

## A Train Trip

(rated R)

by valjean

*Comes now, this warrior and this woman, from the streets of a great city, and below those streets, to a magic place among the oaks on a riverbank where, over a week of nights, love was wooed and won; where strategy changed aggression; where the circle of family was mended; and where two souls' desire became Easy and content.*

~ ~ ~

Catherine hurried to answer Joe's call to come to his office. As she entered, he jumped up from his chair, exclaiming, "Have I got a job for *you!* Radcliffe, you're going on a train trip! And I don't mean the subway! *A real* train!"

"A train trip?" responded Catherine with surprise, as Joe began to gesture excitedly.

"I'm telling you, I wish I could go!" he said, slapping his hands together, savoring the idea. "But, *you* are the one to pull this off!" he reiterated, turning to face her, full of enthusiasm.

"Oh . . . ?" she replied, regarding him with caution, but smiling affectionately at her friend. "Do tell . . ."

"Well, it's like this," he began, pulling documents and photographs from his briefcase, spreading the papers over his desk to show her. "The Southern Pacific Railroad donated the '745' steam engine to the city of New Orleans in the 50s. It was restored a few years ago. It basically tours as a novelty, a showpiece . . . No one would suspect an investigator would be traveling on it!"

"And just why *would* an investigator be traveling . . . ?" asked Catherine carefully, watching Joe's face.

"Well, Mardi Gras starts on February 16 and we have reason to believe Darin Weston—"

"Darin Weston? The one suspected of the Housing Department fraud—and murders?" asked Catherine, becoming interested now.

“Yeah, he’s the one. We have a tip he’ll be at Mardi Gras to leave the country during the celebration. We need someone—someone like you, Cathy—to find him and alert our people before he can get away. It’ll take some interaction with the locals to track him down.”

“First, let me tell you the history! Here, come sit down . . .” Joe pulled his desk chair out for her and Catherine took the seat, amused by his gusto.

“You’ll leave from New York Penn Station to travel straight to New Orleans. There’ll be actors dressed in period costume from the 1890s, as part of the show.”

Catherine’s memory flashed back to her design courses in college, before she had focused on law school. The 1890s—ah, Gibson girls. . . . hair swept up in ribbons, evening dresses with squared décolletage necklines, corseted waists and long skirts. The men in their dark tail coats, white bow ties, and winged-collar shirts for the most formal wear . . .

“Um, Cathy, hello, hello? Are you still with me?” Joe was waving a handful of black and white photographs in front of her.

“Oh, sorry, Joe, I was daydreaming for a minute,” said Catherine, returning her attention to him. “Go on.”

“Well, the *Southern Crescent* combined two trains in the 70s that had run separately between New York and New Orleans for decades. The original scheduled time for the New York-New Orleans run was advertised as a 40-hour, unprecedented trip with vestibuled service.”

“What does that mean?” Catherine asked, looking more closely at the photographs and growing more interested in the project.

“With vestibuled cars, luxury trains developed. It was the golden age of rail travel. The *Crescent* was introduced in 1891 as the *Washington and Southwestern Vestibuled Limited*, but became known as *The Vestibule*.

“Before that time, if passengers moved about between cars when a train was running, it was dangerous—stepping over a shifting plate between swaying cars with nothing on either side but chain guard rails and with soot and cinders raining down, not to mention any inclement weather.

“There were no dining cars, no lounge cars, and rarely any sleeping cars. The trains stopped for meals, making all trips extra time-consuming. Specialized cars were

added once vestibules came about. Look at these photos, Cathy, drawing-room and stateroom sleeping cars, dining cars, smoking and library cars, and observation cars with the most luxurious designs! Gas-lighted throughout and equipped with hot and cold running water!”

“It is amazing!” Catherine agreed. “So lavish! And it’s completely restored, like in these pictures?”

“Even better,” Joe answered. “There’s TV and telephone behind these wall panels, see here?” he gestured to the photo.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. “Com’in!” Joe shouted. On a wave of testosterone, two men swaggered into the office.

“Let me introduce Detectives Cary Devereux—he’s from New Orleans, actually played for the Saints—” Joe began.

“Actually, I never started,” said Cary, with a modest, friendly smile, reaching to shake her hand. Catherine regarded Cary with interest. *Why, he’s just a kid!* she thought, noting the longish blonde hair combed straight back over his collar, the sleeves of his pressed Oxford shirt rolled back over tanned, muscled forearms covered with pale blonde body hair, bright blue eyes framed with golden lashes and brows, a beautiful smile. In another life, he could be—

“And Tony Cobretti,” Joe went on, gesturing to the other man and interrupting Catherine’s thoughts.

“From Jersey,” Tony acknowledged, nodding at Catherine with full eye contact and extending his hand.

With his balding, Italian good looks and middle-aged heaviness, Tony somehow retained the agility and power of a younger man. Catherine respected them both right away. Two formidable opponents for any bad guy.

“Tony and Cary will fly down separately and be in different locations in New Orleans, so between the three of you, we expect to get our man!” Joe finished with confidence, looking from one to the other.

“Well,” said Catherine, shrugging exaggeratedly. “I guess I’m going on a train trip!”

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Below, Vincent and Catherine sat in his chamber pouring over maps and books about New Orleans.

“Most streets in the American Quarter fan out from a central point in the city,” said Vincent, pointing to the map. “Canal Street divides the traditional downtown from uptown areas, meaning downriver from Canal Street, or upriver from Canal Street.”

Catherine loved this instructive side of Vincent. Listening to his velvet voice, she could experience any place through his description. He was so educated; if only . . .

“Downtown,” he was saying, “there are the French Quarter, and the Upper and Lower Ninth Ward neighborhoods.

“Other major districts within the city include Bayou St. John, Mid-City, Gentilly, Lakeview, Lakefront, New Orleans East, and Algiers,” he told her, pointing each one out.

“Carnival officially begins on the Catholic Feast of the Epiphany. Mardi Gras (French for Fat Tuesday), the final and grandest day of the festivities, is the last Tuesday before the liturgical season of Lent, which commences the next day, Ash Wednesday.”

Vincent folded the maps and leaned back in his chair. He looked lovingly at Catherine; there seemed to be something on his mind. Just as she was about to ask him what he was thinking, he switched gears and continued with more descriptions of the city.

“The architecture, the cooking aromas, the gardens . . . and of course, New Orleans has always been a significant center for music, showcasing its intertwined European, Latin American, and African cultures. As the only North American city to allow slaves to gather in public and play their native music, New Orleans gave birth to an indigenous music—jazz.”

“It sounds wonderful, Vincent!” said Catherine, taking hold of his arm. “If only . . .”

“Yes . . .” he answered, looking at her and through her. “If only . . .”

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Catherine was met at Penn Station by Joe's designee, who handed over all her paperwork for the trip. The train was festooned in the colors of Mardi Gras—green, gold, and purple—and Catherine was in a festive mood. She was even more delighted when she saw her personal car. She would have it all to herself with its polished brass, wood, and velvet upholstered furniture, so no need for a hotel once she arrived in New Orleans.

Such economy of space! Cabinets, closets, drawers, cubby-type storage areas, the sink, toilet, and shower, and couches that folded out to beds—no space was wasted. A skylight, called a cupola, in the ceiling was propped open to allow fresh air. A neat pantry held all she could want: wine, water, juice, cheeses, fruit, nuts, bagels and spreads, tiny cakes, boxes of cereal and cartons of milk, wrapped sandwiches and cut vegetables. As the train got underway, she settled into the reclining seat, pulled up the footrest and relaxed, looking out the window. Over the first day, the city, then trees, houses, towns, and farms, swept by the window in a pleasant blur.

Around 6:00 p.m., Catherine went to the dining car for soup and salad, and then returned to her car to read and study her notes for the investigation. She felt . . . something. An anticipation, an eagerness she couldn't explain. She pulled out the bed and tucked in, missing the man she loved and wondering what tomorrow would bring.

The second day, Catherine got her breakfast in the dining car, noticing that the landscape was changing and becoming more beautiful as the journey progressed. As she worked on her case, fields became marshes where the lacy Spanish moss, draped like veils from the trees, gave a decidedly Southern feel to her surroundings.

Toward midday, she got up to get a snack and then returned to sit by the window with her almonds and Chardonnay. She tucked one foot under her, leaned her cheek against her hand, and began to reminisce.

The only other time Catherine had been on a train was for a school field trip to the Smithsonian Museum and the Washington Zoo; she must have been 10 years old at the time. She had a visceral memory of the rhythmic, rocking motion of the train as it traveled over the rails. It felt like lying in her mother's arms and she luxuriated in it, losing herself in the pleasant memories.

Somehow, she felt connected to Vincent as if, well, almost, as if he were really near . . . The sense of anticipation she had felt last night returned to her.

Just before dusk, the train slowed to a stop on the tracks in Louisiana near Girod Street and the Mississippi River near Union Passenger Terminal. Catherine used the telephone to report to Cary and Tony that she had arrived and would turn in for the night. They made plans to meet the next morning at a local pub.

Outside, the sun dropped behind the horizon. The end of the day began and darkness settled upon the landscape. The moon was full and silver as the night mists began to rise from the river.

Catherine felt Vincent near her, beside her, within her. She quivered with that thought as she pulled the bar in the ceiling panel to open the skylight. The cool night breezes rushed in, carrying the fragrances of the night. She closed her eyes, leaning against the mahogany panels, wishing . . .

Suddenly, noises from the roof brought her back to reality.

“Who’s there?” she called, reaching for the telephone behind the sliding wall panel, and glancing toward the drawer where her gun was stored.

In the next instant, her wishes were fulfilled—Vincent was there in front of her!

“Vincent!” she cried, rushing toward his embrace. She remembered feeling like this one other time, when he first came to her after her attack, more than two years ago.

They collided in a clutch that surprised and restored them both, and then broke apart, gasping for breath. They looked hard into each other’s eyes.

“Vincent, how did you get here?” Catherine asked, when she could speak.

“I know these tracks, these routes . . . we have Helpers here. A family at a local marina, and another at a pub in the French Quarter.”

“I felt you . . . I dreamed you . . .” Catherine began.

“As I you,” was Vincent’s reply.

Still disbelieving, Catherine stared at the man she loved. “Now that you’re here . . .” she began, touching the couch seat beside her, “Come and sit down.”

They sat together and Catherine rested her head on his shoulder.

“Vincent, I still can’t believe it! It’s more than I hoped to have you here with me. Whatever did Father have to say about this?”

Their right hands clasped, fingers intertwined. She felt his light nuzzle to the top of her head; he breathed a little laugh into her hair. “He drilled me over and over about the location of our Helpers’ warehouses along the river and he fretted otherwise . . .” Catherine smiled at the image, sharing Vincent’s fondness for the good Dr. Wells.

The train car was now in complete darkness. Catherine reached for the gas lamp. Vincent cupped her hand, preventing her, pressing her fingers to his lips.

“But, Vincent . . . I *want* to see you . . .”

He loosed one hand to gently stroke her hair. She, in turn, pushed her fingers into his thick, golden mane, combing his locks.

Vincent pulled her into his embrace. The stars glistened in the night sky and the evening was full upon them. “Is it dark enough to see me now?” he asked, his voice a velvet growl.

“I see you fully . . . clearly,” she replied, cuddling into his side, loving him.

And so ended the first night.

\* \* \*

Marianna LeRoux hurried along the sidewalk of Claiborne Avenue. She was a petite, animated woman who could have been 20 or 50 or any age in between. Her head was wrapped in two brightly colored scarves; one wound snugly around her head, the other sashed loosely with the fringed ends hanging down her back. Red tendrils escaped randomly around her neck. Her face and ears were punctured with so much silver jewelry, she seemed to glitter as she moved. The tops of her breasts rose up out of a black low-cut tank top with the lace and straps of a red brassiere fully visible underneath. Multiple silver necklaces, charms, stones, and plastic Mardi Gras beads were draped en masse around her neck. She wore tightly-fitting

jeans with zippers at the ankles, more silver chains and beads around her tiny waist, draped so that they swayed with her hips as she walked, and ridiculous yellow platform-soled sandals. Both arms were sleeved in tattoos from shoulder to wrist. Silver rings were on every finger and toe, with all her nails painted neon green. Her exotic face had the full features of racial blending.

She was late; the bar should be hopping by 8:00 a.m. and it was 7:50 now. Usually, she got there at 5:00, but Lisette was opening for her today. A silver Camaro pulled up alongside her and the driver lowered the passenger window slightly, beckoning to her.

“Hey, Miss!” he called. “Help me out, will ya? I’m looking for someone.”

Catherine was a few paces behind Marianna and she slowed her steps to assess the situation. She was glad Cary and Tony were meeting her at the corner of Claiborne and Orleans Avenue, just ahead.

“Crack d’glass some more,” Marianna answered, not moving any closer to the car, “and I tell ya what I know and what I don’t know.”

The tinted window opened fully and from behind his sunglasses, the driver asked, “You know Darin Weston and his girl, Charlene?”

“Yeah, I know a Darin Weston,” Marianna replied, “He from backatown; (Catherine knew she meant from Claiborne Avenue to the Lake) and d’woman, she Algereen, not from ’round here.”

“Look, honey,” said the driver, shutting off the car motor and sliding across the seat. “I’ll pay a lot of money to find out their location . . .”

“Mista, I gotta job to get to. You stop in the Bordeaux Lounge and I’ll try to help ya—”

The driver got out of the car and advanced on Marianna, his hands jammed in his pockets. “I need information *now*, honey,” he growled, whipping off his sunglasses and bearing down on Marianna.

“Uh, excuse me!” Catherine called out, stepping up to the two of them. She glared at Marianna with hands on hips. “Girlfriend, you need to be at work or you’re fired!” she asserted.

“Oh, uh, yes ma’am!” Marianna, quickly picking up on Catherine’s ruse, ducked her head and gave the driver a little wave. “Gotta go!” she said and hurried on down the sidewalk.

The driver pushed his sunglasses back on and gave Catherine a head to toe sweeping glance, his mouth pulled down in an ugly scowl. Without another word, he got back in the car and sped away, tires squealing as he pulled away from the curb.

Catherine took note of the license plate number and felt for her gun strapped securely in the holster against her ribs, drawing a deep breath. She hurried along the walk to meet Cary and Tony, who, thankfully, were waiting as expected at the corner.

“So what was up with that guy?” asked Cary from behind mirrored sunglasses.

“Yeah, what’d he have to say?” echoed Tony, looking in the direction the Camaro had gone.

“Not much,” Catherine replied, “but I have a feeling that was Norton Wimbley—the rival to our man Darin—and I need to have a conversation with a young lady at the Bordeaux Lounge.”

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As the three settled in at the bar, Marianna served up sausage, grits, and pancakes with coffee so strong it made them wince. They observed with amusement as Marianna moved up and down the bar making small talk and flirting with every customer, refilling cups, removing empty dishes and scribbling checks with lightening speed. She called out to the waitresses at the tables, clearly commanding the entire restaurant and missing nothing. Many patrons were already imbibing of strong drink as if Happy Hour was the first hour of the day.

“Thank ya, lady, for ya help back there,” said Marianna to Catherine when they had a moment to talk. “That ginny woman just makin’ troubles for folks what’s got the time f’rit.”

“A gossipy man,” Catherine whispered to Tony who was looking quizzical at Marianna’s terminology.

“How ’bout another gout?” Marianna said, poised with the coffee pot over Tony’s cup.

“No, no thanks,” said Tony defensively, covering the cup with his hand. He already had a headache from the strong brew.

“Marianna,” said Catherine carefully, “what does Norton want with you?”

“Ah . . . you know ’is name, uh?” Marianna regarded Catherine with new respect. “And I reckon you know him and Mista Weston fightin’ over that Charlene, that Algereen? It’s f’true, it is.”

Marianna leaned in to lower her voice to Catherine. “Every evenin’, I see ’im make the block, looking f’dat woman!”

“What does he want with her?” asked Catherine.

“She got somethin’ on ’im, I figger,” replied Marianna, casting a gaze up and down the bar. “Somethin’ he gotta git, b’fo he git outta town.”

Cary was watching Marianna with an attraction that went beyond the investigation. Catherine smiled, feeling a pang of envy. The two of them would be free to pursue their possibilities . . .

Snapping back to the present, Catherine took out her notebook and pen. “Is there somewhere private we could talk?” she asked Marianna.

“If ya don’t mind a broke-down freezer box,” answered Marianna with a grin, untying her apron and stepping away from the bar. “Hey, Lisette!” she called to one of the waitresses, “c’mere and watch d’bar!”

“I’ll call you,” Catherine tossed over her shoulder to Cary and Tony, as she and Marianna proceeded to the back of the restaurant. The two men conferred briefly and then went their separate ways, each following different leads.

That evening, Catherine placed a call from her train car and compared notes with Cary and Tony. To date, the case was mounting to reveal that Darin Weston and Norton Wimbley were in competition for the romantic attentions of Charlene Gray, who was playing one against the other. Apparently, Charlene was in possession of a tape recording linking Weston to the murders and fraud under investigation by the District Attorney’s office in New York. Charlene was implicated as well, and hoped Wimbley would supply her with an alibi, though Wimbley hoped to extort

Charlene's loyalty in return for his help—loyalty she did not feel nor intend to provide. Individually, the three of them planned to leave the country during the Mardi Gras revelry to escape prosecution. This was what Catherine, Tony, and Cary intended to prevent.

“What a tangled web . . .” said Catherine to herself, as she hung up the phone and shuffled her note papers. She decided to have dinner in her car tonight. Vincent had said he would be near.

After an avocado and tomato salad, Catherine refreshed herself with a shower and shampoo and dressed in velour; loose drawstring pants and a zippered top, over a white cotton tee shirt, braless underneath. She prepared the fold-out bed with the covers drawn up, and turned down the gas lights until only the shadows remained.

Reclining against the pillows, Catherine felt a peaceful anticipation. Expecting Vincent's visit with no expectation beyond his mere presence, she waited . . .

Just after midnight, he came to her. Catherine stretched out easily upon the bed, without speaking, without agenda. Vincent sat quietly beside her. He wore a woven tunic over denim trousers; his cloak tossed over a nearby chair.

“Rest here beside me, Vincent,” she entreated, moving over to make room for him on top of the bedclothes.

He pulled off his boots and reclined beside her. They were face to face, belly to belly. As they lay together, Catherine felt the doubt in him.

“I cannot . . .” he said anxiously, shifting himself away from her. “I don't deserve. . .”

“Then just touch me,” she countered. “Just let me feel your hands on me, Vincent,” she said, drawing his arms around her and snuggling against his chest. “Let me rest here next to your heart. Let me anticipate . . . what's to come . . . for us . . .”

“Catherine . . . how can I ever be worthy to . . .”

“But, you are! You are worthy, Vincent!” she protested. “So many people love you. I am just one of them.”

“So many . . .?”

“Yes, your family, the community Below. They all love you.”

“It’s because I’m like them—outcast, different . . .” he sighed.

“No, it’s because you’re kind and giving, because you value family, because you live an honorable life . . .” she asserted, reaching up to caress his face. Their eyes locked one on the other and they moved gently into a kiss. The passion simmered softly between them.

It was the second night, and Catherine whispered, “Vincent, there’s a reason you came here.”

She pressed the length of her body against him, her arms around his neck, softly crushing her breasts to his chest, her pelvis tilting upward to his groin, her leg flexing over his hip.

To her amazement and pleasure, he accepted her motion, and responded by grasping her thigh and drawing her to him. She tightened her clutch around his neck, shifting herself higher on his large body. His hands sought her hips, then moved lower to grip her buttocks; she felt his nails through the fabric of her pants.

He began to stroke her bottom, her thighs and her lower back, and she moaned and writhed beneath his touch. She thrust her hands under his tunic, feeling the contracted muscles of his belly under a second thermal shirt. His flesh was hot to her touch through the material and she could only imagine working her fingers in the fine, soft body hair that must be red-gold in color.

She was fevered with imagining, her thoughts driving her toward discovery, and yet, she was grateful for this much—to lie in his arms and feel his strong hands on her and the heat of his breath against her cheek.

And so ended the second night.

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The third day in New Orleans was spent in calls and meetings in Tony’s and Cary’s hotel rooms. Catherine was glad when she could come back to her train car, anticipating Vincent’s visit.

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On the third night, Catherine received him dressed in a cream-colored peignoir, a long-sleeved gauzy robe over a lacy gown with satin straps. She was nude underneath. Her hair was swept up loosely in a velvet ribbon tie.

“The way is still new,” Vincent said softly as his large hands slipped slowly over the silky fabric, tracing her form. His calloused palms and long nails against the yielding flesh of her belly and flanks produced shudders of pleasure along both their bodies.

Slowly, he tugged the ribbon fastening the robe at her throat. The garment fell away from her neckline where Vincent’s crystal glistened softly on its golden chain between her breasts. With a shrug, Catherine slipped the robe from her shoulders and Vincent watched wordlessly as it dropped in a cream-colored pool at her bare feet.

His head lowered to nuzzle her jaw, her throat, she arching under his kisses, desiring him beyond reason.

She loosened the buckles, pushed his leather vest off, and thrust her hands under the linen shirt, clutching for his heated body, knowing him now . . .

“Vincent!” she gasped, barely audible. “I’m screaming inside . . .”

“I hear you,” he purred, “I join you . . .”

“Silence me,” she whimpered, and his mouth closed over hers.

Suddenly, his hands were under her breasts, cupping her flesh through the silk cloth, teasing her nipples to rigidity.

She was thrilled, and he was frightened, at his boldness. Their breaths mingled, each tasting the other. As she exhaled, he filled his lungs. He embraced her then, positioning her on the bed where they had lain last night fully clothed, wanting each other.

Now, he placed his hands at her ankles, his grip completely encircling her lower limbs, and slid his grasp up her legs, pushing the silken gown up to reveal her knees, then her thighs, until the warm wet flesh was in his hands.

He pressed his lips to the soft heat of her thigh, breathing the words, “You are a river . . . running through me . . . .”

“I feel it,” she answered, fevered now. “I need you closer. You belong here, Vincent,” she murmured, tossing her head in anticipation. “Everything is . . . just . . . a choice . . . away . . .”

“*Catherine . . .*” he breathed.

Then, to her dismay, he drew back and looked at her with great sadness.

“Vincent! What is it?” she cried, reaching out to him, as he turned away from her.

She could hear the tears in his voice as he said, “Catherine, if we continue . . . in this way . . . I fear . . . My fear is . . . All my wildness . . . all my . . . darkness . . . will rise up within me . . . and destroy . . . the two of us.”

She cast about in her mind for some comforting response, painfully realizing she had none. Vincent may be right. Catherine felt tears stinging her own eyes as she struggled to imagine the aftermath of what she was hoping for. Their lovemaking may cost them their relationship. It would certainly change everything. What if Vincent was right? What if his dreaded Other emerged during their passion? The destruction Vincent feared may very well be physical destruction, even death.

“Oh, Vincent,” she sobbed. “I only know that I *love* you!”

At this, they folded into each other, desperate, frightened, locked in their conflict of desire.

And so ended the third night.

\* \* \*

The fourth day, there was word that Wimbley, Weston, and Charlene Gray had used credit cards to book flights departing from Texas and probably planned to take boats from Louisiana to Texas to catch their flights. Cary and Tony focused on covering these bases and asked Catherine to stand by.

\* \* \*

On the fourth night, Vincent and Catherine lay together.

Following her lead, he had begun to dress in soft, loose clothing for their encounters—clothing that could be easily removed. Deftly, they undressed down to a few pieces of underwear, and lay next to each other on the bed.

She received him arduously, fearful and hopeful all at once. They embraced carefully, engaging in a timid kiss that blossomed into boldness. Kissing Vincent was all that Catherine had ever fantasized and hoped it would be. His unique mouth made an exhilarating connection with her own. The heat of his kiss swelled throughout her body and she could tell he felt her intensity as well.

Breathless, they parted, and Catherine whispered, “Our destiny . . . is just a kiss away . . .”

He caught her hands, looked hard into her face. “Catherine . . .” he rasped, “I have wanted to weep . . . for this secret I bear . . . this longing . . . this desire . . .”

“*Vincent*, our love. . . is our *choice* . . . !” She held him—and herself—accountable.

“Only a choice . . . away . . .” he repeated, aware of the hollow space, the sacred interval between them.

She clutched his face in her hands. “I see my children in your eyes, Vincent! I need you closer!”

“I can see my future—and my history—in *you*, Catherine. I know I belong here . . .”

Their embrace was eager and fearful.

And so ended the fourth night.

\* \* \*

On the fifth morning, Catherine received a call from Tony that he and Cary were following some leads and planned to stake out local marinas and would be back in touch later. She decided to go about the city by herself and dressed casually for the day.

The old city was so beautiful! Catherine's imagination was filled with visions of herself and Vincent strolling the walkways or resting under the tall oaks. She kept walking until she came upon a red brick building with wrought iron fencing and a weathered sign that read House of Voodoo.

She went inside and felt the mystique right away. The interior was cool and dark and there was a fragrance in the air that reminded Catherine of a cathedral she had visited in Europe. Shelves and glass cases containing statuettes, framed pictures, jewelry, and decorative trinkets representing Africa, Catholicism, and Native American culture filled the shop. Votive candles were lit throughout and soft music that sounded like Gregorian chant played overhead.

"Goodday, miss," called out a plump woman from behind the counter.

"Oh, hello," Catherine replied. "Your shop is wonderful!"

"I am Matilda," said the woman with a smile. "How 'bout a reading today?" she asked, shuffling a deck of cards in her hands and nodding toward a table and chairs at the end of the counter.

"Well, alright," Catherine agreed, taking a seat. "My name is Catherine," she said.

Matilda placed several charms on the table, a silver amulet bearing a purple stone, a white ceramic dish containing a yellow powder, a prayer card picturing the Virgin Mary, and a tiny dried bouquet tied with white ribbon. "For your mother," Matilda said, startling Catherine.

"Choose from the cards," Matilda instructed.

Catherine chose the High Priestess from the Tarot deck.

"You are at a crossroads and don't know which way to turn," said Matilda thoughtfully. "You must gain knowledge before you act."

As the reading continued, Matilda observed that Catherine was conflicted and torn. Then the cards revealed that her main journey in life was the one to find true love.

"A blue-eyed man," Matilda remarked as the Knight turned up on the next card. Catherine felt electricity run through her.

As the reading came to an end, Matilda said, "Catherine, mourning and celebration can come together. As fear and joy can come together. Learn to change, and learn to trust. Happiness will come to you."

Catherine blinked against the sunlight as she stepped out into the street after the reading. A funeral procession passed by, led by a jaunty band. She recalled what Matilda had told her about a mourning and a celebration, and that fear and joy could come together.

Glancing at her watch, she turned to head back to her train car in time to receive Tony's next call. And then, to wait for Vincent.

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On the fifth night, Vincent and Catherine kissed and caressed each other.

They dispensed with their clothing quickly this time, and lay skin to skin, keen to experience the sensations and the thrills that had stirred them the night before.

As their bodies closed one toward the other, heated air became body hair became fevered skin, beneath which could be felt muscle and pulse beats. Vincent's physical body was fully aroused, though his spirit held back.

A little gasp escaped Catherine's lips as she looked down upon his masculine form. His swollen sex rose rigid from its base up along his flat belly toward his hip. Its velvet sheath was drawn back, revealing the tawny rounded tip. His length was more than average, which she had expected due to his overall body size, but his *width*! Incredibly beyond average, at once daunting and enticing.

A small shudder traveled through Catherine's body as she beheld him. Immediately through the bond, Vincent felt a hesitation, a question, something akin to fear. He was terror-stricken. In one smooth motion, he tucked the covers around her and slipped out of bed. In another instant, he dressed and was moving toward the roof top opening. Catherine wrenched up from the pillows, reaching helplessly for him, tears in her voice, "Vincent! Don't leave me . . . ! Don't go . . . ! No . . . *no* . . . !"

She sat there in the bed, the sheet still warm from where he had lain. There was only the cool, moist air and the call of the night birds. He was gone.

Sobbing, suffering, she crashed against the pillows and clutched the empty sheets.

As he had done so many times in New York, Vincent began to walk the streets. The moon still shone in the night sky, the stars waning into the wee hours. Wearing

his cloak, hood, and gloves, Vincent traversed the streets and alleys until he found himself at a bar on Claiborne Avenue. The neon sign advertised “Le Bordeaux,” already illuminated at 5:30 a.m.

The establishment bore openings in the walls without doors or windows—just wooden awnings propped up to let in light and air. The bar may have been closing from the night or opening for the day; it was impossible to tell. Ceiling fans were in full swirl as it was already beginning to warm up for the day. Inside was wet and steamy, as if the cement floor had been recently hosed down. The place was most like a cave since Vincent had left New York.

A female bartender was wiping down the bar and counter tops, intent on her work, the muscles in her arms flexing with the effort.

Spying Vincent’s silhouette, she called out, “Where y’at, O my big brah?” squinting in the beams of the rising sun. “C’mon down here!”

“No. Thank you,” Vincent replied, reflecting on her accepting term of endearment for “brother.” “I need only a moment . . .” He pressed against the wall, deciding where to go.

“Somethin’ keepin’ ya down, I say,” the woman said, as she moved down the bar toward him. “I can see you don’t like no strong drink.” She reached for a pitcher on the counter and a glass from the ice chest. “Here some cool tea, cool yo thoughts, big brah, uh?” Her voice was like a balm to him and he trusted her immediately.

“You show extreme empathy,” he said softly, taking the cold glass from her hand, keeping his face turned away.

“O, you too,” she answered him. “Ya heart is near broke I say.” She crossed her arms on the bar, leaning in gently, examining him. “Where ya stay, brah?” she asked.

“I do not live here. I am a visitor,” he answered, turning slightly to look at her.

“Beautiful eyes—behind the beautiful mask—shows a wise soul, soul from ancient times, I reckon. She ya heart, uh?” the woman went on. When Vincent didn’t reply, she said, “I am Marianna. Tell me ya name, brah.”

Marianna—the name tugged at his heart, the names of his two mothers. “Vincent,” he replied, looking fully at her then. Her eyes were a golden color and aglow with kindness.

“So, tell me now, about y’woman,” Marianna gazed at him, not letting him off the hook.

“She fears me,” Vincent answered, surprising himself.

“How you know this woman feelin’ fear?” Marianna countered, confronting him immediately. “Maybe she feelin’ excitement, such as what a woman draw from a man—how you know the difference, uh? Maybe they the same feelin’ for you, uh?”

How could this extraordinary woman cut to the chase this way? How did she know Vincent’s contention?

“I . . . I don’t know . . . perhaps you are . . . correct . . .” he murmured in reply.

“Ya say ya visitor—where ya from, Brah Vincent, huh?” she asked.

“I live in New York city,” Vincent responded.

“Ahhh,” said Marianna, with a faraway look, “My ma and my pa, they dead now . . . they lived in New York. My pa, he was gonna be a doctor—went far in school and did good too, all the way. All the way till some bad men—what hate and trade on race—made sure he was stopped . . .”

Vincent waited in silence for her to continue.

“My ma was a white woman. Dem bad men, they din cotton to no black doctor wid a white wife. Was another white man, Mr. Jacob, spoke up for him—got in trouble hisself f’rit, too, he did,” she went on.

“Have you family in New York?” Vincent asked her.

“Only, my maw-maw, Narcissa,” she answered wistfully. “But I ain’t heerd from her in the longest . . .”

Vincent inhaled sharply. Was he speaking with Narcissa's granddaughter? Before he could continue the conversation, they were disturbed by sounds of customers entering the bar. Vincent withdrew into the shade of the morning glories on the trellises along the walls, as Marianna turned to her patrons for the day.

And so ended the fifth night.

\* \* \*

The news on the sixth day was that only Charlene Gray had gotten on the boat leaving for Texas. Law enforcement agents would wait for her there. "We still need to watch for the other two," said Tony, in a conference call to Catherine and Cary. "Looks like she ditched the two of them, so they'll be plenty mad. Cathy, you keep standing by. Cary, meet me like we planned."

Catherine rang off with the two detectives and called for a taxi. She traveled to St. Louis Cathedral where the Cathedral Concert Choir and Orchestra were performing. Sitting in the beautiful sacred environment, Catherine reflected upon her life and all that was truly meaningful. Afterward, she stopped for a glass of wine at Muriel's in Jackson Square. She indulged in the crawfish and goat cheese crepe, leaving a smiling waiter with a 40 percent tip. She returned to her train, wondering what the evening with Vincent would bring—if anything at all.

\* \* \*

On the sixth night, Vincent and Catherine engaged in alternative pleasures.

"I'm sorry I left you," he began, as soon as he arrived. Catherine responded by nestling against his chest. "Let's begin again," he said plaintively.

"Yes," she answered him. "Let's . . ."

They shed their clothing, dispensing with ceremony at this point, and reclined together on the bed. The train car was dark, with cool night breezes wafting in through the skylight.

They began with sweet kisses and gentle embraces, taking their time, wary of any pressures or expectations.

She slipped from his embrace to cuddle lower on his body, clutching and kissing his belly, down to the dark gold pubic triangle. His deep breathing and tight

muscles acknowledged his excitement. As she reached her destination, she paused to take in the view.

Even though Catherine could count her intimate partners on one hand, she had never seen a man's body like Vincent's. Of course, the obvious differences existed—but, his masculinity on display was startling. The length and width of him amazed her. She wondered how she would please him—and she was determined to please him! And herself.

She held his engorged shaft with both hands and began with tender kisses to the tip. He shifted self-consciously and reached for her, but she gently took his hand and kissed it. “Let me please you, Vincent,” she whispered. “I love you so much.”

He submitted to her attention, his great golden body burning into the bed. She stroked his heated flesh with her hands and with her mouth until he could hold back no longer. As he released his pent-up passion, he simultaneously lifted her to his chest, the lovers' wine spilling out over her belly and thighs.

Their kisses seared one into the other, each panting and gasping. Vincent cradled Catherine in his arms and laid her gently against the bed pillows. His kisses grazed along her breasts and belly down to her moist thatch. Tenderly, he caressed her womanly body, centering on her pleasure point until she began to quiver with delight. Firmly, he kissed her core, bathing her flesh with his broad tongue.

As she convulsed under his lingual battery, he gripped her thighs and ground into her, until she clutched a pillow to muffle her screams of completion. Then, dissolving in raucous laughter, she grabbed his golden tresses and literally tugged him back to face her.

They kissed furiously then, tasting their exotic flavors and breathing in the steam between them.

Catherine attempted to speak. “Vincent,” she croaked hoarsely, “where did this come from?”

“I'm trying to see that fear and joy can exist together,” he answered, equally gruff.

“H-how did you know that?” Catherine asked, astonished at his reference.

“It's something I'm trying to believe,” he answered, enfolding her.

Exhausted, they lay entangled upon the bed. Lulled by the night sounds, they slept.

As the first rays of dawn broke over the tree tops, they drowsily shook apart from each other. Staggering to stand, Vincent pulled on his clothing. Collapsing on the bed while trying to don his boots, he and Catherine laughed together.

Clutching his head, Catherine said seriously, "You should go."

"I'll come to you tonight . . . and burn for you until then," Vincent said, kissing her possessively.

And so ended the sixth night.

\* \* \*

Catherine endured the seventh day waiting for word from Tony, who finally called to say that despite stake-outs throughout the city, there had been no sign of the men they sought. Resigned, Catherine busied herself in her train car till the daylight began to fade and her thoughts turned to the evening, and a visit from Vincent.

\* \* \*

On the seventh night, the love between Vincent and Catherine was consummated.

Vincent tugged off his jeans and boots, and pulled his shirt off over his head. They settled easily onto the bed, nuzzling and conspiring, hands reaching everywhere, lips and tongues hungry for each other.

Catherine was naked under a simple gauzy batik-print tunic and Vincent delighted in the feel of her body beneath it. She thrust her hands in his hair and kissed him full on the mouth, tasting his fear dissolving into passion.

The voice was not her own, but his voice, come through her spirit, as she gasped, "Love me! Love me, my darling!"

Then his hands were under her dress and clutching her warm thighs. She opened to him like a flower, her flesh burning with a tropical heat.

His caressing hand found her heated core and its melted-butter consistency. She writhed under his touch, moaning, and reaching for him. He indulged in manual pleasure for a moment, enjoying the sight and scent of her, remembering last night.

With Catherine encouraging him, Vincent positioned his body above hers. She raised her knees alongside his hips, extending her arms for him to remove her dress.

He set himself at her entry, kissing her mouth passionately at the same time. She was wet for him, eager to receive his love, but the fit was yet to be accommodated. Vincent did not have raw experience, but he knew his Catherine's body. Carefully, he slid both hands under her hips and began a gentle massage to the small of her back.

As she relaxed over his caress, Catherine felt her pelvic joints soften and almost separate. As she experienced this sensation, Vincent pressed forward ever so slightly.

He continued to kiss her as he moved within her; the entrance prolonged and savored. As her internal muscles seized around his width, he waited patiently, and continued the kisses and massage.

She slowly relaxed around him and he moved his hands to cradle her head, holding her shoulders and back along his strong forearms. Now he filled her completely.

Fully engulfed in her heated folds, he paused, ready to sob with emotion. She gripped his huge body, covering his face with kisses. Almost involuntarily, Vincent flexed his erection within her, sending shock waves rippling through her body. Her legs began to shake and he reached back and clutched them into stillness.

Vincent could not believe the ecstasy he found in her body, her hot, lush, open body! He began to build their pleasure with fearless and concentrated passion, basking in her essence, protecting and respecting her even as he advanced.

The two moved as one; matching each gentle withdrawal and each driving force. They increased in momentum, his diameter merging into her depth. He was gently rending her now and she was loving it—her body was shattered with pleasure, shaken with joy.

Their sexual energy echoed soundlessly through the train car and out onto the river  
...

And so ended the seventh night.

\* \* \*

Very early next morning, Vincent decided to go back to the Bordeaux Lounge to thank Marianna and seek more information about her connection to Narcissa.

As he rounded the corner, keeping out of sight along the trellis, Vincent heard sounds of a struggle.

“Hey now, Cap,” Marianna’s nervous voice was saying. “I just a harmless lil charmer, uh?” She gave a little yelp that almost propelled Vincent toward her, but, instead, he was able to move just enough to get a glimpse of the scene. Norton Wimbley and Darin Weston were holding Marianna and her kitchen crew at gunpoint. Weston had his gun against Marianna’s head as he held her arms behind her back. Wimbley held old Marcus, the cook, and young Toby, the dishwasher, at bay. “OK, Chief! I’m ahelp ya good as I can,” placated Marianna. “Let my crew go, then I give ya what you want. Lemme get a inkpen and I write down the number f’ya.”

Vincent’s heart went out to Marianna for her courage and concern for her employees. With a terrifying roar, he leapt from the doorway.

Everyone scattered amidst screams, clattering cooking pots, and breaking glass. Vincent swept Marianna, Marcus and Toby to the side and turned to face the other two.

Wimbley and Weston advanced on Vincent, each with a gun in his hand. Vincent sized up the situation; he had been in many like this before. On the streets of New York, or in the dark passageways of the Tunnels, he had been faced with adversaries in potentially deadly scenarios.

This time, there were no steam valves to release; no unseen crevices or chasms to lure enemies into. He could simply rip them to pieces, slashing with his lethal talons and crushing them against the ground. But somehow, Vincent couldn’t kill now. Something was different—the way his mind was working to problem-solve the circumstances, killing was not an option.

The nonfunctional freezer chest stood with open door and dank interior just a few paces beyond where the three men had paused, confronting each other. Suddenly, Vincent developed an idea. He lurched toward the others, arms outstretched, clawed hands reaching. As he expected, Darin and Norton both lunged toward him.

Vincent grasped their arms and whipped them into the confines of the freezer chest with one smooth motion. Slamming the door and thrusting the bolt into place, he cleanly confined the two criminals.

“Though you are men worth killing,” Vincent growled, “you will not die by *my* hand today.”

“Oh m’stars, Brah Vincent! Ya saved m’*life!*” cried Marianna, running to hug Vincent. He dropped to one knee to receive her hug, as he would to hug the Tunnel children. She was so tiny, she reminded him of the other orphans Below.

“Is there someone who can help you with these men?” Vincent asked her, noticing Toby and Marcus peering anxiously from behind the bar.

“Well, there’s po-lice here from New York lookin’ for them two anyhow. I got the lady’s card here somewhere.” Marianna stepped back from Vincent to pat her pockets. “Yeah, here ‘tis,” she said producing Catherine’s business card.

Vincent attempted to stifle his reaction, but Marianna was too quick for him.

“How you know ’bout this lady?” Marianna demanded. Then, instantly, she put everything together. “Ohhhhhh! Catherine! *She’s* ya lady!”

“Well . . . I surely hope things is better b’tween ya than the *last* time y’was in here!” she called with affection over her shoulder, as she went to use the telephone.

Vincent suppressed his smile and slipped out into the alley.

The kitchen staff stepped cautiously from behind the bar, brushing debris from their clothes.

“Whoa, brah, t’anks to Gawd dat fella wid d’mask came in here!” panted Marcus, mopping his brow.

“I’m not sure that guy was *wearing* a mask!” mused young Toby aloud, looking out the way their champion had gone.

\* \* \*

Later that night in Catherine’s train car, she and Vincent sat in the dark and recounted the events of the day.

“New Orleans PD picked up Wimbley and Weston for extradition back to New York,” said Catherine. “And the Texas authorities were waiting for Charlene. Tony and Cary invited me to fly back with them, but I told them I’d rather have one more train trip . . .” she smiled up at Vincent, who kissed her tenderly. He pulled her onto his lap and tucked her head against his shoulder. She was a woman fulfilled and he was a man transformed.

“I must tell you about an extraordinary woman I met here, Catherine; and I believe you met her as well,” said Vincent. He proceeded to tell her about Marianna.

“Vincent! Do you think she is really Narcissa’s granddaughter?” Catherine responded.

“I would like to ask her to come back to New York with us . . . with you, Catherine, if she is willing,” he said.

“Of course!” Catherine agreed. “After all the help she’s been to us! It’s a wonderful idea. And . . . I think a certain Cary Devereux will be happy to have her in town as well!”

They sat without speaking. It was the eighth night in New Orleans and Vincent and Catherine had come full circle.

“We have a new definition of fear, don’t we Vincent?” she posed.

“And of joy,” he answered her.

Resting against his body, Catherine began to untie the lacings on Vincent’s vest. “How will you get back to New York?” she asked.

“The same way I came here,” he replied, opening her blouse.

And so began the last of their endings.

\* \* \*

Back in Joe’s office, Tony, Cary, and Catherine received commendations and Joe praised their collaboration and hard work. “But I hope you had time for a little fun,” he said.

Turning to Catherine, Joe teased her, “Did ya pass a good time in N’awlins, Radcliffe?”

With a Southern drawl and a secret smile, Catherine replied, “I’d say I passed a very good time indeed!”

*Finis*