

ESSENCE

Essence and Chardonnai huddled together in seats in the semi-darkness of the arena. It was beyond hot. They could see up to a huge hole in the dome ceiling blown off by Katrina. *What a funny name for a storm*, Essence had thought, imagining a big lady with cheeks puffed full, huffing and puffing the roof half off the place. *Nothing super about this dome to that old gal, Katrina*. Chardonnai began to cry again, asking for Mimmi and Mama, even George. They were alone now, and Essence knew it was up to her to protect and comfort her little sister.

“Little girl. Honey? You two all alone here?”

Essence looked up to see a lady about the age and size of Mimmi leaning over them. “Why, I’d sit a spell with you two, but I’d bust through this flimsy seat in no time. I just sent Harold to get some water for us. And for you, too.”

Essence’s ears picked up at the familiar name. Harold. Could it be? Remembering her manners as Mimmi would want her to, she introduced herself and Char to the kind lady.

“Now, child, I’m Mrs. Beaudrie, and I’m very pleased to meet you and your sister, Char. You tell me the story of how you got here all alone,” she said, plopping right down on the aisle and pulling Chardonnai onto her lap. “And what’s this beautiful quilt you have so tight ‘round your shoulders?”

“Anybody up there?” a man had called above the low putter of the motor on his boat.

Essence had turned to Mimmi, her eyes questioning, her mouth afraid to answer. Her grandma had moved off the bed fast, grabbed a pillow, and yanked the case off it. Damp as it was, it worked as she leaned out the window, waving it in a call for help. The water was up to her ankles in Mimmi’s bedroom, but had stopped rising.

“Here, here,” she yelled. “Help us.”

“How many?” the man shouted, idling the motor.

“Who are you?” Mimmi asked. She looked down into an old aluminum boat, carrying two men, both dressed in old, rough jeans and plaid shirts, their boots covered with a small lake of dirty water in the bottom of the boat.

Essence moved from the bed, pushing her aside. This was no time for old politeness and introductions. He wasn’t one of her mama’s beaux come to call. They wouldn’t be here if not for this old woman’s refusal to leave. Chardonnai rose up from the bed, fear in her eyes.

“I’m Josh, ma’am. And this here’s Ben.”

“Well, young man, I am pleased to meet you,” answered Mimmi, giving Essence a shove with her hip as she strained to look over the peeling windowsill to see their rescuers. She looked down on him, sitting in the back of the small aluminum boat, his hand on the motor behind him, peering up at her through his sunglasses. “Let me see your eyes, Josh.”

Essence couldn’t believe this, but she was wedged back from the window, unable to move forward.

“Yes, ma’am,” Josh said, pulling his glasses off with his left hand, still idling the motor with his right hand.

“Well, I do see truth in those eyes,” Mimmi called down,

“So I’ll tell you there are three of us up here. Me and my granddaughters, Essence and Chardonnai. Girls, say hello to this young man who’s come to rescue us.”

She moved back just enough to let the two girls lean out under her watchful eye. “Good morning, sir,” little Chardonnai shouted, trying to project her voice over the motor’s rattle. “And you, too, sir,” she said nodding at Ben.

“Now, Essence,” Mimmi prodded.

“Please, kind sir, get us the hell out of here,” Essence called down.

If it hadn’t been for the men’s hearty laughs, Essence knew she would have received one of Mimmi’s smacks across her bottom. No time for that now. No time to enforce the no-cursing truth. Besides, George took that moment to make himself known by pushing up to the window and barking, his tongue hanging out over the sill from his silly French head.

“Ma’am, we’ve got room for you and the girls, but not the dog,” Ben called up from the front of the boat.

“Oh, no,” Mimmi called back. “We can’t leave George. He’s my only grandson.”

“Sorry, ma’am. Orders. Pets have to stay. They’ll be rescued later.”

Josh had maneuvered closer, and the boat now sat beneath the window next to the shed.

“Have you got something to stand on?” Ben yelled as Josh cut the motor.

“Yes,” Essence called back as she pulled the small table over, sweeping Mama’s memories onto the bed. She and Mimmi had the same thought at the same time.

“That’s a mighty puny table for my hefty behind,” Mimmi said, rolling her eyes. “You girls better go first.”

“We’re not leaving you,” Essence cried.

“Now, girls, I didn’t say that at all.”

Essence knew that Mimmi needed pills for her diabetes. She knew there were only a few left in the small red bottle on the dresser. She would die if she didn’t get out of this house soon. She pulled Chardonnai over the table, hoisted her up, and called

out to Josh below. "Here's our Chardonnai." Poor little Chardonnai closed her eyes tight, afraid to look below.

"Okay, Char," Josh called up to her, "Just walk out onto the top of the shed."

"I can't watch," Mimmi said. "You do it, Essence." She plopped back down on the bed with a sigh.

Essence had her arms around Char, leaned to kiss her on top of the head, and gave her a little push, then watched helpless as her little sister stood alone. The shed was holding her weight so far. Josh stood up in the boat, and it began to rock. Reaching out, he grabbed the tiny girl, turned fast, and handed her over to Ben. Not wasting a moment, Ben plopped her on the aluminum seat. Not until then did she begin to cry softly.

"Hush, now, Char, honey. You're safe," Mimmi called from above. "Go, Essence. Char needs you in that rickety boat."

"Promise you'll follow me," she said, looking down into the brown eyes she loved best in the world, even more than Mama's.

"Course I will. You think I'd leave my best gals alone?" She patted Essence on the behind, and gave her a big smooch on her lips. "Hmmm, love that sugar," she said, a line they'd used to say goodnight forever. "Now, Essence, you take your mama's wedding quilt with you to keep you safe. Best thing your mama got from her marriage besides you and Chardonnai." Leaning out the window, Mimmi tossed the quilt down into the boat and Josh grabbed it.

Assured, Essence then put one knee up onto the table, hoping it would hold, and out the window she went, crouching tentatively on the shed. She had no chance to even look around before Josh stood again and pulled her down by the waist into the boat. Char grabbed for her, and the two sat on the aluminum seat together, arm in arm, shivering in fear.

Above them, for a minute they saw Mimmi's face in the window. Then there was a crash and a splintering of wood and she disappeared. Silence. Chardonnai began to wail and Essence hugged her harder and called out, "Mimmi?"

Mimmi stuck her head out the window and called to Josh, "I'm okay. That flimsy table was no match for my butt. You take

my girls and leave me here for now with George. Get my girls to the Dome, you hear?"

"You promised, Mimmi! You promised," Essence sobbed. "You've never lied to me."

"Well, here's a truth for you. Sometimes lying is the only way. Just white lies. And that table made the final decision. Now go, Josh. Take care of those babies."

"Yes, ma'am," Josh called, wrapping the quilt around the girls.

Essence rose up in the boat, wanting with all her heart to return to the bedroom in the old white house, but Josh pushed her down. He sat back down on the seat, trying hard to settle the boat in its rocking, and tugged at the pull-start. Essence pulled Char tight to her under the quilt and tapped the photo in her pocket for luck. "Daddy," she whispered, "please help us."

From above, the girls heard Mimmi crooning. She was singing about that lazy river again. The girls cried.