave if that was what he wanted to do. Still, Solomon hated disappointing his mother. She’d already experienced enough let-downs to last a lifetime.

“They’re not that bad,” she insisted. “You just have to give them a chance.”

“Mom, I don’t believe you sometimes. These people ran you out of town, and you’re defending them.”

“Nobody ran me out of town, boy. I left because I needed a do-over... for you and for me. I knew that what I did wasn’t right, and I didn’t want you living with the consequences of my actions every day of your life.”

“News flash, Mom: I lived with those consequences every day I woke up without a father in the house.”

“I’m sorry, Solomon.” She sighed. “I was young and stupid back then. I hadn’t even bothered to take two seconds to consider what the next day would bring. But, as God is my witness, I have repented of my actions and spent a long time praying that your life would be blessed in spite of the circumstances of your birth.”

He could hear the quaver in her voice. The last thing he wanted to do was to make his mother cry. “You did a good job raising me, Mom,” he assured her. “I wouldn’t be where I am now if it wasn’t for you.”

After a moment, she cleared her throat, then continued. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but your father had a lot to do with where you

are now, too. If he hadn't kept up his end of the bargain, we wouldn't have been able to live in a decent neighborhood, and Lord only knows what would have happened to you if one of those gangs had gotten ahold of you. And we sure wouldn't have been able to afford your college, even with the partial scholarship you received."

"He didn't do any more than he had to," Solomon muttered.

"No, Solomon, that's not true. I have friends who have never seen a dime of child support from the deadbeats they had children by."

"So, what am I supposed to do? Thank him for sending those checks, even though he never bothered to show up or call on birthdays or Christmases or that time I broke my arm?"

His mother sighed again. "You're a grown man, so I can't tell you what to do anymore. But you were raised in the church, and I know that you have the ability to forgive and move on—if not for your father's sake then for your own."

Solomon rolled his eyes. "I'll call you again in a little while, Mom. I need to get back in there." Then he made his way up to the third floor, to his father's room. He figured he'd come all this way, he might as well hear the man out. He had no idea what his father would say to make up for all these years, but Solomon knew one thing for sure: He wasn't about to offer up any of that forgiveness his mother had talked about. Not today.