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The Things We Did for Love

Written by Natasha Farrant

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The Things We Did for Love

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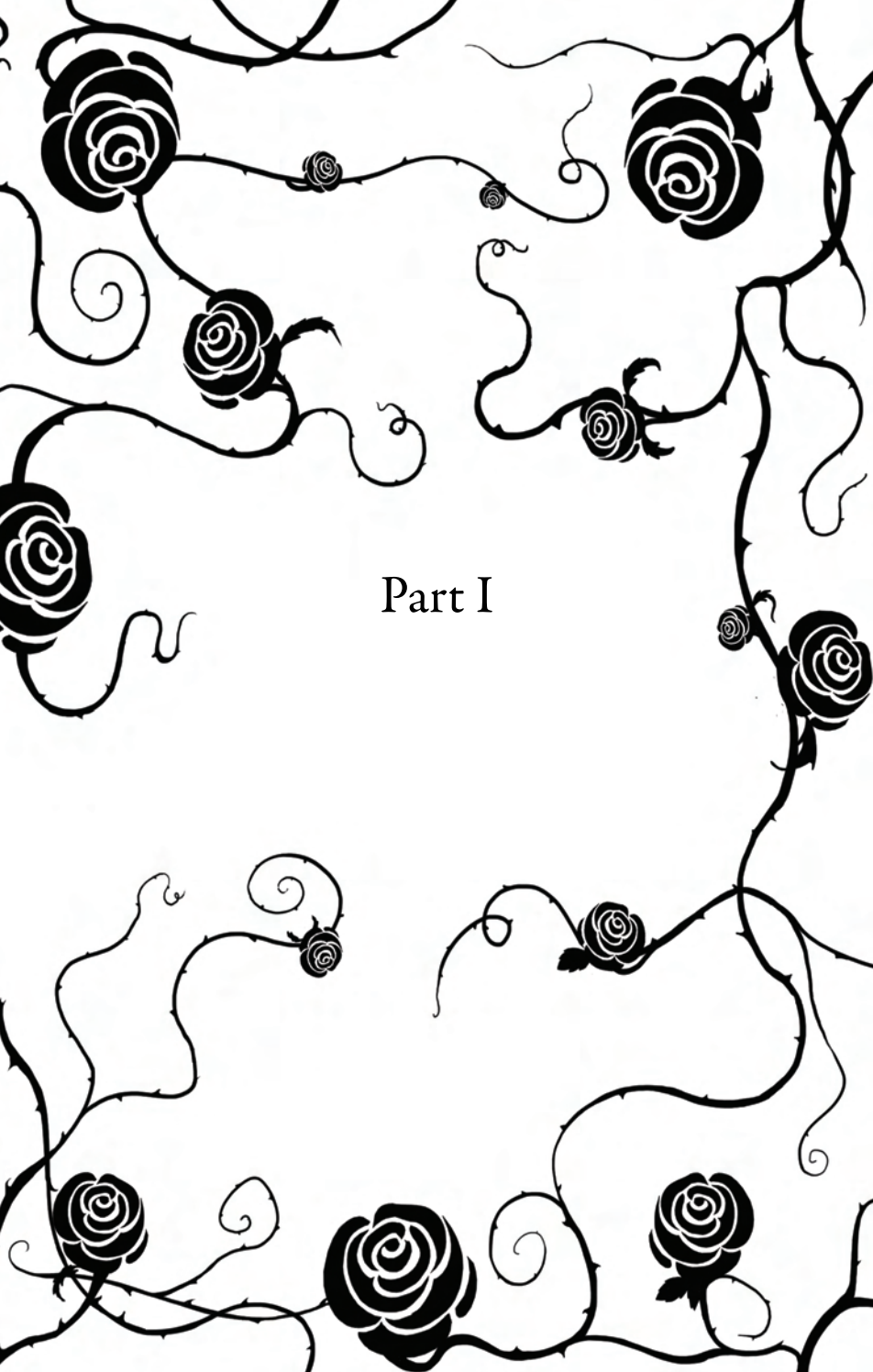
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South-West France, 1944

France has been occupied by Germany since June 1940. For four years, she has had to pay for the cost of the Occupation, in money and in kind. A major proportion of her food and raw materials is taken by the occupiers while the French themselves go hungry. Young men and women are sent to work in German factories. A puppet government has been set up, French in name but taking orders from Nazi Germany. Its police, the Milice, work alongside the Gestapo to arrest any undesirables – Jews, Communists, Résistants – who are sent to concentration or death camps. As it becomes obvious Germany is going to lose the war, more and more people flock to join the Résistance and the Maquis, the underground army helping the Allies. The Nazi response to their activities grows more brutal: three men hanged for any German injured, ten for any killed. When the Allies land in Normandy on June 6th, the occupying forces, helped by the Milice, are quick to reassert their authority over the civilian population. Atrocities are committed in the name of maintaining the public order.

This book is based on one such event.



Part I



I should leave. I want to – I think – but it's so difficult. I love it here. There's the lake, look, surrounded by trees. And there's the river going into it, where we used to swim because the lake is so muddy, and there's the road curving round the hill up towards the village. It's so peaceful. The countryside hasn't changed a bit. The river still gurgles, birds still sing. There's still wheat in the fields and deer in the forest, the hills still look blue where they meet the sky. Rain falls, sun shines. It looks so pretty, despite everything. Not exciting enough for a holiday, maybe, but you'd stop for a picnic in the woods.

Others stayed too, for a while. I've not been completely alone. Together, we pieced it all together. This is our story, but only I am left to tell it now.

So I'll get on with it, shall I? Then I can decide what to do.

Whether to go or stay.

February 1944

1

'Any minute now,' sighed Solange.

'I don't know why you're so excited,' said her cousin. 'I thought boys our age were all stupid.'

'This one's different.' Solange pulled a face, pretending to salivate. 'This one's new.'

'*Nearly* new,' corrected Arianne.

'Five years away makes him new,' said Solange. She rolled across the bed and pulled a nail file out of her bedside drawer. 'I wonder why they're coming back.'

'I'm sure we'll find out soon enough.'

'Mother heard there was a fight. She says they moved to his grandparents' at the beginning of the war because they were broke, but that his mother doesn't care how poor she is, she can't bear to live there any more. She says . . .'

'You shouldn't listen to gossip.' Arianne turned towards the window. 'People always exaggerate.'

It was still raining. Once, there had been fires and warm lights on winter afternoons, brioche straight from

the baker's oven dunked into bowls of chocolate. But now the day was spluttering to a close without ever having grown light, and the streets of Samaroux were empty. The grates were cold to conserve fuel, the paraffin lamps used to supplement the electricity supplies were dim. As for brioche and chocolate . . . Arianne pressed her forehead to the glass and watched as a droplet detached itself from the top of the windowpane. She traced its course with her finger until it hit the water collected at the bottom of the glass. 'Imagine being that drop,' she said. 'To be all tiny and alone and suddenly to belong to a whole collective of drops.'

'You're so weird.' Solange had abandoned her nail file and was stuffing stockings down her bra, admiring her reflection in the mirror over her dressing table. 'You know what the problem is, don't you? Five years of war has made us dull. Nothing ever happens.'

'The Duponts came last year.' Arianne did not say what she wanted to say, that her father being taken prisoner had not been *nothing*. 'There are their piano recitals.'

'Piano recitals!' cried Solange.

'Paul says the oldest daughter can skin a rabbit almost as fast he can.'

'Your brother has the strangest reasons for liking people.'

'I've never known *you* turn your nose up at a rabbit stew.' Arianne turned to face the room. 'I don't think

it is the war, you know. I think maybe Samaroux's too small for us. Maybe we should leave. Maybe . . .'

But Solange wasn't listening. She had joined Arianne by the window and was staring down at the street.

'Don't look now,' she murmured, 'but I think Samaroux just got bigger.'

And there below was Luc Belleville. Taller than when he went away, as skinny as they all were but broader than most boys his age, his jacket collar turned up against the rain. Five years . . . A group of women pressed around the cart which had brought him with his mother from the station to their old home across from Solange's house. Teresa Belleville embraced them each in turn. Luc ignored them, and began to unload cases from the back of the cart.

'Turn around,' urged Solange. 'Let us see you properly . . .'

'I wonder if they're back for good,' said Arianne.

'I do hope so,' drooled Solange.

Luc looked up. Arianne caught her breath. High cheekbones, full lips. Eyes which she knew from memory to be grey but which looked black in the half-shadows and which held hers for the space of a few seconds. She raised her hand in a half-wave. He scowled and turned away.

'Not fair,' cried Solange. 'Did you see how he looked at you?'

'He hardly looked at all,' whispered Arianne.

'Oh, he looked.' Solange bounced up and down, trying to attract Luc's attention, but he did not turn back. 'Believe me, he looked.'

They watched as the light from oil lamps moved from room to room in the house opposite, until Luc's mother leaned out to close the shutters.

'He knew we were talking about him,' said Arianne.

'Price you pay for a mysterious reappearance,' said Solange. 'And for being drop-dead gorgeous.'

'Price you pay for living in a tiny village,' grumbled Arianne.

Solange spent the rest of the evening trawling through her wardrobe, trying on and rejecting outfits she knew by heart because when had she last had any new clothes? Arianne wrote in her diary, as she did every night, pages and pages, recording the minutiae of the day. *He looks just the same,* she wrote about Luc. *The same, but bigger. And FURIOUS. I know that look. He's spoiling for a fight.*

II

Arianne had known Luc all her life, but the first time they met properly was on July 14th, 1939, Bastille Day, when he was eleven and she was ten.

The village picnic, as far as Arianne was concerned,

had been a disaster. She had looked forward to it since Easter and she had planned *everything*, from what she would wear to the games she would play with her friends when lunch was over. They were going to paddle in the river after lunch, then steal raspberries from Madame Lamotte's garden and eat them before tea. It was going to be *heaven*. Instead, when the time came, her mother was sick, her father would not leave her side, and she was saddled with looking after her brother.

'It's *so* unfair!' she complained to Solange. Paul, five years old and already a handful, was dissecting a cowpat with a stolen parasol. 'I still don't understand why Mother can't look after him. Or Papa. They might have kept him at home instead of inflicting him on me.'

Solange was silent, a reaction Arianne was growing used to whenever she complained about her mother. 'I suppose you think I'm being horrible,' she muttered. 'But it *is* unfair.'

'They'll bring pudding soon,' said Solange.

'I *always* have to look after him!'

'Chocolate éclairs,' murmured Solange. 'And meringues.'

'Yes, well. Meringues would be good.'

The afternoon was lifted by the promise of cakes. Games were organised, but when Solange rushed to join in, Arianne shook her head.

'I can't,' she grumbled. 'Because of Junior over there.

You go, though,' she added, with a generosity she did not feel. 'I know you want to.'

As Solange ran off, Romy Dulac detached himself from the crowd and began to limp towards Arianne. She groaned. Poor Romy, crippled by polio, with his three strapping brothers and his father so disappointed in him.

'He's like a dog,' she told her mother once. 'You know the way they sit and watch you when you eat?'

There wasn't a dog in all of Samaroux who couldn't melt Arianne's heart, but the thought of Romy's adulation today was too much. Paul was wandering towards the far end of the meadow. She jumped to her feet to run after him.

'Ari, wait!'

She hesitated, just too long, so that he knew she had heard him. Up ahead, Paul cackled and vanished into the long grass. She heard a splash, followed by a scream, and ran faster. Romy, helpless, watched her go.

She stopped short at the sound of laughter, her *brother's* laughter, an unmistakable sequence of gasps and chortles. The river bank was steep here. She walked to its edge and looked down and there was Luc, up to his waist in the river, messy blond hair pushed back from his face, spinning on the spot as he hit the surface with his palm. Drops caught the gold of the afternoon sun, and he gleamed in their reflected light. She wondered how she had never noticed him before. Luc, still spin-

ning, sent a sheet of water over Paul paddling in the shallows. Paul squealed, looked up and saw his sister.

'Ari!' he bellowed.

Luc stopped turning.

'It was you,' she stammered, which in itself was strange. Arianne never stammered. 'The splash. I thought it was Paul falling into the river.'

'He wouldn't do anything so stupid, would you, Paul?'

Paul rolled on to his front, kicked his legs a few times and struggled to his feet. Arianne stared at him in awe.

'You're *filthy*!' she said.

'Cold,' remarked Paul.

'Out,' ordered Arianne.

'I've got a towel,' offered Luc. 'We can dry him on the grass.'

It was warm up on the riverbank. She fussed over Paul and tried not to look as Luc dried off in the sun. He was skinny but strong, his limbs tanned dark brown. He pulled his shirt back on but did not button it up, and the back grew damp where it touched his sodden shorts.

'*So* dirty,' she scolded Paul. She stripped him down to his underpants. He stood with his head down and his bottom in the air, preparing himself for a forward roll.

'He'll do that for hours,' she sighed to hide her blush.

'He's funny.' Luc held out a slab of chocolate. She

broke off a square and he took the rest of the row. 'I can watch him if you want to play.'

'You go. They were just starting a game of football.'

'Not today.' He had wolfed down his chocolate and now sat cross-legged on the grass, fiddling with a homemade catapult. 'Papa,' he explained. 'He used to say this picnic was the only reason he still lived here. I don't know why. All he did was drink too much then fall asleep by the river. But it still makes me think of him.'

He fitted a pebble to the catapult from a pile in his satchel and released it. The pebble smashed into a tree on the opposite bank.

'He made it for me,' he said. 'On this holiday, the year before he died.'

'Can I try?'

She fumbled her first attempts, but her fourth pebble flew straight. She had not anticipated the fun of it – the vibration of the catapult, the whistle of air, the sense of triumph when her missile slammed into its target.

'It's brilliant.'

'I'll make you one if you like.'

They played for a while longer, taking turns, until only one pebble was left. He nodded that it was hers and she took her time over choosing a target, enjoying the moment, the smoothness of the pebble, the unexpected companionship.

'Your mother's ill, right?'

She lowered the catapult.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Just I heard . . .'

'She's a *bit* ill.' Arianne raised the catapult again and squinted down her line of vision, aiming for a low stump with a bright patch of yellow fungus. 'But she's getting better.'

Luc said nothing. The fungus exploded.

'I have to go,' said Arianne.

'Ari.'

Strange, she thought, how her nickname on his lips sounded like a real name.

'If anything happens . . . I mean you know, if . . . Just remember I know what it's like?'

She nodded, not meeting his eyes. Paul had grown bored of his solitary games and they each took one of his hands, swinging him clear of the ground. As they walked back towards the picnic tent, neither of them noticed Romy watching from the trees.

Arianne lay on her mother's bed that evening and told her about the picnic.

'I met this boy. Well, Luc Belleville. He was nice.'

'Surely you knew him before!'

'I knew who he *was*. I just didn't know *him*.'

'I taught him.' It was hard to believe Marielle Lafay-

ette had once been a teacher, with her voice now little more than a whisper. She attempted a smile. Arianne looked away. 'Hopeless daydreamer. His father was a wonderful painter.'

'What did he paint?' Arianne turned on to her back and held her hands out above her face, gazing at the ceiling through her splayed fingers. She could imagine the paintings Luc might make. Green and gold, with bright splashes of colour.

'Landscapes, mostly. But always different. Like he didn't see them the way we did. Dancing. He made the countryside in his pictures dance. They were wild, but they had so much heart.'

'Dancing pictures!' Arianne snorted and flipped on to her side. 'Luc said he was going to make me a catapult.'

'That's nice too.' They lay in silence for a while. Marielle closed her eyes. Arianne stroked a strand of her mother's copper hair, the hair Paul had inherited, and noticed that it was streaked with grey. Elodie called her down for supper.

'I wish you could still cook,' she told her mother. 'Auntie Elodie's food is disgusting.'

Marielle's mouth twitched. 'It can't be that bad.'

'It is,' Arianne assured her. She leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek. 'I'll come back up after I've eaten.'