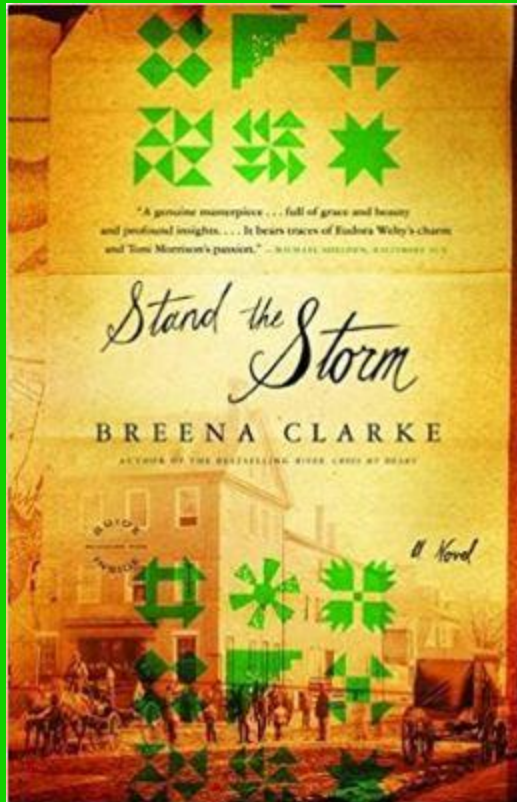


Even though former slaves Annie Coats and her son Gabriel have managed to buy their freedom, their lives are still marked by



constant struggle and sacrifice--to the extent that Annie secretly recalls her days on the plantation with fondness. Washington's Georgetown neighborhood, where the Coatses are seeking to build their new lives--with Gabriel, a tailor, producing uniforms for soldiers and fine suits for pompous politicians, and Annie, a seamstress and laundress, catering to the nearby brothels and stately homes--is supposed to be a safe haven, a "promised land" for former slaves, but is effectively a frontier town, gritty and dangerous, with no laws protecting black people. In fact,

the city's own emancipation efforts in 1862 serve only to compromise the Coats family's status, putting Gabriel's three young daughters (each of them born free of free parents) at risk of becoming the property of the Coatses' former master. The remarkable emotional energy with which the Coatses rise their daily battles--as they negotiate with their former owner, as they assist other former slaves en route to freedom, as they prepare for the encroaching war, and as they struggle to love each other enough--is what fuels this novel and makes its tragic dénouement so devastating.