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SHARON J. WISHNOW

# THE PELICAN TIDE



*A Novel*



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LAKE UNION  
PUBLISHING

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.*

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*To my mother, Doris Wishnow, my first and best cheerleader*

*In memory of Josephine Francois*

The world, we are told, was made especially for man—a  
presumption not supported by all the facts.

—*John Muir*

At a time when so many species of wildlife are threatened, we once  
in a while have an opportunity to celebrate an amazing success story.

Today is such a day. The brown pelican is back!

—*Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, November 11, 2009*

# CHAPTER 1

*Grand Isle, Louisiana*

*Sunday, April 18, 2010*

*2:00 p.m.*

Chef Josie Babineaux shook a bowl of flour over hot oil in her grandmother's cast-iron roux pot. The flour sizzled as it made contact, and tiny bubbles danced around the edges, releasing its nutty toasted-bread essence. With a practiced hand, she mixed the flour with her roux paddle like she was on a mission, and she was.

In two hours, a food critic and a photographer from *Vacation Ventures* were interviewing her, the spice queen of the bayou, for the magazine's cover story. At least that's what the editor had crowned her last month, when she told Josie they'd selected Odeal's as the 2010 Island Restaurant of the Year. This wasn't the first accolade that her family's restaurant had earned over the past decade. Josie proudly displayed the small write-ups in *Zagat*, *Southern Living*, and *Gourmet* as if she had won a Michelin Star.

*Vacation Ventures'* glossy pages, prestige, and dedicated readers were the miracle Josie needed. The international publicity, combined with the

full calendar of fishing rodeos and events planned for Grand Isle, would fill the restaurant, making this tourist season the turning point to pull her out of the financial death spiral her husband, Brian, had plunged the family into. But she had no time today to worry about Brian. He was six months in her rearview mirror.

Today, her passion for feeding people mattered most. She'd cook off-menu anytime someone in their tiny Grand Isle community needed a special dish to brighten their day. Food was Josie's love language.

She smashed a lump of stubborn flour, splashing the thickening roux onto her forearm. "Ouch." She shook her arm from the sting. Roux was weaponized wheat.

A firm, warm hand landed on her shoulder and gently pulled her back. "Hey, hon. We have a gallon of roux in the refrigerator. More than enough for today and tomorrow," Maisy Phillips said.

As Josie's sous-chef, Maisy was a force in and out of the kitchen, towering over her at five foot ten. The long butcher's aprons the kitchen staff wore stopped at her knees. She styled her hair in waist-length braids with gold-tone braid rings, pulled back while she cooked.

"You're right. But . . . it's almost done." Josie switched the paddle between hands and scraped the edges of the pot. No one remembered where the cast-iron pot came from. It'd been there as long as they could remember. The heavy metal was coal black from use and looked like a cross between a witch's cauldron and something you'd hang from a campfire spit.

She surveyed her busy kitchen. Linh Nguyen stood on a stool to reach her prep counter. Her white-haired head bent over a tray of baby vegetables as her nimble fingers turned each one into an edible masterpiece. Josie had asked her now-retired friend to come help prepare for today.

Josie's son, Toby, hefted a blue bucket of ice, with a mound of lumpy oysters threatening to spill over. The kitchen aprons, too short on Maisy, used to sweep the floor on his eleven-year-old body. But not anymore. He had shot up like a stalk of okra since winter. The only sweep left was his dark hair hovering over his brown eyes. He needed a haircut. A chore for Brian this weekend. He should at least be able to manage that.

Without looking away from the roux, she said, "Hey, *cher*, where's your mesh glove?"

"I'm not a baby." Toby crossed his arms over his puffed-out chest, contradicting his words.

Josie flicked off the gas under her roux, held her left hand an inch from his nose, and lowered her voice. "I was twelve when I got this scar from an oyster knife." *I damn near lost the use of my hand.*

He rolled his eyes. "You've told me like a million times."

She rested her hand on his head. "Be grateful I don't roll your whole body in stainless steel mesh."

"Haul that bucket to the prep sink. I'll supervise," Maisy said.

"I can shuck oysters," Toby grumbled.

“All new chefs are supervised in the kitchen. You’re fast with that blade, even *with* the glove, but I’m not ready to leave you alone either.”

Toby softened under Maisy’s words. “I guess.”

Linh chuckled. She had rocked Josie’s kids to sleep when they were babies.

Maisy stood over Josie with her fists resting on her hips.

“What?” Josie asked.

She put her hands on Josie’s shoulders and spun her toward the door. “Take a minute, out there.” She pointed. Then, in a stage whisper, added, “Before someone gets ugly.” That was Maisy’s not-too-subtle reminder that she needed to pull herself together.

“Right.” Josie wiped her hands on a kitchen towel. She had skipped her morning beach run, and now her body was overcharged like a lightning bolt seeking a path to ground. “The kitchen’s yours.”

Josie removed her apron and smoothed the chef’s jacket she had bleached within an inch of its existence for today. It was the newest of the old chef whites. She patted her light-brown hair, tightly twisted into a bun. In a nod to glam, she wore her best friend Louise’s diamond studs. She rubbed her finger along the scar at the edge of her mouth. She’d have to remember to tilt her head away from the camera to hide it.

Josie walked into the dining room. The waitstaff had cleaned the tables after the lunch service. Maisy suggested they close for the rest of

the day for the magazine interview. Closing was the logical decision, but Josie couldn't afford an empty restaurant on a Sunday night.

Odeal's Sunday Suppers had been an island mainstay since the 1930s. People brought their fresh catch, and the restaurant would prepare it with all the sides. Sunday Suppers carried the restaurant through the Depression, the Second World War, and years of bad storms. Josie was in a financial storm. Without Sunday's receipts, she couldn't pay for the extra supplies she had ordered for the photo shoot.

The bigger problem now was that the dining room wasn't at its best. The tables were balanced with matchbooks, the linen was showing its age, and long ago she had stopped being able to afford fresh flowers or tea lights for the tables.

She went to her small desk, wedged between the walk-in refrigerator and the dry storage, and grabbed a handful of black Sharpie markers. She next found her daughter, Minnow, along with her friend Bonnie and the rest of the waitstaff, outside on the marina deck, eating a late lunch.

“Who's ready for a fun job?”

Four faces exchanged knowing glances.

“Whatcha need, Chef?” Bonnie said.

Josie handed out the Sharpies. “I need you to color in all the scuff marks on the chairs and tables.”

“For real?” Bonnie said.

“For real.” She was doing her best to wrap the restaurant in her version of hospital corners.

A steady breeze wobbled the red café umbrellas, casting dancing shadows. Josie breathed in the ocean. The Gulf water soothed her. She tasted it with each breath and felt it on her skin. The best part of living on an island was that the ocean hugged her from all directions. When she’d left for culinary school in California, she went often to the Pacific, but the cooler water just jangled her. It wasn’t like home.

The staff cleared the tables and headed inside. Josie caught Minnow’s arm, stopping her before she disappeared too. “You didn’t eat lunch?”

At seventeen, her daughter, Minnow, was five foot six, a whisper taller than Josie, but that was where the similarity ended. She was Brian’s mini-me with doe-brown eyes, sandy-brown hair highlighted from her days at the beach, and a lean body that bounced with nervous energy. Josie ignored the fact that the Odeal’s T-shirt Minnow wore was one size too small. Today, though, she couldn’t ignore the hollow in Minnow’s collarbone and how it had deepened in the past few months, or the belt cinched tight around her waist.

“I ate some.” Minnow shrugged. “Guess I’m anxious about all this working out?” She waved her hand over her head.

*You’re not the only one.*

“I’ve never been in a magazine before. I’m nervous about this big family photo you said they wanted. The ‘generations’ of Odeal’s.”

Minnow made air quotes around the word *generations*.

The magazine had asked for a photo with Josie's father, her brother, and the kids. It was lucky Brian was still on the rig. She could avoid the uncomfortable choice of whether to have him in the photo for the sake of the kids.

Josie leaned in to hug her, and Minnow pulled away, a scowl on her face. Josie needed to table her hurt feelings. The hardest reality of her split from Brian was keeping the truth about why she left. Minnow blamed her, and it wasn't fair. Yet Minnow always accepted affection only on her own terms. Lately, those terms were like a prison sentence.

Josie forced a smile, wanting a way to redirect both their moods.

As if she had made a wish, their brown pelican, Gumbo, circled the restaurant and skidded to a lumbering stop on the rear deck, almost tripping over his massive webbed feet. The bird swaggered when he landed, like a dancer with a signature move. He dipped his head side to side at Josie and Minnow and fluffed the crown of golden feathers on his head. The family had rescued him two years ago, after Hurricane Gustav left him, then a fledgling, injured and stranded on the beach. And now, Minnow was his favorite person. She squatted, meeting him face to bill, and scratched behind his long neck.

"Hello, handsome," Minnow said to the pelican.

"If you'd all stop messing with that bird, we wouldn't need this sign," Hughdean said.

He clomped up the deck stairs in his work boots, tattered jeans, and a blue ball cap that covered his reddish-brown hair. He dropped his tool kit and a metal sign he was carrying heavily onto the deck.

“Dumbest thing I’ve ever been asked to do.”

“Hi, Uncle Hughdean.”

“Well, hey there, Princess Minnow of the High Seas.”

Hughdean was Josie’s younger brother and a third owner of the restaurant, along with Josie and their dad.

“Such is the glamorous life of a restaurateur,” Josie said.

“Mom, I’m heading in to help.” Minnow waved the Sharpie.

“Brian shoulda done this last month,” Hughdean mumbled.

*Brian should have done a lot of things. Last month and all the months before.*

“At least help me.”

Josie stood next to Hughdean. “He’ll be home tomorrow. You can give him your bill.”

Hughdean knew Josie could barely make the restaurant mortgage, buy her supplies, and pay her staff. She hadn’t taken a salary for two years, once she discovered Brian’s gambling had grown from the occasional pastime to a financial hellfire. Hughdean had, surprisingly, held his tongue on that.

“Hold the sign where you want it,” he said, dropping to his knees.

Josie smiled at it. **DO NOT FEED THE PELICAN.** They attached it to the post Gumbo liked the most. He’d perch on top for hours, his long

neck tucked into his body with his swordlike bill pointing toward the water, waiting for . . . whatever pelicans waited for.

The deck door banged open. “Mom,” Minnow said. “Maisy says you can come back inside. Everything’s ready, just the way you want.” The sass in her voice was not lost on Josie. “I forgot to tell you, Daddy called. He’s staying an extra day on the rig for an award-presentation thing. He’s coming home late Tuesday, and he’ll pick us up Wednesday, okay?”

“Tuesday, Wednesday.” She forced another smile. “I’ll take another day with my kiddos.”

“Yeah, but that means we have to stay longer at Grandpa’s house. No offense, Uncle Hughdean. I love you. I just hate living with you.”

“And I hate living with you too.” He winked.

“You need to get a move on. You’ve got to change for the photo and pick up Dad,” Josie reminded him.

They walked into the restaurant, and Josie stopped in her tracks.

*Where was the hum?* The air conditioner made an annoying wheezy hum. It was so loud they had to play a continuous swamp pop music loop to mask it. But it wasn’t there now.

Josie pulled a chair over to one of the air returns and placed her hand over it.

*Nothing.* Just what she needed.