

❖ Award-Winning Author ❖

DENISE LIEBIG



DEAR
MAUDE

Book I

❖ The Dear Maude Trilogy ❖

DEAR MAUDE

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PROLOGUE

Today's the day I bury my journal—not because it's dead, but because it needs to live. This is the only way.

I was so naïve when I first started writing in it. What it became—what *I* became—hardly can be described in words, but they are all I have. So it is with words that I begin.

My name is Emily Stanton. I was born in Portland, Oregon, to a free-spirited liberal arts major who chose to give me life over completing her part-time college career. It seemed to be a hereditary decision, handed down from her mother. Her parents, Papa Bob and Nana Rosie, were self-proclaimed “Children of the Universe,” a title they used to describe their often misunderstood lifestyle, which included a year-long adventure from their studies, starting in the summer of 1966. That all ended on a rainy day in March 1967, when the weight Nana Rosie had put on in the winter produced a seven-pound, four-ounce baby girl—my mother. Nana always said the clouds parted when they heard my mom cry, so they named her Sunny. After that, Papa Bob went on to medical school, and Nana Rosie, a former sociology student, stayed home to raise Sunny, the most important human-interest project of her life. Fascinated with her every movement, change,

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and mood, Nana recorded Sunny's life in journals—volumes of them.

That is where I inherited my love of journal writing. It is both a blessing and a curse, as all love is.

CHAPTER ONE

I remember it vividly—Saturday, April 7, 2012. Although I didn't know it at the time, that date would mark the end of my world.

The morning began shrouded by an overcast sky that hung heavily over the campus of Carlston University in Upstate New York. The desolate, dew-covered lawns and pathways, winding endlessly around the school, were devoid of footprints that might have indicated any sign of life. That wasn't unusual, though, especially on a morning after several Easter-themed frat parties. In fact, most sensible people were sleeping soundly in their dorms, with the unfortunate exception of my roommate, Sophia, whom no one would ever accuse of being sensible. Instead, she was intent upon consuming our dorm room—its floor space and air space—as if it existed only for her. I suppose, in her mind, that was exactly why it was created.

Her high-pitched voice could cut through any material with razor-like precision. It was deadly, and she was well versed (literally) in its use and effectiveness. No manner of pillow or blanket could escape its wrath; even mattresses were no match for her glass-breaking, shrill tone.

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I thought—or at least hoped—I was dreaming.

“Em...”

The sound whispered, then drifted in the air, as if floating on the breeze.

“Emi...”

It grew stronger.

“Emily?”

The almost metallic noise belched its hot breath unmistakably in my ear.

“Emily Stanton!”

“What?” I barked toward the offending sound, my face fixed in a morning grimace.

“Look, I’m sorry to wake you, but...”

I opened my eyes to see Sophia squatting only inches from my dorm room bed.

“I have been up all morning working on my lit paper, and I’m completely freaked out!”

Great. Here we go! I fluffed my pillow and sat up against it in preparation for another one of Sophia’s rants.

“I have a sociology paper due Tuesday, a chemistry exam and a math quiz on Monday, and my lit teacher thought it would be ‘fun’ to write ‘a few’ pages about a haunted house! It’s April!” The words spewed from Sophia’s mouth like steam from a boiling tea kettle.

Still half-asleep, I stared blankly at my overwrought, finger-quote-wielding roommate. Her voice rose with every word as she paced the floor of our dorm room, alternately gesturing at the door and the window with every turn. The movement suddenly made me feel nauseous. I quickly swung my legs out of bed and placed my sock-covered feet on the carpet, then slowly drew my head between my knees. “I think

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I'm going to be sick," I moaned.

Sophia, oblivious to my comment, continued her descent into the absurd.

I closed my eyes in an attempt to block out Sophia's pacing, but the room began to spin. My ears rang like a church bell on Sunday morning, forcing me to my feet. I reached the door in two steps, flung it open, and narrowly missed Sophia in the process. I rushed into the hall, fighting to balance myself as I made my way to the restroom, where my stomach contents quickly reminded me of my overindulgence at the frat party the night before.

Several flushes and twenty minutes later, I left the cold comfort of the tile floor and sought the closest sink to rinse my mouth and splash water on my face.

When I was finished, I looked up at the mirror, pushed the wet hair from my face, and let it fall back in blonde strings that rested limply along my shoulders and back.

"Apparently waterproof doesn't mean hangover-proof," I mumbled to the mascara-covered face staring back at me. "I'm even patriotic." I strained closer to examine my normally clear, blue eyes that now were bloodshot and swollen.

After several failed attempts to remove the mascara with a wet paper towel, I weakly shuffled back to my room.

"Wow! You look like hell," Sophia said, then quickly resumed her tirade. "So I got up super early to try to get it all done, but I can't stand anything I've written so far." She plopped down dramatically on her bed.

I was still in the doorway, squinting at the alarm clock to see the time. "Six o'clock?" I screamed into the room, closing the door behind me. "Are you crazy? It's Saturday!" I directed my attention toward the dorm room sink and my toothbrush.

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Two brushings and a thorough face washing drowned out the accelerating complaints of Sophia. Once I was done, I shuffled to my bed, unfluffed my pillow, and resumed my previous sleeping position with my back to her.

"Well?" Sophia asked in disgust.

"What now?" I mumbled into my pillow.

"Can you help me?"

"With what?"

"With what? What do you mean, with what? With my lit paper!" she screamed at the back of my head. "Weren't you listening?"

I had hoped the question was rhetorical, but in an effort to get myself closer to my goal of getting Sophia to stop talking, I took a deep breath into my pillow and offered her the only reasonable response I could muster: "Maybe you haven't noticed here, Soph, but I'm a little hungover. Thanks for disturbing me. If you had really wanted my help, you would have let me sleep. Now, I'm useless."

Sophia ignored my comment. "Oh, come on Em. You're so much better at writing than I am."

I could hear the syrup in her voice and turned my head slightly to catch her flashing her world-famous dental work in my direction.

"Whatever, Soph, it's not working," I muttered, turning back to the wall.

After a long pause and an even longer moan-like sigh, Sophia finally blurted, "Okay, what do you want?"

Want? I was attempting to fall asleep until her words caught my attention. "Huh?"

"You know what I mean. What do you want?" Unable to hide her frustration behind her teeth or her money as she was

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so accustomed, the real Sophia reared her ugly head with condescension and impatience.

The cobwebs continued to clear in my head as I once again fluffed my pillow, propped myself up against it, and slowly processed the potential of the opportunity unfolding before me. "How much do you need to write?" I asked.

"Just a page."

"If it's that short, why can't *you* write it?"

I thought that Sophia's money wrote all her papers. Then, I remembered her sometimes boyfriend and paper-writing partner in crime. "Or what about Nathan? Don't tell me you broke up with him again."

"Whatever, Emily," Sophia snapped.

"Fine." I slid down my pillow while pulling my blankets up to my chin.

"Yes, okay? There. I said it. Yes," she sputtered, then folded her hands in a praying gesture. "Come on, Emily! Daddy's coming to town tonight for Easter, and he's taking me shopping tomorrow. I'll never get all of this done by then."

Daddy. Sophia both feared and worshiped her father and would do anything to please him. I stared at her for a few seconds, trying to search my hungover brain for something I could use against her. Unfortunately, my head felt as if it had been flushed down the toilet minutes before; I had nothing.

"Really, Emily, are you going to help me or not?"

"Just show me the assignment and whatever you've written already." I groaned, fighting another wave of nausea on the heels of my missed opportunity to play the Daddy card.

Sophia walked to her desk, shuffled through some papers, and handed me two.

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I skimmed the scribbled pages. *What a train wreck!* "I think I wrote better than this in kindergarten," I said to the papers, "before I learned to read."

Sophia was humorless by nature and acknowledged my attempt at a joke with a loud, "Humph!" as she continued to pace the floor.

I laughed and tried to turn my attention back to the nightmare assignment in front of me, but the constant movement of my roommate proved too much for my stomach. I felt as if I were having an out-of-body experience as I suddenly and instinctively flung my blankets back, dropped the papers onto the bed, and attempted to exit the room. Instead, the sound of muffled voices in the hallway caused me to seek the comfort of my dorm room sink as a convenient alternative to a run of shame to the restroom.

Sophia gagged at the sink-side scene while she stuffed her other homework into her backpack. "I'll be in the library all day. Just give me something I can turn in," she said from behind the hand she had firmly cupped around her nose and mouth.

I ignored her as I gripped the sides of the sink for support.

Not waiting for a reply, she slammed the door behind her.

After cleaning the sink several times, I shuffled across the floor to open the window and air out the stuffy, stench-filled room. I took several deep breaths, then returned to my bed and bent down to swat Sophia's writing assignment onto the floor before climbing in.

Fortunately for me, most of our other neighbors had been out late as well, so the dorm remained quiet for most of the morning. After several hours of uninterrupted sleep, I awakened in a better frame of mind and body. Two large bottles of

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water and a long, hot shower later, I was ready to start on my homework.

My conversation with Sophia seemed in the distant past, and I chose to address her writing assignment by walking around the papers that had been deposited on the floor earlier. It quickly became a habit to step around and ignore the sheets. By the afternoon, I was finished with my own homework and was leaving the room when I accidentally stepped on one of the pages.

“Oh, you again,” I said from above.

I stared at the papers for several seconds before bending down to pick them up. If only I had known what would transpire as the result of such a simple act, I would have left them in their place. Unfortunately, I didn’t know.

Instead, I turned the assignment over in my hands several times, growing angrier with each flip of the page. *She thinks she can buy her way through school! I worked too hard to get here — and I just can’t stand cheaters!*

I fought the urge to crumple the sheets in my hands, but curiosity overcame me. As I started to read, I glanced at the bottom of the assignment page and noticed a sentence that brought a smile to my face. “Ha!”

I sat on the floor and reread the sentence aloud: “This assignment is for extra credit only.” I giggled and skimmed the page again. “I love it! She deserves this.”

Sophia and I had been roommates since our freshman year in college. One of the conditions of my scholarship was to live on campus all four years. It seemed reasonable until my junior year, when all of my friends escaped the dorm life and rented apartments in town. Another condition of my scholarship was that I could not have a vehicle on campus.

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Soon, my friends moved on without me, and I was stuck with the only other senior who was not allowed to live off campus—Sophia. Her father thought it was safer for her to live in the dorms. Ironically, she usually lived with her boyfriends and seldom spent any time in our room, except when she was between relationships.

“She needs a new boyfriend!” I exhaled loudly into Sophia’s assignment. “And I need to make sure she never asks me to help her again.”

After spending several minutes on the floor contemplating the many ways in which my life would improve without Sophia in it, I heard my appetite finally return with a grumble. I stood and stretched, then locked the writing assignment safely in my desk before leaving the dorm in search of a late lunch. Deep in thought about Sophia’s assignment, I did not realize she was screaming my name until I had almost reached the student union.

“Stanton?” She was standing near the entrance with her hands on her hips, surrounded by an entourage of her equally annoying friends.

I jumped back at the sound of my name in that unmistakably irritating screech that only Sophia could deliver and nearly stumbled into a bench in front of the building.

Sophia’s friends laughed as she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Why?” I quickly recovered and edged closer to the door. She ran toward me. “Hello? My paper!”

If it were possible to hear the last thread of my patience snap, it would have made a resounding *twang* that echoed loudly in all directions. I was finished. I was hungry, tired, and annoyed by the needs of that over-indulged, under-edu-

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cated brat. I really didn't care for Sophia's friends or what they thought of me, and I was beyond tired of the way she treated me in public. I had nothing to lose.

I stepped defiantly toward Sophia, making her stop several feet from me. "Aren't you supposed to be in the library?" I didn't wait for an answer. "Maybe if you made a habit of spending a little more time there and less time being social, you might have already finished it yourself!"

"Is it done?" she asked, ignoring my response.

I pretended to look around nervously. "What is wrong with you?" I whispered. "Do you want to get caught?" I reached for the door to the student union. "We'll talk about this in the room."

She stepped closer, until her nose was almost touching mine. "We'll talk about it *now!*"

"No, we won't. I'm hungry, and I need to eat!" I pushed past her and entered the building.

"Meet me in an hour!" she called after me, her fists clenched at her sides.

"I guess you don't own her after all," her friend Katie said, giggling sarcastically.

Sophia scowled in reply as she walked back to the group.

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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