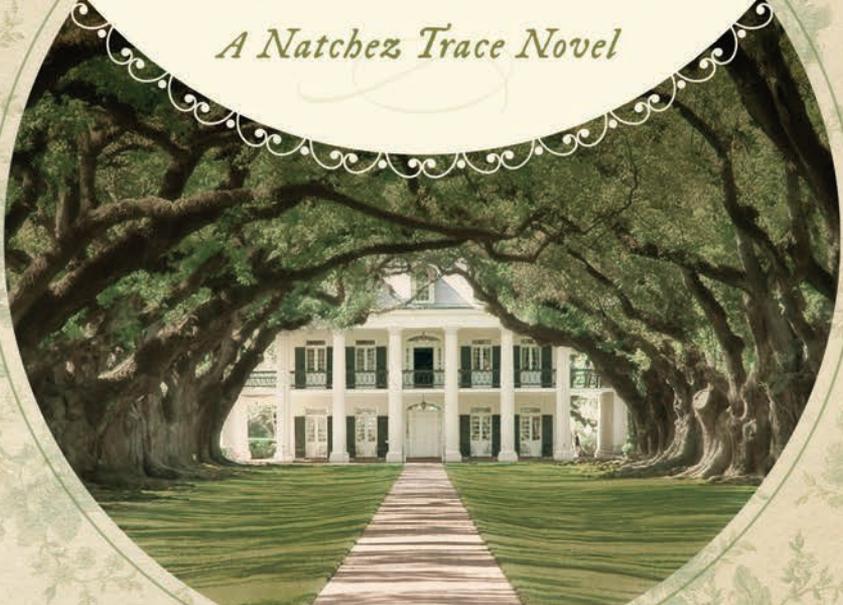


A circular inset image showing a woman in profile, facing right. She has her hair styled in intricate braids and is wearing a light-colored, high-collared dress. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

THE PROMISE OF
BREEZE HILL

A Natchez Trace Novel



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 time-worn 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

“Hillman crafts a tale with fascinating, down-to-earth characters. If you are a fan of Westerns, you will enjoy this. Livy is a character who will steal your heart.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4-star review for *Stealing Jake*

“In this romantic historical, Hillman’s characters wrestle with grudges, vengeance, and wanting what they feel they deserve. But they learn that the sins of their fathers must be forgiven along with their own trespasses if they are to live in freedom and experience the joy of love.”

CBA RETAILERS AND RESOURCES on *Claiming Mariab*

“[Hillman is] gifted with a true talent for vivid imagery, heart-tugging romance, and a feel for the old West that will jangle your spurs.”

JULIE LESSMAN, on *Claiming Mariab*

“Pam Hillman’s debut novel, *Stealing Jake*, is a little gem of a story and a credit to Pam’s talent as a writer.”

RELZ REVIEWS

“A fantastic read for fans of Western romance.”

RADIANT LIT on *Stealing Jake*

The Promise of Breeze Hill



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BREEZE HILL
A Natchez Trace Novel

PAM HILLMAN



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Designed by Jennifer Phelps

Edited by Erin E. Smith

Published in association with the literary agency of The Steve Laube Agency.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hillman, Pam, author.

Title: The promise of Breeze Hill / Pam Hillman.

Description: Carol Stream, Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., [2017] | Series: A Natchez Trace novel

Identifiers: LCCN 2017001889 | ISBN 9781496415929 (sc)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.I448 P76 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017001889>

Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 18 17
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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

MAY 1791

Connor O'Shea braced his boots against the auction block and glared at the crowd gathered on the landing.

Vultures. Ever' last one o' them.

The stench of the muddy Mississippi River filled his nostrils, and the rude shacks along the riverfront reminded him of the roiling mass of humanity in the seaports back home in Ireland. Hot, cloying air sucked the breath from his lungs, and the storm clouds in the sky brought no relief from the steam pot of Natchez in May.

Dockworkers shouted insults at each other. Haggard-faced

women in rags scuttled past as grimy children darted among the wheels of rickety carts. One besotted fool lay passed out in the street, no one to help him or care whether he lived or died. As far as Connor knew, the man could be dead already, knifed in the dead of night when no one would be the wiser.

A commotion broke out at the back of the crowd and all eyes turned as a gentleman farmer shouted that he'd been robbed. The man chased after a ragged boy, but the moment they were out of sight, his compatriots turned back to the auction, the incident so common, it was already forgotten.

Connor ignored the chaos and focused on the high bluff overlooking the wharf.

Ah, to be up there where the wind blew the foul odor of rotting fish away and the scent of spring grass filled a lad's nostrils instead. And be there he would.

As soon as someone bought his papers.

"Gentlemen, you've heard the terms of Connor O'Shea's indenture," James Bloomfield, Esquire, boomed out. "Mr. O'Shea is offering to indenture himself against passage for his four brothers from Ireland, an agreement he had with his previous master."

A tightness squeezed Connor's chest. After serving out his seven-year indenture with Master Benson, they'd come to a mutual agreement that Connor would work without wages if the influential carpenter would send for his brothers. Benson's untimely death had squashed his hopes until Bloomfield suggested the same arrangement with his new master. One year for each brother. Four years.

No, three and a half. Assuming Bloomfield made it clear in the papers that Connor had already worked six months toward passage for the first of his brothers.

But who first? Quinn? Rory? Caleb? Patrick?

Not Patrick, as much as he wanted to lay eyes on the lad.

Having fled Ireland eight years ago, he'd never even seen his youngest brother. He'd start with Quinn, the next eldest. The two of them could work hard enough to bring Caleb over in half the time. He'd leave Rory to travel with Patrick.

Pleased with his plan, he panned the faces of the merchants and plantation owners spread out before him. Surely someone needed a skilled carpenter. Dear saints above, the mansions being built on the bluff and the flourishing plantations spread throughout the lush countryside promised enough work to keep Irish craftsmen rolling in clover for years.

He spotted an open carriage parked at the edge of the crowd. A barefoot boy held the horses, and a lone woman perched on the seat. Eyes as dark as seasoned pecan met and held his before the lass turned away, her attention settling on a half-dozen men unloading a flatboat along the river's edge.

She looked as out of place as an Irish preacher in a pub, and just as condemning.

He stiffened his spine and ignored her. It didn't matter what she thought of him. He needed a benefactor, a wealthy landowner with ready access to ships and to Ireland. And he planned to stay far away from women with the means to destroy him.

The memory of one little rich gal who'd savored him,

then spit him out like a sugarcane chew would last him a lifetime.

“I say, Bloomfield, what’s O’Shea’s trade?”

“Joinery. Carpentry. He apprenticed with the late John W. Benson, the renowned master craftsman from the Carolinas.”

A murmur of appreciation rippled through the crowd of gentlemen farmers. Connor wasn’t surprised. Master Benson’s work was revered among the landed gentry far and wide. Unfortunately, Master Benson’s skill with a hammer and a lathe hadn’t saved him from the fever that struck no less than six months after their arrival in the Natchez District. With the man barely cold in his grave, Connor now found his papers in the hands of the lawyer, being offered to the highest bidder.

But regardless, no one offered a bid. Connor squared his shoulders, chin held high, feet braced wide.

The minutes ticked by as Bloomfield cajoled the crowd.

Oh, God, please let someone make an offer.

What if no one needed a cabinetmaker or a carpenter? What if Bloomfield motioned for him to leave the platform, his own man, belonging to himself, with no way to better himself or save his brothers from a life of misery back home in Ireland, a life he’d left them to suffer through because of his own selfishness?

All his worldly goods stood off to the side. The tools of his trade. Hammers. Saws. Lathes. He’d scrimped and saved for each precious piece during his years as a bonded journeyman to Master Benson. He could sell them, but what good would

that do? He needed those tools and he needed a benefactor if he would be any good to his brothers.

Finally someone made an offer, the figure abysmally low. Connor gritted his teeth as the implication of his worth slapped him full in the face. But the terms. He had to remember the terms. Every day of his labor would mark one more coin toward passage for his brothers.

A movement through the crowd caught his eye. The bare-foot boy made his way toward Bloomfield and whispered something in his ear. Connor glanced toward the edge of the crowd. The carriage stood empty, and he caught a glimpse of a dark traveling cloak as the woman entered the lawyer's small office tucked away at the base of the bluff.

"Sold." Bloomfield's gavel beat a death knell against the table in front of him. "To Miss Isabella Bartholomew on behalf of Breeze Hill Plantation."

Cold dread swooshed up from Connor's stomach and exploded in his chest.

A woman.

He'd been indentured to a woman.

He closed his eyes.

God help him.



Isabella Bartholomew pulled back the faded curtain in the attorney's office and glimpsed the Irishman's eyes close briefly as the gavel fell. Relief, maybe?

Or despair?

Unsure if Mr. O'Shea might be the man for the job, she'd hesitated to buy his papers, but hearing that he wanted to secure passage for his brothers swayed her in his favor. Surely Papa would be pleased with her choice.

Thoughts of her father swirled in her head. His strength was returning as slowly as cotton growing in the field, inch by painful inch. She couldn't see his progress, but he'd surprise her with a halting step or his gnarled fingers grasping a spoon. Small victories, but so much more than they'd dreamed of eight months ago.

Connor O'Shea jumped down from the platform. Butternut-hued breeches, roughly mended, hugged long legs. A handwoven cotton shirt, worn thin, stretched across broad shoulders. Leather lacing up the front hung loose, revealing the strong column of the man's throat.

Long strides brought him closer to Bloomfield's office. Isabella whirled from the window, unwilling to be caught staring. She hurried across the small room, skirts swishing, to stand beside a crude table strewn with papers.

The Irishman stepped through the door and removed his hat in one fluid motion. Stormy, moss-green eyes clashed with hers before he bowed stiffly in submission.

Isabella fought the urge to apologize. This arrangement wasn't about master and servant. She would have offered the job to a freemason if one could've been found. Her chin inched up a notch. She would *not* feel guilty. It wasn't her fault the man's master had expired and his papers were for sale.

“You do understand the terms, don’t you, lass?” His Irish lilt rumbled throughout the close quarters.

“Of course I do, Mr. O’Shea.”

“I’m no’ a slave.” His square jaw jutted.

Isabella stiffened her spine. “Breeze Hill does not deal in slaves.”

Having clawed his way up from the bottom, her father preferred freemen and bonded servants—men and women with a vested interest in seeing that the plantation flourished. Neighboring plantation owners had tried to convince him otherwise, but he refused to listen. When pressed, a faraway look came into his eyes, and he’d say that no man had the right to own another.

He would say no more on the matter.

“Forgive me, Miss Bartholomew. I stand corrected.” The Irishman gave a slight bow, his wind-whipped dark hair falling forward over his forehead.

He didn’t look the least bit repentant. As a matter of fact, his clenched jaw and wide-legged stance made her wonder if he regretted putting forth such terms in the first place.

No time like the present to find out. She didn’t have the time, the money, or the patience to transport him all the way to Breeze Hill if he’d already changed his mind.

“Mr. O’Shea, a fire destroyed an entire wing of my family home last fall, and I need a skilled carpenter to rebuild it.” Memories of the flames that destroyed their crops, a third of their home, and almost took her father’s life flashed across her mind, but she pushed the horrific images back into the

recesses where they belonged. “From Mr. Bloomfield’s glowing recommendation, you are that man. If you’re unwilling or unable to fulfill the terms of your indenture, now is the time to say so.”

“No, ma’am. I’m willin’.” The words grated, like a hammer pulling a nail free from a board.

She eyed him. His words and his tone were at odds with one another. But what choice did she have? Her father was obsessed with repairing the damage to Breeze Hill, and Connor O’Shea had been the first carpenter she’d found in Natchez.

No, that wasn’t entirely true. Mr. O’Shea was the first carpenter she could afford. She squished down the thought that Breeze Hill couldn’t exactly afford him now. But there would be plenty of coin after the fall harvest to send for the first of his brothers. And by then, her father would be recovered, Leah would have her child, and all would be right in their world.

As much as it could ever be without Jonathan.

“Very well. We’ll lodge here in Natchez and be on our way on the morrow.”

Bloomfield stepped in, and before she could change her mind, she signed the papers indenturing Connor O’Shea to Breeze Hill. When Bloomfield slid the papers across the table, her indentured servant took the quill in his large, work-roughened hand and scratched his name on the paper in barely legible script. With papers in hand, she led the way to the carriage, where Toby waited. She smiled and waved a hand at the lad. “This is Toby. He’s one of our best stable hands.”

“Thank ya, Miss Isabella.” The youngster grinned.

“Toby, help Mr. O’Shea load his belongings; then we’d best head on over to the Wainwrights’.” She glanced at the moisture-laden clouds. “Looks like we’re in for a rain.”



The woman gathered her skirts in one gloved hand. Connor stood by, not knowing whether to offer his hand to the haughty miss or not. He knew his place and knew from experience how easily the wealthy took offense. Before he could make up his mind, the stable boy stepped forward and assisted Miss Bartholomew into the carriage.

He noticed a discreetly stitched tear along the hem of her outer skirt as she settled on the worn leather seat. He frowned, his gaze raking the rest of the carriage, the old but carefully repaired tack, the mismatched horses. From the looks of the conveyance and Miss Bartholomew’s mended clothes, would the plantation coffers be able to fulfill the obligation of sending for his brothers?

“Miss Bartholomew . . .”

The question died on his lips as two riders careened down the bluff, heading straight toward the outdoor auction. The color drained from Miss Bartholomew’s face, and she gripped the edge of the seat.

The riders, both lads on the verge of manhood, reined up beside them, hair tousled, clothes dusty and sweat-stained.

“What’s wrong, Jim? Is it Papa?”

“No, ma’am. It’s Miss Leah.”

“The babe?” If possible, she paled even more, and Connor braced himself in case she might faint.

“I don’t know, ma’am. She just said to hurry.”

Miss Bartholomew took a deep breath and scooted to the edge of the seat.

“Jim, I’ll ride on ahead. The rest of you follow on the morrow with Mr. Wainwright’s party.”

Jim twisted the brim of his hat in his hands. “Miss Isabella, you can’t travel the trace alone.”

“Thank you for worrying, Jim, but I don’t have a choice. It’s much too soon, and Leah needs me.”

Connor realized her intention and reached for her hand, assisting her from the carriage. Grateful eyes, laced with fear, pierced his before she turned away, intent on her mission.

Would the boys stop her? When the lads didn’t protest, Connor grabbed the horse’s reins just below the bit. Decent stock, the lathered animal still needed rest before making the return journey.

“Mistress, it’s too dangerous.”

“I’m going.” She faced him, a stubborn jut to her chin.

“I may be new to Natchez, but I’ve been here long enough to know the dangers of traveling that road alone.”

“Mr. O’Shea, I won’t argue that fact.” She stood tall, the top of her head barely reaching his chin. “But my sister-in-law needs me, and nothing you can say will prevent me from going to her. Stand aside.”

Her chin thrust forward, dark-brown eyes flashing, she somehow made him feel as if she looked down at him instead

of up. He took a deep breath, struggling to remember his place. She owned the horses, the carriage, and for all practical purposes, she owned him and the three youngsters gawking at the two of them. Well, if she meant to dance along the devil's backbone, then let the little spitfire flirt with death. No skin off his nose. But at least he could give her a fighting chance.

He addressed the stable lad. "Those carriage horses broke to ride?"

"Yes, sir."

He faced Miss Bartholomew, having a hard time showing deference to a woman as daft as this one. "Mistress, if it's all the same to you, let the lads switch the saddle to one o' the fresh horses. This one could do with a bit o' rest, if ye don't mind me saying so."

She looked away, the first sign of uncertainty he'd seen. "Thank you, Mr. O'Shea. In my haste, I didn't think of the horse. Jim, do as he says, and be quick."

Two boys scurried to unhitch the horses from the carriage while Jim stripped the saddle from one of the lathered animals. In moments, they had the mare ready, and Connor assisted Miss Bartholomew into the saddle, taken aback that she didn't have any qualms about riding astride. He glimpsed a fringe of lacy ruffles just above a pair of worn leather boots before her skirts fell into voluminous folds around her ankles.

"Jim, make haste to Mr. Wainwright's. He'll see you all safely home on the morrow." She spoke to Jim, but she

looked at Connor as if she left responsibility for the boys on his shoulders.

“Yes, ma’am. Will you be all right? Shouldn’t I—?”

She reined away, the animal’s hooves kicking up dirt as it raced to the top of the bluff and disappeared northward. Connor shook his head. Crazy woman. To take off in a dither just because of the birth of a babe. The whole lot of them would probably arrive before the child made an appearance.

“I’m such an idiot.” Jim threw his hat in the dust and let out a string of curses. “Why didn’t I go with her?”

“She didn’t give you much choice, lad, rushing off like she did.” Connor led the extra horse toward the carriage.

“It’s a day’s ride to Breeze Hill.”

Connor whipped around. “A day’s ride?”

“Yes, sir. And the Natchez Trace ain’t safe for nobody, especially a lady. Mr. Bartholomew will have my head, he will.”

Connor raked a hand through his hair. Daft woman.

“Saddle up the other horse, lads. I’m goin’ after her.”

A Note from the Author

A BOOK ISN'T BORN out of one person's imagination, but from an entire cast of characters: artists, editors, agents, family, and friends. And during edits, an author of historical fiction realizes that not just those who actually have their hands on the project have a say, because the historians who have made it their lives' work to document history have a chance to shine.

I've had the pleasure of working with the same editor on this project as my first two books released through Tyndale. Erin Smith cracks the whip gently, but she knows me well. Once an anachronism is discovered, I cannot rest until I've exhausted every effort to fix it. I'm not saying I'm always successful, and any errors are mine and mine alone, but I'm glad to have Erin on my team.

Writing about the Natchez District in the 1790s was especially challenging, but also rife with potential as it was a melting pot of French, British, Spanish, African, and Native American.

Breeze Hill Plantation, the Bartholomews, Braxtons,

Wainwrights, and Hartfords, as well as their respective plantations, are fictional, as are Connor O'Shea and the majority of the secondary characters.

Actual historical figures who play a part in the story are Manuel Luis Gayoso de Lemos Amorín y Magallanes. Gayoso was the governor of the District of Natchez, also known as West Florida, in 1791. His second wife, whom he married in 1792, was indeed Elizabeth Watts. Unfortunately, she died three months after their wedding.

Another historical figure was Stephen Minor. Born in Pennsylvania, Captain Minor served in the Spanish Army before being appointed as the secretary to Governor Gayoso de Lemos. He later went on to become a successful planter and banker, as well as one of Natchez's richest residents in the early 1800s.

I hope you enjoyed this first book in the Natchez Trace series. I can't wait to share Quinn and Ciara's story with you.

Pam Hillman