
GULF COAST CHRONICLES • BOOK 1

THE
Pelican Bride

A NOVEL

BETH WHITE


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Beth White, *The Pelican Bride*
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For Robin, Katie, and Kim—
my sisters, my best friends.

1

MASSACRE ISLAND MOBILE BAY, 1704

The fifty-six-gun frigate *Pélican* lunged as Geneviève Gaillain dropped six feet over its side before the canvas sling jerked her to a stop. Clutching the sodden rope above her head, she looked up at the dark-skinned mariners straining to keep her from plummeting into what they charmingly called “the drink.” The sling swung with the motion of the ship, setting the sky tilting overhead in rhythm with the ocean’s slap-slosh against the hull.

Queasy, she searched among the women still aboard until she found her sister leaning against the rail, cheeks as pale as the belly of a sea bass. If Geneviève yielded to her own terror, Aimée would refuse to get into the sling when her turn came.

And if her sister didn’t get off that pestilential ship soon, she was going to die.

Geneviève looked over her shoulder at the scrawny, wind-twisted pines staggering along the shore like teeth in a broken comb. She’d begun to wonder if she would ever see this Louisiane that she was to call home—the New World, God help her.

She shut her eyes as the jerky, swaying descent resumed.

“Hang on, miss!” shouted the mate in the longboat below. “Almost down.”

The seamen above chose that moment to release the rope, dumping her unceremoniously into a pool of seawater in the bottom of the longboat. Laughter erupted from the ship, but she caught her breath, ignored the merriment at her expense, and began the awkward business of untangling herself from the ropes.

The mate in the longboat reached down to help, grinning. “Welcome to Massacre Island.”

She resisted the urge to jerk from his grasp. “Thank you,” she muttered, recovering her dignity by scooting onto one of three narrow planks crossing the center of the boat. As the sling was hauled up, she looked up and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Aimée! Come on.”

Her sister recoiled from the sailor waiting to help her into the sling. “I can’t.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Geneviève forced sympathy from her voice. “You can and you will!”

The sailors grabbed Aimée, stuffed her into the sling heedless of petticoats and shrieks, and dropped her over the side. Geneviève supposed they had little choice, but it was maddening to see her little sister treated like just another item of goods for sale. Although, essentially, she was.

After swinging through the air like a sack of sugar on a string, Aimée fell into the boat with a solid thump and a muffled squeal. “My skirt’s wet!”

The mate chuckled as he extricated her from the sling. “You’ll get a lot wetter than this before the day’s out, *m’selle*.”

Aimée’s blue eyes widened as she struggled to keep her balance in the reeling longboat. “What do you mean?”

“Sit down before you pitch us all into the bay.” The sailor shielded his eyes against the sun and gestured for the sling to go up for another passenger.

“Geneviève, what does he—”

“Aimée, sit down.” Geneviève grabbed her sister’s clammy hand. “You’re going to faint.”

Aimée crumpled onto the seat. “I wish we’d never come,” she whispered, leaning against Geneviève. “I want to go home.”

Geneviève put her arms around her sister’s quaking body. There was no home to go back to. Tolerance in France for Huguenots had come to a flaming end. Here in Louisiane there was at least the promise of marriage, a chance of gaining independence, a home and children. The pouch of coins in her pocket pressed against her thigh, reassuring her. So many unknowns about this venture. She had promised to marry one of the Canadians who had already come here to explore and settle, and Aimée, as young as she was, had promised as well.

Yielding herself was inevitable, part of the bargain she had struck, as was hiding her faith. She and Aimée would have to make the best of it.

Another girl landed in the rocking boat, displacing her anxious thoughts, then one by one, with varying degrees of noise and struggle, four more. Finally the mate in charge roared, “No more room! We’ll get the rest on the next trip.”

The sailors hauled up the empty canvas seat, tossed it onto a pile of rigging, and noisily saluted the departure of the longboat.

Thank God she and Aimée had been chosen to depart with the first group. They would have the choice of accommodations for the night—though who knew what that would be like. *Massacre Island*. She shivered. What a name for their landing place. But at least they would not have to stay here long. Tomorrow they were to travel up the river to their final destination, Fort Louis.

By the time they were halfway to shore, she and Aimée were both soaking wet from salt spray. Still, incredibly, her sister’s cheek against her shoulder burned with fever.

Geneviève anxiously brushed her hand across her sister’s damp,

curly blonde head. Poor baby, she was lucky to be alive. One of the sailors had been buried at sea only yesterday. Geneviève herself still trembled from the fever they'd all picked up in Havana, but at least she was upright.

As the longboat drew closer to the beach, she lifted her hand to block the stark glare of sand as white as spun sugar. She began to make out human figures—male figures—gathered to watch their arrival. Her stomach tightened. Was her future husband among them? Some unknown Canadian with pots of money as they had been promised?

With every stroke of the oars she came closer to meeting him. Would he be like her father, a good man who had failed to protect his daughters? Or would he be like the rude and vicious dragoons who had been quartered in their home? Could she be so lucky, so blessed, as to find a man as kind and resourceful as Father Mathieu? As brave and principled as the great *Réforme* warrior Jean Cavalier?

Still several yards out from the beach, the boat grounded against sand with a bump. Aimée whimpered and stirred in her arms. Geneviève looked up and found herself encircled by grinning, bearded men standing hip-deep in the water. Her overpowered gaze took in a variety of faded, ragged clothing, sunburnt faces, and twinkling eyes.

The young man closest to her, the only one in uniform—the blue, white, and gold of the French marine—removed his tricorne and bowed, all but baptizing himself in the chopping surf. He rose, plopping his misshapen headgear back into place, and scanned the passengers of the boat as if surveying goods in a market. “Welcome, *mademoiselles*. We’ve come to carry you ashore.”

Geneviève stared at the boy. He couldn’t be more than nineteen or twenty years of age, his cleft chin emphasized by a dark beard still thin and fine. Indeed he was broad of shoulder but built on lanky lines.

They were all slender, she realized, looking around at the other men. Gaunt in fact. Another sliver of apprehension needled her

midsection. “I can walk, *monsieur*. But I would be grateful if you would help my sister. She isn’t well.”

The young man transferred his gaze to Aimée, who lolled against Geneviève like a rag doll. “We’d hoped the fever in Havana would be gone by now.” He slid his arms gently under Aimée’s knees and around her back, lifted her with surprising ease, and turned to slosh toward the beach.

Ignoring the rough voices and equally rough, reaching hands of the men surrounding the boat, Geneviève hauled herself over the side.

And found herself underwater. She thrashed, tried to find footing as she sank under the weight of her skirts. Just when she thought her lungs would burst, a pair of steely hands clamped her around the waist from behind and hauled her into sweet, blessed air. She coughed and vomited.

“Let go!” Choking, she shoved at the sinewy arms around her middle. “You’re squeezing the life out of me!”

“Stop kicking,” the voice rumbled against her back, “or I’ll let you swim.”

“I *can’t* swim!”

“Then relax and enjoy the ride.” He hoisted her over his shoulder and turned toward the beach.

Geneviève shoved a hank of sopping hair out of her eyes. She had lost her cap in the water, and her braid had come loose. All she could see was a rough shirt of a faded, pink-tinged brown, plastered against hard lateral muscles flexing as her rescuer half waded, half swam with her. He gripped the back of her thigh with one large hand to hold her in place and extended the other for balance.

Lifting her head, she peered at the *Pélican* floating in the distance, sails flapping against the steely sky in a brisk northwest breeze. No more worm-ridden hardtack for breakfast. No more briny bathing and drinking water. No more malodorous cabin shared with three other fractious women.

She realized she had much to be thankful for.

A noise must have escaped her. The man halted. “Pardon. Are you uncomfortable?”

She hung upside down with her hair dragging in the water, her thighs tucked under a strange man’s chin. “Oh, no, monsieur, I was merely wondering what time tea will be served.”

A rusty chuckle erupted against her knees. “Forgive us, made-moiselle. No one thought to warn you about the sinkholes.” He continued slogging his way toward shore.

Sinkholes. What other unexpected dangers awaited her in this alien land? As the water got shallower and clearer, she could see sea creatures swimming amongst bits of brown, foamy algae. The gentle roll of the surf was wholly unlike Rochefort’s rocky, choppy seashore, as were the long-legged, wide-winged white birds swooping in the distance. They were big enough to carry off a small child.

The bay was big, the wildlife was big, the men were big. She and Aimée would be swallowed whole.

The man stopped. “You can walk from here,” he said, shifting her into the cradle of his arms. He held her a moment, looking down into her face.

Boldly she returned his stare. His bony, angular face was outlined by a neatly trimmed dark beard and mustache, with black eyebrows slashing above a pair of fierce brown eyes uncannily like those of the boy who had carried Aimée ashore. Dark hair curled to his shoulders and blew back from a broad, intelligent brow.

“You should know,” he said, “that I only came to pick up supplies. I’m not here for a wife.”



It had been a long time since Tristan had held a woman in his arms. This one was thin, bedraggled, and exceedingly wet. But she held her arms clasped across a nicely shaped bosom and stared

up at him with black-fringed eyes the color of the ocean sloshing around his legs.

Stiff as a wet cat, she fairly hissed. “As if I would want to marry a presumptuous oaf who hoists me over his shoulder like a barrel of flour and then insults me without bothering to introduce himself.”

“I am Tristan Lanier,” he said with as much dignity as he could muster. “I’m s—”

“Put me down. I’ll take my chances with the sink holes.”

And then he saw the tears. Pity curbed his initial impulse to dump her onto her curvy derriere in the sand. He released her legs but kept a steady arm across her back. “The sand is firm here. You’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.” She would have stepped away, but her legs buckled. “Oh!” she gasped as he caught her, pulling her hard against him. “The ground is heaving up and down!”

“It will do that for quite some time. Give yourself a minute before you try to—”

But she had already pushed away, staggering onto dry sand, where she stood peering up and down the beach. She had to squint against the sun, which had abruptly come out from behind the clouds.

Tristan followed her gaze. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t see my sister.”

Each of the men who had flocked to the aid of the women in the longboat had collected a prize and headed for shade. The longboat was already on its way back to the ship for another load. Tristan and this woman were alone on the beach.

“Come,” he said, softening his voice. “I’ll take you to the warehouse. That’s where she’ll be.”

She nodded and picked up her soggy skirts to follow him. As they rounded one of the large dunes lumped along the beach, he glanced at her. She looked like a woman who had just awakened from sleep to find herself face-to-face with her nightmare. The

fine sea-green eyes darted right and left at the seagulls wheeling in search of food, and she visibly struggled to maintain her balance. Her small leather boots, cracked and thin, must be little protection against the hot sand.

Halfway up the beach, a tall stand of sea grass blocked the way. Tristan went ahead to hold it back so that she could pass without getting slapped in the face. On the other side of it, she stopped, putting a hand briefly on his forearm.

“Monsieur Lanier, I must beg your forgiveness. I have been unkind in the face of your assistance.” She bit her lip, looking away. “My—my distress is no excuse for lack of gratitude.”

“Apology accepted, mademoiselle.”

A faint smile curved her lips and found her eyes, turning her from a pinched-face harridan into a starkly lovely young woman. Her hair was drying in dark waves that gleamed in the strong sun with umber and bronze lights, and there was a charming sprinkle of freckles across her straight nose. She couldn’t be more than seventeen or eighteen years old.

She grabbed the blowing tresses with a self-conscious yank and twisted them into an impromptu knot at the back of her head. “In the absence of correct social protocols, m’sieur, I must introduce myself. I am Mademoiselle Geneviève Gaillain, late of Rochefort.” She dipped a curtsy whose grace was marred only in the slightest by an unsteady step backward into the sea grass.

Tristan grabbed her wrist before she could go rolling down the hill. “It is my very great honor to make your acquaintance, ma’m’selle.”

She peeked up at him as if gauging his sincerity, but allowed him to help her up and over the dunes. She was quiet as they trudged the remaining distance between the beach and the warehouse at the top of the rise. He could not fathom what had brought such a pretty, engaging young woman to the wilds of Louisiane to find a husband. Were the men in Rochefort blind, deaf, and dumb?

This largest of the structures erected during the French occupation of Massacre Island stood between two open-air sheds and contained, at any given time, varying quantities of consumable products such as flour, sugar, barley, molasses, wine, lard, and meat. Also stuffed under its twelve-foot-high roof one could find piles of wooden shingles, miscellaneous cooking pots, axes, guns, and butcher knives; available as gifts for the Indians were red stockings—the preferred color—as well as handbells and glass beads.

But as Tristan shoved open the warehouse's warped front door, his supply list fled his mind.

Holding court on a rough three-legged stool just inside the door, hands clasped demurely in her lap, was the most beautiful young woman he'd ever seen. She blinked up at Tristan's brother Marc-Antoine with eyes the color of gentian violets, her flaxen curls spilling onto her dainty shoulders from under a white ruffled cap. Her oval face was thin from illness, but the ivory skin gleamed with the purity of a cameo.

Then he caught Marc-Antoine's dazed eye. His brother looked like he'd run straight into a wall.

Geneviève rushed past him. "Aimée!"

The two women embraced for a scant second before the beauty squealed. "Ooh, Ginette! You're making me wet again!"

Geneviève pulled away, searching the younger girl's face. "Are you all right?"

Aimée nodded. "I've been well cared for, Sister." She pursed her sweet lips and flicked a glance at the male audience observing the exchange with slack-jawed interest.

"Indeed?" Geneviève tucked her arm around Aimée's shoulder and faced the crowd like St. Jeanne d'Arc confronting the English at Orleans.

Clearly Geneviève Gaillain was capable of taking care of her little sister, which put his responsibility for them at an end. And at the moment he had more pressing concerns to discuss with his brother.

Tristan slapped Marc-Antoine's shoulder. "Come, you promised to help me transport supplies to my boat."

Marc-Antoine blinked. "Ah. Yes." He bowed to the two young women, a jerky, little-used courtesy. "Mademoiselles."

Tristan grabbed his reluctant brother by the sleeve and towed him toward the open doorway of the warehouse. "You'll have all the time in the world to fix your interest, once the ladies settle in at the fort."

Marc-Antoine looked over his shoulder. "But what if some other fellow takes up with her before I go off-duty again?"

"Yours was the first face she saw, is that not correct?" His brother had taken the drooping Aimée from her sister's arms and carried her ashore as gently as a mother with a newborn babe. And the girl's blue eyes had flickered to Marc-Antoine's face each time he looked away.

Marc-Antoine shrugged. "Women's affections, I have noticed, are often swayed by proximity."

Tristan chuckled. "Then let us hope she will return to your proximity at a more convenient time. I have news from the upper river."

"News?" Marc-Antoine glanced at him sharply. "What is it?"

Tristan lifted a hand. "Not here."

Stepping outside the warehouse, Marc-Antoine switched to the tongue of the people among whom he had spent a year as a teenager. "The Alabama? Has something happened to them?"

Tristan answered in the same language. "No, why would you assume that?"

Marc-Antoine's expression cleared. "What then?"

Tristan lowered his voice. "The British have sent agents to the Koroa—maybe the Kaskaskians as well. If Bienville wishes to protect trade on the upper river, he'd better find a way to convince those Indians that their best interests lie in alliance with us."

"So they still think to take our territory? We were here first!"

"They'll never be satisfied until they control the rivers and ports."

Matching his brother's angry pace, Tristan shrugged. "But neither will King Louis and Pontchartrain. It's going to come down to war."

"We'll have to send agents of our own to renew Indian alliances." Marc-Antoine's expression shifted to a mischievous, engaging grin. "There's nobody better at that, brother, than you and I."

Tristan halted. "Oh no. I'm no longer responsible for keeping Bienville out of trouble."

"You know your own safety depends on the fortunes of Louisiana. Besides, how can you abandon us to this British thievery?"

"You'll figure it out. In the meantime, how do you plan to get twenty-five women and all their fripperies transported to the fort in two little barques and a fishing boat?"

"We had to send the pinnacle to Veracruz for gunpowder." Marc-Antoine started walking toward the beach, where the longboat could be seen debarking another load of passengers from the *Pélican*. "By the time we got word of the *Pélican*'s arrival, I was the only officer available to meet her." He waved a hand in irritation. "Well, me and Bienville's little hound, Dufresne."

Tristan nodded, grateful that he no longer had to deal with colonial politics. "You should keep an eye on young Dufresne. He's definitely got something up his sleeve besides his elbow. He was sniffing around La Salle's office earlier this afternoon—walked off and pretended to be looking for something on the ground when he realized I'd seen him—but there's something, I don't know, *off* about the fellow."

Marc-Antoine rubbed his forehead. "Bienville hired me as an interpreter, not a babysitter."

"He sent you down here because you can be trusted to do your job." Tristan threw an arm around his brother's shoulder. "So quit whining and do it. And who knows, little brother—you may end up with a wife!"

"It could happen." Marc-Antoine gave him a sideways look. "Why don't you visit the settlement? It's been a long time since you lingered in civilization."

“Yes, and for good reason. I’ve planted corn this year, and I don’t need to be away for more than a few days.”

“If you cleaned up a bit, there might be a woman crazy enough to go back with you.”

Tristan laughed. “*I’m* not crazy enough to take a Frenchwoman to Lanier Plantation, so get the notion out of your head. You’re all the heir I need.”

“Tristan—”

Tristan stopped him with a cuff on the arm. “Leave be,” he said lightly. “I’m happy with my independence. I come and go as I please, and have to answer to no one but myself. It’s a good life.” As he reminded himself ten times a day.

Marc-Antoine shook his head. “The least you can do is lend your barque to help us transport the young ladies up to the settlement.”

Tristan frowned. “No one takes my boat but me.”

“Then *you* captain her. Tristan, we can’t leave any of those women to fend for themselves here on the island. We haven’t enough men to protect them from . . . well, from the men.” Marc-Antoine laughed. “You know what I mean.”

Tristan looked away, picturing the Gaillain sisters, one damp and flushed with righteous indignation, the other pale and delicate as a butterfly. Neither should be left to the doubtful care of a handful of bored and randy young soldiers.

Conscience defeating pragmatism, he chanced a look at Marc-Antoine and found him grinning. Reluctantly Tristan laughed. “All right. One trip up the river with as many parakeets as you can fit onboard—and that’s all! Then I’ll be on my way—and don’t ask me to stay.”