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Provence

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Jenna Fleming

Happy comes in blinding bright flashbacks to moments that should be so fresh but feel as if they happened inside a dream world, memories that seem like secrets whispered to me late at night by some other fairy girl who really lived them, thoughts planted like ephemeral seeds inside my head and left to grow into fantasy, watered by nostalgia, sunkissed by imagination. Those sweet Provençal days were sparkling prisms of brilliant white, soft yellow, gentle pink—each a whole spectrum of joy squeezed for me into one rainbow. Instantly unforgettable. Muted a little at first, chastened and calmed and quieted by the cold, it came to blossom vibrant before my delighted eyes, a radiant citrine diamond shine I could never never have expected to kindle from embers into sparks, igniting finally to luminous flame. It was a light so bright it scalded me, my skin bearing its scars for weeks, my heart forever.

The all-encompassing, overwhelming brightness of the little city I called home shot straight through the carefully carved crystals of what I thought I knew, showering sparkly jewel toned reflections across the weeks, red and blue and yellow. I found whispered echoes and secret flashes scattered like confetti along the cobblestone sidewalks, tangled into my hair, hidden between my fingers, stuck in my shoes at the end of each day. The light brought me shadows, too—deep gray moments of a different kind of clarity, the barest of hints at incomprehensible complexities I couldn't yet see, the most delicate suggestions of mysteries tiptoeing around the edges. For the light and the dark I am likewise thankful; together they pushed me half a miniscule millimeter closer to an incredibly flawed, unintelligibly perfect version of understanding. In and along those uneven streets, I started to learn how to look, to see how to listen. That charming city between the mountains and the sea taught me to speak differently, to breathe clearly, and to laugh more quietly, its irresistible embrace discordantly tender, lovingly brash.

The sacred waters of Sextius gurgled unending from the fountains around every corner, bubbling lazily from deep underground, falling in sprinkles from the sky. Imbibed straight from the spigot, those sweet springs sated a thirst I'd hardly known I'd harbored. In shocking, drenching, cleansing splashes, the blessed waters brought me peace, however fleeting, and within their droplets I felt ancient knowledge beyond my

own understanding, resting on my skin a moment then rolling right off, just a little of their cold clarity all I needed.

The wide Gallic sky, reflected empty and blue over the treetops, was a constant companion and a constant reminder, my ever-present source of wonder at the vast simplicity of the land. At first its purity, unblemished by the finest trace of fluffy cottony white, took me aback, a startling sign of my solitude and strangeness. As days became weeks, this bluest blue gained a fond significance, a singular remembrance, its fidelity and persistence urging me onward.

The stark Provençal sun burned me bright red, chastising my folly, searing away my arrogance, scolding my assumptions. At the same time she warmed my shivery shoulders, thawing out and melting away the stubbornness I no longer needed. This sparkling, spectacular yellow star bur-nished each day, rounding its edges, polishing its memory, lending me a miniscule drop of her own liquid gold to take away with me, warm and rich and lovely.

The square-stacked houses, lined up haphazardly like so many rows of slowly tarnishing teeth, were the backdrop for my exploration, eked out almost painfully at times. When the unrelenting, shocking chill of the whipping winter winds had at last planted a goodbye kiss on each of my raw pink cheeks, the beautifully blossoming trees giggled down drizzles of dry, prickly, sneezy, cottony pollen, burning up my throat, gathering in piles of soft slippery carpet beneath my feet. Here I found a thin cushion for the silly heartbreak that entrenched itself so stubbornly within my chest, bitter fuzzy flashes recalled far too many times over during the solitary cozy nights in my chaste little white bed.

I did fall in love in Provence. Romance came to me among Arlesian ruins and within Alsatian wines, around scandalously smiling cigarettes and under white china cups of café crème, in the cool purple morning clouds and under the blurry nighttime city glow. The greatest attraction was, however, joyously unexpected—without my even noticing, a passing flirtation caught fire, violently flaming into an epic passion, and I was and am caught in a torrid affair with that foolish funny francophone language. Latinate melodies cradled absurd sprinkles of prepositions while languid malleability softened impossible pronouns, blending together in an enticingly hopeless challenge. Countless senses and tenses and rearrangements, liaisons and conjugations and past-proche-parfait confusion all made up for me a constant struggle, a constant joyful surprise. Native patience dealt kindly with my special brand of graceless hesitance and loving labor, leading to something like a careful confidence, wildly daring and perpetually uncertain, an enchanting, exhausting, extraordinary daily freefall.

Somehow there were fourteen, then ten, then three more walks

home along the stony streets, three more lucky days in my beautiful little city in the sun. Suddenly, incredibly, tragically, it was all over, only not really. This kind of love is not something forgotten, each lesson in seeing rightly, living plainly, trying and being and knowing, not something replaced. The crepes and café and wine and sunshine are for me eternal; in burying part of my heart beneath an ancient stone belltower I gained a slice of light to keep with me always. Provence remains, with its windy winter and pollen-dusted spring, with Gabriel at the pizza parlor, amid fickle Provençal heat and cold Provençal shade, in the sweet sky and the clear air.