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## A NOTE ON HISTORICAL FICTION

**I**n order to make this story fit together as I desired, it was necessary for me to fudge on some historical details. I suppose this is something of a necessity in all historical fiction, but I also suspect that I have done this a little more than is normally done. For example, there were no American fatalities in the raid on the *Philadelphia*, but in this book there is one. Neither were there any rescued hostages, still less a beautiful one. There are more things like that, but you get the picture. The downside of this is that an unsuspecting young reader might not be getting his history from a pristine mountain spring, but rather out of the tap in the kitchen. The upside is that any old-fashioned blunders of mine will most likely be chalked up to the author's creativity instead of to his ignorance.



*Chapter One*  
**THREE ESCAPES**

**T**homas Watson knew that he had to be breathing somehow, but he couldn't exactly remember the last time he had actually taken a breath. His master, the bashaw of Tripoli, had left their sloop for the evening at the invitation of the English ambassador to Spain, whose ship was across the harbor. Thomas was now outside that sloop's main cabin, looking at the small lights along the shore. He was almost certain he could make it there by swimming, provided he could get into the water without alerting the watch. Spain wasn't his native Maryland, but it was European and not that cursed Tripoli, which had been his prison home for the last five years. His master almost never sailed anywhere—this was only the second time since Thomas had been his prisoner—and if he was going to make an escape, now would have to be the time.

Before his capture, Thomas had been a mate on the *Blue Heron*, a merchant ship out of Boston, and they had been taken by the Barbary pirates just south of Sicily. He had been held for hostage along with the rest of the crew, according to the Barbary fashion, and then after about six months, the bashaw had gotten the idea into his head that he needed an Anglo cupbearer in order to impress his visitors from the other cities along the north coast of Africa—not to mention the occasional embassies from the infidels. Thomas was a good-looking man, well over six feet tall, strong and well-built, and unlike some other members of the crew, still had all of his teeth. Despite his experience at sea, he was still relatively young—about twenty-one when he was captured—because he had first put out to sea as a ship’s boy when he was very young. He looked far more presentable than the other hostages, and with his shock of sandy blond hair, he stood out drastically from the other servants in the palace at Tripoli. And so he had been chosen to wear the bashaw’s livery, worse the luck. “Well-favored is ill-favored,” he used to say to himself.

Matters only got worse as the rest of the *Blue Heron* crew had been quietly ransomed three months later when a payment arrived from a British bank in London—one which specialized in routing ransom payments that the new American government didn’t want to publicly admit to having paid. The system of hostage taking in the Mediterranean was a game that everyone played, but the Americans were becoming restive about it. They begrudgingly played along, but didn’t want anyone to know about it. So secret payments

were made under the table. At the same time, demands were beginning to grow in the United States for the government to do something about these pirates. No one wanted the hostages to languish, but no one wanted to admit to paying the necessary ransom.

So Thomas continued to languish quietly, serving the bashaw, and did not know if anybody even knew where he was, or if anybody was even trying to ransom him. For all the crew of the *Blue Heron* knew, he had been taken off and killed. Thomas had been encouraged by the outbreak of open war with the pirates after the election of President Jefferson, but there was never much news, and not all of what news there was even reached him. And from what he had heard, he didn't think that President Jefferson was really in favor of a strong Navy—and his enslaved condition, it seemed to him, called out for a strong Navy. The stronger the American Navy was, the better he liked it.

The night air was clear but heavy, and rich scents coming from shore wove their way around Thomas. The moon was full, with the occasional backlit cloud scudding across its face. Outside the places set off by the moonlight, all was black in effect, but a heavy and dark purple in reality. Thomas had been standing in one place so long that one foot had gone to sleep. He shifted and let the blood rush back into his foot. The air was balmy, cool, inviting, and occasionally warm.

So here he was now, just a mile from that Spanish shore, with his first clean opportunity to escape. Now that the time had come upon him, he hesitated about what to do.

His first thought had been to creep up behind the watchman standing silently by the helm, cut his throat, and be on his way. And there were some of the bashaw's men who would have deserved the sharp justice of that kind of knife edge—a kitchen blade stolen from the galley—and he would have been in the water and swimming with a clean conscience. But the man who had the watch this night was Hamet, the one man in the bashaw's entourage who had been even partially decent to him. No, it would have to be stealth down the anchor line. He moved quietly and eased over the gunwale.

Every small sound clattered, squeaked, and roared in Thomas's ears. He could not understand why Hamet did not leap to his feet, shouting at whoever was making the ferocious and infernal racket. But for anyone who did not already know that an escape was in progress, the evening was gloriously quiet, broken only by the regular slap of water against the hull. The full moon hung over the harbor at Rota, and a shimmering reflection of that moon ran straight across the harbor from shore to ship, providing Thomas with a pale, jagged white road that he was going to swim alongside, just outside the light in the silent blackness. It was the spring of 1803, and Thomas slipped into the water, tucked his knife in his belt, and began a methodical and quiet breaststroke. When he was a hundred yards from the sloop, he dropped his jealous guard against the sound of his breathing. Nothing could keep him from making that shore now.

Jules Monroe stared unhappily at his cousin, Samuel, who had caught sight of him making his way down a red clay dirt path toward the road that ran along the river and into town. Samuel had chased him down, and Jules turned around, prepared for a stiff argument.

The unseasonably muggy Maryland air hung about the two of them, but they were both native to it and noticed the humidity no more than any one of the crabs in a nearby inlet might notice the water. A high line of heavy green trees, a giant's hedgerow, ran along each side of the road, hemming the two in. In the quiet before either of them spoke, crickets and birds chattered madly in the spring background, each trying to be heard above the other.

Jules was broad in the shoulder and more than six inches taller than Samuel. Samuel was not slight, but rather muscular and wiry—neither was Jules. Jules was not fat, but obviously powerful. The two stared at each other for a moment, and they did so with the same clear eyes. But Jules was a black young man, the mulatto son of Samuel's Uncle Henry. Henry had been the youngest and most irresponsible of six sons and had gotten Jules by one of the house servants at his parents' plantation farther north, and he had then run off in disgrace when the affair was found out. Samuel's father, John Cochrane Monroe, the second oldest of the clan, had agreed to take Jules' mother to his plantation house, a tobacco farm in southern Maryland.

He had freed Jules' mother before Jules was born so that Jules could grow up with at least some measure of freedom. But it was apparent to everyone by the time Jules was six that



he would have a hard life in one direction, and an impossible one in the other. His mother had died when he was just three, and he had been educated right alongside Samuel. On the Monroe plantation he had all the privileges of a scion of the household, but that all ended necessarily at the property line of the Monroe place, and all the wishing in the world wouldn't change it. He had his grandfather's high intelligence and his father's energy. He loved Samuel's father and mother as his own parents and was as loyal to them as anyone could possibly be, but he was miserable and, furthermore, completely and utterly trapped.

"Where are you going?" Samuel said.

Jules nodded toward the road, which was now in sight. "Baltimore," he said.

"Why?" Samuel said.

"There's a letter on the mantelpiece," Jules said. "I didn't want to go without saying goodbye, but I *have* to go, and I don't know that you can let me. But I have to go . . ." Jules trailed off.

Samuel just stared at him. Jules kicked at the dust on the road. "I can't go north . . . no place for free blacks, especially free *educated* blacks. I sure can't go south, and I can't stay here. I think I can sign with a ship in Baltimore—out at sea, a man's a man. At least more of a man, that's what I hear. Or they at least let you *try* to be a man."

"Well, I don't know what they'll—we'll—do. But Jules . . ." Here Samuel held out his hand, and Jules brushed past it to embrace him. They held each other close for a minute, and then Jules pulled away, tears in his eyes. "Bye, Samuel," he said.

“Bye, Jules,” Samuel said. He watched until Jules disappeared around the turn where the path met the road, then turned around and ran back to the plantation house.



Susannah Wilcox closed the lid of her trunk with a flourish. She was going to visit her uncle and aunt in Naples, and she was as excited as she had ever been about anything. Her uncle had been the ambassador there for only about a year, and when his letter had arrived inviting her to visit them for six months or so, the decision took about two weeks for her parents to make. Susannah’s parents were not thrilled with the prospect of her traveling across the ocean, but at the same time they knew it would widen her experiences, and it would finish her education off with an impressive flourish. She would almost certainly be presented to the King of Naples. In her politics, Susannah, like the rest of her family, was a fierce republican, but she also kept thinking about which of her dresses she should wear to the court. Perhaps the purple . . .

Susannah’s mother, a handsome and obviously kind woman named Clara, swept back into the room, carrying another dress. “Are you sure you don’t want this one?”

“I’m sure, Mama. Look at the hem.”

Her mother looked at the hem, fussed over it for a minute, and then burst into tears. “Oh, Mama,” Susannah said. They held each other for a few moments and then pulled back again.

“I will only be gone for six months, or perhaps just a few more. And it will be *such* an adventure . . .”

Clara nodded, wiping her eyes. “We know. It is good. It is good. You will write?”

“With all the news, as much as I can. And not very *much* gossip . . . just small enough to avoid the Rev. Smythwick’s understanding of St. Paul’s censures.” They both laughed. The sermon the previous Sunday had circled endlessly around precisely that, one of the pastor’s favorite sins to preach against. “Upon my word, Mrs. Wilcox,” Susannah’s father had said, “if that good man preaches against gossip one more time, the devil will be plainly out one good tool from his toolbox.”

Clara took the frayed dress back to the closet in the next room and reappeared a moment later, saying, “Well, come down now. Robert will get your trunk. I am sure breakfast is waiting, and your father will be back from the stables momentarily. He is getting the coach ready, and we decided that he should take you to Baltimore. We will have breakfast, then all pray together, and then you can go, leaving your mother most disconsolate.”

“Don’t talk like that, Mama.” They both walked out onto the spacious landing and then descended the staircase at the end of the hall.

Susannah’s uncle had been a strong supporter of Mr. Jefferson in Maryland, and after the election the ambassadorship had been a natural reward. But it was not an abuse of spoils, because Susannah’s uncle, James Wilcox, was one of the most able men in the state—no better man could have been picked, and even Jefferson’s political enemies

acknowledged it. He was already being spoken of in the capitals of Europe as a fair credit to the new republic. But Susannah remembered him from her time growing up as one of the kindest men in her life. She was looking forward to seeing her uncle and aunt as much as she was looking forward to Italy, and that was a great deal indeed.



Samuel was a good runner, and he ran the mile back to his home quite easily. A servant at the front door saw him loping up the drive, and opened the door to tell someone inside that something seemed amiss. After Samuel bounded up the steps, the servant pulled the door wide open as Samuel ran through it. “Thank you, Aeneas,” Samuel panted and headed straight for his father’s study.

After Samuel burst in and told him what Jules was doing—and about the letter on the mantelpiece—the first thing Mr. Monroe did was turn and order one of the servants to saddle two horses. Then he hurried to get the letter from the mantelpiece, shouting for Samuel’s mother, Molly, as he went. She joined him when he was halfway through the letter, and he silently handed her the first page. They both read through it quietly, and just stood silently for a moment when they were done.

John Cochrane said, “We waited a week too long to talk to the boys about our decision.” His wife nodded.

Aeneas appeared in the doorway. “Your horse is ready, sir,” he said, and disappeared again. The Monroes walked slowly out the front door of their stately home.

“I knew he was unsettled, but I had no idea he was so unhappy. I will bring Jules back,” he said, mounting. “You tell Samuel what we have decided to offer them. I will tell Jules. When Jules and I get back, we will speak of all the details over dinner. It appears we have a great deal to talk about, matters that should have been discussed some time ago.”

*Chapter Two*  
“I WOULD BE  
HONORED, SIR”

**W**hen Thomas first arrived back in the United States, he was the toast of Baltimore. News of his daring escape from the bashaw had been celebrated in newspapers from Boston to Savannah, and he found himself invited to call on scores of the nicest aristocratic homes in the city, where he was prevailed upon to tell his story over and over again. At first it was gratifying, but he was beginning to grow heartily sick of it. But during that time, and in the course of those visits, he had kept his wits about him, and had also met some men who were interested in developing land tracts in Kentucky. Thomas was deeply interested in going there because Kentucky seemed to him to be about as far from the deep blue sea as it would be reasonable for a man to live. Kentucky had its perils—bears, Indians, revivals, and assorted other bad