

Where Life Begins And Love Never Ends

(a sequel to 'Don't Give Up')

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Note: Some lines were taken from the episode 'Invictus' from the series 'Beauty and the Beast' written by George R.R. Martin.

With quick long strides and his dark veil ruffling behind him like wings, Vincent was leading the way to the tunnel exit below Central Park. Following him were Pascal, Cullen, Edward and Joseph; the men he had chosen from the many who had volunteered to go with him on his son's rescue mission that night.

When Father had called the Council and the tunnel folks just a few hours before, he didn't need to explain twice how dangerous the mission was going to be. And at the same time, he didn't need to wait for more than a few seconds after he had asked if there were any volunteers - men were lifting hands all around him immediately.

Deeply loved and respected by anyone for many years, Vincent, as by now was also Catherine, no one in the study had hesitated to lend a helping hand that late afternoon, no matter what dangers were awaiting them. Vincent had risked his life countless times in the years before, to protect the tunnel dwellers. So now, when it was he who needed their help the most, everyone was more than eager to stand by his side and face the darkness with him.

Vincent was truly touched, and although he gave them still the option not to follow him, as he didn't want to threaten their lives, it was no use. In the end, he had picked Pascal (one of his oldest and best friends; not the strongest of men, but clever and fast in reactions), Cullen (fast and strong) and Edward and Joseph (both strongly built and they both had been boxers in their past).

As they were all walking through the tunnels now, none of them spoke. Each of them was deep in thoughts.

Vincent was trying to focus on his son's emotions through the weak bond between them. For days now, he was feeling the baby's unrest, his strength slowly fading away from the tiny body his father hadn't ever seen and yet, felt so close to.

He needs me; I know he needs me, just like he needs his mother.... That's why he's fading away...

Vincent was growing impatient and was almost running by now when suddenly, someone bumped into him.

"Mouse!" he exclaimed, catching the boy in his arms to avoid his fall at the collision.

"Mouse go with Vincent! Vincent needs Mouse!"

Looking into his dear friend's determined eyes, Vincent's voice softened when he spoke, still holding Mouse by his arms. His companions were watching the exchange silently.

"Mouse... It will be too dangerous for you to go with me; you must stay at home," he said.

The boy tried to stand his ground.

"Vincent is Mouse's friend, Catherine is Mouse's friend! So, Vincent and Catherine's baby is Mouse's friend and needs Mouse!"

Vincent felt like weeping from the love his friend displayed.

"Mouse...", he spoke softly. "I need you to do something for me."

"Mouse will do anything for Vincent," the boy said with pride.

Vincent smiled, and then his look turned serious.

"If I don't.... If anything bad should happen to me, I need you to take care of Catherine and the baby if it finds its way down here.... Will you do this for me, Mouse?"

The boy stood quiet for a moment, staring into Vincent's eyes before he comprehended the meaning of his friend's words. Fear was written all over his face, but when he felt his eyes welling up, he blinked, straightened his back and said with determination.

"Vincent can be sure Mouse will take care of Vincent's Catherine and baby. Mouse always keeps his word!"

The warmest of smiles appeared on Vincent's face as he stroked his dear friend's hair in an almost fatherly way.

"Thank you, I know I can trust you, my friend." His eyes were glistening.

Then he took a deep breath, exhaled loudly and turned away to continue in his journey.

When Vincent and his friends had disappeared out of sight behind the tunnel bend, Mouse wiped away a tear from his cheek.

It was just before 10.30 pm when Vincent and his friends arrived at the Central Park entrance. When Vincent pulled the lever of the steel door. Joe and Diana were standing on the other side.

Joe looked impatient and slightly nervous, but determined. Diana was, as always, calm and focused, with a serious expression on her face. She couldn't help but shiver momentarily when she spotted Vincent illuminated by the orange glow floating from the tunnel behind him. *Just stop it, Bennett, focus on the task*, she berated herself immediately.

"There is a hidden entrance to the mansion from its basement. Father found it on one of the older maps. That mansion was built in the early 20th century. If we are lucky, it should still be there. That is probably the only way how to access the mansion without being seen," Vincent said.

"Yes, according to the city records, the mansion was built by an infamous criminal of that time. At least we know why it's so attractive to Gabriel," Diana added.

Joe scratched his head. "What do we do if the entrance isn't there anymore?" he asked.

Vincent looked at him determined. "Then we make one."

Something in the way Vincent said the words, and the resolve in his eyes, made Joe understand the meaning of his words immediately.

"Right...," he said, transfixed by Vincent's eyes. His sixth sense was telling him he was about to witness so much more that night than he had bargained for.

"Once we get there," Vincent continued. "We will split; we must disarm everyone in our way as safely and as noiselessly as possible, in order not to attract attention - and be able to find my son..."

He stopped speaking and looked around at all of them.

"You can still go back if you wish." He waited if anyone had changed their minds. But it seemed no one had, as his friends were still.

"All right. Are you ready then?"

Everyone nodded.

"Follow me."

They were walking for almost forty minutes, with none of them saying anything.

Joe was amazed at how Vincent could move in what seemed to him as an identical set of tunnels and tunnel junctions, knowing perfectly well where he was going. The labyrinth was endless, and Joe thought this would be a perfect hideaway for criminals. He felt lucky that Vincent and his people were not on the side of the darkness.

Diana's eyes were following Vincent, and she was trying to clear her mind of every thought that might distract her, focusing only on the anticipation of the task ahead of them.

Vincent's mind was focused, though his mind was switching constantly between the bond with his son and his bond with Catherine. The love and courage he felt coming from her were calming him, but the fear and aloneness he was feeling from his child were making his vision go red at times. How dared Gabriel do this to a baby?! How dared he do this to Catherine?! No, there was no going back now, even if it was the last thing he was to do on this Earth...

Finally, the company stopped at a heavy wooden door in the wall.

"So, it *is* here," Joe said, deep inside a bit disappointed for missing Vincent in the act of literal breaking and entering.

Vincent tried to push the door but couldn't move it. "It seems it's locked from the other side," he said. "Move back."

They all did as he said. With a powerful blow of his strong hands and a roar, which made Joe jump, Vincent broke through the door, shattering most of it to splinters.

Everyone stood still; they all have seen Vincent in this state before. Everyone but Joe.

The attorney's mouth opened in awe and respect. Strangely, he wasn't afraid at all. He was just mind-blown how a man could possess such strength.

"Nice of Vincent for not leaving you disappointed," Diana whispered in his ear with a bemused smile. Her watchful eyes had noticed Joe's reaction to Vincent's words before they started their journey. She knew very well what he was excited about.

They all remained quiet and vigilant for a few minutes until Vincent spoke quietly. "It seems we have been lucky, and no one heard... the noise."

Pascal smiled briefly. "I think we should split into groups before we set out to search the house," he said quietly.

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "You go with Joe and Edward. Diana will go with Cullen and Joseph. I'll go first."

"You can't go alone; someone has to back you up...", Diana contradicted.

"Standing alone doesn't mean I'm alone; it means I'm strong enough to handle things all by myself," he quoted and looked into her eyes, pleading for understanding.

Diana sighed and nodded. "All right," she agreed.

"Diana..." Vincent's hand pulled out something from his cloak pocket and put it in Diana's hands. "This was Catherine's. She brought it down Below when we were in great danger once to protect us, to protect *me*... She wanted you to have it should the need arise ..."

Diana looked at the gun in her hands, and a shiver ran through her spine. Vincent didn't say any more, but suddenly she realised what Catherine had meant.

"I will use it should the need arise," she said determined and stepped away from the remains of the door to the cellar to let him pass first.

Vincent nodded slightly and walked into the cellar.

They walked past wooden crates full of wine bottles, right up to the staircase leading above. After walking up two sets of stairs, they understood why nobody had heard Vincent's breaking through the door. The cellar was two levels below the ground floor. When they reached the door leading out of the cellar, Vincent turned to them all and whispered.

"Be very careful and watch your backs, please."

He turned back towards the door but suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He turned his head and felt Joe's warm brown eyes on his, looking with genuine care.

"Good luck, Vincent," he whispered.

Vincent smiled and put his hand on Joe's shoulder for a moment as a thank you to his new friend. Then he turned back, listened for a moment, took a deep breath and very carefully pushed the door inch by inch. When he saw the air was clear, noiselessly, he walked out of the cellar, leaving the door ajar and vanished from their sight.

They waited a bit, and Joe was just about to push the door open when they heard a faint growl and a heavy thump of a body falling to the ground. And then, all went quiet again.

Catherine was looking at the chessboard in front of her, the white and black pawns, rooks, bishops, knights, Kings and Queens staring at her impatiently, awaiting her turn.

"I believe it's your turn, my dear."

Jacob, who was sitting on the other side of the chessboard, was trying to distract her while waiting for Vincent's return.

Catherine raised her eyes towards the patriarch and smiled. "I'm sorry, Father... I don't think my mind is up to it tonight," she apologised.

At first, she had been determined to wait for Vincent in their chamber, alone with her thoughts, focusing on their bond, to send him courage and love whenever he needed it. But then Father came and suggested a game of chess. Seeing his nervous eyes skimming through the objects in the chamber, she knew what he was trying to do and simply couldn't refuse him. He was afraid for Vincent, just as she was, and trying hard to suppress his anxiety.

"You're right, Cathy, neither is mine....," Jacob agreed with a sigh and he leaned back on his chair.

Hardly anyone was asleep in the Tunnels that night. The silent and fearful shadow of expectation, worry and hope were lingering in the air everywhere.

The sound of footsteps made them both turn to the study entrance.

"Father, Catherine....," a soft voice spoke.

It was Rebecca, and she made her way down to the two people she came to see. In her hands, she was holding something wrapped in a linen cloth.

"Rebecca, is something wrong?" Father asked worriedly.

"No." She smiled and then turned to Catherine. "I brought something for you."

She passed the linen-wrapped object to the younger woman.

Catherine unwrapped a beautiful cream coloured conic candle. A lovely sweet scent hit her nostrils immediately, without the candle even being lit.

"Iris?" she asked in wonder.

"Blue iris, to be precise," Rebecca replied with a smile. "I made it some time ago when I was experimenting with flower extracts from flowers one of the Helpers regularly sends us. The lavender-scented candle I gave you back then before Winterfest was made the same way. I came across this one today, and I thought you might need it tonight... Blue iris represents hope, trust, faith and victory..."

Catherine looked from the candle up to Rebecca's engaging eyes. They were glistening in the warm candlelight in the chamber.

"Thank you...", Catherine whispered and felt her own eyes burning.

She stood up and embraced her friend tightly. Neither of them saw Jacob quickly wiping his eyes.

Then, Catherine pulled back and smiled warmly. "Maybe you could teach me how to make them one day?" she asked with genuine interest.

"It would be my pleasure," Rebecca replied, her face beaming with pride. "Besides, I could use some help with them, since the demand in the tunnels is growing."

Both women chuckled and were looking at each other with deep understanding.

Catherine took the candle to the nearest empty candle holder and lit it. She placed it on the table where she had played chess with Jacob before.

All three of them kept gazing at the candle's steady flame, full of hope, praying for a safe passage and a victorious return of those they loved.

And then suddenly, as lightning which comes unannounced, Catherine felt a sharp sting of rage coming over her, a terrible feeling of hate which she couldn't suppress. She gripped the edge of the table so hard that her knuckles went white.

"Catherine?" Jacob was frowning with worry.

Breathing heavily, frowning, her eyes moving from side to side, Catherine suddenly knew where those feelings were coming from. Vincent had finally met Gabriel....

Fear gripped her fully and a sudden realisation even more. She did the only thing she could do at that moment. From the deepest core of her being, she screamed his name...

Joe had waited for a minute. Then, he carefully peeked from behind the door checking both, the right and the left of the room that appeared to have been a large kitchen. When he heard no more noise, he reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out his gun. He pushed the cellar door open and walked out. After a few steps, he found a man lying unconscious on the marble floor nearby. He searched him and found no gun.

Vincent is on the job already.

Joe turned his head and saw Diana peeking out from the cellar. He waved his hand as a sign for the others to get out. One by one they did, and like mice, quietly and carefully, they set out on their mission.

Vincent silently rendered two more men harmless - one standing guard in the huge marble hall full of large paintings covering the walls and one in the corridor he was just walking through quietly.

Suddenly, he felt a pull at his heart. Immediately, he knew where it was coming from and with every cautious step he made, the pull was getting stronger, setting his heart racing.

I am on my way, son...

Vincent was moving closer and closer to the source of the pull, until he stopped at a slightly open door with a ray of soft light penetrating through the dark corridor he was standing in.

For a brief moment, he just stood there, listening for any disturbance behind the door. Then, he slowly pushed the door open, and the first thing he saw made his heart thump in his chest - it was a crib with something moving in it restlessly. He heard a sharp cry coming out of the crib. He stepped closer and saw a baby lying in it crying - Vincent finally saw his son.

He stood there in wonder; his eyes were welling up, his breathing was heavy, and an incredulous smile appeared on his face. When he was just about to reach out for the child, a slimy voice spoke behind him.

"A sight for sore eyes, isn't he, Vincent?"

Vincent turned sharply, and his heart threatened to burst out of his chest; his blood was boiling, his whole body shaking. The sight of the man who had almost killed the woman he loved and took away their child making it ill was awakening such rage and hate in him he had never known.

Gabriel came into the light of the bedside table lamp and with a mocking expression on his face, he spoke to Vincent again.

"Most definitely, he inherited his beauty from his mother, wouldn't you say?"

The devilish grin that appeared in Gabriel's face made Vincent sick to the stomach. It was the face of pure evil, just like Diana had said - mocking, with sharp cheekbones, pale as a vampire's, eyes burning in the semi-darkness, the grin of someone, who was more than satisfied with his stature and achievements.

"Gabriel...", Vincent's voice was quiet and as cold as ice; fires were raging in his eyes though.

"I was hoping you would come, you know?" Gabriel said, his grin never fading.

"I was hoping you would join me in my efforts to rule the world." He put his hands in his trousers pockets.

"The boy surely must have inherited your strength, your immense power... He could have become the greatest and most powerful man in the world!"

"My son would never use his power to do anything evil, for he was born out of the greatest *love* that has ever been...", Vincent said quietly with determination.

"Vincent, Vincent...", Gabriel chuckled. "Even the greatest love can turn into hate."

If anyone wanted to see what hate looked like, they would only have to look into Vincent's eyes, the sharpness and almost blackness of which were clearly visible in the dim light of the lamp. He was eyeing Gabriel like a starving lion waiting to attack his prey. He tilted his head slightly in denial of Gabriel's words.

"Of course, I'm truly sorry Catherine had to die; I found no more use of her to me once I had my child," Gabriel apologised mockingly.

"He is *not* your child..." Vincent said between his teeth.

"However, then I realised the boy started weakening, fading away like the last autumn leaf hanging on an already bare tree... Not even the good doctor who pushed the drug into your dear Catherine knows what to do to save her child..."

Gabriel's grin was wide and disturbing as he heard Vincent snarl.

"I guess the boy is no use to me anymore, so by all means, he can follow his mother..."

That was all Vincent was willing or able to listen to. The blood boiling in his veins by that point awakened wild rage in his heart. His vision turned red and his brain switched into destruction mode. With a roar, he raised his clawed hand and made an advance toward Gabriel when suddenly, he heard a voice calling his name from a distance...

Vincent!!

He stopped; his hand froze midway in the air. His facial features slowly relaxed, and only an ice-cold stare piercing Gabriel's widened eyes remained from the beast of just seconds ago when he spoke calmly.

"No."

He let his arm drop and regained his straight posture, towering over Gabriel.

"My son will live, just like his mother."

Gabriel's grin faded like a shadow.

At that moment, Diana appeared at the door, and quickly assessing the situation, she pointed her gun at Gabriel.

"Vincent, all men have been disarmed and tied up. We are waiting only for you so we can call the police," she said.

A mewling sound interrupted the sudden silence as the child in the crib started crying again, feeling its father near.

"The child is crying, Vincent... Take him and go; I'll wait here for Joe." Diana pleaded with him to leave. She knew what he was capable of and what must have been going on in his head at that moment.

Vincent felt torn between his urge for revenge and justice and his son's need for attention. In the end, the parent in him won, and he turned away from Gabriel and walked over to the crib. He gently lifted the baby, looked at it with glistening eyes and noticed, the boy had inherited his sapphire blue eyes. Then he cradled him close, leaning his cheek to the boy's little head.

It will be all right now, little one; I'm here for you...

As if the boy had heard him, he stopped wiggling and crying, and Vincent felt the child's unrest slowly fading away, his strength returning to him.

Diana couldn't help but watch him in wonder - the reunion of the son and his extraordinary father was quite moving, and there was a unique aura surrounding the two of them.

The short moment of Diana's loss of focus was all Gabriel needed. He quickly pulled out his gun and pointed it at Vincent.

"You know," he said when a grin settled on his white face again. "Prison is a place to grow stronger. But no court would ever convict me. Jurors have families too. And even if they did, you can rule the world from a prison cell.... I own nations! And now..." He looked coldly into Vincent's eyes. "I own... *your life...*"

Vincent instinctively turned his back to Gabriel to protect his child, and the next thing he heard was a loud sound of a gun. To his surprise, he didn't feel any pain. Moreover, the baby in his arms didn't make any sound of discomfort; the boy just kept looking at him wide-eyed with deep interest.

Slowly, Vincent turned around and saw Gabriel lying on the floor with his arms spread out wide and a trail of blood staining his perfectly white shirt.

Vincent's eyes found Diana. She was still holding Catherine's gun in her raised hands and exhaled loudly, trying to compose herself.

"I guess the need had arisen," she said determined when she finally looked at Vincent's bewildered face.

Jacob looked worriedly at Catherine, who was still gripping the edge of the table.

"Are you all right, Catherine?" he asked.

Catherine turned around and started pacing the study restlessly. Though her body was present, she looked as if her mind was somewhere else - a deep look of focus in her face, she was frowning, and her eyes were restless just like her feet.

Jacob looked helplessly at Rebecca standing next to him.

"She must be feeling something coming from Vincent," Rebecca whispered.

They both were observing her quietly, for there was nothing else they could do.

After a few minutes, Catherine suddenly stopped when a feeling of relief and joy started warming her heart. Her features straightened, and a hopeful smile graced her face, lighting up her emerald eyes.

"He's coming back....," she whispered, and her eyes were already following the way out of the chamber.

Without even looking at Jacob or Rebecca, she ran up the few stairs and disappeared into, the tunnel.

The candle which Rebecca had brought flickered briefly, but its light never faded away.

Catherine was running through the tunnels leading to the Central Park exit, each minute feeling more strongly, that Vincent was heading that way. Their bond had taken a life of its own in the recent weeks, and her perception of Vincent's feelings was much greater, compared to the years before.

When she was almost out of breath, she finally got to the heavy steel door leading out of the tunnels. Gasping for air, she stopped and leaned against the wall for a few moments to recover. Then, she looked in the tunnel opposite the one she had just come from. She focused her eyes on the distant orange glow coming from there. Something was telling her that was the way to keep looking, to see the beloved cloaked figure emerge from the soft glow.

Suddenly, her pulse quickened even more, for along with feeling Vincent's approach through their bond, she could feel a thin thread tugging at her heart. That was when she knew he was not returning alone.

Only after a few more minutes, Catherine's anticipation was rewarded with a sight she had been dreaming of for so long. Out of the darkness into the light, which reminded her of the colour of sunrise, Vincent's tall figure appeared walking slowly, but with pride towards her and in his arms, he was carefully holding a small bundle...

She felt tears warming her cheeks, and her bottom lip started quivering, as she tried to contain her emotions, but in vain.

Followed by Diana and his friends from the tunnels, Vincent came to a halt just a couple of steps away from her. The sight of him with the baby in his arms almost took her breath away. His face was radiant, his eyes twinkling brightly in the dim tunnel lights, a blessed smile softened his unique facial features. The father was finally holding his son.

"He *is* beautiful, Catherine...," Vincent almost whispered, and his own eyes welled up when he glanced at the child in his arms again.

Catherine gasped and couldn't stop smiling when he slowly passed her the baby, so she could finally hold him in her arms. Her tears were wetting the small blanket the baby was wrapped in.

"Jacob...," she whispered. "Oh, Jacob..."

Her trembling fingers caressed her son's cheeks and head, her lips blessing his forehead with first gentle mother's kisses. Then, she cradled him close and sobbed quietly. And for the first time in his short life, in the arms of his mother and presence of his father, little Jacob felt well, safe, warm and truly loved.

Vincent put his arm around Catherine's shoulders and a lingering kiss on her temple. His own tears were running down his face quietly.

Family is where life begins, and love never ends...

They didn't know how long they were standing like that, the new family under the warm glow of the tunnel lights. Eventually, Catherine stopped sobbing and holding their son in one arm; she embraced Vincent's waist tightly to pull him even closer. She finally had both men of her life with her and was unwilling to part with either of them. The sudden feeling of complete peace filling her heart was the first since her kidnapping.

"Catherine," Vincent whispered into her hair. "Just so you don't worry, Joe stayed behind with the police to clear things up. He will join us tomorrow."

"I'm glad to hear that...," Catherine replied quietly.

Suddenly she thought of something else.

"And....," her voice faded, unwilling to spoil such a magical moment with that cursed name.

"It's over," Vincent said quietly. "He's gone."

She lifted her head from his chest where she was resting it, looking into their child's beautiful face. The look in her eyes held the unmistakable question.

"No, it wasn't me... But he pointed a gun at me when I held Jacob in my arms, and that's when Diana shot him... with your gun."

Catherine gasped and shivered, imagining what could have happened if Diana hadn't been there with her gun. She could feel her eyes burning again.

They were looking into each other's eyes for a while.

Then, Catherine looked in Diana's direction. The detective nodded, and a faint smile appeared on her lips. Catherine smiled back at her and nodded as well to express her genuine thanks.

"I wanted to kill him, Catherine... God knows I almost did but then..." The pain in his voice at that memory made him shudder. "Then I heard you calling out my name..."

Catherine was staring at him for a moment. "I could suddenly feel such a rage coming from you... I knew you must have met him at that moment, and I knew what you would do but Vincent..." She shook her head, and her eyes were full of compassion and love. "If you killed him, it would have been ..."

"... revenge, not defending someone I love, I know..." Vincent finished her thought. "Then, I would have truly become a beast. I would have been no better than he was."

Catherine reached to stroke his cheek tenderly. "But you are better, Vincent. So much better..."

Her loving smile melted his momentary melancholy and made him smile. Then his eyes noticed a motion in the distance ahead of them.

"Catherine, look..."

She turned her head in the direction which Vincent indicated and saw Jacob and Rebecca walking towards them. It was unusual for the patriarch to walk such a distance from the Home Tunnels, but he had sensed this was a special occasion - and he wasn't disappointed. Supported by his walking stick on one side and Rebecca on the other, Jacob limped to them heavily, and the wonder in his old grey eyes was easy to see.

Catherine showed him the baby with a beaming smile. He looked at it and gasped, then smiled, and his eyes glistened when he looked up to his son.

Neither of them said anything, but the happiness and pride were visible in both of their faces. Jacob put his hand on Vincent's shoulder for a moment and smiled. Then he stroked Catherine's cheek.

"Let's go home," he said and with a big smile and oblivious to his aching leg, he turned around to lead the way.

"Wait..." Catherine halted Vincent when they finally came to the entrance leading to their chamber.

Vincent looked at her a little puzzled and tilted his head, but Catherine smiled.

"I want to savour the moment," she said. "It's the first time we are coming home as ... a true family..."

"Yes..."

A deep feeling of pride and fulfilment was warming Vincent's heart, and with a smile, he carefully caressed baby Jacob's rosy cheek. Then he looked back into Catherine's bright eyes, lowered his head and kissed her softly. He pulled back and saw her smiling, with a dreamy look on her face.

"Ready?" he asked.

Catherine took a deep, shaky breath and still smiling, whispered, encompassing all her excitement in a single word.

"Ready..."

She took hold of his hand and then, mother, father and their son crossed the threshold to *their* new and happy life together.

