



## DAWN'S LIGHT

By Terri Blackstock

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### Chapter One

Beth Branning sat on her bike a block up the street from Alabama Bank and Trust and watched the hungry mob waiting in the rain. The violent May thunderstorm pounded and cracked like special effects on a Hollywood set, drenching those who waited to get their money. If her parents saw her they would freak. It was no place for a thirteen-year-old, they would say.

Even from a block away, she could feel the tension and thrill of those who would go from poverty to plenty in a matter of minutes. Armed deputies surrounded this bank and all the others in Crockett, along with the few running vehicles in town — sheriff's department patrol cars, ambulances, fire trucks. Clearly, they expected violence. The banks had been closed since the power outage began a year ago, crushing the economy and leaving even Beth's family poor. With the poor and homeless so desperate, no one with cash would be safe today.

The newspaper warehouse was on the other side of Crockett, so she turned her bike around, careful not to tip the bike trailer she pulled. Rain or shine, she had to deliver papers. Raindrops pricked her skin, soaked her softball jersey, and made her shiver. It would take longer to prepare her stacks today, since she'd have to wrap the papers in plastic to keep them from getting wet. She might as well get it done.

As she turned the corner onto a less populated road, a bolt of lightning flashed in front of her, thunder cracking instantly. Her heart kicked through her chest.

People got struck by lightning riding bicycles all the time. A great-uncle of hers had been fishing in a boat when lightning struck him dead. She had to get to shelter. She looked around for a safe place to wait it out, and saw the Cracker Barrel up ahead. It, too, had been closed for a year — since the power outage began — but its rustic porch would shelter her until the storm passed.

She pulled her bike onto the parking lot and rolled it up toward the porch, wishing they'd left their famous rocking chairs out. Lightning burst and thunder crashed again, making her jump.

Her clothes were soaked, and beads of water ran from her long blonde curls into her eyes. She shivered, wishing she'd listened to her parents. There were probably tornados coming, and the winds would pick her up and blow her away, like Dorothy and Toto.

Leaving her bike and trailer in the rain, she sat on the porch floor. Hugging her wet knees, she heard a sound from somewhere behind the building. A garbled cry, a muttered curse.

“Don't shoot!”

She sprang up and crept to the end of the porch.

“Please . . . I'll give you the money!”

Her breath caught in her lungs as she peered around the side of the building.

Two men — one on his knees, facing her. The other stood behind him, holding a revolver to the kneeling man's head.

Beth's knees went weak, and she crouched, making herself smaller. The man with the gun wore a black raincoat with the hood pulled up. She couldn't see his face. But the one on his knees looked young — no more than twenty-five. His wet hair strung into eyes squeezed tightly shut.

She watched, frozen, as the gunman bent and pulled a stack of bills out of the other man's pocket. He shoved it into his, then cocked the pistol against the back of his victim's head.

The gun went off . . . the victim thudded forward.

Beth's scream drew the killer's cold gaze.

Get away! Get help! She lunged for her bike, picked it up. Her necklace caught on the handlebars, breaking the chain. The cross pendant fell, and the bike tumbled into the mud. She heard pounding footsteps behind her — no time to right the bike. She would have to run.

As she leaped over it, the gun fired again. Hot wind whizzed past her calf, and she fell over the bike, flipping quickly onto her back to defend herself. She screamed again as the killer came closer, aiming for her chest.

She raised her hands to cover her face. “I won't tell!” she squealed. “I didn't see anything! Please . . .”

His eyes were piercing, death staring her down. His finger curled over the trigger.

Lightning exploded again, hitting a nearby tree. Thunder cracked like an axe . . . or another gunshot. From the edge of her vision, she saw movement. A man with a chest-long beard and a dirty T-shirt came out of nowhere and tackled the killer, knocking off his aim.

Beth scrambled to her feet and grabbed her bike. She heard the grunts of the two men wrestling for the gun as she leaped onto the seat. Standing on the pedals to move the weight of the trailer, she felt the bike's tires slide in the mud.

As she reached the street, the gun went off again. She looked back. Her rescuer had fallen. The killer leaped over his body, aimed his gun at her.

Her bike slid again, and she fell. He fired again, missing.

She righted the bike and pumped the wheels, putting distance between them before he pulled the trigger again.

“You say a word, and I’ll kill you and your family, Beth,” he shouted after her. “I know where you live!”

Shivering, she realized her name was on the back of her jersey.

Why had she worn it? Why had she even come out today? He must know her family — her father and mother, her sister or brothers.

Flying for her life, Beth rode toward home, praying the man wasn't following her.

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