

PROJECT PROTOTYPE

by Gamin Davis

(from TALES FROM THE LITTERBOX TWO)

Catherine Chandler had completed a long and not especially satisfying day at the DA's office, and thus could not help viewing any diversions that occurred after she got home as an improvement. When Vincent appeared on her balcony just after she had eaten supper, she therefore immediately counted it as the high point of her day - especially since she hadn't seen him in an unusually long time. If she had had the slightest inkling of the chain of events to be set in motion by his visit, however, she would have sent word to him not to come.

Not being clairvoyant, Catherine could think only of the happiness and relief she felt at the sight of him. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, each drinking in the sight of the other as if it might be their last- an ever-present risk, in their case.

Finally, Catherine broke the silence. "I haven't heard from you in over three months, Vincent. I was beginning to think something had happened to you."

Vincent nodded, turning to look out over the city and taking advantage of the marvelous view of Manhattan afforded by the balcony of Catherine's 18th floor apartment.

"I know; I'm sorry. It's Father," he explained apologetically. "He's been concerned about the amount of time I tend to spend Above. I had to promise not to come up so often."

Catherine shook her head in amused exasperation. "How did you persuade him to let you come up tonight?"

"I convinced him it was necessary, and I promised to be more careful. And he still grumbled for half an hour before I left."

They both laughed softly.

Then Vincent's eyes met Catherine's. "I sensed your anxiety, and I know you needed to see me. Father understood that."

Catherine nodded slightly. "Father is paranoid," she concluded, half-facetiously. "Doesn't he know I'd never let anything happen to you while you're up here?"

Vincent's leonine features echoed her smile. "He knows - but he also has reason to be afraid."

"Yes," Catherine admitted, remembering the day she and Vincent had discovered Father's real identity and the reason for fleeing the world Above to live in the tunnels.

"So he can't help worrying," Vincent finished.

Catherine sighed, looking up into the star-filled night sky. "Well, maybe someday I'll convince him that you're as safe here as you would be Below."

"I won't hold my breath," Vincent returned wryly.

At that moment, in a similar but not quite as lavishly decorated apartment across the street, a man in his early seventies stood on his own balcony, scanning the skyline before him, not looking for anything in particular but simply passing the time while dinner was cooking. The years had been kind to both him and his house guest, a long-time friend and colleague - certainly kinder than either of them deserved - and among their few friends and acquaintances, fewer still knew their true age. Only the good die young, he reflected bitterly - which, by his reckoning, meant that the two of them would likely outlive their grandchildren.

He continued to scan slowly from the horizon forward - and just as he was lowering his binoculars, he caught sight of something that almost made him faint in shock. "My God - Rheinstadt! Dr. Rheinstadt, come quick!"

He was instantly joined by a second man of approximately the same age. "Now what?"

The first man thrust the binoculars in Rheinstadt's face. "Look. The building across the street - 18th floor, middle balcony. You won't believe it."

Rheinstadt focused the binoculars on the indicated spot. *'He's alive!'* "After all these years, he's alive!"

"But how?" the other man demanded. ***"You had him killed; I remember you showing me the body on the morning after... how could he possibly be alive?"***

Rheinstadt shook his head angrily. ***"You know how, Von Holtz. We were betrayed - and we both know by whom. He was supposed to die. He should have died!"***

"All right, just slow down a minute," Von Holtz interjected, trying to calm his more easily excited friend. "Let's not get carried away, here - first things first. Let's find out how in hell he survived this long before we... do anything drastic."

Rheinstadt turned toward him, suspicious of his apparent attempt to buy time. "More research? It's been a long time - maybe you've forgotten what could happen to us if word gets out that we were responsible for creating that... mutation."

"We've already lost our hospital privileges along with our licenses," Von Holtz reminded him, seemingly unconcerned.

"Which means we also have no access to any research facilities with the kind of equipment we need to study him," Rheinstadt countered.

"Yes, we do. Fortunately, I still have a couple of friends at the hospital who can get us inside." Von Holtz took back the binoculars and focused again on the 18th floor balcony across the street.

Catherine and Vincent were still standing at the railing, Vincent with his arms around her as they looked out over the city.

"We have to capture him," Von Holtz decided.

"Who's that woman with him?" Rheinstadt. asked.

"She lives in that apartment, but this is the first time I've seen the creature with her." Von Holtz lowered the binoculars finally. "She probably knows where he lives. If we have her followed, she'll eventually lead us right to him."

"Know somebody who could do the job?"

"Certainly. Ashton and Clarke, my friends from the hospital," Von Holtz replied. "They owe me a favor."

Rheinstadt nodded finally in agreement. "Let's do it, then. We start tomorrow. But first, I think I'll pay a visit to a certain ex-nurse."

The next morning, in another part of the city, a middle-aged woman got up as usual and prepared to face the beginning of another day. She was a widow of several years and had grown accustomed to living alone. The trials and tribulations she had faced in her younger years had left her with premature grey in her formerly jet black hair and a rather cynical view of humanity as a whole, belying her basically compassionate nature.

She was not feeling cynical this morning, however - nor was she thinking of the dark secret buried deep within her, convinced by now that she had succeeded in blocking the memory of it out of her mind. The day had dawned clear, sunny, and slightly cool - obviously not a day to be spent cooped up inside - and the only thing occupying her mind as she went outside to get the morning paper was wondering what excuses she could find to get out of the house. As she picked up the paper, stood back up, and turned around, she caught sight of her living room window - until now unnoticed from the inside because the curtains were still closed - and gasped, wanting to scream but suddenly finding herself with no voice.

Drawn across the window in red paint was a large swastika.

She knew instantly who had done it and what it meant. *'Why must I continually be punished for doing what I had to do?'* she asked herself bitterly, and somewhat fearfully. As she slowly moved toward the window, she heard the sound of a car engine revving up and whirled toward the street in time to see a powder blue Buick Regal pulling away from the curb, speeding off down the street, and tearing around a corner.

She recognized the man inside the car - he had aged and gone gray, but the features were unmistakable - and knew he had meant for her to; it was obviously a warning.

She turned finally back toward the window and went to examine it more closely. "He found out," she told herself aloud, as if that would help her accept it. "Somehow he found out, and he's going to... oh, no..."

Abruptly, she ran back inside to the phone, ran her finger down a list of numbers taped next to it, found the one she wanted and quickly dialed it. After a seemingly endless wait, someone answered.

"Yes, my name is Lydia Wyman. I'd like to report a crime."

For Catherine, however, it was business as usual, and a day spent mostly in wondering why she had bothered to report to work that morning. There was little to do at present but finish up some paperwork in a robbery case - then, as far as she knew now, that was it; she would have to scrounge around for something to keep her busy until they got a new case - which, fortunately, shouldn't be long. If there was one thing Catherine hated; it was busy-work.

Perhaps it was this restlessness that left her easily enough distracted to notice a blue Buick with a cracked windshield following her back to her apartment building and parking across the street as she parked and went inside, and to vaguely remember seeing the same car following her to work that morning. She gave it only a passing thought, however, chalking it up to coincidence and her own eagerness for something to happen to break up the current monotony of her job.

Another day passed, during which Catherine began to wonder if it was going to be another three months before she saw Vincent again - and became determined to see that it wasn't. That night, she decided to go into the tunnels herself, on the theory that spending a little more time with Father might make him more willing to trust her with Vincent's safety.

As she made her way across Central Park toward the tunnel entrance where she and Vincent customarily

met, she became aware of a car following her at a distance along one of the streets through the park. She watched the car out of the corner of her eye, noting that it did not turn or otherwise deviate from its path as she drew nearer to the tunnel entrance.

Catherine paused, ducking behind a grove of bushes and considering the situation. No one Above knew about Vincent and the tunnel world except herself and the Helpers, so it was not likely that someone was following her through the park to get to the tunnels; it was probably just some carload of juvenile delinquents cruising through the park in search of someone to pick on who had latched onto her as an easy target.

As she sat crouched on her knees, watching the car through the branches of a bush, it passed under a street light - and she saw that it was the same blue Buick that had been following her for the last couple of days.

"Well, I wanted some excitement," she reminded herself sardonically. "But I'm *not* sure this is what I had in mind."

Then, some instinct told Catherine that she had better lose her pursuer before she reached the tunnel entrance - just in case. With that in mind, she stood and stepped from behind the bushes, making sure the occupants of the car saw her, and proceeded to lead them on a merry chase, going from brush grove to bush grove in the most roundabout route she could find - but trying to walk calmly, as if she were unaware of the car behind her and this was her normal path through the park.

Finally, her pursuers, unable to continue following her by car due to the growing distance from the street and unwilling to give themselves away by getting out of the car to follow her on foot, were forced to park and watch her from a distance. This Catherine continued to make as difficult as possible, darting back and forth through the trees and bushes; she turned around one last time, looking back the way she had come, and decided she had effectively confused her pursuers, whatever their intent had been. At last, she drew near the tunnel entrance again.

Vincent was waiting for her at the gate when she finally arrived, somewhat breathless and slightly rattled.

"Catherine, what troubles you? Why were you running?" he asked, concerned. "I have not felt such apprehension and confusion within you in some time."

Catherine waited until she had caught her breath before responding, glancing back down the tunnel toward the opening in bewilderment.

"I don't know, but something funny's going on. Maybe I'm over-reacting... two weeks of paperwork and cases I could've walked through in my sleep, and now this..."

She turned back to find Vincent still looking at her inquiringly, waiting patiently for her to elaborate.

"Vincent, somebody followed me across the park. I think I finally lost them, but they've been following me everywhere for the last couple of days."

Vincent appeared to consider this for a time, undecided as to how to react. He was instinctively apprehensive, but aware that Catherine would not be here unless she thought it was safe for both of them.

"You have no idea who it is, or why they're following you?"

"None," Catherine returned, sighing. Aware of his uncertainty and wanting to reassure him that it was not him her pursuers had been after, she then added, "It could have been anyone. Friends or relatives of people I helped convict, hit men, or just some kids out joy-riding- anyone."

Vincent nodded finally in acceptance of her attempt to console him- despite not felling very comforted- then turned away to open the gate, allowing Catherine to enter and following her inside.

"I think it best not to mention this in front of Father," he suggested quietly.

"I think you're right," Catherine agreed.

Together they made their way back through the tunnels to the main chambers where they found Father sitting at his desk, reading. He looked up as they approached, startled.

"Catherine? Vincent told me you were coming, but we expected you some time ago," he informed her, in a puzzled tone. "I assumed you had changed your mind."

"I meant to be here some time ago," Catherine returned apologetically, sitting down near the desk. "I was... delayed."

She and Vincent exchanged knowing looks, which Father noted and promptly dismissed; if something was going on that he needed to know about, Vincent would tell him when the time was right.

"In any case, I'm glad that you came; I need to talk to you," he continued, motioning for Vincent to leave the room. "If you'll excuse us for a while, Vincent--"

"Of course, Father." Vincent cast a final look at Catherine. "I'll be in my chamber, reading."

She nodded once, watching him leave, then turned back to Father. "Well?" she prompted.

"Catherine..., I know it must seem as if I'm trying to keep you and Vincent apart," Father began slowly, sighing. "That's really just an unfortunate result. I want you to understand why he doesn't come up to see you as often as he used to."

"I'm listening," Catherine replied neutrally.

"I may seem to you to be over-reacting, but you know as well as I do the risk he takes every time he goes Above- and the more often he goes, the more concerned I become," Father elaborated, getting up and walking around to the front of his desk.

His eyes met Catherine's. "That's why I asked him not to visit you so frequently. I know he's safe when he's with you; it's what might happen to him between the tunnels and your apartment that worries me. Someday, Catherine, he'll be caught and you won't be able to help him. That's what I'm afraid of."

Catherine remained silent, refusing to admit verbally to that possibility, though her constant inner awareness of it was evident in her eyes as she looked back at him.

Having finally achieved mutual recognition of their shared concern for Vincent, Father's mood quickly lightened, and he turned away from Catherine momentarily, going to the bookshelf behind his desk. He scanned its contents quickly without finding what he was looking for, searched around briefly elsewhere, and his eyes finally fell on the chess set, which was still sitting on a table across the room, he turned abruptly back to Catherine.

"Do you play chess, Catherine?"

Catherine looked up at him, startled. "No. I never really had the time to learn." She smiled in amusement at a sudden memory. "My father tried to teach me once. Six months and several grey hairs later, he gave up-said I was hopeless."

Father chuckled softly. "Would you still like to learn?" he asked.

"Do you think you can teach me?" Catherine countered.

"I could never resist a challenge," Father assured her, smiling slightly.

"Careful, Catherine. Father is a terrible loser."

They both turned to find Vincent standing in the doorway of the chamber.

"Forgive me for interrupting. I assumed you were through with your private talk," Vincent continued apologetically.

Father nodded in response. "Nonsense, Vincent. You're too good a winner," he argued good-naturedly.

Vincent laughed just audibly and came to join them.

Catherine spent the next few hours in an earnest but futile attempt to follow Father's play-by-play explanations and suggestions, as he talked her through a few games of chess that were meant more as a means of passing time than as a learning experience. That was Catherine's impression, at least, since she knew Father was as aware as she was that getting to know each other better could only benefit both of them.

Vincent sat beside them near the table as they played, kibitzing gently in Catherine's favor, until Father finally announced that they should be getting to bed, since it was nearly midnight.

"I hate to win and run," he told Catherine, a touch of humor in his voice.

She smiled back at him. "It's just as well- tomorrow's a work day for me, and my ego can only stand so many consecutive losses."

Father returned her smile silently as she rose and Vincent got up to follow her.

"I'll get you in the rematch," Catherine assured him, as she and Vincent left the main chamber.

When they were alone in the passageway, Vincent said, "Whoever was following you may still be in the park. I'll take you back the other way."

Catherine nodded in agreement, and they started off through the tunnels, traveling for a time in silence.

"I hope I made some kind of positive impression on Father tonight," she admitted finally.

Vincent turned to her in feigned puzzlement, knowing the true cause of her concern but wanting to make the evening's light mood last as long as possible.

"You always do," he told her earnestly.

"You know what I meant, Vincent."

Vincent nodded. "I think Father understood that you weren't just here to see me."

"I'm glad," Catherine returned sincerely.

They had reached the tunnel opening underneath Catherine's apartment building.

Just before going through, she turned to Vincent one last time. "I'll see what I can do about coming down here more often; that ought to ease his fears about your safety."

Vincent nodded gratefully in acknowledgment. "Perhaps we'd better meet here for a while, until you're sure you're not being followed anymore," he suggested.

"Good idea," Catherine agreed.

She turned then and stepped through the opening, and Vincent lingered, watching as she walked over to the rungs on the opposite wall and began to climb up, disappearing abruptly into the bright light that shone down from the unseen opening Above.

When Catherine walked into the office the next day, a few minutes late but unconcerned because of the recent light workload, a surprise awaited her. Edie passed by her desk and greeted Catherine in her usual

cheerful manner. "Hey, Girlfriend!"

Catherine stashed her purse in a drawer and responded in kind. "Morning, Edie. Is something up?"

"I'd say so. Joe's waiting for you," Edie informed her.

"Thanks, Edie. I'll go see him right now." Catherine headed for her boss' office and stuck her head through the door, which was slightly ajar. "Joe?"

Joe Maxwell looked up from his paperwork, getting up instantly when he saw who it was.

"Sorry I'm late. Edie told me you wanted..." She had to stop as her attention was diverted by the folder Joe suddenly tossed to her; she opened it up.

"What's this? Why, it looks like a case file!" She observed, in mock surprise.

Joe grinned. It helped to have a sense of humor when you made your living as a part of the New York City legal system.

"All right, Radcliffe. I know things have been pretty slow around here lately and you've been bored. That's why I thought I'd give you first shot at this case," he explained. "Seems this lady out in Queens woke up yesterday and found a swastika painted across her front window."

"A what?" Catherine questioned incredulously. "You mean as in Nazis, red and black armbands, and Hitler?"

"Right-----two out of three, anyway. They're called '*Neo-Nazis*', Cathy, and they're everywhere-----though they don't usually advertize their presence," Joe elaborated. "Anyway, she reported it and then clammed up. All the cops could get out of her was something about it being a warning and things would just be worse if she talked about it anymore. They don't even have a starting place to look for suspects."

Catherine had heard of Neo-Nazis, of course, but this was the first time she had ever been asked to handle a case that actually involved any of them.

"Does she know who did it?" she asked curiously.

"Moreno thinks so. He thinks you might be able to get her to talk,"

"Hmmm..." Catherine grew intrigued as she examined the contents of the folder - among them, some photos of the vandalized property; a large picture window with the swastika painted across it in wide, dripping brushstrokes. It was possible that there was more to this than a simple case of vandalism.

"Okay, Joe. I'll get on it right away."

Catherine drove out to Lydia Wyman's house; a cursory look in the rear-view mirror as she pulled into the driveway told her that she still had her unidentified shadow, but she had no time to worry about it now. She got out, walked quickly to the door and rang the doorbell. In a minute, the door was opened slightly and Catherine found a large, black eye staring apprehensively at her through the narrow opening.

"What do you want?" it demanded.

"Mrs. Wyman?"

"Who wants to know?" the eye asked warily.

"I'm Catherine Chandler, with the D.A.'s office. I'd like to have a talk with you, if it's convenient," Catherine told her.

The door finally opened the rest of the way, and Catherine found herself facing a woman apparently in her early fifties, whose hair, black streaked with grey, was pulled back in a knot behind her neck. Her face was

slightly wrinkled, but not unattractive.

"About the vandalism?"

Catherine nodded.

Lydia sighed. "I've been expecting you. I knew they'd eventually send someone else to question me," she admitted, moving back and allowing Catherine to enter.

Once they were both inside and the door was closed, Catherine turned to her. "It's really in your best interests, Mrs. Wyman. We can't get whoever did this until you tell us what you know."

"I know, but it isn't easy." Lydia went into the kitchen. "Coffee, Miss Chandler?"

"No, thanks," Seeing that Lydia was getting some for herself, Catherine went to the dining table and sat down, waiting for the older woman to join her. In a moment, she did.

"There were no other witnesses?" she began, when Lydia had seated herself.

"No. Only the man who did it and me," Lydia replied.

"You saw him?"

"I didn't see him do it, but I saw him drive away from where he was parked - right in front of the house - and I know he would do it."

"So you know him!" *'Now we're getting somewhere,'* Catherine thought. "You told the police it was a warning. Is this man blackmailing you?"

Lydia became visibly nervous. "Not that I know of; it's more like.... revenge," she said cautiously.

Catherine put down her pen and notepad, realizing there was no point in taking notes until Lydia stopped dancing around the subject and gave her something specific.

"Why would he want revenge on you?"

Lydia was silent for so long that Catherine began to think she should try another approach; not until Lydia finally spoke again did Catherine become aware of the depth of the older woman's inner turmoil.

"I must admit I've never tried talking about it. I thought I'd put it behind me and forgotten all about it until this happened. Now, maybe it would help - maybe I could at least go to sleep at night without wondering if...." Lydia trailed off uncomfortably.

"Wondering if what?" Catherine prompted carefully, readying pen and notepad again.

Lydia spoke without looking up. "A long time ago I was involved in something I now wish to God I'd had no part in. I used to be a nurse in the Maternity Ward at St. Vincent's Hospital; one year – 1957 - I heard that two of the doctors I worked with were starting some kind of secret project. We three were the only ones who ever really knew what it was. Administration didn't find out until it was too late..."

Catherine listened in a growing fascination that later turned to shock as Lydia unraveled a tale more appropriate for a science-fiction novel than testimony in a court of law.

"All I can tell you about the project at this time is that its top secret and it's an experiment in in vitro fertilization. Only you, Dr. Von Holtz, and myself will be involved, and you'll be told more as the information becomes necessary to you."

Lydia Carstairs considered this for a time. Dr. Friederich Rheinstadt was an obstetrician by profession, but she knew he had for some time been interested in the relatively new field of human fertility. He had written

several papers on it and related subjects and was considered an authority on it, and was well-respected by everyone at St. Vincent's Hospital, as well as by the medical community in general; the same could be said of his colleague, Heinrich Von Holtz, and this was hardly the first time they had collaborated. Both had emigrated here from Germany during World War II and had been at St. Vincent's ever since the war had ended.

Lydia was sure any project they were involved in had to be legitimate, well-conceived and well-intentioned - besides, it would be fun to get into an area she was intrigued with but never really had the chance to research seriously. She assumed her interest in in vitro fertilization was the reason she had been among those considered to work with them on the project, since both Rheinstadt and Von Holtz had known of it for some time.

"Are you with us?" Rheinstadt asked then.

"Yes, sir." Lydia responded decidedly.

Days passed. Lydia dutifully kept what little she knew of Project: Prototype, as it came to be known, to herself, though she was still unsure why it was necessary, or for that matter exactly why Prototype had been chosen as its name. Even more confusing was the notice Lydia found on the lobby bulletin board one morning as she left on her lunch break:

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED - HEALTHY YOUNG MEN
AND WOMEN TO ASSIST IN EXPERIMENT IN
REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY. SEE DR. H. VON HOLTZ
OR DR. F. RHEINSTADT, 3RD FLOOR
OBSTETRICS/GYNECOLOGY WARD, TO ARRANGE
PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW**

Lydia thought about it briefly during lunch and decided that Rheinstadt and Von Holtz must have decided they needed more help on the project - though she couldn't imagine why they had specified that the applicants were young and healthy. Certainly neither had mentioned that as a requirement in any interview with her.

Finally, however, the time came when the two doctors agreed that Lydia would have to be told the truth. All the preliminary work and research was done now; the groundwork had been laid gradually over the years in research, notes, experiments, and the numerous articles on which they had collaborated - and now, thanks to a small government grant(which the hospital had requested on the assumption that it was going to be used for research in reproductive biology) it was finally all becoming a reality. The choice of male and female subjects was rapidly being narrowed down, and Lydia would be working too closely now with both of them and the subjects to justify being kept in the dark any longer.

Thus it was that Lydia was called into Rheinstadt's office one morning some three months after becoming involved in the project and found him and Von Holtz waiting for her. Each gave her a carbon copy of some of his notes and the jointly-written general outline of what they actually hoped to accomplish with Project: Prototype, inviting her to read through it all at her own leisure and even giving her time off from the project so her night would be free. Lydia wondered why they were being so generous - until she got home and started reading.

It took her all night to pore through it all, but the next morning, Lydia went back to Rheinstadt's office. He was there waiting for her again, and looked up from his work as she dropped the pile of paper

unceremoniously on top of his desk.

"Finished?" he asked unnecessarily.

Lydia nodded, staring at him in astonishment, deeply troubled by what she had read and wanting him to know it - even though it was clear from the expression on Rheinstadt's face and the tone of his voice that he had no greater interest in her opinion.

"Doctor, I don't understand. You can't be seriously thinking of trying what this outline suggests?"

"I believe it and the accompanying notes are sufficiently explicit," Rheinstadt returned, unruffled. "Assuming the experiment is successful, we will have created what may be the first of a race of perfect human beings. The interviews and tests we've been conducting are a means of selecting the best and most physically compatible parents."

Lydia's mind was reeling with the implausibility, immorality, and possible insanity of what Rheinstadt was proposing; now she fully understood the notice she had seen on the bulletin board, and the significance of the project's name. She had assumed they would be experimenting with animals, as was customary - but no. Rheinstadt and Von Holtz intended to use human subjects! The idea of the reproductive experimentation was merely a front for the real focus of the project. Suddenly, she found she retained enough presence of mind to remember the circumstances under which they had emigrated from Germany to the United States. And she had thought they left to avoid the Nazi movement!

"A master race," she stated; no need to make it a question.

"Exactly," Rheinstadt confirmed. "If we succeed."

"And if you don't?"

Rheinstadt shrugged elaborately. "We'll keep trying until we do."

They're both mad as March Hares, Lydia decided. "Dr. Rheinstadt, you're talking about genetic engineering. That's only been done with plants and a few animals," she pointed out, in disbelief.

"So we'll be pioneers in our field. Somebody had to take the first step."

At this point, Lydia gave up; obviously it was going to take someone with considerably more clout than her to convince these two to back down.

"You can continue this 'experiment' without me, then; I don't want any part of it," she told him finally.

Rheinstadt got up and came around the desk to confront her. "I'm sorry, Nurse Carstairs. We're too deeply into the project for you to back out now. Besides - you'll be needed after the baby is born."

Lydia instinctively recoiled as he approached, backing up several feet.

"Calm down, Lydia - we're not going to hurt anyone. That's why we left Germany, you know; the violence was getting out of hand," Rheinstadt continued, in a seemingly sincere attempt to reassure her. "Hitler had the right idea, but he went about it in the wrong way. You don't establish a master race by destroying another one - you create a master race. We want life, not death."

Lydia was not convinced. "I still want out. I'm a volunteer, remember? You can't make me continue; if you try, I'll expose the whole project - and I'll start by telling the Administration."

Rheinstadt smiled a death's-head smile at her. "Your word against mine and Dr. Von Holtz'. And who do you think they'll believe, my dear - a first year RN, or two doctors whose combined credentials list is longer than you are tall?"

The man's complacent overconfidence was infuriating, but for the moment, Lydia remained defiant. "Being

interns at a death camp doesn't count," she retorted coolly.

Rheinstadt chose to ignore her swipe at their concentration camp backgrounds. They had been in their late twenties when they had emigrated here and were now in their late thirties - to them, a seemingly long time to accomplish the preparation for this project, and they hadn't wasted it. As for the death camp, they had done their best to live down their involvement in that nightmare since coming here. It helped that they had come through the Nazi war trials virtually unscathed, due to 'mitigating circumstances'; during their entire tenure at Auschwitz, they had not killed - nor taken part in killing - anyone. It was the one part of the whole experience that they had found cause to take pride in.

Essentially, their careers had not begun until St. Vincent's accepted them; they quickly proved themselves, however, and their Nazi past was forgotten - and neither had any intention of reminding anyone by allowing the truth about Project: Prototype to get out.

"That was uncalled for, but I'll let it pass - this time," Rheinstadt returned, a note of warning touching his voice, as he finally went back to sit down at his desk. "It's very simple, Nurse. Tell and you'll only be hurting yourself; keep the secret and be patient, and you may see the dawn of a new era in human history."

Lydia still rebelled inwardly, but she realized that Rheinstadt was right. His and Von Holtz' reputations were too sound now; unless they confessed themselves. Her word against theirs - with nothing to back it up - would likely be viewed by the Board of Regents as something akin to heresy, and she would be the one to be punished. For the time being, she had no choice but to continue and hope they gave her a chance to gather evidence - though that seemed unlikely now, with one doctor already alerted to her intentions.

The search for the 'best and most physically compatible' prospective parents finally began to wind down within a week or so, by which time Rheinstadt and Von Holtz had found their potential father - a man in his twenties, married, and (since he was a former Olympic athlete) in textbook physical condition; finding a woman who fitted their requirements for the mother proved to be a bit more difficult and took longer. Finally, however, after another month of innumerable interviews, examinations, tests, and evaluations, they found the woman they were looking for.

When they and their spouses were brought together for their first joint interview and Lydia saw both couples for the first time - each pair sitting in Rheinstadt's office and looking like the all-American couple; bright-eyed, optimistic, and chatting enthusiastically with each other about the possibilities they saw in this project (undoubtedly expecting what Lydia had expected when she first became involved) - she knew it could be no coincidence that both subjects fitted what was known of the Aryan master-race image established by the Nazis; in addition to top-notch physical and mental conditions, they both had blond hair and blue eyes.

Rheinstadt and Von Holtz were both there to conduct the interview; Lydia was there only because they had ordered her to be, supposedly to help familiarize herself with the subjects and their medical history.

"I suppose the first thing we should do is get the introductions out of the way, since you're seeing each other for the first time and you haven't met my colleague formally," Rheinstadt began. "Randall and Ginny Kent, meet George and Genevieve Marsh."

"We introduced ourselves to each other while we were waiting," Randall informed him.

Rheinstadt nodded in acknowledgment and indicated Von Holtz. "This is my friend and colleague, Dr. Heinrich Von Holtz." He nodded toward Lydia. "...and this is Nurse Lydia Carstairs. We'll be working closely with you, but we want to be sure first that you all understand the risks involved. In vitro fertilization is still only in the experimental stages, and in fact, this is the first time to my knowledge that it's been tried with human subjects - so we can't guarantee the safety of either Mrs. Marsh or the baby."

The Marshes exchanged significant looks as the Kents watched anxiously, George appearing particularly apprehensive as they communicated silently, but in the end, Genevieve spoke for both of them; "We knew it would be dangerous from the onset, Doctor. I still want to take part."

The expression on Rheinstadt's face invited her to elaborate.

"My sister, Geneva, has the same problem as Mrs. Kent," Genevieve explained reluctantly. "She can't have children, either, so I know what it feels like ... to want so badly to hold your own baby, yet know you never can. Geneva I am very close, and I would've given anything to get her involved in this, but she and her husband are very religious and dead set against anything 'artificial', including in vitro fertilization. George tried to talk them into it, but it was hopeless."

George slipped an arm around her reassuringly. "She believed it was 'God's will' for her not to have children," he added. "But Genevieve was still so enthusiastic about the idea that I thought ... if she could take part in the experiment and somehow make it possible for someone else to have a baby, it would make up for not being able to help Geneva."

Genevieve nodded in agreement. "We already have three of our own; I wanted to give someone else a chance before I had my tubes tied. Fortunately, George understands."

Satisfied, Rheinstadt turned to the Kents. "Mr. Kent?"

Randall glanced at Ginny, who nodded supportively, and responded. "As Mrs. Marsh says, it's a chance. If she's willing to offer it, Ginny and I are ready to take it."

Lydia watched in a silence enforced by the intimidating gaze of Von Holtz, which focused itself on her recurrently - knowing now that neither doctor had any intention of letting the baby out of his hands for adoption. Deception on top of deception, and never mind any innocent couples who had their hopes trampled along the way. And from the expression on Von Holtz' face, it was clear he knew what she was thinking.

Rheinstadt, meanwhile, took two pieces of paper out of his desk drawer and handed one each to Genevieve and Randall. "You'll each need to read and sign this release form. It just basically says that you've volunteered to be test subjects and we won't be held responsible for any untoward results."

While the couples were busy reading and signing, Rheinstadt looked through Randall's records folder and handed Genevieve's to Von Holtz, who did the same with hers. "Hmmmmmm....."

Genevieve had just finished with her release form and now handed it back to Rheinstadt, looking up at Von Holtz as the latter spoke.

"Mrs. Marsh, there's something here about a claim to some sort of ... extrasensory power?"

"Yes, Dr. Von Holtz," Genevieve asserted, preparing for the jeers with which this admission was usually met. "I... sense... other people's thoughts and feelings."

Von Holtz was looking at her records again. "Mmmm-hmmmm. Interesting."

Encouraged by his apparent open-mindedness, Genevieve elaborated. "I was once foolish enough to mention this... ability... to someone outside the family, and this well-meaning armchair psychoanalyst friend said I was having hallucinations and should get professional help. So I went, just to prove her wrong - which I did."

It was unclear if Von Holtz had ever heard her; he was still reading her records. "An I.Q. of 150... with degrees in English and Philosophy....," he noted, half to himself.

"Yes - is that important?" Genevieve asked, puzzled.

"... and your family doctor tells me you have a passion for classic literature, especially Shakespeare. Yes, Mrs.

Marsh - more important than you know."

Genevieve Marsh and Randall Kent came to know each other well over the ensuing months of frequent visits to the hospital, as Rheinstadt and Von Holtz tried to ascertain when the fertile period of Genevieve's cycle fell so they could extract her ovum for fertilization. It was a living nightmare for Lydia; she knew that neither they nor their spouses had any idea of the real reason for the experiment, or why they alone, out of the dozens who had applied to take part in it, had been chosen.

If Lydia told them, as everything within her dictated she should, they would back out of the experiment and Rheinstadt and Von Holtz would have her head on a platter. But she dreamed of being a career nurse, and her sense of ethical responsibility warred with the importance of keeping her job. In the end, feeling trapped, she said nothing.

Finally, the time came. Randall's sperm and Genevieve's ovum were successfully removed, transferred to a culture dish, and stored in the lab - a procedure which Rheinstadt saw to himself. Unfortunately, he was rather rushed for time and did not pay terribly close attention to which culture dish (of several that were immediately at hand on the counter at the time) he was using - as he discovered later when he returned to check the progress of the fertilization, which, was, of course, too late to correct the mistake. No one else knew, however, until the day of the implant surgery, when Lydia was sent to the lab to get the culture dish now containing the fertilized ovum which would be returned to Genevieve's womb.

As Lydia withdrew the culture dish from the incubator, it was obvious that something was wrong with the embryo; to begin with, it was too large. And it was floating in a puddle of strangely-colored culture medium. Alarmed, Lydia set it down carefully on the counter and ran to the nearest intercom, hurriedly switching it on. "Dr. Rheinstadt to the OB lab - urgent!"

A few minutes later, Von Holtz arrived. "Rheinstadt's scrubbing up for surgery. What's the problem?"

Lydia drew his attention to the culture dish sitting nearby on the counter. "It's the embryo. I think Dr. Rheinstadt put it in the wrong dish - it looks like the experimental growth media you were working on," she told him anxiously.

Von Holtz hurried over to examine the culture dish. "Damn ... it is ... and not one of the more promising ones, either," he muttered disgustingly, taking some keys out of his coat pocket and tossing them to Lydia. "Here, there should be a folder in that drawer with the formulas for all these culture media. See if the formula for this one is still there - it's designated CM-22."

As Lydia turned and reached under the counter to open a locked drawer, Von Holtz took the culture dish across the room to examine under a microscope. "It is developing more quickly than usual... but that could simply be because of the superior genetic material provided by our subjects," he opined.

Lydia appeared at his side. "You really don't believe that, do you?" she asked incredulously.

Von Holtz, looking up at her, chose not to answer except with another question. "Where's the formula?"

"I couldn't find it. Are you sure it was CM-22?"

"Of course, I'm sure," Von Holtz replied impatiently. "It was the only green medium I came up with - or that I'd ever seen, for that matter." He stood, picking up the culture dish. "Well, we'll have to look for the formula later. Right now, Rheinstadt's waiting for his embryo - and us - in surgery."

Lydia was horrified. "But surely he won't want to implant the embryo now! Without the formula, we have no idea what it's been exposed to!" she protested.

"It doesn't appear to have been harmed, Nurse. The fact that it's growing faster than normal isn't

necessarily bad," Von Holtz pointed out quietly. "In any case, we have too much time, money, and effort invested in this project to abort it now."

"And what about Mrs. Marsh?" Lydia demanded.

"She knew the risks at the onset. Don't worry, Lydia - with careful surveillance, there should be no further problems with the pregnancy."

Lydia was still dissatisfied, but Von Holtz had made up his mind and was already on his way out of the lab with the culture dish - and she knew that Rheinstadt would feel the same way. The closer the project drew to completion, the more determined he and Von Holtz seemed to become - and the more frightened she became. It would clearly take more than a freak accident in the lab to stop them now.

The surgery, of course, went on as scheduled shortly thereafter; Rheinstadt responded to the news of their discovery of his mistake only with renewed determination, but there were no problems or complications. When it was all over, Lydia found the Kents and George Marsh in the waiting room.

"How is she?" George asked, as Lydia came toward them.

"Still asleep, Mr. Marsh. The operation was a success - no complications." Lydia told him, trying to sound more optimistic than she felt.

"So now what happens?" Randall Kent asked anxiously.

"She'll stay here for a few days while we run some follow-up tests." Lydia debated with herself whether or not to tell them about the accident. It seemed futile; there was certainly nothing that could be done about it now, and it was too late for either Randall or Genevieve to back out.

More time passed. Genevieve's pregnancy was monitored so closely and carefully by Rheinstadt and Von Holtz that the Obstetrics Ward was soon rife with rumors of complications in the Marsh case. In fact, however, the pregnancy seemed to proceed quite smoothly - entirely too smoothly for Lydia's comfort, and this time she knew she wasn't the only one who was concerned - apparently unhampered by a fetus that was surely developing abnormally.

Finally, Lydia reached a decision. As pointless as the knowledge might be to them now, she could not stand to see Genevieve and Randall continuing the project under false pretenses - so on her day off, Lydia called the Marshes and the Kents, asking all four to meet her for lunch.

"All right, we're here. What's up?" Randall asked curiously, once they had all seated themselves.

"There have been some complications," Lydia began uneasily.

"Dr. Rheinstadt didn't mention anything at my last check-up," Genevieve returned, puzzled.

'He wouldn't,' Lydia noted to herself sarcastically. "It's something that happened before the embryo was returned to your uterus."

Genevieve exchanged alarmed looks with the others - George first, then Randall, then Ginny - and finally turning back to Lydia, studying her face for a time and realizing that something was seriously wrong. "I wondered why you've been so tense lately. What is it?"

"Yes, what happened?" George put in apprehensively.

"There was a mix-up at the lab," Lydia explained hesitantly. "The ovum and sperm were accidentally put into the wrong culture dish - a dish containing an experimental culture medium."

"Which means what?" asked Ginny, appropriately confused.

"Which means that the ovum was exposed to a combination of unknown elements while it was being fertilized," Lydia elaborated. "Dr. Von Holtz lost the formula for the medium -- and without a list of exact ingredients and amounts, there's no way he can really be sure what the embryo was exposed to or how it's going to be affected."

There was a few minutes of chaos as all four of the others began issuing protests at once, until Randall realized that none of them were making any sense and tried to calm them down enough to speak one at a time.

"Hold it, everybody, just hold it! I don't like it any more than you do, but let's not take it out on Nurse Carstairs."** He turned to Lydia, still angry. **"Why in hell didn't they tell us? We had a right to know!"

"Before the surgery!"** Genevieve added indignantly. **"Maybe I wouldn't have changed my mind anyway - but I would like to have known in advance what they were putting into my body!"

"I know," Lydia agreed sympathetically, trying to calm them. "They didn't tell you because they knew how upset you'd be. Dr. Von Holtz felt it would be safe to continue the experiment, and he and Dr. Rheinstadt are so committed to it that they're ... fanatically determined .. to see that nothing jeopardizes it. I wasn't even supposed to tell you about it, and I'm out of a job once they find out I did."

The expressions on the faces of Randall and Genevieve assured Lydia that they would do their best to keep her name out of any future discussions on the matter.

***"Is this ... embryo ... going to hurt my wife?"** George demanded.*

***"And what about my baby? Is it going to be all right?"** Ginny pressed.*

To all of them, Lydia replied, "There've been no problems with the pregnancy so far; all we can do is keep a close watch on Mrs. Marsh and hope."

It was obviously not good enough, but it was the best she could offer them, under the circumstances and they seemed to understand that.

Almost seven months to the day after the implantation of the embryo in her uterus, Genevieve Marsh went into labor and was rushed to St. Vincent's in an ambulance; as soon as Lydia found out, she phoned the Kents and they came to the hospital, arriving just as Genevieve was being wheeled into the delivery room. Rheinstadt and Von Holtz were there are ready for her, and quickly agreed on a diagnostic procedure; premature labor induced by a malformed fetus.

Genevieve was in full labor for nearly a few day; as Rheinstadt pointed out, it was as if the baby itself was fighting the birth process. In the end, Von Holtz was forced to do a Caesarean section and remove the baby himself.

The first clue that something was wrong with the baby was when it cried; it sounded like no crying any of them had ever heard before - at least, not from a baby. It was more like an animal cry. She sponged off its face and head first - and then, more out of surprise than fright, let out a wordless yelp.

***"What's wrong, Lydia?"** asked Von Holtz, still occupied with Genevieve.*

***"I think you'd better come look at this baby,"** Lydia told him shakily.*

Von Holtz and Rheinstadt exchanged apprehensive looks. "Finish closing for me," Von Holtz ordered quickly; Rheinstadt nodded once in acquiescence, and Von Holtz hurried to join Lydia, staring at the baby in horror as Lydia continued to bathe it.

"Oh, my God..."

It already had a full head of curly, golden hair, and its eyes were as blue as a cloudless sky - but any external resemblance to its parents ended there. The nose and mouth were more like that of a lion cub than a human baby, and its entire body was covered in golden fuzz of varying thicknesses. "It's covered with hair," Lydia announced unnecessarily.

"That's the least of its problems," Von Holtz retorted, examining the baby's extremities. "It also has enlarged fingers and toes... with retractable claws!" he noted incredulously.

"Claws?"

They looked around briefly in acknowledgment as Rheinstadt finally joined them.

He, too, was horrified. "This isn't a baby --- it's a Frankenstein monster!"

"Then what does that make you?" Lydia whirled accusingly to Von Holtz without giving Rheinstadt a chance to answer. "Or both of you, I should say. I knew this would happen. I warned you the project should have been aborted after we discovered Dr. Rheinstadt's accident with the culture dish!"

"That's enough!" Von Holtz snapped.

Lydia finally finished the baby's bath, removed it from the water, and began to dry it off. "Damn - the genitals are deformed, too," she observed, picking the baby up and passing it to Rheinstadt, who handled the baby with obvious distaste as he likewise examined the area in question - a hopeless jumble of openings and appendages that looked half human and half animal. "Male?" Lydia guessed.

Rheinstadt nodded; the baby did have appendages, malformed enough though they might be, He gave it back to Lydia, turning then to Von Holtz.

"Did you ever find the formula for that culture medium?"

Von Holtz had resumed the search immediately after the surgery, of course, and had turned the lab and both their offices upside down looking for it - had even searched his own house - to no avail. He shook his head, watching Lydia as she tried to calm the baby, who was still yowling.

"No - it's gone. I must have decided that the formula was useless and thrown it away," he admitted reluctantly, apparently annoyed with himself. "I thought I'd saved it; the culture dish itself was still there because I was planning to try one last thing with the medium before giving up on it."

"And you don't remember the ingredients?"

"None that would cause birth defects like this."

"Even in combination?"

Von Holtz was losing patience. "I don't know! How can I? The medium was experimental, you know!"

"And you lost the formula. How could you be so stupid?" Rheinstadt demanded.

Von Holtz bristled. "You're the one who put the ovum in it by mistake and insisted on going on with the project anyway!"

"We agreed to continue," Rheinstadt reminded him, in a tone that said the debate was at an end.

The baby was gradually calming down as Lydia began to rock him, trying to ignore the argument and eyeing the still-sleeping Genevieve.

"What are you going to tell the Marshes and the Kents?" she asked anxiously.

The doctors appeared startled; this was an aspect of the situation they hadn't even considered yet. The realization that all their years of work had just gone up in smoke still dominated their thoughts.

"The truth - which they'd find out anyway," Von Holtz answered finally.

"But neither family will want him," Lydia pointed out, realizing even as she spoke that that was undoubtedly what Rheinstadt and Von Holtz wanted - but for different reasons now than before.

Von Holtz glanced once more at the baby, who seemed to be trying to go to sleep now and was kneading Lydia's arm with its tiny foreclaws; it didn't seem to bother her.

"Can you plane them?"

Lydia's head jerked up, and she glanced at Von Holtz. "Doctor!"

"Well, look at him! Would you want to raise that as your son?"

Lydia looked, then returned her attention to Von Holtz. "If they don't want him, maybe I will," she retorted.

Von Holtz just shook his head, not in the mood to expound on arguments to the contrary. "If we're all lucky - if he's lucky - he won't live long enough for it to be a problem."

Lydia opened her mouth to protest again, but found herself too astonished to know what to say.

Rheinstadt drew near the baby with noticeable reluctance, regarding him with a poorly disguised expression of contempt. "So this thing ... is the first of our 'master race'. Pathetic."

All three fell silent now, contemplating the results of this failed genetic experiment and the desperate chance Rheinstadt and Von Holtz had taken by continuing it with a suspect embryo, and wondering just how far-reaching the effects would be.

"Well, there's a couple out there waiting to see their baby," Lydia reminded them, finally breaking the silence.

Rheinstadt nodded, sighing in resignation. "Take the baby to my office, and I'll get the Kents. I don't want a scene in the waiting room."

"Right."

While Von Holtz stayed in the delivery room to monitor Genevieve's condition, Lydia took the baby and went to Rheinstadt's office, where she found him and the Kents waiting.

"What about our baby? Is somebody going to tell us if it's a boy or a girl?" Randall asked impatiently.

Rheinstadt sat down at his desk. "It's male," he replied carefully.

"A boy!" Randall and Ginny embraced excitedly, then Randall, remembering the accident, turned back anxiously to Rheinstadt. "Is he all right?"

Lydia hugged the baby protectively as she and Rheinstadt exchanged anticipatory looks. "I'm not going to sugar-coat it for you. The baby is severely deformed," Rheinstadt told him, point-blank. "Naturally, you're not under any obligation to take him, but ..."

"Let me see him," Randall interrupted, looking straight at Lydia. She returned his gaze apologetically, and his eyes conveyed understanding. He would not hold Lydia responsible for whatever had happened; she, at least, had warned them.

"Nurse Carstairs, show them the baby," Rheinstadt ordered.

Lydia came forward hesitantly, bringing the baby close enough for Randall and Ginny to see, partially unwrapping the blue blanket and watching them hopefully. At the first sight of the baby's face, Ginny screamed and turned away, burying her face against Randall's shoulder and bursting into tears. Randall

simply stared at the baby in growing horror, fighting to keep it from showing on his face. "My God - it doesn't even look human," he observed finally.

Lydia looked at Randall searchingly, the question in her eyes.

"Has Genevieve seen him?" he asked hesitantly.

Lydia shook her head. "Dr. Von Holtz had to do a Caesarean. She's still asleep." When Randall still appeared indecisive, she took advantage of the opportunity. "A baby is a baby, Mr. Kent; even a deformed one needs love."

"I'll take him if I can convince Ginny," Randall decided finally, stepping back from Ginny, lifting her chin and looking into her eyes. "This may be our only chance to have our own baby, Ginny. Do you really want to throw it away?" he asked her.

Ginny took one more look at the baby, not bothering to hide the expression of repulsion that immediately appeared on her face. "I want a normal baby," she told him bitterly. "I'll adopt before I'll take this horrible little... freak... home as my son!"

"Ginny--"

*"No, Randy. Look at him - he's an animal! He belongs in a zoo, not in a house!" She turned and looked straight at Lydia. **"Get that monster out of my sight!"***

Randall looked at Lydia with an expression that was a strange combination of regret, resignation, and relief. "There's no way I can take him now, Lydia. Maybe George and Genevieve will want him."

"And what if they don't?"

Randall couldn't answer, but he knew as well as Lydia what that would mean; the baby would be left totally at the mercy of Rheinstadt and Von Holtz.

Lydia took the baby back to the Maternity Ward and waited anxiously for the effects of Genevieve's anesthesia to wear off. When they finally did, very early the next morning, the doctors met Lydia and George Marsh in the recovery room. Lydia hung back while they explained the situation to the Marshes.

"There's been... a change in plans," Rheinstadt began. "The Kents don't want the baby."

"Oh, God....." 'The accident,' Genevieve thought instantly, as she and George stared at each other in alarm. "There's something wrong with it, isn't there?" she guessed apprehensively, returning her attention to Rheinstadt.

Rheinstadt nodded. "He's severely deformed."

"A boy?" George perked up hopefully. All their children so far had been girls. He looked questioningly at Genevieve, who nodded in agreement.

"Let's see him," she decided quickly. After all, how bad could it be? They had both seen deformed babies - babies with limbs missing or malformed, Siamese twins, and other such oddities - and she was sure no birth defect could be repulsive enough to induce them to surrender their baby to these two doctors. She turned out to be wrong.

When Lydia dutifully brought the baby to Genevieve's bedside and showed him to them, they were too shocked to speak for a long time.

"No wonder the Kents didn't want him," George murmured finally. "He looks like a lion cub. Is he even human?"

"We aren't completely sure yet," Von Holtz admitted reluctantly, "But we assume he's at least partially human. We won't know for sure until we can examine him and run some tests."

There followed several minutes of terrible silence. George could tell from the way his wife was looking at the baby that she was thinking of taking him - if only to get him away from Rheinstadt and Von Holtz.

"Genevieve, be practical. They don't even know if he's human. What would we do with him? What future could he have, except as a circus side-show?"

Genevieve still hesitated, reaching timidly out to touch the baby who was more a victim of this situation than any of them; he stirred slightly, moving a small hand to grasp her finger - but Genevieve pulled her hand away at the sight of the approaching claws.

*She looked up at George again. **"Do you think it would be any better for him without a family?"** she demanded, then lowered her voice to just above a whisper and nodded slightly towards the doctors. "With his future in the hands of these people? Whatever he is, it's not his fault."*

George's eyes remained on the baby. He was furious with the entire situation, and didn't understand why Genevieve wasn't, also. Rheinstadt's idiotic blunder in the lab was responsible for the baby's appearance, and it was obvious neither doctor cared one iota what could have happened to Genevieve while she was carrying this thing in her womb - yet there was nothing they could do, since the release form they had signed absolved Rheinstadt and Von Holtz of any guilt in the matter.

"He's their responsibility," he stated finally. "Let them worry about what to do with him."

Genevieve reluctantly gave in, realizing that George was probably right. And maybe Geneva was, too; whatever the doctors' true intent had been with this experiment -- and there had to be more to it than in vitro fertilization, or they wouldn't have insisted on continuing it with a suspect embryo. Any results, including a baby for either family, were clearly not meant to be.

"Well - maybe they can reverse his condition," she rationalized, still not wanting to trust Rheinstadt and Von Holtz with the baby's care.

Rheinstadt stepped forward. "Be certain you understand what you're doing. By the terms of our agreement, if neither you nor the Kents claim the baby, he is ours to dispose of as we see fit," he reminded them gravely.

***"Dispose of?"** Still holding the baby, Lydia turned and stared at him in alarm. Rheinstadt ignored her.*

Genevieve was glad that Lydia, at least, seemed inclined to look after the baby, and she cast a helpless, apologetic look at her, ignoring Rheinstadt and Von Holtz.

"Take him," she told Lydia at last, in resignation. "We can't. Not... now. I'm sorry."

As Genevieve gave into tears of frustration and anger, Lydia took the baby and went back to the makeshift nursery which Von Holtz had set up in an unused room in the Maternity Ward (since, for obvious reasons, this baby could not be put in the public nursery with the other babies), pausing before the crib and holding him tightly for a moment before placing him inside it. Tears came to her eyes, and she was somehow glad that the baby had slept through both encounters.

Lydia made herself responsible for the baby's care during the ensuing days, and the first thing she decided to do was think of a name for him. Von Holtz, apparently partial to Rheinstadt's initial comment on the baby's appearance, began calling him 'Baby Frankenstein' - and the name began to stick; far from being a term of endearment and even going beyond derisive humor, it was a deliberate reminder of their responsibility for his existence. Whatever sort of twisted altruism was behind this, Lydia became determined that the baby should at least have a normal name.

Not long after, Lydia had finally decided on one. Von Holtz stopped by the private nursery on his regular rounds and found her trying out the name, playing with the baby, and generally making more of a fuss over him than he could possibly be worth. She was leaning over the crib when he walked in, and he watched as she withdrew a bottle from the crib, set it aside, and gently picked the baby up in her arms.

As Von Holtz approached, still unnoticed, Lydia continued to talk baby talk to the small bundle in her arms, speaking so softly that Von Holtz only caught fragments - among them, "Richard", "Good baby", "num-num", and "all gone". The baby, wide awake for the moment and seemingly happy, babbled something back at her in response as she let him capture her finger in his hand.

"If you must continually handle that thing, at least remember to wear a mask and gloves. We don't know what diseases he may be carrying," he admonished coolly.

"Oh, nonsense. You're already given him every shot and immunization there is," Lydia retorted, holding the baby against her with his head on her shoulder. "He's probably healthier than you are."

"We don't know that for sure," Von Holtz persisted, relenting somewhat as he watched Lydia gently patting the baby on the back, obviously trying to get him to burp. "By the way... did I hear you call him 'Richard' a minute ago?"

Lydia nodded. "I had a little brother named Richard who died of leukemia when he was twelve. He needed special care, too," she explained.

Von Holtz contemplated this silently for a time; the silence was finally broken by a strange, barely audible sound like an abbreviated growl, which he deduced to be the baby burping. Then, for reasons which eluded Lydia, Von Holtz began laughing.

"Doctor?" she prompted, puzzled

"I was just thinking how appropriate your choice of name was. Instead of Richard the Lionheart, we have Richard the lion face!"

Lydia wanted to throw something at him, but she held her temper. "It's better than 'Baby Frankenstein'," she countered quietly.

"I suppose so," Von Holtz agreed, gradually recovering his usual professional decorum. "Appropriate, yet subtle. All right, Richard it is." He turned then and left to continue his rounds.

Despite his appearance, Richard was a good baby and had the sort of disposition which, Lydia was sure, would have won the heart of anyone who could see past his external features. Even the endless tests, poking, prodding, and sample-taking by Rheinstadt and Von Holtz were usually endured with little more than a few initial growls of protest. Occasionally, though, the doctors went too far - were too rough or tried to put him through too much in one day - and it was then that Richard fought back.

Late one afternoon, for instance, after Richard had had a tiring morning and an unusually long afternoon nap, Lydia was again playing with him - this time allowing him to play with some toys she had recently bought for him - when Rheinstadt entered the nursery. Lydia was oblivious to him at first, her attention completely absorbed by Richard as he continued to play, now waving his rattle around and gurgling at it contentedly. Lydia leaned close, diverting his attention from the rattle.

"Richard," she urged softly. "Mama. Say 'ma-ma'." Richard rewarded her with a long gurgle and batted at her cheek with his free hand.

Rheinstadt snorted derisively at the scene; Lydia didn't know it, but she wasn't going to be around Richard long enough to teach him to talk. "Even a normal baby needs months to learn to talk," he reminded Lydia.

"You may as well not even waste your time with this one."

Lydia turned toward him startled. "You don't think he can learn to talk?"

"No," Rheinstadt returned matter-of-factly, coming to join her.

"Well, I don't know why not - he certainly seems able to do everything else," Lydia informed him, looking back down at Richard and smiling. "His coordination is excellent; he hasn't dropped that rattle once."

"Meaningless, in his case," Rheinstadt returned, reaching down into the crib to pick Richard up. "Von Holtz and I agree that whatever intelligence he has must be sub-human, from what we know of him so far."

"With someone of Genevieve's intelligence as his mother?"

Rheinstadt had no chance to answer, for Richard's mood had changed abruptly at his approach; his gurgles changed to a low growl, and he struck Rheinstadt's arm with the rattle. Rheinstadt yanked the rattle out of the baby's hand, grabbing Richard and pulling him out of the crib.

***"Doctor, what are you doing?"** Lydia demanded, alarmed by his roughness.*

*"Skin sample," Rheinstadt muttered, fighting with Richard as he yowled in protest, but finally getting him over to a table near the crib and flipping him awkwardly over onto his stomach - by which time Rheinstadt's hands were covered with scratches. **"Damn little monster ..."***

"He's still bleeding from the last sample you took!" Lydia objected indignantly, already beside him.

"Stop whining and help me hold him down," Rheinstadt ordered.

Lydia moved in front of Rheinstadt, blocking Richard's view of him and trying to soothe the baby, who quieted a little at the sight of her.

"What's wrong with him, anyway?"

"He remembers you. He knows what happens to him when you and Dr. Von Holtz are around," Lydia returned coolly. "What else do you expect? He'll never learn to trust you if all you ever do when you're around him is stick needles and things into him."

"I don't need any instruction in bedside manner from a nurse, thank you very much!" Rheinstadt retorted irritably. "I believe I know my own creation better than you do - and he's not capable of remembering yet."

Lydia ignored him, keeping her eyes on Richard's face; he was quieter, but still obviously nervous, and she let him hold onto her fingers as Rheinstadt took the sample. Richard let out one last yowl and began to cry - as Lydia could tell from the tiny tears on his cheeks.

Rheinstadt seemed oblivious. "There - that'll do for now. All right, Nurse, he's all yours."

Lydia watched him with relief, carefully picking up Richard in her arms and laying him against her shoulder, then went to lock the door behind Rheinstadt - insuring that Richard would be left in peace, at least until tomorrow. Rheinstadt and Von Holtz be damned - nobody could tell her this baby was not as intelligent and sensitive as any other!

"Shhhh, Richard - it's all right now. He's gone, it's all right," Lydia whispered, going back across the room to sit down. She began rocking him and, as she felt him relax gradually, began softly singing to him; "Hush, little baby, don't say a word ... Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird. And If that mockingbird don't sing ... Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring...."

Days turned into weeks as Rheinstadt and Von Holtz continued their study of Baby Richard. Finally, one night after putting him to bed, Lydia walked in on an obviously private discussion between the doctors; her

curiosity got the best of her, and she quickly hid behind a file cabinet in order to listen undetected as the discussion continued.

"- and we therefore conclude that Baby Richard, as we now call him, is a mutation of both human and animal characteristics - physical, mental, and emotional - too animal-like to even really be considered human, but retaining enough human behavioral traits to place him in a higher order than that of an animal," Rheinstadt was saying.

Growing even more curious, Lydia shifted her position behind the file cabinet in an effort to see around the edge without being seen herself. Rheinstadt appeared to be reading from a piece of paper, presumably the final report on the project, which they had taken turns working on for the last few days.

"Lydia and I were having an argument about the baby's intelligence a while back," Rheinstadt recalled thoughtfully, setting aside the paper. "She thinks he's totally unimpaired."

Von Holtz shook his head. "We still don't know the full extent of his deformity. It's quite likely that this ... mutation ... resulted in mental retardation, though I must admit I've never seen a retarded baby of Richard's age with the memory capacity he has."

Rheinstadt shrugged it off. "So he knows enough to be afraid of us. Animal instinct - that's all. Lydia was trying to get him to talk."

Von Holtz appeared amused. "Hmmmmmm. Well, be grateful for small favors. His genitals are so deformed he'll never be able to reproduce. He may even be impotent," he pointed out.

Rheinstadt looked at his gravely. "I don't intend to allow him to grow old enough to find out." Von Holtz startled look didn't phase him. "We're responsible for bringing this freak into the world; he never should have been born. Now we have to see that he is quickly and quietly destroyed before someone finds out about him and traces him back to us."

Von Holtz hesitated. "You're talking murder, Freiderich. Are we killing now instead of creating?"

"Do you see any other choice for us?" Rheinstadt demanded.

"He could be hidden," Von Holtz suggested.

Rheinstadt shook his head determinedly. "He'll be found. Believe me, it's best for all of us - him included."

Von Holtz nodded finally, but with obvious reluctance. "All our work - all that research and testing - for nothing. Project: Prototype is a failure."

"Perhaps not entirely," Rheinstadt countered cautiously. "All that stopped us this was was my faux pas with the culture dish; that's easily prevented. As long as we keep it quiet and make sure the baby's disposed of, we can try again."

Unable to stand it any longer, Lydia jumped from her hiding place, intending to express her shock and disbelief; Rheinstadt, however, gave her no chance.

"Nurse Carstairs - just the woman we were looking for," he greeted her pleasantly, as if they had been planning an outing in the park. "We have a job for you."

"No, Dr. Rheinstadt! I will not help you kill an innocent baby!" Lydia told him emphatically.

"Think of it as euthanasia, Nurse," Rheinstadt suggested hopefully. "What would happen to him if he lived? He's an orphan, and no one's going to want to adopt a baby that deformed. Where would he live? How? With whom? He would be scorned and laughed at all his life. Believe me, this is a textbook example of a mercy-killing."

Lydia was in turmoil. She loved Baby Richard as if he were her own, and her heart rebelled against the idea

of him being killed for any reason - but her mind could find no answers to the questions posed by Rheinstadt. Once again, for perhaps the thousandth time since Richard's birth, she thought of adopting him herself; was it really her modest nurse's salary that kept her from doing it, or was she - deep down - just as afraid of and repelled by him as everyone else?

"Now, the sooner we get it out of the way, the better it'll be for all of us," Rheinstadt continued. "He trusts you the most, Lydia, so it has to be you; neither of us could get near him with a needle now. Tomorrow night when you put him to bed, you'll give him an injection - he won't wake up. Simple and painless."

Von Holtz remained curiously quiet, content to let Rheinstadt take charge of this matter; necessary though it might be, he did not want this baby's death on his conscience.

Lydia did not sleep that night. She spent the night and most of the next day in Richard's nursery, contemplating the seriousness of the situation and trying to think of what she could do to save the baby. Rheinstadt and Von Holtz had been tempting fate - and testing her patience - ever since they began the project, but now they had gone too far. Baby Richard was blameless, a victim of circumstances, Lydia reflected, as she watched him playing quietly in his crib - mercifully unaware of the external forces conspiring against him; there was no reason for him to pay for someone else's carelessness with his life.

This time, Lydia decided, Rheinstadt and Von Holtz would not get away with it. Perhaps she couldn't take care of Richard herself, but she knew someone who would at least find him a good home - or so Lydia hoped. She knew the woman only as 'Alicia', a former nurse at St. Vincent's who had left the hospital under circumstances she refused to discuss with Lydia, but the two had become fast friends since meeting in Central Park a couple of years ago and discovering their common interests.

Alicia had several children, some of whom were adopted, and had found homes for others (though she had never gone into much detail on where or how). She impressed Lydia as being a good and kind woman, and a notoriously soft touch where children were concerned; when her hands weren't full enough with her own, she was known to baby-sit other people's little ones.

At her first opportunity, Lydia located a phone that was as far away from Rheinstadt and Von Holtz as possible and called Alicia, explaining the situation and as much as she thought Alicia could readily understand of the circumstances surrounding Richard's birth.

"It's literally a life-or-death emergency, Alicia. They want him killed, and they expect me to do it. I don't know what else to do. Do you think you can help?" she finished finally, her voice filled with urgency.

"All right, Lydia, calm down and stop worrying," the voice at the other end of the line responded, quietly and reassuringly. "I know someone who'll take him in."

"Are you sure?" Lydia asked uncertainly. "He's badly deformed, but he's very special to me. I want someone to take care of him, not discard him like a pile of garbage."

"Trust me," Alicia reiterated consolingly. "I know a place where Richard will be safe and well cared for, where his appearance won't be held against him."

Lydia would not be able to get off work until the wee hours of the morning and Alicia refused to set foot in the hospital, so a compromise was quickly worked out and Lydia began making some preparations of her own. A major stumbling block was the fact that Rheinstadt expected her to give Richard the lethal injection as soon as the baby was asleep, which would be long before he could be gotten safely away.

Lydia was still trying to figure out what to do about that when she returned to the nursery to check on

Richard and found Von Holtz standing near the crib, studying Richard in silence as he played, trying to be unobtrusive. She froze, fighting down her instinctive fear. "Doctor -?"

Von Holtz spoke without turning toward her. "You're planning to save him, aren't you?"

Lydia did not dare answer him.

"Well, I don't see how you can, now ... but maybe this will help." He turned toward her now, showing her the hypodermic syringe and needle, presently capped for storage, which he had been hiding. "It's morphine, diluted enough not to kill him. This is the only way I could get it to you - Rheinstadt's preparing his own hypo, seeing to the dosage himself," Von Holtz continued, opening a cabinet underneath the table next to the crib and placing it carefully inside the storage rack. "You'll have to switch hypos - and Rheinstadt's going to be watching you every minute----- but it's the only chance you're going to get."

When he got up and turned around, Lydia was staring at him in confusion.

"Disposing of Richard was Rheinstadt's idea, Lydia. I may be a coward, but I'm no murderer," he told her quietly. "We never should've allowed him to be born, and Rheinstadt's probably right about the rest of his life being hell on earth... but I don't see why he shouldn't at least have a chance to overcome his deformities."

Lydia was still distrustful. "I thought all you cared about was not letting anyone connect Richard's existence with your experiments."

Von Holtz started for the door. "Call it an attempt to soothe a guilty conscience. Rheinstadt will be starting his rounds soon - I've got to get out before he walks in," he returned hurriedly as he left. "Whatever you've got in mind, I... hope you pull it off."

Stunned, Lydia just stared after him as he ducked out of the room.

That night, she went to put Richard to bed, as usual, and found Rheinstadt waiting for her just inside the door with a hypo full of morphine. She took it cautiously, examining it for a moment, then looked at Rheinstadt, careful not to behave as if she were about to follow his orders to the letter.

"Aren't you overdoing it, Doctor? There's about twice as much as you need here."

"I don't want any slip-ups, Lydia," he returned gravely. "We may not get a second chance. I'm relying on you. If anything goes wrong, we'll all pay for it."

We're all paying for it already, Lydia told herself, nodding in response. She went to Richard's crib, aware of Rheinstadt's eyes following her from across the room; unseen by Rheinstadt, however, she moved to the table and switched the hypo for the one Von Holtz had given her - which now lay at the ready on top of the table, hidden from Rheinstadt by a stack of diapers. Hopefully, by the time Rheinstadt discovered the deception, Richard would be safely out of his reach.

After giving the injection, she quickly disposed of Von Holtz' hypo, at the same time discharging the correct amount of the lethal concentration in Rheinstadt's hypo into the basin (which she would empty and clean as soon as he was gone) hidden in the cabinet - all while doing her best to appear inconspicuous from Rheinstadt's angle and distance, always keeping her back to him, knowing that if he ever suspected what she was doing, all would be lost.

Finally, she turned and marched back to where Rheinstadt still stood, presenting him with the half-empty hypo. "Here, Doctor. I hope you're satisfied."

Rheinstadt ignored the veiled bitterness in her voice, examining the hypo closely. "You didn't use all of it," he noted critically.

"I used enough," Lydia countered coolly.

*Rheinstadt went to the crib and briefly examined Richard's still body - as Lydia, beside him, literally held her breath. "Pulse dropping off ... good. **Since you insisted on using half the dosage I gave you, It's going to take a few minutes to work,**" he told her testily. turning back toward her at last. "I'll be in early tomorrow to see that you've disposed of the body properly. I want no trace of him left, Lydia, so get rid of those damnable toys of his, too - toys, clothes, everything."*

Lydia nodded silently and Rheinstadt appeared satisfied as he started past her toward the door; Lydia nonetheless did not breathe easily again until he had left and she had locked the door after him. So far, so good.

Some hours later, she picked up Richard from the outspread blankets in his crib, where he had been lying on his back and playing contentedly with his feet since awakening a few minutes ago, and carried him around with her or held him on her lap until it grew late enough that she was sure both Von Holtz and Rheinstadt had gone home for the night. Richard, as if realizing the importance of his presence not being known, was quiet the whole time - and Lydia, remembering the empathic tendencies of his mother, wondered if he didn't sense her anxiety.

As she continued to hold him, she was inevitably reminded of how underweight he was. Rheinstadt and Von Holtz had allowed her to feed Richard just enough to keep him out of danger of starving, and Lydia knew he must be hungry most of the time, but he seldom complained.

Finally, she gathered him up in his blankets, with his bottle and the few other little personal belongings that he had, and - in accordance with her agreement with Alicia - took him outside to a predesignated spot behind the hospital, behind a stack of boxes, and made sure his blankets were wrapped tightly around him as it was cold outside and starting to snow. She positioned him carefully under a wide, overhanging box flap that would provide protection from the snowfall.

Richard's blue eyes looked up at her trustingly as she fussed over him, and he remained strangely quiet, as if he somehow understood what was happening. "You'll be safe now, Richard. Someone's coming to take you where they can't hurt you anymore," she whispered, kissing him on the cheek. "You're not really my baby, but you'll be taking a piece of me with you ... and I know you'll always be a part of me. God go with you, little one."

She got up then and went back toward the hospital entrance, knowing she would never be able to leave him if she remained any longer. Tears were in her eyes as she reached the door, and she tried, as much as possible, to keep them averted from the faces of the few other people who were still there working at that hour; she prayed fervently that Alicia would find Richard before anyone else did. If all went as planned, Alicia would come by on her way to work, pick Richard up ... and shortly thereafter, Lydia hoped, would have him safely ensconced in whatever or wherever the wonderful place she had described was.

If Catherine had been the fainting type, she would surely have been stretched out on the floor by the time Lydia Carstairs Wyman finished her story; as it was, she was finding it difficult to keep her mind on the case. Her notepad was filling up rapidly, but few of her notes had anything to do with the vandalism. She was thinking of Vincent.

Too many facts were coming together too fast to be dismissed as coincidence; 1957, St. Vincent's Hospital two ex-Nazi doctors with a plan to create a blond-haired, blue-eyed master race ... a lab accident ... a deformed baby with leonine features, rejected by its parents and threatened with death ... and a mysterious woman entering the picture at the last minute, promising to take the baby to a safe place.

"So what happened afterwards?" Catherine asked finally.

Lydia gave an elaborate shrug. "Alicia kept her word. She called me later that day to let me know Richard was safe." She paused, distracted by a disturbing memory. "He wasn't where I left him, though. Someone else had apparently found him first, wrapped him completely in dirty rags, and taken him out to the garbage dumpster. Alicia said she had to dig him out - never would have found him if he hadn't been crying. And he managed to claw through the rags, fortunately, or he would've suffocated before she got to him."

"Rheinstadt?" Catherine guessed.

"Probably. Richard must've been sleeping again, and Rheinstadt would've been looking for him, expecting a body," Lydia replied. "After that, I finally went to the Board of Regents and told them everything about Project: Prototype. The Kents and the Marshes backed me up. I was so disgusted with it and with my part in it that I didn't even care what they did to me anymore; I just knew I owed it to Richard," she explained. "The Board wanted to avoid involving the hospital in a big scandal so they made a deal with Rheinstadt and Von Holtz; no criminal prosecution if they would voluntarily resign from the hospital staff. They went for it. But the A.M.A. was notified and they lost their licenses. I was fired, too, though I was still able technically to practice nursing. It was all hushed up, except for some wild, inaccurate rumors that were still going around the hospital for some months afterwards."

Catherine desperately tried to return her attention to the case. "And you think Rheinstadt wants to get back at you for not killing ... Richard?"

Lydia nodded. "It was him in the car."

"Can you describe him?"

"Seventy-ish. Gray hair - it used to be black - and a mustache with a sort of Van Dyke beard. Dark eyes, gaunt face with pronounced cheekbones about six foot one, 170 pounds - at least, that was what he used to weigh. Doesn't seem to have changed much, from what I saw of him, except for the hair," Lydia told her.

"Okay, fine..." Catherine finally finished writing and put her pen down. "Mrs. Wyman, do you have ... a picture of Richard?" she asked cautiously.

"Yes," Lydia answered warily, "But what does that have to do with - ?"

"It's not for the case," Catherine interrupted reassuringly. "I'm just curious."

"Oh." Lydia got up hesitantly and Catherine followed her to the living room closet, then watched as she began to rummage through some boxes on the closet floor. Finally, Lydia found what she was looking for. "This is the only picture there is. Dr. Rheinstadt had everything connected with the project burned after I told Administration - notes, test results, pictures, all of it - but I kept one picture for myself. It's all of Richard I have left."

She produced a red shoe box, opened it, and pulled out an old, slightly yellowed black-and-white photo of baby Richard, lying on his back and playing with his feet; she handed it to Catherine and watched her apprehensively for a reaction.

Catherine stared at it. The baby's leonine features were not as pronounced, but they were obvious enough to leave no more doubt in her mind; what she had here was a baby picture of Vincent. She returned her gaze to Lydia. "May I borrow this for a few days?"

"No, no - it would just cause more trouble," Lydia protested immediately. "Nobody else sees it."

"Mrs. Wyman, I promise you - nobody at work will see it. No authorities, no newspapers. This is personal," Catherine continued pleadingly. "I'll return it when I'm through."

"Personal?" Lydia repeated suspiciously. "How? Why do you need the picture, Miss Chandler?"

"I can't explain further right now," Catherine returned gently. "Just trust me. Please."

Lydia's eyes met Catherine's, and she somehow understood that Catherine - whatever her interest in Richard was - meant him no harm. "All right," she agreed reluctantly, at last.

They examined the picture together for a time in silence.

"I wonder if he's still alive."

Catherine smiled quietly. "I'm sure he is."

She stuck the photo inside her purse, pulling out her notepad and pen again. "One more thing before I go. I need a description of Rheinstadt's car."

"Oh, yes... a light blue Buick, I think. An older model - not sure of the year," Lydia answered.

"Hmmm..." Catherine wrote it down quickly, her mind racing. "Did that Buick happen to have a small spider-web crack in the corner of the windshield?"

"I think so. Why?" Lydia asked curiously.

Catherine sighed, looking up as she returned her writing materials to her purse. "That sounds like the same car that's been following me around for the last few days."

Coincidence? Catherine was beginning to wonder. As Lydia pondered this revelation, Catherine handed her something. "I'll leave you one of my cards. If you '*hear*' from Rheinstadt again, or if you just want to talk... give me a call."

Lydia nodded and watched Catherine leave, knowing that if Rheinstadt was after her, too, she had to have some connection to Richard - and wondered what it was.

In another part of the city at that moment, four men met in a small coffee shop, and, though it was nearly empty, were talking in whispers over the remains of their light coffee-and-danish brunch - Rheinstadt, Von Holtz, and two younger men, Everett Ashton and Philip Clarke.

"Well?" Von Holtz demanded. ***"You're supposed to follow her all day and report back at night. What happened?"***

Clarke handed him a notepad. "We know her name is Catherine Chandler, and she works for the D.A. This morning, she went to this address in Queens; I thought it might be important."

Von Holtz barely glanced at the address before exchanging looks with Rheinstadt. "Lydia's house. She could have just been sent to check out your little calling card ... or she could be onto us."

"It would serve us all right if she was," Rheinstadt returned, turning back to glare at Clarke. "I'm getting a little tired of having to loan out my car for this. When is yours going to be out of the shop?"

Clarke shrugged apologetically. "They're waiting on a part."

'Naturally,' Rheinstadt added to himself. And of course, Ashton had no car. "Well, she still hadn't led us to that creature, so we'll have to change our plans. Let's see if we can make him come to us."

"How?" Von Holtz asked.

"Simple. We'll go the hospital and get things ready, then we send Ashton and Clarke here to kidnap her when she returns home and bring her to the hospital," Rheinstadt explained. "If I'm right, judging by what we saw on that balcony, that misbegotten freak will come to rescue her."

Von Holtz looked at him as if he were insane. "Do you seriously think that she and that creature...? A normal, healthy, attractive woman in love with...? Rheinstadt, that's sick!"

"I call it as I see it, Heinrich; he did have his arms around her, you know." Rheinstadt retorted quietly. "Amor vincit omnes. Our not to reason why."

Catherine, meanwhile, went back to the office with her information, paying a visit to Edie and waiting while she ran the doctors' names through the office computer.

"Heinrich Von Holtz and Freiderich Rheinstadt?" She repeated jokingly. "Are those their real names? They sound like German spies from some old World War II movie."

Catherine chuckled. "No, these are their real names."

"Heinrich Von Holtz..." Edie punched it in, then stared at the monitor screen, shaking her head.

"Try Rheinstadt," Catherine suggested.

Edie obediently punched in the other name. "Nada," she reported, after a moment.

"Nothing on either of them?" Catherine questioned, disappointed but not really surprised.

"Not even a traffic violation. Whoever those guys are, they're so clean they squeak," Edie told her.

"What about hospital records?" Catherine asked then.

Edie nodded, already punching in the necessary commands. "St. Vincent's, right?"

"Right."

"Here it is..." Edie read off the screen. "Rheinstadt and Von Holtz... held positions there from 1945 to 1958, then resigned. Their licenses were revoked..." She looked puzzled. "It really doesn't say why, though - just something about '*unethical practices*'."

What was there, however, was just what Catherine needed. "Get me a hard copy."

Edie complied quickly and handed the printout to Catherine.

"Thanks, Edie." Catherine got up and headed for the door.

Twenty minutes later, she was at the New York City Library of Journalism, determined to find as much on the doctors as possible to back up Lydia Wyman's story(*though what she was going to do with the information remained to be seen*). Three hours later, she had found several nationally-circulated articles on Rheinstadt's and Von Holtz' testimony in the Nazi war trials and the results thereof, a few articles in local papers with titles like '*Ex-Nazis Appointed to St. Vincent's Staff*,' one short back-page item titled '*Government-Backed Project Could Mean Breakthrough in Reproductive Biology*' - but nothing current, and nothing directly related to the real purpose of Project:: Prototype. Which in and of itself supported part of what Lydia had told her.

Obviously, the hospital had squelched the story to save face, and Rheinstadt and Von Holtz would have been obliged to stay out of the public eye after their resignation from the hospital staff, so it made sense that there would have been nothing published about them since 1958.

Having worked through lunch, Catherine then went back to the office to file her report - a carefully worded one, to say the least. Some of what Lydia had told her seemed too explicit and specific about Vincent to repeat, requiring Catherine to do the closest thing to creative writing she had done since college. She found Joe waiting at her desk, with a rather anxious look on his face.

"Turn up something of Rheinstadt and Von Holtz?" Catherine guessed.

"Yeah, for what it's worth. Their addresses," Joe returned, handing her a piece of paper.

"That's it?" she questioned, somewhat disappointed in spite of herself, as she took it from him.

"Don't be so quick to write it off, Cathy," Joe cautioned. "Take a look at Von Holtz' address."

Catherine read the address aloud. "1127 Fifth Avenue, Apartment 22..." *'Of course,'* Catherine thought; *'now it all makes sense.'* She looked at Joe in full comprehension. "Right across the street from my apartment building."

"Right, so consider yourself warned," Joe asserted. "I'm working on getting you increased patrols."

"Thanks," Catherine replied appreciatively. "By the way, Joe, I'll be out of the office the rest of the day. This case had really got me hopping."

"You love it," Joe reminded her, grinning slightly, having expected it. "Go to it, Radcliffe."

Catherine drove back to her apartment building, parked her car in the parking lot beneath the building, and got out, her mind occupied more with how she was going to explain what she had learned to Father and Vincent than the case itself; as she started toward the entrance, a car pulled quietly up beside her and two men jumped out. One went after Catherine, tapping her on the shoulder.

"Catherine Chandler?"

She turned toward them, startled, taking in both quickly; neither matched Rheinstadt's description. "Yes?"

"We'd like you to come with us, please." He pointed toward the car, and Catherine again saw the light blue Buick that had been shadowing her recently.

Catherine tried to make a run for the entrance, but suddenly both men had grabbed her, one from behind. She bit his arm and jabbed her elbows backwards into his ribs, momentarily incapacitating him, but then the other nab seized her arms and pulled it behind her back; Catherine surprised him by suddenly whirling toward him and giving him a knee to his groin. Then she tried again to make a run for it.

Still doubled over in agony, her attacker managed to shout, **"Ashton, quick! Get the hypo!"**

Ashton had already jumped back into the car after it and was now instantly upon Catherine.

She felt her sleeve being ripped and a needle plunging into her arm, and screamed. Both men grabbed her again, but this time Catherine's muscles would not obey when her mind commanded them to resist.

As if from a great distance, she heard one of them say, "Get her into the car."

She felt herself hit something hard and begin to find it increasingly difficult to think; soon darkness enshrouded her mind entirely and she knew no more.

At that moment beneath the city, Father walked into Vincent's chamber and found Vincent hurriedly preparing to leave. "Vincent? Where are you going?"

"Wherever I must," Vincent replied, pulling on his black cloak. "Catherine needs me."

Of course - Catherine again. "What's happened now?" Father asked patiently.

"Someone has drugged her - kidnapped her," Vincent explained hastily. "I don't know how long I'll be gone, Father - but don't worry. I'll be careful."

Then he was gone, racing up through the tunnels and subways, finally into the city Above and on towards

the kidnappers.

Catherine awoke in a sterile world of white and silver; white walls, counters, and sheets ... silver metal fixtures, bed frames, needles, and other instruments. Silver bands strapping her to her bed. And white uniforms on the men before her - two of whom (*from their apparent age and Lydia's description*) were obviously Rheinstadt and Von Holtz.

The room she was in looked more like a lab than a patient's room and seemed not to have been used in some time; it was largely empty, except for her bed and some painting equipment stashed in one corner. A laundry hamper on the other side of the room with a stenciled label on the front declared itself '*Property of St. Vincent's Hospital*', and it didn't take Catherine long to realize she had been brought there as bait.

She glared at them. **"You won't get away with this."**

"We already have, Miss Chandler," Von Holtz returned quietly, seeming unruffled. "Just cooperate with us and you'll be released unharmed and as soon as the creature arrives."

At Catherine's expression of feigned innocence, Rheinstadt added, "Don't bother trying to pretend you don't know what Von Holtz is talking about. We both saw him with you on the balcony."

"Why do you need to lure him back here? What are you going to do with him now?" Catherine demanded, straining against the straps that were holding her down.

"What we meant to do in the first place," Rheinstadt replied.

"You've already been accused of vandalism; adding kidnapping to that is just going to make it worse. But you add a first degree murder charge on top of that, and you'll be in jail for the rest of your life!" Catherine warned him.

"A calculated risk, Miss Chandler," Rheinstadt returned resignedly. "You've talked to Lydia Wyman. You know our reasons. We created that thing. The fact that his – mutation - was the result of an accident doesn't release us from responsibility."

"And you think killing him will?" Catherine challenged angrily.

"No. But it will prevent his existence from being linked to us," Von Holtz persisted.

"It's been thirty years. Isn't it a little late to worry about that now?" Catherine queried sardonically.

"No, we've done a little checking - with the help of our two friends here," Rheinstadt assured her, indicating Ashton and Clarke, who were still hovering in the background. "There are no records of him, here in the hospital or anywhere else - but as long as he's still alive, there's a chance that could change and we could be connected with his existence. However slight, it's not a chance either of us are willing to take."

Catherine shook her head incredulously at their apparent obsession with the idea of purging themselves through Vincent's death. "Lydia told me you left Germany in the first place because you believed in creating life instead of destroying it."

"That accident left us no choice!" Von Holtz insisted, in a voice that almost pleaded for understanding.

Catherine focused her attention on Von Holtz, remembering his reluctant but seemingly sincere part in helping Lydia to save the baby Vincent; she looked at him accusingly. "And *you're* willing to take part in killing him? what did he ever do to you - to either of you - to deserve death?"

Von Holtz lowered his eyes and said nothing, knowing that Lydia must have told her about the deception which he had so far kept hidden from Rheinstadt.

Before Rheinstadt had time to seriously wonder about his colleague's failure to respond, the conversation was cut off abruptly by the sound of a glass-shattering crash. By the time they had turned toward the window, Vincent was inside, and -- as was always the case when he found someone threatening Catherine -- furious almost to the point of insanity. He closed on them, roaring.

"Vincent, go back. It's a trap!" Catherine cried, straining to be heard over him.

Vincent froze in mid-roar, looking at her questioningly, momentarily confused but no longer in his previous border-line irrational state.

"Run, Vincent! They want to kill you!" Catherine repeated urgently, but he could not bring himself to retreat further, despite sensing, through his bond with Catherine, that the danger to him was real and immediate.

However, Vincent's moment of hesitation was all Rheinstadt and Von Holtz needed. Catherine was distracted abruptly by a scuffling sound near her and looked around to find that the doctors had changed positions. The one called Ashton was suddenly at her side with a hypo poised near her arm.

Rheinstadt's cold, black eyes were on Vincent. "Freeze!" he ordered. "Vincent - if that's what you call yourself now - stay where you are. Dr. Ashton is prepared to inject your lady friend here with enough sodium pentathol to kill four people if you run. Remain, and we'll release her now."

Vincent calmed himself a little, but remained distrustful. "All right - if I see you let her go first."

"Agreed." Rheinstadt removed the straps that had held Catherine down; she leapt at him, but Ashton and Clarke both grabbed her, pulling her away. "Take her outside and see that she finds her way out of the hospital," Rheinstadt told them.

As they rushed her toward the door, Catherine's eye met Vincent's, conveying what there was no time to speak of - she would explain it all later, tell Father what had happened, and of course, come back for him - and the responding expression in Vincent's eyes told her he understood. Then she was gone.

Vincent returned his attention to Rheinstadt and Von Holtz. **"What do you want of me?"** he demanded.

They came toward him as Rheinstadt answered. "Much, Vincent - very much."

While Rheinstadt and Von Holtz were *'studying'* Vincent, Catherine managed to elude Ashton and Clarke. She knew her way around somewhat better than they had anticipated, having been to St. Vincent's a few times before; ironically, it was here that her father had brought her to complete the cosmetic surgery on her face, which had been necessitated by her attack on the night she met Vincent.

However, thinking of the hospital as being haunted by largely-unknown atrocities, committed against someone so close to her thirty years in the past, made Catherine distinctly uncomfortable. She remembered Vincent's sketchy description of his own background and wondered once again how he would react to the news of Rheinstadt's and Von Holtz' part in his birth.

Catherine's thoughts were interrupted as she approached the Admissions desk and found Edie talking with one of the nurses. Both of them looked up as she drew near.

"Cathy!"

Catherine went to meet her. "Edie? You're not sick, are you?"

"No, just visiting a friend during her break," Edie told her reassuringly, indicating the nurse beside her. "Aggie Mullins, meet Cathy Chandler."

Catherine shook hands with the blonde woman. "Hi, Aggie."

"Cathy - you work with Edie in the D.A.'s office, right?"

Catherine nodded, managing a smile. "That's us - crime fighters extraordinaire. I dig 'em out and Edie digs up the dirt."

"Don't let her fool you. I do all *her* work," Edie quipped, as Aggie laughed, then she turned back to Catherine. "So what're you doing here, girlfriend? Shopping around for unmarried doctors?"

Catherine stifled a snicker. "Sorry to disappoint you, Edie. I'm... still working on the Wyman case."

Edie struggled for a moment to make the connection, then remembered the hospital files she had accessed on Rheinstadt and Von Holtz.

"Oh, yeah..." It seemed to her like an awful lot of trouble to go through for a vandalism case, but Catherine always seemed to know what she was doing.

Aggie glanced down at her watch. "I've got to go back on duty. See you later, Edie."

"Bye, Aggie."

Catherine waited until Aggie had disappeared through a door, then spoke to Edie. "Could your friend get me a nurse's uniform?"

Edie could see from her expression and tone of voice that she was deadly serious. "A uniform? Hey, Cathy - what is going on here?"

"All I can tell you is that ... it's for the case," Catherine replied.

"Something I can help you with?"

"I wish it was, Edie, but I don't think so - not this time. What about the uniform?"

Edie sighed. "I'll ask when Aggie gets off."

Catherine nodded in appreciation.

"When do you want it?"

"ASAP. If I can have it tonight, I'll have it back to her tomorrow."

Though she wondered how she could explain this to Aggie, Edie gave in finally. "I'll see what I can do."

Catherine took a cab home, and it was beginning to get late when she arrived, but she did not return to her apartment; she went instead to the building's basement, hurriedly pushing some boxes out of the way, and climbed through the hole in the wall behind them, down into the tunnel entrance below.

Quickly locating some exposed pipe, she picked up a rock and proceeded to bang out a message:

'FATHER-----MEET ME, MY ENTRANCE. URGENT. HURRY-----CATHERINE.'

Father was pacing back and forth in his chamber, worrying, as usual, about what might be keeping Vincent, when he heard the faint tapping. He couldn't make it out from where he was, but he knew the message would be relayed if it was for him. The tapping continued for a while, then stopped; a few minutes later, Kipper appeared. "Pascal sent me, Father. There's a message for you." He handed Father a piece of paper.

Father took it, reading it silently. "Oh, no, not again....."

"What is it?" Kipper asked anxiously.

"It's from Catherine. Something's wrong," Father explained hastily, deliberately not elaborating; he turned the paper over and wrote something on the back. "Run back to Pascal and have him send this. I have to go meet her."

Catherine was pacing impatiently when the response finally arrived; '**CATHERINE-----RECEIVED AND UNDERSTOOD. STAY THERE. AM ON MY WAY-----FATHER.**'

She continued to pace. It seemed to take Father forever to make his way up to her, but finally he arrived.

"What's happened?" he demanded immediately.

"Vincent's been caught -"

"Catherine, how many times have I warned you of this --" he interrupted ominously.

"Father, hear me out," Catherine interjected, cutting him off. "There's more to it this time." As quickly as she could, she summarized what Lydia had told her about Project; Prototype, including as many of the important points as possible, then watched Father anxiously for a reaction.

Father paled, looking as if he were about to have a heart attack. For a long time, he would not speak at all; finally, he found words. "Good Lord ... Catherine, where did you get this information?"

"From a woman whose case I'm working on. She was a nurse involved in the project and witnessed his birth," Catherine told him.

"Are you certain it was Vincent?" Father questioned, though he was really already convinced.

"I suppose you'd be able to tell that better than I would," Catherine admitted, reaching into her purse and pulling out the photo. "I borrowed this from her," she said, handing the photo to him.

Father stared at it for a moment, then spoke, his voice choked with emotion. "Dear God. Yes... that's him," he confirmed reluctantly, then looked up at Catherine as he gave her the photo back. "And these.... doctors... .have Vincent?"

Catherine nodded. "They're holding him at the hospital. If I don't get back and find a way to rescue him, they're determined to kill him."

"Then I won't keep you any longer. Hurry, Catherine!"

Catherine studied him for a few second, realizing that he was not angry now - just very frightened for Vincent. "Father, don't worry. I'll get Vincent out if it's the last thing I do," she promised him, then turned and hurried back toward the entrance to her building's basement.

Catherine went quickly back up to her apartment to wait to hear from Edie; fortunately, she didn't have long to wait. She had barely been there ten minutes, again pacing impatiently, when the phone rang. She rushed to it and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

Edie's voice answered. "It's me, Cathy. I'm calling from the hospital."

"You got the uniform!"

"No, but Aggie has it," Edie returned hurriedly. "She agreed to meet you at Admissions with it once I told her you could have it back by morning."

"Great. When?" Catherine asked.

"She said 10:30 - that gives you about twenty minutes to get down here. I gotta go home and get some sleep, so I won't be here."

"Thanks, Edie - you're a sweetheart. I'm leaving right now - bye."

Catherine arrived at St. Vincent's right on schedule, and Aggie Mullins was waiting for her at the Admissions desk. She immediately handed the folded uniform to Catherine. "I don't know why you need this for, and I don't think I want to know. Just have it back here by tomorrow morning - leave it at the desk with whichever nurse is on duty. She'll see that I get it."

Catherine nodded, taking the uniform and heading for the nearest bathroom to change.

A few minutes later, she was carefully making her way toward the isolated fifth floor lab where she knew Rheinstadt and Von Holtz would still be holding Vincent. Catherine knew their scientific curiosity had so far kept him alive; she would have felt Vincent's death, but instead her awareness of his presence intensified as she drew closer to the lab, dodging assorted nurses, interns, and occasional doctor.

Fortunately, St. Vincent's was a large hospital with a large nursing staff, and very few who worked there knew everyone else on sight, so no one found Catherine's sudden appearance particularly suspicious. Never mind the fact that, despite wearing a complete nurse uniform, she still looked out of place.

All went well until she neared the door. It opened suddenly, and Catherine ducked into the first hiding place she saw - which turned out to be the open door of an empty storage room next to the lab. Peeking around the edge of the door, Catherine watched silently as all four doctors filed out of the room next to the door, Ashton and Clarke leading the way.

"Where in hell did that thing come from?" Clarke demanded, in a stage-whisper.

"No questions, Clarke. Classified information," Rheinstadt replied quietly. "We'll dispose of him tomorrow. He should be out the rest of the night."

"Good. We were just lucky this lab was being remodeled," Ashton reminded them, rather irritably. "Let's not press our luck any more than necessary."

"And what if his girlfriend from the D.A.'s office shows up tonight to rescue him?" Von Holtz asked.

"No problem," Ashton replied. "Only medical personal are allowed on this floor - everyone else has to be escorted."

"Even if she makes it this far, that creature isn't going anywhere in his condition," Rheinstadt added. "We gave him enough of that sedative you two came up with to knock out a horse for a week."

They moved off down the corridor and their voices faded into the distance. Catherine waited until she saw them round a corner and disappear from sight, then she stepped back into the corridor and quickly went to the lab door. Not surprisingly, it was locked, so she frantically rummaged through her purse and eventually came up with something with which she could pick the lock. Then she opened the door, hurried inside, closed it behind her, and turned on the lights.

Catherine quickly spotted Vincent, who was in his underclothes, strapped down to the bed where she had been. As she approached him, it was apparent that he was under extremely heavy sedation - otherwise, Catherine knew, he would surely be awake and out of bed (*if not gone entirely*) by now, straps notwithstanding. She unfastened and removed the straps, then grabbed Vincent by the shoulders and shook him into consciousness.

"Vincent!"

After a moment or so, Vincent's eyes opened slowly. "Catherine...?"

"Yes, Vincent, it's me. Hurry and get up-----we've got to get out of here," Catherine told him urgently.

Vincent sat up cautiously, shaking his head vigorously as if to clear it, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed and carefully stood up.

Catherine, meanwhile, found the rest of his clothes in a discarded pile in the corner of the room and brought them to him, placing them on the bed before him. "Here- get dressed."

While he was doing that, she went to the door, cracked it open, and watched the corridor. For the most part, however, it remained empty, and the few people who passed by seemed to have no interest in the room Vincent occupied. Looking down the corridor to her right, she could see an elevator entrance not too far away.

"Ready, Catherine."

She closed the door and turned around to find Vincent fully dressed and moving unsteadily toward the broken window. "Wait! You can't go out that way. In your condition, you might ... lose your grip and fall!" she protested.

"I have no choice," Vincent replied, not turning.

Catherine grabbed him by the arm. "Vincent, I saw an elevator at the end of the corridor. Maybe there's also a staircase. Stay here a minute and let me check," she pleaded.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly, leaning against the wall next to the window, still tired and disoriented.

Catherine left the room and walked down to the elevator, looking around; sure enough, just around the corner was a door marked *'Fire Exit-- Emergency Use Only.'*

'Well,' she thought as she opened the door slightly and studied the stairs for a moment, *'this is definitely an emergency.'*

She ran back to the lab and ducked inside, going quickly to Vincent. "There is one. Come on," she told him, taking his arm and drawing him after her back toward the door.

"No, Catherine. I'll be seen," Vincent objected weakly.

"Just let me worry about that," Catherine returned reassuringly, opening the door cautiously again. The corridor was still empty. "All clear. Let's go."

Vincent pulled his hood up over his head and she helped him carefully but as quickly as possible down the corridor and through the fire exit door, her eyes constantly scanning the corridor around them for interlopers, then down the stairs as fast as she could get Vincent to move. Unfortunately, that was not very fast; he was still nearly asleep that he could barely think, let alone run. Catherine could only be grateful that the hospital had no more than six floors.

Finally, they reached the ground floor. Catherine led Vincent around underneath the staircase. "Wait here," she told him.

"Where are you going?" Vincent asked anxiously.

"To change out of this uniform. Just stay there - nobody will see you. I'll only be gone a minute," she promised him.

Vincent was in no condition to argue. "Hurry," he pleaded.

She nodded and took off through a side door, making it back to the bathroom where she'd left her clothes in record time. She hurriedly changed, took the uniform and dropped it off at the desk, then raced back to the fire exit.

Vincent was under the staircase, just where she had left him. "See? I'm back," she told him reassuringly, pulling him into the light.

As she put an arm around him to help him around the staircase, Vincent - overcome with relief - suddenly hugged her.

"Vincent-?"

"When the door opened... I thought it might be someone else," he admitted softly.

Catherine held him briefly. "I promised you'd be safe, didn't I? Come on."

The staircase ended before another door, which Catherine now opened and pulled Vincent through after her, and they found themselves outside in the dark. "Now what?" Vincent asked her.

"You tell me," Catherine suggested, looking around. "Are there any tunnel entrances around here?"

Vincent hesitated, thinking hard, hoping the sedative would allow him to remember correctly. "None close by," he told her finally.

That left Catherine with one alternative. "I was afraid of that. All right then, come with me."

"Where?" Vincent asked warily, though he did not resist as she continued to pull him along beside her, one arm around his back.

"You'll see," she replied mysteriously.

All too soon, he did. They were headed for the hospital's brightly-lit parking lot.

Noticing that Vincent seemed to be slowing down, Catherine turned back to him and found him looking at her with an expression of puzzlement and apprehension. "I'm going to drive you back up to the park," she explained.

"Oh...all right," Vincent acquiesced hesitantly.

Fortunately, the hospital parking lot was deserted at this hour, except for a few cars; there were no people in evidence, and Catherine was confident it would stay that way long enough for her to get Vincent out of sight. They reached her car at last and she helped him get into the front seat, then went around and got in on the driver's side, sat down, and started the car. "Lie down, Vincent," she directed gently.

Vincent hardly needed encouragement. If he hadn't been so tired, he would have been nervous around being in a car for the first time in his life; for now, he just curled up on the seat beside Catherine as she adjusted it to allow him room to rest his head in her lap. She looked down at him for a moment, smiling quietly at the sudden impression of child-like vulnerability he conveyed, then pulled out of the parking space.

Catherine drove into Central Park and followed the road as far as she could, then parked the car by the side of the road. She looked down and found that Vincent, not surprisingly, had fallen asleep again. She hesitated to wake him, but there would be plenty of time for him to sleep once he was back in his own chamber - and it wasn't a good idea to sit around in the park at this time of night, even in a car. She put a hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently.

"Vincent, wake up. We're here."

Vincent slowly rolled over onto his back and made himself sit up, and Catherine reached across him to open the door on his side.

"This is as close as I could come to the tunnel entrance by car," she told him, opening the door on her own side and getting out.

Vincent was already out of the car by the time she came around to his side, and together they made their

way as quickly as possible toward the tunnel entrance. Once inside, it took both of them to open the gate. They traveled through the tunnels in relative silence, broken only by Vincent's occasional whispered directions; Catherine found herself supporting more and more of his weight as time passed and he found it harder and harder to stay awake. Finally, just within sight of the opening to the main chamber, Vincent collapsed against the tunnel wall.

"Vincent!"

"I can't... stay away any longer, Catherine," he told her softly. His eyes were nearly closed.

"Oh yes, you can," Catherine countered determinedly, taking him by the hands and pulling him back upright again. "Come on, you can make it. We're almost there."

Mustering the last of his remaining strength, Vincent staggered the rest of the way down the tunnel to the opening, unassisted. Anticipating disaster, Catherine ran after him, catching up with him just as he reached the opening and collapsed against the wall again. He immediately felt Catherine's arms around him as she again helped him up and on into the chamber.

Father was at his desk, fully occupied with a book, and only now did he look up and notice Vincent and Catherine approaching. Catherine was literally holding Vincent up. He got up instantly and went to them.

"Vincent!" he exclaimed, shooting an alarmed look at Catherine.

"He's not hurt, Father - just drugged. Some very powerful sedative," Catherine explained, trying to reassure him. "They expected him to sleep all night; apparently, they weren't going to *'dispose of him'* until tomorrow."

"Thank God..."

Together, they helped Vincent off to his chamber, where he promptly collapsed on his bed. Catherine rolled him over briefly onto his side to pull his cloak out from underneath him, then folded it up and placed it on a nearby table, sitting beside him on the bed; he was already sleeping, however, and was never even aware she had moved him.

Father watched them silently from across the room as Catherine slowly removed Vincent's outer garments -- again leaving him in his underclothes - and tucked him in, then began gently arranging his long, golden hair on the pillow. Finally, Father walked over to join her.

"It's very fortunate that all he needed this time was sleep," he noted quietly. "It could have been much worse."

Catherine turned toward him, beginning to grow impatient with his tendency to blame her - at least subconsciously - every time Vincent got into trouble Above. "Of course it could have. I *did* promise to bring him back safely.

Father sat down in a nearby chair, his expression conveying understanding of her feelings. "Catherine, I'm sorry. Try to understand - I've never been as afraid for Vincent as I was after you left ... after what you told me," he explained.

Catherine's manner softened a little, but she still felt hurt. "Don't you think I was afraid for him? Don't you think I *always* feel responsible for him when he comes Above - especially if it's because of me?"

"Yes, I know," Father conceded. "I may seem over-protective to you, but I'm not blind," he quipped facetiously, cracking the first smile Catherine had seen on his face since before the kidnapping. "I know you wouldn't let anything happen to Vincent ... but I can't very well stop worrying about him. And under the circumstances...."

Catherine nodded understandingly. "This situation has both of us on edge," she decided, glancing back

down once more at Vincent and sighing. "How in the world are we going to tell him the truth about his birth?"

"I don't know," Father admitted doubtfully. "I wonder if we should. The knowledge would surely only cause him pain; I fail to see any good that would come out of it."

Catherine turned back to him. "At least he would finally know what happened. He has that right," she pointed out.

Father thought this over. "We could leave it up to him," she suggested.

"Could you carry that knowledge around inside you, knowing he didn't know and you wouldn't tell him?" Catherine challenged. "I couldn't. If you won't tell him, I have to."

Father's expression said he understood, but he did not respond verbally.

"I was actually a little surprised that you didn't already know about it yourself," Catherine admitted. "Didn't this Alicia tell you anything about Vincent before she brought him to you?"

Father shook his head. "Only that he was deformed. Alicia was one of our first Helpers; she'd brought children Below before, and I had no reason not to trust her. Obviously, she didn't think it was necessary for me to know anything more." He looked sympathetically at Vincent. "My God, Nazis ... it never occurred to me that *that* madness had anything to do with his birth," he reflected, more to himself than to Catherine.

With a sigh, Catherine stood up. "Well, I have to get back. I left my car in the park," she told Father. "Gotta get some sleep. Tomorrow I've got to figure out how to wrap up this case."

Father stood also. "Come with me and I'll have one of the children show you out."

The next morning, Catherine barely made it to work on time. When she walked into Joe's office, it was apparent that he had been waiting for her.

"I just got off the phone with the cops, Cathy. Based on your witness' statement, they searched Rheinstadt's apartment. They said the place looked like a World War II museum - Nazi '*memorabilia*' Rheinstadt called it."

"They picked it up."

Joe nodded. "He confessed to the vandalism charge. And he wants to talk to you."

"All right. But you'll pardon me if I'm not especially enthusiastic about seeing him," Catherine replied sardonically.

Joe grinned knowingly. "For doctors, these guys seem like a couple of hardcases. It's kinda hard to believe we don't have anything on them."

Catherine shrugged elaborately. "Well, Edie looked through the files. There was no criminal record on either of them."

"Well, vandalism won't keep Rheinstadt out of circulation for long," Joe observed, looking her in the eyes. "I read your preliminary report, Cathy. You're taking this case personally, for some reason, and I take it you'd like to see him go up for something more serious."

Catherine nodded, not denying it, but also not taking his cue to elaborate. "If I can make it stick; I'm still following some leads," she returned cryptically, but also with determination. "Don't count me out yet, Joe. I'm a long way from giving up on this."

"I know, Radcliffe, I know. I'm just glad you're on our side."

Catherine grinned at him silently, then went back to her desk. After considering the situation for a time, she

decided to call Lydia.

"Hello?" answered a voice, which Catherine immediately recognized as Lydia's.

"Mrs. Wyman? This is Catherine Chandler. I thought you'd like to know Rheinstadt is in police custody."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Lydia exclaimed.

"Could we meet somewhere for lunch?" Catherine asked then. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Yes, of course. Just tell me where and when."

"Four Seasons, about 12:30?"

"Fine."

"Okay, see you then. Bye."

"Goodbye, Miss Chandler."

Catherine hung up and spent the rest of the morning trying to work on her report; as the time approached for her to leave for her lunch appointment, however, it became more and more apparent that she wasn't going to have much to put in the report until she talked to Rheinstadt. She decided to go to the Tombs and talk to him after lunch - the report would have to wait until she got back to the office.

Catherine arrived at the restaurant first and Lydia arrived about ten minutes later, sitting down opposite her; they each ordered a light lunch and ate quickly.

"Sorry I was late," Lydia apologized, as she finished up. "It's a rather long way up here from Queens. Lovely place, though," she added, looking around. "Do you eat here often?"

"When I have time," Catherine replied.

Lydia quickly returned to the matter at hand. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Catherine drew a deep breath. "Lydia, I have to tell you something about Richard."

Lydia's heart skipped a beat. "I knew it. He's alive, isn't he?" She guessed excitedly.

Catherine nodded. "I can't tell you where, but he *is* alive, safe and well."

Lydia contemplated this for a moment. "He's a friend of yours, then. That's why you wanted to borrow the photo; when I showed it to you, you looked like you recognized him."

"Yes."

"Do Rheinstadt and Von Holtz know you know about him?"

"They do now." Catherine told her how Ashton and Clarke, under orders from Rheinstadt and Von Holtz, had kidnapped her and taken her to the hospital in order to lure Vincent there and kill him. "Von Holtz lives right across the street from me. Apparently, he and Rheinstadt saw us together on my balcony."

"Oh, no... but you said Richard was safe!" Lydia pointed out anxiously.

"He is. I went back for him and helped him get back home."

"Thank God." Lydia still wondered where '*home*' was, but she wasn't going to press the issue. "Catherine... what's he like?" she asked curiously.

Catherine smiled quietly as her thoughts turned again to Vincent. "Intelligent, sensitive, gentle... wonderful. He has an inner beauty so great that it radiates outward. You'd be very proud of him. And by the way, his name is Vincent now - after the hospital."

"Vincent. Hmmmmmm...." Lydia considered the name for a time and decided she liked it. "And his appearance... doesn't bother you?"

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't frighten me the first time I saw him," Catherine admitted slowly. "But the feeling didn't last long, and I've never give it a second thought ... except, occasionally, to wish that whatever happened to make him look that way had never happened so Vincent could lead a normal life."

Lydia looked back at her with an expression that was part joy, part wonder, and part compassion as the realization finally began to sink in. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Catherine lowered her eyes. "It's ... something more than love. Lydia - something I can't explain. Vincent calls it... being '*connected*'."

The waitress finally brought the check and Catherine went to pay for it, leaving Lydia effectively stunned as she thought back over everything Catherine had told her. For the first time, she realized how shocked Catherine must have been to hear the story of Project: Prototype and Vincent's birth.

When Catherine returned to the table, Lydia asked, "Does Richard ... I mean, Vincent - know?" She knew further elaboration would not be necessary.

"No, but he soon will," Catherine assured her.

They got up to leave, but Lydia hesitated. "Catherine, is there any way... would it be possible for me to see him?"

Catherine thought long and hard about this before answering. This woman knew Vincent, had obviously been the closest thing to a mother that Vincent had ever had, and she had surely earned the opportunity - but Vincent did not know her, and it was possible that he would have no interest in seeing anyone connected with Project: Prototype, once it had been explained to him. Perhaps she *could* arrange something, even if it was no more than a brief, clandestine view of Vincent from behind some bushes in Central Park.

"I'll talk to him and see what I can work out, Lydia, but I can't make any promises," she said finally.

Lydia nodded understandingly, and they finally left.

Half an hour later, Catherine was talking to Rheinstadt in his cell; the first thing she found out was that his lawyer had refused to take the case.

"Apparently, the word is now out on the street that I'm a Nazi. He says he has his reputation to consider," Rheinstadt elaborated bitterly.

"I'll talk to the Public Defender about getting a lawyer assigned to your case," Catherine responded coolly. "But how long has this man been your lawyer?"

Rheinstadt knew what she was thinking. "Not long enough to be aware of the circumstances under which I came to this country, but long enough that I should have told him. I never expected it to be necessary," he admitted. "If Lydia had done her job in the first place --"

"If Lydia had done '*her job*', as you call it, an innocent baby would have died," Catherine answered tersely. "Her *real* job as a nurse was to save lives, and I'm glad she did it."

Rheinstadt was silent for a long time, wondering if it would do any good to defend a decision made thirty years ago - or if, under the circumstances, he should even try. "With all due respect, Miss Chandler, you weren't there. We did what we thought was necessary," he told her finally.

Catherine, resisting the temptation to become involved in an argument, quickly changed the subject. "You

said you wanted to talk to me."

Rheinstadt nodded. "I'm not going to take all the blame for the kidnapping. If I help you get Von Holtz and the others, I want a reduced sentence."

"I'll see what I can do," Catherine replied neutrally. "Come with me and I'll take your statement."

Catherine finally got back to the office and spent the rest of the day working on her report, again having to phrase it carefully. As before, it seemed to take forever; never before had she been forced to handle a case so closely connected with Vincent, and she didn't want to take a chance on saying something that might end up endangering him or the tunnel world.

By the time she finally finished and turned it in to Joe - who had been considerate enough to wait up for her - it was well after normal working hours, and Catherine felt a headache coming on. She went back to her apartment to take something for it, then down to the basement, through the hole in the wall, and into the tunnel entrance below - then stopped dead in her tracks. Vincent was standing at the threshold, obviously waiting for her. "Vincent?"

The simple fact that his presence apparently took Catherine by surprise was enough to cause Vincent a certain amount of dismay, and he made no attempt to hide it. *'What was it that so distracted her?'*

"Catherine, something troubles you deeply.....what is it?"

For the first time since she and Vincent had met, Catherine silently cursed their empathic bond. She strove to relax and clear her mind of any thoughts of the case or Project; Prototype - and this of any emotions connected with it; the one thing she knew she must not do was allow Vincent to guess the nature of the terrible truth she was carrying inside her before Father had the chance to decide how to tell him.

"I have to talk to Father," she told Vincent evasively.

For the time being, Vincent decided not to press the issue, knowing Catherine would share it with him eventually if he needed to know. He led her back down through the twisting and winding tunnels towards the chambers he shared with Father. As they traveled in silence, however, Catherine's refusal to talk at all began to puzzle Vincent - and the fact that he could not sense anything further about what might be bothering her didn't help any. But Vincent held his peace.

When they finally reached the main chamber, they found Father pacing back and forth across the room. He stopped when he saw Catherine and Vincent approaching.

"Catherine wants to talk to you, Father," Vincent told him dutifully, as Catherine went to meet him.

"Well?" Father prompted anxiously.

Catherine threw an apologetic look at Vincent. "We need to talk alone. It won't take long."

Vincent looked back and forth from Catherine to Father suspiciously, but made no protest. He turned reluctantly and went to his own chamber.

Catherine returned her attention to Father, waiting until she was sure Vincent was gone before speaking. "I think it's time he was told the truth."

Father bowed his head in resignation, sighing. "I hate to admit it, but I suppose we have no choice. I just ... don't know how he's going to take it."

"Neither do I. That's why we're both here," Catherine paused. "Do you want to tell him?"

Father looked back up at her. "It was your discovery, Catherine," he pointed out. "Perhaps we should *both*

tell him."

Catherine nodded in agreement. "I'll go get him." She left the chamber, reappearing a minute later with Vincent at her side.

He turned toward her as they entered. "**Catherine, what is going on? Why are you being so secretive?**" he demanded, in growing anxiety.

Catherine hesitated. "Vincent ... If I'd found out some things - things neither you nor Father knows - about the circumstances surrounding your birth ... you'd want to know, wouldn't you?"

"Yes!" Vincent was too astonished, for the moment, to say anything else.

"Even if the knowledge might hurt?" Catherine asked again, uncertainly.

"I've spent all my life wondering what happened. If you know anything at all about it, you must tell me," Vincent insisted, his eyes full of entreaty.

"Come sit down, Vincent," Father called from across the room. "Catherine and I will explain it to you."

Vincent and Catherine went to join him, and they all sat down at the large table where the tunnel world's Council normally met. Vincent in the middle and Catherine and Father on either side of him.

"Several days ago," Catherine began, "I became involved in a vandalism case in which a woman named Lydia Wyman found a swastika painted across her front window. Lydia is an ex-nurse who used to work at St. Vincent's Hospital, and the man who defaced her window was a doctor she used to work for named Freiderich Rheinstadt ..."

Vincent listened in silence for nearly an hour as Catherine and Father related the tale of Project: Prototype in excruciating detail - Father relying on Catherine for clarification of points he was vague on - finally tying in the kidnapping incident with Rheinstadt and Von Holtz.

Vincent was too stunned to speak, at first; his head had been bowed for some time as he tried to decide how to react. Finally, he looked up at Father. "How can this be true?"

Father, for once, had an answer for him.

"Fortunately - or unfortunately - there's proof," Catherine revealed, watching both of them sympathetically. She reached into her purse for the photo and gave it to Vincent. "She saved this picture. I also still have the notes I took when she was telling me about it."

Vincent took the photo, staring down at the baby whose features were undeniably his own. "No..." He turned it over, reading a hand-written inscription on the back. '**Richard - November 1, 1958, 10:03am**' He looked up at Catherine.

"That's what Lydia called you," Catherine supplied. "There was no birth certificate. This is the closest thing to a birth record that there ever was for you."

Vincent shook his head incredulously, turning the photo back over and staring at it - at himself. He had always suspected that his appearance was the result of some sort of accident; that, in and of itself, was not what he found so hard to accept. What angered and humiliated him so much that he didn't want to believe it was true was the intent and the Machiavellian attitude of the doctors who had engineered his creation. But worse even than that was the painful new awareness of the two biological '*families*' who had rejected him so contemptuously.

"It *is* true, Vincent," Catherine continued carefully. "I'm sorry ... but at least you know now."

Vincent ignored her now, thinking only of a deformed, unwanted baby, left to the mercy of Rheinstadt and Von Holtz by his natural parents - who must surely have known that they could not be trusted with him. "I

should have died at birth," he whispered bitterly, closing his eyes in shock and agony and crushing the photo in his fist. As it dropped to the floor and Catherine rescued it, Vincent stood abruptly and ran out the chamber into the passageway.

"Vincent!" Catherine cried after him, standing up; he ignored her.

Father got up, also. "I was afraid of this. We'd better go after him."

And off they went, Vincent running madly through the tunnels--not knowing or caring where he was going - Catherine chasing him, trying to catch up, and Father just trying to move fast enough to keep Catherine in sight. Neither of them really knew where they were going now, and he could only hope that Vincent would not inadvertently lead Catherine into The Maze.

Fortunately, Vincent finally had to stop for breath. Catherine saw him stop near an opening a few yards ahead of her, panting, leaning against the tunnel wall, finally turning his face toward it and forcefully pounding his fists against it in anger and frustration. Catherine kept running, gradually lessening the distance between them - but just as she was about to reach his side, he turned and ran through the opening.

As Catherine followed him through, finding herself in the Whispering Gallery, she saw him partially cross the narrow bridge over the Abyss, stop, then throw back his head and give out an anguished roar.

She went carefully but quickly to his side, making a mental note to ask Father later about putting railings on these bridges, and waited to catch her breath. "Vincent...."

Vincent lowered his head, feeling lost and ashamed, and slowly turned toward her. "I should never have been born," he told her brokenly.

Catherine felt his pain just as deeply as if it had been her own, and it was unbearable to her to think that, by telling him, she might in some way be responsible. She reached up, pushed back some of Vincent's beautiful, long, golden hair and touched his face; it was wet with tears.

She pulled him into her arms. "I'm sorry, Vincent so sorry. I wish there was something I could say to change the past for you."

Vincent held her close. "In all my thoughts and imaginings of how I came to be what I am, it never occurred to me that I might be the product of of some Nazi plan for world domination ... to be discarded and disposed of to cover up their mistakes when it failed ... don't you see, Catherine? This entire Project: Prototype was wrong from the beginning. My birth was never meant to be."

He seemed a little calmer now, but was still inwardly disconsolate. Catherine stepped back from him for a moment and lifted his chin so that they were facing each other, wiping tears from his cheeks as she spoke.

"Even if that's true, you have to think of it in terms of what's happened *since* then," she told him gently, but with conviction. "Your life has *not* been wasted, however it came about, and you've turned a misguided genetic experiment into a living example of everything we all value and aspire to. You were born, Vincent - and both our worlds are better off for it."

Vincent wordlessly embraced her again, his pain and humiliation finally overcome by gratitude, laying his bowed head against her shoulder.

Catherine heard a noise behind them and looked toward the opening; Father was standing there, smiling, his eyes filled with unshed tears.

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

He came out to join them, embracing them both, looking at Catherine with an expression that was both grateful and apologetic; she smiled back understandingly and returned the embrace.

Father released them finally and went back to the opening, watched them a moment longer, then left them alone and went back to his chamber.

Catherine and Vincent, meanwhile, stood together silently on the bridge for some time after that, Catherine continuing to hold him and Vincent drawing strength and solace from her presence. For once, they ignored the whispered voices that echoed through the cavern around them and the presence of the bottomless Abyss below; they were aware only of each other.

Catherine was kept fairly busy for the next couple of months. Von Holtz, Ashton, and Clarke were all brought in and eventually tried and convicted of kidnapping, and Rheinstadt got off with a slap on the hand in the form of a light sentence for the vandalism charge.

It infuriated Catherine and Lydia both that she couldn't put together a case on anything more serious, but that would have required testimony from Vincent. And as for Project: Prototype ... in the eyes of the law, that was past history. Catherine realized that she would have to ignore her personal feelings in the matter and accept the situation - but that seemed far easier said than done.

When it was all over, Catherine decided to go back down to the tunnels and see how Vincent was coping with his newly-discovered natal background. She found Father alone in the main chamber, for once not doing anything at all but sitting at his desk and worrying. He got up when he saw Catherine enter, and she went to him quickly.

"How is Vincent?"

Father hesitated. "I don't know, Catherine. I had thought he would be all right after you left him last, but he's ... just withdrawn into himself since then. He's hardly eaten, and he doesn't talk at all. I've only seen him occasionally - he doesn't even come out of his chamber unless he has to."

He paused, sighing. "I knew when we told him that it might take him a while to adjust, but ... this is so unlike him. He usually *wants* to talk when something's disturbing him."

Catherine nodded in agreement, understanding his concern. "Well, maybe I can do something for him," she suggested. "Is he still in his chamber?"

Father was willing to try anything, and he suspected that Catherine's presence was just what Vincent needed. "Yes, he's still there - I'll go with you."

Catherine followed him cautiously into Vincent's chamber, pausing at the opening while Father went in ahead of her. Vincent was sitting on the edge of his bed, chin resting on folded hands, obviously lost in thought.

"Vincent?"

Vincent looked up at him questioningly, but said nothing.

"You have a visitor, Vincent," Father told him, moving aside.

Catherine stepped into the room, studying Vincent worriedly for a minute, then went to his side; he looked up at her uncertainly, as if he were trying to decide how to react. Then he reached to take her hands in his, bowed his head, and drew her against him.

"Catherine...."

"Shhhhh - I'm here now," she assured him gently, noting the surprise and relief in his voice and stroking his

hair soothingly as his head lay against her stomach. They released each other finally, and Catherine sat down beside Vincent on the bed.

"Thank God. I was beginning to think you'd lost your voice," Father observed half-facetiously, sitting in a chair opposite them.

Vincent glanced over at him. "I know, Father - I'm sorry. I've had so much to think about lately that ... trying to put my feelings into words seemed futile," he explained, then turned back to Catherine. "I had hoped that you might come back before now."

"I know. I'm sorry - this is the first chance I've had," Catherine apologized sincerely. "I didn't mean for it to be this long, but I've had a pretty full schedule lately."

"I see," Vincent's eyes conveyed understanding.

"Are you still working on the case involving Rheinstadt and Von Holtz?" Father asked anxiously.

"Not any more. I just wrapped it up," Catherine told him, trying to sound proud of herself and failing.

"You seem so disappointed," Vincent observed, puzzled. "What happened?"

"I hope you're not going to tell us they got off," Father added.

"No, they'll do some time ..." Catherine sighed in frustration. "... but not nearly as much as they deserve to do. I could only get a conviction on kidnapping, and Rheinstadt even plea-bargained his way out of that - he'll only do time for the vandalism charge."

Somehow, Father was not surprised. "Well, I'm sure you did all you could, under the circumstances," he admitted resignedly.

Catherine shook her head regretfully. "I wanted to get them on attempted murder. And I could really have shaken things up if I had been able to expose Project: Prototype. Sometimes statutes of limitations are more trouble than they're worth."

Vincent was silent for a long time and consequently, so were Catherine and Father; they were all thinking the same thing - that maybe it was just as well. Exposure of Project: Prototype would surely mean exposure of Vincent at some point.

Vincent stood up finally. "I'm going to take Catherine home," he told Father at last, "And I may not take the most direct route either way."

Father nodded understandingly. "I'll probably be asleep when you return then."

Catherine got up to join Vincent, and together they left the chamber and started back through the tunnels, Vincent remaining curiously silent long enough for Catherine to become concerned.

"That was the shortest visit I've had down here in some time. Did I say something wrong?"

Vincent still did not respond.

Catherine grabbed him by the arm, staring at him in growing alarm. "Vincent, what is it? Tell me."

Vincent stopped, keeping his face averted from her. "I'm sorry," he whispered, in a voice filled with self-loathing.

"For what?"

"I don't enjoy forcing you to disguise the truth from me, Catherine," he told her softly. "I feel your frustration ... and your anger."

"You didn't force me. I made a promise," Catherine reminded him gently, meeting his eyes. "And I'm not angry with you - I'm angry with Rheinstadt and Von Holtz and the fact that this whole mess is their fault in the first place," she then assured him.

Vincent looked into her eyes, saw her sincerity, and accepted the truth of this; He put his arm around her, drawing her against him as they continued walking.

Catherine still looked up at him worriedly. "I'm sorry. I know you don't need a reminder of their involvement."

Vincent met her eyes again with an expression of disappointment on his face. "If we cannot share our pain as well as our joy, our bond is meaningless." Before she could respond, he continued, "I know what you've risked to keep my secret - not only this time, but every day. I don't know what to say, except that I'm grateful ... and I wish it wasn't necessary."

"So do I," Catherine admitted, hugging him briefly. "But the fact that you continue to trust me is gratitude enough."

They fell silent again and walked without speaking for some time.

"Vincent ... Are you going to be all right?" Catherine asked seriously at last, concerned.

Vincent nodded reassuringly, smiling slightly. "In time."

Catherine smiled back faintly, convinced, but her smile faded as she thought of Lydia and her wish to see Vincent.

"I don't know if this is the right time to mention it, but ... Lydia wants to see you. All I promised was to ask you about it."

They finally reached the tunnel opening under Catherine's apartment building. Vincent, taken by surprise, stopped, leaned against the tunnel wall, and stared back at her apprehensively, uncertain of how to respond.

Catherine had expected this reaction. "I'm not going to try and force you to see her, but I think you should consider it. Lydia *did* save your life."

Vincent still hesitated. "You want me to see her, then?"

Catherine nodded. "She's a widow. She lives alone - no family. Only memories of a baby she loved and cared for thirty years ago. And maybe I shouldn't have, but I told her you were still alive and well, I just couldn't stand for her not to know at least that much. Now she wants to see for herself. I think she'll be very hurt if you refuse to see her, but it's your decision," she told him quietly.

"I don't want to hurt her," Vincent asked finally. "If you trust her, then I must also. Where would we meet?"

"I'd thought of inviting her to my apartment," Catherine suggested, watching him uncertainly for a reaction. Vincent was likely to be reluctant to climb up to her balcony for some time to come.

"Couldn't we meet in the park?"

"Yes. But just because Central Park is safe for you at night doesn't mean it would be safe for *her*."

Vincent nodded, accepting this, his instinctive trust of Catherine finally conquering his fears. "You will be there?"

"Of course."

"Then so will I. Just tell me when."

All the arrangements were made, and one night a week or so later, Lydia came to Catherine's apartment; together, they waited for Vincent to arrive. The appointed time came and passed, and Catherine secretly began to wonder if he'd changed his mind - though she knew that wasn't likely. He would have sent word before now.

"I couldn't really blame him if he decided not to come," Lydia admitted.

Catherine was pacing anxiously. "He said he would come, Lydia. And he always keeps his word."

Abruptly, she heard a noise coming from the balcony and went to see who it was; as expected, she found Vincent stepping down from the railing. "I apologize for being late, Catherine. Father didn't want me to go up - I had a difficult time convincing him I would be safe here."

"Does he know about the meeting?"

Vincent shook his head. "I only told him I was going to see you."

"Well, I don't guess I can blame him this time. We're all going to be a little skittish about it after this, at least for a while - but I hope it won't keep you away."

"I won't let it." Vincent paused hesitantly. "Is she here?"

"Yes. Come on inside."

Vincent followed her as far as the French doors, then pulled back behind a section of wall and out of Lydia's line of view.

Catherine took him by the hand, urging him gently forward. "It's all right, Vincent - come on."

Vincent slowly followed her inside, keeping his head bowed, and she led him over to stand before Lydia, who was by now also standing.

Catherine looked at Lydia imploringly, and it was clear from her expression that Lydia would have to make the first move.

"Vincent, I'm Lydia Wyman. I ... took care of you when you were a baby," she began carefully. "There's no need for you to be afraid to look at me. I've already seen every inch of you before."

"Thirty years ago," Vincent reminded her softly, still not looking up.

"I remember it as if it were yesterday," Lydia assured him. "Please, look at me."

Vincent looked up at her finally, slowly pushing back the hood of his cloak, and watched her face apprehensively. He could feel Catherine beside him, still squeezing his hand encouragingly and being silently supportive.

Lydia barely blinked; Vincent looked much as she had imagined, and her eyes met his without fear. "Come sit down with me, Vincent."

She sat back down on Catherine's couch, and Vincent, encouraged by her quick acceptance, sat down next to her. Catherine retreated to a chair across the room and sat down, watching them in silence.

"I just wanted to see you - to know that you were all right," Lydia explained.

Vincent nodded understandingly. "Catherine told me all you did for me. I owe you my life."

Lydia lowered her eyes in embarrassment. "You owe me nothing. If I had half the courage and compassion I pretended to have, I would have adopted you myself."

They talked together for over an hour while Catherine pretended to busy herself elsewhere, unable to resist the urge to eavesdrop.

Finally, Lydia got up to leave and Catherine rejoined them. Lydia took her hand. "Catherine, thank you. You don't know what this has meant to me."

"My pleasure," Catherine replied sincerely, smiling slightly.

Lydia looked gratefully at Vincent once more. "And thank you, Vincent. I wasn't sure you would come."

Vincent lowered his eyes, by now embarrassed by his earlier apprehension. "It seemed such a small thing to ask, Lydia... I...", he hesitated. "...I almost feel... that I should call you '*Mother*'."

Lydia shook her head regretfully, regarding Vincent's bowed head with a sad little smile. "I lost that right when I gave you away. I didn't raise you, so I don't deserve the title."

Vincent looked back up at her in concern, and she met his eyes.

"But I appreciate the suggestion," she added gently, drawing closer to him and studying his face for a moment, reaching out to cautiously touch his golden hair. "Catherine is right, Vincent; you are beautiful. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

She embraced him briefly, and Catherine escorted her to the door, then went back to rejoin Vincent; he turned silently and went back to the balcony, resting his hands on the railing and looking thoughtfully up at the star-filled sky. Catherine followed him curiously.

"Vincent? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Vincent replied truthfully. "It's good to know I wasn't *really* abandoned," he admitted, turning toward her. "You were right about her, Catherine. She cares."

Catherine drew near his side. "I told you she did. Did you doubt me?"

"Yes. I shouldn't have, but I did."

She smiled at him and responded playfully. "I forgive you."

Vincent responded with a broad grin, then he laughed - a sound Catherine hadn't heard in some time - and put an arm around her, holding her close. "I think I'll talk to Father about her tomorrow," he decided.

Father's approval and that of the Council would be necessary before he dared discuss the tunnel world with Lydia, as he now knew he wanted to. "If she knew of our world... I'm sure if Father met her, he would agree she could be trusted..."

Catherine looked up at him, startled, realizing what he was suggesting. "Lydia, a Helper? I've been thinking of that myself!"

"Where do you think I got the idea?" Vincent questioned, half-jokingly. They both laughed softly. "Do you think Lydia would be interested?" he asked her.

"I think she'd love being a part of your life in whatever way she could," Catherine assured him more quietly, laying her head on his shoulder.

"I'm glad I decided to come," Vincent admitted at last.

"So am I."

They fell silent then, any fears for Vincent's safety there gradually forgotten and replaced with feelings of peace and contentment as they surveyed the brightly-lit Manhattan skyline and the clear, starlit sky above; they stayed there together all night.

Dawn found Vincent still there, both of them sitting asleep against the railing, Vincent's head resting against the top of Catherine's and her head still against his shoulder, both blissfully unaware of the sun's first rays touching their faces, warming them and signaling the approach of another day.