when attacked by an aggressor. Unfortunately, in this case, the peace-keeping forces are out at Mega-Foods doing the Saturday shop.

I try to plan a strategy. At least it keeps my mind off what is happening behind the door of that baby’s room, in that crepuscular light. The carrot or the stick? Or, to put it another way, the chocolate cheesecake or the Uzi? I could try the chocolate cheesecake of false bribery. Such as, “Lucas, just give me my book and I’ll do your poop-scooping in the backyard this week.” This technique has lost its effectiveness through overuse, however. Even Lucas, microbrain that he is, doesn’t fall for that one any more.

So what about the Uzi. “Lucas, if you don’t give me back my book this minute I’m going to tell Dad that you ...” What? I’ve used up the fact that Lucas was the one who let the rabbit into Mum’s office where he ate through her modem cord. I’ve already gotten my mileage out of the time he tried to photocopy his bum on the photocopier at the public library. I’ve used up everything I know about Lucas’s sins, crimes, misdemeanors and shady dealings.

I collapse on the couch in despair. I am a stealth bomber with no aviation fuel. I am a pioneer with no powder for my musket. I am a merry man (well, OK, merry woman) with an empty quiver. I am weaponless.

Not quite.

“Rats, Lucas, there’s someone at the door. I’ll get it but I’m warning you, Lucas, if you’re not out of there by the time I get back, you’re toast.”

“Yeah, with peanut butter.”

I run to the door. The doorbell gives three loud blats.

“Just a minute. Coming!” I open the door.

There are two. no, three of them. The faces are hooded and I only catch a glimpse but it is enough to make me step back in horror, as though a huge hand has given me a push. This is my first mistake, leaving me a split second too late to push the door shut.

They are inside. They are silent.

“Hey, hold it, you can’t do that. Get out of here. Help!”

I pull myself together and try to fool them. “Dad!”

The front door clicks quietly shut behind them. I race around the corner into the hall and fall against the bathroom door. I strain to hear.

Nothing.


Lucas’s bored voice makes its way out of the bathroom. “Forget it, Amy, you’re not fooling anybody.”

“Lucas, I mean it. Let me in. Please. Those faces. They’re not ... aagh.” A shadow falls into the hallway. I grab the doorknob and screw my eyes shut.

The first thing is the smell. The fetid stench. The noxious reek. It is the smell of something dead, sweet and rotten. It rolls into the hall like a huge