

Blind Jealousy

by Ingrid Hechler

It was Friday evening. After a tiring week, Catherine was looking forward to a long bath. But she couldn't stay in the tub for long. A glance at the clock told her it was time to get dressed. The evening wasn't over yet. Vincent would be expecting her in Central Park in about an hour. The children were giving one of their concerts, something everyone was excited about. Catherine didn't want to miss it either.

At the same time, deep beneath the streets of New York, Vincent was sitting in the library with his foster father, Jacob Wells. They were discussing the upcoming concert.

Father: "I'm very curious to see what the children have planned to surprise us with at the concert."

Vincent: "Yes, me too. Just like you, they haven't told me anything. I only know that they've been rehearsing deep in the tunnels so that no one would find out what they're going to play."

Father: "That sounds very mysterious indeed. When are you picking Catherine up?"

Vincent: "I'll expect her in Central Park in an hour. Catherine's had a tough week and is as excited as a little kid about the concert."

A smile flickered across his father's face. Over the past three years, he had grown very fond of Catherine. Initially, there had been some difficulties between him and Catherine. He couldn't, or wouldn't, accept that a woman would be so interested in his adopted son, make him the center of her life, and adore him. However, when he learned a year or a year and a half ago that the two had taken the final, decisive step, he was completely taken aback. But he did notice a change in his son. A positive change. The usually reserved Vincent had become more open and self-confident.

Vincent: "What are you smiling to yourself about?"

Father: "I was just thinking about how much you've changed."

Vincent looked at him, puzzled.

Vincent: "Changed?"

His father shared his thoughts with him. His son became slightly embarrassed and got ready to pick up Catherine. He watched Vincent leave, smiling.

On his way to Catherine's, he kept thinking about his father's words. Even when he reached the tunnel entrance, he waited, lost in thought, for his beloved.

Catherine cautiously approached the tunnel entrance so as not to be seen. To her surprise, she saw Vincent, who was already waiting for her. Beaming with joy, she ran into his arms, her eyes locked on his. Vincent felt the same way. He was still captivated by her beauty, her radiance, and her love for him.

Vincent leaned down to her, gently touched her chin with his hand, and kissed her tenderly. Catherine smiled slightly. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. Their kiss grew more passionate,

more intense, more demanding, and seemed endless. But finally, they had to force themselves to end this beautiful moment.

Vincent whispered, "Let's go."

Catherine replied, "If you promise me I'll get another kiss like that later..." Catherine's voice was hoarse, her cheeks slightly flushed.

Vincent didn't answer her but kissed her forehead and smiled.

What Catherine and Vincent didn't realize was that they were being watched! This person seemed unable to believe their eyes as the two kissed passionately. After Catherine and Vincent left, the person followed them discreetly.

From a certain point in the tunnel, music could already be heard in the distance. The children had clearly started playing. Away from the others, they sat down on the steps of a staircase, as all the other seats were taken. Father and Mary saw the two approaching and nodded to them.

To everyone's surprise, the children performed an excerpt from *The Nutcracker Suite*. Catherine beamed at Vincent, for it was her favorite piece. Ever since she had first heard of it as a child, she had always been captivated by it. During the Sugar Plum Fairy's dance, Catherine drifted into a reverie. She pressed herself close to Vincent, so that he held her tightly in his arms. Catherine gazed at him dreamily. When their eyes met, her lips formed the words "I love you." Vincent didn't hesitate.

The person who had followed them crept up unnoticed. One floor above the assembled residents, they could see everything. Their breath caught in their throats as Catherine and Vincent kissed again and again. Sometimes it was just a feather-light kiss, and sometimes a longer, more passionate one. Meanwhile, Catherine gently stroked his face. She also saw her father observing this. But he had a gentle smile on his face. Just as unnoticed as the person had come, they had disappeared again. She had seen enough!

After the concert, there was tremendous applause and a standing ovation. The children who had organized the concert beamed from ear to ear. Pride was written all over their faces. They received praise from all sides. The next concert was sure to follow soon.

The adults sat together late into the evening, happily discussing the children's concert. They could hardly believe what they had accomplished without any adult help.

A few days later, Vincent was in the library with his father and Catherine when Geoffrey came downstairs with a letter in his hand.

Father: "Geoffrey, where are you rushing off to?"

Geoffrey: "A letter has been delivered for Vincent." He handed the letter to Vincent and disappeared.

When he opened it and began to read, a certain unease was evident on his face.

Catherine: "Vincent? Is everything alright?" She sounded worried.

Vincent: "This can't be happening..." he murmured. His father and Catherine looked at each other, bewildered.

Father: "Vincent, what..." But he didn't get any further.

Vincent: "Lisa! She's back in town and wants to meet me!" With that, he turned to Catherine, who looked troubled. Suddenly, all the events of two years ago flashed before her eyes. Lisa had re-entered Vincent's life

after almost 20 years. She wanted to go back into the tunnels! Back to Vincent! But she brought many problems with her, dragged Catherine into them, and disappeared again.

Father: "So she's back. Will you meet with her?" Father asked very cautiously.

Vincent: "No! Absolutely not..."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief.

Catherine: "What will she want from you?"

Vincent: "Good question... I just hope she leaves me alone." Vincent crumpled the letter, threw it in Father's wastepaper basket, and left the library without another word. He went for a long walk and didn't return to his room until late, where Catherine was already waiting for him.

She was lying on his bed, reading a book. She looked up at him, relieved.

Catherine: "Vincent, there you are. I was worried sick."

Vincent smiled slightly: "You don't need to worry. I've been thinking about a few things. I know she's up to something. But what?"

Catherine: "You think she's plotting something?" Vincent nodded thoughtfully.

Catherine continued: "Last time, she wanted you back, Vincent."

Vincent: "Yes, I know."

Catherine: "Do you think she'll try again?"

Vincent: "I hope not!"

Catherine: "Why doesn't she just give up? What could be the reason?"

Vincent: "I guess Lisa and I made a big mistake years ago..." He sounded thoughtful.

Catherine: "A mistake? What kind of mistake..." She couldn't make sense of what he meant.

Catherine: "Vincent?" she pressed again when he didn't answer.

Vincent: "Do you remember when I confessed to you that I was hurting her?"

Catherine: "Yes, of course. She was dancing for you. She wanted to seduce you and was toying with you. And when you reacted, you injured her shoulder."

Vincent: "Right... That was... but not all."

Catherine: "In what way?"

Vincent: "A few weeks later, I got quite ill. I wasn't myself anymore. You know, my other side was getting stronger and stronger, trying to take over. I was only 16! Well, during that time, my entire physique changed. I grew taller, more muscular, and stronger within just a few days. When that trauma was finally over, I had mostly lost my memory. Everyone was informed, including Lisa. She visited me several times a day, and we got quite close.

"Father had often told her though he only confessed to me years later - to stay away from me. He must have suspected something. She, in turn, lied to me, saying we were officially together. That we were, so to speak, a couple. Since I couldn't remember it, I believed her. And then, eventually, what had to happen, happened..." Vincent didn't continue.

Catherine: "You slept together..." Vincent nodded.

Catherine continued: "What did Father say about it?"

Vincent: "He still doesn't know!"

Catherine: "You mean you managed to keep it a secret from him?"

Vincent: "Yes, for a year..."

Catherine: "What happened then?"

Vincent: "Our paths diverged. She joined a theater group and saw her chance as a ballet dancer."

Catherine: "And you saw her again just two years ago."

Vincent: "Yes."

By now, they were both lying on the bed, still thinking about what Lisa wanted. And about what had happened between Lisa and Vincent many years ago.

The days passed. So did the excitement over Lisa's letter to Vincent. He hadn't shown up for their meeting. Lisa wasn't very pleased about that. She decided to take matters into her own hands.

Late one evening, she set off for the tunnels. Lisa didn't take the usual guarded route, but instead found her way in by taking many detours. Her path inevitably led her past the reflecting pool. She stopped a little above the pool and admired its beauty.

Suddenly, she heard two voices, albeit faintly. Curious, she set out to investigate. In a small, secluded cove, she found what she was looking for, even though she didn't like it at all. Lisa discovered Catherine and Vincent. The two of them lay in the soft, warm sand under a blanket, making love. Today was their third anniversary, which they were celebrating.

Lisa had no idea about any of this and kept her distance so she wouldn't be seen. She lingered at her vantage point for a few minutes, unable to believe what she was seeing. Her Vincent was sleeping with another woman. And this woman was none other than Catherine... her rival! Lisa was seething with anger. She should be in Catherine's place! They kissed again and again. Vincent's powerful muscles moved playfully. Lisa could see it even from this distance. But now she'd had enough. Quietly, she withdrew.

The following day, her father, Mary, Catherine, and Vincent were sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee when Lisa suddenly appeared at the entrance. Mary had spotted her first.

Mary: "Lisa...what a surprise. We weren't expecting you at all. Come, sit with us." Mary had no idea that no one was happy about it. Father remained polite.

Father: "Lisa, how are you?"

Lisa: "Fine, thank you."

Catherine and Vincent offered a simple but equally polite "Hello..."

Catherine felt uneasy.

Vincent: "Come on, let's go, Catherine."

Catherine: "Good idea..."

Lisa: "No...I want you to stay, Vincent."

Vincent: "Why?"

Lisa: "You know why." Lisa placed a hand on his chest and moved very close to him. Vincent took a step back to avoid her touch.

Vincent: "Lisa, what do you want from me?" Vincent sounded desperate.

Lisa: "I want you back, Vincent. I want things to be like they used to be."

Vincent shook his head at every word. Now Father intervened.

Father: "Lisa, it would probably be better if you left now!" he demanded of her.

Mary watched the scene unfold. She was neither able to speak nor able to leave the room.

Lisa: "Leave? Why are you saying that? We belong together, Vincent."

Catherine: "Lisa, please just leave us alone. Let Vincent have his peace!"

Lisa: "You're telling me to leave? Catherine... Vincent belongs to me! You have no idea what was between us!"

Catherine: "Oh yes... I know what happened between you... many years ago. How you lied to him to get what you were so afraid of. How you took advantage of his ignorance!"

Vincent had to stop Catherine. Father and Mary watched this spectacle with rapt attention. They had never seen Catherine lose her temper like this.

Vincent: "Catherine, please... calm down. We're leaving now..." Vincent gently took her arm and pulled her along behind him.

Once in her room, Catherine sat down on the bed, panting and angry. Vincent leaned tensely against the rock wall. He silently shook his head repeatedly.

Vincent: "Could you perhaps explain to me what just happened in the kitchen?"

Catherine: "I'm sorry. I lost my temper..."

Vincent: "That's not what I mean. You were great, thank you. I didn't know how to react. I was struggling to control myself."

Catherine: "It's not easy for you to find the right words. You didn't want to hurt her."

Vincent: "I can't imagine why she doesn't realize or understand that nothing will ever be the same again. That was over 20 years ago. What does she think she's going to do?"

Vincent was distraught and buried his face in his hands. Catherine went to him and put her arms around him. Vincent looked at her thoughtfully.

Catherine: "Vincent, I don't want Lisa to ruin everything we've worked for." Catherine sounded scared.

Vincent: "I don't want that any more than you do, Catherine. After what happened earlier... we can assume she'll try anything to get what she wants."

The next few days were literally hell for Vincent. Lisa ambushed him at every opportunity. She waited until he was alone and constantly tried to reason with him. She tried to convince him that they belonged together. Vincent, on the other hand, was nearly losing his composure. As soon as Catherine left the tunnels, he fled somewhere she couldn't find him. He wasn't always successful. He hadn't told Catherine any of this.

Catherine sat at her desk, buried under files. In a few minutes, she'd have her lunch break. She decided on a leisurely meal at her favorite Italian restaurant, which was quite close by.

Just as she was eating, a man approached her.

"Hello, Catherine..."

Catherine: "Tom..."

Tom: "Surprised?"

Catherine: "You could say that, yes. How are you?"

Tom: "Thanks for asking... good, and you? I mean, we haven't seen each other since you broke up with me."

Catherine looked at him, embarrassed. After her terrible accident, she and Tom had broken up. This had come as a complete shock to him.

Catherine: "I'm doing well. I've been working at the prosecutor's office for three years now. I really enjoy it there."

Tom: "I'm happy for you. I'm still very busy with my real estate and have little time... Is there someone in your life?" This question came very cautiously.

Catherine: "Yes, I'm with someone. What about you?"

Tom: "I'm single, unfortunately... After you, I haven't let anyone get close to me. My work has been my solace, so to speak... I'm glad you've found someone worthy of you. I really am."

Catherine: "That's kind of you, thank you, Tom. You'll meet your dream woman eventually." Tom didn't say anything to that. He forced a smile and put on a brave face... Because Catherine was his dream woman!

Tom: "Do you come here for dinner often?"

Catherine: "I do at the moment, why?"

Tom: "Well, would you mind if I came by for lunch now and then? For a meal, I mean..."

Catherine: "I'd be happy to."

Tom: "That's nice. Well... I have to get back to work. See you?"

Catherine: "Yes, see you."

That evening, Catherine returned to the tunnels as usual. Vincent wasn't in his chamber yet. She went to Father in the library, where he was reading a medical book. He didn't notice Catherine until she was standing right in front of his huge desk.

Father: "Catherine... I didn't hear you come in, I'm sorry."

Catherine: "Good evening, Father. You were very engrossed in your book. I didn't mean to disturb you. Tell me, do you know where Vincent is? He's certainly not in his chamber." Father looked worried and searched for words.

Catherine: "Father? Is something wrong?"

Father: "I don't know where he is all day, Catherine. The only thing I know is... as soon as you leave the tunnels, Vincent is almost impossible to find, and... when you come back in the evening, he's back in the inhabited tunnels a short time later. Very often, he spends many hours in the large hall where all the training weights are. He lifts the weights there until he can't anymore. I've tried to talk to him about it several times, but he shuts me down every time and just leaves without a word. He can't find any peace at the moment." Catherine's face froze.

Catherine: "I didn't realize it was this extreme. Oh God... this can't be true. He covered everything up and didn't let on to me. Lisa...!"

Father: "What does she have to do with it? I mostly see her with the children."

Catherine: "Some things, Father... it has very little to do with the children. But I'll go and see Vincent first."

On the way, she met Randolph, who saved her the long search.

Randolph: "Hi Catherine, if you're looking for Vincent, he's in the main hall, working out his aggression."

Silently, she nodded and set off.

She stopped at the entrance to the main training hall, her eyes scanning for him. Far back in the hall, she found him. Only when Catherine was standing diagonally behind Vincent did he notice her. Vincent was completely drenched in sweat. Beads of perspiration streamed down his body. Catherine knew all too well that it took a lot of effort for Vincent to even begin to sweat.

Vincent: "Have you been here long?" Vincent struggled to compose himself, completely out of breath.

Catherine: "I've been looking for you... How long have you been here?" Catherine whispered to him.

But Vincent didn't answer. Instead, he sat down on a nearby weightlifting bench. Catherine could see him struggling with himself and went to him. Kneeling before him, she looked into Vincent's eyes. He closed his eyes several times, threw his head back, and took deep breaths. Catherine placed both hands on his chest to calm him. Gradually, he regained his composure.

Catherine: "Have you been here all day?"

Vincent: "Since this afternoon."

Catherine: "And the other days?" Astonished by her knowledge, he looked at her.

Catherine: "Father told me earlier that you haven't been seen for days. Apparently, you've been far away, out of reach, or here in the hall most of the time. What's wrong, Vincent?"

Vincent: "It has nothing to do with you, Catherine."

Catherine: "Is it Lisa?"

At the mention of the name, he stood up abruptly. Surprised and worried at the same time, Catherine watched him.

Catherine: "She won't leave you alone..."

He didn't answer that either.

Catherine: "Vincent, please talk to me!" she pleaded with him.

Vincent: "What do you want me to say, Catherine!"

Vincent: "Should I tell you that Lisa is lurking around me at every opportunity? That she's following me like a shadow?... God, I...I'm going crazy!"

Catherine: "Why didn't you tell me sooner, Vincent!"

Vincent: "And then what? Catherine... I don't even know how to act myself. Telling her what I think... it's pointless. You've noticed it yourself! Even Father has asked her to leave several times. But she won't! You know, I'm often swimming in the evenings and I feel...how she's watching me..."

Vincent was desperate. He hung his head and a feeling of unease rose within him again.

Catherine stepped closer to Vincent and held him by the hips. She kissed his chest. The salty taste on his

skin was intoxicating. Vincent let his head fall onto her shoulder.

Catherine: "Come on, let's go for a swim in the lake. We could both use a dip." Vincent nodded.

Together they walked to the lake. Vincent had simply slipped his shirt on without buttoning it. He was warm enough!

On the way, as expected, they ran into Lisa. The sight of Vincent made her blood race. The way he had casually pulled his shirt on almost drove her wild. She only had eyes for him! Catherine, standing beside him, didn't seem to notice Lisa at all. Lisa moved very close to Vincent, placed a hand on his chest, let it slide under his shirt, and gave him a meaningful look. Then she walked past him very slowly and closely, never breaking eye contact.

Vincent couldn't escape her gaze either.

Catherine: "I think that's enough for now, Lisa!" Catherine confronted them.

Lisa: "What... are you jealous?"

Catherine: "Keep your hands off him!"

Lisa: "And if I don't?"

Catherine: "Then you'll see what I mean, my sweet!"

Vincent: "Stop it!"

The two quarreling women stared at him in surprise. Vincent broke away from them both and took off. Lisa smiled maliciously to herself, and Catherine couldn't believe that Vincent had simply left her standing there like that. Furious, Lisa and Catherine went their separate ways.

It wasn't until late that night that Vincent returned. Exhausted, he collapsed into his chair, leaned back, and lost in thought. Catherine sensed his presence and woke up.

Catherine: "Vincent?"

Vincent: "Yes, I'm here." Catherine: "

Where have you been? I've been waiting for you half the night."

Vincent: "I've been everywhere, I guess..." The answer was like a whisper.

Catherine: "Are you coming to bed?" Tiredly, he nodded, took off his clothes, put on his pajamas, and lay down next to her. Catherine didn't want to overwhelm him with affection. She'd noticed for days that there had been less caressing between them.

Catherine: "Will you hold me?"

Vincent: "Come here." She gently snuggled against his side.

Catherine: "Can I have a goodnight kiss?"

Vincent: "Sure, sorry..." Their kiss was tentative at first. Not like usual, so full of passion and devotion. Gradually, however, it grew more intense. Yet something held him back. He simply couldn't give in to his feelings.

The following days were no different. Vincent withdrew more and more. Catherine hardly ever saw him anymore. This didn't go unnoticed by her father and the others. They usually all had breakfast together. Often, the two of them could be seen sitting by the lake, or in the evenings, talking about the day. This hadn't happened in a long time. Her father and Mary often spoke to Lisa and asked her to leave. But the

only answer was always:

"What are you going to do about it? You can't force me to leave my home. And as for Vincent and me, that's none of your business!" They were at a loss.

Catherine's situation with her ex-boyfriend had also changed. Tom waited for her almost every day at her Italian restaurant to have lunch with her. He showered her with compliments, which made Catherine very embarrassed. Even when Catherine spent her lunch break at her desk to avoid Tom, he came to her office with a packed lunch. Catherine couldn't believe her eyes. She asked him to go outside so they could talk undisturbed.

Catherine: "Tom, what's the meaning of this?"

Tom: "I thought we could have lunch together again."

Catherine: "That's... really nice of you, but I don't have time and... Tom... I think you're taking this way too seriously."

Tom: "What do you mean? I thought you liked going out to lunch with me?"

Catherine: "I'm sorry if I gave you false hope, but I was thinking about it now and then. Not every day!"

Tom: "Catherine, being back together with you... is... like a miracle. A dream has come true for me."

Catherine's face was completely expressionless.

Catherine: "Tom, what are you talking about! We were together once, yes! But that's over!"

Tom: "You broke up with me, Catherine. I still haven't gotten over it. Please give me a chance to slowly let go of you. I beg you!"

Catherine: "Tom, I'm so sorry I hurt you so much, but I love someone else."

Tom: "I'd like to take you out sometime."

Catherine: "Please, Tom... don't torture me!"

Tom: "To the theater sometime..." His eyes pleaded with her.

Catherine: "I'll think about it, okay? I... I have to get back to the office now."

Tom: "Yes, that's fine..."

With a tense expression, she returned to her desk. Catherine could no longer concentrate on her work at all. The afternoon dragged on for Catherine. She had accomplished almost nothing. The confrontation with Tom was taking its toll on her.

When she returned to the tunnels that evening, she went straight to Vincent in the training hall. The other men had already left. Vincent was putting away the weights when Catherine suddenly appeared behind him.

Catherine: "Hey..." Surprised, he turned to her.

Vincent: "I didn't even hear you." A light kiss as a greeting was all.

Catherine: "I was being really quiet. How are you..."

Vincent: "I finally had some peace and quiet today..."

Catherine: "At least you did!"

Vincent looked at her, puzzled. Embarrassed and searching for words, Catherine looked down.

Vincent: "What's wrong?" She took a deep breath. It was clearly difficult for her to talk about it.

Catherine: "About two weeks ago, I was at lunchtime. Suddenly, Tom showed up... my ex-boyfriend." She paused briefly.

Catherine continued: "Since then, he's been waiting for me every lunchtime. Today, I thought I'd stay in the office and spend my lunch break there... and who shows up at my desk with food in his hand? Tom..."

Catherine had to take a deep breath and continued.

Catherine: "He told me... that he still hasn't gotten over the fact that I left him three years ago. He said... he wants to slowly let go of me and asked if I'd like to go to the theater with him sometime, and so on... I don't know what to do, Vincent!"

Vincent: "Then you're just like me... you don't want to hurt or upset the person. After all, you were with 'her' or 'him' for a while. But that also puts a strain on the existing relationship between the people involved. No one really knows how to react to it or what to do about it."

Catherine looked at him in astonishment. Vincent was right about what he was saying. Now she could understand him.

Catherine: "So...what are we supposed to do now?" Vincent shrugged and shook his head.

Vincent: "I don't know anything anymore, Catherine. I don't know what to think! I don't know what to feel! Nothing at all! When I see Lisa, I think of the past. The only thing I know about her is that she'll try everything to seduce me. And that, Catherine... is what I'm most afraid of. I'm afraid I won't realize it until it's too late."

Catherine remained strong and composed. Hearing Vincent's desperate words surprised her. This wasn't how Catherine was used to hearing him.

Catherine: "What women are really good at is knowing how to seduce a man. And men often fall for it when the attraction or the temptation is too strong."

Vincent: "But I don't want it!" He looked at her intently.

Catherine: "I know you don't want it, Vincent. I certainly don't! She mustn't drive a wedge between us."

Vincent: "Hasn't she already done that?"

Catherine: "What? Vincent, what are you talking about!"

Vincent: "I'm distancing myself from you, Catherine. The way she acts towards me. This... she can't keep her hands off me. Catherine, every touch you try to make... I think every time it could be Lisa! The thought that she could manage to be in your place... makes me sick. That's why I try not to let anyone near me."

Catherine: "That's it... That's why you don't let me hug you anymore. Yes, I've noticed that you don't let me get close to you. Even when we kiss. Vincent... I miss you!" Catherine's eyes filled with tears.

Vincent: "I know... I miss you just as much."

Oblivious to all of this, Father and Mary stood behind them.

Father: "Are you both all right?" Vincent turned in a direction where his face was hidden, and Catherine discreetly wiped away her tears.

Mary: "Tell me, you two, what the hell has been going on for weeks? You're never seen together, and when you are... I don't know. Something's definitely wrong!"

Vincent: "Well spotted, Mary!"

Father: "Vincent! What's going on?" Father had put on his stern face.

Vincent: "I'm going to go away for a while to clear my head." He kept looking at Catherine the whole time. Her tears came again. Vincent was about to leave when Father grabbed his arm and looked intently at him.

Vincent: "Please let me go, Father."

Father: "Not until you tell me what's going on. I mean it!"

Defiantly, Vincent threw on his shirt, leaned against a nearby table, casually put his hands in his pockets, and searched for words.

Father: "Well?" Vincent shook his head.

Vincent: "Father, please... don't ask any more questions!"

Mary: "Catherine? Can you tell us what's happening to the two of you?" Looking for help, she glanced at Vincent, but he didn't move.

Catherine: "It's Lisa..." Silent glances were exchanged. Vincent threw his head back.

Father: "What's wrong with her? I hardly ever see her."

Vincent: "How could I... she's always looking for me!"

Mary: "Excuse me?" Vincent didn't want to elaborate on the subject.

Vincent: "Listen. I don't want to talk about it... I'm going to pack a few things and disappear for a while."

Catherine approached him, grabbed his shirt, and gently pulled him close.

Catherine: "Please don't go..."

Vincent: "I can't think straight like this, Catherine. Don't worry."

Just as he was about to turn away from her, she held him tighter. Vincent leaned down to Catherine and kissed her. Then he left the hall without looking back and was gone. Tears streamed silently down Catherine's face.

Father and Mary couldn't say anything. They were too shocked by what had happened. They couldn't make sense of what was going on either. Stunned, they stared at Catherine, unable to ask her anything. After a few minutes, Catherine had regained some composure.

Catherine: "I'm going upstairs for a while." Her voice was broken.

Mary: "Catherine, for God's sake! Just tell me what happened between you two!" A forced smile escaped her.

Catherine: "Nothing happened between Vincent and me. If anything, we could have solved it together, Mary. It's simply Lisa! She... she's driving a huge wedge between Vincent and me. She's trying to tear us apart."

Father: "What happened..." Father spoke very gently. But Catherine couldn't utter another word. Instead, she shook her head and withdrew, just like Vincent.

Father: "Mary, run as fast as you can to Vincent and try to stop him somehow."

Mary: "What are you going to do?"

Father: "I'm going to have a word with Lisa to find out what's going on. Why didn't I notice anything?"

Mary: "Don't blame yourself, Jacob."

Father: "Easier said than done. Come on, we have to hurry."

Mary had great difficulty running the whole way. She wasn't getting any younger. But as fate would have it, she arrived just in time. Vincent was just about to leave when Mary suddenly stood before him. He looked at her with concern. He had never seen her completely out of breath before.

Vincent: "Mary, are you all right?"

Mary: "I'm asking you that, my boy."

Vincent: "Mary, please..."

Mary: "Vincent. What's the meaning of this! Why won't you two talk to us!"

Vincent: "There are just some things you can't help us with. Please understand that!"

Mary: "Just try..." Mary practically begged him. But Vincent wouldn't listen. He was about to walk past Mary when Lisa came in.

Vincent: "What do you want here! Haven't you caused enough trouble already?"

Mary: "Lisa, what do you have to do with all this!"

Lisa: "A great deal, I reckon!"

She sounded very smug. At that moment, Father entered Vincent's room.

Father: "I've been looking for you, Lisa! Vincent, I'm glad you're still here!"

Vincent: "Not for long!"

Mary: "Jacob, I think Lisa has contributed quite a bit to this situation."

Vincent: "You can keep talking, but I'm leaving!"

Lisa: "Where are you going?" She sounded bossy.

Vincent moved close to her.

Vincent: "Somewhere you can't find me!"

Lisa: "Don't worry, I'll find you, my love." She seemed very sure of herself. Vincent, on the other hand, responded with a deep growl from his throat.

Mary and Father were now aware of the seriousness of the situation.

Lisa also moved very close to Vincent and whispered to him.

Lisa: "You know perfectly well that your growl doesn't scare me in the slightest. Quite the opposite! No matter where you go now... I'll look for you and I'll find you!"

Vincent: "Then I suppose I'll have to go past a few ravines. Hoping you won't make it through them!" Mary and Father had understood everything perfectly, and this frightened them.

Father: "Lisa, that's enough! Pack your things and get out of here! I won't tell you again! Never come back!"

Vincent was unimpressed and left. Lisa didn't care what Father said to her. Her only thought was of Vincent.

Lisa: "Vincent will soon be mine again... you'll see!"

Father lowered his gaze and closed his eyes. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd been this angry with someone. Lisa managed it! Mary had known Father long enough to know that he was about to yell.

Mary: "Lisa, please, do yourself and us a favor and go! Randolph! Josef!" Father and Lisa looked at her in surprise.

R. + J.: "We're here, Mary!"

Mary: "Please be so kind as to take Lisa upstairs. She still needs to pack." The two addressed nodded. Lisa couldn't believe her ears. However, she didn't have time to think about it. Randolph and Josef grabbed her arm, led her to her room, helped her pack, and took her straight upstairs. Before her eyes, the gate was closed, a chain placed around the gate bars, and locked from the inside.

This was meant to make it clear to her that she had no business being in the tunnels anymore. But Lisa wasn't so easily driven away! She was furious! Her own family had banished her!

Randolph and Josef reported back to Mary, who was looking after Father. He wasn't feeling well after this confrontation.

Mary: "Should we tell Vincent that Lisa is gone?"

Father: "No, not yet. Let's give them both a few days. It will do them good."

Mary: "What if she comes back down? She knows her way around down here just as well as everyone else."

Father: "I don't know. We can't do more than banish her."

Vincent had been traveling for many hours. He knew of a secret place far below, even further than the catacombs. There, an underground river flowed, its babbling having a calming effect on him. Vincent gathered pieces of wood, lit a fire as it was getting cold, and made his camp.

Catherine, on the other hand, went straight to her apartment. As soon as she closed the door behind her, sadness overwhelmed her. Catherine collapsed onto her large bed and wept all night until morning.

Arriving at her office the next day, Catherine's boss, Joe Maxwell, noticed the dark circles under her eyes and asked her to come in.

Joe: "Catherine, are you all right? I don't like the look of you at all."

Catherine: "I'm sorry, Joe. I...I'm having some personal problems at the moment."

Joe: "I'm sorry to hear that, Catherine. If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know."

Catherine: "Thank you, Joe... I just need some time."

Joe: "Listen, we'll manage fine for the next few days. There are plenty of people around, and if you need a few days, take them. You have enough vacation time left."

Catherine: "Okay, if you need me, then..."

Joe: "Just get out of here!" Catherine didn't need to be told twice.

Once back at her apartment, Catherine refused to see or hear anything. Consequently, she locked the door behind her and turned on the answering machine.

Tom, Catherine's ex-boyfriend, kept calling about her. He called the law firm almost daily. When they wouldn't give him any information, he pulled out all the stops to get Catherine's address and phone number. It was four exhausting days for him...

When he finally got her number, he called her. Luckily for her, Catherine had her answering machine on.

Tom: "Hi Catherine, it's Tom. I've been desperately trying to reach you for days, but you're not exactly listed in the phone book. The reason I'm calling... I wanted to ask if you'd like to come to the opera with me. I have two tickets and thought you might like to join me. The performance is next week, and I'd be delighted if you could come along. I'll get back to you soon. Please let me know. Take care."

Catherine stood in front of her phone, listening to the message. A little change of scenery would certainly do her good. Vincent hadn't contacted her in over a week, and she was starting to feel restless. But she had her doubts about whether it was the right thing to do.

After endless back and forth, lasting almost a week, she called Tom and arranged to meet him. He was overjoyed. Catherine wasn't so sure anymore.

Vincent sensed her inner conflict the whole time. Catherine, like him, had to come to terms with the past. Which was the right way?

Lisa, meanwhile, had found another way into the tunnels. She slipped past the guards unnoticed. Her path led her near the catacombs. There, she searched everywhere for Vincent. In vain! Lisa certainly wasn't about to give up! She spent the night in the cold.

The next day, she doggedly continued down into the sprawling tunnel system. After several hours, Lisa heard the faint sound of rushing water. She followed the sound and reached a river. Little did she know that she had found Vincent's location. Curious, Lisa looked around and discovered a small fire pit. Right next to it, a makeshift sleeping area. There was no sign of Vincent anywhere. When she suddenly heard his footsteps, she quickly retreated. She wanted to wait until he had gone to bed.

Catherine, meanwhile, had been excited all day. She hadn't been to the opera in a long time. The thought of Tom, who would be picking her up in a few hours, made her nervous. How would the evening go? Catherine thought intensely about what to wear. Nothing too revealing, otherwise Tom might think she was easy.

Around eight o'clock, there was a knock at Catherine's door. It was Tom. Together they drove to the area near Central Park, where a new opera house was opening. Tom had reserved a box seat for them both. They seemed to be the best seats in the entire opera house. They were completely undisturbed.

During the performance, Tom glanced at her several times. His face betrayed longing. Longing for Catherine.

At a very sentimental moment in the opera, Tom gently let his hand slide onto Catherine's. She closed her eyes and tried to control her emotions. Catherine looked at him pleadingly not to do this. Consequently, he withdrew his hand. Her heart pounded, and she was afraid he might hear it.

The play lasted almost three hours. Tom had complimented her several times during the performance. How beautiful and enchanting she was. How perfectly the dress suited her.

After the opera, he invited Catherine to dinner. It was already quite late, and Catherine was very tired. Nevertheless, he managed to persuade her. During their late-night meal, they talked a lot about their failed relationship. Catherine could see that it still hurt Tom deeply to talk about it. She tried to make him understand emphatically that there was no future for them together. But he wouldn't let up.

Tom: "Catherine, please tell me what I did wrong, and I'll change. But I'm begging you! Come back to me."

Catherine: "This has nothing to do with you, Tom. After our last evening together, I was mugged in Central

Park. You know that. Since that incident, I've changed. I'm not the same Catherine you knew."

Tom: "But I could adapt."

Catherine: "No, Tom. There's another man in my life. And I love him." Catherine glanced surreptitiously at her watch. She wanted to put an end to it all.

Catherine: "Listen, Tom. It's getting very late. Could you please take me home?"

Tom: "Yes, of course. I'm sorry..."

On the way to Catherine's apartment building, they barely exchanged a word.

Once there, Catherine didn't want to be rude and allowed him to walk her to the door. To avoid prying eyes, she even invited him inside. When Catherine turned to him, he was suddenly standing just inches away.

Catherine: "Thank you for the lovely evening." Her voice trembled. She was more than aware of the tension in that moment.

Tom: "Please reconsider."

Catherine: "Please don't torture me. I wouldn't trade the time we spent together for anything. Please believe me when I say there won't be an 'us'."

Tom: "Can I ask you one more favor?" he whispered to her. Catherine said nothing. Tom moved closer and closer. His lips gently touched hers. He noticed that Catherine wasn't pulling away and thus increased the pressure. She gave in to her feelings. He held her tightly. He couldn't get enough of her. His hands wandered over her back, her shoulders. But when he tried to open her dress, Catherine recoiled. Only now did she realize what Tom was planning. She pushed him away and asked him to leave.

Tom: "Catherine, what is it?"

Catherine: "You're even asking? Did you plan all of this?"

Tom didn't answer but lowered his gaze to the floor.

Catherine: "Who do you think you are! Go, Tom! Please go..."

As soon as he left, she collapsed onto her couch, shocked by what had just happened.

Catherine: "Oh God...what have I done! How could this have happened? Vincent, forgive me!"

That same evening, but in a different place, Lisa watched Vincent swim up and down the river. When he got out of the water, his muscles were tense and the remaining water dripped down him. His flat, muscular stomach and chest rose with every breath. While drying himself, Lisa almost lost her temper. She wanted to be with him!

After a few minutes, she decided to go to him. Slowly, she crept up to Vincent. Until now, he hadn't noticed her. Vincent had fallen asleep by the campfire.

Carefully, Lisa lay down next to him. His closeness made her dizzy.

Tenderly, she let her hand glide over his chest to his stomach and back again. Lisa leaned over him and kissed him gently. Slowly, Vincent opened his eyes and looked at her, confused.

Vincent: "Lisa, what..." He didn't get any further. Lisa covered his mouth with hers. Vincent wanted to gently pull away so as not to hurt her.

Vincent: "Don't do this... please!" Lisa's breathing had quickened rapidly.

Lisa: "Please, Vincent... don't fight it. I want you... only you... and no one else!" Lisa practically overwhelmed him with all her feelings, so that he finally gave in.

He kissed her, just as she kissed him. Lisa lay on top of him and kissed him passionately. Vincent's hands roamed over her body as if they had never done anything else. She opened her blouse, which she had already half-unbuttoned. Vincent pushed the garment off her shoulders, tossed it carelessly to the side, and turned Lisa onto her back. She put her arms around his neck, pulled him down to her, and took him captive.

Lisa: "Love me, Vincent... sleep with me..."

Suddenly, Vincent stopped. He collected himself. He came to his senses and looked at Lisa strangely.

Lisa: "What is it? Why are you stopping?"

Vincent: "I just can't believe what I'm doing!"

Lisa: "It's okay, Vincent." Lisa tried to convince him and stroked his chest.

Vincent: "No, nothing is right! Why are you doing this, Lisa!"

Lisa: "Because you belong to me, Vincent! That's why!"

Vincent: "Belong to you? Lisa... when we were together, we were teenagers. Do you even realize how long ago that was? Over 20 years... Did you really think I waited for you all those 20 years? We had one year together, and it was wonderful. Then you left without another word. After so many years, you reappear with a ton of problems. You drag Catherine into dangerous situations, then you disappear again. And now you're asking me to leave Catherine? You can't be serious!"

Vincent got dressed and packed his things.

Lisa: "What are you planning?"

Vincent: "What does it look like? I, the idiot, almost fell for you. This can't be happening!"

Lisa: "You can't just leave me here alone!"

Vincent: "You found your way here on your own, so you'll be able to find your way back." Shortly afterward, Vincent disappeared.

Vincent walked all night. Around noon, he entered his father's library and called back. Vincent had been gone for almost three weeks. Father embraced his boy with relief.

Father: "How are you?" Nothing escaped Father's scrutinizing gaze.

Vincent: "Nothing... How is Catherine?"

Father: "Honestly, I don't know. After you left, she left too and hasn't been down here since. All I know is that she wasn't doing very well." Vincent nodded silently.

Vincent: "I'm going to lie down for a while..."

Father: "That's fine..." Father didn't want to rub salt in the wound just yet.

One day, Peter unexpectedly came to the tunnels. He hadn't been seen for ages. When Peter entered the library, Father's eyes lit up. The two men had shared a deep friendship for years.

Father: "Peter, good to see you!" Father walked up to him, took his hand, and hugged his best friend.

Peter: "Good to be back, Jacob. How are you, old friend?" Peter saw a certain sadness in his eyes.

Father: "I'm fine, thank you. I hope you are too."

Peter: "You don't sound very convincing. And to be honest, I'm worried about Catherine." Father leaned back and listened to his words.

Peter continued: "Yesterday I called her office and they told me that Catherine had taken an indefinite leave of absence. I was able to track her down at her apartment. She didn't sound well at all, Jacob. Very sad! When I asked her about Vincent and how things were going, she started to cry and said that she missed him so much. We didn't get any further. I ended the call then."

Father shook his head strangely and rubbed his tired eyes.

Peter: "Do you know anything more about this, Jacob? I've never seen Catherine like this before."

Father: "What I know isn't enough to explain what's going on. I wish it were different. Then maybe I could help them both. But they're keeping quiet and drifting apart. They haven't seen each other for three weeks."

Peter: "What could it be?"

Father: "Well, several weeks ago Lisa showed up here..."

Peter: "Oh dear... I have a bad feeling about this!"

Father: "Is there anything I should know?"

Peter: "Do you remember how Lisa used to chase after him when they were teenagers?"

Father: "I know she used to dance for him..."

Peter: "You'd better continue."

Father: "Like I said, she came here one day and started following him around constantly. Even right in front of us in the kitchen... and not to forget, Catherine was standing right next to him, claiming him for herself. After that, we saw less and less of Vincent. We didn't see him with Catherine anymore either. It got so bad that Vincent suddenly packed his things and disappeared for three weeks. Nobody knew where he went. Catherine has been upstairs ever since."

Peter: "And Lisa?" Father paced around his desk.

Father: "We took Lisa upstairs, along with her things, and forbade her from ever coming back here."

Peter: "Do you think she'll listen?"

Father: "I hope so... If not, I don't know what to say."

Father continued: "Anyway, we have to find a way to get Catherine and Vincent back together."

Peter: "What's the best way to do that? I mean, I know Vincent well enough to know he's not open to discussion. At least not when it comes to personal matters."

Father: "That's right. He can't even talk to me about everything..."

The two men looked at each other helplessly.

Peter: "I can take over Catherine. I'll do it tonight."

As if from nowhere, someone who hadn't been seen in ages was suddenly standing at the library entrance! It was Devin, Jacob's biological son and, in a way, Vincent's half-brother. No one had expected him.

Father: "Devin! Goodness me!" Father jumped up from his chair and hugged his son.

Devin: "This is the kind of welcome I was hoping for. It's good to see you again, Dad. Hello, Peter. I'm sorry I

didn't greet you right away."

Peter: "Don't worry about that. Your father comes first."

Devin: "So? What's new? Where's my little brother? I can't wait to see him."

Peter and his father glanced at each other furtively.

Devin: "Okay, what's going on here!"

In short sentences, Father recounted the past few weeks and the drama that had unfolded. Devin could only shake his head in disbelief.

Father: "I don't know what's happened, Devin. Neither of them is saying a word."

Devin: "No offense, Dad. But if neither Catherine nor Vincent is saying a word about the real problem and isn't confiding in anyone, then they must have good reasons."

Peter: "I have to agree with Devin, Jacob. We can't just meddle in things that don't concern us."

Father: "You're right... Still, we should talk to them."

Peter: "I'll go upstairs to Catherine's. Let's see what I can find out. See you later!"

Father: "Thanks, Peter!"

Devin: "Good, then I'll have a word with my brother!"

Father: "You came at just the right moment, my son. It's good to see you."

Devin: "What are children for, anyway?" Devin managed to coax a smile out of his father and grinned mischievously back.

Devin continued, "I'll go look for him."

After a thorough search, Devin found his stepbrother. As he had been doing for several weeks, Vincent was spending his free time in the gym.

Devin sang joyfully, "Surprise..." Vincent looked around in surprise. A smile flickered across his face.

Vincent said, "Devin. I can't believe it... Nobody was expecting you." The two men approached each other and embraced.

Devin said, "Good to see you, little brother. All alone here in the gym? Nobody can last as long as you, huh?" Vincent smiled sheepishly.

Vincent said, "Joker! A few weights would do you good, big brother! I think you've gotten a bit thinner." The two brothers enjoyed this teasing.

Devin said, "And I see you've gained some muscle mass."

Vincent replied, "It just looks that way," trying to deflect.

Devin: "You should have seen Dad's face when I suddenly appeared at the library entrance. He was just as surprised as you were."

Vincent: "You can say that again. It's good to have you here, Devin."

Devin detected a hint of wistfulness in Vincent's voice.

Devin: "So? Tell me! How are you and Chandler?"

Devin's strange tone led Vincent to suspect that he had already been informed about the events of the past

few weeks. Vincent looked at Devin appraisingly. He knew his stepbrother very well and could see in his eyes that he knew something was going on.

Vincent: "Devin, I can hear from your voice and see in your eyes that you've already been informed. So why are you still asking?"

Devin looked down, embarrassed.

Devin: "Well, I know a few details. When I arrived earlier, I caught Father and Peter having a private conversation. They both looked worried. What I do know is that you two, Catherine and I, haven't spoken or seen each other for weeks. Nobody really knows why. Not Father, not anyone. And it seems Lisa was the trigger."

When Devin mentioned her name, Vincent snorted irritably and turned away from him. Devin gave a barely perceptible nod.

Devin: "Ah yes... judging by your reaction, I guess I'm right."

Devin: "Aren't you going to tell me what's going on?"

Vincent: "Devin, please!" Vincent sounded annoyed.

Devin: "For God's sake, Vincent! You two didn't just break up overnight, can you? Or am I mistaken?" Devin was getting angry.

Vincent: "Just so you calm down... we didn't break up!"

Devin: "Then what did?"

Vincent: "Devin... can't you understand, or won't you? I don't want to talk to anyone about this!"

Devin: "I'm not leaving here until you tell me what happened."

Vincent was about to walk past Devin to leave the hall when Devin grabbed his upper arm. They looked at each other in surprise. Devin saw the pain in Vincent's eyes.

Devin: "I'm your brother, Vincent. We've always confided in each other. Why not now?"

It felt like they had been staring into each other's eyes for minutes. Vincent suddenly hung his head and took a deep, tense breath.

Devin: "I can clearly see there's more to this than meets the eye. You can't fool me, Vincent."

Vincent pulled away from Devin, leaned against a nearby table, and put on his shirt.

Vincent: "What do you want me to say..."

Devin: "You know what I want to know! How did you two drift apart?"

Vincent: "We didn't break up, nor did we grow apart! It all started when Lisa showed up here."

Devin: "In what way?" Vincent took a deep breath.

Vincent: "Lisa came here with one thing in mind... she wanted to be with me. She practically demanded that Catherine leave me to take her place. And she did this in front of Father, Mary, and me! Right in front of Catherine, she tried to seduce me. It even got to the point where Lisa was constantly stalking me. As soon as I was alone, whether in my room or swimming in the evening, she would seek me out, approach me, and try to reason with me over and over again... I don't even know how many times I told her to leave me alone."

Devin: "Why is she so persistent? There's more to it than that."

Vincent: "You're right."

Devin: "Oh, am I?"

Vincent: "When Lisa and I were 16... we were together."

Devin: "What do you mean, together?"

Vincent: "My God, Devin! Do I really have to explain this to you?" Devin's eyes widened.

Devin: "You mean... you... slept together?"

Vincent: "Yes..."

Devin: "And Father?"

Vincent: "He still has no idea, and that's how it's going to stay."

Devin: "Father didn't notice any of this?" He shook his head silently.

Vincent: "All those advances had a certain effect on our relationship. When I was with Catherine, when she touched me or hugged me, I saw Lisa in my mind's eye."

Devin: "Lisa was pressuring you so much that it became uncomfortable for you."

Vincent: "I couldn't take it anymore... I want to be with Catherine."

Devin: "Did you talk to Catherine about it?"

Vincent: "Yes. And to my surprise, she was going through something similar at the time."

Devin: "What?"

Vincent: "Before we met, Catherine was in a committed relationship. After her accident, she broke up with her boyfriend and came to live with me. To this day, he hasn't gotten over Catherine leaving him. Well, by chance, they ran into each other again. Catherine went to lunch with him a few times, and like Lisa did with me, he wouldn't leave her alone. He waited for her, constantly called her at home, and so on. That day, I told her I was going to be gone for a few days. As expected, Father and Mary showed up and bombarded us with questions."

Devin: "Did you tell them anything?"

Vincent: "Not much. I just left. Father had Lisa and her things brought upstairs."

Devin: "Were you at least able to think everything over?"

Vincent: "At first, yes... until Lisa found me!"

Devin: "I think you were far away?"

Vincent: "I was too. Or so I thought."

Devin: "And?"

Vincent: "She was looking for me... found me, however she managed it, and one late evening she... surprised me, so to speak... while I was asleep, had me wrapped around her little finger, and..." He didn't finish.

Devin: "You didn't...together..."

Vincent: "No, thank God we didn't take the final step... but it was a close call. I'll be honest!" Astonished by these words, Devin looked at his brother and breathed a deep, relieved breath.

Devin: "Why are we men so easily seduced?"

Vincent: "Women know exactly how it's done."

Devin: "And Catherine? What about her?"

Vincent: "I don't know. We haven't seen each other since our last conversation. We wanted to give ourselves time."

Devin: "Wouldn't it be about time, Vincent... for you... to go see her?"

Vincent: "Yes... I just don't know what to say to her."

Devin: "Just let it happen. That's easier said than done, I know... but... you two need to talk, Vincent. This can't go on. You're growing apart!"

Vincent didn't reply. Lost in thought, he turned away from Devin, silently agreeing.

At the same time, Peter stood outside Catherine's apartment door and knocked. When she hesitantly opened it, a pair of pitiful eyes peered out. Peter entered her apartment, immediately took Catherine in his arms, held her tightly, and tried to comfort her.

Sitting together on the couch, Peter tried to get to the bottom of things. But just like Vincent, Catherine wouldn't say a word about it. She had to be coaxed into giving him every word, stammering and hemming. Catherine was now standing at her balcony door, staring absently out into the darkness.

Peter said, "Catherine, please. We're all very worried about you. I'm worried!" he emphasized.

Peter continued, "I solemnly promised your parents I would always look after you, even if it was just heartbreak." At the word "heartbreak," a small smile flickered across her face, and she turned to Peter. Suddenly, she broke her silence. In short sentences, she described the problems that Lisa had brought with her and Vincent.

Catherine said, "She stalked him, ambushed him. She tried everything to get physically close to him. This went on for several weeks. At first, I didn't notice anything. But gradually, Vincent stopped allowing any affection. Even when we kissed, he held back."

Catherine said, "I can reassure you about one thing, Peter."

He looked at her in surprise.

Catherine continued: "Vincent and I didn't break up, if that's what you meant by heartbreak."

Peter nodded silently.

Peter: "Have you talked to him about it?"

Catherine: "Yes, that's how I know. Vincent told me that he... saw Lisa in his mind every time we were together. That was also the reason why he left for so long. He just couldn't take it anymore!"

Peter: "When did you last see each other?" She thought hard.

Catherine: "Three or four weeks... It feels like an eternity, Peter. I miss Vincent so much I can hardly sleep."

Peter: "It seems Vincent feels the same way you do." Catherine looked at him with wide eyes.

Catherine: "Is Vincent back?"

Peter: "Yes, but don't ask me since when. You hardly ever see him. According to Father, he avoids everyone as much as possible." Catherine stood up abruptly and grabbed her jacket. Peter looked at her in surprise.

Peter: "You're not going downstairs now, are you? Do you even know what time it is?"

Catherine: "It's almost 1:00 a.m., and I know Vincent is still awake at this hour." She waved her arms in front of Peter's face.

Peter: "Catherine, please be sensible. Going to Central Park at this hour is dangerous."

Catherine: "Peter, I long for Vincent so much. I want to see him, talk to him..." She was speechless, but Peter understood.

Peter: "Then let me come downstairs with you." Catherine agreed, relieved.

In a flash, Peter and Catherine left the apartment, took the elevator to the reception lobby, rushed outside, and were on their way to Central Park. Peter was struggling to keep up with Catherine. He often asked her to slow down. In vain! After all, he wasn't getting any younger, as he was beginning to realize.

Just before Catherine reached the tunnel entrance in Central Park, she heard two familiar male voices. She stopped abruptly. This suited Peter just fine. He was completely out of breath. After listening more closely, Catherine recognized the voices. They were Devin and Vincent's! Catherine jumped out from behind the tree and slowly walked towards them. Until now, Devin and Vincent hadn't noticed anything. They were so engrossed in their conversation. Devin looked around and suddenly saw Catherine. He stopped, wide-eyed, grabbed Vincent by the upper arm, and silently pointed in her direction. Vincent followed Devin's meaningful gaze... and there she was... Catherine.

As if in a trance, Vincent walked towards her. Catherine's eyes filled with tears. Now she realized even more how much she had actually missed him. More than she had known.

Their steps quickened until they fell into each other's arms. Catherine and Vincent held each other for what seemed like an eternity. Catherine let her tears flow freely.

Peter and Devin nodded to each other in silent smiles of greeting. The two of them kept their distance, making sure no strangers came near. They felt like two secret bodyguards.

Again and again, they kissed deeply and passionately. Catherine ran her fingers through his hair several times, holding his head firmly.

Vincent buried his face in her hair, kissing her neck gently. When they finally broke apart, they gazed at each other intently, almost expectantly. Catherine stroked his face.

Catherine: "I missed you so much," she broke the silence first. Silent tears of emotion streamed down her cheeks again. Vincent gently brushed away each one.

Vincent: "I missed you too. Very much so... Come, let's go for a walk." Vincent's voice was just a whisper. A whisper that Catherine loved so much about him. Especially when he read to her.

Vincent gave Devin and Peter a silent signal. He was letting them know that they wanted to be alone and talk in peace. They didn't need to be asked twice.

While Catherine and Vincent walked silently side by side for the time being, Peter and Devin patted each other on the back, verbally.

Devin: "I think we made a bit of history today." Peter smiled.

Peter: "How on earth did you manage to get through to Vincent? I mean... Jacob and Mary tried to talk to him several times. Without success. He wouldn't even listen to them."

Devin: "Peter... you know, Vincent and I grew up together. I've looked after him all these years. We're more than just brothers! We confide in each other about everything. No matter how bad it is or whatever. It took him a while to open up to me, but he did."

Peter: "You can be proud of that, Devin. There are very few people Vincent confides in." Devin looked at Peter, a little embarrassed, and smiled.

Devin: "I know..."

They couldn't break the news to Father yet. At this ungodly hour, even he wasn't awake anymore.

Meanwhile, Catherine and Vincent walked through Central Park, hugging each other tightly. They came to a small pond in the park and stopped. Still speechless, Vincent turned to her. Dreamily, he stroked Catherine's face. She took his large, strong hand, pressed it firmly against her cheek, and closed her eyes.

Vincent hugged Catherine tightly. Still, neither of them said a word. But eventually, they had to! And so Vincent made the first move... He gently pulled away from her, looked deep into her eyes.

Vincent: "We should talk..." It was like a whisper.

Catherine lowered her gaze.

Catherine: "Yes, I know..." They looked at each other seriously.

Catherine continued: "I just don't know where to begin."

Vincent: "You're in the same boat as me. Okay, then... I'll ask you straight out. What happened with Tom?"
Catherine searched for words.

Catherine: "We went out a few times. One evening he walked me all the way back to my apartment. There he kissed me and... well, he wanted more. He desperately wanted me back. I told him what I thought and kicked him out."

Vincent nodded silently and thoughtfully.

Catherine: "What about you?" Vincent turned away from her and took a few steps toward the pond.
Catherine stepped behind him.

Vincent: "A few days after I packed my things and disappeared, she came looking for me... She found me!"

Catherine: "And..." Tears welled up in Catherine's eyes.

Vincent: "One night she crept up on me and... seduced me."

Catherine: "Did you sleep together?" At that moment, he looked back at Catherine.

Vincent: "No... but it almost happened. I only realized it when she told me she wanted to sleep with me."

Now, tears of relief streamed down Catherine's face. She went to him and took him in her arms. There, she let her tears flow freely. Vincent held her as tightly as he could. They had confided in each other. This was the greatest act of trust, and a great burden had been lifted from them.

After a long nighttime walk, Catherine and Vincent returned to the tunnel system of New York City. Lying together on Vincent's bed, they discussed what had happened in the past few weeks. They didn't fall asleep until early morning.

A few hours later, when Catherine and Vincent appeared in Father's library, he couldn't believe his eyes. With a broad smile, he got up, went over to them, and embraced them.

Father said, "Whatever happened... I hope you've sorted it out." Neither of them answered. Otherwise, Father would have bombarded them with countless questions. Nevertheless, they wondered what would happen with Lisa.

A few days later, Peter came by to check on things. He sat in the common room with Father, Mary, Catherine, and Vincent. Peter had spent the last few days thinking a lot about the problem with Lisa. Separately, he had spoken at length with a psychologist. He described Lisa's behavior toward Vincent. Of course, he didn't mention any names!

The psychologist classified this intrusive and unreasonable behavior as very deliberate. He also pointed out to Peter that things could get worse. These people were capable of anything. They would even readily hurt those they desired, just to be close to them.

Peter had suspected something like this and wanted to be sure. His colleague strongly advised him to get Lisa psychological help.

These revelations gave them pause. Shocked, they looked at each other. No one dared to speak. Catherine took Vincent's hand and held it tightly. She was afraid for him. Vincent, on the other hand, couldn't bear the silence any longer and went for a long walk.

Mary said, "We absolutely must keep our eyes and ears open."

Father: "Easier said than done. We can't watch Vincent around the clock. It's impossible. He needs his space."

Peter: "Lisa grew up down here. She knows every nook and cranny, every path..."

Father: "We can only hope she's finally given up." Catherine shook her head and looked at her father.

Catherine: "Lisa won't give up that easily, Father. She won't rest until she gets what she wants."

Mary: "Then we'll be prepared."

Peter: "How will you prepare, Mary? You don't know what she'll do next. Especially not when or how..."

Devin arrived at that moment.

Devin: "All we can do is wait and see what happens. Even if I were to search for her upstairs and find her, there's nothing we could do about her."

Peter: "Devin is right. Even though the psychologist strongly advised me to put her in psychological treatment, I can only force her to go if she - this sounds terrible - harms him or someone else. Catherine, you'll have to agree with me on that. You, as the prosecutor, know that too."

Catherine agreed resignedly.

Catherine: "Peter is right. There's nothing we can do before then."

Devin: "So we wait until Lisa hurts Vincent. That can't be true! It's so absurd! Where's the logic in that? Can someone explain it to me?" These words came from a despairing Devin.

The group sat together for quite some time, discussing what to do. But a sensible solution was nowhere in sight.

The days passed. To the delight of all the residents, Catherine and Vincent were together more often again. The two were seen at the reflecting pond, swimming, or with Father in the library. Catherine spent every night with Vincent. She didn't want to leave him alone overnight for a single moment. Her fear was too great that Lisa would seize the opportunity.

And as if Catherine had sensed it, Lisa appeared in the tunnels one night. No one had noticed her coming and going. She made a quick detour into Vincent's room and saw him lying in bed with Catherine. Jealousy surged through her. This was an image she couldn't bear. Silently, she crept out of his room. An idea came to her!

As silently as she had entered and left Vincent's room, she did the same with her father. His room was divided into two areas: the living area, where his bed, wardrobe, bookshelves, and a small desk stood, and

the medical area. There, she found a medicine cabinet, various medical books, and so on. Quietly, Lisa opened the cabinet containing the medications, read the labels on all the bottles and vials, and discovered two small containers with Vincent's name on them. These were color-coded. Lisa couldn't decipher what was written on them. Her father's handwriting was typical of a doctor! Barely legible! Lisa wondered what would happen if Vincent, while healthy, were given one of these capsules. If he lost his memory again, the way would be clear for her. She quietly took two capsules from each container, put them in her jacket pocket, and disappeared into the darkness.

Lisa hadn't been seen for three weeks, and her hope that she might have finally given up grew stronger every day. In the tunnels, everything proceeded as usual. The relationship between Catherine and Vincent had also solidified. After some initial difficulties, they finally found each other when Father arranged a reading evening.

The community had gathered one evening in the library. The best seats were already taken when Catherine and Vincent arrived. They were left with the vantage point above the gallery, where Father kept his best books.

Vincent leaned casually against the railing. Catherine was close to him, at his side. Father was reading *"Romeo and Juliet"* by William Shakespeare. Everyone present knew the play only too well. They had already studied it in class and discussed it in detail. At certain passages, Catherine gazed dreamily up at Vincent, scooting closer and closer to him. At a particularly sentimental moment, she snuggled completely against Vincent, looked up at him again, and lost herself in his azure eyes. Vincent placed his hands on her hips and turned Catherine toward him. He pulled her to the back of the gallery, out of sight of the others. For a while, they simply gazed at each other, caressing each other's faces, until they grew closer, kissing and caressing each other tenderly.

After two hours, Father, as is well known, took a break from reading to warm his vocal cords. Shortly before he resumed reading, Catherine and Vincent slipped unnoticed from the library.

Cuddled close together, they went to Vincent's room, closed the entrance with a curtain, and lit a few candles. In their light, they spent a passionate evening and an exciting night. Their bond was renewed.

A few days later...

It was finally the weekend again. Catherine had just arrived at the tunnels when her father and Vincent crossed paths. Joyfully, she slipped into his arms and kissed him tenderly. Father watched with an embarrassed smile.

Together, the three of them went to Father's library. Vincent, as usual, took a cup of tea from the thermos and sat down at the table with Father. Catherine stood opposite them, talking about her disastrous day at the law firm. Father and Vincent smiled at each other several times. They only ever saw this kind of distraction from Mouse.

While Catherine poured her heart out, Vincent helped himself to a second cup of tea. When he had finished this cup as well and was about to put it down, he felt hot and dizzy. His glowing face caught Father's attention. Father's brow furrowed. Since Catherine was standing opposite him, she looked at him, puzzled.

Catherine: "Father, what..." She followed Father's worried gaze toward Vincent. When she looked at Vincent, her breath caught in her throat.

Father: "Vincent..." At that moment, Vincent dropped the cup and fell to the floor. He leaned against a nearby table and braced himself with his hands. Catherine was immediately at his side, but didn't know what to do. Father immediately checked his pulse. It was racing...

Catherine: "Vincent? Please say something." Vincent's heart was beating so fast and loudly that Father and Catherine could hear it. The blood was rushing in his ears so loudly he thought his head would burst.

Father: "Can you talk?" Vincent began to tremble and shook his head in a negative tone. His breathing quickened by the minute when suddenly Lisa stood at the door.

Surprised by her presence, Father looked up.

Father: "Lisa, this is a terrible time to cause trouble."

Lisa: "I disagree! So far, everything is going according to plan."

Father: "I must have misheard!"

Lisa: "No, you didn't." Lisa remained perfectly calm, her gaze drifting to Vincent, who was clearly unwell.

Catherine: "What have you done?" Now Vincent also looked at Lisa.

Lisa: "Let's put it this way: if Vincent loses his memory again, the way is clear for me. He won't give Catherine another thought."

Father: "Oh God... what have you given him!" Triumphant, she took two capsules from her jacket pocket, which Father immediately recognized. He himself had marked them with a specific color.

Lisa: "I just happened to find something in your medicine cabinet that dissolves very easily in warm liquid." She placed the two remaining capsules on the table. Catherine stared at them, unable to believe it.

Catherine: "Father, what did she give him?"

Father: "Which of the capsules did you put in the tea?"

Lisa: "Both..." Father's face changed from furiously red to deathly pale.

Father: "Both? You gave him both capsules, whole?"

Catherine: "Father, tell me now what she gave him!"

Father: "Later! We have to get him to the infirmary immediately!" But they didn't get the chance. Vincent pushed himself away from the table and paced erratically around the room. One growl after another escaped his throat. He clenched his hands into fists and shook his mane. Suddenly, he dropped to his knees, his breathing uneven. Father and Catherine were instantly at his side. He wouldn't let them near him.

Vincent: "Don't come any closer... I don't know... how... how long I can... control myself." It was incredibly difficult for Vincent to speak.

When Jamie unexpectedly entered, she was filled with dread. This scene was a shock to her. Father snapped her out of her thoughts.

Father: "Jamie! Run to Peter as fast as you can! Tell him it's about Vincent! It's an emergency! Run!" She didn't need to be told twice and started running.

Vincent tried to stand several times, but because he was having trouble breathing and could barely get any air, he had partially lost his bearings. Cold sweat trickled down his face.

Catherine: "What were you thinking, Lisa?"

Lisa: "You know what I was thinking. Soon Vincent will be mine again!"

Father: "With what you gave him, you could kill him!" Father shouted at Lisa. From that moment on,

Catherine saw a certain uncertainty in Lisa's eyes. Lisa hadn't thought of that.

Lisa: "Kill him? I don't want to kill him!" she tried to defend herself.

Father: "You should have thought of that sooner!"

Catherine looked at him, horrified. Father's words had made her realize how dire Vincent's condition was.

Catherine and Father exchanged silent glances. In his eyes, she could see that Father feared for Vincent's life.

Catherine: "What can we do, Father?" She was desperate. Vincent's growling was growing louder and more intense. His alter ego seemed ready! Ready to take up this fight!

Father: "Nothing at all... We can only watch and wait."

Catherine: "What? Surely you can give him something!" Father shook his head.

Father: "In his condition, and with what Lisa gave him, any medication would be his instant death..."

Catherine was beside herself with fear.

She couldn't dwell on the thought for long. Vincent was about to leave the library. His instincts told him to descend into the lower tunnels and let off steam. Father and Catherine could clearly see in Vincent's face how much he had to restrain himself from smashing everything to bits. Vincent headed purposefully toward the library exit, where Lisa was still standing. He tried to walk past her without a second thought, but she grabbed his arm. In his state, he couldn't stand that at all. With a jerk, he grabbed Lisa by the neck, pushed her against the rock wall, and growled menacingly at her. Lisa thought she had him back and smiled. His expression betrayed something else. Vincent moved very close to her. Catherine and Father held their breath. What would happen?

Lisa: "Come back to me, Vincent!" His voice trembling, he replied:

Vincent: "For... what you did... you will pay...for a lifetime!" He loosened his grip and disappeared into the darkness.

Father immediately summoned two guards who took Lisa into custody. Mary followed closely behind, making sure Lisa stayed where she had been taken.

After Mary returned to the library, a great sense of helplessness set in.

Mary: "Mouse has followed Vincent. He's keeping an eye on him."

Father: "Well, there's nothing more we can do right now. Leaving him unsupervised would be a fatal mistake. Going near him would be sheer suicide." Father sat at his desk, his face buried in his hands.

Catherine: "Can you tell me now which medication Lisa gave Vincent?"

Mary, who hadn't witnessed this dramatic sequence of events from the beginning, listened intently.

Mary: "This outburst of rage wasn't natural?"

Father: "No! Lisa... at some point... stole two different medications from my medicine cabinet."

Mary: "Which ones..." She felt uneasy. She knew, as did Father and Catherine, that Vincent reacted to medication differently than a normal person.

Father: "A sedative that Vincent gets when his other side tries to take over. The other medication, you already know about it, Catherine. I used it on Vincent about two years ago when all his vital functions had stopped. I used it to stimulate his circulation. A kind of stimulant."

Catherine: "Yes, I remember. You injected it into him." Father took one of the capsules that Lisa placed on

the table in his hand.

Father: "That's right. But this single capsule contains enough of this medication to sedate Vincent several times. The powder inside is portioned out by Peter or me as needed and diluted with saline solution. Lisa gave him a full dose of both medications." Mary and Catherine covered their faces with their hands.

Catherine: "That means we have to be prepared for anything."

Father: "Absolutely anything, without exception." The atmosphere was extremely tense.

After a good hour, Peter came running down the stairs. He saw three worried faces. He had his medical bag with him and placed it on a nearby chair.

Father described the situation to his longtime friend and colleague. Catherine had known Peter for ages. After all, he had been present at her birth and was a close friend of the family. But on this day, she saw a new expression on his face. An expression of worry, fear, and helplessness. Just like Father, Peter was of the opinion that Vincent should not be given any more medication.

Peter: "She actually managed to do it!"

Father: "No one noticed anything."

Mary: "We should pack a few things and be near Vincent." Mary sounded determined.

Catherine: "You're speaking my mind, Mary. I'd feel so much better if I were near him, Father. I don't care if it might be dangerous." She looked pleadingly at Peter.

The two men looked at each other for a moment, nodded silently, and went to the infirmary. Peter, Mary, and Father packed some medical supplies.

The group of four hadn't been walking long when they heard footsteps. Out of the darkness, they could make out three people. It was William the Tunnel Cook and Pascal. To their surprise, they were supporting Vincent, who could still walk but seemed very weak. Mouse, who was near Vincent, ran after them. When he saw Father, he squeezed past Pascal.

Mouse: "Father! We've got Vincent here! Came to me all by himself...Mouse wasn't supposed to call anyone." Father stroked Mouse's mop of hair and reassured him.

Father: "It's all right, Mouse. You did the right thing." Peter had meanwhile approached Vincent. Catherine stood behind him.

Peter: "How are you feeling, my boy?" But he was unable to answer. Father took his pulse, felt his head. He could feel some scratches on Vincent's face and bruises.

Father: "Take him to the infirmary. It's too dark here." William and Pascal did as Father said and carried the increasingly weak Vincent to the infirmary.

Vincent was put to bed and thoroughly examined by Peter and Father. Peter took a blood sample to determine how much of both medications remained in his system. He endured everything without a flicker of emotion.

To stabilize Vincent's circulation, an IV of saline solution was administered. Catherine sat on the other side of the bed and gently stroked his face. Vincent gazed at her as if in a trance, repeatedly opening and closing his eyes.

Father: "The sedative seems to be mostly working."

Catherine: "Is that a good sign?" Her question was extremely cautious.

Father: "Not necessarily..." He sounded worried.

Peter: "To be on the safe side, we should keep an eye on his breathing and heart rate." At that moment, something happened that Father had feared from the beginning. When Peter checked his breathing, he noticed that it was becoming shallower and more irregular by the minute.

Peter: "Jacob! We need to get him upstairs immediately!"

Before Father could reply, Catherine whispered to Peter.

Catherine: "Peter! Take Vincent upstairs? We can't just take him to a hospital!" She was beside herself.

Father: "Catherine, please calm down. Peter has all the necessary equipment in his practice."

Peter: "I have a small hospital upstairs in my practice. I'll explain everything to you later, sweetheart. We need to get him to my practice immediately." She hastily agreed. Vincent had lost consciousness in the meantime. Time was of the essence.

William and two other men had carefully placed Vincent on a stretcher. After a long walk, they reached the freight elevator, which ended in a disused warehouse. Peter parked his small van there when he visited his tunnel friends. The men carefully moved the patient into the van, stabilizing everything around him.

While Peter started the vehicle with Catherine in the passenger seat, Father watched over Vincent's condition. Mary was at his side, assisting him as best she could. William and Joseph were also there to carry Vincent into the practice.

Half an hour later...

Peter's van turned onto a deserted street and approached a secluded house. He drove around the house to the back entrance. William and Josef gripped the stretcher firmly, brought Vincent into Peter's office, and gently laid him on the bed for further examination.

Father sent Catherine and the others outside. Peter asked her to bring the two men back inside. At first, she didn't want to leave Vincent's side, but Peter assured her that there was nothing she could do for him for the time being.

Catherine set off immediately with William and Josef. She wanted to be back with Vincent as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, Father and Peter had another problem. Vincent's condition was deteriorating rapidly. He had stopped breathing. He had to be intubated and put on a ventilator. Monitoring electrodes were attached all over his body and connected to all the necessary equipment. The two doctors didn't want to take any risks. The situation was too serious.

Father stayed by Vincent's bedside until Catherine returned, while Peter analyzed the blood he drew.

When Catherine arrived at Peter's office later, the sight of Vincent's condition was horrifying. Father explained to her in broad strokes what had happened in her absence, including that it could take some time before Vincent regained consciousness. Even if his body completely metabolized the medication, he would still need to recover from the shock. According to the blood tests, the sedative was the predominant drug. The stimulant seemed to have been almost completely neutralized. Peter and his father couldn't explain it. Vincent's body simply reacted differently.

The next day, Peter arranged a meeting with the psychologist he had already informed about Lisa. Together with Catherine, Peter got Lisa out of the tunnels. All her pleading and begging was to no avail. They both knew she was putting on an act. Undeterred, they took her to the car and went directly to Peter's colleagues.

After an intense conversation with Lisa, the psychologist assessed her personality as severely disturbed. He deemed it best to place Lisa in the clinic for observation for a period of time.

The days passed...

Vincent's condition changed daily. One day they were overjoyed that things were improving, the next their hopes of Vincent ever recovering plummeted. The fever came and went.

His father and Catherine stayed by his side day and night. Catherine even managed to persuade her boss, Joe Maxwell, to let her take her work home with her. At a desk next to Vincent's bed, Catherine worked through her files and was able to spend every free minute with her beloved.

Father drew blood from his foster son every day and analyzed it. He was reassured to see that his blood test results were steadily improving.

Catherine asked, "And? What are his blood test results?" She sat on the edge of Vincent's bed, stroking his face. She still felt uneasy whenever Catherine touched the ventilator.

Peter: "If that's the case, Cathy, things are looking good. I just hope the shock wasn't too much for Vincent."

Catherine: "It won't just be the shock of the medication, Peter. The last few months have been pure hell for Vincent."

Peter patted her hand affectionately and put his arm around her.

Catherine: "Do you think Vincent won't need a ventilator much longer?"

Father: "Hard to say, Catherine. He's very weak. As you said, it's not just the medication, but also what happened weeks and months before."

One day, around noon, Catherine couldn't believe her eyes. Vincent was lying there with his eyes open. She went to his bed, sat on the edge, and spoke to him. But Vincent didn't respond. Father overheard this. He also spoke to his foster son in a calm voice. Just like with Catherine, there was no reaction. Catherine looked at Father, her face filled with fear.

Catherine: "What does this mean, Father?" Tears welled up in her eyes.

Father: "According to the readings I'm seeing here, Vincent seems to be in the awakening phase."

Catherine: "Awakening phase? Father! That... that's wonderful!"

She threw her arms around her father in joy. Catherine moved very close to Vincent. She looked into his empty, open eyes and talked to him incessantly, always hoping he would hear her.

Catherine: "Vincent... wake up. Come back to me," she whispered to him, stroking his thick mane of hair and his face.

This state lasted for several days. During the day, Vincent had his eyes open, and at night, they closed them. As if in a trance, he stared at the ceiling without any movement, even though he was spoken to again and again. Catherine often read to Vincent from a book — books he knew very well and discussed with her when they were together.

On a sunny Saturday, Catherine sat by Vincent's bed as usual, reading to him. The evening before, Peter had removed the ventilator from Vincent. He had built up enough strength to breathe on his own. The readings had remained stable and unchanged. Therefore, he could risk taking this chance. He would be proven right. While Catherine read, losing track of time, Vincent subconsciously heard many birds chirping and leaves rustling in the trees.

The sounds grew louder and more real. Vincent also heard someone talking. The voice was familiar. Was he dreaming? Should he dare to open his eyes?

Catherine noticed a change in Vincent and put her book down. She saw that Vincent was moving his eyes restlessly. Her heart pounded with excitement.

Catherine: "Vincent? Vincent... it's me, Catherine. Can you hear me? Vincent... wake up... please wake up. I need you."

She called his name several times, talking to him. Then two tired, azure eyes looked at her.

Catherine: "Vincent... good morning." She whispered to him with tears in her eyes. She took his hand in hers and held it tightly, stroked his face, and kissed his forehead.

Peter no longer heard Catherine's voice and wondered why she wasn't reading to him anymore. When he entered the room where Vincent lay, his heart leaped. He hurried to the two of them and stood behind Catherine. Vincent was struggling to keep his eyes open. He would wake up one moment, then quickly fall back asleep.

Peter: "I'll examine Vincent when he's fully awake."

Catherine: "Okay..."

As soon as Father returned and heard the news, he couldn't wait to go back to his foster son's bedside.

That evening, Vincent regained consciousness again. It was already dark outside.

Catherine: "Hey..."

Vincent: "Hey..." His voice was barely audible. It sounded like a scratchy whisper. Vincent clutched his throat.

Catherine: "Are you all right?" She sounded worried.

Vincent: "My voice..."

Catherine: "Don't worry, your voice will come back soon. You had to be on a ventilator for a while. How are you feeling otherwise?"

Vincent: "Pretty good... I think."

Father and Peter came over, examined him, and asked a few questions.

Vincent: "Where am I?" He was a little confused.

Peter: "Calm down, everything's fine. You're in my office." Vincent looked at him in disbelief.

Father: "We had to bring you here, my boy. Your condition was more than serious. Peter has the necessary equipment here in his office."

Vincent: "What actually happened?"

Catherine: "You don't remember anything?" Vincent tried hard to recall.

Vincent: "I don't know..."

Father: "What's the last thing you remember?" He thought for a moment.

Vincent: "We were in the library... I can't say anything more."

In short sentences, Father told him what had happened. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. Judging by Peter and Catherine's faces, what Father was telling him seemed to be true.

Vincent: "Where is she now?"

Peter: "She's in a special clinic. They can help her there." Vincent nodded silently.

The next morning was like a miracle for Vincent. His strength had returned enough that he wanted to walk. Lost in thought, Vincent stood at the window of his hospital room. He had often spent weekends with Catherine at her apartment, watching the sunrise and sunset with her and standing on her balcony in the daylight.

Behind Peter's house, there was only a large meadow, and beyond that, a wooded area. No high-rises, no crowds, no cars. The birds flew from branch to branch.

Catherine quietly snuggled up to Vincent and held him close. Together, they stood at the window, looking outside.

Catherine: "I'm so happy you're back with me, Vincent."

Vincent: "I can hardly remember anything that happened after that."

Catherine: "That's a good thing."

Vincent: "Yes, that way I can finally put everything behind me."

Vincent hugged Catherine tightly. After endless, fear-filled days, they were together again. Tenderly, Vincent took the first step and kissed Catherine. For her, it was like her first kiss. She had butterflies in her stomach.

Vincent got better every day. One evening, Father, Catherine, and Vincent packed their things and put them in Peter's van. While Peter drove his friend Jacob to the tunnel community, Catherine and Vincent decided to walk.

Vincent couldn't sit or lie down. He had to move! They walked for about an hour. They talked about what had been and what was to come. When they reached the bottom of the tunnels, they were breathless!

The community arranged a warm welcome for Vincent.

THE END