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Opening extract from

A Little in Love

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Rue de la Chanvrerie, 5 June 1832

I'm dying. There's no use hoping I'll live or telling myself, *Keep going, it's only a small wound.* There's too much blood on the ground.

I'm going to die in this street.

I can hardly breathe. My hand, my arm and my body are so full of pain. I'm whimpering, trembling. And I'm cold too – lying on my back with the cobblestones pressing into me. In the distance are horses' hooves, and someone is shouting, 'Is anyone alive out there?' I want to call, *'Yes, over here!'* But I can't. It hurts too much to speak or move.

I can smell gunpowder. And burning wood. The barricade's still alight, filling the air with thick, black smoke. It protected us for a while, this wall, but not now. The soldiers broke through it, set it on fire with their musket shots. It's crackling near me, turning to ash, and like all the people who are dying on this street it will be cold by morning.

I will be cold by morning.

I blink. I can see stars through the smoke – too many to ever count, millions and millions. What are they thinking as they look down? Perhaps they're sad because Paris is burning. Because so many good people are dead.

The stars . . . They've always felt like my friends. They're like tiny, shining faces I've known all my life. When I've been scared or can't sleep, they've been there to keep me company. I've done so many bad things in my life but the stars always forgave me.

I whisper to them now: 'Can you hear me? I'm so scared. Please don't let it hurt so much . . .' But how can they stop me bleeding? No one can.

Please . . . My eyes fill with tears.

What will stop the pain? And how can I stop being afraid? I don't want to die. Not tonight, and not like this.

Maybe it'll help to think of happy times and the beautiful things in my life? I close my eyes very tightly. Yes, that's better . . . I can see a bird singing. A peach tree. A full moon over the rooftops of Paris. A rainbow. My brother's freckled face. Flowers in hedgerows that made the lane smell lovely.

And him.

I open my eyes.

Him. Marius. Yes, I'll think of Marius because he makes me happy. He always has, from the first time I saw him in the Gorbeau tenement. He's kind and shy, and he hums without knowing it and once he held my hand on a sunlit street . . .

Is he near me? Is that him, shouting, 'Is anyone alive?' I try to sit up, to call out, but I can't for the pain is like a fire, shooting through me.

Instead I whisper, 'Stars? Bring him to me?' He'd make

this hurt less, I know. He'd smile very gently. He'd crouch down and say, 'Ssh, Eponine . . . I'm here, see?' I don't think I'd be frightened of dying if he was by my side.

The nearby church clock is chiming – eleven times. My teeth are chattering. I'm so tired, so cold.

I close my eyes again. For a moment I see Cosette.

Then I see rain. It's rain through a window. There are ditches full of water. I can see a horse too and she's so wet she's turned from grey to black.

Where's my mother? Downstairs . . .

My body lies in a Paris street, surrounded by corpses and my own blood and a burning barricade, but my head and its thoughts are in Montfermeil. How old am I, in Montfermeil? I'm three. And I'm in a blue pinafore, watching the rain.

What did I know back then? Some things. But I didn't know, couldn't even imagine, the life that lay ahead for me or that I'd ever fall in love. Or that I'd put my hand in front of a soldier's gun to save that boy's life, and bleed to death for him.





BOOK ONE





MONTFERMEIL

I was born in the year of 1815. That was a hard year. In the summer they had a battle called Waterloo and all the village's men fought in it, far away. There weren't many left in Montfermeil to cut the hay or bale it, to wring the necks of chickens or shoe horses or chop wood.

'I was walking,' Maman told me. 'Then I felt you coming. The grass was waist-high so I just squatted down in it . . .'

That was my arrival. While Papa was fighting in a muddy field, my mother was cursing. She pushed me out into thistles and hay.

'You were a girl – so of course I kept you,' she said.

She never liked boys.

After the battle, Papa came back. Many men didn't return but he did. He didn't have a scratch on him and he clinked with coins that he'd stolen from the pockets of dying men. Once, he told me about it: picking his teeth, he said, 'I pretended I was helping them but I wasn't! Ha! I was taking

their pennies and silver crosses . . . Well, the dead don't need money, do they?'

That was my father. Luc Thenardier. Thin with a greying, bristled chin. His eyes were quick like a rat's – quick and cunning and black. He smoked a pipe. It yellowed the ends of his fingers and left a dent in his lip.

The Battle of Waterloo made him rich. With dead men's money he bought himself a new hat and a pocket watch. For Maman he bought a cape edged with fur. I'm not sure what he thought of me, his new baby daughter – but I know what he thought of the empty inn in Montfermeil. It sat at the end of the Ruelle de Boulanger. Maman told me how they walked there one summer's evening, arm in arm, to look at it. It was damp and crooked. Its windows were greenish with moss, birds and spiders nested in its eaves.

Papa rubbed his chin and said, 'Why don't we buy it, *ma chère*?'

She scowled. 'Buy it? Why? It's falling down!'

'It is. But there aren't any other inns for miles and miles! People would come! And there's money to be made from drunken men . . .'

So they picked the moss from its glass with their fingernails and swept the bigger spiders out into the yard.

My father called the inn The Sergeant of Waterloo. 'Named,' he told his customers, 'after myself, and my own brave role in the battle . . .' Papa told lies all the time and Maman would listen to them, polishing glasses and admiring him – this man who'd plucked buttons from dying soldiers' coats and then left those men to die in the rain.

My parents.

This inn was my home. I was born in a bright hayfield but I grew up in a dark, stone tavern with nettles by its door. Its

sign creaked back and forth. Mice scurried behind my bedroom wall at night.

I think I remember my sister being born; it was October when the leaves were crispy-brown. But my first proper memory came when I was three. It's clear and real like cupped water.

It begins with water too – weeks and weeks of it.