

TWICE UPON A TIME

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Rebecca Caldwell eased her Jeep Cherokee to a stop at the dimly lit intersection. Coldwater Road lay before her. Just around the corner, Carol's house beckoned with a morbid fascination. Shivering, Rebecca glanced up and down the deserted street. Snow blanketed sleeping winter lawns and Christmas lights twinkled along the eaves of hundred year old Victorian houses. It looked perfectly safe. A week ago she would have had no reason to believe otherwise.

Rebecca sucked in a ragged breath. It didn't seem possible that it had only been a week since the nightmare had begun. It seemed more like a lifetime. An icy finger traced a path up her spine and strange sensations flooded her mind. They grew stronger as she steered the midnight blue Jeep tentatively around the corner onto Coldwater Road. The headlights flashed across wide yards dotted with ground-hugging shrubs and tall evergreens, and surrounded by white wrought iron fences. A dirty mix of snow and cinders filled the gutters, overflowed the curbs, and spilled onto the icy sidewalks.

Rebecca eased the Cherokee against the curb in front of Carol's house. She killed the lights, turned off the engine, and dropped the keys into her purse. Grasping the steering wheel in both hands, she stared straight ahead. Half a block away, a dim halo encircled an antique streetlight that spilled a pool of yellow light onto the blacktop. An icy gust of wind rattled the trees and sent a thin mist swirling down the street. A chill seeped in around the Jeep's windows. Rebecca's palms began to sweat.

The nightmare had begun with a strange mixture of feelings she had never felt before. The first, a premonition, began as an uneasy nagging in the back of her mind. She'd tried to ignore it, but as New Year's Eve had drawn nearer the feeling that something bloody and senseless would happen if she went to Carol's New Year's Eve party had grown stronger. The second feeling had been harder to grasp. Finally, she'd recognized it as a little twinge of anticipation.

Rebecca didn't know what to think of these new emotions. She prided herself on her ability to think logically. Rational people did not believe in premonitions, or have a

sick fascination for the macabre. It didn't make sense that if she went to Carol's party something horrible would happen. The violence on the television news took place in big cities, not small quiet towns like Prescott, Arizona. But despite that and every other rational argument she could think of, the premonition had grown stronger and stronger the closer she'd gotten to her friend's house. The sweet sense of anticipation had lingered, too.

Still staring down the street, Rebecca gripped the steering wheel so hard her hands hurt. When she'd turned onto Carol's street the feeling of impending disaster had nearly overpowered her. Rebecca hunched her shoulders, trying to ward off the sensations coursing through her body. She abhorred violence. She really, really wanted to turn around and go back home and forget this whole thing: curl up in front of a warm fire with a cup of hot cocoa and read a good book. But at the same time, she had this morbid desire to stay and see what evil was about to unfold.

Rebecca closed her eyes and gripped the wheel even tighter. Logic told her she couldn't give in to every weird feeling that came along, no matter how scary. She was a rational person. She'd taken calculus in college. Math had a cold logic that she'd appreciated. That sense of logic had served her well in life. It always worked. No, she wasn't Mr. Spock of the Starship Enterprise, but she truly believed that if she looked hard enough she would find a reasonable explanation for this feeling of imminent disaster that had come over her.

Gathering her courage, she took a deep breath and looked around at the houses lining the street. Windows in the hundred year old homes glowed warmly. Christmas

lights blinked merrily. She looked at her friend's house. It sat well back from the street, nestled between the winter skeletons of a pair of giant elms. Yesterday's snow sparkled like diamonds in the dim glow of the porch light. An old fashioned wooden swing hung from the porch rafters, casting a latticework of shadows. She had never seen the house at night. It looked warm and charming, not the least bit sinister. Logically, she knew it was ludicrous to think that if she went inside something horrible would happen. She could only think of one rational answer for her fear. Her over active imagination had to be the culprit. She relaxed her grip and let out the breath she'd been holding. A hazy shadow drifted across the draped front window. Another chill raced down her spine.

Sitting there in her car, she felt like a little kid afraid of the bogeyman. The absurdity of it made her angry. She banged her fist against the steering wheel. "This is ridiculous. I am an intelligent, thirty year old woman, and I DO NOT believe in ghosts and goblins." She paused and took a calming breath. "I am in control here. I am not afraid of some stupid premonition."

With that thought firmly in mind, she pulled her coat tighter, opened the door, and stepped out into the frigid night air.

In her head a voice whispered, "*Don't go.*"

She swallowed hard, hugged herself tight and doggedly walked toward the house. The feeling grew stronger. She stopped. Her dad always said that only fools tempted fate. Well, she certainly felt like a fool, standing there scared out of her mind. She pulled her coat tighter around her and glared at the front of Carol's house,

wondering what she was doing here anyway. She had never liked parties. David had been the party animal. A tear rolled down her cheek as she thought of her husband. Two years ago, on his way to a client's Christmas party, he'd lost control of his car on a rain-slicked freeway. The car smashed into an abutment. David had died instantly. And alone. She would never forgive herself. She hated the holidays. She hated parties.

She turned to go.

Bittersweet memories washed over her. David would have laughed out loud at her silly fear. "Come on, party pooper," he would have chided. "It'll be fun."

She'd never been able to tell him no. She started up the walk. Again.

"Don't go to Carol's party," the voice warned.

She stopped six feet from the front door. "C'mon," she whispered fiercely. "It's just a stupid party." Boldly she squared her shoulders. "I'll go if I want."

"Don't--"

"Cool it!" She stepped closer to the door.

"--go--"

"Stop!" She stomped her foot and reached for the doorbell.

"--INSIDE!"

Her trembling hand stopped an inch from the bell. The warning rang in her ears. She clenched her fists. "I'm trying to be brave, David," she whispered. "Help me."

The air seemed to close in on her. Terror screamed for her to run for her life. At the same time, the unholy fascination with whatever evil was about to happen tightened

its grip, drawing her closer. She couldn't breathe. "Please, David," she gasped.

Her terror turned to blind panic. She ran. Branches grabbed her ankles. Shadows darted across her path, taking her breath away. She slipped on a patch of ice and almost fell. From the yard next door, red-eyed demons raced toward her. "David!" she cried, gasping for breath and struggling to regain her balance.

She'd gotten halfway to her car when Carol's voice interrupted her flight. "Hey! Where are you going? The party's this way."

Rebecca skidded to an awkward stop and looked frantically around. No limbs held her in their sadistic embrace. Cheerful plastic elves glowed in the yard next door. She smiled foolishly at Carol. "I...was...uh...just going to get something from the car."

"Whatever it is can wait. It's colder than the dickens out there."

She glanced hesitantly at Carol, then back at her Cherokee. Snow had begun to fall, big fluffy crystals floating straight down. She pulled the collar of her coat tighter and glanced at the dark sky. The weatherman had forecast eight to ten inches of new snow by morning. She turned back toward the house. It looked warm inside. She started back up the walk.

"Don't go," the voice warned again.

Carol waited, smiling expectantly.

Chin up, Rebecca kept walking.

"Don't go to Carol's party."

The air had grown dense again. Rebecca's knees trembled. She swallowed past the panic rising in her throat and stumbled forward.

"STOP!"

She halted on the threshold.

Carol reached for her.

"Enter and you..will...DIE!"

Rebecca took a jerky step backward. She tried to focus on her friend, but her vision blurred. She glanced over her shoulder toward the friendly sanctuary of her Cherokee. It looked familiar and safe. And light years away. She glanced back at Carol. Carol was looking at her like she'd lost her mind. Rebecca didn't care. Logically, she knew that she wouldn't die if she entered the house. Emotionally, she knew she WOULD die if she went inside. Emotion won. But before she could move, Carol grabbed her hand and pulled her inside.