

DIARIES in TIME

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The dark clouds of trials and sorrows are over our beloved country,
and who can escape the shadow, even if sheltered from the bursting storm?

– From *Godey's Lady's Book* 1862

A low growl of thunder like an angry beast sent a warning into the night. I looked out a window and saw the edges of dense clouds galloping across the sky overhead, pulling a veil to obscure the starlight. But there was little to fear. Usually, when a storm moved from the west, the Chesapeake Bay would break it apart or fling it to the north. The Bay kept it away from the Eastern Shore, making it a sanctuary for boats and people. To me, it meant safety, discovery, and adventure since I was a little girl.

But tonight, the storm's deep rumble was building, adding layer upon layer of sound, giving voice to its fury. This storm had overwhelmed the forces of the largest bay of salty water in the hemisphere. And it was getting closer. This storm was coming to Waterwood Plantation, the Cottage, and me.

White-hot bolts of energy crackled through the night sky. The explosions they triggered sent jarring vibrations through my body, reminding me of Civil War cannons firing into the night. And that brought up thoughts of Daniel and Emma and the cabin where his desk now stood.

In the lightning flashes, I could see the wind had torn a tree limb off its trunk. A splintered lightning fork stabbed the earth. The Cottage shook. The lights flickered and went out. That strike was close. I'd have to check the cabin in the morning.

Then the rain came in a furious downpour that pelted the glass. Driven back from the window, I inched my way across the floor in the dark. The last thing I needed was to trip over something. My leg, mangled in an accident months earlier, was better, but, in my mind, I couldn't chance even a stubbed toe.

Keeerrrack! Boom! The storm's symphony went on and on. I'd had enough. I wanted it to stop. Lightning flashed white hot, and its sound slammed like a fist coming down on the Cottage. I ran, launched myself into the bed, and pulled the covers over my head. I knew I was being foolish. The Cottage had weathered storms for more than a hundred years!

Yes, but I'll never get to sleep with all this racket. I'll never get to sleep. I'll never...

Rays of sunlight warmed my face. It was morning. The storm was over.

The storm! The lightning strike! The cabin!

Quickly, I scrambled out of bed and into a pair of clean sweats and a hoodie. At the top of the stairs, I forced myself to hold the banister and step carefully. *Easy does it.* A fall would ruin everything.

Safely on the main floor, I slipped my feet into my rubber moccasins, went outside, and skidded to a stop. After the nighttime uproar and fireworks, Mother Nature had created a breathtaking morning. The tall pines sparkled with diamond raindrops in the sunlight. Birds greeted me with a lively symphony of song. Not just one bird, but a forestful of those who had not yet flown south. There were Blue Jay squawks and Chickadee chirps plus the voices of those who had come for the winter: robin trills, crow caws, and Canada goose honks. And over it all

was the cloudless sky of an achingly gorgeous blue. But it was the air that impressed me the most. Scrubbed clean by the storm, the air was as Mother Nature had intended it to be in the beginning.

You don't get clean air like this in the big city, I thought as I drew in a deep breath and then scurried down the path toward the cabin. But the thick mud and deep puddles made it slow-going, giving my brain plenty of time to concoct all kinds of nightmares for the cabin. I half-expected the wind gust had carried away the roof, or the lightning strike had left only a burned-out shell. Or...

I came around a bend in the path and saw the cabin was safe, nestled in a grove of crepe myrtle and wild grasses, as it had always been. Relieved, I took the key from its hidey place and opened the door.

From the outside, all appeared intact, but inside, a tempest had struck. I looked to the old plantation desk. Daniel's desk. Thankfully, it was not damaged, but sheets of white paper I'd left on its writing surface were strewn everywhere, as if someone had thrown an almighty tantrum. It was a sight I'd hoped never to see.

Months earlier, on the day I arrived at the Cottage, the antique desk was discovered in the garage. I had the movers set it up in the den and an extraordinary adventure began. A letter addressed to Emma by a man named Daniel appeared on the desk. I thought it was written to me until I looked at it carefully. His letter was dated 1862 and this was the 21st century. Daniel wasn't writing to me. He wanted to contact his true love, Emma. Our only connection was that we shared the same name. In a moment of silliness or boredom, I'd responded. It launched our correspondence. Daniel's desperation and loneliness made me want to help. I figured anything was possible since I was corresponding with a ghost.

We went through many harrowing moments complicated by a murder. Two, actually. Then, thinking that Daniel had reunited with his Emma, this cabin was built to shelter the desk. If all was well, I assumed he would never leave another letter on the desk.

Now this! Papers scattered everywhere, as if flung into the air in a fit of rage. Had Emma failed to join him? Was this another betrayal in his life, one that had finally broken his heart and ignited eternal grief and fury? Would an angry ghost now haunt the Cottage? I jumped when I heard footsteps.

“There you are.” The deep male voice sounded relieved. It was TJ, the tall, muscular local farmer in his thirties who was hired to watch over the Cottage and me. Dressed in clean jeans and a pale green shirt that brought out his eyes, he walked into the cabin with a large yellow lab at his feet that was so light he looked white. That was why he’d named the dog Ghost.

“I thought the cabin... whoa!” Looking around and seeing the mess, he realized what it probably meant. “Did Daniel...?”

I turned away, fighting tears of disappointment. “I’m sorry,” I murmured as he put his arms around me.

He didn’t say a word. What could he say? The evidence was all around us. We’d failed to reunite the lovers of old. After all the research I’d done to uncover their true connection... and discovering the identity of the man who’d torn them apart. After learning of a rich treasure rumored to be life-changing...and the terrifying confrontation at the Lone Oak. After TJ rebuilt the cabin ... we were left with disappointment and rage.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled as I turned and looked up at TJ.

“It’s okay.” He pulled out a cloth handkerchief from the back pocket of his jeans. “Time to dry your tears and let me see what happened here.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I-I-I failed them,” I sputtered.

“Sh-h-h, we don’t know that yet.” He went around the small cabin interior, collecting the papers flung everywhere. “Didn’t you say that if our efforts to reunite Emma and Daniel failed, he would write a scathing letter about betrayal and being abandoned?”

I nodded.

TJ held up a fistful of white sheets to me. “Emma, every one of these pages is blank.”

I took the papers and inspected them. It was true. “Maybe his words have already faded?”

“You have been checking the cabin several times a day over these past weeks. There hasn’t been a hint of a problem.”

I was surprised. “How did you know...”

“Because you’re not the only one who wants them to be happy. I’ve been anxious to know if we succeeded. I haven’t found any evidence of correspondence from Daniel either. I don’t think Daniel did this. He isn’t a vengeful ghost, thank goodness. If we were going to have a ghostly encounter, we were lucky it wasn’t with a creepy, vindictive spirit.”

He gestured to one of the cubbyholes of the massive desk. “If Daniel wanted to send you a message, he probably would have shredded the butterfly you made.”

I followed his gaze to the origami crimson butterfly I’d folded for the lovers to symbolize a soul set free and a bond of love meant to last forever. It sat untouched where I’d left it.

“Stop worrying, please. I think we succeeded,” TJ said softly. “I don’t think Daniel made this mess. I think the storm...” He paused, his hazel-green eyes slowly inspecting the ceiling, the door, the ... “There’s your culprit.” He pointed to a broken pane in the window overlooking the creek and the Lone Oak tree. He looked outside. “Yes, there’s a branch on the ground out there. Probably broke off and hit the window in the storm.”

TJ was ever optimistic, and I decided to follow his lead. It was so much better than the alternative. I folded his handkerchief and stuck it in my pocket. "I'll put this through the wash."

"OH! I almost forgot." He reached into his shirt pocket. "I wanted to check on the cabin and to show these to you, two letters I found last night in the box of family history my Aunt Louisa put together." He handed me the small envelopes, discolored with age. The heavily canceled one-cent stamps dated in the 1860s. "They're addressed to Emma Collins, Daniel's Emma after her marriage, right?"

"Yes," I said, all disappointment gone. "This is exciting."

He pointed to one of the envelopes. "You need to look at that one."

I eagerly took out the letter and unfolded it.

"See the notation there?" He pointed to the bottom of a page. "Do you think Emma wrote it?"

The words that looked as if written by a different person were squeezed into the only blank space left on the paper. It read:

Which is worse ~ to live without the man you love as I do or to live with your beloved, a man who many revile and despise.

I tapped my index finger against my lips, thinking. "Yes, I think Emma might have written those extra words since the letter was addressed to her, but what did she mean?"

TJ smiled. "I suspect you have a new research project, and you'll find out."