

❖ Award-Winning Author ❖

DENISE LIEBIG



FOR THE LOVE OF
MAUDE

Book II

❖ The Dear Maude Trilogy ❖

FOR THE LOVE OF
MAUDE

DENISE LIEBIG

FOR THE LOVE OF MAUDE

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CHAPTER ONE

Y here I stood, teetering on the precipice of where I'd been and where I needed to go. Dell, my mom, and my life were somewhere down the tunnel on my right. I squinted into its long darkness, eventually losing sight of the taillights from the car I'd just exited. I continued to strain my senses until the echoing engine noise left only silence. Then I took a deep breath before slowly turning to my left and the approaching welcoming committee.

I was in one of the H&S basement laboratories, subterranean portals to the past and future, equipped with more security than Fort Knox. Located beneath structures they called "safe houses," their labs were connected to elaborate systems of high-speed tunnels that allowed time travel via specially modified vintage automobiles. I could still smell the exhaust from the light blue 1957 Corvette, whose driver had just delivered me.

I looked around the giant warehouse space in search of my husband; as usual, I was left disappointed. I tried to remain hopeful each time I traveled, but I was growing tired of playing the H&S waiting game.

Crash!

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In his hurry to greet me, a man leading a gaggle of white-coated lab workers dropped a metal clipboard on the shiny, gray epoxy floor. The sound echoed off the cavernous walls that surrounded me, a loud reminder that I was, in fact, living a nightmare.

“Mrs. Holtz!”

Like geese, the group arrived in a V-formation with the man in front extending his hand in my direction.

I gave his soggy hand a shake and counted my blessings when he quickly released his grip. “Please call me ‘Emily’!” Since he’d used my married name, I knew I could safely offer my first, but my new last name still didn’t feel right. I hadn’t used my maiden name, Stanton, in years, and without Dell, Holtz was just another name, one I hadn’t earned.

“Yes, thank you, Miss Emily...and hello. So glad to see you. I’m...blah-blah...and these are my colleagues...blah, blah, and blah.”

He lost me at “Hello.”

His use of names should have signaled something in my brain about his position with the company, but all I could do was stare at the green piece of yuck stuck between his front teeth. *Spinach?* I squinted to get a better look. *No. Definitely lettuce.* A victim of lumpy beds and constant travel, I hadn’t slept well in weeks, maybe months; I’d lost track. Watching the man’s lips move was the only way I could focus on his words that seemed to drift in and out like waves on the ocean.

“We’re just so delighted to...”

Wow, *is that a cold sore?* I shifted my focus to the crusty mass at the corner of his mouth.

“But I’m sure all this talk of technology and breakthroughs can wait for Mr. Holtz.”

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His words finally drew my full attention as his flapping lips met in an arrogant grin.

I cannot believe you just said that! Science wasn't my strongest subject in school, but I always pulled A's in it, as well as every other course I studied. *Just because I'm tired doesn't mean I'm stupid!* I fought through a number of scenarios in my head, most of which required more effort than he was worth. Regardless, I didn't have the energy, but my mouth did. Thus, against my better upbringing and my position as the boss's wife, I decided to allow my now cranky disposition to wipe the smile from his face. I ignored his last comment and offered "Nice to meet you all!" to the rest of the group.

Two other men and one women, all in lab coats with non-descript black slacks beneath, took turns shaking my hand.

Then I smiled at Mr. Lettuce Teeth. "I take it you're in charge?" It was obvious, but I needed to know for sure.

"Yes, I am!"

With his mouth no longer the center of my attention, I noticed the perfectly combed brown hair and amber eyes that looked at me as if I were a field mouse or, rather, a lab rat. The man was in his late twenties and his clammy handshake reminded me of Mr. Wilson's, the Evergreen employee who helped train me to live in the past. Since I wasn't paying attention when the introductions were made, I decided to rename Mr. Lettuce Teeth "Willy."

When he eagerly remained before me, smiling confidently, I pelted Willy with a barrage of questions, which I flung out in such rapid succession that he staggered backward, as if he had actually been struck by them. The stunned look on his face was priceless. I referred to that method as the "Tommy Gun Approach," named after the gangsters' weapon

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of choice in the 1920s. Similar to them, I felt justified; in fact, I had nothing to lose. Therefore, I led with, “When and where am I?” I noted the reaction carefully, trying not to blink as I did so.

“Well, uh...”

I smiled. “Oh, that’s all right. I know you probably can’t tell me. And where is Dell?”

“Uh, I’m not—”

“—at liberty to say?” I finished for him, then added, “Of course.”

At that point, my smile grew, while the one in charge stopped smiling entirely and began to shuffle uncomfortably. I had him. Answering my questions was far above his pay grade. Most valued their jobs enough to avoid unnecessary conversation with me, but that was not the case with Willy. His colleagues masked their smiles from behind tightly stretched lips, staring at the ground in the process. I felt like their hero as I kept guiding the bullets.

“Shane, then?” I asked, referring to Dell’s younger self, whom he had plucked from his past to provide assistance in his absence.

“Uh...” Willy drew his clipboard toward his downturned face.

“Right!” My smile only grew broader. “And how long shall I be here?”

“Well, we really don’t—”

“—know?” I smiled, pretending to be helpful.

The clipboard was now in full use as Willy feverishly flipped through the pages, most likely in search of his lost importance.

I was unrelenting. “I’m quite tired.” I worked up a yawn

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and patted my open lips.

"You're—"

"Yes. The journey."

"Oh. Well, uh..."

Then, a brave one stepped out of the group and walked toward me. He reached for Maude's suitcase, a vintage, rigid-sided reminder of home that I refused to travel without. "May I?" he asked.

"Of course!" I ignored the now distraught Willy, who had been reduced to a babbling idiot in front of the co-workers whom, judging by their reactions, he had belittled for years. I couldn't resist the urge to shoot one more bullet his way. "Finally! So kind of *someone* to offer!"

As I brushed past, I cast a backward glance at Willy, who was staring in pale disbelief while his co-worker and I, as well as his career, faded away.

We walked down a long, white hallway dotted with picture windows, behind which were housed banks of instruments and more employees in lab coats. Neither the lab worker nor I spoke as he escorted me to a large metal security door. I just wanted sleep, without all the fanfare, and I appreciated the silence; I knew I'd probably said too much already.

After punching numbers into a keypad beside the door, he bent down so his retina could be scanned by a small screen above the keypad. The vault-like door made a clicking sound, and the guard standing next to it turned the wheel on its face and opened it just enough for us to pass through. Such security measures were common to other labs, and I wasn't surprised to find many similar doors down a long series of cavernous hallways. The final entrance placed us before a stainless elevator door, next to which the lab worker pressed the

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up button.

"It was nice meeting you, Miss Emily," he said.

"You too, uh..." I searched the front of his coat for a nametag I knew wouldn't be there. *I guess I should have been paying attention earlier.*

His forgiving smile drew me into his handsome features and held me there. "Barnaby. Samuel Barnaby," he said.

I could only stare. The man was just under six feet tall, with light brown hair and bright eyes that now danced at my reaction. *How did I miss those big, hazel eyes? And his face is nearly perfect. Look at that mouth, those lips, those teeth! Am I that dead?*

The open elevator door saved me from further embarrassment as the heat from a familiar, hot blush crept up my neck, and reassured me that I was very much alive. I rushed inside and turned to see Barnaby pushing the first floor button.

"Have a pleasant stay," he said. Then he handed me the suitcase and stepped out of the elevator.

The door closed before I could reply, and stood in front of me like a giant mirror, reflecting the crimson blush on my cheeks. I looked away but caught my reflection on the other stainless walls that surrounded me. Unnerved by my unwanted embarrassment, I just stared at the white tile floor beneath my feet. *Nice, Em. One minute, you're taking Willy out at the knees, and in the next, you're making a fool of yourself over his co-worker. After losing so much of who you are, I can't believe blushing at the sight of a good-looking man is one of the few things that remain.* I fanned myself with my hand and tried to regain my composure. *And what about Dell?*

When the elevator door opened, a sight as welcome as a ray of sunshine in midwinter gave me a second wind and

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temporarily cast my thoughts to the back of my mind.

I found myself in the safest of all the so-called safe houses, the one in which I spent the majority of my time. Located on a secluded island somewhere in the Atlantic off Great Britain, it was where I was first sent shortly after Dell's accident. I grew to regard it as a home of sorts—or at least a place where I knew what to expect.

I eagerly stepped out of the elevator and dropped the suitcase onto the runner-covered wooden floor that led me down a hallway and out to a great lawn. A blanket of fog and sea mist slowly enveloped me while I filled my lungs with cool air and held it there, savoring its freshness. As I gradually exhaled, I was drawn to the cliff's edge, where an invisible ocean roared its greeting.

The fog, mixed with a cool breeze, felt like fingers running through my loosely held hair. I longed for it to be Dell's touch, to smell his musky scent overwhelming me as he cradled my face in his strong hands and drew my lips to his. I imagined my fingers melting into his soft, light brown curls as his hands traced their way to the small of my back, his muscles straining the fabric that tried to contain them.

The sting of tears, mixed with the misty air, sent streams down my cheeks to drip unhindered from my chin. *I didn't agree to this, Dell. We're supposed to be hiding in history together. Why did you leave me here alone?*

A crashing wave brought my attention back to the cliff's edge and the fact that it lacked a guard rail to keep me from plummeting to the jagged rocks hidden below. I wiped my chin and retraced my steps to the house, watching it fade in and out of focus behind the shifting fog. Its stone façade stretched the length of at least a football field somewhere in

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the white vapor, which also masked several Victorian spires, resembling broken pencils beneath the fog that hid their tips. Windows sprinkled along the multistory walls blended into the stone, reflecting only the morning haze. The craggy rocks and heather that surrounded the remainder of the house were nowhere to be seen in the ever-thickening fog.

I usually visited the house prior to or during 1908, and since it came without a name of its own, I referred to it as “The 1908 House.” It may not have required a name, but I did, and the aboveground staff addressed me as “Lady Milton.” I didn’t mind; it had a nice ring to it.

What wasn’t so nice, though, was the garment that met me at the door when I reentered the house. Although my location was secluded, I was still required to wear the proper clothing of the day, just in case. Among the garb was my nemesis, the ever-ill-fitting corset. Even though the house was staffed with H&S employees, precautions were always enforced to ensure time-period continuity, and that extended to my wardrobe. I mistakenly hoped the fog would hide the jeans and white T-shirt I was wearing, but I was wrong.

My lady’s maid stood just inside the door, holding my new wardrobe and the Maude suitcase, and giving me the time-to-take-your-medicine look.

“Hello, Goodwin,” I said. It had been several months since my last visit, and I was genuinely happy to see her, despite the corset.

Like all the staff, Goodwin was always dressed and pressed in black, her skirts just clearing the floor, and she wore a loose bun that held her brown hair in place near the crown of her head. Her quick smile softened her otherwise overly proper appearance that came complete with a British

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accent. "Milady, shall we?" She gestured toward the hallway and my doom.

We climbed the stairs to the familiar bedroom with its overstuffed canopy bed. The only somewhat-modern convenience was the attached bathroom that came complete with indoor plumbing. The French doors that led to the balcony and its usual view of the lawn and ocean beyond, now served as a barrier from the fog.

A coal-burning fire kept the chill from the air as Goodwin helped me don my outfit. Within minutes, I was wearing white stockings and a union suit that looked like a tank top attached to knee-length drawers, with ruffles at the shoulders and hems. Then I stood, and tried not to pass out, as Goodwin worked behind me, lacing my white cotton, boned corset. She attached the stockings to garters on the front of the corset and buttoned a pair of black Oxfords on my feet. The next layer was a fitted top, sleeveless and trimmed in lace, which covered the corset, and an attached petticoat that went to the floor. Then, she covered it all with a floor-length skirt and separate top made of white silk, lace, and enough buttons to render its removal impossible without assistance.

"Last one," she said.

"Good."

Goodwin let out a brief giggle. "Now that wasn't so bad, was it, milady?"

"No, it wasn't. Thank you, Goodwin."

But it really was. It had been almost two years since I first traveled to a time other than my own, yet I still found it difficult to adjust to all the fuss. The costume changes, hair styles, manners, and especially the staff were more than I could process at times. Before the ink on my college diploma had dried,

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I went from plugging quarters in dorm basement washing machines in 2012 to having a personal maid to dress me more than a century earlier. It was a bit much.

I reached for the hairbrush on my dressing table, but Goodwin beat me to it.

“Why don’t I do that for you, milady?”

Granted, she was far better at doing my hair than I was, but at the rate I was going, I had no hope for improvement. From making my bed to making dessert, I was scolded at every turn.

“No, milady, allow me.”

It was a staff conspiracy that extended to all the safe houses. I couldn’t lift, lend, or offer a hand to save my life; that was ironic, because in my family, not working was an evil punishable by the humiliating and ever-frustrating, “Sit on your hands!”

“Sit on your hands, and watch how it’s done,” my maternal grandfather, Papa Bob, would say when I messed up. Nana Rosie’s favorite line, if I complained about working, was always, “Poor thing! Sit on your hands, so you don’t hurt yourself.” Then there was Mom’s dreaded, “Sit on your hands and think about it!” The only one who didn’t make it a punishment was Maude, Nana’s aunt, who liked to say with a wink, “Sit on your hands and listen to a story.” Maude always had my back.

In the end, I was an overachiever with a vivid imagination, sitting on my hands so much they were losing circulation.

My lack of purpose, as well as the island’s isolation, was driving me crazy. I wanted out. Since the majority of the house was surrounded by unpassable rocks and dense

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heather, I spent hours surveying the cliff from the lawn and upper floor windows, trying to find a path to the water and my escape. The only route was a slippery stone staircase that ended at a gated dock, where boats dropped off monthly supplies. The delivery process, although often unnecessary, lent authenticity to our seclusion. The dock was guarded by James Hogg, a burly man whose swollen nose told the world of his love for whiskey.

Hogg was the only one who stood between me and freedom.

I baited him for weeks with bottles of whiskey from the house stores, which the staff supposedly used for cooking. At first, I smuggled him a new bottle twice a week.

"Cheap, but it'll do the trick." James smiled, bearing a set of brown, rotting teeth as he uncorked the first bottle and took a drink. "Doesn't hurt to sample the merchandise."

After that first sip, he never questioned my motives.

"Much obliged, Lady Milton. It becomes lonesome on these waters in the spring, and I sures can use the company!" He looked longingly at the bottle as if I had just set him up on a blind date with a super model.

"Glad I could help!" I said with a smile.

After a few weeks of that, I was certain the staff would start to notice the sudden reduction in their whiskey supply. Therefore, when I wasn't outside, I was combing the dank basement for any sign of a wine cellar or some other cache of alcohol. Original to the house, the basement had an exterior entrance through a weathered wooden door, hidden within the stone foundation. Behind the door, an iron railing guided me down a series of flagstone steps into the darkness, where a maze of musty, unlit hallways crisscrossed beneath the

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house. Within a few days, my search was rewarded with the discovery of a small oak door with rusty iron hinges that creaked loudly as I pulled it toward me.

I waved the candle I was carrying at the stone floor, hoping to scare off any rodent friends living in the room. None emerged. "We're so far from civilization the rats haven't even found us." I surveyed the floor a second time. "Good thing. I'd just freak out and scare us both away."

With my free hand, I drew the long coat I was wearing around me, then stepped into the room. An initial survey by candlelight was all I needed. The space was filled, floor to six-foot ceiling, with shelves of alcohol, some still in crates. "Perfect!" I said, despite the musty stench that greeted me.

I wiped off a few of the bottles and saw dates as early as 1757. "Amazing! This would sell for a fortune on the internet." I scanned the rows of shelves for signs of whiskey.

Within a few steps of the entry, I found what I was looking for—a crate labeled "25 Year Old Pure Pot Still Whiskey."

I pulled out one of the filthy bottles and tried to blow off the dirt. Unfortunately, I was holding the candle too close and succeeded in blowing it out instead.

"Brilliant, Emily." I stood in the pitch-black room, completely disgusted with myself. Electricity wouldn't be installed in the house for decades, and I was fresh out of matches.

Fortunately, during my childhood, I was known as the "Queen of Hide-n-Seek in the Dark." None of my friends could ever find me, and I always made it to home base without being caught. I even had a crown.

With my title to back me, I licked my fingers and squeezed the remaining heat from the wick, then stuffed the

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candle and the bottle into my coat pockets. I felt along the shelves for the small door and found my way to the exit without much effort. The trip down the hall wasn't so uneventful, however, when I nearly knocked myself out on a low-hanging unlit lantern that swung dangerously from an overhead beam.

"Stupid thing!" I screamed in the dark. Rubbing my head only seemed to make it worse as I felt the charcoal from the candle wick transfer from my fingers to my forehead.

To avoid any further trauma, I held my left arm above my head to protect it and used the right one to feel the walls as I shuffled my way down the corridor to the staircase. When the blood began to drain from my left hand, I bent my arm at the elbow and rested my head on my forearm.

"Just call me Rudy." I tried to amuse myself with the thought of Rudolph Valentino and the cape he wore in his sheik movies. I grew up with Maude's vast library of old VHS tapes, recordings of films from the silent era that she played until the machine ate most of them. *I love silent movies! If I wasn't stuck on this stupid rock, I might be watching a few right now.* My mood soured even more as I worked my way to a small light that was coming from the staircase in front of me.

I emerged from the basement filthy, covered in dust, cobwebs, and candle soot, and blinded by the midday light. I felt less like Valentino and more like a vampire or a rodent. *I'm the only rat this place every produced.*

I squinted back the light and half-ran inside and to my room, quickly closing the door behind me. "Phew!"

Since I was the only guest occupying its halls, the house was staffed with fewer than ten people, who mostly kept to their quarters except at dressing and meal time. Luckily, it

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was not one of those times.

Without the aid of yet-to-be-popular makeup, I attempted to explain the nasty bump on my forehead as a mishap with a falling branch. The poor gardener could only scratch his head as he wandered the grounds in search of the offending tree and its wayward offspring.

My next trip to the cellar was made with several candles, deposited like bread crumbs along my pathway. I even lit a few of the lanterns I passed, with the exception of the one with which I had previously collided. It was easy to find; it was the only one that had come unattached from the beam that held it, precariously hanging upside down by a single nail. “Jerk,” I said every time I passed it.

I spent several days sharing bottles of watered-down whiskey before finally letting my friend, Mr. Hogg, enjoy a nice bottle of the twenty-five-year-old Irish whiskey, which I delivered right after lunch.

“Anything, anytime, anyhow, Lady Milton. Just let me know what you need, and it’s yours!” He wiped the liquid from his chin as he eagerly gulped another swig from the bottle.

He was mine.

I had a perfect view of his shack from the cliff above. The bottle was empty by the time the kitchen staff had cleaned the lunch plates and were preparing for dinner.

They won’t miss me for hours! I hoped, anyway.

I carefully descended the cliff stairs one at a time, holding the cold iron railing in one hand and another dusty bottle of the basement’s finest in the other.

When I finally reached the bottom, I stared at the water with only one regret: “I wish I hadn’t caught a cold and

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dropped out of swimming lessons when I was five.”

Although I couldn’t swim a stroke, I could row—or at least I hoped I could as I looked at Hogg’s emergency boat rocking gently against the dock to which it was tied.

I adjusted my dress and walked, bottle in hand, to the guard shack and the snoring man who inhabited it. Empty bottles greeted me as I stepped inside and placed the one I was carrying on a table near the door. “He won’t even notice the missing boat when he wakes up to this,” I whispered, turning the “1865 Irish Whiskey” label toward him and dusting it off with my fingers.

I watched him sleep while I carefully reached across him to free two oars from their posts along the wall. I held my breath as I succeeded in grabbing the first one, but just before I had my hand on the second, a wave hit the dock and caused one of the empty bottles to roll across the floor of the shack and collide with another bottle.

I froze.

When the wave subsided, so did the clanking bottles on the floor. Mr. Hogg didn’t even flinch. Relieved, I quickly grabbed the second oar and left the shack for the small boat.

The first few yards of rowing were the most difficult as I tried to gain enough distance from the dock that the boat wouldn’t be sent crashing back into the rocky cliff. My arms felt like wet noodles by the time I made it beyond the breakers.

When originally formulating my plan, I noticed that there was no clear view of my destination from either the dock or the house above. Anxious to get off the island, I decided it was worth the risk, so I kept rowing, pushing the boat in the direction from which the people delivering food would arrive

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in two weeks. My back was to the uncharted course as I fought the current and my corset to widen the gap between myself and the island. I rounded the cliff to one side and soon lost sight of the house, which gave me a chance to look behind me at the route I would have to take.

Far in the distance, I saw a sliver of land with a blinking light at one end. I could only stare in disbelief.

"Great," I finally muttered. The disappointment was overwhelming as I calculated the gulf that separated my little boat from the distant shore. "It must be at least twenty miles away! It will take me days to get there if the current doesn't send me somewhere else first."

I scanned the horizon for a different, closer sign of land, but I couldn't find one.

I sat rocking in the little boat for several minutes, trying to think of a workable Plan B before I finally admitted there was none. Defeated, I pulled in the oars and held them as I lay back in the boat, staring up at the slightly overcast, bird-filled sky. "God, I'm so stupid!"

The seagulls overhead seemed to reply, *No argument here. Duh-duh-duh.*

I tried to ignore them but couldn't contain my frustration. "Now what?"

The gulls failed to respond; rather, they appeared to lose interest and simply flew away.

"Whatever!" I offered at their departure, lying in an ever-growing puddle of sweat and self-pity.

"No wonder the deliveries come in bigger boats...with motors on them. Maybe I can fashion a sail with this stupid corset I'm wearing! I think it's made out of whale bone or something."

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At that point, the sound of the rocking boat seemed to mock my poor decision as well, offering *lap-lap-lap* against the wooden sides.

“God!” I screamed at the universe. I knew my only option was to turn the small boat around and try to make it back to the dock alive.

Once I was close, I drifted just outside the breakers for several minutes, trying to determine what kind of wave would safely deliver me to the dock without destroying my boat and me in the process.

It took several minutes of concentration before I realized that the roaring crash of foaming waves, a constant reminder of my mortality, periodically took a break. The pause was only long enough to allow a rolling wave or two to take the place of the brutal ones, but it was just the opportunity I needed. After several minutes spent watching for the least foamy set, I finally rowed as hard as I could toward the dock.

Somehow, it worked.

Unfortunately, by the time I tied up the boat, I was completely exhausted. I set both oars on the dock and crawled out of the boat, barely finding the strength to roll myself onto the wooden planks and close my eyes. I lay there for several minutes, grateful for the sliver-filled dock below me.

“Think of that one on your own?” asked a male voice that was all too familiar.

I squeezed my eyes closed tighter as if that would block out all sound.

The planks creaked beneath the approaching footsteps. They stopped within a few inches of my feet, and a shadow covered my face as I continued to hide behind my eyelids.

He took a seat on the dock next to me, laughing hysteri-

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cally.

I slowly opened my eyes just in time to see him blowing his nose into a white handkerchief. The top of his light brown head was unmistakable; it was an unfortunate shade lighter than Dell's. "Hello, Shane," I mumbled.

"Oh, Em, you never disappoint!"

I stared at the younger, less appealing version of my husband and exhaled in disgust. "Speaking of disappointing, why are *you* here instead of Dell?"

"Nice try, Lady Milton, but in this house, *I'm* the lord of the manor."

"Excuse me?" I sat up, quickly forgetting about my tired body.

"Yes, my dear, I'm Lord Milton."

"No, you're not. Dell is!"

He grinned and shrugged. "Tomayto, tomahto."

"What?! You have to be kidding me!"

"Would I kid my lovely bride?" He wiped his eyes and returned his handkerchief to his pocket.

Then, an especially loud snore drifted out of the guard shack.

"Hmm. I hear your partner in crime." Shane stood and walked over to the source of the noise and emerged, holding the bottle of whiskey. "And, I see you've found my stash."

I just stared at him.

He walked toward me with the bottle, grabbed the oars from the dock, and hung them in their rightful resting spots. Then he returned to my side, extending his free hand down to me. "Milady..."

I was too tired to argue, so I let him help me up.

He held my hand until we reached the stone staircase,

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and he walked close behind me to keep me from falling backward while I slowly dragged my exhausted body to the top. It was humiliating.

So much for my escape.

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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