

Whether you're already a fan of Deborah Heal's original *[Time and Again](#)* trilogy or just meeting Merri Randall for the first time, you'll love ***Once Again***, the first story in her exciting next generation series.

Once Again

Spending the night in an old attic, especially on Halloween, should have been creepy. But for Merri Randall, it turns out to be a night for miracles. With the discovery of an amazing computer program that allows her to fast-forward and rewind time, she's given the chance to say goodbye to her long-dead friends one last time.

And the ability to watch history unfold could also be of unimaginable value in her work as a history professor and genealogy consultant. But would she be able to keep the program safe? The ramifications of such power are terrifying, because if the government ever got its hands on it, Uncle Sam could make Big Brother look like a kindly Wal-Mart greeter in comparison.

Should she risk using it or keep it safely locked away? The choice may not be hers to make.

Once Again

A Merri Randall Story

Story # 1

Deborah Heal

Write Brain Activity
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Once Again

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Novels by Deborah Heal

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[*Unclaimed Legacy*](#) (book 2 in the trilogy)

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“As we have seen, both the Articles of Confederation and the subsequent State Constitution of 1818 prohibited the ownership of slaves in Illinois.” Merri Randall paused and studied the students busily taking notes in the dimly lit lecture hall. Many would take the next part hard. They were only freshmen, after all. She hated to be the one to shatter their naiveté, but they’d have to learn that no, Virginia, there really is no Santa Claus.

“However,” she continued, “the law was quite handily circumvented. Because, as they say, where there’s a will, there’s a way. In actuality, the free state of Illinois, the Land of Lincoln, was in many regards indistinguishable from the slave states.”

Heads popped up and eyes opened a little wider. She clicked the remote and the next slide projected onto the screen behind her.

“The mansion you see here still stands in Equality, Illinois. It is amazingly well preserved, given that it was built in 1834. A lot of horrible things went on up on its third floor. But that’s a whole story in itself.

Suffice it to say, a man named John Granger built this house from the blood-tainted money he made off the backs of the slaves who worked the salt mine at the bottom of his hill. How, you ask, was Granger able to use slave labor? And, mind you, he did it openly. Well you see, salt was a very valuable commodity. At one time, the sale of salt from the Equality mine contributed sixty-five percent of the state’s economy. So the Illinois legislature had no qualms about waiving that pesky

anti-slavery law. That is, as long as Mr. Granger paid the annual fee. And as long as the slaves were registered in the state of Kentucky, where slavery was legal.

“And, in case you were thinking that at least slavery was limited to the salt mine, please understand that the rest of the black population of Illinois was not much better off than those unfortunate souls laboring in the mine.

“We’ll be discussing that next time. Please refer to your online syllabus for further reading. There are some pretty cool links there, if I do say so myself. Pay special attention to the material on the Black Code, which, before you ask, will be on the final exam.”

She used the switch behind her to turn the room lights back up. The students began gathering their things to leave.

She slid her notes into her briefcase and hurried to the classroom door so she could make a phone call before her next class. But as usual, eager students followed her, peppering her with questions. She kept walking, answering as she went. Just outside the door, Brett Gregory was propping up the wall and grinning at her like an idiot.

She ignored his knowing smirk and turned to her students. “We can discuss this more next week in History Club. If you have questions about anything else, my office hours are posted on the door.” She smiled to take the sting away. The students drifted away, one calling out, “Happy Halloween, Professor Randall.”

“You, too, Sam.”

Brett laughed. “They are so crushing on you, Merri. No wonder. You’re beautiful and smart. And not that much older than they are.”

“It’s no use flattering me. I don’t date faculty members, and that’s final. Anyway, you’re ridiculous. What those students love is history. Who doesn’t?”

“Side note: I wasn’t leading up to a date. My pitifully wounded hide hasn’t healed yet from the last time I asked you out. Back to the topic of history: I hate to disappoint you, but not everyone loves it. I much prefer Calculus, myself.”

“I’m happy for you, Brett. It would be soul-numbing to teach something you didn’t love.”

“The university made the right call—for once. I have to give them points for being smart enough to snatch you out of your cradle and make you a faculty member. The youngest ever, as I recall.”

“You’re making me blush.”

“I wish you would. It’s so cute. Now back to why I’m hanging around your door. I need your expertise.”

“I need to get to my office to make a dentist appointment before I forget again and another six months go by. So walk and talk, Professor Gregory.”

“It’s my Aunt Nelda.”

She laughed. “You do not have an Aunt Nelda.”

“I really do have an Aunt Nelda. And you’d like her. She’s a history buff. Even I would be if I lived in her ancient house.”

“Really? How old?”

“Aunt Nelda or her house?”

“The house, silly.”

“I’m not sure of the exact date. I don’t think anyone is.”

“But antebellum?”

“Definitely. Probably ante-antebellum. There’s talk it was built from the remains of an old stone fort. The family has owned the property for generations.”

“Really?”

“Really. Aunt Nelda wants me to help her track down more of our ancestors for the old family tree. But I’m clueless about that sort of thing. And then I thought of you. I heard that you found bunches of genealogy stuff for Marla Scott over in the French Department. She won’t quit blathering on about it to anyone in the faculty lounge who’ll listen.”

“It sounds intriguing and I’d love to help, but I’m already working on five other projects as it is. At the moment I’m helping Jillian find out more about her ancestor who came over from Switzerland, and after that—”

“I’ll double whatever they’re paying you.”

She didn’t respond.

“You’re kidding, right? You’re doing it for free? On the beggar’s wage they pay non-tenured people around here I would think you could use a little extra dough.”

“Oh, I definitely could. It’s just that I hate to ask colleagues to pay for something I enjoy doing.”

“That’s crazy talk. You deserve to be paid for your work and time.”

Genealogical research did take a lot of time. At least it did when you researched it the old-fashioned way. Her phone rang and she fumbled around in her briefcase to get it.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think about how much money you’ll charge me.” Brett waved and walked off down the hall. He turned a few yards away and said, “And fair warning, Merri. My hide is healing fast. Better by the minute. But until then, happy Halloween, Professor Randall.” He said the last in a syrupy sweet voice. She shooed him away and concentrated on her phone.

“What’s up, Abby?”

“Can you talk? I can never remember your schedule. Just say so if you want me to call later.”

“No. I’m good. You sound rattled.”

“I’m definitely rattled. Mom’s in the hospital. They think it’s pneumonia. And Dad can’t be alone, so John and I are going over there to take care of things. We’ll stay the night. Maybe all weekend. And our regular babysitter—”

“I can be there in two hours.”

“Are you sure?”

“I have one more class, and I’ll need to stop by my apartment for a few things. And then it’s Auntie Merri to the rescue.”

“The girls will be thrilled.”

“Me too. I miss the little critters.”

Warm happiness washed over Merri as she stepped up onto the front porch of the beautiful old Victorian house where Abby and her family lived. Eulah and Beulah, or the “Old Dears,” as she had fondly called them, had specified in their wills that John and Abby were to be given first option to buy the house. It had taken some doing for them to get the financing, but thankfully it had all worked out.

Eulah and Beulah had been gone for ten years now, and Merri still missed them. She had first met the ladies fifteen years ago the summer she was eleven. Although they were identical twins, they were different in personality. But they had immediately appointed themselves Merri’s dual grandmothers, and in doing so, they had generously filled a gaping hole in her life. Memories of them still permeated the house. At least Abby and John and their girls, her favorite people in the whole world, lived there now.

Although Abby and John were ten years older than her twenty-six, they had always treated her as a peer. Abby had come to be her tutor that same horrid summer she met the ladies. Merri had

certainly not made it easy for Abby. She had been in such emotional pain at the time, what with being uprooted from her home and dragged to that shabby old house in Miles Station after her parents' divorce. When her dad was arrested on drug charges later that summer, her heart had nearly broken. But Abby, John, and the Old Dears had been there for her.

Bright maple leaves littered Abby and John's porch floor, and pots of mums sat by the door next to a plump pumpkin. It wore no carved face, not even a benign smiling one, because Abby was opposed to celebrating Halloween on religious grounds. Merri's own antipathy for the holiday went beyond that, and it didn't take a degree in psychology to understand why.

The door opened before she could knock, and Lauren and Natalie launched themselves at her. Merri set her overnight bag down and enveloped them in a three-way hug.

She drew back and took in their sweet faces. "I've missed my little bugs. Well, not so little now, but I'll refrain from making those embarrassing comments aunts always do."

"Come on," eight-year-old Lauren said. "We've got everything ready."

"What are we making this time? Guitars out of cereal boxes? Alien spaceships out of Styrofoam bowls. Bracelets out of rubber bands?"

Lauren laughed. "Don't be silly, Aunt Merri. We made that last time."

"We're gonna make dolls, Aunt Mewwi," five-year-old Natalie said. "Outta clothes pins."

John opened the door wide and smiled a welcome. "Girls, let your Aunt Merri get settled before the crafting marathon begins."

Abby joined her husband at the door, leaning into his side as if she still couldn't get enough of him even after ten years of marriage. Merri's heart lurched every time she saw them mooning over each other. Their marriage was the standard that she had set for herself, the reason none of the men she dated ever turned out to be good enough.

"Okay, you two," Merri said. "You're making me a little nauseous. Get out of here and leave us girls to our fun."

Abby left John's side and pulled Merri into a hug. "Thanks, kiddo, for helping out."

"Are we mentioning the pneumonia?" Merri asked softly when the girls had run on ahead.

"No, we are not," Abby said.

"We decided to wait until we've got a better idea about how serious it," John added.

As usual, Abby had a long list of "guidelines" to go over with her. Merri always tried to comply with the rules, even though in her opinion most of them were needless. But, they were not her kids, after all.

Thirty minutes later, Abby and John finally kissed the girls and left. Thirty-one minutes later Merri was ensconced with Lauren and Natalie at a table in the sunroom ready to make clothes pin dolls.

The table looked like a small tornado had passed through, leaving behind piles of calico scraps and bits of lace. Some of the fabrics looked familiar. When asked, Abby had told her the best birthday gifts she could give the girls were craft supplies and fabrics—lots and lots of fabrics.

At first Merri was terrified to see Natalie handling a hot-glue gun. But when she realized it was the low-temp type and that both Natalie and Lauren were old hands at it, she settled down to enjoy making dolls with them.

Lauren, always the serious big sister, made tailored school clothes for her dolls. They were nicely color coordinated and exquisitely detailed with darling little collars and belts. Natalie's creations were, like her personality, more flamboyant. She made fairies—not mere dolls—complete with wings and dresses in sparkly purple, hot pink, and teal.

The two dolls Merri managed to construct looked like clothespins with fabric stuck to them. Her attempt at creativity was, as usual, woefully inadequate. The girls' kind comments, clearly meant to bolster her confidence, only made her feel worse.

Their neighborhood was largely elderly, and Abby had told Merri not to expect many trick or treaters. Nevertheless, she was disappointed that the doorbell only rang three times throughout the evening. Three times Lauren and Natalie left their crafting and rushed to the door to admire the kids' costumes and hand out miniature candy bars from the bowl Abby had set by the door.

Eventually, they all grew weary of doll making and went to the living room. Each of them chose three candy bars, per Abby's "guideline," and sat together on the floor to eat them. Merri told them a silly story about the adventures of a doll named Betty Broccoli Head while they tried to make the candy last as long as possible. The girls laughed at the story, and Merri felt vindicated in the creativity department.

She had planned on "forgetting" the time so they could stay up a little later, but at eight-thirty Lauren dutifully announced that it was their bedtime.

Although she personally had never seen the point of celebrating death, demons, and ghosts, it seemed un-American not to do something at least a little Halloweenish with the girls.

"I have an idea," she said. "How would you like to have a Halloween camp out? You still have your Cinderella tent, don't you?"

“Can we, really?” Lauren said. “That would be so cool. We could scare the kids when they walk by the house.”

Merri ruffled the girl’s blonde hair. “So you wouldn’t be scared?”

“No.”

“Me neither,” Natalie added.

“Anyway, it’s fun to be scared,” Lauren said. “Only Mom doesn’t get that.”

“Good,” Merri said. “But it’s a little too cool to camp outside. Besides, your mother would kill me. I have a better idea.”

Yawning, Merri put aside the novel she had been reading by the light of her flashlight and got up from the air mattress to check on the girls. The Cinderella tent glowed from within, a bright beacon in the attic’s gloomy light.

The Old Dears had let her play in the attic whenever she came to visit. Granted, she had been eleven, not six or eight, but there wasn’t anything the least bit scary about the attic. That didn’t mean Abby wouldn’t get her feathers ruffled when she found out the girls had spent the night there. But better to apologize later than to risk asking permission first. Lauren and Natalie were intrepid little girls who wanted to have a little excitement. How scary could it be with her sleeping next to their tent?

She poked her head in and saw that they were conked out, flashlights lying loose in their limp hands. She brushed a golden strand of hair from Lauren’s face, kissed each smooth forehead, and switched off the flashlights—including her own.

The nearly full moon shone through the dormer windows, and the light she’d left on at the bottom of the stairs spilled through the doorway. There would be plenty of illumination if anyone needed to go down to the bathroom during the night.

Yawning again, Merri checked the clock on her phone. Eleven o’clock. It had been a long day. She sank back onto the air mattress, pulled the blanket to her chin, and fell to sleep instantly.

And then Charlotte Miles was there in her quaint nineteenth century clothes. Merri knew that it was a dream. But it was so good to see Charlotte again that she willed herself not to wake up. Merri’s house—well, technically Charlotte’s—was there, fresh and brand spanking new, not at all like the shabby place it had been when Merri and her mother moved into it one hundred and fifty years afterward.

Then Charlotte was at the depot waiting for the two o'clock train to arrive. But she wasn't there to meet someone. No, this time she would be a traveler herself. She'd board the train and go to Chicago. Merri could go too—go home at last. She started to follow Charlotte into the passenger car. But then, panic filling her chest, she took her foot off the step and set it back on the depot's boardwalk. The girls! What was she thinking? She couldn't leave Lauren and Natalie alone. They'd be frightened.

A beam of blue light lasered past Merri's eyelids, and she sat up and blinked. The light came out of the darkest corner of the attic. The sight of it filled her heart with joy in a sudden rush. But it couldn't be. Could it? Not after all these years. A blue light had wakened her at her mom's ancient house in Miles Station on more than one occasion. Now it was here in the Old Dears' Victorian house. The common denominator was that they were both old houses—old houses with soul. That's how it worked, after all.

She rose from the air mattress and switched on her flashlight. She peeked into the tent and was reassured that the girls slept on, oblivious to the world.

The blue light was still there. Actually there, definitely not part of a dream. But she was being a fool. The light was probably only a smoke or radon detector that she had somehow overlooked earlier.

She crept on stocking feet toward the light, until she saw that it came from a set of metal shelves John had set up to store various abandoned household goods. More specifically, the light came from a hole on the side of a box that had originally held printer paper.

Merri set her flashlight on the shelf next to the box and lifted the lid. The light poured out, turning her hand neon blue. Inside the box sat John's old laptop, instantly recognizable by the distinctive label he had affixed to it after someone had tried to steal it. She cleared a place on the shelf and then lifted the laptop out of the box and set it there. Thumbing the release button, she opened it and saw that somehow, somehow, Beautiful House was alive and well again, the slide show of houses scrolling by like old times. The banner at the top invited viewers to "Take a Virtual Tour."

She laughed out loud, but then muffled it with a hand to her mouth so she wouldn't wake the girls. For one thing, they needed their sleep. For another, it was best they didn't see what was on the laptop. When the program had stopped working fifteen years ago, they had all agreed that it was probably for the best. It had seemed entirely too risky to let word of it get out. True, the program only worked in conjunction with old houses. But if Beautiful House fell into the wrong hands—even

their own government's hands—a clever programmer would eventually find a way to adapt it until every detail of every citizen's life was available for scrutiny.

Uncle Sam would make Big Brother look like a kindly Wal-Mart greeter in comparison.

Merri studied the parade of houses on the screen. Many looked familiar. Some not. Then, like old times, Eulah and Beulah's house slid into view. She hurried to click on it before the image was replaced by another.

And there it was—the attic in which she now stood. Only instead of moonlight, it was sunlight that came from the dormer windows. A girl of eleven or twelve walked into the attic, humming under her breath. Judging from her hairstyle and low-waisted lavender dress, not only was Merri seeing the attic at another time of day, she was seeing it at another time entirely.

Merri glanced at the time counter at the bottom of the window. It read October 30, 1922.

The program was nothing short of miraculous. She saw that now even more clearly than she had as an eleven-year-old. They had never had a clue about how it worked. There hadn't been time to find out. But as Brother Greenfield had said, God was omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. And if he wanted to give them such a miraculous gift, well then, he could.

The low-battery indicator flashed. The miracle was about to come to a crashing halt. Merri looked in the box and found that, fortunately, the electric cord was there. Good old dependable John. She snatched it and the laptop and hurried to plug it into the wall outlet near her air mattress. The indicator light stopped flashing, and she was able to breathe again.

She settled cross-legged on the mattress with the laptop on her knees and brought the blanket up around her shoulders. The girl on the monitor was kneeling in front of a large wooden steamer trunk, rummaging through what looked like cast-off clothes.

Merri's breath caught in her throat, and her stomach did something weird. It had to be one of the Old Dears. She zoomed in closer to study the girl's face and then laughed softly. It was probably Beulah, although she'd always had trouble telling the twins apart unless Eulah was grousing about something.

The attic door opened again, and a girl wearing an identical lavender dress came in. Now that the twins were together, Merri was sure she'd been right. It was Beulah at the trunk.

Beulah looked up at her sister and said, "I can't find it."

"Drat," Eulah said. "I can't go as Shéhérazade if I don't have a long veil."

Beulah held up a pink tutu. "How about a ballerina?"

"I did that two years ago."

Merri grinned. They were planning their Halloween costumes. How cute. The screen flickered, and Merri's stomach bottomed out. It would be too cruel to have Beautiful House stop working again now. Not after seeing Eulah and Beulah again. After a minute or so, the screen settled down, and with it her stomach.

She and Abby and John had made a pact that they would never "time-surf," as they called it, alone. And they would never go into bedrooms or bathrooms, like perverted peeping toms.

But Abby and John wouldn't be back until tomorrow night—or maybe even Sunday. What if she shut down the program and it never worked again? What if Abby and John, fearing the repercussions—and grown stuffy in their old age—refused to let her use the program?

One of the girls mumbled something in the Cinderella tent, and Merri stopped to listen. When no other sounds came, she went back to watching Eulah and Beulah pick through the clothes in the chest.

Surely Abby and John would want her to take the opportunity, before it was lost forever, to see their old friends one more time. She wouldn't even set the program to go virtual. She could just tag along with them for a while.

She set the dial to slightly faster than real time, because obviously she'd use up her whole life if she didn't skip over some things. Eulah and Beulah stood up and walked toward the door, each carrying a pile of clothes. Merri tried to remember which dial she needed to set in order to lock onto them. If she didn't, she wouldn't be able to follow them out of the attic. At last, she managed to lock onto Beulah just as the last of her dress was visible in the doorway.

Merri followed them downstairs and then watched in amusement as they fussed over their Halloween costumes. Afterward she went with them to the kitchen and watched them make popcorn balls with their mother.

Merri increased the speed again, and then again, until the screen became a blur. Every few minutes she slowed to real time to see what they were doing. Most of it was the mundane, boring stuff that made up the majority of a person's life. But it was fascinating to watch the Old Dears grow from adolescents into beautiful young women and then eventually into the spunky and lively eighty-five-year-olds they had been when she first met them.

She slowed to real time again and saw that now they sat on their front porch, looking older yet and so tired, as they had in the last months before they died, one sister after the other. It wouldn't do to fast-forward now. She had no wish to re-live those last sad days. And certainly no wish to experience their deaths again.

She had to stop anyway. She was so tired she could barely hold her head up. She'd just have to hope the program would restart in the morning. Mentally crossing her fingers, she shut the laptop, and put it into her overnight bag on the floor beside her mattress.

But, no matter that her body needed sleep—craved it—she was too wired to sleep. She turned over, and then over again. The top sheet came loose, then the bottom one. She hated loose sheets. She tried not to think about it. At last, she found the perfect position. Her muscles began to relax, and she felt herself drifting off to sleep.

Until the blue light came on again.

“Okay. Okay.” She sat up and took the laptop out of her bag. Fifteen years before, when the computer had insisted on coming on at odd hours of the night to wake them, she had proposed the theory that it wanted them to time-surf, to discover specific things. It seemed to actually have a mind of its own. It was crazy, of course. But even Abby and John had half believed her theory by the time they had finished using it to uncover genealogical information for Abby’s roommate Kate.

With trepidation, Merri opened the laptop. The monitor flickered and then stabilized. Hand to her chest, she exhaled the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. Not only was the program still working, Eulah and Beulah were still chatting on their front porch swing on a summer evening.

Merri took that as permission to proceed without Abby and John. And she decided to grant herself permission to switch to virtual mode, too. She set the speed to a fraction under real time, because that usually prevented, or at least minimized, the skip in time that happened when they went virtual. She couldn’t go too far forward. Eulah and Beulah didn’t have a whole lot of time left.

Beulah took her twin’s arm and steered her back toward the dining room. “Let’s not go to the attic, okay?” When Lucy got back she’d be mad that she had let Eulah get off the couch. Well, not mad, because Lovely Lucy never got mad at them. But she’d be worried that Eulah would fall and break another bone. But who could stop Eulah once she got something into her stubborn old head? The best she could do was try to distract her.

“We’ve got to get ready.” Eulah’s mouth turned down on the left side and her speech was so garbled that nobody could understand her. Beulah smiled fondly. Except her of course. They’d been thinking each other’s thoughts too long for a stroke to get in the way.

“Ready for what, Yoo?”

“I get the tutu this year,” Eulah said petulantly. Then her expression turned kindly. “But I’ll help you find the veil.”

Beulah had no idea what on earth she was talking about, but she led Eulah to her usual chair at the table. Her sister obediently sank into it and put her thin wrists on the table in front of herself. Then Beulah realized what her sister had meant and laughed. “You want to go trick or treating, is that it, Yoo?”

Eulah grinned and said something that even a twin couldn’t decipher. Well, if she wanted to dress in a tutu and go trick or treating in the neighborhood like a kid, then that’s what they’d do. Not that Eulah needed a costume. She was a ghost of herself, so thin Beulah could nearly see through her. She chuckled at the thought and immediately felt guilty. But then, she reminded herself that dear Eulah would want her to keep her sense of humor. Anyway, Lucy would know what to do when she got back from Walgreens.

Beulah sat down in her own chair and picked up the lined yellow tablet on which she’d been writing earlier. She pushed her glasses up and squinted at the paper. “Now, where were we, Yoo?” When her eyes focused, the best they could anyway, she saw that the next item on the list was the tea set.

Just thinking of the ivory cups and plates with their pretty pink roses around the rims made her smile. It was too bad they hadn’t thought of it back in June, or they could have given the tea set to Abby and John as a wedding present. They appreciated old things.

And the tea set was very old. She and Eulah had always believed their mother had bought the set, that is, until Abby and John went on the World Wide Web and found out that the tea set was much older than they’d realized. In fact, they discovered that it had been in the family for four generations.

Dear Abby and John. They had helped them find their Buchanan roots. She turned to look at the family tree hanging on the dining room wall and smiled in satisfaction at the names she’d hand painted on the little apples. Abby and John should have the tea set.

But then Lucy’s sweet face came to her. Kind and generous Lucy, their next-door neighbor who had taken care of them all these years. She was out this very minute buying Depends for Yoo. Beulah picked up her pen and wrote Lucy’s name on the tablet. Then she wrote the name again on a matching pink Post-It note.

Next to her, Eulah attempted to rise from her chair. “Tutu,” she said.

Beulah put a restraining hand on her shoulder. “Not yet, Yoo. You have to stay here and help me.”

With the sticky note in hand, Beulah pushed herself up from the chair and went to the china cabinet against the wall. The door always stuck a little, but she tugged and it came open. She carefully lifted one of the rose teacups from the shelf and stuck the Post-It on its bottom. “There,” she said. After a last look, she put it back. Then she picked up their father’s pocket watch from its position of honor on the top shelf.

“This will be the toughest one to decide,” she said, carrying it back to the table. “Who did you have in mind, Yoo?”

Eulah didn’t have an opinion, or at least didn’t care to express one. Beulah studied the watch in her hand. The fob kept coming off the chain when she polished it each week with Silver Cream. Just picking it up now, it came off again, drat it. Lucy would know where to take it to be repaired.

The extra loud doorbell that John had installed for them clanged, and they both looked up. Perhaps Lucy had forgotten her key. Beulah, glad she hadn’t sat down yet, put the watch and fob in the pocket of her sweater and turned to her sister. “Stay there, Yoo. I’ll be right back.”

The bell clanged again before she could get the door open. She turned on the porch light, and there was their sweet Merri, teary-eyed and disheveled.

“Grandma Beulah? Can I come in? I know it’s late, but...”

Beulah opened the door wide and her arms wider. “It’s never too late for you, honey.”

Shocked to her core, Merri dragged herself out of the past and paused the program. She had never she run across herself while time-surfing. They hadn’t realized it was possible. But then, they’d been so fascinated by their trips to the past that they’d never gotten around to fast-forwarding to the present, much less into the future.

She had no desire to continue. There was no need to. That night was burned into her memory.

On the monitor, her sixteen-year-old self was captured in all her teenage angst, ready to fly into Beulah’s comforting arms. She remembered vividly the way Beulah took her inside and listened as she wept out all her anger and shame.

She had come straight from her best friend Jenna’s house where she had been surprised to learn that she was un-invited to the Halloween party raging inside. Somehow Jenna had found out that

Merri's dad was not deceased as she had told everyone, but very much alive in Joliet Prison, five years into a ten-year sentence for making and distributing methamphetamine. When Merri had tried to explain, had begged to be let inside, Jenna had threatened to tell everyone she knew about her father if she didn't leave.

Her present self was nearly as frozen with indecision as the image on the screen. What should she do?

She could shut down the program and go back to bed. It was surely the most sensible thing to do. She could un-pause the action and let the scene play out. She'd hear again the wise advice and comfort Beulah had given her that night, words that had shored up her wobbly confidence and helped make her who she was today. She'd watch as Eulah, not quite understanding what the fuss was all about but wanting to help, gave her one last big hug.

Or, she could change the settings, switch the lock from Beulah to the sixteen-year-old Merri, and presumably watch herself grow up. What new insights would she gain if she revisited all the key events of her life from the perspective of time and maturity?

But no matter what she decided to do, there was no changing the fact that at a few minutes before ten o'clock as they sat waiting for Lucy to get back, a third stroke would come and take Eulah away, breaking her heart and her twin's.

Setting the laptop beside her pillow, Merri lay down and and stared at the frozen scene. The thing to do was go forward for just a few more seconds. Then, after she'd seen the Old Dears' sweet faces one last time, she would shut down the computer before it went too far.

The sky was lightening. It would be dawn soon, and she knew from experience that Lauren and Natalie were early risers. Very early risers.

She wiped her eyes with the corner of the sheet, then sat up and put the laptop on her knees. She clicked the dial and sixteen-year-old Merri flung herself into Beulah's waiting arms. Grandma Beulah staggered, and as she did, a shiny coin dropped out of nowhere onto the porch floor and rolled away, unnoticed by either of them. Arm in arm they started down the hall toward Eulah.

Merri clicked to stop the action. The wooden porch floor had acted as a drum, amplifying the sound of the coin's landing. Of course, Beulah couldn't hear very well, but her own hearing had keen. Yet wrapped in her misery, she hadn't even noticed. It just went to show how much sensory information the brain tuned out during moment of stress.

She zoomed in close and studied the wooden floor. The porch light was plenty to see by, but the coin had disappeared. It was stupid to get obsessed with it, but somehow she couldn't bear to go

on without discovering where it had gone. She rewound, and played again, this time in slow motion, and saw that the coin had come from Beulah's sweater pocket. Her pulse kicked up as she realized that it wasn't a coin at all.

She stopped the action with the shining disk in mid-air. Merri laughed out loud and hugged herself. It was the Old Dears' Lewis and Clark Peace Medal, passed down through the generations. Their father had used it as a watch fob, although no one had known its historical significance until Abby and John time-surfed back and saw what it actually was. Suspicions had run high after Beulah's death, everyone assuming the valuable artifact had been stolen.

She clicked and the medal continued to fall in slow motion. At last it landed and rolled across the porch. Then it hit a crack in the floor at just the right angle and fell in.

With that mystery answered, Merri was ready to allow Beulah and her young self to continue. Just until they reached Eulah.

"Got to get back to Eulah quick. She's had it in her her head to go up to the attic all evening."

Merri, in spite of her misery, wondered why she would want to go up there. And then a spurt of worry hit her. Grandma Eulah would fall again if she tried to climb all those stairs.

"To be honest," Grandma Beulah said, "there are a few un-Christian words wanting to come out of my mouth about that so-called friend of yours, Merri. But I'm not going to let them out. Of course," she said thoughtfully, "since the Lord already knows I'm thinking them anyway, maybe I should go ahead and speak my mind."

Merri was amazed to find that she was smiling. In the dining room, Grandma Eulah was writing something on a yellow pad at the table. She looked up and smiled sweetly, albeit crookedly, at Merri. When she got to the table, Merri saw that Grandma Eulah had written Merri's name in her spidery cursive on the tablet.

"Sit down here and let's talk, honey," Grandma Beulah said. "When Lucy gets back in a few minutes, she'll watch after Yoo, and you and I'll go to the icebox and get us some Coca-colas."

Merri stopped the scene from playing out. There. That was enough. All she needed to see. She'd remember the three of that way, sitting together at the table.

Then, what she'd just seen sank in, and she zoomed in close to the tablet in front of Eulah.

Merri laughed and then laughed again. "Well, what do you know about that? I'm an heiress."

“What’s so funny, Aunt Mewwi?” Natalie stood outside the Cinderella tent, rubbing her eyes. In the pink-tinged light streaming into the attic her hair and nightie glowed as if some fairy godmother had sprinkled fairy dust on them.

“What’s so funny?” Merri slipped the laptop into her overnight bag, then pulled Natalie down to sit beside her. She kissed her turned up nose and said, “Life, little bug. Life.” She stretched over to get her phone from beneath the rumpled sheets.

“Can we make more fairies, Aunt Mewwi?”

“We can after breakfast. And I’ll fix breakfast for you and Bug Number One in just a minute. First I have to text Professor Gregory. On second thought, I’m going to call him. It will be so much funnier for him to hear his phone ring at dawn on a Saturday morning.”

She punched in Brett’s phone number and it rang in her ear.

He mumbled something undecipherable in a sleep-clogged voice.

“Good morning, Professor Gregory,” she said in her cheeriest voice. “If you still want to take me to dinner...”

“Yes.” He sounded measurably more awake.

“I mean a strictly business dinner.”

“I’ll take it. I mean you. I’ll take you to whatever kind of dinner you like.”

“Good. Give your Aunt Nelda a call and set something up.”

“What?” He sounded like he was being strangled.

“We’ll discuss my new sideline profession. My high-paying sideline profession. You’re going to be my first client. Or rather your Aunt Nelda is. You’ll just be the one paying me.”

“Aunt Nelda. Date. They don’t go in the same sentence.”

“Well, you did say whatever kind of dinner I wanted. And I don’t date faculty anyway, Professor Gregory. Remember?”

“Right. Not a date. Can I go back to sleep now?”

Merri laughed. “Yes. I’ll see you Monday. Right now I’m going on a treasure hunt,” she said, but he’d already hung up.

Natalie’s eyes lit up. “Can I go too?”

Lauren came stumbling out of the Cinderella tent. “Me too.”

“We’ll all go.”

“Come on, Lauren,” Natalie said. “Let’s go get our Dora the Explorer boots.”

“I wish I had some,” Merri said.

Natalie laughed.

Lauren frowned. “Mine don’t fit any more.”

“Never fear. I will buy you another pair, Bug. But you won’t really need them for this treasure hunt. We don’t have to go far—just to the front porch.”

The End



Deborah Heal is the author of the *[Time and Again](#)* virtual time travel mystery series, which has been described as “Back to the Future meets virtual reality with a dash of Seventh Heaven thrown in.” She was born not far from the setting of her book *[Every Hill and Mountain](#)* and grew up “just down the road” from the setting of *[Time and Again](#)* and *[Unclaimed Legacy](#)*. Today she lives with her husband in Waterloo, Illinois, where she enjoys reading, gardening, and learning about regional history. She has three grown children, three grandchildren, and two canine buddies Digger and Scout. She loves to interact with her readers, who may learn more about the history behind the books at her website www.deborahheal.com.

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<http://www.deborahheal.com>

Thanks. I look forward to meeting you online.

Sincerely,

Deborah Heal

