

## HOUSE OF RECKONING

Sarah Crane woke up with a start, her heart pounding. The image from the nightmare she'd been having since her mother died was fading rapidly, and all she remembered was that in the dream she was in a house—a huge house—and even though it was filled with people, she couldn't see or hear them.

But she knew they were there.

And they were as lonely and frightened as she was.

Now she lay still in her bed, her pulse slowly returning to normal as the last images from the nightmare faded away. She was about to turn over and try to go back to sleep when she suddenly had a feeling that something wasn't right.

She listened, but heard nothing.

The house was silent, as silent as the great mansion in her nightmare.

A clouded moon cast soft shadows across her bed in the stillness.

She hugged the worn plush rabbit that had been her nighttime companion for as long as she could remember, and listened again.

Nothing.

The house was quiet.

Too quiet.

Her mom used to say that her father could snore the paint off the barn, but tonight Sarah heard no snoring from the next room, nor anything from anywhere else in the house.

Which meant one thing: he'd gone out drinking at the Fireside.

Hoping, wishing, even praying that it might not be true, Sarah slipped out of bed and peeked into her parents' bedroom. But the bed hadn't been slept in. She crept quietly down the stairs, but even before she got there, she knew she was alone in the house.

She could actually feel the emptiness.

The sofa, too, was vacant, the crocheted afghan still stretched cleanly over its back. A dozen beer bottles littered the kitchen table, and a glance out the kitchen window showed her that her father's truck was not in its usual place in front of the garage.

Which told her that he was indeed at the Fireside, where he'd gone more and more often, and drinking more and more every time he went? And last time he'd come home drunk, he almost rammed the truck into the barn, and she'd decided that the next time it happened, she would go to the bar and bring him home herself.

And tonight was "next time."

She didn't have a driver's license yet but had driven the truck all over the farm since she was ten, so she could certainly drive it the two miles home from the Fireside. She pulled on jeans and a sweater, and tried to imagine herself walking into that bar and trying to convince her father that he needed to give her the keys and get into the truck so she could bring him home.

But she couldn't. She just couldn't picture it at all. But her mother had done it, so she would do it, too. And maybe someone there would help her if they weren't all as drunk as her father.

Sarah wrapped the wool scarf she'd worn to check the chicken coop and the barn a few hours earlier back around her neck, pulled a thick stocking cap down over her head and ears, put on a heavy jacket and a pair of fleece-lined gloves, and went out into the frosty night.

She wheeled her bicycle out of the garage and climbed onto it, riding down the long driveway and out onto the quiet road with only the intermittent glow of the moon to light her way.

She stood up on the pedals and pumped hard, the cold breeze making tears stream from the corners of her eyes, and hoped she'd make it to the Fireside before her face froze.

As she came around a bend in the road, she saw headlights crest a hill in the distance, then disappear as she dropped into a dip and then pedaled even harder up the small rise beyond. When the headlights appeared again, they were on the wrong side of the road.

And far closer than they should be.

Too late, she realized she had not worn the jacket with the reflective stripes that her mom bought for her when she went out at night.

And the generator for the bike's headlight had given up last year. She told herself that when she got to the top of the hill, where whoever was coming toward her could at least see her, she'd pull off to the side of the road and let them pass.

But by the time she crested the hill, it was too late. The car was still on the wrong side of the road, and it was careening straight toward her.

Blinded by the headlights, Sarah swerved her bicycle across the road to get out of the way, but the driver seemed to see her at the same moment and jerked the steering wheel, slewing straight at her.

She didn't want to dive into the ditch, but had to get out of the car's way. She jumped from her bike and pushed it off the road, intending to follow it into the ditch.

She was a split second too late.

The driver saw her at the last instant and swerved too hard the other way, overcorrected, and slewed back to the left, tires screaming in protest.

Sarah, terror freezing her in place, suddenly realized exactly who was hurtling toward her. "Daddy?" she whispered.

The single word still hung in the night air when the truck's enormous radiator grille slammed into her.