



THE ROAD TO
MAGNOLIA GLEN

A Natchez Trace Novel

PAM HILLMAN

Praise for Pam Hillman

“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, AUTHOR OF *FREEDOM'S RING*

“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
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“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, 4½-STAR REVIEW, TOP PICK

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

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“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

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

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“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

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Prologue

THE *LADY GALLANT* IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN
JANUARY 1792

“Keep your brother away from my sister!”

Quinn O’Shea spread his feet wide and tried to keep his balance on the deck of the *Lady Gallant*. After weeks on board, he’d just begun to get his sea legs. A violent storm had kept all the passengers confined for days on end, the coffin-like spaces in steerage hardly fit for pigs, let alone humans.

But now the storm had passed . . . well, except for the one that stood in front of him, blue eyes blazing, strands of blonde hair blowing in the wind, and pale cheeks stained cherry apple red.

She was sky blue and golden, from the top of her head to the peach-and-cream silk gown she wore. He'd seen her on deck twice before, but her kind didn't mix with the masses stacked like cordwood in the belly of the ship.

He grinned. "Ah, now which o' me brothers would that be, lass? Rory or Patrick?"

In response to his teasing, her brows, three shades darker than her hair, descended into a frown. She stood taller, looking down her haughty little nose at him.

"Don't tell me there's more than one of the scoundrels?"

Her tone and the tilt of her chin gave her the look of sniffing something foul on the wind. He scowled. Her accent was British with a wee hint of the homeland that she tried hard to hide. One of those, eh? Just enough British aristocracy flowed through her veins that she'd squashed her Irish heritage to death, much like the British landlords had done to him and his.

"Scoundrels they be, fer sure." Quinn stepped closer, his gaze on hers. She blinked, stepping back. "And aye, there's more than one. So I shan't be knowing which of the rascals you're referring t', now shall I?"

Two well-dressed gentlemen taking a constitutional around the deck stopped nearby, eyeing Quinn with suspicion. One turned to the girl. "Miss Young, is this—" the middle-aged man tossed a condescending glance toward Quinn—"gentleman bothering you?"

"No, Mr. Marchette." Her day dress rustled as she dipped into a curtsy, the creamy skirt falling in silky folds across the deck, then pooling over Quinn's broken-down boots. "He

was helping me look for my sister. But thank you for your concern, sir.”

“Of course. Good day, miss.”

Before they were out of sight good and proper, the haughty miss whirled back to Quinn. Like a dog worrying a bone, she didn't miss a beat. “I don't know your brother's name, but ever since the storm broke, the two of them have been roaming this ship from stem to stern, and I'm at my wit's end.”

“And I'm supposed t' keep him away from her? Mayhap your sister needs t' keep her distance, eh?”

“I'll see that she does.” Her blue eyes snapped. “And if you would be so kind as to—oh!”

The ship lurched sideways. She grabbed for the railing but missed. Quinn snagged her around the waist just before she pitched forward onto the rough planking.

Those blue eyes stared into his, no longer narrowed in anger, but wide in shocked surprise. Her full pink lips rounded into a surprised O before just as quickly compressing into a thin line, her displeasure returning full force.

She pulled away, straightened her dress, and crawled right back on her high horse. “My sister is too young—” Twin spots of color polished her porcelain cheekbones. “She oughtn't be dallying with boys.”

“Ya mean poor Irish trash?” In spite of his teasing, Quinn held his temper in check.

“I never said any such thing.” She sighed. “Look, Mr. . . .”

“O'Shea. Quinn O'Shea.” Quinn touched his hat and gave a short nod.

“Mr. O’Shea. The truth is that within a few weeks, we’ll land in Natchez, and well, I’m to be married, you see, and . . .” She bit her lip, the fire in her gaze banked to a worried simmer. “Megan’s already a handful, quite the tomboy, and the less drama I have from her, the better off we’ll all be.”

“A tomboy? And you’re worried about her and me brother Rory?” He squinted at her. “Just how old is this sister o’ yours?”

“She’s eight—”

“Eight?” Quinn threw back his head and laughed.

“I fail to see anything funny about the situation.” The glare returned with full force.

“As I said, I have more than one brother, and I do no’ think ya should worry o’er Patrick and the lass. They’re both eight. What harm can they do?”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Do you even have a clue where either of them are right now?”

He frowned. “Well, no—”

“So they could have fallen overboard and you wouldn’t even know it—”

“That’s a wee bit far-fetched, Miss . . .”

“Young. Kiera Young.” She crossed her arms. “And on the contrary, it’s very likely. Do you know where I found them yesterday?”

“Where?” Quinn asked, not sure he wanted to know, but just as sure that she was going to tell him.

She stabbed a finger toward the mainmast. “There. Halfway up the rigging. Now, tell me that your brother is a good influence on my sister?”

Quinn's lips twitched, but he did his best to keep a straight face. "My humble apologies. I shall do everything in me power t' keep me rascally brother away from yer—ah—delicate wee sister."

"Please see that you do."

And with that, she whirled and was gone.



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Chapter 1

THREE WEEKS LATER

NATCHEZ UNDER-THE-HILL ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

FEBRUARY 1792

“Stay close.”

Eyes on the bustling wharf, Kiera held tight to Megan’s hand, ensuring her adventuresome sister didn’t disappear into the crowd.

“But, Kiera, I wanted to say good-bye to Patrick.”

“That snotty-nosed lad?” Sixteen-year-old Amelia wrinkled her nose. “Really, Megan, he’s simply not the kind you should be associating with. Gutter—”

“Amelia, that’s quite enough.” Kiera kept her tone even,

nervously searching the wharf for a glimpse of the man who might be her intended.

Amelia sniffed, then looked away, as poised and regal as Megan was wild and untamed. Sometimes Kiera felt like the two of them pulled her so hard in opposite directions that she would be torn asunder.

She didn't know which one she worried about the most—the one who never met a stranger and never backed down from a challenge, or the one who seemed bent on following in the footsteps of their flirtatious half sister, Charlotte.

Kiera sighed. If there was one thing to be grateful for about being shipped half a world away from her beloved home in Ireland, it was putting an ocean between Amelia and Charlotte.

It was terrifying how much of Charlotte's personality Amelia had taken on in the last two years. Kiera had spent many a night in prayer over the impressionable sixteen-year-old's future. Amelia would have stayed in Ireland, but Charlotte's husband hadn't given her a choice. When Father died, God rest his soul, Charlotte's husband had decided to sell the family holdings in Ireland in order to finance his own dealings in London.

Since George was married to the oldest sibling and all their father's property fell to him, it was his right to do with as he saw fit. But that still didn't stop Kiera from pining over the loss of the only home she'd ever known.

Only a few short weeks after George had cheerily announced that he was disposing of her father's legacy, he'd

dropped a startling piece of news. He'd arranged an advantageous marriage for her in the colonies. With Charlotte's blessing, they'd agreed it was best that Amelia and Megan travel with Kiera across the ocean to the Natchez District.

Not for the first time, her stomach roiled at the thought of her upcoming marriage to a stranger, and with great effort, she pushed the panic down. She wasn't the first woman to enter into a marriage of convenience with a man she'd never met, and she wouldn't be the last.

She should be thankful George had arranged a marriage for her and allowed her sisters to accompany her to the colonies instead of just throwing them all out in the streets. As a British nobleman, he had no obligation to his wife's half-Irish half sisters.

Everything had happened so fast after that.

Or maybe she'd simply ignored the inevitable during the long ocean voyage from Dublin.

But now they were here, and she couldn't ignore it any longer.

Her gaze panned the wharf, the dockworkers in tattered clothes unloading the ship, the other passengers disembarking, some never pausing on the crowded thoroughfare but walking quickly away toward waiting carriages, greeting friends and relatives. Others, like her, stood at the railing, unsure where they were supposed to go or what they were supposed to do now that they'd arrived.

Each conveyance wove through the crowd and up the steep incline that led to the city spread out on the bluff above

the wharf. Even from here, she glimpsed several spacious homes nestled among the trees, the full-length verandas facing the river to catch the summer breezes. Wouldn't it be grand if her intended owned one of those homes with the fancy scrollwork and porches that stretched from end to end? But she wouldn't fret over that. If her husband was a man of God and of sound moral character, she'd call herself blessed.

She searched the wharf once again, frowning as one by one their shipmates went on their way. The noon hour was far gone, and they needed to be settled before nightfall. Why wasn't her intended here to greet her and her sisters?

She spotted the boy, Patrick O'Shea, and his two older brothers threading their way through the crowd, Quinn O'Shea's broad shoulders and forceful march breaking the tide and allowing them ease of passage toward their destination. He left his brothers in charge of a meager pile of baggage and, without hesitation, entered a small building tucked against the base of the cliff.

She read the sign.

James Bloomfield, Esquire. Attorney-at-Law.

Bottom lip pulled between her teeth, she eyed the door that led to the lawyer's office. Making a quick decision, she motioned for two stevedores to carry their trunks to shore and headed toward the gangway. "Girls. Come."

As they stepped foot in a strange land where she knew no one, she squelched another surge of panic. She breathed a prayer as a pair of drunken sailors pushed past, almost pulling Megan out of her grasp. *Be with us, God.*

Even her unknown intended had to be better than the fetid smell of dead fish, unwashed bodies, and debauchery found along the waterfront.

Without bothering to carry their belongings any farther than necessary, the stevedores dumped their trunks at the end of the gangway and rushed away, no doubt in search of strong drink and comfort in one of the rough buildings lining the wharf.

She squared her shoulders. Surely Mr. Bloomfield could give her directions to her destination. She caught Amelia's attention. "Keep an eye on our belongings. I'm going to secure a conveyance."

Amelia huffed. Kiera sighed and bent down to Megan's level. "Stay with your sister. And no matter what, do not run off."

Megan nodded without taking her eyes off the chaos surrounding them. "Yes, ma'am."

Kiera threaded her way along the crowded wharf. She mounted the steps, tossing a quick look toward her sisters. They both sat on one of the trunks, Megan openly watching everything while Amelia pretended not to.

She ducked inside the lawyer's office, hoping to get her questions answered posthaste and be on her way. She pushed the door shut, then turned.

Quinn O'Shea stood next to a balding man wearing eyeglasses. Both men looked up, questioning, but it was Quinn's arched brow that set Kiera's face aflame.



Quinn took in the freshly pressed dress made of something soft and satiny, the pale hair pulled up and away from Kiera's face, the white bonnet trimmed with a blue ribbon that matched her eyes.

"Miss Young."

"Mr. O'Shea."

"Good day, miss." Mr. Bloomfield nodded a greeting, then looked to Quinn for introductions.

"Mr. Bloomfield, meet Kiera Young, a fellow passenger on the *Lady Gallant*."

"Miss Young, it is a pleasure." Mr. Bloomfield motioned toward Quinn. "Do you mind if Mr. O'Shea and I conclude our business? We'll only be a moment."

"Not at all. Please, continue." She moved to stand by the window, giving them some privacy.

Quinn turned back to Mr. Bloomfield. "You were saying?"

Bloomfield smiled. "We've been expecting you and your brothers. As soon as I heard you were on board the *Lady Gallant*, I sent word to Thomas Wainwright—"

"Thomas Wainwright?"

"Yes, the Wainwrights, good friends of your brother and his wife's family, have a home here in Natchez." Bloomfield searched through some papers. "As soon as the runner returns, I'll have him escort you and your brothers there until you head to Breeze Hill."

"Why do we have t' wait?" Quinn scowled. He'd been

cooped up on a ship for almost three months, and he saw no need to sit and wait when he could just as easily go straight to this plantation his brother had married into. “Just point me down the road t’ Breeze Hill, and I’ll be on my way.”

“No, no, you can’t go alone. The Natchez Trace is too dangerous. It would be much better if you wait and travel with Wainwright’s party.”

Quinn tamped down his impatience. “I see.”

Someone knocked and Bloomfield called out, “Come in.”

A man old enough to be his father entered, followed by the distinguished gentleman who’d asked about Kiera’s welfare aboard the *Lady Gallant*. The second man nodded politely in Kiera’s direction, then turned toward Quinn. After a brief pause, he inclined his head in recognition.

“Mr. Wainwright. I didn’t expect you so soon.” Bloomfield sounded pleased. “I haven’t long sent a boy to fetch you.”

“Poor lad.” The man called Wainwright chuckled. “His trip will be wasted. As soon as I spotted the *Lady Gallant*, I came to welcome Mr. Marchette to our fair city.” Wainwright motioned to his companion. “My business associate from London, Alistair Marchette.”

“Of Marchette Shipping?”

“You’ve heard of us?”

“Of course, my good man.” Bloomfield smiled, then cleared his throat. “Perhaps you could join me for dinner this evening? I have several clients who have need of a reputable shipping company in London.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Marchette spread his hands, returning Bloomfield’s smile. “I’m at your disposal, sirs.”

“Splendid.” Hands behind his back, Bloomfield addressed Wainwright. “Thomas, I’d be pleased if you’d join us.”

“I’d be honored.”

Bloomfield turned to Quinn. “My apologies, Mr. O’Shea. The prospect of an alliance with Marchette Shipping made me forget my manners. Thomas, meet Connor O’Shea’s brother, Quinn O’Shea.”

“Mr. O’Shea, it is a pleasure to meet you at last. A pleasure indeed.” Wainwright shook his hand. “My son is a friend of your brother. Actually, my daughter-in-law and your brother’s wife are sisters-in-law.”

Quinn’s confusion must have shown on his face because Wainwright laughed and clapped him on the back. “It’s complicated. You’ll get the gist of it by and by. I promised Connor I’d be on the lookout for your ship and would arrange transportation to Breeze Hill.”

“Transportation, sir?”

“Yes, it’s a day’s journey to the plantation.”

“I see.”

“Mr. O’Shea, if you’ll just sign these papers, you can be on your way.” Mr. Bloomfield handed him a sheaf of papers and stepped back. “Excuse me, sirs, while I attend to Miss Young.”

Quinn made his mark where indicated, then turned to the next page. When he was done, he set the papers aside.

“I trust your passage was uneventful?” Wainwright asked.

“It was—”

“The Blue Heron? Are you quite sure, miss?”

Quinn turned at Bloomfield’s distraught tone.

“Yes, sir.” Kiera Young glanced toward him, then turned her attention back to Mr. Bloomfield. “Is that a problem?”

“Well, miss, the Blue Heron isn’t exactly the place for a lady, if you’ll pardon my saying so. And you have two younger sisters, you say? I’m afraid—”

“Mr. Bloomfield, my brother-in-law sent me to Natchez with the understanding that I’m to be married. The address given was the Blue Heron.” She gave the solicitor the same look she’d given Quinn on board the *Lady Gallant*. “Might someone please secure a carriage for us?”

“Yes, but . . .” Bloomfield glanced around helplessly.

“Is there a problem, Miss Young?” Marchette interrupted, coming to her aid once again.

“No thank you, Mr. Marchette.” Kiera’s face bloomed with color. “A misunderstanding, perhaps.”

The lawyer pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. “Miss Young, you seem to be acquainted with Mr. Marchette and Mr. O’Shea. May I introduce one of our leading citizens, Thomas Wainwright?”

“My pleasure, miss.” Wainwright dipped his head. “Welcome to Natchez.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Miss Young, if you would permit me, Mr. Bloomfield is right to be concerned over your welfare. The Blue Heron is not the type of establishment a young lady should rendezvous

with her intended.” Wainwright’s smile was filled with fatherly concern. “Perhaps you’re mistaken—”

“There’s no mistake, sir. My brother-in-law made the arrangements, and—”

The door flung open and Patrick barreled inside. “Quinn. Hurry. That man’s taking Megan and Amelia.”

“Taking them? Where?” Kiera lifted her skirts and rushed toward the door.

Quinn hurried after her, pausing briefly on the porch to search the wharf for Kiera’s sisters. In spite of the lengthening shadows, Natchez Under-the-Hill still crawled with humanity. There. At the end of the gangway. His own brother Rory was wielding a broken board, the two girls cowering behind him. A hulking brute of a man with a wicked-looking knife advanced on Rory, the sixteen-year-old no match for the giant.

“Megan! Amelia!” Kiera ran across the wharf, skirts flying.

Quinn sprinted after her, grabbed her arm, and pushed her behind him. “Get out o’ the way, lass.” Palming a knife, Quinn shoved his way between Rory and the brute, his left hand held palm out. “Wait. What’s the meaning o’ this, man?”

“Get out of the way, *monsieur*. This is none of your affair.”

Quinn crouched, knife at the ready. Looked like he and Rory were in for it, and he didn’t even know what had caused the ruckus. Rough men, silent and watchful, gathered round. Women in rags and children with dirty faces jostled for position. No one offered to help or to stop this.

“Quinn, he—”

“Hush, lad,” Quinn growled at Rory to keep quiet. The man-mountain circling him wasn’t in the mood to talk about whatever had set him off. And from the scars crisscrossing his face, he’d been in enough fights to bury Quinn ten times over.

Dear Lord in heaven, protect me this day. Don’t let me have come all this way t’ spill me guts on me first day in the New World.

“Claude. Enough.” A voice with a heavy French accent cut through the tension. The crowd parted, and a well-dressed man inserted himself between Quinn and the brute with the knife. He turned, his emotionless black eyes boring a hole through Quinn. His craggy face would have been unremarkable, and might have even been considered handsome at one time, but a long, jagged scar ran from his temple to his jawline. His thin lips curved into a sardonic half smile. “My associate is correct. This is none of your affair.”

Quinn didn’t take his eyes off the Frenchman or the thug with the knife.

“He said Amelia belonged to him, that he was going to take her to a tavern and force her to—” Rory’s voice broke over the horror of what he’d heard—“to . . .”

“It is true. These *filles* are my charges.” The Frenchman stepped forward. “The captain of the *Lady Gallant* has accepted payment for their passage. My apologies for any confusion my man caused with his limited English. Claude.” He snapped his fingers. “Load up their belongings and let us be on our way.”

“*Oui*, Monsieur Le Bonne.”

“No.” Rory swung, and in one quick move, Claude caught

the board, wrested it from Rory's hands, and had the knife at his throat before Quinn could stop him. Wide-eyed, Rory stared at him.

Quinn crouched again, his attention jerking from the thug to the well-dressed Frenchman, his heart in his throat as his brother's life hung by a slender thread. Slowly, he put down his knife, then held up his hands, palms forward. "The lad meant no harm. Just—just let him go."

The Frenchman lifted his hand, and a hush fell over the crowd. Quinn's stomach dropped, and he knew he was looking death in the eyes. One word, one snap of the Frenchman's fingers, and Rory would be dead.

Kiera pushed in front of Quinn before he could stop her. "Monsieur Le Bonne?"

The Frenchman's gaze raked Kiera, like a merchant giving his stamp of approval on goods received. Quinn barely resisted the urge to strike out at him. Only the knife at Rory's throat held him in check.

"Please, have your man put away his knife." She fumbled with the drawstring on her purse. "A letter. Here's a letter from my brother-in-law." She held the letter out, hand trembling. "I'm—I'm to be your wife."