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Nola Gals

Barbara J. Rebbeck

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Essence LaFontaine and Grace Woodson don't know each other, but soon Hurricane Katrina will blow into their lives, forcing them together into a different kind of storm a storm swirling with the winds of bigotry and prejudice. Can the girls find their way to the light behind the clouds?

New Orleans: Essence watches her neighbors prepare to evacuate, but her stubborn grandma refuses to budge, jeopardizing the lives of both her granddaughters, Essence and her little sister, Chardonnai, while their mother works as a nurse at a local hospital.

Houston: Grace listens to her iPod and sighs when her mom urges her to finish her summer reading, but Grace can think only of her forbidden MySpace page.

"Hear me! I am Katrina."

Katrina strikes with a fury and although Essence and Chardonnai are rescued, their grandmother Mimmi stays behind with their skinny poodle, George. After terrifying hours in the Superdome they board a bus for the Houston Astrodome along with other victims of Hurricane Katrina, including a man named Harold, who Essence strongly suspects is her long-lost father.

After Grace is suspended from St. Catherine's for her disobedient behavior, she accompanies her father, a psychologist, to the Astrodome to help with the evacuees.

"I grew up today."

So Grace begins her essay for English class, her attempt to describe her day with the pitiful Katrina victims. She sees before her the lessons of her required reading, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and at a loss as to what to do, she begins to read the book aloud to a tattered group including Essence and her new family of fellow survivors.

With the city of New Orleans devastated, the Woodson family allows Essence and Chardonnai to live with them and both girls begin school at St. Catherine's. But, like a hurricane, trouble is brewing.

"They're not like us."

This sentiment is shared by Grace's best friend Lindsey and others, and the gifts Grace has been leaving in Essence s locker, much like those given to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, are replaced by a KKK poster from an unknown student. At the same time, a movement is underway to have the book banned from the school's curriculum.

"This novel is a beautiful mockingbird song..."

After Essence and Chardonnai leave town with Harold and his friends, their whereabouts unknown to the girls mother as well as the Woodson family, Grace becomes more determined than ever to bring the powerful message of the classic story to St. Catherine's students, their parents and members of the board.

This is the story of two girls from completely different walks of life and their journey to bring about a healing that will change their lives forever.

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