

PRE-PUBLICATION EXCERPT



The Diary of Essie Lassiter

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CHAPTER 1

The Village of Wickhamshire, England May 9, 1773

Thomas coughed violently. His flesh was marred by the ugly lesions of smallpox. In his final moments, a loud snapping sound abruptly shattered the peaceful aura I attempted to create. A broken string! The harp had been in my family for generations. The music gently caressing my husband's forlorn soul perished like Thomas's ability to incur a simple breath. His body ceased with a shallow intake of air strained by a wheeze. Smallpox has ravaged our village. So many good people have died. And now, my Thomas! I don't know how to go on.

Hours passed. I sat alone in our cottage. Just me and Thomas when a gentle knock befell my door. I opened it to the site of Reverend Pelt, a portly, older man with a kind manner.

"I am so sorry to hear about Thomas's passing. I intended to come earlier but as you know, so many have taken ill. Without Thomas here to tend to the sick, I am making the rounds and doing what I can."

"I know the people of the village appreciate anything you can do." I paused and then shifted from feeling sorry for myself to needing the Reverend's help in planning a proper funeral. "We have a small plot in back. I was hoping you could find two young men to dig a grave for Thomas, and maybe, you could say a prayer, or a few words, or something.

Reverend Pelt looked at me with sad eyes. He placed an arm around my shoulder. "I know you aren't religious and have no family nearby. We will speak at church this Sunday of Thomas and the other villagers who have succumbed. I hope you will attend. It will bring you peace."

He was right. Thomas and I were not religious although we did believe in God. We came to Wickhamshire five years ago, shortly after Thomas was credentialed. He had seen a post for a town doctor. The pay was meager but the chance for a young couple to start fresh somewhere new felt like an adventure. Now, life seemed to be an angry wave exerting its temper against a rocky cliff. Then, Reverend Pelt shattered my weakened spirits.

“I’m afraid local ordinance stipulates that the bodies of all smallpox victims be burned.”

Of course, I knew this already. My husband was the town doctor. I, the midwife, assisted him in many medical procedures. We worked together often, and I learned much beyond my designated station. “I understand,” was all I could manage to stammer out.

Reverend Pelt embraced me. He reminded me of my grandfather; a big bear of a man who said little but from whom love emanated. “Thomas’s body will be burned this evening, along with the others. I recommend you stay home. I do not find it to be a pleasant experience.”

I nodded but had not decided if I would attend. Being absent didn’t feel like the right thing to do. Reverend Pelt left and returned within the hour. He brought two young men wearing neckerchiefs who proceeded to wrap Thomas’s body in a bed sheet. Then, I watched as they gently placed the body in a horse-drawn cart. Once they left, I sat alone on my favorite chair. It was from that position by the window I could work on my quilts and enjoy the late afternoon sun. Feeling more alone than at any point in my life, I began to cry. Thomas had been so sick; I didn’t realize how deprived I was of sleep. I napped on the hardwood chair until a rapping on the door sprung me to my feet.

“Mrs. Lassiter, open the door at once!”

I gently opened the door, but only slightly, poking my head through to see a stranger who bore a black handlebar moustache and an evil grin. I was not in the mood for visitors. Didn't he know my husband died only hours ago? "Can I help you," I asked.

He pushed his way past me into the house. "My name is Elias Carmichael. I hold your husband's debt. I understand he passed away earlier today. When will you be making good on the amount owed?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "My husband's body has barely turned cold. You have some nerve showing up now and demanding money. How dare you! I would thank you to leave."

The evil man shrugged. His burly shoulders rolled backward in temporary defeat. "Fine, fine. Take a day or two to mourn. I'll be back to collect the £200 that is owed."

"£200?" I exclaimed. "Well, you may as well say £1,000. I have no such fortune to give."

"You have two days to figure it out. If not, I will take possession of all you own including this house. You will be thrown into the London Debtor's Prison."

"Good day to you, you wretched man."

With that, I slammed the door and contemplated my predicament. Thomas and I worked steadily. We had no family about. The people in the village were mostly appreciative constituents. There were no close friends from whom I might borrow this grand sum. I supposed I could run but my family never condoned cowardice.

It was approaching the hour for supper. I wasn't hungry but, as was my habit, I went to the kitchen and prepared a bowl of chicken broth. I took a spoonful or two to my mouth

and discarded the notion of eating. My will to live had evaporated with Thomas's last breath. Eating was superfluous. I needed to leave the house. It smelled of illness and felt confining. I began walking toward town when I detected an enormous plume of smoke filling the early evening air. Several of the men from town had dug a trench. Bodies wrapped in bed sheets were being carelessly tossed into a fire. My Thomas was one of them. These men showed no respect for the dead. Thomas deserved a proper funeral. He gave everything, including his life, to help the people of Wickhamshire. And this is how he is repaid? The acrid smell of the event turned my stomach and lowered my spirits to depths previously unseen. Scared and alone, I returned to my cottage to face the murky future.

CHAPTER 2

The Village of Wickhamshire, England May 11, 1773

Despondent when I awoke, I thought I might write a letter. Sadly, my parents had passed on. Since I had no siblings, and no close friends to speak of. I settled on the only person that came to mind, Thomas's older sister, Charlotte. Three years Thomas's senior, Charlotte was the first to leave home upon marrying a teacher enchanted by the growing population of Wales. I dipped my quill in the ink jar and realized that my letter had a true purpose. It wasn't to extort my feelings and make myself feel better, but rather to let Charlotte know her younger brother had died. How did I not think of this? What kind of person was I?

I had not been able to complete the salutation before the angry rapping darkened my doorstep.

"It is Mr. Carmichael. I have returned to settle your debt."

I gradually opened the door and was crestfallen to observe a small army complete with horses and covered wagons. Why did they need to send so many men to confront a grieving widow with her husband's debt?

"Have you the £200?" He barked as if he already knew the answer.

Drawing breath deep into my lungs, I replied simply, "I do not but if you grant me some time, I will find a way to repay the debt."

Mr. Carmichael snarled. "Mrs. Lassiter. It is not within my purview to grant extensions. The fact of the matter is your husband was already severely delinquent." Then, as

if to add insult to injury, he said, “After we sell your meager abode, your husband’s medical supplies and whatever else you may own, your remaining debt will still be substantial.”

He paused and then as if inconvenienced went on. “I am required by law to ask if you have anyone who might stand in for you?”

“I don’t understand.”

“To assume your debt, my good lady.”

There was no one. I shook my head slowly side to side, while my eyes drilled into the wooden floor of the cottage.

“Fine. He nodded to a much older man with rounded glasses and a kind disposition. “The town constable will read a proclamation.”

The constable reluctantly read from a piece of parchment. “It is so ordered that this home and all its possessions shall be repossessed and sold at auction to retire, in part, the debt of Dr. Thomas Lassiter. His widow, Esther Lassiter, commonly known by the name of Essie, shall be immediately remanded to the London Debtor’s Prison where she will remain and pay rent until such time as the debt can be retired. Let all men here with me today bear witness.”

I watched sullenly as the army of men invaded my home and began removing all that we owned including my prized harp with the broken string. I recognized two of the men and passionately addressed them.

“Mr. Williams! I delivered your son three months ago. Mr. Sammons! My husband cured your wife’s fever just last week. Have you no shame?”

Our memories waltzed past me as the men whom Thomas and I served dutifully refused to look me in the eye. When the last of our possessions was gone, I stood in the

barren space, trying to suppress the tears, as two lawmen approached. As they each grabbed an arm and escorted me to their carriage, I looked over my shoulder at the little home where Thomas and I had been so happy and wondered if life would ever be normal again.

CHAPTER 3

London Debtor's Prison, London, England May 12, 1773

For all intents and purposes, my life ended once Thomas died. We lived happily outside London in the quaint village of Wickhamshire. Even though we were unable to have children of our own, my heart filled with joy each time I assisted a young woman in bringing a babe into this world. Married seven years, debt and hard times befell us. Thomas would not charge a fee to the indigent. Those who could, made installments for care and elixirs. The debts Thomas owed for medical supplies and training overwhelmed us. Somehow, Thomas managed to keep the creditors at bay.

Days after my husband's passing, I was removed from my home and taken to this horrid place with nothing but the clothes on my back. Here, I am expected to retire Thomas's remaining debt, and pay rent for the privilege of residing in this place of incarceration. Meager sums were offered to prisoners as offsets to debt for completing simple tasks for the jailers. Certainly, I could cook, mend garments, and clean their quarters but since I have no means of significant income, retiring the debt will be impossible.

A quarter-century has passed since my birth. I draw breath, but I am no longer alive. Too afraid to speak I sat against the wall on the cold, stone floor. Thirty or more women, I can't be sure, live in a space suited for a third that number. The wretched conditions were not fit for man nor beast. Some had been here for months. I just arrived and wonder how I might survive a single night in this dreadful building. There were no beds. The single wooden bucket, for relieving oneself sat unattended in a corner. The odor was ten times more pungent than any stable I'd mucked. The noise was reminiscent of the vulture's screech when a dead animal was found on a country path. The room was stifling. No one could bathe and the

sweat poured from us like moisture sprouting from a rotten plum. I glanced to my right and saw a young woman, a girl really, perhaps fifteen or sixteen and I slid over to her, never rising to my feet. I feared drawing unwanted attention. When I reached the young girl, I saw she was sitting up, her knees pulled to her chest and her head hanging low.

“I am Essie,” I said as I placed one arm around her shoulder for comfort.

Her head lifted slowly, acknowledging the gesture. I could see the young, freckled face was more frightened than I. Her blue eyes radiated the unabashed innocence of youth.

“What is your name?” I asked.

Slowly, in an accent that sounded French, she replied in broken English. “I am called Marie.” She stated her name in two long drawn syllables, Ma – ree.

Marie held a cold sweat across her forehead and was pale, like a faint yellow moon. When she spoke, her tongue appeared pasty, as if she hadn’t had any water for days.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

Marie sat up. It was then I could see she was with child. “Two days,” she said. She shivered, indicating her sweat was from fever and not the warm spring day in the overcrowded room with only one barred window.

“You are unwell,” I proclaimed. “How far along are you?”

She shrugged. “I cannot be sure. Seven or eight months, I think. I am so scared. I do not wish my child to be born in this place.”

I gently brushed her strawberry blonde hair from her eyes and felt her forehead. For sure, Marie was feverish. I worried her illness would endanger her child.

“I am a midwife. I could help you, but I have no supplies. We must let the guard know you are ill and require a doctor.”

Marie let go a nervous sort of laugh. “It is frivolous to try. When they found me in an alley and tossed me in here, my condition was obvious. They do not care.”

Alarmed, I asked perhaps too directly if she was prepared to lose her child to cowardice. “You have nothing to lose,” I proclaimed.

Marie smirked in a manner I thought immature. “The primary guard assigned to this cell is called, ‘The Ruffian.’ He is a large, round man with bulging eyes and a sagging jowl. I have watched him come into this hell hole, pull out prisoners by the hair, and then have his way with them in the next room. Do not fool yourself that a man like this will pay any mind to the medical needs of any of us. They’d sooner see us die than offer proper care.”

It was a difficult argument to rebut.

“If you let me look between your legs, I can tell when the baby might arrive.”

Marie nodded and lifted her soiled skirt and pulled down her undergarment.

As I prepared to examine her, a strong hand landed on my shoulder and a deep, throaty voice barked, “I got me first rights on that young lass.” Her lurid breath swooped down on me like an approaching storm kicking up the road’s unwelcome dust.

“You have mistaken the situation,” I replied. “This girl is with child. I am a midwife.”

Her large hand balled into a fist and landed forcefully on the right side of my jaw. I fell back, dazed, barely aware of my surroundings. While my vision was blurred and the sudden pain obscured my thoughts, I could hear the ogre’s haughty tone as she plunged her filthy hand between the legs of young Marie.

“I’ll show you a good time,” I heard her say. Wrought with fever, Marie writhed in agony on the unsanitary floor until the last breath had left her body. The disgusting ogre who murdered Marie and her unborn child exhibited no remorse, returning to her clan and seeking some other way to exert her dominance.

I lay on the floor longer than I needed. There was scant room to move. I admit I felt guilty in not rising to Marie’s aid. I was frightened and felt physically unequipped to challenge the larger woman. I pulled myself to a sitting position and slid on my buttocks across the small expanse, trying to get close to Marie. I don’t even know why. She was gone. I felt like someone should pay some respect to her short-lived existence. I knew precious little about her, but I did know that no one should leave this world in the manner Marie did. No one should have to live in the deplorable conditions of the Debtor’s Prison. I could only pray that something good might arise from the tragedy of my current plight.

CHAPTER 4

London Debtor's Prison, London, England May 26, 1773

I have endured this hell for fourteen days. There is little to eat and living conditions are deplorable. I am unsanitary, unworthy of my status as a human being. I have Thomas's debt, and now I accumulate even more as they levy daily rates to merely exist. I sleep on the stone floor with my back to the wall. I have learned to always be watching. Even though the ogre who murdered young Marie has been taken away, a feeling of safety continues to elude me. I don't know where the ogre went. I suspect they put her down like a rabid animal. For me, I see no way out. There is no silver lining on my dark cloud. Death would be a welcome respite.

A guard deposited a pail of cold water and two loaves of stale bread into our room. Parched women attacked the pail and each other to get a drink. I didn't bother. Loathing violence, I prefer to wither and perish. An older woman rescued a small portion of the bread and was kind enough to offer me some. Not eating for so long twists your stomach in knots. After too long, you simply don't feel hungry. I reasoned that the irritation may prove temporary, so I stashed the tiny morsel in a skirt pocket. I sat contently hoping to get a turn at the recently emptied waste bucket. I closed my eyes and felt myself doze off when a loud, garrulous voice startled me.

"You! You over there against the wall. Come with me."

The older woman who had shared her bread looked at me. "My dear, I fear The Ruffian is calling for you. Be still and it will pass quickly."

Immediately, I understood her warning. The Ruffian had been working his way through the younger women in our cell. I had become adept at blending in along the back wall. Apparently, I hadn't escaped his notice, nor could I stave off the unwanted advance.

I stood up slowly. "Me Sir? I am feeling unwell. I have come down with dysentery."

He grumbled something indiscernible in reply. The raucous women of our cell were too loud for me to hear. He finally motioned with one finger for me to approach. I proceeded slowly across the room to the accompaniment of jeers. As I was just mere steps from his putrid aroma, I decided to faint. I rolled my eyes toward the top of my head and simply allowed my knees to buckle. I fell in a heap on the pestilent floor and lay perfectly still with my eyes closed. The Ruffian grumbled again before choosing another and departing.

My heart ached for the woman chosen to take my place. I snuck a peak through a squinted eye. She looked to be about my age and was, if I may say so, a homely type. Then again, it was difficult to maintain any façade of beauty in a place like this. Here, it was survival by any means possible or die trying. Once I felt it safe to do so, I rose and walked slowly, hunched over for effect, back to my spot on the back wall. On the way, I used the waste bucket and thought how refreshing it might be to take a simple bath. My skin crawled and itched so. At times, I wanted to scratch the flesh right from my bones. I managed to fall asleep and was again interrupted by the calling of my name.

"Mrs. Lassiter, come to the front."

The guard calling my name was a young man, tall with chestnut hair. "The governor of this prison would like to see you. You shall address him as Lord Hall."

I nodded. As if he sensed my fear, he offered, “Do not despair, Madam. Lord Hall is an elderly man serving his final post. He looks the other way with guards like The Ruffian, but he is not like that himself.”

We walked from the cell along a cobblestone path to a large red brick house serving as the governor’s residence. The air was cool, and the smell of blooming honeysuckle made me feel alive. I had almost forgotten the pleasing sensation of the sun on my face. “What does Lord Hall require of me?”

“First, that you get cleaned up. Lord Hall won’t tolerate filth in his presence. A warm bath has been drawn off the entry level drawing room. There you will have privacy and a clean dress to wear. Once you are presentable, Lord Hall requires your service to mend his favorite quilt.”

“To mend a quilt? I am sure there are many here who could accomplish such a simple task. Why was it that he chose me?”

“I am told that Lord Hall had a chance encounter with a woman from Wickhamshire who swore to him that you were the best quilter in England.”

I was struck by the coincidence of it all. I could not fathom who from my village could have met Lord Hall and what would have caused her to speak of me and my quilts. Of all things! I was given fifteen minutes to take a bath, brush my hair, and dress. The new dress was a basic grey cotton gown and proved too big for my petite frame. Nevertheless, it was good to have something clean to wear and to feel a sense of dignity simply by being clean.

I opened the door and found the young guard patiently waiting to take me to Lord Hall. We climbed two flights of a wide, circular staircase, adorned with the most exquisite

wood carving. I felt like a fairy princess on her way to the ball. When we arrived at the top, two matching doors blocked the path to Lord Hall's chambers.

The young guard knocked gently on the door and stated his purpose. "Lord Hall, I am accompanied by Mrs. Esther Lassiter, by your request, Sir."

"You may enter," came the reply.

My first impression was one of relief. Lord Hall was a tall but elderly man, easily in his seventies. He had a slight paunch and wore his powdered wig on a head held high. It was evident that this man regarded himself as a gentleman even if he looked the other way at how his prison was run. He was like a king, oblivious to the actions of his knights. For Lord Hall, it was about hearing what he wanted to hear and coasting until retirement or death, whichever came first.

"I am Jonas Hall," he stated in a regal manner befitting his station. "I understand you are a gifted quilter. I fear that in my older years, I always seem to be cold. My favorite quilt has come undone and requires mending."

I spied the quilt on his large, four poster bed and immediately noticed a tear in the well-worn material. "I could certainly mend the old one or, if you prefer, I could make a new one."

"Oh, that would be divine," he replied. His smile revealed yellow teeth, likely from a lifetime of tobacco. A pipe sat in a holder on the round table situated beside Lord Hall's stuffed armchair. "How long do you need to complete the task?"

I didn't offer an immediate reply. I reasoned I could spend more time away from the cell if I prolonged my effort. "It depends. Would you want a similar pattern or perhaps something more elaborate?"

Lord Hall clenched his thin lips as a smile broadened his creased face.

"I believe the Hall family crest would do just fine."

"A complex design could certainly take more time. I would think the task might be complete over the course of six weeks if I am permitted to work on it for the duration of each day." I would do almost anything to stay out of the prison cell. Since the corrupt operation of this institution charged daily rent, I calculated an opportunity to perhaps mitigate my growing indebtedness. "Lord Hall, if I may be so bold. Would you consider letting my work on your new quilt pay down some of my debt?"

He cleared his throat and said rather directly, "You shall be paid six pence per day, no more. My valet will provide you with everything you need. While this work is ongoing, you will be brought to the main house to do your work. Returning each evening to the cell will place you in danger. The other prisoners will resent your being favored. A cot will be made up in the stable. You will bathe each morning before entering the main house and meals will be provided. Is this understood?"

I saw no benefit in attempting further negotiation. Sleeping in the stable, meals, and a daily bath were payment enough. Thomas's debt and the new daily assessments could never be overcome. I nodded and merely replied, "Yes, m'Lord."

CHAPTER 5

London Debtor's Prison, London, England June 16, 1773

As the quilt neared its completion Lord Hall took ill. I asked to see him and was escorted to his chamber by the same auburn-hair soldier who first brought me to the big house. The truth was that Lord Hall and I had developed an arms-length friendship of sorts. He was lonely and favored me for my compassionate listening and optimistic point of view. Even though he was my captor, the thought was not lost on me that Thomas once appreciated those same qualities.

As I entered the expansive quarters, the air held the scent of illness. It wasn't like Thomas and smallpox, but it was evident, nonetheless. The room felt stuffy, and Lord Hall lay underneath the old, worn quilt, coughing so. His cheeks turned crimson with each hack. It reminded me of the many patients I assisted Thomas with who had pleurisy. Thomas would prescribe remedies to reduce inflammation of the lungs and to promote free flow of the blood. Honey and milk might be used to ease the symptomatic cough.

"Lord Hall, might I suggest that you try barley water, linseed oil, or sarsaparilla?"

Before he could answer, I went to his bedside and helped him to prop his upper torso against the headboard. I placed two down pillows behind his back and head. That would keep the blood from stagnating and mucus from collecting in the lungs.

Once he was comfortable, he replied to my question with a decided huff. "The doctor attending me spoke of bloodletting as a means to recovery. I much prefer your suggestion."

"With your permission, M'Lord, I will take my leave and visit the kitchen to see what I might find."

“Of course, thank you Essie.”

The fact that he called me by my first name, a nickname at that, comforted me. Lord Hall had come to view me as the daughter he never had. I walked unescorted to the kitchen and found the storage cabinet. I surveyed its contents and discovered a small burlap bag with barley roots. That would do just fine. I took the bag and turned to go when a sharp voice commanded my attention.

“What, pray tell, do you think you are doing?” The auburn-hair soldier appeared angry and in no mood for interruption to his mundane patrol,

“If you will pardon me, kind sir, Lord Hall sent me to fetch a remedy for his illness.”

“You are not a doctor,” he proclaimed. “You are a quilter, and a prisoner at that. Do you know what the penalty for stealing is?”

If they would throw a widow in prison for her late husband’s debt, I could only imagine what they might do to a thief. I chose not to debate the irritable soldier but instead to appeal to his sense of reason.

If you would simply go and ask Lord Hall, he will surely validate what I have told you.”

He grabbed my wrist, hurting me and causing the pain to travel through my forearm. The barely roots dropped to the floor.

“Why don’t we do that?” he snarled. The soldier nearly dragged me up the stairs to Lord Hall’s chamber only to find the old man sound asleep.

“I dare not disturb Lord Hall to corroborate your lie. Back to the cell with you.”

“But I reside in the stable now,” I pleaded.

“Not anymore,” he remarked with disdain.

“But the new quilt, Lord Hall anxiously awaits its completion.”

He paused at this notion. I appealed to his sense of responsibility. Or rather, the idea that he didn't wish to be held responsible for the delay in the quilt's completion. Maybe he realized that the possibility of making an error in judgment was not beyond the realm. Never relinquishing his grip on my wrist, the soldier looked to the sky, as if in prayer, and exhaled sharply. “My responsibilities are clear. I caught you red-handed. You are a thief. I'm sure one of your other cell mates can finish the quilt. And he threw me back to the wolves.

CHAPTER 6

London Debtor's Prison, London, England June 30, 1773

Lord Hall passed away in his sleep last night. Since suggesting barley water and other remedies two weeks prior, I never saw him again. The scuttlebutt was already ablaze concerning who London may send to replace Lord Hall. No doubt it would be someone less accommodating and certainly stricter.

Since being tossed back into the hell of the large cell, I have had to fight for morsels of food and an occasional sip of water. Four days ago, I simply gave up. I found my strength waning and without a purpose, my will to live has been extinguished like the last flicker of an overused candle. My stomach churned. As I placed my hand on its surface to ease the discomfort, I felt my ribs protruding. I lay on the filthy floor and yearn for the days of a short while ago. Tending to Lord Hall and making his quilt provided a purpose, meager as it was. This existence offered nothing but misery and eventual death.

How quickly tables turn. Barely two months ago, Thomas and I were content in our daily routines in Wickhamshire. We had not a care in the world and the future seemed bright. We talked of starting a family. We shared dreams of traveling the world. Thomas longed to visit the New World. There was opportunity, he postulated, for people with medical training. Lands were abundant and fertile. The money we could make from farming was far greater than Thomas's meager pay as a doctor or the pittance I earned for delivering babies. These things we did from the goodness of our hearts. Still, we both had ambitions that will never be realized. Driving these now fruitless thoughts from my head was no small task.

I breathed in the tepid air of the cell while doing my best to ignore the unsanitary stench of confinement with dozens of women denied the most meager aspects of humanity

and self-preservation. The rusty creaking noise of the cell door distracted me from wallowing. A loud boisterous voice bellowed throughout the cell.

“Ladies, your attention is required.” The noise did not subside, and the soldier raised his voice. “Ladies, the new governor of this prison is here with an announcement.” The noise level diminished but not completely. The soldier blew into a ram’s horn to fully capture the attention of the inmates. The next thing I knew, a man much younger than Lord Hall took command of the gathering.

“I am Lord William Tomlin. The temporary governor of this prison. London has ordered the closure of this place, and it is my responsibility to see to an orderly closure.”

“What is to become of us?” asked an elderly woman in the front of the room.

“We have arranged your passage to the colonies in two weeks’ time. Each of you will be responsible for the cost of said passage to be added to your existing debt.”

“It’s outrageous,” another woman yelled. “These debts can never be retired.”

“To the contrary,” Lord Tomlin responded, “...your debts have been assumed by wealthy colonists. You each will be indentured to a colonist and liable to that gentleman for the debt with which you entered the prison in addition to the costs of lodging, food, and passage to the New World.”

The older woman reared up and screamed, “Paying for food and lodging? We barely have a scrap to ourselves. Take a look around. Did you see what you’ve done? And you mean to charge us for the pleasure of starving?”

A soldier produced a whip and angrily addressed the old woman.

“I’d advise you to remain quiet or I shall be forced to help you in this regard.”

The older woman quieted down and yet another spoke up.

“Where are they taking us, exactly?”

Lord Tomlin assumed control of the gathering once again. “You will journey to Annapolis in the British colony of Maryland. At your port of entry, your name will be called, and you will be turned over to the colonist who assumed your debt.”

After pausing for a moment to collect his thoughts, Lord Tomlin continued.

“You will travel across the ocean on a ship called the Odyssey. The journey will take a month or more, depending on seafaring conditions.”

Wouldn't Thomas be surprised? I was going to the New World after all. I had no idea what would come next. All I knew was that it had to be better than the hell they called the London Debtor's Prison.

CHAPTER 7

The Odyssey, July 16, 1773

Until today, the only boat I had ever been on was my father's small paddleboat. He kept it by a local pond on the back end of the land where I was born. That paddleboat never felt seaworthy to the young girl I was. I remember the small craft rocking perilously as I held firm to the side, hoping the short trips Papa deemed fun would not cause my stomach to turn.

The Odyssey was much larger than Papa's tiny boat, but it looked just as rickety to me. I turned queasy at the thought of spending a month or more on this ship. As I grew older, I shunned Papa's overtures to join him on the pond, hoping beyond hope that I would keep my two feet on God's green Earth for the remainder of my days. Dozens of frightened women were gathered on the London dock waiting embarkment. Judging from their expressions, many shared my sentiment. As we stood there nervously in the early morning sun, a sweat broke out across my back. I heard a whistle blow and a uniformed man with a bushy moustache ordered us to proceed up a gangway. None of us were permitted to carry personal belongings of any kind. All we owned was taken from us when we entered the London Debtor's Prison. The shoddy clothes on our backs represented the current state of our existence. I walked slowly in the middle of a pack that moved at snail's pace. When I reached the foot of the gangway, I stepped on to the first weathered board and grabbed hold of the rope on both sides. The enormous strain of the group caused the gangway to feel as though it would fail and cause us to plunge into the harbor. My stomach rattled with the cracking sound of each tired board on the gangway. I imagined the boards giving way and my body lodged in the wreckage. My lower half wet and uncomfortable, my midsection in pain from the jagged edges of the broken boards, with my face succumbing to tears.

Despite my inner turmoil, I boarded the *Odyssey* without incident and was herded below deck into a dark, damp space that smelled of journeys past. The tiny quarters wreaked of the sea and its rotten aftermath. At first glance, the quarters held a few small wooden tables of the most basic construction, and a handful of beds, if one could call them that. I approached one of these beds and discovered it was no more than a paltry handsewn mattress filled with an insufficient quantity of feathers and secured to a group of small barrels brought together with a thick rope. The uniformed man with the bushy moustache suddenly appeared at the stairs from the top deck and addressed the group.

“Ladies, I am Captain Quarles. This is home for the next several weeks. The beds are to be shared. You will receive two meals each day and there are two chamber pots on either side of the deck. You are to stay below in this space until we arrive in the New World. I expect there’ll be no trouble from you. Insolence is dealt with swiftly.” He paused, stroked his moustache, and appeared to grin as he concluded, “If you cause trouble in any way, we will take you up to the top deck and throw your arse to the sharks.”

Sadly, I understood Captain Quarles’ threat to be hollow. We were to become indentured servants, meaning we were to be no more than property to a well-to-do colonist for an undetermined number of years.

CHAPTER 8

The Atlantic Ocean, August 2, 1773

I remember why I hated Papa's paddleboat. The nausea from the still pond was one thing. But two weeks at sea wreaked havoc with my insides and my balance. The heat from the summer sun coupled with the dark, moist hold and the inability for anyone to bathe made our quarters nearly untenable. The two chamber pots were emptied infrequently. I could scarcely stand the odor of my own being. Many of the women have become weak, I amongst them. I was afforded a night on one of the barrel beds, my first. It was only slightly better than sleeping on the wooden floor. I moved to the floor but was so weak that I had nary the strength to arise from my spot against the wall. I turned to my right and dry-heaved before lifting my head to witness the unthinkable. One of the women simply lost her mind.

I had heard of people becoming mad from illness. Seeing it was something else. The woman who looked to be about my age, ran up the stairs to the main deck and began pounding on the hatch.

"Let me out!" she bellowed. "Let me out now or I'll claw your eyes from your heads, you mealy-mouthed, flea-bitten dogs!"

She pounded and pounded. Finally, a crewman opened the hatch and the madwoman fell backwards off the steps. The crewman descended the short flight of stairs and picked her up from the front of her tattered dress. I heard the garment rip as he lifted her miniscule body from the floor and carried her to the top deck.

"Causing a fuss, are we?" I heard him yell. "Want to go up top? Be careful what you wish for."

Suddenly, my head filled with visions of young Marie in the Debtor's Prison. The pangs of guilt struck me like lightning bolts in the summer sky. While Marie was being senselessly attacked, I sat idle, devoid of strength but more so, lacking courage. This time, I barely had the wherewithal to stand and speak. But I couldn't watch them abuse this woman, or worse, kill her.

"Leave her be," I yelled at the crewman. My throat was so dry I thought my voice sounded weak and pathetic, as if I had swallowed dust from the ground.

He looked at me as if I were a gnat, nothing more than an annoyance. A presence to simply be swatted away. "What did you say?" he inquired with disgust.

I swallowed hard as he dropped the madwoman on the deck and came toward me. "I...I said you should leave her be. She's not in her right mind. She needs food and water to recover."

"And how would the likes of you know what she needs to recover?" he snarled.

Gathering my courage, I replied. "My husband was a doctor. I assisted him and I am also a midwife."

"Oh, a medic, are you? Our medic has taken ill. You come with me."

He picked up the madwoman from the floor and threw her over his shoulder. She continued to berate him and pounded her fists into his back as he hauled her up to the top deck. Obediently, I followed. When I reached the top of the stairs, the sunlight stung my eyes. After all, we had been subjected to darkness for two weeks. The crewman took the madwoman to the edge and acted as if he would toss her over the side for her insolence.

"You know the punishment for misbehavin,' now, don't you?"

“You filthy vermin. Let me go.”

Again, I recalled Marie’s attack and my cowardice. I found my voice and addressed the crewman. “That woman is the property of a wealthy colonist who retired her debt. If you kill her, you will find yourself in a predicament similar to ours...saddled with a debt you cannot pay and imprisoned for years.”

He looked dumbfounded as if the thought had never occurred to him.

“All right, Missy. I guess you have a point.” He set her down against the top deck wall and handed her a flask. “This here is filled with water. Go, drink up. I’ll fetch you some bread in a minute.”

If it were possible to feel a tiny bit of exhilaration, I did. When the crewman retreated to the galley for the bread, I sat down next to the woman and tried to calm her.

“Sip the water. Don’t drink too fast. It will turn your stomach.”

She returned my gesture with the smallest of grins. She wasn’t herself but from looking into her eyes, I could tell she had a good heart.

“I am Essie. What is your name?”

“Hazel,” she replied. “Hazel Giddings. Glad to make your acquaintance.” From her cockney accent, it was evident that she was from London.

“I don’t know what will happen after you are done eating and drinking but get what you can, gather your strength, and for God’s sake, hold your tongue. These men are dangerous.”

Hazel took my hand and squeezed it. The crewman came back with a bread crust and tossed it near Hazel. She picked it up and immediately offered it to me. I appreciate her

attempt to repay my kindness but eating anything would disagree with my sea sickness. I motioned for her to eat the bread and the crewman, having exhausted his benevolence, growled at me to follow him.

I was led to the crew's quarters on the rear of the ship. There was a small flight of steps similar to the hold where I was being kept. This space had beds and mattresses built into the side of the ship's inner wall unlike our space which was merely designed for stowing cargo. All of the bunks were empty except for one. The medic lay still on his back, his eyes were closed and at first, I thought he was sleeping. I leaned my head toward the medic's face and waited to feel a breath. When there was none, I placed three fingers on the medic's wrist, in search of a pulse. There was none.

"I am afraid this man has expired," I declared to the shock of the crewman.

"The captain will be most unhappy with this news."

Before I could utter another word. The crewman whistled and two men appeared from the hatch opening, they lifted the deceased medic from his bunk and carried him to the top deck. I followed to see them explaining to the captain who promptly ordered that his body be wrapped in a bed sheet and bound. The captain summoned the crew to the center of the top deck and the body was placed on a plank with two low-rise guardrails. The captain removed his hat, bowed his head, and said, "We mourn the passing of our medic and friend, James Greavey. May God bless his soul."

With that, the plank was lifted, and the body of James Greavey slid gently into the sea.

Moments later, Captain Quarles addressed me directly. I feared he would somehow blame me for Mr. Greavey's death, and I recoiled. I am sure my expression did little to hide the concern.

"You are the midwife," he said. His manner was direct but not overtly aggressive.

"Yes," I replied. "I am not well-heelled in medical training although my late husband was the town doctor, and I did learn quite a lot from assisting him."

He looked me over curiously. His bushy moustache bounced up and down as he spoke. "Our journey is only halfway through. You will have to serve as the medic for the remainder. Can you handle that?"

I was taken aback and unsure of what to say. I managed to muster only a meek, "I can try."

Captain Quarles replied firmly. "On a voyage like this, men get sick. Some drink too much, some get seasick, some get the scurvy, and like poor Greavey, some die. All you can do is what you can do."

I nodded slowly. "Are there medical supplies at my disposal?"

He looked at the crewman who had accompanied me from the medic's bunk.

"Show her Greavey's medical gear." He then reverted to me and said, "We have no quarters for a female. You will need to remain in the hold with the other ladies and we will call you if we need you. What is your name?"

"I am Esther Lassiter," I replied. "Everyone calls me Essie."

"Fine, fine," grumbled Captain Quarles. He again spoke to the crewman. "Give young Essie Mr. Greavey's rations before returning her to the hold."

CHAPTER 9

Port of Annapolis, The Maryland Colony, September 12, 1773

My stomach and my mind were both greatly relieved. Through the small porthole in our cargo hold, the sight of land was evident in the distance. Soon, we would dock in the port of Annapolis in the Maryland Colony. The balance of our journey, medically speaking, was quiet. Shy of one drunken sailor and a broken arm, my responsibilities as the ship's medic were minimal. I did, however, get called up once daily for Mr. Greavey's food ration and where I could, I would smuggle half to the cargo hold and share it with Hazel.

I could only imagine what I looked like. A mirror would have produced a frightful response. Despite being afforded Mr. Greavey's daily ration, I was unable to bathe, and my dress was terribly soiled. Uncontained hair and skin as dry as parchment caused my self-loathing. What would my new benefactor think of me? I spent the next several hours conjuring up images of my new master and how brutally tyrannical he might be. I pictured an older, brutish man, a cross between the slovenly Captain Quarles and the aged Lord Hall. After surviving the London Debtor's Prison and the deplorable conditions at sea, I was sure I could survive most anywhere although truth be told, my heart ached for Thomas and our quaint Wickhamshire cottage. My heart was heavy. These were now mere memories to be cherished vanishing with each passing day, as distant as I was from England.

Before I knew it, we were approaching the docks in Annapolis. Bedlam reigned as an angry mob paraded around a man elevated by a simple wooden podium. Their voices were clear. The mob leader, a townsman named Williams, I think, was quite frantic, wondering whether the incoming ship, meaning the one I was on, contained a shipment of tea. The other irate men were there to inquire about the same thing. The poor sod at the podium appeared

exhausted in his attempt to allay their concerns. Through a crackle in his voice, I heard him yell, “The colony of Maryland honors the importation of tea from any reputable English source. The tea shall be assessed the King’s tax as prescribed by His Majesty’s government. All those who interfere with the importation or taxation of British tea shall be imprisoned.”

The lead man, Williams, jumped forward and yelled, “If we find tea in that cargo hold, we’ll set the ship aflame right here in the bloody harbor.”

More shouting ensued, making the conversation all but impossible to hear. As the ship slowed to a crawl, crewman dropped anchor and I heard the voice of Mr. Williams approach.

“Where’s the Captain? I want to see the ship’s manifest. In fact, we demand to search this ship.”

Captain Quarles was an experienced man. He did not take kindly to the intrusion.

“And who might you be? Are you the governor?”

Williams growled back, “No, just an honest businessman who doesn’t take kindly to British rule.”

Quarles scoffed. “You’ll have no need to search this ship. We are transporting women from the Debtor’s Prison. They are consigned to a Mr. Benjamin Carver, the local magistrate.”

I heard Williams back down and Captain Quarles bark at his crew, “Secure the lines, and open the hatch. Get these women on to the dock in a straight-line formation.”

A moment later, the bright sunlight penetrated the hatch’s opening and I, along with the other women, rubbed our eyes. We were tired and weak. Ascending the small flight of

stairs to the top deck was difficult as our bodies had succumbed to atrophy over the course of the long journey.

While waiting in line on the dock, I saw a tall man with a powdered wig and a blue coat matching his patriot's hat. He was clean-shaven and spoke in a deep voice.

“Ahoy Captain. I am Benjamin Carver. I am here to take the consignment you have brought.”

I bristled at being called a consignment. My life was no longer worth anything. I was regarded as a commodity, something to be bought and sold.

Captain Quarles presented Mr. Carver with a sheath of documents and a quill and asked for his signature. Once procured, Quarles offered Mr. Carver his hand to consummate the transaction and said, “They're all yours now,” and with a laugh he said, “Don't mind the smell.”

Quarles walked toward a tavern with his first mate, and I never saw him again. Mr. Carver turned and addressed the hapless group of scared and emaciated women.

“Hear Ye, Hear Ye. Be it known that I am Benjamin Carver, the local magistrate in the town of Annapolis, the capital of the Maryland Colony. You are hereby indentured to colonists who have retired your English debt. You will work for your master in any way he deems appropriate until such time as a fair calculation of your efforts equals or exceeds the amount of your debt.”

Although these facts were known, hearing them proclaimed sent a chill down my spine. What did, “any way he deemed appropriate” really mean? Was I to be conscribed as prostitute for some elderly brute?

Pointing to a matronly woman with a plump disposition, Mr. Carver continued. “Mrs. James will be your guide until sunrise tomorrow when your new masters will be here to claim you. There is a women’s bath house where you will clean up and receive a new garment to wear. Two local inns will house you for the night. It will be four to a room and one meal at sundown.”

He paused as if to consider his thoughts and then finished by stating, “Do not contemplate escape. The inns will be guarded by local militia. They will not hesitate to shoot if you run or otherwise cause trouble.”

I poked Hazel who was standing next to me. I didn’t want her to speak out. Her expression told me my instinct was right, but she took my meaning and remained quiet.

CHAPTER 10

Port of Annapolis, The Maryland Colony, September 13, 1773

The night passed without incident. The inn was sufficient if not cramped but even sharing a bed with Hazel proved to be the best night's sleep I'd had since being whisked away to the Debtor's Prison. Before bed, they gave us each a bowl of some sort of red-hot fish stew. It was unlike anything I'd ever tasted. Someone heard the word "crustacean" mentioned. All I knew was that it delighted my senses and was a welcome respite from the occasional morsels of stale bread to which I had unfortunately become accustomed. Prior to the meal, Mrs. James led us to the bath house where we all stripped and cleaned up with warm water and rags. A soap cake of fragrant lilac was provided. A proper bath would have been a godsend, but it still felt good to wipe the grime from my body and put on a new dress, even if it was a gray pauper's garment. I heard Mrs. James give a young aide the order to gather the pile of our old clothes and take them out back to be burned.

I stretched and sat up on the edge of the bed, poking Hazel's shoulder to awaken her.

"Today is the day," I proclaimed. "We shall find out to whom we are indentured. I hope we will be together."

Through sleep-filled eyes, Hazel yawned and matter-of-factly replied, "It doesn't much matter, now does it? Being close would be a joy but it is likely not to be. Our lives are without hope."

"Don't be so melancholy. We won't be indentured forever."

"I wish I had your sense of optimism," said Hazel.

The sun had risen, and the early morning was warm and sticky. A slight breeze off the harbor kept things palatable. Mrs. James was almost singing her good morning to the women as she summoned us to meet on the square outside the inn. Ten minutes later, Hazel and I stood together with the others as a podium was brought by two men to the center of the square. Mr. Carver, the town magistrate, assumed his position at the lectern, and holding a sheath of documents, began to speak. Behind the podium, a crowd of well-heeled men waited patiently. I assumed these were the wealthy colonists to whom we would be indentured. Mr. Carver began to speak.

“This morning we shall commence the handoff of each indentured servant to her new master. As the magistrate, I have certified that each colonist has properly retired the debt of the servants that he shall be granted possession of, forthwith. I shall now recite the debtor-in-possession and the names of their servants. Ladies, once your name is called, please raise your hand, and leave with your master.”

There were those horrifying words again, master and possession. Was I ever to feel human again? I listened as Mr. Carver droned on.

“We begin with Alice Brenington. You are indentured to Mr. Elijah Stonewall of Charles County.” I watched as a girl of perhaps seventeen years of age, sheepishly raised her hand and was met by a smaller, middle-aged man with a mousy demeanor. I couldn’t imagine how this young girl had found herself in such a position but then again, I also questioned my own predicament.

Two quarters of an hour passed. Mr. Carver called the name of a young woman and the process repeated itself. Finally, I perked up when Hazel’s name was called.

“Hazel Giddings. You are indentured to Mr. Charles Greene of Harford County.”

I watched as Hazel left with Mr. Greene. I flashed her a smile and mouthed the words, “Good luck.” I so hoped I would see her again. I was unfamiliar with the geography of the Maryland colony and had no idea where the county of Harford might be. I stood impatiently in the square with the remaining women, waiting for my name to be called. Finally, as there were only two of us left, Mr. Carver called my name. Two colonists remained behind the podium. One was younger, tall, and somewhat dashing while the other was the ogre I had feared when told we would be coming to the New World.

“Esther Lassiter. You are to be indentured to Mr. Aquila Wright of Harford County.”

Which of these men was Aquila Wright? I slowly raised my hand and walked toward the podium.

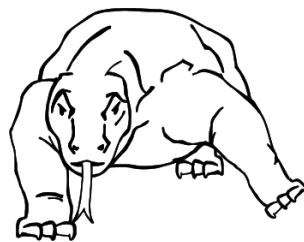
THE DIARY OF ESSIE LASSITER

Historical fiction from award-winning author Sam Polakoff

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