

SUBTERRANEAN
By Jeanne M. Rideout

Fire erupted from the sun's corona toward Earth, licking the stratosphere, tasting, probing.

Cars and motor homes sped down the road toward old Acadia National Park, beneath treetops bending under the furnace breath as drivers squinted at the map to the Mountain of Hope.

Fate put Johnny Jay and his Harley-Davidson at the head of the caravan, hundreds of cars long, snaking over the road winding toward the secret entrance to the manmade catacombs hidden within Cadillac Mountain. The shrill voice of a man in the fully-packed RV behind him emerged out of the cacophony.

"We'll make it just in time," the driver yelled. The digital thermometer above the windshield read 110 degrees, rising more quickly than predicted.

Fiery tongues protruded suddenly, slashing into the atmosphere.

The digital numbers blinked to 112.

"There it is!" the man in the RV shouted.

Johnny Jay, his scraggly gray hair whipping about his face, roared to a halt in front of the overhead door to the bunker.

Johnny and RV Man jumped out and each grabbed a handle and heaved. The corrugated door creaked upward to reveal- nothing but solid granite.

No inclination rolled down into a sanctuary in the core of the mountain. Johnny confronted an indentation two feet deep carved behind the raised door. Cars braked to a halt behind him, rear-ending.

Johnny's jaw hung slack, his eyes wide. The old man's head slowly moved back and forth. He yanked a battered cigar box out of his saddlebag, popping off the rubber band with a calloused thumb and yanking out the contract.

"Never trusted that gol-danged Clarence," Johnny muttered. Gold and green lights shot from the laser-cut border of the smiling photo of the savior businessman who had sold him, and thousands of other suckers, the promise of life in the granite haven far below the inferno about to consume the earth.

But Johnny Jay had a Plan B. He leapt on his hog, rumbling south, weaving through traffic jams and crashes, and then bouncing into the rough terrain. He had heard rumors about a sanctuary on the other side of the mountain, and he had kept the directions in a pocket in his mind. Praying it wasn't another lie, Johnny opened the throttle wide. He had to get there before they blockaded the door.

In the steaming line of cars jammed around the Mountain of Hope, the digital numbers clicked to 115. RV man was hopelessly blocked in by the mob crushing around him.

"It's a scam," he wailed. He had spent all his money. He had bet his life and lost. Every nerve ending in his burst body into a hot barb as the solar flare sliced across the planet.

The cars became ovens, then tin cans tossed into a bonfire. The metal shells exploded, blasting bloodied hunks of metal and charred flesh against the Mountain of Hope.

Kate slowly tore another page off the calendar. It was now Zeta, the 6th month in the 15th year P.A., and Dr. Dean said that only the Subterraneans lived. Fifteen of the 19 years since she

was born, Kate had lived in the bowels of Otter Cliff, not having seen the sun she barely remembered.

She traced her finger over the hated the Greek lettering that Dean had chosen as an acronym for the Post Apocalyptic era. The backwards candy cane and tilted A were pretentious, just like Dean himself. There were 24 letters in the Greek alphabet, and now there were 24 months in a year, with five days added on to Omega as celebration days.

She longed to tell her beloved Gregor how she felt about Dr. Lance Dean, but Gregor admired the director of Subterranea, who was teaching him to be a medic. There were days that Kate's lower lip bled from biting back the words.

Shouting burst out from the common chamber, more noise than the group normally made gathering for the evening meal at the massive oak tables. Gregor ran to her, grasped her around the waist and swung her around, kissing her.

"What?" Kate said breathlessly as her feet landed on the carpeted floor.

"Freddy and Joel just got back." Gregor paused, staring at her with twinkling eyes, like he knew a secret and he wanted her to guess. Subterranea's first above-ground scouting party had left the shelter just yesterday. Kate shook her head, laughing.

"I don't know, Gregor. Tell me. What did they find?"

"They found people," Gregor said.

Freddy and Joel had spotted the rooftops of a village near the southern slope of Cadillac Mountain.

Green poked through the blackened world before Kate as she walked down the trail. She blinked in the pools of morning sunlight flowing through a sky still clotted with clouds of ash, carefully picking her way through brambles overgrowing the path. Gregor stayed close beside her, his canvas medical bag slung over his shoulder by a wide strap.

Something hard bumped her calf, and she quickly knelt and parted the grass.

A scorched human femur poked out of the ground.

"Gregor, it's so horrible," she said. Then four tiny paws landed on her knees, and a little brown furry animal with a bushy tail and two black stripes down its back stared at her for a moment with almond eyes before scampering away.

"A creature that was in hibernation, just like us," Kate said.

Halfway down the slope to the village, the party found an abandoned bunker. The iron door in Cadillac Mountain was flung wide open on a cave sloping into the earth. Following the beam from Dean's flashlight, they stumbled deeper into the cavern. Dean swept the light in a wide arc. The shelter was stoic, a single room with a cement floor littered with ripped-open faded packets of dehydrated food. A dozen or so crude wooded stalls lined the walls.

"Obviously a rush job brought on by a failure to plan ahead," Dean said contemptuously.

A generator rusted in the back of the cave. Gregor picked up a gas drum and shook it.

"Looks like they ran out of fuel and food," Gregor said. "I bet they didn't last a year in here."

Kate thought of the purification system silently blowing freshened air through Subterranea, the deep purple carpets and comfortable bedrooms, electricity flowing as though there had never been a solar flare, and the kitchen filled with fresh fruits and vegetables from the hydroponic gardens. A maze of plastic tubes wound from an air lock in the common room through the Atlantic toward the ocean's surface, so that, even in the depths of the mountain, the Subterraneans could stroll in the tubes and enjoy the sunlight filtering down from above.

“It must have been so terrible for them,” Kate sadly.

“See how depressed Kate is,” Dean said. “Nothing good can come from the outer world. I told you people a scouting party was a bad idea, but you won’t believe me until tragedy befalls us.”

The group followed the narrow path down the mountain through a grove of white birches. The wind off the ocean had blown ankle-deep drifts of ash in the knoll. Through the thick boughs of the pine trees growing along the ledges descending the cliff, Kate glimpsed a tear-shaped inlet flowing off the ocean, expanding onto the low-lying area as far as she could see.

“My mother used to take me to Acadia almost every summer before the government collapsed, and I don’t remember there was an inlet here,” Kate said.

“There wasn’t, for sure,” responded Gregor, who was three years older. “Who knows what geographical changes the fires triggered? There may have been extensive flooding.”

Kate and Gregor trailed a little behind the scouting party, but she was careful that Joel’s broad orange cotton shirt, almost covered by the backpack carrying his camera equipment, stayed in view. A splotch of red by the side of the path caught her attention.

“What’s this?” Kate poked her toe at a flat mushroom shape half hidden under a fern. The thing plopped out. Kate covered her mouth to stifle a scream.

A severed human ear, the lobe glistening with blood, lay on the path.

“Don’t touch it,” Gregor said. He quickly knelt, pulling plastic gloves from his medical kit. “The clotting is fresh. This can’t be more than a few hours old. The ear was sliced off, not torn off, which rules out an animal attack.”

Kate’s eyes darted around the shadowed woods. “Of course no animal did that,” she hissed. “Whoever did it may still be close by, watching us. Gregor, where is the rest of the body?”

“I see the huts!” Freddy’s shout carried back to them. Gregor quickly popped the ear into a specimen bag and they hurried to catch up with the others.

“Why is it so quiet?” Kate asked.

The scouting party stood motionless and silent at the edge of the woods. Kate elbowed her way through.

Bodies sprawled in a large clearing ringed by perhaps a dozen log huts.

“Not as much blood as there should be,” Gregor said.

“Armageddon!” Dean bellowed.

The bodies filled the clearing. Most had their throats slit, some were stabbed in the back.

One corpse, the height of an adolescent, dressed in frayed jeans and white cotton shirt, lay face down a distance from the others, clutching a blood-spattered hunting knife. A purplish opening oozed where one ear should have been.

“Rigor mortis has started to set in,” Gregor said.

Using gloved hands, he lifted the stiff hand and the knife slid out. Gregor took the knife and dropped it in a specimen bag. “If the hand was holding the knife at the time of death, the knife wouldn’t have fallen out of the grip so easily,” Gregor said in a low voice to Kate. He turned the body over.

The face was sharply triangular, with a small, thin-lipped mouth and flat nose. Under the purplish tinge of lividity, the flesh was the white of freshly curdled milk. Gregor pried open the mouth, exposing small, square teeth bordered by oversized incisors. He ran his hands down one thin arm.

“Kate, look as this,” he said, holding the hand palm up. He pressed down on the index finger, and a retractable claw curved out of the first joint. He pressed each digit in turn, producing a claw.

“What about the eyes?” Kate asked. Gregor lifted a lid. The orb glowed orange, with a double pupil.

“Is this a human, Gregor? Is this an ‘it’ or a ‘he’?”

“Define human,” Gregor said. “Plato once defined man as a featherless biped. Under those criteria, I’d say the corpse is human.”

“The rest of the anecdote is that some bratty student brought in a plucked chicken and called it Plato’s man,” Kate commented. A ragged shadow fell over Kate.

“The eyes are the mirror of the soul,” Dean intoned. “I see nothing human reflected in these eyes. This mutant is an abomination spawned by the outer world.”

Dean paced away, calling for a burial crew. “We must be swift!” Dean shouted. “This creature turned on its human procreators in bloody carnage, and there may be more of these homicidal mutants lurking nearby to ambush us. We must be prepared to shoot on sight. These abominations must be destroyed.”

Kate gazed into the face of the corpse, at the mouth contorted with pain. Through the dirt, she saw the trace of dried tears.

“It’s a ‘he,” she said softly. “He looks afraid.”

“Well, ding-dong areeni!”

Kate jumped at the shrill voice cutting through the funeral tones of the scouting party. She turned quickly and saw an elderly, gray-bearded man emerging from the forest.

“Johnny Jay’s the name, crumb top berry pie is the game,” the old man said. He sat down on the back of a corpse sprawled over a rough-hewn bench. The corpse belched, a squishy, repulsive sound.

“I can’t leave these folks alone for a minute,” Jay said, nodding toward the carcasses. “I go out for a little stroll under the moon, gathering blueberries, you know, and I come back to this mess.”

“Our lone survivor,” Gregor said wryly. “I bet he’ll be a reliable source of information.”

“Possible he’s in shock. Maybe he’ll come out of it,” Kate said.

“Dementia, more likely,” Gregor said. He patted the shoulder of the body lying in the dirt between him and Kate. “So far, our best source of information is the...”

“...the creature?” Kate finished for him.

Gregor paused, looking at Kate. “Our best source of information is *him*,” Gregor said gently.

“Maybe this dead man will tell a tale,” Kate said. Gregor’s stern expression momentarily relaxed.

“I hope so,” he said. “We’ll need to carry the body back to the lab. See if you can find a sheet or blanket in one of the cabins.”

“I’ll help you out, girlie!” the old man said. “Johnny Jay at your service. Let’s go find us some of that broccoli your buddy wants.”

The one room cabin combined a kitchen area with a boulder fireplace and a curtained sleeping area. There was one big bed and one little bed. A Barbie doll with frizzy blond hair lay on the floor. On a table, Kate saw an empty pitcher and two glasses. One glass was overturned, with a grainy residue dried on the side.

“Place smells like a brewery,” Johnny commented.

Kate picked up the doll. "There must have been a little girl here," she said. "Johnny, what happened to the children?"

"Never had a glass of beer in my life, and I'm still alive and kickin'," he said, winking. "Johnny Jay says, don't be a lush."

Kate pulled a rumpled sheet off the cot and brought it to Gregor and Freddy. While the two men spread the sheet out and gently encased the body, Kate took Gregor's bag into the cabin. She slipped on gloves and placed the overturned glass with the residue in a specimen bag and tucked it away with the other evidence.

"C'mon to my place, gotta toss some clothes in a suitcase," Johnny said. He led her into a cabin that looked like bargain day at an old-time discount store. Every corner was crammed with an odd variety of things. Johnny opened a cracked black leather valise and packed a pair of paisley boxer shorts, three faded packets of dehydrated green beans, and a stack of World War II paperbacks.

"Ooops, outa room, and I got to bring my box of special things," Johnny said, staring in distress at a battered cigar box held closed with two red rubber bands. Kate picked up the cardboard box and slipped it inside Gregor's bag.

"I'll keep it safe for you," she promised.

A row of burial mounds now filled the clearing. Joel had fashioned a makeshift cross out of two birch branches taped together. Freddy stood by the cross with an open Bible.

"You can stay for the prayer. I'm heading back to the lab," Gregor said, taking the med bag from her. "You can come back with Freddy. Joel's heading to the north side of the mountain to see if there are any other villages."

"The Lord is my shepherd," Freddy began.

"I shall not want," Kate joined in. The voices of the rest of the group united as Freddy recited Psalm 23, then listened as he improvised a sermon.

Kate didn't wait for the service to end. She hurried down the path, anxious to find out the results of Gregor's analysis of the specimens in the med bag.

She sprinted around a turn in the path and suddenly stopped, crying out.

Gregor sprawled face down in the leaves, one arm dangling over the edge of the cliff, bleeding from a gash on the base of his skull. The med bag was gone.

The scouting party raced the night back to Subterranea. Within the hour, Joel returned. Dean sat at a table in the common room, huddled with his lieutenants, as Joel flashed images of the massacre scene on his laptop.

"And there's more," Joel said. "I took these pictures of what used to be called Park Loop Road on the northwestern side of Cadillac Mountain with the telephoto lens. I didn't want to get too close."

A line of scorched and mangled cars and RVs snaking along the road, hoods crumbled into the trunk of the vehicles in front of them, showed starkly on the screen. In one corroded Buick, the driver's skull rested in the cracked windshields, skeletal fingers still clutching the steering wheel. In another car, a leg bone emerged from the open door, trousers burnt off, with one skeletal foot resting on a sooty rubber sole, all that was left of the shoe. The skeleton train ended in a jumbled mass of wreckage under a sign so blackened by smoke that Kate could not make out the words. Bones, too jumbled to distinguish one set of remains from another, piled under the sign.

Kate shuddered. "I've seen enough," she muttered to Gregor. She tugged at his sleeve and they slipped into the air lock. A line of scuba diving suits, the shoulders powdered with dust, hung beside the locked cabinet storing the emergency pump. Kate touched the bandage on the back of his neck with her fingertips.

"I'm okay," Gregor said. He twirled the wheel on the six-foot metal door that vetted onto the series of underwater plastic tubes climbing the side of the mountain. Just outside the air lock, the metal portal for the emergency pump that was implanted in the side of the tube reflected the dim light filtering down from the outer world.

Gregor took her hand and they walked through the twilight, mirroring the current flowing around them. A perch stared at them through the thick Plexiglas. Kate reached out to it, but the fish wriggled away after its school.

"I feel like a hamster in here," Kate said as they strolled through Otter's Cove. "I used to have two hamsters, Justin and Brittney. I wanted to bring them when we came to Subterranea, but Dean said I couldn't, so I had to let my hamsters go. I was maybe four years old, but I knew they would die, and I was helpless to save them. They were so tiny and defenseless, Gregor." He squeezed her hand. They walked in the underwater gloom and climbed the ladder at the end of the tube up to the tube at the next level. They climbed the ocean tube by tube, until they stood in watery sunlight, the Atlantic rippling over the heads. Seaweed drifted by in green clouds.

At the end of this tube, a metal cover with a rubber gasket sealed access to the uppermost tube, where there was a star-shaped hole. Years earlier, a huge boulder had crashed through the upper tube, sending seawater cascading down through the series of tubing into the common room.

"Do you remember the Great Flood?" Kate asked. "I was six then, and my mother dashed into our bathroom, carrying me. She stuffed towels under the door, to keep out the flood. If the bulwark hadn't held, I don't think that would have saved us from drowning."

"What impressed me was when my dad and I put on scuba gear and swam in and out of the hole to install this huge pump with a hose that pumped the water out of the tubes," Gregor said. "We closed off access to the broken tube, and when the tubes were clear, the tunnels were walkable again." He tapped the metal plate. "Still holding strong. What are you staring at?"

"I don't think there's any water in the upper tube," Kate said. Gregor looked up.

"I think you're right." He looked at her, and they shared one thought.

"Let's try it, Gregor."

He took out his utility knife, working the blade around the rubber gasket until the metal plate fell into his hands. They ascended out of the ocean into the top tube. Thick shards of Plexiglas clinked under their feet. Kate reached out, grasping the thick jagged edge of the hole.

"Gregor, we can climb out!" Kate said breathlessly. They clambered up the ladder and stood in the sunlight on the curved top of the tube, a bridge leading to the crest of Otter Cliff. Kate held onto Gregor's waist to steady herself, and they crossed the broad arc of the tube to a stretch of deep grass on the tip of the mountain.

The ocean curling around them, they sat on a patch of grass on their mountain island. Yards away, a seagull flapped her wings above her nest, tilting her neck to stare at them. They sat motionless until the mother gull settled back with her chicks.

"This is the first time we've ever really been alone," Kate said. Gregor's jaw muscles tightened.

"Dean said we shouldn't be out here," he said, his voice suddenly husky.

“Gregor, this is our world,” she said. She lifted her face. His kiss was soft and warm, and she lay down beside him, hidden in the tall grass. The only sounds were the waves and the cooing of the gull. They were truly alone. His kissed her deeply, asking, then demanding.

Kate tore off another page off the calendar. It was the first day of the month of Kappa. It was the day that Dean had posted a notice summoning the Subterraneans for his big announcement of the results of his analysis of the mutant body carried back from the village massacre.

This was also the first day she felt the small, secret roundness below her waistband. She placed Gregor’s hand on her stomach, and his eyes softened with love and wonder.

“Our own little Gregor,” Kate whispered. Her baby would be a boy. She rested her head on his shoulder. Together, they joined the gathering of Subterraneans in the common room.

“My extensive testing has determined the cause of the mutant births,” Dean pronounced. “The atmosphere, poisoned by solar plasma, caused genetic damage in the womb of the female. Any fetus conceived outside the protective walls of Subterranea will be born a mutant and criminally insane and must be aborted. Conceived here inside Subterranea, our children are healthy and of sound mind.”

Kate ran into the bathroom and vomited.

“Why did he take so long to do his tests?” Kate tearfully whispered to Gregor.

“Maybe he didn’t have the right equipment to do an adequate analysis,” Gregor said. His eyes were moist and his lips pressed tightly together.

“Why would he not have those things? He has everything else,” Kate said. Only when she felt the tears wet on her cheeks did she realize she was crying.

“Our baby will be perfect,” Gregor assured her. But he was crying, too.

Kate tore page after page off the calendar, crumpling the sheets in her fist and dropping them in the trash as the months slipped by. Before Zeta had ended, she and Gregor married. She moved into his quarters, and they set up a birthing room adjacent to their bedroom. Gregor Junior was due in Upsilon, so that Kate and Gregor would be celebrating Thanksgiving with little Gregg. All the while smiling, one trembling hand on the growing roundness under her dress, Kate lived in a shell of fear.

“You’re not a monster,” she whispered to Gregg. “I know you’re not.”

One day in late autumn, she put on her green wool cape, stuffed scraps of toast in her pocket, and slipped through the air lock alone. She climbed the tubing through the ocean to the grassy spot where she had conceived her child. She fed the bits of toasted bread to the mother gull, whose babies had already flown away from the nest.

Without a plan or any intention, she descended the mountain through skeletal trees, clumsy from the shifting center of gravity created by Gregg’s growth. Halfway down, cramps fisted in her body and she doubled over, her breath white in the cool air.

When the cramp subsided, she kept going down the path, to the place where she had found Gregor unconscious. Leaning against a pine, catching her breath, she looked down the cliff. A dark brown square against the gray stone caught her attention. Something dangled from the branches of a bayberry bush clinging to the sparse soil on a ledge.

She breathed in sharply.

Gregor’s med bag hung there, swaying in the updraft from the inlet.

“It smells like a brewery in here.” Johnny Jay’s comment on that day in the village when she had found the emptied glass with the gritty substance coating the side echoed nonsensically in her mind.

Kate touched her rounded stomach and felt the surge of life. Below, the med bag hung precariously over the inlet, the bayberry bending lower and lower in the updraft. What if the med bag contained evidence that her baby was not a monster? What if the branch snapped and the med bag fell into the water below, lost forever?

Kate grasped the trunk of a pine and stepped over the lip of the cliff, lowering herself onto an outcropping of rock.

Don’t look down, she told herself, but still she could not fend off the impulse. Suddenly the ocean telescoped, like she was rocketing above the earth, and her body swayed. The wind swept her cape over her face. She closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against the wool, and again her feet rested on solid rock. Her baby pressed against the cliff, keeping her body much farther out from the granite wall than she wanted.

Kate opened her eyes and fumbled for a hold, then slowly, tentatively, worked her way down to the ledge to the bayberry bush. Pressing as hard as she could against the granite, she bent sideways until her fingers closed over the strap of her med bag. Another contraction seized her body and her legs buckled. She doubled over, whimpering. Momentarily she hovered, gravity pulling at her back. Kate hunched her shoulders, thrusting her weight forward. The contraction passed, and her body steadied against the cliff. She inched her way upward, lopsided from the med bag hanging from her shoulder, until she gripped the pine trunk and hauled herself up onto the path.

She stumbled up the mountain to the gull’s nest. The contractions came more frequently, rhythmically, so she paused and crouched every four minutes. Never had the tubes seemed so endless. She had to time going down the ladders so she wouldn’t be hit with a contraction while balancing on the rungs.

She reached the air lock crying with pain. Hiding the med bag under her cape, she scurried through the common room to her quarters. As she slammed the door behind her, her water broke. Gregor was there. He bolted the door, gathered her in his arms, and carried her into the birthing room. Contractions, quick and hard, consumed her. Moments later, she heard her baby’s first cry. Gregor placed their son, wrapped in a soft blue blanket, in her waiting arms.

She gently stroked his finger and a tiny claw emerged. Gregg’s face was triangular and his lips thin, but not as dramatically as those of the mutant adolescent, whose corpse now lay preserved in Dean’s lab. The baby’s eyes were a root beer color, with tiny V’s in the top and bottom of each pupil.

“This may mean his eyes will turn color and pupils will split into two as he gets older,” Gregor said. “There’s not much I can do to hide it if that does happen, but I can get rid of the claws.”

Kate, pain pulling at her midsection, lay out clean white towels on the diaper changing table. Gregor gently placed his son down. Gregg flinched, whimpering as Gregor sedated him. Gregor applied pressure to each finger, causing the spur to protrude, then clipped the claws below the surface of the skin and sutured the wounds with dissolving stitches.

Kate dressed Gregg in a powder blue flannel nightgown she had sewn herself, with flaps that folded over his tiny hands to hide the bandages on his fingers. She would tell her mother that the built-in mitts were to keep Gregg’s hands warm.

“I’m going to the lab to analyze the residue in the glass you found at the village,” Gregor said, grabbing the med bag. “What’s this?” He took out Johnny Jay’s cardboard box and handed it to her.

Kate locked the door behind Gregor. She held Johnny’s special box in her hands, a battered cigar box he probably bought in a Boston tobacco shop back in the 1960s. The red rubber bands twanged as she slid them off and lifted the lid. A folded paper lay tucked on top of the contents. She set down the box and opened the certificate.

Dr. Lance Dean stared up at her with shining eyes, his ultra-white teeth gleaming in a broad smile. Laser colors burst from the edge of the paper, dazzling gold and green, as she read the contract.

Congratulations on your purchase! You now own your own haven in the Mountain of Hope. Salvation is in the hands of you and your loved ones. Signed, Clarence Dean

“The Mountain of Hope,” Kate murmured. Instantly she recalled the photos of the charred skeleton train. She had to get a closer look at those pictures. Gregg slept soundly in his crib, his breathing deep and peaceful. Kate hurried to Freddy’s room and asked him to go to her quarters and watch the baby.

Still reeling from the shock that Dr. Lance Dean was the same person as the fraudulent salesman Clarence Dean, the seller of bogus shelters, she scurried to the common room and opened Joel’s laptop.

She wriggled the mouse and clicked on the photos. In front of the line of scorched cars with skeletons on the wheel was a raised corrugated door opening to a solid wall, with a soot-blackened sign overhead. Kate magnified the image until she could make out enough of the letters to verify that this was Dean’s Mountain of Hope. Dean had sold all those people a place in a death trap.

She covered her mouth with her hands, not wanting to scream. She scurried back to Gregor. Breathlessly she told him what she had found.

“Dean is a murderer,” Kate whispered frantically. “He sold space in a shelter that he never intended to build. That’s how he got so rich that he could create Subterranea. He’s responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people.”

“And of the victims at the village,” Gregor said. “The glass contained a residue of beer and arsenic.”

“He was afraid there would be survivors of the Mountain of Hope who knew he’s a criminal. He poisoned them and then finished them off with the knife,” Kate gasped. Then she gasped again. Freddy walked toward her, a DVD case in his hand.

“Why aren’t you with Gregg? Where is my baby?” Kate demanded.

“Dean’s with him. He said you better look at this,” Freddy said, handing Kate the DVD.

A series of clips flowed over the screen, showing Kate and Gregor entering the air lock and ascending the tubes to climb out onto the mountain on the day Gregg was conceived, Gregg’s birth, and Gregor cutting back the little claws. The last clip showed Dean carrying the squirming baby into the air lock.

“He has Gregg,” Kate wailed.

They rushed for the air lock. Kate slipped in a puddle, grasping the arm of one of the scuba suits to keep from falling. Droplets of moisture glistened on the wetsuit, and the door to the storage cabinet was ajar.

“Kate, come on!”

Kate followed Gregor into the tubes, scrambling up the ladders through the murky water, hot pain tearing at her midsection. Climbing as fast as she could, her legs pumping, her hands gripping the rungs, she clambered up ladder after ladder. Gregor disappeared in the maze above her.

Gregg's cries filtered down the tubing, getting louder and louder as she neared the surface. She grasped the jagged edge of the hole torn in the upper tube and hauled herself out.

Gregor faced Dean, clutching his utility knife, his legs spread apart for balance atop the tube. Dean, his arms crossed, stood blocking the way to the mountaintop. Gregg's wails filled the air.

"Where is my baby?" Kate screeched.

Dean nodded toward the gull's nest. Tiny balled fists waved above the rim of twigs. The gull roosted above the baby, her head tilted to one side as she scrutinized the pink featherless intruder.

"Drop the knife if you want the baby," Dean ordered. Gregor lay the knife down before him. Dean kicked the utility knife towards the waves. The knife skittered over the plastic, sliding into the hole, clanging against the rungs of the series of ladders as it bounced deep within the tubes.

"Don't worry about your little mutant," Dean said. "We are kind to animals. I will keep the little beast humanely caged to study its abnormalities. It will be living example to all others of dangers of the outer world."

Gregor lunged at Dean, striking him in the chest and knocking him backwards into the grass. "Get Gregg!" Gregor shouted.

Kate waddled across the tube, once slipping. She flailed, righted herself, and dashed onto the mountain. She veered around Dean. He snatched her ankle, almost toppling her over. Gregor slammed his fist into Dean's nose, shooting out blood in a geyser. Dean howled, releasing Kate.

She ran to the gull's nest and snatched Gregg. The gull's round eyes met hers and the gull cooed. Kate stood stock still for a moment, then turned and dashed for the tube.

Squeezing her baby against herself with her left arm, Kate edged precariously down the ladder. Pressing her weight against the metal each time she released a rung to reach for the one below, she made it to the bottom of the tube. Gregor bounded after her.

"Give me the baby," Gregor ordered. Kate thrust Gregg into his arms and, as quickly as she could, she descended to the next level. She held up her arms. Gregor handed the baby to her, plunged to the next tube below, and reached up for Gregg. Kate handed over the baby and scrambled down to Gregor and froze.

"What's that rumbling?" she asked. The Plexiglas under her feet trembled.

"It's the pump," Gregor said quietly. Seawater rushed into the tubing below. "Dean installed the pump and switched it to reverse. He's filling the tubes. We have to go back to the top. Hurry!"

Water swirled around Kate's feet. She scaled the ladder, with Gregor and Gregg at her heels. Ladder after ladder, she scrambled upward until she reached as far as she could go. Dean had firmly cemented the metal plate back in place, shutting off escape to the upper tube. Behind her, seawater flooded the tubes, rising rapidly.

"Gregor, he planned this!" Kate wailed. "He's going to drown us all!"

"No," Gregor said. He dove into the surging water, swimming downward toward the pump against the force of the inundation.

The water gushed up from below, whirling over her ankles. There was no way to get out. Gregor could not open the air lock without engulfing Subterranea.

The water rose to her knees. She climbed the ladder as high as she could, the back of her head pressed against the metal plate. Gregg whimpered, his eyes wide with terror. Seawater crept over her hips, lapping Gregg's toes.

How long could Gregor hold his breath? Three minutes? Four minutes? Even if he did reach the pump, could he reverse the flow? Bubbles swelled into the tube, popping, releasing precious air. The waves sloshed over her chin. She pressed Gregg's little face against hers.

Suddenly a bizarre underwater face pressed against the Plexiglas, cheeks puffed out around stark white lips, grey hair streaming. He jabbed a wrinkled finger downward.

"Johnny Jay!" Kate shouted.

Johnny dove toward the ocean bottom, disappearing in a green cloud of seaweed.

Want of air burned in Gregor's lungs as he hovered above the rush of seawater pouring in from the pump. Dean had installed the pump into the portal from the outside, so that the waterproof switch was on the outer side of the tube. Dean must have used a remote to activate the motor. Gregor pounded his fists against the Plexiglas.

Then he saw Johnny Jay swimming toward him, his legs wriggling furiously in the pump's intake. Johnny's palms slammed against the tube to keep from being sucked against the pump. He freed one hand and hit the reverse button. For a moment he hovered in still water, then the whoosh of seawater pumping out of the tube shot him upwards. Johnny tilted back his chin, pinned his arms tightly against his body, and spiraled upwards in a stream of bubbles.

Gregor flipped over and spotted a glint showing through the silt. With strong strokes, he swam toward the ladder and grabbed his utility knife.

Kate struggled for breath in the pocket of air, holding Gregg up as high as she could. Tears blended with the salt waves splashing against her lips. She inhaled as shallowly as she could, saving the air for her baby. The tube filled rapidly. She struggled for one last breath. The next wave... Gregg's rib cage heaved, then he giggled.

The water level had stopped rising.

Gregor popped out from under the surface, gasping, clenching his utility knife. He motioned for Kate to let go, and she pushed off, treading water. Gregor deftly sliced away the gasket sealing the metal plate over the opening over the ladder and tossed it. The metal disc floated down, striking the bottom of the tube.

Kate's shoulders showed above the brine.

"Get below. Get Gregg into Subterranea as soon as you can!" Gregor yelled. He clenched the utility knife in his teeth and swarmed up the ladder.

The water had fallen to her waist. She knew she should follow the receding water down to the air lock. She looked down through the Plexiglas, then up toward Gregor.

"Daddy needs us," she said to Gregg. He blinked, seeming to agree. Shouts from above tumbled down, and, clenching Gregg, Kate waded to the ladder and carried Gregg up and out of the tube. Tottering across the top of the upper tube, Kate edged toward the fighting men.

Dean's fist crashed into Gregor's jaw, and Gregor staggered backward. Dean grasped both Gregor's wrists and Gregor fell, clenching the knife in his hand. Gregor thrust his head forward, crashing into Dean's forehead. Dean howled, covering his head with both hands.

Gregor's fist cracked into Dean's jaw. Dean struggled to his knees, and Gregor stood over him, brandishing the knife.

"Get up and put your hands above your head," Gregor ordered.

Dean stood, his lips pulled into a twisted smile. "What do you think you're going to do, turn me over to the authorities? I am the authority." His arms stayed at his side.

"Hands up!"

Slowly Dean raised his hands, then he lunged forward, past Gregor, reaching for Kate.

"Give me the mutant!" he demanded.

Kate screamed, hugging Gregg close. The baby began to wail. Dean clutched at Kate's arm. Suddenly, the tips of white feathers slapped against her cheek.

Dean screamed. The mother gull's talons had dug into his shoulders, the punctures welling with blood. Her beak pecked at his eyebrows, aiming lower. Dean tumbled backwards toward the edge of the cliff. The gull's strong wings beat at his shoulders, and he tumbled off.

Kate scurried to the cliff's edge. As Dean plummeted toward the ocean, the gull released her hold and swooped upward. Dean landed on the boulders, his head cracking like a watermelon. Pink glistened on the granite, and then the surf splashed over Dean. The corpse disappeared into the whitecaps.

The gull swooped back to her nest. Tilting her head to one side, eyeing Gregg, the gull cooed.

Kate shivered in a blanket in front of a roaring fire in the common room, clutching a mug of coffee in both hands. Freddy sat on the bench next to her, gently rocking Gregg in his arms. Freddy's face had the strained look of someone trying to wrap his mind around the unthinkable. Everyone in Subterranea sat in stunned silence. Finally Joel spoke.

"Dr. Lance Dean, AKA Clarence Dean, mass murderer. That's gonna stink on his resume," he said. Somebody laughed.

"God's readin' that resume right now," Johnny Jay said. "I don't think any of us want the job Dean's in line for."

"Johnny, why didn't you tell us that Dean killed all those people?" Kate asked.

"You put my special box with the baloney sandwich in your Lovey Dovey's lunch box, and the lunch box got lost," Johnny said.

"He means that I put his cardboard box with the contract proving that Dr. Lance Dean is the criminal Clarence Dean in your med bag, and the med bag got lost," Kate said.

"I know," Gregor said.

"By myself, I couldn't of done it. Overcooked spaghetti don't stand very tall," Johnny said.

"He means that he couldn't have done this alone," Kate said.

"But, at the end of the day, Johnny Jay, you are a hero," Gregor said.

Johnny grinned.

"Johnny Jay's the name, bein' a hero's the game," he said.

Kate set her coffee aside and took Gregg from Freddie.

"Johnny, where are the children from the village?" she asked.

"I smelled what Clarence was up to, and I hid the kids in the blueberry patch," Johnny said. "The moms and dads had already guzzled the beer, but I got the kiddos away before Clarence could finish the job with a gallon of soda. That boy your Lovey-Dovey found, his name was Doug. I couldn't make Doug come with the kiddos. He was 13, the oldest of the lot, and he

thought he could take down that Clarence, but I knew it was too late. Once the water boils, the lobsters are as good as cooked.”

Crisp air blew off Otter Cove as Johnny Jay, with a brown paper bag under one arm, led the group down past the village and into the woods. Johnny ambled along with the casual gait of someone who knew the way well. Kate and Gregg, the baby warmly bundled up in a blue plaid blanket, rode on a stretcher carried by Gregor and Freddy. Johnny finally stopped in a quiet glen.

Gregor lowered the stretcher and helped Kate to her feet. A sudden wind swept down the mountain, whirling the dead leaves in the air, and Kate cradled Gregg securely in her arms. In one hand, she dangled a Barbie doll with frizzled hair.

“Come on out, kiddos,” Johnny called, waving the bag. “Chow time!”

For moments, there was no sound but the gusting wind.

Then one small, triangular face peaked out from the bushes, and then another. Kate counted seven children as they slowly emerged, huddled together. A toddler with orange eyes with double pupils and a wilted pink bow in her blond curls crept forward and took the doll that Kate offered to her.

Kate held Gregg out to the children. The pupils in the baby’s orange-brown eyes were already splitting. The children gathered around Kate, gazing at Gregg. One little boy reached out and touched the baby with one finger.

“Brother?” he asked. Kate nodded.

The toddler looked at Kate.

“Mama?” the little girl asked.

“Yes,” Kate said.

“Our mama?”

“Yes, your mama,” Kate said gently.

“That makes me the daddy of octuplets,” Gregor said, slipping his arm around Kate. His brow furrowed. “But what kind of a world are we bringing them into?” he asked. Kate smiled and kissed him.

“It’s our children’s world, Gregor,” she said.