



NIGHT LIGHT

By Terri Blackstock

Excerpt courtesy by www.TerriBlackstock.com

Chapter One

Stealing came easy today.

Most days, breaking and entering was harder than this for the boys, requiring hours of watching and waiting for families to leave their homes so the two of them could slip in and out, arms full of loot, without being noticed.

At nine and seven, Aaron and Joey Gatlin knew how to blend in. They had a system. They would case the ritzy neighborhoods while bouncing a basketball or tossing a Frisbee back and forth, looking like any other kids out playing on a summer day. No threat to anyone.

The massive power outage that had set technology back over a hundred years, knocking out everything from cars to electricity, had left millions hungry and desperate. But not Aaron's family. He made sure his brothers and sister had something to eat every day.

Some of those who lived in this neighborhood called Oak Hollow had begun plowing up their front yards, and vegetables were growing there instead of grass. Word around town was that they were digging a well, which meant they would have fresh water soon. The lake in the middle of the neighborhood already made them rich, since they didn't have to walk far to get water, and most of them had fancy barbecue pits in the backyard where they could boil the lake water to sterilize it.

"The Br-an-nings." Joey, Aaron's seven-year-old brother, sounded out the name on the mailbox. "They have a big family — they were all working out here in their garden yesterday. Bet they got a lot of food."

Aaron remembered seeing them. "Nobody around today. They're all at the lake, just like the message board said."

The big wooden message boards were a major source of information in every neighborhood around town, since there weren't any newspapers and people couldn't talk on the phone. According to the boards, Oak Hollow was having some kind of big-deal meeting.

The mayor was coming to tell people about something. Most of the neighborhood would be there. There would be bicycle patrols up and down the streets during the meeting, but it was easy for the boys to work around them.

If they'd had more boxes and a way to carry them all off quickly, they could have swept a dozen houses clean in Oak Hollow today.

As it was, they'd hidden their empty boxes in the woods surrounding the neighborhood. They would hit one house, fill the boxes to the brim, then roll their loot home in their rusty wagon. Then they would come back and do the same with the next house, and the next. The problem was that few of the homes had much of what they wanted, so it took a lot of hits to gather enough to call it a day.

The Brannings' house had two stories, with a double front door and a big porch with white wicker rockers and a cushioned swing.

It was the kind of house Aaron's mother used to dream about on her good days. She would cut pictures out of magazines and tack them to the walls — glossy-paged shots of colorful rooms with soft, clean furniture and shiny floors. As if she had a chance of ever owning such a place.

There was no one around. The street was quiet. Aaron couldn't have timed things better. He hoped they'd left their windows open, inviting in whatever breeze there was in the sweltering month of August, as many families did since air-conditioning became a thing of the past. He and Joey had easily gotten into most of the houses they'd hit today and found treasures they hadn't expected. This morning, he'd even managed to find nearly new tennis shoes for Sarah and Luke, who'd been barefoot since they'd outgrown their own. His three-year-old sister had stepped on broken glass last month, and it had been a mess trying to get it healed. Now that it was, he didn't want to let her play outside till she had shoes. Luke, his five-year-old brother, was wearing an old pair that Aaron and Joey had both outgrown — they were so holey there was almost no point in wearing them.

They went around the house and through the wooden gate to the backyard. No one was there. The gate at the back of the property was open, offering a view of the yard behind them, but there was no sign of anyone there, either.

“Okay, Joey, I'll look for a way in. You run back and get the wagon. And watch for the bike patrol. Wait till they've gone by before you cross the street.”

Joey complied, as always. Aaron glanced around again, then went to the back door and tested the knob. It was locked, as he'd expected. These people weren't stupid.

He backed up into the yard, stepping on some of the plants, and surveyed each of the windows. The ones on the ground floor were all closed . . . but one on the second floor was open a few inches.

Perfect. There was a trellis with vines on it leaning against the house — as good as a stepladder to reach the second floor. He shook it to make sure it would hold him. Carefully, he climbed up, testing each foothold of the white lattice before moving higher.

At the top, he balanced carefully on the steep roof and stepped across the shingles to the open dormer window, pulled it up, and slipped inside. He looked back out — Joey was stealing back into the yard, two big cardboard boxes in the rattley wagon he pulled behind him.

Aaron grinned down from the window and flashed Joey a thumbs-up. His partner-in-crime grinned up at him, revealing his two missing front teeth.

The room looked like a teenaged boy's room, with a framed baseball jersey with Mark McGuire's number on it hanging proudly on the wall, an autographed picture beside it. Aaron lingered in front of it for a moment, wishing he could snatch that and hang it on his own wall. But it would be too hard to carry. No, he hadn't come for that.

The bed was unmade. Several pairs of large, muddy shoes lay on the floor. A computer sat in one corner on a desk, looking like it could boot up any time. A television with a DVD player and a PlayStation sat on shelves facing the bed, coveted items before the outage on May 24. But they were useless now.

He tiptoed out of the room and down the stairs, staying quiet in case they were wrong about no one being home. As he'd hoped, he saw and heard no one. Quickly, he opened the back door, letting Joey in. "Anybody see you?"

His brother shook his head. "Nope. They're all gone."

"Yeah, well, we better be fast. That meeting could break up any minute."

His brother rolled the wagon in behind him, its wheels rattling across the ceramic tiles. Aaron ran into the kitchen and threw open the cabinet doors. Worthless stuff: dishes and small appliances — a mixer, a blender, a coffeepot. He opened the dark refrigerator and saw nothing but recycled plastic containers, a stack of books, and some folded towels. He turned to the floor-to-ceiling pantry next to the fridge and opened it.

"Score!" Joey cried at the sight of the food on the shelves. The Brannings had a bag of apples and a loaf of homemade bread wrapped in plastic wrap. A paper sack full of potatoes sat on a shelf with a dozen or so jars of vegetables.

"We'll be eatin' good tonight!" Aaron began loading everything he could reach into the boxes in the wagon. He glanced at the kitchen counter. There were several jugs of water lined up there.

Someone had written drinking water on the side of a plastic milk jug. They'd struck gold! "Go get that water," he told his brother.

Joey's grinning eyes widened. "Do you think they cooked it?"

"Prob'ly. Throw it in, quick."

Joey found the caps and snapped them on, then carefully placed them in the box. They'd have to remember this place, Aaron decided, so they could give the family time to restock and hit them again.

Joey helped him empty the shelves, then rolled the wagon around the open pantry doors.

"Careful, now. Those jars'll break."

"Mom?"

Aaron froze at the sound of footsteps coming through the back door. He grabbed his brother's hand and stopped him. The pantry door hid them as the footsteps entered the kitchen.

"That you?" It sounded like a girl or a young boy. Aaron looked down at his feet, wondering if she could see them under the pantry door. She was coming toward them.

He looked for somewhere to hide, but there was no place.

Joey's eyes were huge, fixed on Aaron's, silently asking what they should do.

Suddenly, the door swung back. A blonde girl of about twelve faced them, her eyes wide with shock. She screamed, her voice an alarm that would resound across Oak Hollow. Any second a police task force would surround the place with AK - 47s, gunning them both down and taking back the food.

Sarah and Luke would be twice abandoned.

Aaron couldn't let that happen.

Download additional sample chapters and get information on new releases at
www.TerriBlackstock.com!