

✧ Award-Winning Author ✧

DENISE LIEBIG



# FOREVER MAUDE

Book III

✧ The Dear Maude Trilogy ✧

# FOREVER MAUDE

DENISE LIEBIG

## **FOREVER MAUDE**

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# PROLOGUE

It had been months since I cried, fainted, or even blushed. That was the old Emily, the one born in 1990. The new me was on my own for the first time in years—the lone mistress of my destiny—with a new life before me, just waiting to be discovered.

Unfortunately, regardless of which Emily I was trying to be, I was miserable. I let my amazing great-great-aunt and best friend, Maude, die and for that, I would never forgive myself. She was supposed to pass peacefully in her sleep at ninety-six, single and childless. But I traveled back in time and introduced her to the husband she was never supposed to have, whose child she gave up her life at twenty-two to deliver.

The guilt and regret I felt for my actions were overwhelming. So I left the world of time travel and everyone in it behind, carrying only a bag of antique gold coins and justifying every movement I made afterward.

“They can just reach into my past and retrieve a different Emily, one who doesn’t ruin everything she touches!” I told myself daily.

That was the beauty of time travel—mistakes could be

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erased with the addition of a parallel life. Johann, patriarch of the time travel empire Holtz & Sons or H&S, could do just that. He had already taken that approach in his past selves he named “Dell” and “Shane,” making one my husband and the other my boyfriend.

Now I had neither, but I also didn’t have my old life, of which I made such an utter mess. Yes, my future no longer was predetermined—I held all the cards and could play the hand however I saw fit. Most importantly of all, the rules of the game were part of the “big unknown” as they should have been all along...at least that’s what I kept telling myself.

# CHAPTER ONE

**A**lthough time travel left me with a bag of several dozen antique coins, capable of supporting a lavish European lifestyle, I had a conscience that would never allow me to enjoy such a life.

A round of drinks at the right club bought more than just alcohol; it often gained a new friendship with a kindred spirit, typically the daughter of a wealthy tycoon whose love was measured within the contents of her daddy's wallet. I acted as either her sidekick or instigator; regardless, I was simply the sponge she needed to foster her rebellion, and I felt no remorse for my actions. In fact, I was oddly comforted by the company of those who used me for either my companionship, my money, or both. After all, I had ruined too many lives to deserve anything more.

Each club was different, but the results were the same. I was in Genoa, Italy, in one of the many bars near the waterfront on a Friday night in April 1989, but it could have been any time. The Riviera teemed with young people looking for fun, and I was willing to fund it.

"Another round!" I called from my perch atop the bar.

I was surrounded by a mass of young smiling faces, rais-

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ing their glasses and voices toward me. No one seemed to mind that I didn't know Italian. My money bought me fluency in any language. Besides, my hair was long now and bleached by the Mediterranean sun. I didn't exactly blend into the crowd, nor was that my desire—for once in my life, the attention didn't bother me.

So I smiled in reply and stepped down onto the closest available stool to revel in the gratitude of those paying homage to their new best friend—me. Settled on the seat and with my elbows resting on the marble bar behind me, I surveyed all of the smiling faces that surrounded it. Amid the rustic, plaster-covered stone walls and plank floors, the crowd was filled with mostly twentysomethings—girls with big hair and formfitting spandex dresses, much like the black minidress I was wearing; men in slacks and shirts with turned-up collars, unbuttoned at the top to reveal chains that blended into their abundant chest hair. I acknowledged each *“grazie”* with a smile, wishing their gratitude would fill the void inside me.

It didn't.

In the end, everyone seemed to want my company—everyone, that is, except me. Instead, I pretended to pay attention to the affections of a nearby cuff-linked man whose rings and watch filled the space that separated us. His wedding band glistened despite the darkness of the club, apparently serving as nothing more than another meaningless piece of jewelry. My thoughts drifted to my own wedding ring, stowed safely in the train case I left behind—in another life.

I continued to offer a fake smile at the man I mostly was ignoring, consumed instead by my thoughts, until a gorgeous Italian man in his late twenties drew my attention back to the club. A perfect smile and twelve layers of confidence

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preceded him as his intense almond-shaped eyes met mine and held them captive from across the room. His shirt fit like a glove with buttons, flattering his every move as he navigated the crowd, similar to a fish swimming upstream through a sea of my admirers.

I smiled back, knowing how his night would end. In addition to the wealthy young heiresses who frequently adopted me, the men were even more abundant. They soon lost interest, however, when their jewelry and furs rewarded them only with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Neither their money nor their model-good-looks could compete with the memory of my husband.

I shook my head. *You're not Dell!* Aside from a similar muscular build, my Austrian husband was at least ten years older and six inches taller than the man approaching me, and most likely outweighed him by forty pounds or more. *Fifty*, I decided, finally leaving the man's gaze to size him up. *Dell could snap you like a twig; especially if he saw the way you were looking at me.* I met the man's unwavering eyes again, seeing the brown and wishing they were blue. *I remember when Dell looked at me that way.* I followed the smile forming at the corners of his eyes, then traveled to his temples and to his dark hair that was slicked back, glistening amid the bar lights. It was a stark contrast to Dell's light brown hair, soft and grazing his shoulders, always beckoning me to run my fingers through it.

I missed my husband, but I knew that I also missed my opportunity to deserve him when I walked away from my life—our life—and never looked back.

My newest victim wasn't privy to that. However, before the man could reach my spot at the bar, a loud "*Salute!*"

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erupted, and its aftermath cut off his approach and the future disappointment that was in store for him.

Although the crowd around me cheered and showered me with their affection, I felt alone; worse, I felt lonely, overwhelmed by the memory of my husband and aunt, whose lives I no longer could share. But I'd made my choice and had to live with it. So I took a deep breath and tried to channel the theater class I'd taken at school or at least the confidence it often gave me, by once again climbing on the bar. "Who wants to party at my place?" I jumped down and headed for the exit.

I didn't have a "place," but no one appeared to notice as they cheered in their ignorance and followed me as if I were the Pied Piper, out the door and to the marina. The owner of the yacht I decided to invade didn't seem to mind the popularity my actions brought either. His false hairpiece and unnaturally whitened teeth had midlife crisis written all over them as he welcomed us aboard. He later offered me unlimited use of an oversized stateroom in exchange for my "discretion."

I didn't mind, nor did my conscience, when, a little before dawn, I heard the remnants of my host's lifestyle choice tiptoeing along the dock just outside my window. Instead, I let the gentle rocking of the ship lull me back to sleep until the sound of a vacuum charging my closed door awakened me with a start. Slightly disoriented and with my heart racing in my ears, I left the stateroom and walked the narrow corridors in search of fresh air. Drawn to a set of glass doors that revealed a seating area at the stern of the ship, I finally saw what I'd missed the previous evening in the dark. Although the yacht was a monster, able to give at least four school buses a

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run for the money, it was dwarfed by many of the ships moored on either side. I settled myself into a blue-cushioned chaise to better appreciate the view.

"Location, location, location," I whispered to the mammoth, yacht-shaped silhouettes rocking before the rising sun.

The words barely were spoken when my host's manservant brought me a small, white, steaming cup of coffee, surrounded by sugar cubes on a little saucer. Then he left without a word. I preferred tea but didn't complain. Instead, I scanned the multicolored horizon, stirring my cup and admiring my handiwork.

Aside from my overwhelming desire to walk clumsily along the precipice of self-destruction and make every effort to lose my footing and fall into the void, I had to admit that surviving the 1980s in Italy wasn't such a bad gig.

\* \* \*

Along with the social side of life, I had to learn how to embrace economic realities as well. It had been almost a year since I left my old life behind, walking through the front door of a villa in Varazze, Italy, wearing only the clothes on my back and carrying a purse containing the bag of gold coins. They were a souvenir from a visit to 1700s Vienna; beyond that, I had no knowledge of their origin or value. So, when I first arrived in Genoa, I spent hours in a library, poring over books in English regarding gold coins until I finally found a match.

"Bingo!" I held one of the coins in my hand, feeling the round edges and raised emblems on both sides. "A Spanish royal coin," *blah-blah-blah*, "die-cast," *blah*, "one of few minted

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for King Philip V of Spain...worth how much?" I clasped my hand over my mouth. *Hundreds of thousands of dollars?*

I quickly discovered that rare coin dealers were easy to find, but they asked too many questions. Their favorite was, "Where did you say this came from?"

With such a large bag of coins in my possession, I knew I would need to become adept at the answer if I didn't want to get ripped off. I used the first sale to perfect my response.

"Oh, Granny gave this to me for graduation! She always said it was rare," I said to the man behind the counter.

I looked young for my age, so at twenty-five, I easily passed for a recent student or an existing one, for that matter. I often used that to my advantage by offering an innocent smile at the end, my cherry on top.

The dealer, with a newfound gleam in his beady eyes, proceeded with his own response. "It is in fact quite rare; however, it will be difficult to find a buyer for such a specific piece."

*Baloney!* I studied the man's expression, thinking of what the Maude I knew during my childhood would have said. A teenager in the 1920s, my Nana Rosie's aunt and her sayings guided me throughout my youth and beyond.

"Oh, that's strange," I said. "The last dealer told me he could sell these all day long." With my research to back me, I simply smiled. "Thanks for your time."

I reached for the coin, but the man held it firmly in his grasp.

"How much did the other dealer offer?" he asked.

I left the shop with the lire equivalent of two hundred thousand dollars and proceeded to spend some of it on clothes, friends, a fake passport, and a train ticket to Switzer-

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land to safely store the remaining coins in a bank vault.

Then I met Yuri.

He was a creep but held the corner in the underground coin market, and he never asked questions. His handshake was the only sincere part of the transaction, along with his parting request: “Come to me first if you have others.”

I planned on it.

In the meantime, I became skilled at saving my money. Aside from my wardrobe and the occasional round of drinks at a club, I seldom had to spend anything. My heiress girlfriends and doting, frustrated boyfriends lavished me with their lifestyle. As a result, I lived comfortably on the proceeds of the original two sales.

Although the coins erased most social and economic barriers, they couldn’t eradicate all the consequences of leaving my old life behind—especially being trapped in the past. I knew I’d already blown it with my husband and Maude, but the knowledge that I would never be reunited with my mom where I last left her in 2013 also remained—that is until my lonely mind thought otherwise...

End of Excerpt

### Where to find *Forever Maude*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**DENISE LIEBIG** is the author of *Dear Maude*, *For the Love of Maude*, and *Forever Maude*, the books of the Dear Maude Trilogy. A true fan of historical fiction, she spends her free time researching historical events and writing about the possibilities. Denise also enjoys spending time with her husband and three kids at home in Nevada.

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