

TRAPPED By Dean R. Koontz 1 ON THE NIGHT THAT IT HAPPENED, A BLIZZARD SWEEPED THE ENTIRE Northeast. Creatures that preferred to venture out only after sunset were, therefore, doubly cloaked by darkness and the storm. Snow began to fall at twilight, as Meg Lassiter drove home from the doctor's office with Tommy. Powdery flakes sifted out of an iron-gray sky and at first fell straight down through the cold, still air. By the time she had covered eight miles, a hard wind had blasted in from the southwest and harried the snow at a slant through the headlights of the jeep station wagon. Behind her, sitting sideways on the rear seat to accommodate his cast-encumbered leg, Tommy sighed. "I'm going to miss a lot of sledding, skiing-ice skating too." "It's early in the season," Meg said. "You ought to heal up in time to have some fun before spring." "Yeah, well, maybe." He had broken his leg two weeks ago, and during the follow-up visit to Dr. Jacklin a short while ago, they had learned that he'd be in a cast another six weeks. The fracture was splintered - "minor but complicating comminution" - impacted as well, and it would knit more slowly than a simple break. "But, Mom, there's only so many winters in a life. I hate to waste one." Meg smiled and glanced at the rearview mirror, in which she could see him. "You're only ten years old, honey. In your case the winters ahead are countless - or darn close to it." "No way, Mom. Soon it'll be college, which'll mean a lot more studying, not so much time to have fun-" "That's eight years away!" "You always say time goes faster the older you get. And after college I'll have a job, and then a family to support." "Trust me, buckaroo, life doesn't speed up till you're thirty." Though he was as fun-loving as any ten-year-old, he was also occasionally a strangely serious boy. He'd been that way even as a toddler, but he had become increasingly solemn after his father's death two years ago. Meg braked for the last stoplight at the north end of town, still seven miles from their farm. She switched on the wipers, which swept the fine dry snow from the windshield. "How old are you, Mom?" "Thirty-five." "Wow, really?" "You make it sound as if I'm ancient." "Did they have cars when you were ten?" His laugh was musical. Meg loved the sound of his laughter, perhaps because she had heard so little of it during the past two years. On the right-hand corner, two cars and a pickup were filling up at the Shell station pumps. A six-foot pine tree was angled across the bed of the truck. Christmas was only eight days away. On the left-hand corner was Haddenbeck's Tavern, standing before a backdrop of hundred-foot spruces. In the burnt-out gray twilight, the falling snow was like cascading ashes descending from an unseen celestial blaze, though in the amber light of the roadhouse windows, the flakes resembled not ashes but gold dust. "Come to think of it," Tommy said from the rear seat, "how could there have been cars when you were ten? I mean, gee, they didn't invent the wheel till you were eleven." "Tonight for dinner - worm cakes and beetle soup." "You're the meanest mother in the world." She glanced at the mirror again and saw that in spite of his bantering tone, the boy was not smiling any longer. He was staring grimly at the tavern. Slightly more than two years ago, a drunk named Deke Slater had left Haddenbeck's Tavern at the same time that Jim Lassiter had been driving toward town to chair a fund-raising committee at St. Paul's Church. Traveling at high speed on Black Oak Road, Slater's Buick ran head-on into Jim's car. Jim died instantly, and Slater was paralyzed from the neck down. Often, when they passed Haddenbeck's - and when they rounded the curve where Jim had been killed - Tommy tried to conceal his enduring anguish by involving Meg in a jokey conversation. Not today. He had already run out of one-liners. "Light's green, Mom." She went through the intersection and across the township line. Main Street became a two-lane county route: Black Oak Road. Tommy had adjusted intellectually - for the most part emotionally as well - to the loss of his father. During the year following the tragedy, Meg had often come upon the boy as he sat quietly at a window, lost in thought, tears slipping down his face. She hadn't caught him weeping for ten months. Reluctantly he had accepted his father's death. He would be okay.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean he was whole. Still - and perhaps for a long time to come - there was an emptiness in Tommy. Jim had been a wonderful husband but an even better father, so devoted to his son that they essentially had been a part of each other. Jim's death left a hole in Tommy as real as any that a bullet might have made, although it would not scar over as fast as a gunshot wound. Meg knew that only time could knit him completely. Snow began to fall faster and dusk surrendered to night, reducing visibility, so she slowed the jeep wagon. Hunching over the wheel, she could see ahead only twenty yards. "Getting bad," Tommy said tensely from the rear seat. "Seen worse." "Where? The Yukon?" "Yep. Exactly right. Middle of the Gold Rush, winter of 1849. You forgetting how old I am? I was mushing Yukon dog sleds before they'd invented dogs." Tommy laughed but only dutifully. Meg could not see the broad meadows on either side, or the frozen silver ribbon of Seeger's Creek off to the right, although she could make out the gnarled trunks and jagged, winter-stripped limbs of the looming oaks that flanked that portion of the county road. The trees were a landmark by which she judged that she was a quarter mile from the blind curve where Jim had died. Tommy settled into silence. Then, when they were seconds from the curve, he said, "I don't really miss sledding and skating so much. It's just ... I feel so helpless in this cast, so ... so trapped." His use of the word "trapped" wrenched Meg because it meant that his uneasiness about being immobilized was closely linked to memories of his dad's death. Jim's Chevy had been so mangled by the impact that the police and coroner's men had required more than three hours to extract his corpse from the overturned car; ensnared by tangled metal, his body had to be cut loose with acetylene torches. At the time, she had tried to protect Tommy from the worst details of the accident, but when eventually he returned to his third-grade class, his schoolmates shared the grisly facts with him, motivated by a morbid curiosity about death and by an innocent cruelty peculiar to some children. "You're not trapped in the cast," Meg said, as she piloted the jeep into the long, snow-swept curve. "Hampered, yeah, but not trapped. I'm here to help." Tommy had come home early from his first day of school after the funeral, bawling: "Daddy was trapped in the car, couldn't move, all tangled up in the twisted metal, they had to cut him loose, he was trapped." Meg soothed him and explained that Jim had been killed on impact, in an instant, and had not suffered: "Honey, it was only his body, his poor empty shell, that was trapped. His mind and soul, your real daddy, had already gone up to Heaven." Now Meg braked as she approached the midpoint of the curve, that curve, which would always be a frightening place no matter how often they navigated it. Tommy had come to accept Meg's assurances that his father had not suffered. Nevertheless, he was still haunted by the image of his dad's body in the clutch of mangled metal. Suddenly, oncoming headlights seared Meg's eyes. A car rushed at them, moving too fast for road conditions, not out of control but not stable either. It started to fishtail, straddling the double line down the center of the road. Meg pulled the steering wheel to the right, swinging onto the hard shoulder, pumping the brakes, afraid of putting two wheels in a ditch and rolling the station wagon. She held it all the way around the curve, however, with the tires churning up gravel that rattled against the undercarriage. The oncoming car skinned past with no more than an inch to spare, vanishing in the night and snow. "Idiot," she said angrily. When she had driven around the bend into a straightaway, she pulled to the side of the road and stopped. "You okay?" she asked. Tommy was huddled in one corner of the backseat, with his head pulled turtlelike into the collar of his heavy winter coat. Pale and trembling, he nodded. "Y-yeah. Okay." The night seemed strangely still in spite of the softly idling jeep, the thump of windshield wipers, and the wind. "I'd like to get my hands on that irresponsible jerk." She struck the dashboard with the flat side of her fist. "It was a Biolomech car," Tommy said, referring to the large research firm located on a hundred acres half a mile south of their farm. "I saw the name on the side. `Biolomech.'" She took several deep breaths. "You okay?" "Yeah. I'm all right. I just ...

want to get home." The storm intensified. They were beneath the snowy equivalent of a waterfall, flakes pouring over them in churning currents. Back on Black Oak Road, they crawled along at twenty-five miles an hour. Weather conditions wouldn't permit greater speed. Two miles farther, at Biolomech Labs, the night was shot full of light. Beyond the nine-foot-high, chain-link fence that ringed the place, sodium-vapor security lamps glowed eerily atop twenty-foot poles, the light diffused by thickly falling snow. Although the lamps were set at hundred-foot intervals across the expansive grounds that surrounded the single-story offices and research laboratories, they were rarely switched on. Meg had seen them burning on only one other night in the past four years. The buildings were set back from the road, beyond a screen of trees. Even in good weather and daylight, they were difficult to see, cloistered and mysterious. Currently they were invisible in spite of the hundred or more pools of yellow light that surrounded them. Pairs of men in heavy coats moved along the perimeter of the property, sweeping flashlights over the fence as if expecting to find a breach, focusing especially on the snow-mantled ground along the chain-link. "Somebody must've tried to break in," Tommy said. Biolomech cars and vans were clustered around the main gate. Sputtering red emergency flares flickered and smoked along both shoulders of Black Oak Road, leading to a roadblock at which three men held powerful flashlights. Three other men were armed with shotguns. "Wow!" Tommy said. "Door-buster riot guns! Something really big must've happened." Meg braked, stopped, and rolled down her window. Cold wind knifed into the car. She expected one of the men to approach her. Instead, a guard in boots, gray uniform pants, and a black coat with the Biolomech logo moved toward the jeep from the other side, carrying a long pole at the base of which were attached a pair of angled mirrors and a light. He was accompanied by a much taller man, similarly dressed, who had a shotgun. The shorter guard thrust the lighted mirrors beneath the jeep and squinted at the reflection of the undercarriage that the first mirror threw onto the second. "They're looking for bombs!" Tommy said from the rear seat. "Bombs?" Meg said disbelievingly. "Hardly." The man with the mirror moved slowly around the jeep wagon, and his armed companion stayed close at his side. Even in the obscuring snow, Meg could see that their faces were lined with anxiety. When the pair had circled the jeep, the armed guard waved an all-clear to the other four at the roadblock, and at last one man approached the driver's window. He wore jeans and a bulky, brown leather flight jacket with sheepskin lining, without a Biolomech patch. A dark blue toboggan cap caked with snow was pulled half over his ears. He leaned down to the open window. "I'm real sorry for the inconvenience, ma'am." He was handsome, with an appealing - but false - smile. His gray-green eyes were disturbingly direct. "What's going on?" she asked. "Just a security alert," he said, the words steaming from him in the icy air. "Could I see your driver's license, please?" He was evidently a Biolomech employee, not a police officer, but Meg saw no reason to decline to cooperate. As the man was holding her wallet, studying the license, Tommy said, "Spies try to sneak in there tonight?" That same insincere smile accompanied the man's response: "Most likely just a short circuit in the alarm system, son. Nothing here that spies would be interested in." Biolomech was involved in recombinant-DNA research and the application of their discoveries to commercial enterprises. Meg knew that in recent years genetic engineering had produced a man-made virus that threw off pure insulin as a waste product, a multitude of wonder drugs, and other blessings. She also knew that the same science could engender biological weapons - new diseases as deadly as nuclear bombs - but she always avoided pondering the frightening possibility that Biolomech, half a mile overland from their house, might be engaged in such dangerous work. In fact, a few years ago rumors had surfaced that Biolomech had landed a major defense contract, but the company had assured the county that it would never perform research related to bacteriological warfare. Yet their fence and security system seemed more formidable than necessary for a commercial facility limited

to benign projects. Blinking snow off his lashes, the man in the sheepskin-lined jacket said, "You live near here, Mrs. Lassiter?" "Cascade Farm," she said. "About a mile down the road." He passed her wallet back through the window. From the backseat, Tommy said, "Mister, do you think terrorists with bombs are maybe gonna drive in there and blow the place up or something?" "Bombs? Whatever gave you that idea, son?" "The mirrors on the pole," Tommy said. "Ah! Well, that's just part of our standard procedure in a security alert. Like I said, it's probably a false alarm. Short circuit, something like that." To Meg he said, "Sorry for the trouble, Mrs. Lassiter." As the man stepped back from the station wagon, Meg glanced past him at the guards with shotguns and at more distant figures combing the eerily lighted grounds. These men did not believe that they were investigating a false alarm. Their anxiety and tension were visible not only in the faces of those nearby but in the way that all of them stood and moved in the blizzard-shot night. She rolled up the window and put the car in gear. As she pulled forward, Tommy said, "You think he was lying?" "It's none of our business, honey." "Terrorists or spies," Tommy said with the enthusiasm for a good crisis that only young boys could muster. They passed the northernmost end of Biolomech's land. The sodium-vapor security lights receded into the gloom behind them, while the night and snow closed in from all sides. More leafless oaks thrust spiky arms over the lane. Among their thick trunks, the jeep headlights stirred brief-lived, leaping shadows. Two minutes later, Meg turned left off the county route into their quarter-mile driveway. She was relieved to be home. Cascade Farm - named after three generations of the Cascade family who once lived there - was a ten-acre spread in semirural Connecticut. It was not a working farm any more. She and Jim had bought the place four years ago, after he had sold his share in the New York ad agency that he'd founded with two partners. The farm was to have been the start of a new life, where he could pursue his dream of being a writer of more than ad copy, and where Meg could enjoy an art studio more spacious and in a more serene environment than anything she could have had in the city. Before he died, Jim had written two moderately successful suspense novels at Cascade Farm. There also, Meg found new directions for her art: first a brighter tone than she previously had employed; then after Jim's death, a style so brooding and grim that the gallery handling her work in New York had suggested a return to the brighter style if she hoped to continue to sell. The two-story fieldstone house stood a hundred yards in front of the barn. It had eight rooms plus a spacious kitchen with modern appliances, two baths, two fireplaces, and front and back porches for sitting and rocking on summer evenings. Even in this stormy darkness, its scalloped eaves bedecked with ice, battered by wind, and lashed by whips of snow, with not a single front window warmed by a lamp's glow, the house looked cozy and welcoming in the headlights. "Home," she said with relief. "Spaghetti for dinner?" "Make a lot so I can have cold leftovers for breakfast." "Yuck." "Cold spaghetti makes a great breakfast." "You're a demented child." She pulled alongside the house, stopped next to the rear porch, and helped him out of the wagon. "Leave your crutches. Lean on me," she said over the whistling-hooting wind. The crutches would be of no use on snow-covered ground. "I'll bring them in after I put the jeep in the garage." If the heavy cast had not encased his right leg from toes to above the knee, she might have been able to carry him. Instead he leaned on her and hopped on his good leg. She had left a light in the kitchen for Doofus, their four-year-old black Labrador. The frost-rimed windows shimmered with that amber glow, and the porch was vaguely illuminated by it. At the door, Tommy rested against the wall of the house while Meg disengaged the lock. When she stepped into the kitchen, the big dog did not rush at her, wagging his tail with excitement, as she expected. Instead he slunk forward with his tail between his legs, his head down, clearly happy to see her but rolling his eyes warily as if expecting an angry cat to streak at him suddenly from one corner or another. She pushed the door shut behind them and helped Tommy to a chair at the kitchen table. Then

she took off her boots and stood them on a rag rug in the corner by the door. Doofus was shivering, as though cold. But the oil furnace was on, and the place was warm. The dog made an odd, mewling sound. "What's the matter, Doofus?" she asked. "What've you been up to? Knock over a lamp? Huh? Chew up a sofa cushion?" "Ah, he's a good pooch," Tommy said. "If he knocked over a lamp, he'll pay for it. Won't you, Doofus?" The dog wagged his tail but only tentatively. He glanced nervously at Meg, then looked back toward the dining room - as if someone lurked there, someone he feared too much to confront. Sudden apprehension clutched Meg. 2 BEN PARNELL LEFT THE ROADBLOCK NEAR THE MAIN GATE AND DROVE his Chevy Blazer to lab number three, the building deepest in the Biolomech complex. Snow melted off his toboggan cap and trickled under the collar of his sheepskin-lined flight jacket. All across the grounds, anxious searchers moved cautiously through the sulfur-yellow glow of the security lamps. In deference to the stinging wind, they hunched their shoulders and held their heads low, which made them appear less than human, demonic. In a strange way he was glad that the crisis had arisen. If he hadn't been there, he would have been at home, alone, pretending to read, or pretending to watch television, but brooding about Melissa, his much-loved daughter, who was gone, lost to cancer. And if he could have avoided brooding about Melissa, he would have brooded instead about Leah, his wife, who had also been lost to ... Lost to what? He still did not fully understand why their marriage had ended after the ordeal with Melissa was over. As far as Ben could see, the only thing that had come between him and Leah had been her grief, which had been so great and dark and heavy that she had no longer been capable of harboring any other emotion, not even love for him. Maybe the seeds of divorce had been there for a long time, sprouting only after Melissa succumbed, but he had loved Leah; he still loved her, not passionately any more, but in the melancholy way that a man could love a dream of happiness even knowing that the dream could never come true. That's what Leah had become during the past year: not even a memory, painful or otherwise, but a dream, and not even a dream of what might be but of what could never be. He parked the Blazer in front of lab three, a windowless single-story structure that resembled a bunker. He went to the steel door, inserted his plastic ID card in the slot, reclaimed the card when the light above the entrance changed from red to green, and stepped past that barrier as it slid open with a hiss. He was in a vestibule that resembled the air lock of a spaceship. The outer door hissed shut behind him, and he stood before the inner door, stripping off his gloves while he was scanned by a security camera. A foot-square wall panel slid open, revealing a lighted screen painted with the blue outline of a right hand. Ben matched his hand to the outline, and the computer scanned his fingerprints. Seconds later, when his identity was confirmed, the inner door slid open, and he went into the main hall, off which led other halls, labs, and offices. Minutes ago Dr. John Acuff, head of Project Blackberry, had returned to Biolomech in response to the crisis. Now Ben located Acuff in the east-wing corridor where he was conferring urgently with three researchers, two men and a woman, who were working on Blackberry. As Ben approached, he saw that Acuff was half sick with fear. The director of the project - stocky, balding, with a salt-and-pepper beard - was neither absentminded nor coldly analytic, in no way a stereotypical man of science, and in fact he possessed a splendid sense of humor. There was usually a merry, positively Clausian twinkle in his eyes. No twinkle tonight, however. And no smile. "Ben! Have you found our rats?" "Not a trace. I want to talk to you, get some idea where they might go." Acuff put one hand against his forehead as if checking for a fever. "We've got to get them, Ben. And quick. If we don't recover them tonight ... Jesus, the possible consequences ... it's the end of everything." 3 THE DOG TRIED TO GROWL AT WHOEVER WAS IN THE DARKNESS BEYOND the archway, but the growl softened into another whine. Meg moved reluctantly yet boldly to the dining room, fumbling along the wall for the light switch. Clicked it. The eight chairs were spaced evenly around the Queen Anne table; plates gleamed softly behind the beveled panes of the

big china cabinet; nothing was out of place. She had expected to find an intruder. Doofus remained in the kitchen, trembling. He was not an easily frightened dog, yet something had spooked him. Badly. "Mom?" "Stay there," she said. "What's wrong?" Turning on lamps as she went, Meg searched the living room and the book-lined den. She looked in closets and behind large pieces of furniture. She kept a gun upstairs but didn't want to get it until she was sure that no one was downstairs with Tommy. Since Jim's death, Meg had been paranoid about Tommy's health and safety. She knew it, admitted it, but could do nothing about her attitude. Every time he got a cold, she was sure it would become pneumonia. When he cut himself, no matter how small the wound, she feared the bleeding, as if the loss of a mere teaspoon of his blood would be the death of him. When, at play, he had fallen out of a tree and broken his leg, she'd nearly fainted at the sight of his twisted limb. If she lost Tommy, whom she loved with all her heart, she would not only be losing her son but the last living part of Jim, as well. More than her own death, Meg Lassiter had learned to fear the deaths of those she loved. She had been afraid that Tommy would succumb to disease or accident - but, although she'd bought a gun for protection, she had not given much thought to the possibility that her boy might fall victim to foul play. Foul play. That sounded so melodramatic, ridiculous. After all, this was the country, uninfected by the violence that had been such a part of life in New York City. But something had shaken the usually boisterous Labrador, a breed prized for gameness and courage. If not an intruder - what? She stepped into the front hall and peered up the dark stairs. She flicked a wall switch, turning on the second-floor lights. Her own courage was draining away. She had stormed through the first-floor rooms, driven by fear for Tommy's welfare, giving no consideration to her safety. Now she began to wonder what she would do if she actually encountered an intruder. No sound descended from the second floor. She could hear only the keening and susurrant wind. Yet she was overcome by a prescient feeling that she should not venture into the upper rooms. Perhaps the wisest course would be to return with Tommy to the station wagon and drive to the nearest neighbors, who lived more than a quarter mile north on Black Oak. From there she could call the sheriff's office and ask them to check out the house from attic to basement. On the other hand, in a rapidly escalating blizzard, travel could be hazardous even in a four-wheel-drive jeep. Surely if an intruder was upstairs, Doofus would be barking furiously. The dog was somewhat clumsy, but he was no coward. Maybe his behavior had not been indicative of fear. Maybe she had misinterpreted his symptoms. His tucked tail, hung head, and trembling flanks could have been signs of illness. "Don't be such a wimp," she said angrily, and she hurriedly climbed the stairs. The second-floor hall was deserted. She went to her room and took the 12-gauge, piston-grip, short-barreled Mossberg shotgun from under the bed. It was an ideal weapon for home protection: compact yet plenty powerful enough to deter an assailant. To use it, she didn't have to be a marksman, for the spread pattern of the pellets guaranteed a hit if only she aimed in the general direction of an attacker. Furthermore, by using lightly loaded shells, she could deter an aggressor without having to destroy him. She didn't want to kill anyone. In fact, hating guns, she might never have acquired the Mossberg if she'd not had Tommy to worry about. She checked her son's room. No one there. The two bedrooms at the back of the house had been connected with a wide archway to make one studio. Her drawing board, easels, and white-enameled art-supply cabinets were as she had left them. No one lurked in either of the bathrooms. Jim's office, the last place she searched, was deserted too. Evidently she had misinterpreted the Labrador's behavior, and she felt a bit sheepish about her overreaction. She lowered the shotgun and stood in Jim's office, composing herself. After his death, Meg had left the room untouched, so she could use his computer to write letters and do bookkeeping. In fact, she also had sentimental reasons for leaving his things undisturbed. The room helped her to recall how happy Jim had been with a novel under way. He'd had a

charmingly boyish aspect that was never more visible than when he was excited about a story, elaborating on a kernel of an idea. Since his funeral, she sometimes came to this room to sit and remember him. Often she felt trapped by Jim's death, as if a door had slammed shut and locked after him when he had stepped out of her life, as if she were now in a tiny room behind that door, with no key to free herself, with no window by which she could escape. How could she build a new life, find happiness, after losing a man she had loved so deeply? What she'd had with Jim had been perfection. Could any future relationship equal it? She sighed, turned off the light, and closed the door on her way out. She returned the shotgun to her own room. In the hall, as she approached the head of the stairs, she had the peculiar feeling that someone was watching her. This uncanny awareness of being under observation was so powerful that she turned to look back up the hall. Empty. Besides, she had searched everywhere. She was certain that she and Tommy were alone. You're just jumpy because of that maniac jerk on Black Oak Road, driving as if he's guaranteed to live forever. When she returned to the kitchen, Tommy was sitting in the chair where she'd left him. "What's wrong?" he asked worriedly. "Nothing, honey. The way Doofus was acting, I thought maybe we had a burglar, but no one's been here." "Did old Doofus break something?" "Not that either," she said. "Not that I noticed." The Labrador was no longer slinking about with his head held low. He wasn't trembling either. He was sitting on the floor beside Tommy's chair when Meg entered the room, but he got up, padded to her, grinned, and nuzzled her hand when she offered it. Then he went to the door and scratched at it lightly with one paw, which was his way of indicating that he needed to go outside to relieve himself. "I'll put the jeep away. Take off your coat and gloves," she told Tommy, "but don't you get out of that chair until I come back with your crutches." She pulled her boots on again and went outside, taking the dog with her, into a storm that had grown more fierce. The snowflakes were smaller and harder, almost sandlike; they made millions of tiny, ticking sounds as they struck the porch roof. Undaunted by the storm, Doofus dashed into the yard. Meg parked the station wagon in the barn, which served as a garage. When she got out of the jeep, she glanced up at half-seen rafters in the gloom above; they creaked as gusts of wind slammed into the roof. The place smelled of oil drippings and grease, but the underlying sweet scent of hay and livestock had not entirely dissipated even after all these years. As she took Tommy's crutches out of the wagon, she again felt that creepy prickling at the back of her neck - an awareness of being watched. She surveyed the dim interior of the old barn, which was illuminated only by the inadequate bulb on the automatic door opener. Someone could have been lurking behind one of the board dividers that separated the area along the south wall into horse stalls. Someone might be crouching in the loft above. But she saw no evidence of an intruder to justify her suspicion. "Meg, you've been reading too many mysteries lately," she said aloud, seeking reassurance from the sound of her own voice. Carrying Tommy's crutches, she stepped outside, pushed the automatic door button, and watched the segmented metal panels roll down until they met the concrete sill with a solid clunk. When she reached the middle of the yard, she stopped, struck by the beauty of the winter nightscape. The scene was revealed primarily by the ghostly radiance of the snow on the ground, a luminescence akin to moonlight but more ethereal and, in spite of the ferocity of the storm, more serene. Marking the northern end of the yard were five leafless maples, stark black branches spearing the night; wind-hammered snow had begun to plate the rough bark. By morning she and Tommy might be snowbound. A couple of times every winter, Black Oak Road was closed for a day or two by drifts. Being cut off from civilization for short periods wasn't particularly inconvenient and, in fact, had a certain appeal. Though strangely lovely, the night was also hard. The tiny pellets of snow stung her face. When she called Doofus, he appeared around the side of the house, half seen in the dimness, more a phantom than a dog. He seemed to be gliding over the ground, as if he were not a living creature but a dark

revenant. He was panting, wagging his tail, unbothered by the weather, invigorated. Meg opened the kitchen door. Tommy was still sitting at the table. Behind her, Doofus had halted on the top porch step. "Come on, pooch, it's cold out here." The Labrador whined, as if afraid to return to the house. "Come on, come on. It's suppertime." He climbed the last step and hesitantly crossed the porch. He put his head in the open door and studied the kitchen with suspicion. He sniffed the warm air - and shuddered. Meg playfully bumped one boot against the dog's bottom. He looked at her reproachfully and did not move. "Come on, boy. You going to leave us in here unprotected?" Tommy asked from his chair by the table. As if he understood that his reputation was at stake, the dog reluctantly slunk across the threshold. Meg entered the house and locked the door behind them. Taking the dog's towel off a wall hook, she said, "Don't you dare shake your coat till I've dried you, pooch." Doofus shook his coat vigorously as Meg bent to towel his fur, spraying melted snow in her face and over nearby cabinets. Tommy laughed, so the dog looked at him quizzically, which made Tommy laugh harder, and Meg had to laugh too, and the dog was buoyed by all the merriment. He straightened up from his meek crouch, dared to wag his tail, and went to Tommy. When she and Tommy had first come home, perhaps they had been tense and frightened because of the crash they'd narrowly avoided at the blind curve on Black Oak Road, and maybe their residual fear had been communicated to Doofus, just as their laughter now lifted his spirits. Dogs were sensitive to human moods, and Meg saw no other explanation for Doofus's behavior. 4 THE WINDOWS WERE FROSTED OVER, AND THE WIND WAS WAILING outside as if it would abrade the whole planet down to the size of a moon, then an asteroid, then a speck of dust. The house seemed all the cozier by contrast. Meg and Tommy ate spaghetti at the kitchen table. Doofus wasn't acting as strangely as he had earlier, but he was not himself. More than usual, he sought companionship, even to the extent that he didn't want to eat by himself. Meg watched with surprise and amusement as the dog pushed his dish of Alpo across the floor with his nose, to a spot beside Tommy's chair. "Next thing you know," Tommy said, "he's going to want to sit in a chair and have his plate on the table." "First," Meg said, "he'll have to learn to hold a fork properly. I hate it when he holds a fork backward." "We'll send him to charm school," Tommy said, twirling long strands of spaghetti onto his fork. "And maybe he can learn to stand on his hind feet and walk like a real person." "Once he can stand erect, he'll want to learn to dance." "He'll cut a fine figure on the ballroom floor." They grinned at each other across the dinner table, and Meg relished the special closeness that came only from being silly together. In the past two years Tommy had too seldom been in the mood for frivolity. Lying on the floor by his dish, Doofus ate his Alpo but didn't gobble it as usual. He nibbled daintily, frequently lifting his head and raising his floppy ears to listen to the wind moaning at the windows. Later, as Meg was washing the dinner dishes and as Tommy was sitting at the table reading an adventure novel, Doofus suddenly let out a low woof of alarm and sprang to his feet. He stood rigidly, staring at the cabinets on the other side of the room, those between the refrigerator and the cellar door. As she was about to say something to soothe the dog, Meg heard what had alarmed him: a rustling inside the cabinets. "Mice?" Tommy said hopefully, for he loathed rats. "Sounds too big for mice." They'd had rats before. After all, they lived on a farm that had once been attractive to rodents because of the livestock feed stored in the barn. Although the barn housed only a jeep now, and though the rats had sought better scavenging elsewhere, they returned once every winter, as if the long-ago status of Cascade Farm as a rat haven still stirred in the racial memory of each new generation. From within the closed cabinet came the frenzied scratching of claws on wood, then a thump as something was knocked over, then the unmistakable sound of a rat - thick, sinuous body slipping along one of the shelves, rattling the stacks of canned goods as it passed between them. "Really big," Tommy said, wide-eyed. Instead of barking, Doofus whined and padded to the other end of the kitchen,



as far from the rat-inhabited cabinet as he could get. At other times he had been eager to pursue rats, although he was not especially successful at catching them. As she dried her hands on the dishtowel, Meg wondered again about the dog's loss of spirit. She went to the cabinet. There were three sets of doors, top to bottom, and she put her head against the middle set, listening. Nothing. "It's gone," she said after a long silence. "You're not going to open that, are you?" Tommy asked when she put her hand on one of the door handles. "Well, of course I am. I have to see how it got in, if maybe it's chewed a hole in the cabinet backing." "But what if it's still in there?" the boy asked. "It's not, honey. Anyway, it's disgusting and filthy, but it's not dangerous. Nothing's more cowardly than a rat." She thumped the cabinet with one fist to be sure she scared off the foul thing if in fact it was in there. She opened the middle doors, saw everything was in order, got on her hands and knees, and opened the lower doors. A few cans were knocked over. A new box of Saltines was chewed open, the contents plundered. Doofus whimpered. She reached into the lower cupboard and pushed some of the canned goods aside. She removed several boxes of macaroni and put them on the floor beside her, trying to get a look at the back wall of the cabinet. Just enough light from the kitchen seeped into that secluded space to reveal a rigged-edged hole in the plywood backing, where the rat had chewed through from the wall behind. A vague, cool draft was flowing out of the hole. She got up, dusting her hands together. "Yep, it's definitely not Mickey Mouse stopping by for a visit. This is a genuine capital R, capital A, capital T. Better get the traps." As Meg stepped to the cellar door, Tommy said, "You're not leaving me alone?" "Just till I get the traps, honey." "But ... but what if the rat comes around while you're gone?" "It won't. They like to stay where it's dark." The boy was blushing, embarrassed by his fear. "It's just ... with this leg ... I couldn't get away if it came after me." Sympathetic but aware that coddling him would encourage his irrational fear, she said, "It won't come after you, skipper. It's more scared of us than we are of it." She switched on the cellar lights and went down the stairs, leaving him with Doofus. The shadowy basement was lighted by two bulbs dimmed by dust. She found six heavy-duty traps on the utility shelves, rat breakers with steel hammers, not flimsy mousetraps - and a box of warfarin-poisoned food pellets - and she took them upstairs without seeing or hearing the unwelcome houseguest. Tommy sighed with relief when she returned. "There's something weird about these rats." "There's probably only one," she said as she put the traps down on the counter by the sink. "What do you mean - weird?" "They've got Doofus jumpy, like he was when we came home, so it must've been rats that spooked him then too. He doesn't spook easy, so what is it about these rats that have him so nervous?" "Not rats, plural," Meg corrected. "There's probably just the one. And I don't know what's gotten under that pooch's skin. He's just being silly. Remember how he used to be scared witless by the vacuum cleaner?" "He was just a puppy then." "No, he was scared of it until he was almost three," she said as she took from the refrigerator a packet of Buddig dried beef, with which she intended to bait the traps. Sitting on the floor beside his young master's chair, the dog rolled his eyes at Meg and whined softly. In truth she was as unnerved by the Labrador's behavior as Tommy was, but by saying so she would only feed the boy's anxiety. After filling two dishes with the poisoned pellets, she put one in the cupboard under the sink and the other in the cabinet with the Saltines. She left the ravaged crackers as they were, hoping the rat would return for more and take the warfarin instead. She baited four traps with beef. She put one in the cabinet under the sink. The second went in the cabinet with the Saltines and the dish of warfarin, but on a different shelf from the poison. She placed the third trap in the walk-in pantry and the fourth in the basement. When she returned to the kitchen, she said, "Let me finish washing the dishes, then we'll move into the living room. We might nail it tonight, but certainly by tomorrow morning." Ten minutes later, on leaving the kitchen, Meg turned off the lights behind them, hoping that the

darkness would lure the rat out of hiding and into a trap before she retired for the night. She and Tommy would sleep better knowing that the thing was dead. While Meg built a fire in the living-room fireplace, Doofus settled in front of the hearth. Tommy sat in an armchair, put his crutches nearby, propped his castbound leg on a footstool, and opened his adventure novel. Meg programmed the compact-disc player with some easy-listening music and settled into her own chair with a new novel by Mary Higgins Clark. The wind sounded cold and sharp, but the living room was cozy. In half an hour Meg was involved in the novel when, in a lull between songs, she heard a hard snap! from the kitchen. Doofus lifted his head. Tommy's eyes met Meg's. Then a second sound: Snap! "Two," the boy said. "We caught two at the same time!" Meg put her book aside and armed herself with an iron poker from the fireplace in case the prey needed to be struck to finish them off. She hated this part of rat catching. She went to the kitchen, switched on the lights, and looked first in the cabinet beneath the sink. In the dish, the poisoned food was almost gone. The beef was gone from the big trap too; the steel bar had been sprung, but no rat had been caught. Nevertheless, the trap wasn't empty. Caught under the bar was a six-inch-long stick of wood, as if it had been used to spring the trap so the bait could be taken safely. No. That was ridiculous. Meg took the trap from the cupboard to have a closer look. The stick was stained dark on one side, natural on the other: a strip of plywood. Like the plywood backing in all the cabinets, through which the rat had chewed to get at the Saltines. A shiver shook her, but she remained reluctant to consider the frightening possibility that had given rise to her tremors. In the cupboard by the refrigerator, the poisoned bait had been taken from the other dish. The second trap had been sprung too. With another stick of plywood. The bait had been stolen. What rat was smart enough ... ? She rose from her knees and eased open the middle doors of the cabinet. The canned goods, the packages of Jell-O, the boxes of raisins, and the boxes of cereal looked undisturbed at first. Then she noticed the brown, pea-size pellet on the shelf in front of an open box of All-Bran: a piece of warfarin bait. But she had not put any bait on the shelf with the cereal; all of it had been in the dish below or under the kitchen sink. So a rat had carried a piece of it onto the higher shelf. If she hadn't been alerted by the pellet, she might not have noticed the scratch marks and small punctures on the package of All-Bran. She stared at the box for a long time before she took it off the shelf and carried it to the sink. She put the poker on the counter and, with trembling hands, opened the cereal box. She poured some into the sink. Mixed in with the All-Bran were scores of poison pellets. She emptied the entire box into the sink. All the missing bait from both plastic dishes had been transferred to the cereal. Her heart was racing, pounding so hard that she could feel the throb of her own pulse in her temples. What the hell is going on here? Something screeched behind her. A strange, angry sound. She turned and saw the rat. A hideous white rat. It was on the shelf where the All-Bran had been, standing on its, hind quarters. The shelf was fifteen inches high, and the rat was not entirely erect because it was about eighteen inches long, six inches longer than an average rat, exclusive of its tail. But its size wasn't what iced her blood. The scary thing was its head: twice the size of an ordinary rat's head, as big as a baseball, out of proportion to its body - and oddly shaped, bulging toward the top of the skull, eyes and nose and mouth squeezed in the lower half. It stared at her and made clawing motions with its upraised forepaws. It bared its teeth and hissed - actually hissed as though it were a cat - then shrieked again, and there was such hostility in its shrill cry and in its demeanor that she snatched up the fireplace poker again. Though its eyes were beady and red like any rat's, there was a difference about them that she could not immediately identify. The way it stared at her so boldly was intimidating. She looked at its enlarged skull - the bigger the skull, the bigger the brain - and suddenly realized that its scarlet eyes revealed an unthinkably high, unratlike degree of intelligence. It shrieked again, challengingly. Wild rats weren't

white. Lab rats were white. She knew now what they had been hunting for at the roadblock at Biolomech. She didn't know why their researchers would have wanted to create such a beast as this, and though she was a well-educated woman and had a layman's knowledge of genetic engineering, she didn't know how they had created it, but she knew beyond a doubt that they had created it, for there was no place else on earth from which it could have come. Clearly, it had not ridden on the undercarriage of their car. Even as Biolomech's security men had been searching for it, this rat had been here, out of the cold, setting up house. On the shelf behind it and on the three shelves below it, other rats pushed through cans, bottles, and boxes. They were repulsively large and pale like the mutant that still challenged her from the cereal shelf. Behind her, claws clicked on the floor. More of them. Meg did not even look back, and she didn't delude herself into thinking that she could handle them with the poker. She threw that useless weapon aside and ran for her shotgun upstairs.

5 BEN PARNELL AND DR. ACUFF CROUCHED IN FRONT OF THE CAGE THAT stood in one corner of the windowless room. It was a six-foot cube with a sheet-metal floor that had been softened with a deep layer of silky yellow-brown grass. The food and water dispensers could be filled from outside but were operable from within, so the occupants could obtain nourishment as they desired it. One third of the pen was equipped with miniature wooden ladders and climbing bars for exercise and play. The cage door was open. "Here, see?" Acuff said. "It locks automatically every time the door is shut. Can't be left unlocked by mistake. And once shut, it can only be opened with a key. Seemed safe to us. I mean, we didn't think they'd be smart enough to pick a lock!" "But surely they didn't. How could they - without hands?" "You ever take a close look at their feet? A rat's feet aren't like hands, but they're more than just paws. There's an articulation of digits that lets them grasp things. It's true of most rodents. Squirrels, for instance: You've seen them sitting up, holding a piece of fruit in their forepaws." "Yes, but without an opposable thumb-" "Of course," Acuff said, "they don't have great dexterity, nothing like we have, but these aren't ordinary rats. Remember, these creatures have been genetically engineered. Except for the shape and size of their craniums, they aren't physically much different from other rats, but they're smarter. A lot smarter." Acuff was involved in intelligence-enhancement experiments, seeking to discover if lower species, like rats, could be genetically altered to breed future generations with drastically increased brain power, in hope that success with lab animals might lead to procedures that would enhance human intelligence. His research was labeled Project Blackberry in honor of the brave, intelligent rabbit of the same name in Richard Adams's *Watership Down*. At John Acuff's suggestion, Ben had read and immensely enjoyed Adams's book, but he had not yet quite decided whether he approved or disapproved of Project Blackberry. "Anyway," Acuff said, "whether they could have picked the cage lock is debatable. And maybe they didn't. Because there's this to consider." He pointed to the slot in the frame of the cage door where the stubby brass bolt was supposed to fit when engaged. The slot was packed full of a grainy brown substance. "Food pellets. They chewed up food pellets, then filled the slot with the paste, so the bolt couldn't automatically engage." "But the door had to be open for them to do that." "It must have happened during a maze run." "A what?" "Well, there's this flexible maze we constantly reconfigure, half as big as this whole room. It's made of clear plastic tubes with difficult obstacles. We attach it to the front of the cage, then just open their door, so they go straight from the cage into the maze. We were doing that yesterday, so the cage was open a long time. If some of them paused at the door before entering the maze, if they sniffed around the lock slot for a few seconds, we might not have noticed. We were more interested in what they did after they entered the maze." Ben rose from a crouch. "I've already seen how they got out of the room itself. Have you?" "Yeah." They went to the far end of the long room. Near floor level, something had tampered with an eighteen-inch-square intake duct to the building's ventilation system. The grille had been held in

place only by light tension clamps, and it had been torn away from the opening behind it. Acuff said, "Have you looked in the exchange chamber?" Because of the nature of the work done in lab number three, all air was chemically decontaminated before being vented to the outside. It was forced under pressure through multiple chemical baths in a five-tiered exchange chamber as big as a pickup truck. "They couldn't get through the exchange chamber alive," Acuff said hopefully. "Might be eight dead rats in those chemical baths." Ben shook his head. "There aren't. We checked. And we can't find vent grilles disturbed in other rooms, where they might have left the ducts-" "You don't think they're still in the ventilation system?" "No, they must've gotten out at some point, into the walls." "But how? PVC pipe is used for the ductwork, pressure sealed with a high-temperature bonding agent at all joints." Ben nodded. "We think they chewed up the adhesive at one of the joints, loosened two sections of pipe enough to squeeze out. We've found rat droppings in the crawl-space attic ... and a place where they gnawed through the subroof and the overlying shingles. Once on the roof, they could get off the building by gutters and downspouts." John Acuff's face had grown whiter than the salt part of his salt-and-pepper beard. "Listen, we've got to get them back tonight, no matter what. Tonight." "We'll try." "Just trying isn't good enough. We've got to do it. Ben, there are three males and five females in that pack. And they're fertile. If we don't get them back, if they breed in the wild ... ultimately they'll drive ordinary rats into extinction, and we'll be faced with a menace unlike anything we've known. Think about it: smart rats that recognize and elude traps, quick to detect poison bait, virtually ineradicable. Already, the world loses a large portion of its food supply to rats, ten or fifteen percent in developed countries like ours, fifty percent in many third-world countries. Ben, we lose that much to dumb rats. What'll we lose to these? We might eventually see famine even in the United States - and in less advanced countries, there could be starvation beyond imagination." Frowning, Ben said, "You're overstating the danger." "Absolutely not! Rats are parasitical. They're competitors, and these will be competing far more vigorously and aggressively than any rats we've ever known." The lab seemed as cold as the winter night outside. "Just because they're a bit smarter than ordinary rats-" "More than a bit. Scores of times smarter." "But not as smart as we are, for heaven's sake." "Maybe half as smart as the average man," Acuff said. Ben blinked in surprise. "Maybe even smarter than that," Acuff said, fear evident in his lined face and eyes. "Combine that level of intellect with their natural cunning, size advantage-" "Size advantage? But we're much bigger." Acuff shook his head. "Small can be better. Because they're smaller, they're faster than we are. And they can vanish through a chink in the wall, down a drainpipe. They're bigger than the average rat, about eighteen inches long instead of twelve, but they can move unseen through the shadows because they're still relatively small. And size isn't their only advantage, however. They can also see at night as well as in daylight." "Doc, you're starting to scare me." "You better be scared half to death. Because these rats we've made, this new species we've engineered, is hostile to us." Finally Ben was forming an opinion of Project Blackberry. It wasn't favorable. Not sure he wanted to know the answer to his own question, he said, "What exactly do you mean by that?" Turning away from the wall vent, walking to the center of the room, planting both hands on the marble lab bench, leaning forward with his head hung down and his eyes closed, Acuff said, "We don't know why they're hostile. They just are. Is it some quirk of their genetics? Or have we made them just intelligent enough so they can understand that we're their masters - and resent it? Whatever the reason, they're aggressive, fierce. A few researchers were badly bitten. Sooner or later someone would've been killed if we hadn't taken extreme precautions. We handled them with heavy bite-proof gloves, wearing Plexiglas face masks, suited in specially made Kevlar coveralls with high, rolled collars. Kevlar! That's the stuff they make bulletproof vests out of, for God's sake, and we needed something that tough because these little bastards

were determined to hurt us." Astonished, Ben said, "But why didn't you destroy them?" "We couldn't destroy a success," Acuff said. Ben was baffled. "Success?" "From a scientific point of view, their hostility wasn't important because they were also smart. What we were trying to create was smart rats, and we succeeded. Given time, we figured to identify the cause of the hostility and deal with it. That's why we put them all in one pen - 'cause we thought their isolation in individual cages might be to blame for their hostility, that they were intelligent enough to need a communal environment, that housing them together might - mellow them." "Instead it only facilitated their escape." Acuff nodded. "And now they're loose." 6 HURRYING ALONG THE HALL, MEG PASSED THE WIDE ARCHWAY TO THE living room and saw Tommy struggling up from his chair, groping for his crutches. Doofus was whining, agitated. Tommy called to Meg, but she didn't pause to answer because every second counted. Turning at the newel post, starting up the stairs, she glanced back and could see no rats following her. The light wasn't on in the hallway itself, however, so something could have been scurrying through the shadows along the baseboard. She climbed the steps two at a time and was breathing hard when she reached the second floor. In her room, she took the shotgun from under the bed and chambered the first of the five rounds in the magazine. A vivid image of rats swarming through the cabinet flickered across her mind, and she realized that she might need additional ammo. She kept a box of fifty shells in her clothes closet, so she slid open that door - and cried out in surprise when two large, white rats scuttled across the closet floor. They clambered over her shoes and disappeared through a hole in the wall, moving too fast for her to take a shot at them even if she had thought to do so. She had kept the box of shells on the closet floor, and the rats had found it. They had chewed open the cardboard carton and stolen the shells one at a time, carrying them away through the hole in the wall. Only four rounds were left. She scooped them up and stuffed them into the pockets of her jeans. If the rats had succeeded in making off with all the shells, would they then have tried subsequently to find a way to remove the last five rounds from the shotgun's magazine as well, leaving her defenseless? Just how smart were they? Tommy was calling her, and Doofus was barking angrily. Meg left the bedroom at a run. She descended the steps so fast that she risked twisting an ankle. The Labrador was in the first-floor hall, his sturdy legs planted wide, his blocky head lowered, his ears flattened against his skull. He was staring intently toward the kitchen, no longer barking but growling menacingly, even though he was also trembling with fear. Meg found Tommy in the living room, standing with the aid of his crutches, and she let out a wordless cry of relief when she saw that no rats were swarming over him. "Mom, what is it? What's wrong?" "The rats ... I think ... I know they're from Biolomech. That's what the roadblock was all about. That's what those men were looking for with their spotlights, with the angled mirrors they poked under the car." She swept the room with her gaze, looking for furtive movement along the walls and beside the furniture. "How do you know?" the boy asked. "I've seen them. You'll know it too, if you see them." Doofus remained in the hall, but Meg took small comfort from the warning growl he directed toward the kitchen. She realized the dog was no match for these rats. They'd trick or overpower him without difficulty, as soon as they were ready to attack. They were going to attack. Besides being genetically altered, with large skulls and brains, they behaved differently from other rats. By nature rats were scavengers, not hunters, and they thrived because they skulked through shadows, living secretly in walls and sewers; they never dared to assault a human being unless he was helpless - an unconscious wino, a baby in a crib. But the Biolomech were bold and hostile, hunters as well as scavengers. Their scheme to steal her shotgun shells and disarm her was clear preparation for an attack. His voice shaky, Tommy said, "But if they aren't like ordinary rats, what are they like?" She remembered the hideously enlarged skull, the scarlet eyes informed with malevolent intelligence, the pale and plump and

somehow obscene white body. She said, "I'll tell you later. Come on, honey, we're getting out of here." They could have gone out the front door, around the house, and across the rear yard to the barn in which the jeep was parked, but that was a long way through driving snow for a boy on crutches. Meg decided they would have to go through the kitchen and out the back. Besides, their coats were drying on the rack by the rear door, and her car keys were in her coat. Doofus bravely led them along the hall to the kitchen, though he was not happy about it. Meg stayed close to Tommy, holding the pistol-grip, pump-action 12-gauge ready in both hands. Five shells in the gun, four in her pockets. Was that enough? How many rats had escaped Biolomech? Six? Ten? Twenty? She would have to avoid shooting them one at a time, save her ammunition until she could take them out in twos or threes. Yes, but what if they didn't attack in a pack? What if they rushed at her singly, from several different directions, forcing her to swivel left and right and left again, blasting at them one at a time until her ammunition was all gone? She had to stop them before they reached her or Tommy, even if they came singly, because once they were on her or climbing the boy, the shotgun would be useless; then she and Tommy would have to defend themselves with bare hands against sharp teeth and claws. They'd be no match for even half a dozen large, fearless - and smart - rats intent on tearing out their throats. But for the wind outside and the tick of granular snow striking the windows, the kitchen was silent. The cupboard stood open, as she had left it, but no rats crouched on the shelves. This was crazy! For two years she had worried about raising Tommy without Jim's help. She'd been concerned about instilling in him the right values and principles. His injuries and illnesses had scared her. She had worried about how she would handle unexpected crises if they arose, but she had never contemplated anything as unexpected as this. Sometimes she had taken comfort in the thought that she and Tommy lived in the country, where crime was not a concern, because if they had still lived in the city, she would have had even more to worry about; but now bucolic Cascade Farm, at the hayseed end of Black Oak Road, had proved to be as dangerous as any crime-riddled metropolis. "Put on your coat," she told Tommy. Doofus's ears pricked. He sniffed the air. He turned his head side to side, surveying the base of the cupboards, the refrigerator, the unlit open cabinet under the sink. Holding the Mossberg in her right hand, Meg speared her own coat off the rack with her left, struggled until she got her arm into it, took the shotgun in her left hand, shrugged her right arm into the second sleeve. She used just one hand to pull on her boots, refusing to put down the weapon. Tommy was staring at the rat trap that she had left on the counter, the one that she had taken from under the sink. The stick that the rats had used to trip the mechanism was still wedged between the anvil and the hammer bar. Tommy frowned at it. Before he could ask questions or have more time to think, Meg said, "You can do without a boot on your good foot. And leave your crutches here. They're no good outside. You'll have to lean on me." Doofus twitched and went rigid. Meg brought up the gun and scanned the kitchen. The Labrador growled deep in his throat, but there was no sign of the rats. Meg pulled open the back door, letting in the frigid wind. "Let's move, let's go, now." Tommy lurched outside, holding on to the door frame, then balancing against the porch wall. The dog slipped out after him. Meg followed, closing the door behind them. Holding the Mossberg in her right hand, using her left arm to support Tommy, she helped the boy across the porch, down the snow-covered steps, and into the yard. With the windchill factor, the temperature must have been below zero. Her eyes teared, and her face went numb. She hadn't paused to put on gloves, and the cold sliced through to the bones of her hands. Still, she felt better outside than in the house, safer. She didn't think that the rats would come after them, for the storm was a far greater obstacle to those small creatures than it was to her and Tommy. Conversation was impossible because the wind keened across the open land, whistled under the eaves of the house, and clattered the bare branches of the maples against one another. She and Tommy progressed silently, and Doofus

stayed at their side. Though they slipped several times and almost fell, they reached the barn quicker than she had expected, and she hit the switch to put up the electric door. They ducked under the rising barrier before it was entirely out of their way. In the weak light of the lone bulb, they went directly to the station wagon. She fished her keys out of her coat pocket, opened the door on the passenger side, slid the seat back all the way on its tracks, and helped Tommy into the front of the car because she wanted him beside her now, close, not in the backseat, even if he would have been more comfortable there. When she looked around for the dog, she saw that he was standing outside the barn, at the threshold, unwilling to follow them inside.

"Doofus, here, quick now," she said. The Labrador whined. Surveying the shadows in the barn, he let the whine deepen into a growl. Remembering the feeling of being watched when she had parked the jeep in the barn earlier, Meg also scanned the murky corners and the tenebrous reaches of the loft, but she saw neither pale, slinking figures nor the telltale red glimmer of rodent eyes. The Labrador was probably excessively cautious. His condition was understandable, but they had to get moving. More forcefully, Meg said, "Doofus, get in here, right now." He entered the barn hesitantly, sniffing the air and floor, came to her with a sudden urgency, and jumped into the backseat of the station wagon. She closed the door, went around to the other side, and got in behind the wheel. "We'll drive back to Biolomech," she said. "We'll tell them we've found what they're looking for." "What's wrong with Doofus?" In the backseat, the dog was moving from one side window to the other, peering out at the barn, making thin, anxious sounds. "He's just being Doofus," Meg said. Huddled in his seat, angled awkwardly to accommodate his cast, Tommy appeared to be younger than ten, so frightened and vulnerable.

"It's okay," Meg said. "We're out of here." She thrust the key in the ignition, turned it. Nothing. She tried again. The jeep would not start. 7 AT THE HIGH FENCE ALONG THE NORTHEAST FLANK OF THE BILOMECH property, Ben Parnell crouched to examine the rat-size tunnel in the half-frozen earth. Several of his men gathered around him, and one directed the beam of a powerful flashlight on the patch of ground in question. Luckily the hole was in a place where the wind scoured most of the snow away instead of piling it in drifts, but the searchers had still not spotted it until they'd made a second circuit of the perimeter. Steve Harding raised his voice to compete with the wind: "Think they're in there, curled up in a burrow?" "No," Ben said, his breath smoking in the arctic air. If he'd thought that the rats were in a burrow at the end of this entrance tunnel, he would not have been crouched in front of the hole, where one of them might fly out at him, straight at his face. Hostile, John Acuff had said. Exceedingly hostile. Ben said, "No, they weren't digging a permanent burrow. They came up somewhere on the other side of this fence, and they're long gone now." A tall, lanky young man in a county sheriff's department coat joined the group. "One of you named Parnell?" "That's me," Ben said. "I'm Joe Hockner." He was half shouting to be heard above the skirling wind. "Sheriff's office. I brought the bloodhound you asked for." "Terrific." "What's happenin' here?" "In a minute," Ben said, returning his attention to the tunnel that went under the fence. "How do we know it was them that dug here?" asked George Yancy, another of Ben's men. "Could've been some other animal."

"Bring that light closer," Ben said. Steve Harding shone the beam directly into the five-inch-diameter tunnel. Squinting, leaning closer, Ben saw what appeared to be snippets of white thread adhering to the moist earth just far enough inside the hole to be undisturbed by the wind. He took off his right glove, reached carefully into the mouth of the tunnel, and plucked up two of the threads. White hairs. 8 TOMMY AND THE DOG STAYED IN THE STATION WAGON WHILE MEG GOT out with the shotgun - and with a flashlight from the glove compartment - to open the hood. The light revealed a mess of torn and tangled wires inside the engine compartment; all the lines from the spark plugs to the distributor cap were severed. Holes had been gnawed in the hoses; oil and coolants dripped onto the barn floor under the jeep. She was no longer just

scared. She was flat-out terrified. Yet she had to conceal her fear to avoid panicking Tommy. She closed the hood, went around to the passenger's side, and opened the door. "I don't know what's wrong, but it's dead." "It was all right a while ago, when we came home." "Yes, well, but it's dead now. Come on, let's go." He allowed her to help him out of the car, and when they were face to face, he said, "The rats got to it, didn't they?" "Rats? The rats are in the house, yes, and they're ugly things, like I said, but-" Interrupting her before she could lie to him, the boy said, "You're trying not to show it, but you're afraid of them, really afraid, which must mean they're not just a little different from ordinary rats but a whole lot different, because you don't scare easy, not you. You were scared when Dad died, I know you were, but not for long, you took charge real quick, you made me feel safe, and if Dad's dying couldn't make you fall to pieces, then I guess pretty much nothing can. But these rats from Biolomech, whatever they are, they scare you more than anything ever has." She hugged him tight, loving him so hard that it almost hurt - though she did not let go of the shotgun. He said, "Mom, I saw the trap with the stick in it, and I saw the cereal in the sink all mixed up with the poison pellets, and I've been thinking. I guess one thing about these rats is ... they're awful smart, maybe because of something that was done to them at the lab, smarter than rats should ever be, and now they somehow zapped the jeep." "They're not smart enough. Not smart enough for us, skipper." "What're we going to do?" he whispered. She also whispered, though she had seen no rats in the barn and was not sure that they had remained after disabling the station wagon. Even if they were nearby, watching, she was certain that they could not understand English. Surely there were limits to what the people at Biolomech had done to these creatures. But she whispered anyway, "We'll go back to the house-" "But maybe that's what they want us to do." "Maybe. But I've got to try to use the telephone. "They'll have thought of the phone," he said. "Maybe but probably not. I mean how smart can they be?" "Smart enough to think of the jeep." 9 BEYOND THE FENCE WAS A MEADOW APPROXIMATELY A HUNDRED YARDS across, and at the end of the meadow were woods. The chance of finding the rats now was slim. The men fanned out across the field in teams of two and three, not sure what signs of their quarry could have survived the storm. Even in good weather, on a dry and sunny day, it would be virtually impossible to track animals as small as rats across open ground. Ben Parnell took four men directly to the far side of the meadow, where they began searching the perimeter of the forest with the aid of the bloodhound. The dog's name was Max. He was built low and broad, with huge ears and a comical face, but there was nothing funny about his approach to the case at hand: He was eager, serious. Max's handler, Deputy Joe Hockner, had given the dog a whiff of the rats' spoor from a jarful of grass and droppings that had been taken from their cage, and the hound hadn't liked what he smelled. But the scent was apparently so intense and unusual that it was easy to follow, and Max was a game tracker, willing to give his best in spite of wind and snow. Within two minutes the hound caught the scent in a clump of winter-dried brush. Straining at his leash, he pulled Hockner into the woods. Ben and his men followed. 10 MEG LET DOOFUS OUT OF THE STATION WAGON, AND THE THREE OF THEM headed toward the big open door of the barn, past which the storm wind drove whirling columns of snow like ghosts late for a haunting. The blizzard had accelerated, raising a noisy clatter on the roof as it tore off a few shingles and spun them away in the night. The rafters creaked, and the loft door chattered on loose hinges. "Tommy, you'll stay out on the porch, and I'll go into the kitchen as far as the phone. If it's out of order ... we'll walk the driveway to the county road and flag down a car." "No one's going to be out in this storm." "Someone will be. A county snowplow or a cinder truck." He halted at the threshold of the open barn door. "Mom, it's three quarters of a mile to Black Oak Road. I'm not sure I can walk that far with this cast, in this storm, not even with you helping. I'm already tired, and my good leg keeps buckling. Even if I can do it, it'll take a long, long time."



"We'll make it," she said, "and it doesn't matter how long we take. I'm sure they won't pursue us outside. We're safe in the storm - safe from them, at least." Then she remembered the sled. "I can pull you to the county road!" "What? Pull me?" She risked leaving Tommy with Doofus long enough to run back into the barn, to the north wall, where the boy's sled - Midnight Flyer was the legend in script across the seat - hung on the wall beside a shovel, a hoe, and a leaf rake. Without putting down the Mossberg, she quickly unhooked the sled and carried it in one hand to the open door where Tommy waited. "But, Mom, I'm too heavy to pull." "Haven't I pulled you back and forth over this farm on at least a hundred snowy days?" "Yeah, but that was years ago, when I was little." "You're not so huge now, buckaroo. Come on." She was pleased that she had remembered the sled. She had one great advantage over this high-tech Hamlin plague: She was a mother with a child to protect, and that made her a force with which even Biolomech's nightmares would find it hard to reckon. She took the sled outside and helped him onto it. He sat with his shoe-clad left foot braced against the guide bar. His right foot was covered with the cast except for his toes, and both his toes and the lower part of the cast were sheathed in a thick woolen sock that was now wet and half frozen; nevertheless, he managed to wedge even that foot into the space in front of the guide bar. When he held on to the sides of the sled with both hands, he was in no danger of falling off. Doofus circled them anxiously as they got Tommy settled on the sled. Several times he barked at the barn behind them, but each time that Meg looked back, she saw nothing. Picking up the sturdy nylon towrope, Meg prayed that when they got to the house the phone would work, that she would be able to call for help. She dragged Tommy across the long backyard. In some places the runners cut through the thin layer of snow, digging into frozen ground beneath, and the going was tough. In other places, however, where the snow was deeper or the ground icy, the sled glided smoothly enough to give her hope that, if they had to, they would be able to reach the county road before the relentless gales hammered her to her knees in exhaustion. 11 THE BRUSH ON THE FOREST FLOOR WAS NOT TOO DENSE, AND THE RATS evidently took advantage of deer trails to make greater speed, for the bloodhound plunged relentlessly forward, leading the searchers where the creatures had gone. Fortunately the interlaced evergreens kept most of the snow from sifting under the trees, which made their job easier and was a boon to the stumpy-legged dog. Ben expected Max to bay, for he had seen all the old jailbreak movies in which Cagney or Bogart had been pursued by baying hounds, but Max made a lot of chuffing and snuffling sounds, barked once, and did not bay at all. They had gone a quarter of a mile from the Biolomech fence, stumbling on the uneven ground, frequently spooked by the bizarre shadows stirred by the bobbling beams of the flashlights, when Ben realized that the rats had not burrowed into the forest floor. If that had been their intention, they could have tunneled into the ground shortly after entering the cover of the trees. But they had raced on, searching for something better than a wild home, which made sense because they were not wild, far from it. They had been bred from generations of tame lab rats and lived all their lives in a cage, with food and water constantly available. They would be at a loss in the woods, even as smart as they were, so they would try to press ahead in hope of finding a human habitation to share, travel as far as possible before exhaustion and the deepening cold stopped them. Cascade Farm. Ben remembered the attractive woman in the jeep wagon: chestnut hair, almond-brown eyes, an appealing spatter of freckles. The boy in the backseat, his leg in a cast, had been nine or ten and had reminded Ben of his own daughter, Melissa, who had been nine when she had lost her hard-fought war with cancer. The boy had that look of innocence and vulnerability that Melissa had possessed and that had made it so hard for Ben to watch her decline. Peering at mother and son through the open car window, Ben had envied them the normal life he imagined they led, the love and sharing of a family unscathed by the whims of fate. Now, crashing through the woods behind Deputy Hockner and the dog, Ben was seized by the horrible certainty that the rats - having escaped from

Biolomech hours before the snow began to fall - had made it to Cascade Farm, the nearest human habitat, and that the family he had envied was in mortal danger. Lassiter. That was their name. With a surety almost psychic in intensity, Ben knew that the rats had taken up residence with the Lassiters. Hostile, Acuff had said. Exceedingly hostile. Mindlessly, unrelentingly, demonically hostile. "Hold up! Wait! Hold up!" he shouted. Deputy Hockner reined in Max, and the search party came to a halt in a clearing encircled by wind-shaken pines. Explosive clouds of crystallized breath plumed from the nostrils and mouths of the men, and they all turned to look questioningly at Ben. He said, "Steve, go back to the main gate. Load up a truck with men and get down to Cascade Farm. You know it?" "Yeah, it's the next place along Black Oak Road." "God help those people, but I'm sure the rats have gone there. It's the only warm place near enough. If they didn't stumble on Cascade Farm and take refuge there, then they'll die in this storm - and I don't think we're lucky enough to count on the weather having done them in." "I'm on my way," Steve said, turning back. To Deputy Hockner, Ben said, "All right, let's go. And let's hope to God I'm wrong." Hockner relaxed the tension on Max's leash. This time the hound bayed once, long and low, when he caught the rats' scent. 12 BY THE TIME MEG DREW THE SLED ACROSS THE LONG YARD TO THE FOOT of the porch steps, her heart was thudding almost painfully, and her throat was raw from the frigid air. She was far less sanguine than she first had been about her ability to haul Tommy all the way out to the county road. The task might have been relatively easy after the storm had passed; however, now she was not just fighting the boy's weight but the vicious wind as well. Furthermore, the sled's runners had not been sanded, oil polished, and soaped in preparation for the season, so the rust on them created friction. Doofus stayed close to the sled, but he was beginning to suffer from the effects of the blizzard. He shuddered uncontrollably. His coat was matted with snow. In the vague amber light that radiated from the kitchen windows to the yard at the bottom of the porch steps, Meg could see tiny glistening icicles hanging from the ruff on the Labrador's throat. Tommy was in better shape than the dog. He had pulled up the hood on his coat and had bent forward, keeping his face out of the punishing wind. But neither he nor Meg wore insulated underwear, and they were both dressed in jeans rather than heavy outdoor pants. On the longer trek from the house to Black Oak Road, the wind would leach a lot of heat from them. Again she prayed that the telephone would work. Looking up at her, Tommy was bleak faced within the cowl of his coat. All but shouting against the cacophonous babble of the storm, she told him to wait there (as if he could do anything else), told him that she would be back in a minute (although they both knew that something terrible could happen to her in the house). Carrying the 12-gauge Mossberg, she went up the porch steps and cautiously opened the back door. The kitchen was a mess. Packages of food had been dragged out of the cabinets, torn open, and the contents scattered across the floor. Several kinds of cereal, sugar, flour, cornstarch, cornmeal, crackers, cookies, macaroni, and spaghetti were mixed with the shattered glass and wet contents of a score of broken jars of spaghetti sauce, applesauce, cherries, olives, and pickles. The destruction was unnerving because it was so unmistakably an expression of mindless rage. The rats had not torn these packages to obtain food. The creatures seemed so inimical to humankind that they destroyed people's property for the joy of it, reveling in the ruin and waste in much the way that gremlins of age-old myth were supposed to delight in the trouble that they caused. These monsters, of course, were man-made. What kind of world had it become when men created their own goblins? Or had that always been the case? She could see no signs of the rats that had caused the ruin in the kitchen, no furtive movement in the shadowy cupboards, no sinuous forms slinking along the walls or through the rubble. Cautiously she stepped across the threshold into the house. The icy wind came with her, exploding through the door, as if it were water under high pressure. White clouds of flour and sparkling miniature tornadoes of sugar granules were spun across the room, and some of the heavier debris -

Cheerios and broken bits of spaghetti took flight as well. Garbage and shattered glass crunched underfoot as she edged warily to the telephone, which hung on the wall on the far side of the room, near the refrigerator. Three times she saw movement from the corner of her eye and was sure it was purposeful - the rats - and she swung the muzzle of the shotgun to bear on it. But it was always just an empty raisin box or the torn wrapper from a package of cookies stirring in the invasive wind. She reached the phone and lifted the handset. No dial tone. The line was dead, either because of the storm or the rats. As Meg regretfully returned the handset to its cradle, the wind subsided. In the suddenly still air, she smelled fumes. Natural gas. No, not natural gas. Something else. More like ... gasoline. Heating oil. All her internal alarm bells began to clang. Now that cold wind was no longer sweeping through the room, Meg realized that the house reeked of heating-oil fumes, which must be rising from the basement where the lines between the big oil tank and the furnace had been breached. She had walked into a trap. These ratlike gremlins were so hostile, so demonic, that they were willing to destroy the house that provided them with shelter if, in leveling it, they could kill one human being. She stepped away from the telephone, toward the door. Through the ventilation duct she heard the soft, hollow, echoey, familiar thump-click-whoosh of the electronic pilot light on the basement furnace: the sparking of an electric arc to ignite the heating coils. A fraction of a second later, before she could even take a second step, the house exploded. 13 FOLLOWING THE BLOODHOUND AND DEPUTY HOCKNER, FOLLOWED IN turn by three of his own men, Ben Parnell reached the northern perimeter of the woods and saw the faint lights of the house at Cascade Farm, dimly visible through the heavily falling snow, perhaps two hundred yards away across a sloping field. "I knew it," he said. "That's where they've gone." He thought of the woman and the boy in the station wagon, and he was overcome by a powerful sense of responsibility for them that went beyond his duties at Biolomech. For two years he'd felt that he had failed his own child, Melissa, by not saving her from cancer, which was irrational, of course, because he was not a doctor and did not have the knowledge to cure her. But his profound feeling of failure couldn't be assuaged. He'd always had an unusually strong sense of responsibility to and for others, a virtue that sometimes could be a curse. Now, as he looked down on Cascade Farm, he was gripped by a powerful and urgent need to ensure the safety of that woman, her boy, and whatever other members of their family shared the farmhouse. "Let's move," he said to his men. Deputy Hockner was unfolding a lightweight blanket made from one of those space-age materials with high insulation. "You go ahead," he said, dropping to his knees and wrapping Max in the blanket. "My dog has to warm up. He isn't built for prolonged exposure to this kind of weather. Soon as he's thawed out a bit, we'll follow you." Ben nodded, turned, and took only two steps when, out on the lowlands, the farmhouse exploded. A yellow-orange flash of light was followed by a shock wave, a low and ominous wham that was felt as much as heard. Flames leaped from the shattered windows and raced up the walls. 14 THE FLOOR BUCKED, THROWING MEG OFF HER FEET; THEN IT FELL INTO place, and she fell with it, facedown in the torn packages, scattered food, and glass. The breath was knocked out of her, and she was temporarily deafened by the blast. But she was not so disoriented that she was unaware of the fire, which licked up the walls and spread across the floor with frightening speed, as though it were alive and intent upon cutting her off from the door. As she pushed onto her knees, she saw that blood slicked her hand. She had been cut by the broken glass. It wasn't life-threatening, just a gash across the meaty part of her left palm, but deep enough to hurt. She felt no pain, probably because she was in a state of shock. Still holding the shotgun tightly in her right hand, she rose to her feet. Her legs were shaky, but she stumbled toward the door as fire seethed over all four walls, across the ceiling. She made it through the door just as the kitchen floor began to crack apart behind her. The porch was badly damaged by the blast, and the roof sagged toward the middle. When she moved off the bottom

step into the yard, one of the corner posts snapped from the strain of dislocation. The porch collapsed in her wake, as if her passage had been sufficient to disturb its delicate balance, and her temporary deafness ended with that crash. Tommy had been thrown off the sled by the shock wave of the explosion, and he had either rolled or crawled about twenty feet farther from the burning house. He was sprawled in the snow, and the Labrador was attending him solicitously. Meg raced to him, certain that he had been hurt, though nothing had fallen on him, and though he was beyond the reach of the fire. He was all right - frightened, crying, but all right. She said, "It's okay, everything's going to be fine, baby," but she doubted that he could hear her reassurances above the howling of the wind and the roar of the flames that consumed the house. Hugging him, feeling him alive against her, Meg was relieved and grateful - and furious. Furious with the rats and with the men who had made those gremlins. She had once thought that her career as an artist was the most important thing in her life. Then for a while, when she and Jim were first married and struggling to build the ad agency into a thriving business, financial success seemed ever so important. But long ago she had realized that the most important thing in life was family, the caring relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children. In this world beneath Heaven and above Hell, it seemed that irresistible forces were bent on the destruction of the family; disease and death tore loved ones apart; war, bigotry, and poverty dissolved families in the corrosive acids of violence, hatred, want; and sometimes families brought themselves to ruin through base emotions - envy, jealousy, lust. She had lost Jim, half her family, but she had held on to Tommy and to the house that had harbored the memory of Jim. Now the house had been taken from her by those rat-form, man-made gremlins. But she was not going to let them take Tommy, and she was determined to make them pay dearly for what they had already stolen. She helped Tommy move farther away from the house, into the open where the full force of the wind and cold would probably protect him from the rats. Then she set out alone for the barn at the back of the yard. The rats would be there. She was certain that they had not immolated themselves. They had left the house after tampering with the furnace and setting the trap for her. She knew that they would not huddle in the open, which left only the barn. She figured that they had constructed a tunnel between the two structures. They must have arrived in mid-afternoon, which gave them time to scout the property and to dig the long, connecting, subterranean passage; they were big, stronger than ordinary rats, so the tunnel would not have been a major project. While she and Tommy had struggled from house to barn to house again, the rats had scampered easily back and forth through the ground beneath them. Meg went to the barn not just to blast away at the rats out of a need for vengeance. More important, it was the only place where she and Tommy had a hope of surviving the night. With the cut in her left hand, she was limited to one arm with which to pull the sled. She was also in mild shock, and shock was draining. Previously she had realized that pulling the sled out to Black Oak Road in sixty-mile-per-hour winds and subzero cold, then waiting hours until a road crew came by, was a task at the extremity of her endurance; in her current condition, she would not make it, and neither would Tommy. The house was gone, which left only the barn as a shelter, so she would have to take it back from the rats, kill all of them and reclaim her property, if she and her son were to live. She had no hope that anyone would see the glow of the fire from afar and come inquiring as to the cause. Cascade Farm was relatively isolated, and the cloaking effect of the blizzard would prevent the flames from being seen at much of a distance. At the open barn door, she hesitated. The lone bulb still burned inside, but the shadows seemed deeper than before. Then, with the wind and the orange light of her burning home at her back, she entered the gremlins' lair. 15 BEN PARNELL DISCOVERED THAT THE SLOPING MEADOW WAS CUT BY A series of natural, angled drainage channels that made progress difficult. In the nearly blinding tempest of snow, the ground was dangerous, for he often realized that a ditch lay ahead only when he fell into it. Rapid progress across the field was sure

to result in a sprained ankle or broken leg, so he and his three men maintained a cautious pace, although the sight of the burning house terrified him. He knew that the rats had caused the fire. He did not know how or why they had done it, but the timely eruption of the flames could not be a coincidence. Through his mind passed disturbing images of the woman and the boy, their rat-gnawed bodies aflame in the middle of the house. 16 SHE WAS SCARED. IT WAS AN ODD FEAR THAT DID NOT WEAKEN HER BUT contributed to her strength and determination. A cornered rat would freeze up in panic, but a cornered woman was not always easy prey. It depended on the woman. Meg walked to the middle of the barn, in front of the jeep. She looked around at the shadowy stalls along the south wall, at the open loft suspended from the front wall - and at the large, empty, and long-unused feed bin in the northeast corner. She sensed that the rats were present and watching her. They were not going to reveal themselves while she was armed with the shotgun, yet she had to lure them into the open to shoot them. They were too smart to be enticed with food. So ... if she could not lure them, perhaps she could force them into the open with a few well-placed rounds from the 12-gauge. She walked slowly down the center of the barn, to the end farthest from the door. As she passed the stalls that had once housed livestock, she peered intently into the shadows, seeking the telltale gleam of small red eyes. At least one or two gremlins must be crouched in those pools of darkness. Although she saw none of the enemy, she began to fire into the stalls as she moved again toward the front of the barn - blam, blam, blam - three rounds in three of those narrow spaces, a yard-long flare spurting from the muzzle with each hard explosion, the thunderous gunfire echoing off the barn walls. When she fired the third shot, a squealing pair of rats burst from the fourth stall into the better-lighted center of the barn, sprinting toward the cover offered by the disabled Jeep. She pumped two rounds into them, and both were hit, killed, tossed end over end as if they were rags in a typhoon. She had emptied the Mossberg. Wincing, she dug in her pockets with her injured hand and extracted the four shells, reloading fast. As she jammed the last of the rounds into the magazine, she heard several, high shrieks behind her. She turned. Six large, white rats with misshapen skulls were charging her. Four of the creatures realized that they were not going to reach her fast enough; they peeled off from the pack and disappeared under the car. Unnerved by the swiftness with which the last two closed the gap, she fired twice, decisively eliminating them. She hurried around the jeep in time to see the other four scurry out from under the vehicle and across the floor toward the old feed bin. She fired once, twice, as they vanished into the shadows at the base of that big storage box. She was out of ammunition. She pumped the Mossberg anyway, as if by that act she could make another shell appear magically in the chamber, but the clackety-clack of the gun's action had a distinctly different sound when the magazine was empty. Either because they knew what that sound meant as well as she did or because they knew that she had been left with only nine rounds - the five in the shotgun and the four they had not managed to steal from the carton in her bedroom closet - the rats that had vanished under the bin now reappeared. Four pale forms slunk into the wan light from the single, dusty bulb overhead. Meg reversed her hold on the shotgun, gripping it by the barrel, making a club of it. Trying to ignore the pain in her left palm, she raised the gun over her head. The rats continued to approach slowly ... then more boldly. She glanced behind, half expecting to see a dozen other rats encircling her, but evidently there were no more. Just these four. They might as well have numbered a thousand, however, for she knew that she wouldn't be able to club more than one of them before they reached her and crawled up her legs. When they were on her, biting and clawing at her throat and face, she would not be able to deal with even three of them, not with her bare hands. She glanced at the big open door, but she knew that if she threw the gun down and ran for the safety of the mean winter night, she would not make it before the rats were on her. As if sensing her terrible vulnerability, the four creatures began to make a queer keening sound of

triumph. They lifted their grotesque, malformed heads and sniffed at the air, lashed their thick tails across the floor, and in unison let out a short shriek more shrill than any that Meg had heard from them before. Then they streaked toward her. Although she knew that she could never make the door in time, she had to try. If the rats killed her, Tommy would be helpless out there in the snow, with his broken leg. He would freeze to death by morning ... if the rats didn't risk the fury of the storm to go after him. She turned from the advancing pack, dashed toward the exit, and was startled to see a man silhouetted in the fading but still bright glow of the burning house. He was holding a revolver, and he said, "Get out of the way!" Meg flung herself to one side, and the stranger squeezed off four quick shots. He hit only one of the rats, because they made small targets for a handgun. The remaining three vanished again into the shadows at the base of the feed bin. The man hurried to Meg, and she saw that he wasn't a stranger, after all. He had spoken to her at the roadblock. He was still wearing his sheepskin-lined jacket and snow-cruled toboggan cap. "Are you all right, Mrs. Lassiter?" "How many of them are there? I killed four, and you killed one, so how many are left?" "Eight escaped." "So just those three are left?" "Yes. Hey, your hand's bleeding. Are you sure you're-" "I think maybe they've got a tunnel between the barn and the house," she said urgently. "And I've got a hunch the opening to it is around the bottom of that feed bin." She was speaking through clenched teeth and with a fury that surprised her. "They're foul, disgusting, and I want to finish them, all of them, make them pay for taking my home from me, for threatening Tommy, but how can we get at them if they're down there in the ground?" He pointed to a large truck that had just pulled into the driveway. "We figured when we found the rats, we might have to go after them in a burrow, so among a lot of other things, we have the necessary equipment to pump gas down in their holes." "I want them dead," she said, frightened by the purity of the anger in her own voice. Men were pouring out of the back of the big truck, coming toward the barn. Snow - and wind-borne ashes from the collapsing house - slanted through their flashlight beams. "We'll need the gas," the man in the toboggan cap shouted. One of the other men answered him. Shaking with anger and with the fear to which she had not dared give herself until now, Meg went outside to find her son. 17 SHE AND TOMMY AND DOOFUS SHARED THE WARMTH AND SAFETY OF the truck cab while the men from Biolomech attempted to eradicate the last of the vermin. The boy huddled against her, trembling even after the warm air from the heater had surely chased the chill from his bones. Doofus was blessed with the greater emotional resilience that arose from being a member of a playful and less intelligent species that lacked a dark imagination, so eventually he slept. Though they did not think that the rats would follow the tunnel back to the ruined house, some of the Biolomech security men established a cordon around that still-burning structure, prepared to kill any creature that appeared from out of the conflagration. Likewise, a cordon was thrown up around the barn to prevent any escape from that building. Several times Ben Parnell came to the truck. Meg put down the window, and he stood on the short running board to report on their progress. Wearing respirators to protect themselves, they pumped a lethal gas into the mouth of the rats' tunnel, which had indeed been located by the feed bin. "We gave 'em a generous dose," Parnell said during one visit. "Enough to saturate a burrow ten times larger than any they've had time to dig. Now we've got to excavate the tunnel until we find the bodies. Shouldn't be too difficult. They won't have gone deep while boring out a passage between the house and the barn, because going deep would've been wasted effort. So we'll start stripping the surface off the ground, the top few inches, digging backwards from the barn wall, across the yard, shearing the top off the tunnel, you see, until we turn them up." "And if you don't turn them up?" she asked. "We will. I'm sure we will." Meg wanted to hate all these men, and she especially wanted to hate Parnell because he was in charge of the search and, therefore, the only authority figure on whom she could vent her anger. But speaking harshly to him - and

maintaining her rage in the face of his obvious concern for her and Tommy - was difficult, because she realized that these were not the men responsible for the creation of the rats or for letting them escape. This was just the cleanup crew, ordinary citizens, just like all the ordinary citizens who, down through all the centuries, had been called in to clean up when the big shots screwed up. It was the ordinary citizen who always made the world safe for peace by fighting the current war to the bitter end, always the ordinary citizen whose taxes and labors and sacrifices paved the way for those advancements of civilization for which the politicians stole the credit. Furthermore, she was touched by the genuine sympathy and understanding that Parnell showed when he learned that her husband had died and that she and Tommy were alone. He spoke of loss and loneliness and longing as if he had known his share of them. "I heard of this woman once," he said rather enigmatically, leaning in the open truck window, "who lost her only daughter to cancer, and she was so crushed by grief that she had to change her entire life, move on to totally new horizons. She couldn't bear to look at her own husband any more, even though he loved her, because they shared the experience of their daughter, you see, and every time she looked at him ... well, she saw her little daughter again, and was reminded again of the girl's suffering. See, that shared experience, that shared tragedy, was like a trap their relationship just couldn't escape. So ... divorce, a new city, new state ... that was the only solution for her, drastic as it was. But you seem to've handled grief better than that, Mrs. Lassiter. I know how hard it must've been for you these past couple years, but maybe you can take some heart in the fact that, for certain people who don't have your strength, life can be harder." At ten minutes past eleven that night, two thirds of the way across the yard from the barn to the ruined house, they scraped off another couple of feet from the top of the tunnel and found the three dead rats. They put the bodies side by side on the barn floor, next to the other five that had been shot. Ben Parnell came to the truck. "I thought maybe you'd want to see them - that we've got all eight of them, I mean." "I would," she said. "Yes. I'll feel safer." Meg and Tommy got out of the truck. "Yeah," the boy said, "I want to see them. They thought they trapped us, but it was the other way around." He looked at Meg. "As long as we've got each other, we can get out of any scrape, huh?" "Bet on it," she said. Parnell scooped up the weary boy in his arms to carry him to the barn. As the raw wind nipped at Meg, she jammed her hands into her, coat pockets. She was relieved. At least for the moment, not all of the burden was hers. Looking over his shoulder, Tommy said, "You and me, Mom." "Bet on it," she repeated. And she smiled. She felt as if the door, to a cage, of which she'd been only dimly aware, had opened now, giving them access to a new freedom.

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