

*From living in luxury to working in a diner in the desert, Laura has a lot of adjusting to do. To top it off, she's not even in her own body!*

## **Twice Again**

by Heather Rivera

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The image features a warm, golden-hued landscape. At the top, a dense garland of small white flowers hangs down. Below it, a vast field of similar flowers stretches towards a horizon under a sunset sky. The sun is a bright orb on the horizon, casting a glow over the scene. The overall mood is peaceful and nostalgic.

# TWICE AGAIN

HEATHER RIVERA

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ISBN: 978-1-63263-894-6

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Published by Abuzz Press, St. Petersburg, Florida, U.S.A.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Rivera, Heather

Twice Again by Heather Rivera

Fiction: Women | Fiction: Romance | Fiction: Paranormal

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018905833

Printed on acid-free paper.

Abuzz Press,

2018

First Edition

Cover design by Todd Engel, Engel Creative

## Chapter 1

*What's that noise?* A rattling, gurgling noise is the first thing I notice upon regaining consciousness. My eyelids flutter open. A blur of deep red and white is all I can make out. Where am I? I try to lift my head but it's too difficult. My cheek rests on the sippy carpet. The taste of iron in my mouth makes me want to retch. I blink a few times and make out the blood-stained carpet. The pounding in my head keeps me awake. *I've got to see a doctor. Maybe I have an aneurysm,* I consider. Blood drips into my eyes. I try to swipe it away, but I can't make my arm work. Every breath is an effort. The gurgling is getting worse. *Where is that coming from?* I try to take a deep breath and choke on blood. I'm gurgling. It's coming from me.

*Is this going to be my last view of the world—blood-stained carpet in a normally meticulous house?* Panic causes my weakening heart to race. *If Jake sees this mess, he'll go ballistic.* A rattling low laugh in my chest causes me to spasm. How ridiculous, I realize, to worry about his reaction to the carpet as I'm dying. He sure has me well-trained. From my sideways view of our well-appointed room, I can just make out the legs of Jake's grand piano, the blue Pacific view from our Laguna Beach estate, and the pristine white carpet, well, not anymore. Jake and Laura Talbot, the beautiful couple. I've worked so hard to get here.

I fight to stay awake, welcoming the pain—my only anchor to consciousness. Euterpe, the statue, rests near my head and

stares at me with lifeless eyes. Why can't I remember what I did this time to earn his wrath? If only I knew I could make it right. Would he give me another chance? He has to give me another chance.

My head spins. I retch, vomiting up blood. *It won't be long now.* I close my eyes.

## Chapter 4

*The maître d' sat the three of us at our reserved table. I wore a form-fitting sapphire dress with a teasing neckline. It was sexy without being obscene. Seeing that it was my father's birthday and a family affair, I didn't want to give him a heart attack. Mom looked lovely in her plum dress. She kept her figure after all these years. Yoga was good to her. I took after my mother's looks: auburn hair, flawless complexion, straight white teeth, and a well-proportioned body. I had curves, but sometimes I struggled to keep the calories down for the swimsuit competitions. I got my dad's chocolate brown eyes though. My father looked as handsome as ever in his tailored suit.*

*"Laura, would you like wine?" Dad asked.*

*"Yes, please. But you choose, I'm never good at that," I told him as I scanned the room for anyone famous. Coral's restaurant was known as the place for the rich and famous. Dad is a lyricist, so he sometimes rubs shoulders with some big names.*

*"I'll teach you, Sparky," he said and patted my hand.*

*I smiled at his nickname for me—Sparky. It came about one Christmas when I was overwhelmed by all the lights on the tree. "It's so sparky," I said. "Sparkly," my mom corrected, but Dad said he liked Sparky better and so it stuck.*

*It wasn't often I dined at places like this. Two years ago, at the age of twenty, I decided it was time to strike out on my own. I got a job working the front office in a pediatrician's practice and found myself a studio apartment close to work. Dad offered to help me with expenses; I declined. I really wanted to give it a go on my own. Money was often tight, but I liked my independence. Too many years of Mom and Dad in control of my decisions made me complacent. Being an only child did have its drawbacks. My parents focused too much on me. I followed their strict rules while I competed in pageants. And because I was obedient, I did well in competitions—until I got sick.*

*“Look for legs,” Dad was twirling his glass of Pinot Noir. I followed suit, watching the rich liquid flow down the sides of the glass. “More legs indicate high alcohol content, or it can mean high sugar content,” he explained. My mind was distracted by him.*

*Him. The air left the room and suddenly I felt a rush of something I've never felt before. “Are you listening?” I nodded while I kept my eyes on the tall stranger, smiling and greeting a couple at a far table. He had black hair and bright green eyes, a cleft in the chin, and the smile. My heart skipped. I would guess him to be in his mid-thirties. He surveyed the room as if he owned it; his eyes met mine. I couldn't breathe.*

*“Ah, look, it's Jake Talbot,” my father said, waving him over.*

*“Jake Talbot, the composer?” my mother said, looking as if she couldn't breathe either. “He's coming over. Laura, dear, sit up straight.” She didn't have to tell me twice.*

*“Greg Richards? How long has it been?” Mr. Talbot greeted my dad.*

*“A year, maybe two. How are you?”*

*“Well. Thank you.” He looked at my mother, then at me . . . and smiled.*

*“Oh, forgive my manners, Mr. Talbot. May I introduce my wife, Estelle, and my daughter, Laura,” Dad said.*

*“Please, call me Jake. What a blessing to be surrounded by two beautiful women,” Jake said. He picked up my mother’s hand and actually kissed it. I’d never seen her blush before. And then he turned to me. I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. “Lovely Laura,” he whispered as he took my hand. Looking directly in my eyes, he kissed my knuckle. I couldn’t speak. I tried to find my voice, but what do you say when a drop dead gorgeous man kisses your hand? He turned his attention back to my father. “I don’t want to keep you from your dinner.”*

*“We’re celebrating my husband’s birthday,” Mom gushed.*

*“A celebration? Dinner is on me. I insist,” Jake announced.*

*“No, we absolutely couldn’t,” my dad protested.*

*“Tell you what, give me permission to ask your daughter out for a date, and we’ll call it even,” Jake said and winked at me. I swallowed hard.*

*Dad looked at me with a smile. “Jake, you’re such a charmer.” He shook Jake’s hand.*

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*“Bridge, come on out of there, I’ve got to pee,” Nina says. She knocks on the bathroom door.*

I must have fallen asleep. I open my eyes to stare at the bathroom cabinet. I'm lying on a plush pink bath rug. It was surprisingly comfortable. "I'm still in Bridget's body," I realize.

"What did you say?" Nina asks from behind the door.

"Nothing. Is he gone?"

"Yeah, Chris is gone. He says you never came out of the bathroom. Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true," I say, sitting up and unlocking the bathroom door for her.

"Holy crap! Whose bathroom is this? It's spotless," she exclaims. "You must have been scrubbing for hours."

"Yes," I say sheepishly. "I clean when I'm upset."

"No, you don't. You party when you're upset," she reminds me. "You're really out of it." She sits on the toilet and urinates in front of me. I look away, embarrassed by her lack of modesty. "Come on, now you're a prude? We always pee in front of each other. I've known you how long and now you're a prude?"

"Tell me," I press. "How long have we known each other?"

"Chris said that I may be able to bring back your memory if I give you clues. Is that why you're asking?"

"Sure," I lie. No matter how much she tells me about Bridget I won't remember, but what I can say?

"Let's get something to eat first. I'm starving. You hungry? Stomach calmed down? Or are you still hurling?"

“What? Oh, throwing up? No, my stomach is fine, and I am a bit hungry. I could go for a yogurt.”

“Yogurt? You kill me. You don’t eat yogurt. I was thinking of a chili burger.” Nina pulls up her panties, washes her hands at the sink, and yanks off her uniform, dropping it on the bathroom floor.

“Hey, I just cleaned in here.”

“Sorry, I’m not used to this,” she says as she walks away.

“Me neither,” I say, standing at the sink. “Um, Nina, which toothbrush is mine?” I look from the blue one to the green one.

“Whichever; just pick one. That’s what I do.” Her voice is distant.

“We’ve used the same toothbrush?” I shudder.

“Never bothered you before.” She peeks her head back in. Now she’s dressed in purple leggings and a green tank top. “If it bothers you so much, there should be a new brush under the sink.”

I open the cabinet to find a collection of toothbrushes. There must be twenty of them still wrapped in packaging. “Why do we have so many toothbrushes?”

“Oh, you know, from when I was seeing that hygienist dude. What’s his name?”

I brush my teeth with a new red toothbrush, place it carefully back in its wrapper, and hide it under the sink for later. Using the hairbrush I find on a shelf, I pull it through my pink streaked tresses, make a face in the mirror and give up. I’m hideous. “Okay, I’m ready,” I say, stepping out of the

*Twice Again*

bathroom for the first time in hours. The apartment is just as shocking as it was the first time I saw it. “I live here?”

“Come on, let’s get some grub,” she says, opening the door for me. My eyes are assaulted by the brightness of the late afternoon sun. I step out the front door and gasp. The heat practically knocks me over. It’s unbearable.

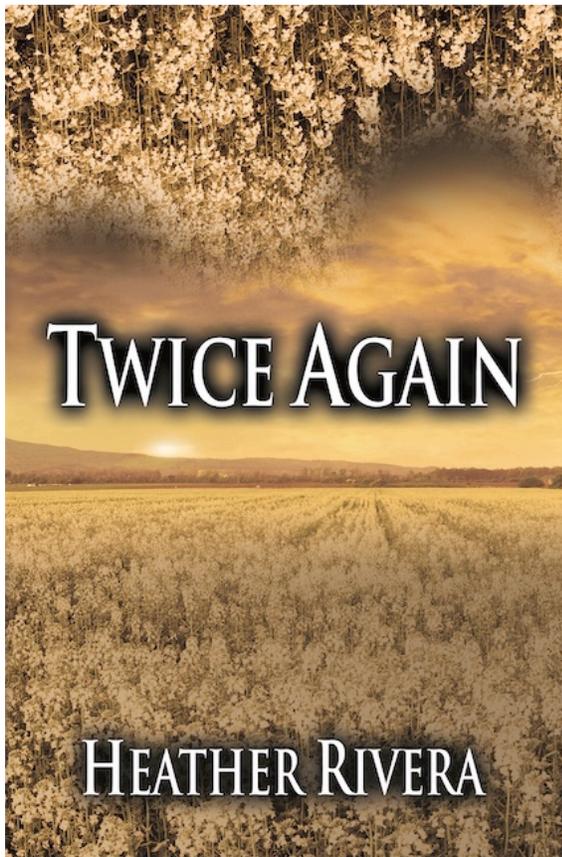
“This really is hell,” I say.

“Nah, just Barstow.” She nudges me in play. I look out at the stark desolation of the desert and burst into tears.

“I can’t do this,” I cry.

“Sure you can. You love the desert.”

“No, I don’t.”



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