A circular inset photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white dress and a crown of small white flowers. She is looking to the left with a gentle smile.

THE CROSSING AT
CYPRESS CREEK

A Natchez Trace Novel

A circular inset photograph of a wooden bridge with a metal railing crossing a narrow creek in a lush, green forest. The trees are tall and thin, and the water is calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery.

PAM HILLMAN

Praise for the Natchez Trace novels and Pam Hillman

“This second Natchez Trace novel is full of romance, faith, and heroes as colonial Mississippi comes alive under Hillman’s richly drawn details. The emotional theme is timely for the historical setting as well as today’s world, and readers will be riveted to the story from start to finish.”

ROMANTIC TIMES ON THE ROAD TO MAGNOLIA GLEN,
4½-STAR REVIEW, TOP PICK

“A hint of mystery surrounding what’s actually going on in Natchez plays well with the sweet love story. . . . This enjoyable novel featuring two strong heroines works as both a stand-alone and a series entry.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON THE ROAD TO MAGNOLIA GLEN

“*The Road to Magnolia Glen* is a sweet story filled with romance, adventure, and Southern charm. A beautiful and redemptive theme comes together in a satisfying ending that will leave readers pondering the extent of true love.”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
FREEDOM’S RING AND THE HIDDEN SIDE

“*The Road to Magnolia Glen* is historical fiction at its finest. Intrigue. Romance. Faith. Author Pam Hillman combines all these elements into a story you won’t want to put

down. You'll root for Kiera and Quinn while booing and hissing at the evil Le Bonne—and finally cheer at the end after an explosive finish. All this and a history lesson too. Win-win.”

MICHELLE GRIEP, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE
ONCE UPON A DICKENS CHRISTMAS SERIES

“If you love historical romance, Pam is definitely an author you want to add to your bookshelves!”

RELZ REVIEWZ

“I was captivated from the moment Quinn opened his mouth and that honeyed Irish brogue skipped right out! I enjoyed every aspect of this story from the cultural diversity and period lifestyle to the foundational role of hope, faith, and forgiveness. This book has earned its place among my all-time favorites and I highly recommend it!”

FAITHFULLYBOOKISH.COM ON *THE ROAD TO
MAGNOLIA GLEN*

“Themes of sacrificial love, faith, and redemption weave together through Quinn and Kiera’s story. A well-paced plot that mingles romance and danger carried my attention the entire time. . . . This novel earned a permanent home on my bookshelf to be reread in the future. I’m looking forward to the next book in the series.”

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MAGNOLIA GLEN*

THE CROSSING AT CYPRESS CREEK

“Romance, danger, and courage are woven through a backdrop of tension as thick as the Mississippi humidity. . . . Quickly embracing Connor and Isabella, readers will remain fully invested in the outcome of their story, savoring each word and maybe even forgetting to breathe a time or two along the way. The first book in the Natchez Trace series is perfect for fans of Tamera Alexander, Laura Frantz, and Lori Benton.”

ROMANTIC TIMES ON THE PROMISE OF BREEZE HILL,
4½-STAR REVIEW, TOP PICK

“Hillman breezily weaves together colorful details, romantic tensions, and suspenseful plotting in this fun historical romance.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON THE PROMISE OF BREEZE HILL

“In the first of her new Natchez Trace series, Hillman carries readers to antebellum Mississippi in an entertaining tale. Greed, murder, and glimpses of the slave trade give it depth, while the subtle Christian themes provide hope.”

BOOKLIST ON THE PROMISE OF BREEZE HILL

“Hillman’s series launch set in antebellum Mississippi effectively mixes intrigue and suspense with a healthy dose of romance and historical details.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL ON THE PROMISE OF BREEZE HILL

PAM HILLMAN

“Pam Hillman has done it again—stolen both my sleep and my heart with a breathless novel unlike any I’ve read. From a Natchez auction block to a timeworn Mississippi plantation, this is a journey richly written and historically alive, a unique and gentle love story that is truly a promise kept.”

JULIE LESSMAN, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE
DAUGHTERS OF BOSTON, WINDS OF CHANGE, AND
HEART OF SAN FRANCISCO SERIES

The Crossing at Cypress Creek



THE CROSSING AT
CYPRESS CREEK

A Natchez Trace Novel

PAM HILLMAN



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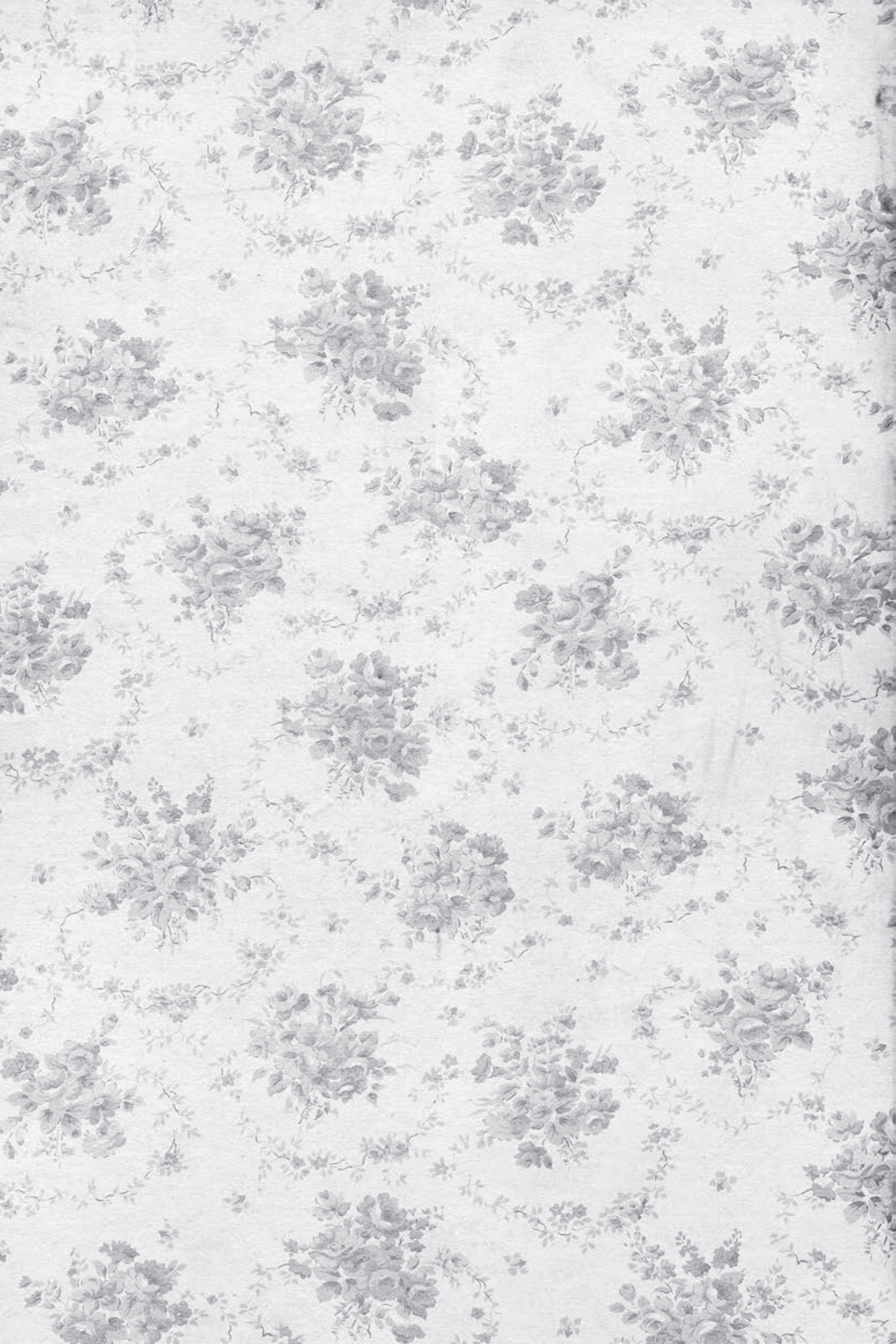
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The Crossing at Cypress Creek *is dedicated to my daughter-in-law, Savannah.*

When Savannah and my son were dating, Savannah became a certified nursing assistant (CNA) and worked at a nursing home. Let me tell you, she was amazing at her job, and all the residents as well as her coworkers loved her. It was obvious she'd found her calling in health care. It wasn't long until she decided to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse. And just as she'd excelled at being a CNA, she excels at nursing. She would have been right there with Alanah and Lydia saving the lives of everyone in Cypress Creek.

Savannah, I'm so proud to call you daughter-in-law.



A decorative flourish consisting of several overlapping, light gray loops that frame the chapter title.

Chapter 1

Natchez Under-the-Hill on the Mississippi River

AUGUST 1792

Caleb O'Shea jerked awake to utter stillness.

Swinging his legs over the berth, he shook Reggie Caruthers. "Docked, we have."

Reggie's only response was a groan.

Caleb swept his palm across the younger man's brow and felt the heat that emanated from clammy skin. "Reggie, lad, did you hear?"

"O'Shea, is that you?" Caruthers stirred, his voice sounding weak and scratchy from disuse.

"Aye. We've docked."

“Where?”

Caleb frowned. The lad must be sicker than he'd thought. He'd told him twice already that the captain had said they were making land upriver from New Orleans at an inland port on the Mississippi River. “Natchez.”

“Natchez?”

“Aye, that's the truth o' it. You're home, lad.”

“I've got to get off this boat.” Caruthers sat up, struggled to swing his legs over the edge of the cot. Even in the dim light cast from the open hatch, the landlubber looked like death warmed over. “Must . . . must see Bloomfield.”

“You're no' in any shape t' go anywhere.”

Caruthers stood, gripping the edge of the upper bunk. He reached for his jerkin, arms trembling as he tried to remain standing.

Caleb sat on his bunk, watching. The boy was nothing if not determined, but he'd proved that fact three months ago when he'd saved Caleb and half a dozen others after the British merchant ship they were serving on had capsized off the coast of Africa during a storm.

A clatter on the rung ladder caught Caleb's attention. Tiberius, the tall, broad-shouldered Moor who'd been one of those rescued, descended the ladder, a bowl of tepid broth in hand. Sweat glistened on the big man's ebony brow, and the early morning light from the open hatch glanced off the gold hoop in his left ear. “How goes he?”

“Out o' his head with the fever.”

Caruthers lost his grip on the berth, then tipped sideways.

Caleb caught the frail body before he slammed face-first into the berth on the opposite side. “Lad, why don’t you lie down and take a bit o’ broth? You need your strength if you do no’ want the captain t’ feed you t’ the fishes.”

Caruthers pushed him away, his pale-blue eyes blazing—from fever or fury ’twas hard to say. He jabbed a finger at the ladder. “I’m going topside, and I’m going to leave this ship if I have to crawl all the way to the wharf. Eight months at sea. Eight months of unlawful conscription when my family probably thinks I’m dead. I am going home.” He enunciated each word carefully.

“Home? Why, you as much as told me your home is a week’s travel north o’ Natchez. You’ll never make it.”

“I’m going.” Caruthers threw his jerkin, and Caleb caught it in midair. “Just get me off this ship. You owe me.” His attention shifted from Caleb to Tiberius and back again. “You both do.”

“Aye, that we do. We’ll get you t’ this Bloomfield. After that, you’re on your own.” Caleb’s gaze met Tiberius’s dark stare, and he jerked his chin toward the deck. “Find Duff. We’re goin’ ashore.”



“Is the mortar to your liking, miss?”

Alanah Adams jerked her attention away from the marble mortar and pestle and focused on the apothecary.

Regretfully, she placed the mortar back on the shelf and picked up her basket, heavy with items she couldn’t harvest

from the deep, dark forests surrounding Cypress Creek. “Yes, very much, but alas, I haven’t the means to purchase it.”

Mr. Weaver hefted the leather pouch in his hands, his appraisal calculating, albeit in a fatherly manner. “I beg to differ. There’s plenty of coin here. And you could use it, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

The temptation to take him up on the offer was almost more than she could stand, but Alanah shook her head. “No thank you, Mr. Weaver. The coins are needed elsewhere, I’m afraid.”

“If you’re sure . . .”

“Quite sure.” Alanah held out her hand. “My payment, if you please.”

“Of course.”

The apothecary handed over the pouch, and Alanah tucked it safely away, then moved toward the door.

He followed. “Don’t forget that I could use more cypress oil and bloodroot the next time you come to Natchez.”

“You know bloodroot is hard to find.”

“I’m depending on you, miss.” Mr. Weaver spread his hands, indicating his shop filled with a mixture of medicinal cures. “If anyone can find it, I’m sure you can.”

Alanah paused, her hand on the latch. “I’ll do my best, but I don’t know when I’ll make it back to Natchez.”

The trip had been fraught with danger. If her uncle found out she’d gone against his wishes in his absence, he’d be livid, but she’d needed more bottles and stoppers, muslin for bandages, as well as supplies to survive the coming

months. And Mr. Weaver paid well for the herbs she delivered to his shop.

The door pushed open, and Lydia peered inside, a frown creasing her forehead. When she spotted the apothecary hovering nearby, the brown-skinned woman lowered her gaze, showing uncharacteristic deference. "We must go, mistress."

"Of course." Alanah turned to the apothecary and curtsied. "Good day, sir."

Outside the shop, Lydia jerked the basket from Alanah's arms, then glowered at her, all trace of the meek and obedient servant gone. "What took you so long? The morning's half-gone."

"I'm sorry, Lydia, but I had to wait on Mrs. Simson to open her shop for the muslin. You know how much she enjoys a bit of gossip over a cup of tea." Alanah stepped aside to allow a stevedore carrying an unwieldy trunk to pass.

"We'll be lucky if someone doesn't spirit away the horses." Lydia pushed ahead, her big-bodied frame making the way easier like the parting of the Red Sea. "And even luckier if your uncle hasn't returned."

"You didn't have to come with me." The glare Lydia tossed her way let Alanah know how the woman felt about allowing her to make the overnight journey alone. "And besides, I didn't have a choice."

Her uncle seemed to think they could live on the meager gleanings from the swamp, but some things couldn't be found in the wild. He'd been gone three weeks, preaching in every hamlet and hollow for miles around.

When they'd run out of salt five days ago, she knew she couldn't wait any longer to make the trip to Natchez. She and Lydia had hurried to Natchez as fast as they could. And they must make haste to return before he did. It wouldn't do for him to spot the extra provisions she'd purchased to see them through the coming months.

Best to keep them stored in the root cellar, where he'd be none the wiser.

Alanah struggled to keep up as Lydia pushed her way through the crowded streets. To her left, a crowd had formed around an auction block as gentlemen farmers bid on the poor, unfortunate souls just off the ships. All around, the mass of humanity surged and buckled, some shackled and shuffling along, others scurrying about their business.

Shifty-eyed boys wove in and out of the crowd.

She kept her hand firmly on the money pouch, experience teaching her that the boys could filch her hard-earned coins with ease. After being bumped and pushed along the narrow thoroughfare, she had the sudden urge to get out of Natchez, to get back to the peace and quiet of the forest, to home. Home on the bluff above Cypress Creek wasn't much more than a dogtrot cabin and a barn, but it was theirs, hers and Lydia's, now that Betsy—

Suddenly Lydia sidestepped, and Alanah came face-to-face with three of the roughest-looking men she'd encountered in a long time, and she was no stranger to the vilest of sorts.

Of varying heights, the three clung together, the slight one in the middle slumped between his companions. An

ebony-hued man with a gold hoop in one earlobe, tall and broad-shouldered enough to overshadow even Lydia's statuesque height, supported the smaller man with ease.

Alanah wrinkled her nose. Drunk, if she didn't miss her guess.

And the sun had yet to climb past midmorning.

She locked gazes with the third man. Dark, piercing midnight eyes rimmed with charcoal lashes captured and held hers. A quick glance at billowing shirtsleeves and worn breeches tucked into scuffed knee-high boots, along with a leather jerkin hanging loose at his trim waist, not to mention the red sash tied around his waist, matching those of his companions, led her to the conclusion that the men were fresh off one of the ships lining the wharf.

Much to her surprise, he shifted out of the way and waited for her to pass through the narrow space between the buildings and stacks of crates lining the cobblestone street.

The slight man centered between the two groaned, then buckled, his legs giving out. The black eyes flickered away as both he and the ebony giant struggled to hold their companion upright. A fourth man, duffels slung over his shoulders, stood behind the others. It was then that it dawned on Alanah the men were not drunk as she supposed, but that the frail young man was ill. From what, she could not tell. But the glazed look of his eyes spoke of fever.

Involuntarily, she made a motion toward the man, but Lydia stepped in front of her, blocking her view of the sick man and his companions. "Mistress Alanah, if you please?"

Reluctantly Alanah nodded. "Yes, of course."

As she passed by, the man with the dark eyes, square jaw, and windswept hair inclined his head ever so slightly, careful to acknowledge her presence without giving the unseemly appearance of accosting a lady. It was all she could do not to smile. Her finery was a ruse only worn as she flitted into Natchez and just as quickly quit the place for the dark, shadowy undergrowth of the cypress swamps.

Impulsively she reached into the basket over her arm and pulled out a pouch of ground magnolia bark. Pressing it into the man's hand, she whispered, "Steep for an hour. It will help the fever."

He clasped her hand, the pouch held fast between them, his dark gaze searching hers. "Bless you, lass."

Her stomach did a slow roll at the unexpected lilt of an Irish brogue.



Clutching the pouch, Caleb watched the golden goddess as she hurried away. What kind of woman paid attention to four pieces of flotsam adrift on the wharf?

He blinked, trying to pinpoint the exact color of the lass's eyes, but all he could think of was the majestic golden lion he'd come face-to-face with on the African savanna. The wide tawny eyes, the light-brown hair shot through with shades of red and gold reminiscent of the woman who'd paused long enough to feel compassion for Reggie's plight.

“Caleb?” Tiberius’s heavily accented voice pulled him back to the task at hand.

“Sorry, mate.” Caleb hoisted Reggie’s limp form higher. “I was woolgathering.”

“I should say so.” The Moor’s gaze shifted in the direction the women had gone. “A pity that we have been on board ship for three months and now we’re honor bound to take this one on a fool’s mission.”

Caleb grunted, in full agreement with Tiberius.

“I heard that.” Reggie roused, found his footing. “Go on with you all, then. Chase your skirts. I can find Bloomfield’s office with my eyes closed.”

“Your eyes *are* closed.” Caleb chuckled. “But if you could be so kind as t’ open them for a wee bit and point us in the right direction, we’d be much obliged.”

Reggie squinted, then pointed toward the row of buildings tucked against the hillside. “It’s around the bend there. James Bloomfield, Esquire. My father’s lawyer.”

They led Reggie in that direction. The boy had told them of how he’d come to Natchez to deliver a load of cotton for his father, of heading to an establishment called the Blue Heron, then waking up aboard ship, with no memory of how he’d gotten there.

It was a common enough tale, one that Caleb was all too familiar with himself. In his three and a half years crisscrossing the Atlantic, fighting in Africa, slashing his way through the jungles of South America, he’d been conscripted more than once. In the beginning, he’d embraced his lot

with gusto, not caring whose flag he served under, which captain he answered to, nor even what kind of cargo the ship carried. If he signed on for a voyage willingly, he could jump ship whenever and however he pleased without fear of repercussion.

Until the next time he was hauled up the gangway with a knot on his head.

His was a hard life, with no guarantee he'd see the next sunrise, but it was better than working in the bowels of the earth back home in Ireland.

But young Caruthers's pining for his plantation home, his *mam* and *da*, and his younger brother had put a damper on Caleb's own wayfaring ways. To his shame, he hadn't thought much of his own brothers since he'd wiped the dust of Dublin off his boots.

Caleb pushed thoughts of his brothers to the back of his mind. Surely, after all this time they'd managed to better themselves and find their way in the world, or in Ireland at least. They weren't his responsibility. And he'd paid Caruthers back for saving his life. He'd gotten the lad to Natchez. He'd hand the landlubber off to the lawyer, then go back to living from day to day, port to port, going wherever the wind pushed him.

And maybe then the niggling sense of loss and guilt that bubbled up every time Caruthers spoke of hearth and home would go north with him and leave Caleb in peace.

Because there was no way he could go back home. Not after the things he'd done.

He scowled at the signs over the doorways. While he couldn't read worth spit, he could decipher a letter or two and could muddle his way through. And if all else failed, the type of clientele usually gave a strong indication of what kind of establishment he was entering.

But he'd never had need to find a lawyer's office. And Reggie wasn't much help. The lad was barely conscious.

A man staggered out of a nearby tavern and bumped into Caleb, too far gone to take offense or blame Caleb for his own clumsiness.

"Could you point us toward Bloomfield's?"

"That way, my good man." The drunk pointed. "Next to the Black Horse Inn."

Without further ado, he continued down the street. Caleb and Tiberius headed toward the inn, Duff following. Moments later, they passed the tavern. To the left was the burned-out shell of a warehouse, and to the right a small building tucked against the base of the cliff. A sign showed that the proprietor wore many hats, but the one that caught Caleb's eye was a pair of scales, the symbol of justice.

"Reggie, lad, we're here."

Caleb rapped on the door. A raspy voice bade them enter.

An older, bald man with round spectacles glanced up as they entered, his eyebrows raised, assessing gaze going from one to the other in rapid succession. His attention ricocheted back to Reggie like shot from a cannon. Lunging to his feet, the portly gentleman rounded the desk.

"Young Master Caruthers. You've returned." He clasped

Reggie by the shoulders, looking him up and down. "And not a minute too soon, from the looks of you."

Reggie gave the ghost of a smile. "Thank you, sir. Have you had news of my father? Is he well? My mother?"

Bloomfield's face clouded. "I'm afraid I have bad news. Please, won't you have a seat?"

A pall quickly descended over Reggie's homecoming as Bloomfield shared that both his father and his mother had passed from this life to another since he'd been gone. Reggie's shoulders slumped, and Bloomfield patted him awkwardly. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of such tidings, son. But, my dear boy, your parents would be pleased to know of your safe return."

"What of my brother? And the plantation?"

"Your brother is married and, with the help of your uncle, running Caruthers Estates."

"Married? But Weston's hardly more than a child." Reggie struggled to his feet. "I must get home posthaste."

"You're in no shape to travel." The lawyer's shock mirrored Caleb's own thoughts on the matter. "Surely a few more days won't hurt."

"I've been away too long as it is. I must see how my father's holdings fare. I'll need horses, provisions. Could I impose on you to make the arrangements?"

"I cannot persuade you to delay?"

"No, you cannot."

"I see. In that case, I'll take care of everything." Bloomfield steepled his fingers. "And if you don't mind my saying so, you would be wise to join yourself to one of the parties heading

north. The highwaymen are in fine form and any lone traveler is asking to have his head bashed in.”

“Of course.” Reggie winced. “I’m all too familiar with the tactics of the lawless sort without the benefit of friends to watch my back. That’s how I woke up with a splitting headache in the hold of a ship eight months ago.” His gaze swept over Caleb, then moved on to Tiberius and Duff in turn. “Will you accompany me? I’ll make it worth your while.”

A week’s worth of travel—make that two—would mean the ship would likely be gone by the time they returned. But none of them would even be alive if it hadn’t been for Reggie. A landlubber he might be, but he’d risked his own life for theirs.

Caleb didn’t hesitate. “You have me word. And no compensation will be necessary.”

“Aye,” Duff muttered from his spot by the door.

Tiberius didn’t say a word, but he didn’t have to. The four of them had formed a tight bond, odd as it seemed. They’d see Caruthers home, then make their way to the nearest port.

“Thank you.” Reggie turned to the lawyer. “My apologies, Mr. Bloomfield. I should have introduced my companions. Without them, I would have expired these many weeks past. This mountain of a man is known simply as Tiberius. Not his given name, but none of us can wrap our tongues around his native dialect. The quiet one is Henry Duff, and the dark Irishman is Caleb O’Shea.”

“My pleasure, gentlemen—” Bloomfield broke off mid-sentence, brow furrowed. “O’Shea? Would you be related to Connor and Quinn O’Shea?”

Caleb stilled. What did this man know of his brothers? The last he'd heard from Connor he'd been in the Carolinas, and Quinn and the little ones back home in Ireland.

"Aye. They're me brothers."

"Well, what do you know?" Bloomfield smiled. "Your brothers have settled in Natchez. Well, not here, exactly, but about a day's ride north along the trace."

"Me brothers are here? In Natchez?" Caleb swallowed. "All o' them?"

"Last I recall, there were four here in the colonies." Bloomfield smiled. "Are there more?"

"No. That is all." Caleb couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. He hadn't seen Connor in years, not since his eldest brother had left Ireland, his reputation in tatters. "But how?"

"It's a long story, but the governor granted your brother Connor a tract of land, and if that wasn't enough, the lucky fellow married a plantation owner's daughter. He lives on a plantation called Breeze Hill." Bloomfield laced his fingers across his chest, looking pleased with himself. "And he's partnered with Thomas and William Wainwright to start a logging enterprise floating logs down the river. As a matter of fact, Mr. Wainwright tasked me with finding loggers to send to their logging camp. The caravan's leaving tomorrow. Perhaps you'd like to see your brothers while you're here?"