

An abused woman flees with her two children from New York, unintentionally arriving amidst the devastation of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. She rebuilds her life and a restaurant and finds love. But to stay, she must break the law.

A Saving Hurricane

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## **A Saving Hurricane**

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With the exception of the reference to the natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, the characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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## Departure

He had too much to drink and she knew it. In a preemptory move and in an instinct to protect, she put the children to bed early, reading through their favorite stories so rapidly that they complained, wanting her to read them again. Celeste shushed them with promises of big bowls of Lucky Charms for breakfast. She took a deep breath and went into the kitchen.

Maisie Florence Brown took a deep breath and went into the kitchen. She had turned off the television and yawned; for some reason she was so tired despite being in the midst of the most horrendous weather she had ever seen. She opened her Good Book and talked to the Lord as she did every night before she went to bed. It wasn't so much prayer as it was sharing of gossip, a few requests, some cajoling, even reprimanding her Dear Savior. But then Maisie did that to everyone. This evening she said: "Dear Lord, there's trouble a-brewing and I don't know what's about to hit me, help me, help my children. Please."

Celeste didn't know what hit her. Sparkling fireworks of pain exploded on the right side of her face, temporarily blinding her. When her vision cleared she saw something spilled on the floor. He had thrown a small package of wheat flour at her head, just missing her right eye, but she felt the full force on that side of her face. The impact knocked her head against the wall. She hadn't seen it coming; it was timed so perfectly. He's getting better at this, she thought absently. Just look at the mess.

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“Oh my, look at that mess,” Maisie said aloud as she looked out the window. Debris was strewn all over her front yard. Trees were blowing so hard they were bent over teasing the ground with their branches. And the rain! Mercy! So powerful was the wind it was forcing rivulets of water to snake sideways on the panes. It was unusually dark for this time of day in late August. Twilight usually fell softy—tonight it fell hard. Maisie felt sick. It just didn’t look good.

That doesn’t look good, Celeste thought as she peered in the entryway mirror. Her right eye and cheekbone had started to swell up. Where had he gone? She wasn’t sure how well her makeup would hide this bruise. She knew he wasn’t through; she had a queasy feeling in her gut. He was just warming up.

Maisie knew things weren’t over. Mother Nature was just warming up.

How did he get this bad? He was the darling of the *New York Times*. His last three books were on the best seller’s list. His accolades were sung from coast to coast in nearly every literary outlet. “The next Tom Wolf,” one had said. Even the ever-cynical Salon.com had grudgingly given him a few good reviews. But the rest of the world hated him. So did Celeste. Hated what he had become. Jeffery Phillip St. John was an artist, a genius and a gentleman, proclaimed *GQ*. His public demeanor was so pleasant and conciliatory, but at home, he was a monster.

On the radar screen, she was a monster. “THE GULF ENGULFED,” declared a weather report that Maisie just turned on. She couldn’t read, not now. The wind blew harder and harder. How does a hurricane grow? How did she get this bad?

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Global warming? Or the perfect conditions to create the perfect storm: full moon, warm water, a hungry atmosphere. Or maybe, it was a long overdue catastrophe. Katrina had one thing on her mind; she wanted the multitudes to suffer.

He had one thing on his mind, he wanted Celeste to suffer. He knew he was a functional drunk. A wife beater, philanderer and a man who had no reverence for anyone or anything—he hated himself. Hated her. But he also knew she wouldn't say a word to anyone, not even her parents. She'd keep her mouth shut and be the perfect whipping boy for his monthly rages. He knew she could take it.

How much more can we take, Lord? Maisie heard the wind whip and whine through all the cracks and crevices in her home. The rain would not stop. Although her house was located in St. Bernard's Parish near the levee, she felt safe. There were scores of hurricanes that had tested the levee and it had held. It wouldn't overflow or fail. She and her neighbors had been reassured by the civil engineers the politicians hauled out for regular town meetings. Though they were fluent in Spanish and English and knew a little bit of Creole, Maisie didn't understand a word they said. She was cautiously hopeful as she crawled into bed but the noise was so frightening. The cable was out now. The lights were flickering. She had a few candles by her bedside just in case, she lit one. For a bit of comfort, she snapped on her old radio that had kept her company for so many years. She tuned to WWLE. The mayor had discussed the situation with the governor. They were hesitant, but if residents wanted to leave, they felt it was safe to evacuate. Too late for her, she couldn't leave now.

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She couldn't leave now. She had no where to go. He had isolated her. Made her dependent. He specifically selected her from the many women who fawned over him. But why? He wasn't doing a good deed by trying to elevate her career. Maybe he needed to be with someone who'd never be professional competition. Celeste certainly wasn't the only struggling writer in New York married to a successful author. Maybe it was because she was pretty, blond, younger than him by eight years. She never knew what her appeal was, but she loved him. After the wedding, his personality unveiled its ugly side in increments. She played the obedient wife. After the children came along, she did her best to distance herself from him whenever she could. She made excuses, took on projects that allowed her to travel. Her parents were a godsend. When she needed someone to watch the kids, they were there for her. But after dad's heart attack, her mom was taken up with dad's diet, his doctor visits, his walking program and his medications. It was unfair to ask her to help. They seemed so far away as he was yelling about some editor at Random House. He had found her, sitting on the kitchen floor, ice against her face. He had dragged her across the living room. She kicked out, breaking his hold. She put the sofa between the two of them. He picked up a crystal paper weight and hurled it at her, at the last second Celeste ducked and it shattered; the apartment window resembled a deformed spider web.

The sound of broken glass startled Maisie from a sound sleep. She must have dozed off. "Dear me!" she cried aloud. Rain was pouring in downstairs. She found black plastic garbage bags and a thick blanket and nailed them to the wall around the window. It was a laborious project. She lost the nails twice, slipped and fell at least four times. Lights went off permanently. It was about 9:30 p.m. and eight inches of rain had already fallen. An



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imperceptible shudder was rippling through the parish's levee. Katrina was now a Category 5—the absolute worst of storms, and she showed no sign of letting up.

He was not letting up. It was as if he hadn't heard the glass breaking. He was hurling insults at her, blaming her for everything that had gone wrong, that day, that week, in his life. She was careful to keep her voice low. It was okay for him to scream but not for her to scream back--the children must already be terrified. "Please Jeff, not now, just go to bed. Can't this wait? We can talk about it in the morning." He starting throwing books at her, yelling that he wasn't going to wait for anything. Celeste covered her face, she started to shiver.

Maisie soaked to the skin, started to shiver. She had taken her diabetes medication earlier but wasn't sure with the electric time clock not working, when her next dose was due. It seemed like it was night forever. She was feeling a little dizzy. Remembering her doctor's advice, she took a small bag of peanut butter crackers and headed back upstairs. She munched on her crackers to keep her blood sugar steady. But every few minutes she'd jump, the noises from the plastic over the window downstairs startling her.

The children were awakened by the glass and the shouting, they were used to daddy shouting, didn't all daddies do that? Mommy said he was not trying to be scary, it just came out that way. They decided to go and see.

Maisie decided to go and see.

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He saw the youngest, Morgan, first. "Daddy what happened?" She was sleepily nuzzling her snuggle bunny. He roughly grabbed her by the arm; she dropped her bunny, too stunned to speak. He shoved Morgan in front of the broken window. "That's what happens when mommy is bad!" He yelled, pointing the damage; a gentle summer breeze wafted through the center hole. "Don't you ever be like that!" He bellowed into Morgan's little face. "Do you hear me?" He shook her to garner some sort of response; he couldn't tolerate her frozen child-stare. JJ hid behind a chair, his little chest was heaving, eyes watery with baby tears of terror. Celeste was dry mouth with shock. Jeff usually let loose when the children weren't around. He never yelled at nor treated the children this way before. Celeste had done her best to keep them out the line of fire, but tonight they walked directly into his cross hairs. He raised his hand over Morgan's head.

Enough!

She kicked him hard in the groin and snatched Morgan and JJ out of the way. Mommy just kicked daddy in that spot! Celeste ran into their rooms. She shoved their clothing into brightly colored backpacks. JJ and Morgan tucked closely behind as she raked through the small night table for underwear. In the process she knocked over Morgan's nightly cup of water, it poured all over the floor.

Maisie saw the water pouring into her kitchen and she hustled up stairs to the second floor. Her lights weren't working, the phones weren't working and the radio kept calling for all the residents to evacuate, to get out of New Orleans. Now wasn't that ridiculous, in the midst of all this? Where would she go?

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Where would she go? Celeste packed clothing, Jeff was pounding on JJ's door, the children started to cry. He'd find her, threaten her, and force her to come back home. All he had to say was "what about the children?" The children, always the children. They had groups of friends at a school they loved, sports and reading and art that they relished. They were city kids through and through and to take them away from it—it just seemed heartless. If it were just she and him, she'd have left long ago. The children whom she loved took away her courage and her resolve and they made her put common sense in a tiny compartment in the back of her heart. The pounding on the door grew louder as did his shouting and even though Celeste had locked it, the door broke open.

The levee broke open and water gushed into the streets. It was called secondary devastation. Not a part of the hurricane's direct wounds, but the levee breach was collateral damage. FEMA was sending in the National Guard but it was already too late for the people and homes of St. Bernard's. The water swept away everything of value. It flowed furiously through houses, shops, schools, daycare centers even the 17 law offices of the parish were not spared. Water consumed what ever its greedy wet mouth could swallow. "Lord have mercy!" Maisie watched in horror as the water crawled up to the hall and lapped against the threshold of her bedroom. She could smell the foul stench of raw sewage. She wondered how her neighbors were doing. She never got a chance to call and check in. All the while the wind was still roaring and the rain was still coming down harder and harder. Lord, what am I going to do? She saw the pictures of her two children and prayed for them. They had moved away before graduating from college. They hadn't written or called much anymore. Maisie couldn't remember what fight made them strangers. But they hated St. Bernard, too small for their big

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dreams. The wind was howling demonically. Maisie did something childish. She remembered an old movie where the hero tossed a message in a bottle and was rescued. She wrote a quick letter, the bedroom floor was becoming watery. *To whoever reads this*, the letter started, *I am Maisie Florence Brown. I live at 101 Green Drive in St Bernard's Parish. I am an old black woman with diabetes and can't swim. Please rescue me.* And she added: *I am upstairs in the attic. Lord Bless you and thank you, I'll give you anything I have.*

She dumped out all her spare change from an old pickled pig's feet jar and tucked the note inside. She set the jar down in the water but its weight kept it from floating. The water had inundated the bedroom; it sloshed around her ankles. Her socks and pajama pants were soaked with stinking muddy water. She was shivering violently now and had no time to find another jar that would ensure the note getting into the hands of someone who could help her. She pulled down the folding stairs and scrambled up to the attic. Its musty odor was replaced with a nasty, stinging scent of hard rain and wind. She had left the note in her pickle jar below. The water followed her up to the attic. Rescue seemed hopeless now; she cried for a little while and weakly called for help out of the attic vent.

And then she got mad.

"Lord," she yelled. "Don't know what I did to you. Don't know how I offended you. Did I ever mistreat my neighbor? You took my man away from me, took my mother and my father and dear Lord, now my poor children are gonna be worried sick about me. Is this any way to treat your daughter? I loved you Lord. Placed you first in my life, now why is this happening? Why?" She hugged herself in the cramped attic and rocked back and

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forth in an old pine rocking chair long forgotten. The motion soothed her. She sighed and surrendered. “I know, Lord, I know, when it is my time, it is my time. But look at me Lord, is this any way to let me die? Drowning in my own attic? Please Lord, I don’t want to drown,” she wept. “Please, make it stop, Lord.”

Please, make him stop, Celeste prayed. She was afraid to stay, afraid to open the door. The kids were sobbing harder now that they had seen their father at the very height of his anger—he was frighteningly unreal. Worst than any scary cartoon or movie they had ever seen. They cowered behind their mother.

She opened the door so suddenly he was taken by surprise. He regrouped and screamed: “Don’t ever kick me, don’t ever lock the door you b---h!” He reached for her but she swung a both backpacks at his head. He was knocked off balance and fell backwards through the door. She shoved him as hard as she could. He hit his head against the wall. The impact and the alcohol finally caught up with him. He slumped and sank in an undignified heap, mumbling and drooling on the carpet. “Is daddy dead?” JJ squeaked. Celeste took her one and only opportunity to leave. She made an irrevocable vow: They would never go through this again. Ever.

She half-carried, half-dragged Morgan and JJ out of the apartment. She stuffed everything she could carry in a small suitcase for herself. She shoved money from the entryway table into her purse. The last thing the children saw was their father passed out drunk on the floor.

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The last thing Maisie remembered was her children. God protect my babies. Her heart quivered and halted; she gave a dainty little cough and died. The water swirled and gushed through the attic vent. The thin metal bent and then gave way. Only some of the contents of her home spilled out through the attic. Those things that were too big to squeeze through the rectangular opening remained behind. Her small frail body floated down the street in a reddish gray dawn. Two days later the photo of a dead black woman that circulated on the Internet only added to the misery of the parish. They had lost so many and were now simply numb to horror of floating corpses. Her body coursed face down through the abandoned areas of the east New Orleans and in an odd twist of fate rested for a time in a marsh that emptied into the Lower Cypress Bayou. From there, Maisie was taken on a tour by the receding waters to parts of Louisiana she had never seen as a living human being.

As if the sea wanted to offer an olive branch to the victims, as though she wanted forgiveness for being an accomplice to Katrina's wrath, she treated the bodies of dead with a certain reverence. Maisie's body was gently laid upon sand one hundred twenty miles from her home. Her partially decomposed body was found almost six months later in Lake Charles, Texas. But her identity remained a secret for nearly a year. There was too much gore to contemplate. Hurricane Katrina killed 1,836 people, destroyed 100,000 homes, caused \$1.2 billion in damage and laid waste to most of the Crescent City.

Celeste took the children to the Port Authority. She didn't stop until she reached the Greyhound bus terminal. Weather reports for the southern portion of the United States consumed the news. Hurricane Katrina seemed to be ravaging large portions of the Gulf Coast. But Celeste and her children were too tired to

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care. They dozed fitfully in each other's arms in the uncomfortable plastic chairs while they waited for the bus attendant to open the window. The sign "Be back in 15 minutes" really meant a half an hour wait before the metal shade was lifted. "Can I help you?" The ticket counter person barely stifled a yawn. It was nearly 10:30 pm. Celeste didn't know where she was going. So she bought one way tickets for one adult and two children under the age of six to the only city she could call to mind: New Orleans.

The kids had slept most of the way on the bus ride down to Nashville. It was a big city, far bigger than Celeste had imagined. This should have been a vacation. They would tour the Grand ol Opry, and Graceland. The children knew all about Elvis. JJ did an absolutely hysterical rendition of "*You ain't nothing but a hound dog.*" It made Celeste smile at the memory. There he was in his little white jump suit she made for Halloween last year. Dancing around and dropping to a knee, saying: "thank you, thank you very much." At the Nashville Greyhound station, she herded the kids onto another bus that was fuller than the last, and unfortunately as JJ accurately pointed out, smelled stinkier. Eventually the kids fell asleep. Celeste wondered if Jeff was awake yet.

## Finding food

“Paella” she said suddenly.

The two men looked at her. “What the hell?”

“Paella,” she repeated as she stood up. She was certain of it: “This is the perfect way to resolve the conflict and for me to promote my restaurant.” Big Charlie tagged along after her. “Aw com’on now hunny, I raise the best hogs in the lower 20 parishes you can *not* tell me you’re gonna dis me for this shrimp boat captain makin’ some stupid pie-ay-yah. I mean now sweetheart...”

"Big Charlie," she whirled around and stopped him in his tracks. "Do you even know what paella is?"

“Well now darlin' it’s gotta be some fancy-dancy seafood dish.” He was definitely squirming.

Tim LeBoungiere hung his head and looked at the floor to hide his smirk. Charlie Durner sure knew hogs but he didn’t know jackshit about serious cuisine.

Celeste looked him square in the eye and said: “It is a dish from Spain, served in Portugal too. It’s like a rice stew that has mussels, shrimp, fish, chicken and sausage. And I intend to make the best Cajun version of it anyone has ever tasted.”

Charlie scratched his head. “Well jes do gumbo jes like everybody else. Pie-ay-ah, I mean com’on now.”

Celeste raised her eyebrows, challenging him to go further and possibly put his foot in his mouth.



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“Look,” he back-pedaled, “what-evah you like, but you know I do more than just sausage.”

Celeste agreed: “Absolutely you do and I will need all the cuts you can give me; loin, chops, ribs--you name it, I’ll need it.”

“Now you're talkin’,” he puffed his chest up a bit more. “My cousin,” he stepped in front of Tim, “has a sweet little troller boat, you know.”

“But Big Charlie,” Celeste stopped him, “you will not be the only supplier at my place. It is my restaurant, not your personalized food shop.” He was deflated again.

Tim’s shoulders were shaking in quiet mirth. The big man looked like a caricature of a naughty schoolboy being chastised by his teacher. Charlie turned and mumbled something about getting back to her about delivery dates. “Wait,” she said. “I’m not through. I need to ask about your specialty items.” Charlie brightened some but still looked like he was about to pout. “Whaddayah mean, ‘specialty’?”

Celeste started writing. She wanted dried smoked pork, boudin blanc, tasso, cured hams, and the sausage? What could give her? Chorizo? No, andouille would be perfect. He looked overwhelmed when he left. He couldn’t read his handwriting, she was talking so fast. A few of the things she asked for weren’t familiar to him. But he was sure someone at Big Charlie’s Inc would.

Tim rubbed his jaw and took a long look at Adele. He liked her. Mama Rae trusted her implicitly. Plus, she behaved like she belonged here. She didn’t know her way around yet, but Tim cut her a little slack. She was a little bitty blond thing, tough

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and stubborn, but fair. She turned to him, “And now for you.” He smiled. And took her list. She wanted catfish and crayfish and bass—could he get mussels, oysters and clams? Shellfish were scarce after the hurricane. But shrimp and crabs, he could get those in a heart beat. The red fish were coming back. Thank God. About a fifth of the fisheries and their boats were literally blown off the face of the earth. The Louisiana men and women who had put their hearts and souls into making a livelihood from fishing were retired or broke or dead.

Though the fishing situation had settled down some, he reminded Adele she might have to settle for some non local product. The board of health hadn’t made it easy on the fishermen, the poisons and toxins that contaminated the Gulf waters and the feeder bayous rendered thousands of tons of fish and seafood inedible. And it was always the little guy who took the hit. Tim was lucky his father and uncle owned a small armada of boats and had contacts through Louisiana into Mississippi and few cousins in Alabama. They did their best to help each other out. But business is business, tough to choose between feeding your family or helping extended family. Tim choose both and squeaked by. Southern blood was thicker than gumbo, without family you were nothing.

Tim explained in his slow stuttering speech (a pretty face had a terrible effect on his tongue), that it would be expensive. At first, anyway. She gave him a big smile. Of course, she said. “I don’t expect cheap ingredients to make good food. And I plan to price it according to its value.” Tim didn’t like it. This was not a place where patrons could pay \$4 for a cup of coffee let alone \$14 for a simple catfish diner. “But that’s just it,” she said. “It wouldn’t be plain old and I don’t plan on robbing my

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neighbors. I'll make good food and let the cooking speak for itself; that should dictate the price."

"And Tim?" She caught him before he opened the door. "I will need you to help me make the best damn seafood chowder this state has ever tasted." Tim smiled, he left with her list, amounts were flexible. Quality and delivery date were not.

An abused woman flees with her two children from New York, unintentionally arriving amidst the devastation of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. She rebuilds her life and a restaurant and finds love. But to stay, she must break the law.

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