

Thanks for checking out *A Matter of Time*. It is still in the draft stage, so please pardon any typos you may find. If you like chapter one, I hope you'll pre-order the novel. (I'll let you know when that option becomes available.) Pre-ordering really helps me gain visibility for browsers looking for books to buy. Thanks!

Chapter 1

Merrideth put her sneakered foot on the next rung. "I'm starting to rethink the plan." Her voice sounded wheezy, but then most people would be a little breathless under the circumstances. It was pitch black, except for the teeny beam from Brett's penlight which was shining everywhere but where she most needed it, the ladder she was climbing in the haunted bell tower of McKendree College's Bothwell Chapel. Allegedly haunted.

"Getting nerves, are we?" Brett said smugly, from a few rungs below her. "It was your brilliant idea."

"Well it seemed logical at the time."

"No backing out now, Nancy Drew. You're closer to the top than you are to the bottom."

"Humph." Merrideth sniffed. "I didn't say anything about backing out." She had thought it, though. Her mild claustrophobia had kicked in the moment they entered the cramped ladder well. But with the students and faculty gone for Thanksgiving break, it was the perfect opportunity to time-surf in Bothwell Chapel, number seven on their bucket list of old buildings to be explored. No one would be there to observe them running her software, which was essential to keep secret. And just as importantly, no one would be there to see the two of them together and make more of it than it was: just two friends engaged in a shared hobby. As for her true feelings for Brett Garrison—well that was a secret the nosy McKendree community didn't need to know. Not even Brett himself.

She climbed two more rungs, and then at last her head was above the ladder and into the relatively lighter bell room. "I can see it!" The historic McKendree bell was suspended to her right and striped by moonlight coming in through the louvered windows.

She climbed the rest of the way up, and a moment later, Brett stood beside her. "Awesome, isn't it?" he said.

"So you say." In the dim light it was frustratingly impossible to see the bell clearly. "Tell me, what does a thousand-year old bell look like?"

"It has a beautiful patina of verdigris. You should come back in the daytime to see for yourself."

"I plan to." She started to put her hand on the bell, but stopped when he said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

“Why? I want to be able to tell people I touched the oldest bell in the United States.”

“Go ahead. If you’re not squeamish about pigeon poo.”

She withdrew her hand and squinted warily at the dark ceiling. “Are they roosting up there, just waiting to drop bombs on us?”

Brett laughed softly. “No, maintenance shooed the pigeons out years ago and then put up chicken wire in the windows to keep them out.”

Merrideth looked around the room. “What do you think? Feel any blasts of frigid air? Hear any moaning or rattling chains?”

“Nope. No piano concertos in F minor either. And if these circumstances aren’t right for paranormal activity, then I don’t know what would be.”

“Exactly.” It was why she had decided they might as well do their time-surfing during ghost visiting hours. Her primary reason for being there, as it was for exploring all the old buildings in the area, was to learn more about the history of Southern Illinois, both for her classes and the book she was writing. But if she was also able to debunk the ghost stories associated with the bell tower—well that would be icing on top of the cake. Through the years, people had claimed to hear piano music playing in the chapel or someone walking around in the bell tower at odd hours. They said it was the ghost of a McKendree student who had hanged himself there.

“Okay,” she said. “We can report that there are no ghosts in Bothwell Chapel. Give me my backpack.”

Brett took it from his shoulders and handed it to her. He had insisted on carrying it, just as he had insisted that she go up the ladder first so he could catch her if she fell. And ever since he had learned about the software back in July and had seen the toll it took on her mental and emotional health, he also insisted that she not time-surf without him. His protectiveness got annoying at times, but it was all part of the Brett Garrison package—brilliant professor of physics and advanced math during the work day, and witty partner in historical adventures during the off hours. Everyone on campus loved him, herself included, but as usual she brushed that thought away and commanded herself to think *friend, just friend*.

They could have won Academy Awards for best actor in a dramatic comedy for the performances they had put on for the past six months. And still some people on campus seemed to think there was a sizzling romance going on between them.

There never had been one. Oh, he had blatantly made it known from the very beginning that he was interested in her, all right. But she had not wanted to wreck her new career by dating a colleague. Then, just when she realized she had fallen in love with him and that he was worth the risk to her career, he had abruptly put her firmly back in the friends-only category.

His conscience wouldn’t let him date someone he knew going in wasn’t a Christian and thus not marriage material. It showed integrity, one of the things she loved about him. But his decision had been like a knife wound. And mixed in with the pain was indignation that he didn’t think she was a Christian. But when

she had calmed down, she was able to admit that she didn't believe like he did. Or her friends Abby and John either. Apparently it took a while to work up the faith to be a true-blue believer. Meanwhile, she was just grateful for Brett's friendship. Most days she was able to ignore the crack in her heart.

She took out her laptop, and they sat down on the dusty wooden floor next to one of the louvered windows. Hopefully, it was dust. Surely the maintenance staff had swept out the droppings when they banned the pigeons from the bell tower. A gust of cool air came in, ruffling her hair. She put the hood of her coat on, pulled the zipper up to her chin, and waited for the laptop to boot.

Once it was up, she clicked the *Beautiful Houses* icon. The screen went neon blue, the light piercing the darkness and turning their aerie eerie. When the program finished launching, the blue light was gone and then the usual parade of homes began scrolling across the screen. At the top, a colorful banner read *Take a Virtual Tour*.

Beside her Brett rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "And now for the moment of truth. Will it, or won't it go into time-surfing mode?"

"Be patient." As soon as she said it, the images on the monitor went haywire. After a second, the pictured cleared, and there was Bothwell Chapel.

Brett grunted happily, and Merrideth smiled at him.

The view was of the interior of the sanctuary below them, not the bell tower in which they sat. The layout was the same—tall windows on three sides of the room and two aisles running through the pews. But the walls were painted a darker color than the current light gray, and the pews were plain oak, unlike the white-trimmed, upholstered ones there now. The carpet was gone, too, leaving the floor's wooden planks exposed. That told her more than anything that they were looking at Bothwell in its youth.

The time counter at the bottom of the monitor read November 28, 1888.

"Our same month and day," Merrideth said. "Weird."

"It's only thirty-two years old," Brett said.

"Hey, Number Man, McKendree College was founded in 1828."

"Yes, but Bothwell Chapel wasn't built until 1858."

"Oh, right." She entered the date, and the screen scrambled—and wouldn't stop scrambling.

"Is it malfunctioning?" Brett asked.

"Amazing, I know, but you must be wrong about a date for once. As you can see, Bothwell Chapel apparently didn't exist yet in 1858."

"We're in January. I'm guessing the building's not far enough along to send out vibes. Try later in the year."

"Can't you just admit you're wrong?"

"I am quite willing to admit when I'm wrong. When I am."

Grinning, she ran the time forward at fast speed for a minute or so and then let it settle back to real time. Bothwell Chapel was back. The time counter said October 24, 1858.

“I do apologize, Dr. Garrison. This is why I let you come adventuring with me.”

Brett’s teeth gleamed in the darkness. “Glad to help, ma’am.”

The gaslight sconces from 1888 were gone, as was the paint on the walls, leaving the chapel drab and cheerless.

“Creepy,” Brett said. “I heard one of the janitors swear that once when he was in the basement of the chapel he heard someone running down the center aisle of the sanctuary.”

“Bothwell doesn’t have a center aisle.”

“But it did in 1858,” he said, pointing to the screen.

“You’re right. That *is* creepy. But it doesn’t prove anything.”

“Only that if ghosts really existed and one of them had the urge to run down the center aisle shouting *hallelujah* he could do it. But never mind that. Let’s go up to the bell tower and see who’s hanging around there.”

“Hanging around. Ha. Ha. I have no idea why *Beautiful Houses* landed us in the sanctuary instead of the bell tower. It’s quirky that way. Unfortunately, we can only move out of it if someone comes in and we succeed in locking onto them. Then, even assuming he or she decides to go up to the bell tower, which surely didn’t happen every day—”

“This could take a while.”

“As I told you when you insisted on coming.”

“I’m not complaining. Just stating a fact.”

“Shhh!” Merrideth said, putting a hand on his arm. “Maybe there are ghosts after all. Did you hear that?”

“What?”

The sound of a low male voice came from somewhere outside Bothwell Chapel. “That.” She put her ear closer to the window and strained to hear. “Who are they, and what are they saying? Can you tell?”

Brett stood up soundlessly and looked through the louvers. “At this angle I can’t see his face, but I’m pretty sure it’s Jim Mize. I can see one of the campus security cars parked in front.”

“Who’s he talking to?”

“I don’t see anyone else down there. So either Jim’s gone over the edge, or he’s talking on his walkie-talkie.”

“Did he just say something about seeing a blue light?”

“Yep.”

Merrideth slapped her laptop shut then put it in her backpack and rose inelegantly to her feet. Peeking between the louvers, she saw Jim’s foreshortened figure on the lawn below. “If we stay quiet maybe he’ll think he imagined the blue light and go away.”

Brett laughed softly. “He’d go away even quicker if we made a few ghostly noises.”

“Or, he might decide to moonlight as ghost buster and come hunting for us.” Her concern turned out to be groundless when Jim started walking back to his car. She heaved a sigh of relief. “Good, he’s leaving.” She started to get her laptop back out, but Brett put his hand on her arm.

“Actually, I think he’s waiting for backup.”

Brett was right. Instead of driving away, Jim was standing next to his car looking down the street.

“How fast can you get down that ladder?”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?”

Motivated as they were, they made it down surprisingly quickly—without breaking any bones—and came out the chapel’s side door. Brett locked it with the key they had given him when he agreed to be a substitute sound technician for events held there. Keeping in the shadows close to the building, they crept to the corner and risked a look. Jim and another man were purposefully striding down the front sidewalk toward the chapel’s main door, both carrying large flashlights with beams that zig-zagged across the lawn.

They ducked back around the corner. “It’s like breaking out of prison,” Brett whispered. “Only without the machine guns and attack dogs. This may be the only time in history someone had to escape from a chapel.”

It was too dark to see it, but she knew he was grinning. She had to clap a hand over her own mouth to keep from giggling—or from singing with the sheer joy of being on another adventure with Brett. Nancy Drew should be so lucky. When they heard the front door shut, Brett took her hand and they slunk away. Because their apartments were only a few blocks away, they had walked rather than leave their cars sitting in front of the chapel to cause gossip. Now she was glad, because it meant the adventure wasn’t over yet.

The street was eerily empty, but the town’s Victorian-style street lights illuminated their way forward. A scattering of snowflakes danced like fairies in the halos around each lamp, and a few landed to frost Brett’s black hair. From the glimpse she had caught of his face, she could tell he was cognizant of the insanely romantic atmosphere. He was maybe even thinking about kissing her, but she knew he wouldn’t. Sure enough, after a moment he casually dropped her hand under the pretext of pulling up his hood. And then they were back to working toward those Academy awards.

She took her gloves out of her pockets and put them on. Even with their thick fleece lining, they were a poor substitute for the warmth of his hand.

“Just so you know, I’m going back to the bell tower one of these days,” she said. “So if you insist on time-surfing with me—”

“Let me know when you want to go, and I’ll be there. Only I suggest we go during daylight hours next time.”

“It would certainly be easier, and I think we’ve proved that the only ghosts in the bell tower were us.”

When they reached the large old house where her apartment was, she was glad she had remembered to leave the porch light on. The other three tenants had already vacated ahead of their landlord's January first deadline, so other than a light from her window on the second floor, the rest of the building was dark.

Brett followed her onto the porch and into the foyer, seemingly intent on escorting her all the way to her door. Normally she would have protested that he was carrying the gentleman routine too far, but now that she was the only one rattling around in the house, she dreaded walking into her apartment by herself. Lebanon was a virtually crime-free town, but still.

On the stairs behind her Brett said, "How's the hunt going?"

"Not so well. The only apartments available at the moment are so tiny I'd go stir-crazy. But I guess I'm going to have to settle for one of them before too much longer."

They reached her door, and Merrideth turned to face him. "Thanks for the adventure, Brett. And the escort home."

"Listen, I'll talk to the owner of my building. He hasn't been able to sell one of the condos, and he may be willing to temporarily rent it to you until you find something better."

She couldn't come up with a response to his offer. An apartment down the hall from Brett was the last thing she wanted. Talk about going stir-crazy.

He frowned. "I know it would be pretty bland compared to this old house."

His condo's total lack of curb appeal and architectural interest were off-putting to be sure, but that wasn't what held her back, and he knew it full well. But since they weren't talking about the elephant in the room, she might as well go with the excuse he had just offered her on a plate.

"There is a beautiful old house in town even more charming than this one. I've been dreaming of buying it ever since I moved to Lebanon, and now there's a for-sale sign in front of it."

"Where is it?"

"Across from the Mermaid Inn on St. Louis Street."

"Ah, yes, the Mermaid. I believe it's number ten on our list."

"I'd like to propose adding my dream house, too."

"How about tomorrow we slip away from the crowd and you can show me?"

"What crowd?"

"The Victorian Holiday Festival crowd."

"I wasn't planning on going. It doesn't sound like my cup of tea."

"I take it you weren't in the faculty lounge when Marla White gave her annual speech. I'm surprised she didn't hunt you down and tell you her thoughts on the subject."

"And what is that?"

"I'll try to summarize. I'm sure it hasn't escaped your notice that today is Black Friday, the biggest sales day of the year for malls and box stores. But tomorrow is Buy-Local-Buy-Small Day for the little guys. All the

stores will have their wares ready for Christmas shoppers. Marla says we are required to the Victorian Holiday Festival because such events keep Lebanon's small businesses in competition with the big boys in the city. As annoyingly sanctimonious Marla is, I have to admit she's right about this particular hobby horse. So I always go. A lot of the faculty members do."

"I'll think about it. I hate Christmas shopping. I usually put it off as long as possible."

Brett laughed. "How man-like of you. It's not so bad. I think of it as a quest. The goal is to get all your Christmas shopping done in one day so you don't have to worry about it anymore. Of course you have to wade through all the pseudo-Victorian claptrap to find stuff, but that's part of the challenge. And then at the end of the day, you sleep guilt-free, knowing you've done your civic duty. So there. You have now heard the spiel."

Merrideth smiled. "You may have convinced me. I'll have to think about it."