

VISION OF LOVE

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by Debbie Ristick

Working diligently over a leather-bound journal, the man some called '*the legend of the tunnels,*' carefully recorded his every thought of the day, his hopes and his pain. He felt everything so deeply, loved life with almost a child's innocence and, though it troubled him greatly, realized that no matter how hard he fought it, there was indeed a hell.

Vincent, whom some might call beast-like because of his leonine facial features, was an overwhelming figure of a man. His eyes were crystal clear, colored a mysterious shade of azure blue and filled with an intelligence that appeared mystical. His hair hung long and loose about his shoulders and was wild at times, resembling a lion's mane. It was a magnificent shade of amber gold, almost seeming to set off sparks in the glow of the candlelight surrounding him. His mannerisms were cultured, those of a man who'd had to accept and be content with his lot in life, who's accepted and admired all whose lives touched his. He was quiet - almost shy - but could take a joke as well as anyone else, and had. For the most part he was happy, having learned at an early age to face certain boundaries and rules applying only to him and no one else. Sometimes though - perhaps just for an instant - he found many of the restrictions governing his happiness difficult, and thought his life, at times, could be cruel and unjust.

With a sigh, he completed his writing, then closed the book lovingly as he set it aside. These tunnels and chambers were home to him, the people living here, his family. He was - and always had been - a symbol to them, for his birth and subsequent life had been miraculous. He'd been found among the garbage behind Saint Vincent's Hospital. He'd been left there, wrapped in rags, on a murderously cold and stormy January night. He'd been brought Below and taken to Father, a squalling, pitiful infant. He was sickly, crying; no one believed he had any chance for life.

It was plain to all those assembled in Father's chamber why the child had been abandoned, why he'd been cast aside as though his life meant nothing. It had taken a supreme effort on everyone's part to decide to do all they could for him, and in the end, he'd lived. With their love, he'd flourished; they had loved him, tended him, nurtured and taught him; accepted him for all he was and could be, and now he returned their love tenfold, choosing to use his differences to protect them and their world.

And yet, he was filled with emptiness. A cold, bitter longing for life to be more than just '*existence*' filled him. He felt that he contributed, felt as though he loved and was loved in return, but Vincent felt the staggering and tremendous weight of perpetual aloneness surrounding him. He knew the darkness that was his future, recognized that, because of who he was, he was doomed to a life of solitude, of loneliness. And though it pained him to admit it, even to himself, the simple knowledge and certainty of that future broke his heart.

With a sigh, Vincent tried to clear his thoughts. There would be always those who would do their best to shelter him in times of trouble. Father, for one, had always been supportive, had tried to teach him to rise above his own uniqueness. He'd made him a scholar, had shown him the world through the pages of literature, helped him appreciate the beauty of art he would never see except in pictures. He'd instilled in him a love of the classics, and once smitten, Vincent had often lost himself in the combined works of Dickens, Byron and Shakespeare, to name a few adorning the patriarch's shelves. There was also a ferocious devotion to music; he loved them all; Beethoven, Mozart and Bach. During the summer, when the concerts were held in Central Park, Vincent would be there, hidden in a

special chamber below the band-shell. He would listen in rapture, allow the melodies to filter through his blood; his eyes would close as he surrendered to their power.

But even with the assurances of these things, he couldn't put aside the gloomy emptiness within himself. He longed for love, for someone to need and depend on him for more than protection, for more than just an intelligent conversation. He wanted what he saw in his friends, what he saw in Kanin and Olivia, what he read of in the many books whose ideals he believed in and clung to. He yearned for romance, for a life, Father insisted, that could never be.

Closing his eyes tightly, Vincent shook his head. Sometimes he sensed things, felt that things would or could happen to him, or around him. For days now he'd seen a face in his dreams, a face unclear for reasons he wasn't sure of. He'd heard a voice, a soft, sweet voice whispering his name, calling out to him from someplace shrouded in fog and surrounded by a stifling chill. When he awakened from these dreams, his heart felt as though it would burst with anticipation, and his hands would tremble while he tried to recall exactly what he'd seen and heard. More times than not, he was disappointed, but he refused to give up on this vision, knowing somehow this woman who called to him needed him, or would need him soon. It was because of this belief that he spent more time Above, prowling the darkness of the park with the passionate desire to find her, to know what it was that he needed to do for her and why she affected him so.

Giving in to the sudden expectation enveloping him, Vincent grabbed his cloak. After throwing it over his broad shoulders, he strode purposefully through the tunnels towards the obscurity of the New York night, and the destiny he hoped was waiting. Somehow, and he didn't understand why, he knew tonight would be the night.

Sitting before the mirror, the finely manicured nails pulled the brush through the honey-colored hair the required one hundred strokes. She smiled as she glanced into the glass, knowing that the maroon dress was quite becoming on her; she'd made the correct choice during her venture to Bloomingdale's, and Tom would certainly appreciate the care she'd taken with her appearance.

With a frown, Catherine Chandler looked away from her reflection. The image she saw there resembled her, but it wasn't really the person she knew herself to be. This woman, this Cathy, was a rich man's daughter, someone who never had to work to make it in life. Everything she had was handed to her on a silver platter, from the apartment she lived in, to the money in her purse. Suddenly, this knowledge left a bitter taste in her mouth. She was filled with a sense of dissatisfaction, and couldn't help but feel shallow, spoiled, somehow overly-pampered in the life she led. It wasn't her fault!

She'd lost her mother at an early age, however Cathy had been a model daughter. Reeking of obedience, she'd come to her father with her every plan; her every desire. He'd listened attentively, assisted her with the choices that he'd assured her, were hers to make, until finally, before she even realized it, his choices had become her ideas. Even after she'd understood, she'd never caused him any trouble, though now as she thought of it, he never really approved of the intimate relationship she'd shared briefly with Steven Bass, though he'd approved whole-heartedly of their engagement. In fact, he'd been disappointed when they had parted. Although he'd listened to her reasons for the break-up compassionately, she was certain that he'd never really understood.

Shaking the memory of Steven from her, she slipped her feet into the shoes she would wear tonight, briefly glimpsing herself in the mirror again. Her skin was flawless, a rich apricot hue accented by sparkling green eyes edged with long, lush eyelashes. Some might call her beautiful, her father did, and she accepted the compliment. Many said she resembled her mother, a woman she'd never really gotten to know, but now tried to emulate within the social circle in which she traveled.

It was difficult sometimes, being nice to her father's associates. She'd retained the elegance she'd

been taught in charm school and demonstrated her skills every time she attended the ritzy functions sometimes required of her.

More often though, those lessons were put to use when she went to work in her father's office. The time she spent within the walls of her father's firm were meaningless somehow, unimportant. The work she did there - when she showed up - bored her, made her feel '*closed in.*'

Upset with herself now, Cathy pushed herself away from the nicely-decorated dressing table. What had gone wrong in her life? Where had her mistakes been made? She'd survived adolescence by attending boarding school in Europe. She'd seen and done things some girls only dreamed of. She'd been showered with gifts, allowed to own horses and dogs, experienced life to the fullest ... until now.

Her father was so important to her and always had been. He'd spared no expense on her education, insisting on Radcliffe after she'd graduated from preparatory school. To please him, she'd accepted his plans; to placate him, she'd finished law school and gotten her degree. To be near him, she'd taken the job he offered in his firm, although now she wondered if that had been the correct choice.

Checking her mantle clock, Catherine sighed. Tom Gunther would be here any moment and she knew he despised tardiness. Even thinking of him made her feel a little jumpy, and she wondered abstractly if perhaps he was another mistake that she'd made. Perhaps it was his influence that made her feel so useless.

Compelled suddenly to get a breath of fresh air, Catherine walked up the step to her French doors. Throwing them open, she looked upon her breathtaking view of Central Park and allowed her mind to wander....

For days now she'd heard a voice in her dreams, felt a presence in her heart. The voice made her feel so peaceful, so protected. When she'd awaken alone in her room, the emptiness she knew surrounded her once more. She felt as though she was drowning in her life, submerged by the riches and luxuries around her. She felt dominated by Tom, controlled by his whims and fancies, as though she were nothing by some elegant show piece he used to prove his worth to the world. She needed a change in her life. She needed freedom, happiness, and hope. She needed to know what she was worth. She needed to know that she could make it on her own, away from Tom, away from her father....

A knock sounded at the door, and with a heavy heart Catherine turned toward it. The night loomed before her; the Planning Commission's party and the company she would keep promised no comfort. The only thing she could think of was the voice in her dreams and the happiness it brought her. Somehow, deep within herself, she knew it was the vision of a destiny she could have - if she made the correct choices.

Determined now to seek those choices out, Catherine grabbed her coat and looked around her apartment as though for the last time. Her heart shivered with a sudden undeniable excitement to leave, to walk through the door and into whatever awaited her beyond. Somehow, and for no reason she could think of, she sensed that something was going to happen in her life tonight; some wonderful and miraculous event would fill her dreary existence with meaning, with hope for a brighter time to come.

As she picked up her bag and raced for the door, she was hit with the promise of something else. In her search for unity with herself, she'd forgotten what she longed for more than anything. She wanted to love someone, totally, purely, and thoroughly. She wanted someone to love her desperately. Pausing before the door, a slight smile crossed her lips. Somehow, she knew she would find that elusive and much-sought emotion as well tonight. She would get her heart's desire and, opening the door, she smiled. She couldn't wait.

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