The Provence Cure for the Brokenhearted

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This novel is dedicated to the reader.
For this singular moment, it's just the two of us.

Here is one way to say it: Grief is a love story told backward.

Or maybe that's not it at all. Maybe I should be more scientific. Love and the loss of that love exist in equal measure. Hasn't an equation like this been invented by a romantic physicist somewhere?

Or maybe I should put it this way: Imagine a snow globe. Imagine a tiny snow-struck house inside of it. Imagine there's a woman inside of that tiny house sitting on the edge of her bed, shaking a snow globe, and within *that* snow globe, there is a tiny snow-struck house with a woman inside of it, and this one is standing in the kitchen, shaking another snow globe, and within *that* snow globe . . .

Every good love story has another love hiding within it.

Part One

Ever since Henry's death, I'd been losing things.

I lost keys, sunglasses, checkbooks. I lost a spatula and found it in the freezer, along with a bag of grated cheese.

I lost a note to Abbot's third-grade teacher explaining how I'd lost his homework.

I lost the caps to toothpaste and jelly jars. I put these things away open-mouthed, lidless, airing. I lost hairbrushes and shoes – not just one of a pair, but both.

I left jackets behind in restaurants, my pocketbook under my seat at the movies, my keys on the checkout counter of the drugstore – afterward, I sat in my car for a moment, disoriented, trying to place exactly what was wrong and then trudged back into the store, where the checkout girl jingled them for me above her head.

I got calls from people who were kind enough to return things. And when things were gone – just *gone* – I retraced my steps and then got lost myself. Why am I here at this mini mart? Why am I back at the deli counter?

I lost track of friends. They had babies, defended dissertations, had art showings and dinner parties and backyard barbecues . . .

Most of all, I lost track of large swaths of time. Kids at Abbot's bus stop and in the neighborhood and in his class and on his Little League team kept inching taller all around me. Abbot kept growing, too. That was the hardest to take.

I also lost track of small pieces of time – late mornings, evenings. Sometimes I would look up and it was suddenly dark outside, as if someone had flipped a switch. The fact of the matter was, life charged on without me. This realization still caught me off guard even two years later, although by this point it had become a habit, a simple unavoidable fact: The world charged on and I did not.

So it shouldn't have come as a surprise to me that Abbot and I were running late for the bridesmaid bonding on the morning of my sister's wedding. We had spent the morning playing Apples to Apples, interrupted by phone calls from the Cake Shop.

'Jude . . . Jude, slow down. Five *hundred* lemon tarts?' I stood up from the couch where Abbot was eating his third freezer pop of the morning – the kind that come in vivid colors packaged in plastic tubes that you have to snip with scissors and that sometimes make you cough. Even this detail is pained: Abbot and I had been reduced to eating frozen juice in plastic. 'No, no, I'm sure,' I continued. 'I would have written down the order. At least . . . Shit. This is probably my fault. Do you want me to come in?'

Henry hadn't only been my husband; he'd also been my business partner. I'd grown up making delicate pastries,

thinking of food as a kind of art, but Henry had convinced me that food is love. We'd met during culinary school, and shortly after Abbot was born we'd embarked on another labor of love: the Cake Shop.

Jude had been with us from the start. She was a single mom – petite, mouthy, with short bleached-out hair and a heart-shaped face – that strange combination of beauty and toughness. She was our first hire and had a natural flair, a great sense of design, and marketing savvy. After Henry's death, she'd stepped up. Henry had been the one to handle the business side of things, and I'd have lost the shop, I'm quite sure, if it weren't for Jude. Jude became the guiding force, my rudder. She kept things going.

I was about to tell Jude that I'd be at the shop in half an hour when Abbot reached up and tugged on my sleeve. He pointed at the watch he wore, its face in the shape of a baseball. Perhaps as a result of my spaciness, Abbot insisted on keeping his own time.

When I realized that it was now after noon, I shouted, 'The wedding! I'm so sorry! I've got to go!' then hung up the phone.

Abbot, wide-eyed, said, 'Auntie Elysius is going to be so mad!' He leant over to scratch a mosquito bite on his ankle. He was wearing his short white sports socks and his ankle looked like it had a golfer's tan, but really it was dirt.

'Not if we hurry!' I said. 'And grab some calamine lotion so you don't itch during the ceremony.'

We darted around our little three-bedroom bungalow madly. I found one of my heels in the closet and the other in Abbot's bedroom in a big tub of Legos. Abbot was wrestling on his rented tux. He struggled with the tiny cuff

buttons, searching for the clip-on tie and cummerbund – he'd chosen red because it was the color that Henry had worn at our wedding. I wasn't sure that was healthy, but didn't want to draw attention to it.

I threw on makeup and slipped the bridesmaid's dress over my head, grateful that the dress wasn't your typical bridesmaid's horror show – my sister had exquisite taste, and this was the most expensive dress I'd ever worn, including my own wedding dress.

When I'd declined the role of Elysius's matron of honor – or was it, to be grimly accurate, *widow* of honor? – my sister had been visibly relieved. She knew that I'd only gum up the works. In a heartbeat, she'd called an old college friend with a marketing degree, and I was happily demoted to bridesmaid. Abbot had been enlisted as the ring bearer, and to be honest, I didn't even feel like I was up for the role of mother-of-the-ring-bearer. I'd made a last-minute excuse to get out of the rehearsal dinner the night before and that day's spa treatment and group hair appointment. When your husband has died, you're allowed to just say, 'I can't make it. I'm so sorry.' If your husband died in a car accident, like mine, you're allowed to say, 'I just can't drive today.' You can simply shake your head and whisper, 'Sorry.' And people excuse you, immediately, as if this is the least they can do for you. And perhaps it is.

This was wearing on my sister, however. She'd made me promise that I would be at her house two hours before the wedding. There was a strict agenda that we had to stick to, and it included drinking mimosas with all of the bridesmaids while each gave an intimate little toast. Elysius likes it when the world finds her as its proper axis.

I couldn't judge her for that; I was painfully aware of how selfish my grief was. My eight-year-old son had lost his father. Henry's parents had lost their son. And Henry lost his life. What right did I have to use Henry's death as an excuse – time and again – to check out?

'Can I bring my snorkel stuff?' Abbot called down the hallway.

'Pack an overnight bag and bring the gear,' I said, shoving things into a small suitcase of my own. My sister lived only twenty minutes away – a quick ride from Tallahassee to the countryside in Capps – but she wanted family to spend the night. It was an opportunity to capture my mother's attention and mine and hold it for as long as possible – to relive the strong bond the three of us had once had. 'You can snorkel in the morning with Pop-pop.'

Abbot ran out of his bedroom, sliding down the hall to my doorway, still wearing his sports socks. He was holding the cummerbund in one hand and the clip-on bow tie in the other. 'I can't get these to stick on!' he said. His starched collar was sticking up by his cheeks, like the Halloween he dressed as Count Dracula.

'Don't worry about it. Just bring it all.' I was fussing with the clasp of a string of pearls my mother had lent me for the occasion. 'There will be ladies there with nervous energy and nothing to do. They'll fix you up.'

'Where will you be?' he asked with an edge of anxiety in his voice. Since Henry's death, Abbot had become a worrier. He'd started rubbing his hands together, a new tic – a little frenzy, the charade of a vigorous hand-washing. He'd become a germophobe. We'd seen a therapist, but it hadn't helped. He did this when he was anxious and also

when he sensed I was brooding. I tried not to brood in front him, but it turned out that I wasn't good at faking chipper, and my fake chipperness made him more nervous than my brooding – a vicious cycle. Now that his father was gone, did he feel more vulnerable in the world? I did.

'I'll be with the other bridesmaids doing mandatory bridesmaidish things,' I reassured him. It was at this moment that I remembered that I was supposed to have my toast prepared. I'd written a toast on a napkin in the kitchen and, of course, had since lost it and now couldn't remember anything I'd written. 'What nice things should I say about Auntie Elysius? I have to come up with something for a toast.'

'She has very white teeth and buys very good presents,' Abbot said.

'Beauty and generosity,' I said. 'I can work with that. This is going to all be fine. We're going to enjoy ourselves!'

He looked at me, checking to see if I was being honest, the way a lawyer might look at his client to see what he's really in for. I was used to this kind of scrutiny. My mother, my sister, my friends, neighbors, even customers at the Cake Shop, asked me how I was while trying to ferret out the real truth in my answer. I knew I should have been moving forward. I should have been working more, eating better, exercising, dating. Whenever I went out, I had to be prepared for an ambush by some do-good acquaintance ready to dispense pity and uplifting sentiments, questions, and advice. I practiced, 'No, really, I'm fine. Abbot and I are doing great!'

I hated, too, that I had to do all of this fending off of pity in front of Abbot. I wanted to be honest with him and

to protect him at the same time. And, of course, I wasn't being honest. This was the first wedding I'd been to since Henry's death. I'd always been a crier at weddings, even the ones of people I didn't know well, even TV weddings. I was afraid of myself now. If I could bawl at a commercial of a wedding, how would I react to this one?

I couldn't look at Abbot. If I did, he'd know I was faking it. *We're going to enjoy ourselves?* I was hoping merely to survive.

I moved to the full-length mirror that Henry had attached to the back of my closet door. Henry was everywhere, but when a memory appeared – the mirror had tipped when he was trying to install it and nearly broke in half – I tried not to linger. Lingering was a weakness. I knew to fix my attention on something small and manageable. I was now trying – a last-ditch effort – to put the pearl necklace on with the help of my reflection.

'I like it better when you don't wear makeup,' Abbot said.

I let the strand slip and curl in my cupped hand. Could he possibly remember having heard his father make a comment like that? Henry said he loved my face *naked*; sometimes he would whisper, *the way I like the rest of you*. I looked so much older than I had two years ago. The word *grief-stricken* came to mind – as if grief could literally strike you and leave an indelible mark. I turned to Abbot. 'Come here,' I said. 'Let's have a look at you.'

I set the pearl necklace on the bedside table, folded down his collar, smoothed his hair, and put my hands on his bony shoulders. I looked at my son – his blue eyes, like his father's, with the dark lashes. He had Henry's tan skin

and his ruddy cheeks, too, even though he was just a little boy. I loved his knobby chin and his two oversized adult teeth – so strangely set in his still-small mouth. 'You look so handsome,' I said. 'Like a million bucks.'

'Like a million-bucks ring bearer?'

'Exactly,' I said.

Abbot and I parked at the end of my sister's winding gravel driveway, maneuvering around a multitude of vans – the caterer's, the florist's, the sound engineer's. The driveway continued past the pool and the clay tennis court and faded to grass between the newly constructed studio and the old barn. Elysius was getting married to a sweet and diffident artist of national reputation named Daniel Welding, and even though they'd been living here together for eight years, I was always struck by the grandeur of the place she called home – and now it was even more breathtaking. The wedding itself was going to be held on the sloping lawn, which Abbot and I now marched up as quickly as we could. It was lined with rows of chairs strung together with sweeping tulle, and the exchange of vows was to take place next to the Japanese-inspired fountain where there was a trellis canopy, woven with flowers. They'd installed a temporary parquet dance floor under a large three-pronged white tent.

Abbot had his stuff in a canvas bag he got for free at the local library. I could see the cummerbund and clip-on bow tie shoved in there, among his snorkel gear – the tubing, the mask, and fins, which were gifts from my father. I was trying to pull my little suitcase on wheels. It bumped along behind me like an old obdurate dog.

We hurried to the studio to drop off our bags, but it was locked. Abbot cupped his hands to the glass and peered in. Daniel worked on massive canvases, and his detached studio had high ceilings, as well as a canvas stand that retracted into the floor. This way, he's not teetering on ladders to get to the upper reaches. There was a sofa in the loft that pulled out into a double bed, where he sometimes took a rest midday and where Abbot and I would sleep that night. Daniel's work sold incredibly well, which is why he could afford the house, the two driveways, the sloping lawn, the retractable canvas stand.

'He's in there!' Abbot said.

'He can't be. It's his wedding day.'

Abbot knocked, and Daniel appeared behind the glass door, opened it wide. He was broad-shouldered, always tan, his hair tinged silvery gray. He had a regal nose that sat a little arched and bulky on his face – an elegant face. He took off his glasses, tucked his chin to his chest in a way that made his chins fold up like a little accordion, and looked at me, messy but in a lovely dress, and Abbot, in his not-yet-garnished tux. He smiled broadly. 'I'm so glad you're here! How's it hangin', Abbot?' He pulled Abbot to him, gave him a bear hug. That's what Abbot needed, bear hugs, affection, from fatherly types. I was good at pecking foreheads, but I could tell how happy he was to be lifted up off his feet by Daniel. Abbot had a silly grin on his face now. Daniel hugged me, too. He smelt of expensive products – hair gels and imported soaps.

'Are you allowed to be here?' I asked. 'You're dressed like a wedding party escapee.'

Abbot slipped around Daniel and stepped into the studio

as he always did – with an expression of awe. He loved the narrow stairs to the loft, the espresso machine, the exposed beams, and, of course, he loved the huge canvases in various stages of development propped against walls.

'I had a little idea, so I popped in,' Daniel said. 'It calms me down to take a look.'

'Shouldn't you have shoes on?' Abbot said.

'Ah, yes.' He pointed to a pair of shoes just a few feet away. 'See, if I get paint on the suit, it's one thing, but the shoes are handmade. A cobbler out in the desert had me stand in powder, barefoot, and from that imprint he made a pair of shoes specifically for my feet.' These are the kinds of stories that he and Elysius had – a cobbler in the desert measuring bare feet in powder.

Abbot ran to the shoes, but didn't touch them. I knew that he wanted to, but shoes tromp around on the ground and the ground is littered with germs. He would have had to scrub his hands in the bathroom immediately. The gesture of fake hand-washing wouldn't do. 'Where's Charlotte?' Abbot asked, returning to the paintings. Charlotte was Daniel's daughter from his first marriage. Daniel had been through a nasty divorce and custody battle over Charlotte, and he swore he'd never marry again – not because he was jaded, but, more accurately, because he was beleaguered. A few months after Henry's death, though, he had a change of heart. There was a natural correlation, of course – what could make you want to cement love more than the reminder of life's fragility?

'She's up at the house,' he said; then he turned to me and added, 'trying to fly under the radar.'

'How's she doing?' I asked. Charlotte was sixteen and

going through a punk phase that alarmed Elysius, though *punk* was outdated. They had new terms for everything now.

'She's studying for the SATs, but, I don't know, she seems a little . . . morose. Well, I worry about her. I'm her father. I worry. You know what I mean.' He looked at me like a co-conspirator. He meant that I understood parenting from the inside out, in a way that Elysius didn't. It was something he could never admit except in this sly way.

'What's this one supposed to be?' Abbot asked. All of the paintings were abstract, chaotically so, but Abbot had stalled in front of an especially tumultuous one with big heavy lines, desperate and weighted. It was as if there were a bird trapped somewhere in the painting – a bird that wanted out.

Daniel looked at the painting. 'A boat far off with full sails,' he said. 'And loss.'

'You've got to cheer up!' I said to Daniel quietly.

He put a hand on my shoulder. 'You're one to talk,' he whispered. 'Are you designing?' I always felt honored that Daniel saw my work as a pastry chef as art. He wasn't rarefied about art. He believed it belonged to all of us, and he always raved about my work. And, at this moment, he was speaking to me as an artist. 'You've got to get back to creating. There's no better way to mourn.'

I was surprised he put it so bluntly, but relieved, too. I was tired of sympathy. 'I haven't started up again, not yet,' I said.

He nodded, solemnly.

'Abbot,' I called, 'we've got to go.'

Disappointed, Abbot walked back to me. He said to

Daniel, 'Your paintings make people feel sad, but you don't know why.'

'A great definition of abstract art,' Daniel said.

Abbot smiled and rubbed his hands together; then, as if noticing it himself, he shoved them in his pockets. Daniel took no notice, but I did. Abbot was learning to mask his problem. Was this a step backward or forward?

'I'm late for mimosas,' I said.

Daniel was looking at an unfinished canvas. He turned to me. 'Heidi.' He hesitated. 'I've had to postpone the honeymoon for a few days to finish up work for a show. Elysius is in an uproar. When you see her, remind her I'm a nice person.'

'I will,' I said. 'Can we leave these here?' I asked, looking down at my suitcase and Abbot's bag.

'Of course,' he said.

'Come on, Abbot,' I said, disentangling his tie and cummerbund from the snorkeling gear. Abbot ran to the door.

'It really is good to see you two,' Daniel said.

'You, too,' I said. 'Happy almost wedding!'

Because Elysius and Daniel had been living here together for eight years, the wedding seemed like a strange afterthought. I considered Elysius and Daniel as not only having a marriage but having an enduring one. For my sister, however, the wedding was monumental, and now, walking past the lush lawn, the back-and-forth tracks of a wide riding mower pushing the grass in stripes, I felt guilty for being so removed.

I should have at least agreed to make her wedding

cake. Once upon a time, I'd had a growing reputation as a high-end cake designer. People from all over Florida still call the Cake Shop for events a year or more in advance to reserve a spot. Weddings had been a specialty. But shortly after Henry's death, I'd retreated to making the cupcakes and lemon squares in the early morning hours and working the counter. I'd sworn off brides – they were too overbearing, too wrapped up in the event. They struck me as ingrates, taking love for granted. Now I was embarrassed for not having offered to make Elysius and Daniel's cake. It was my gift, the one small thing I had to give.

I looked up at the bank of windows, the kitchen and the dining room lit with a bright, golden hue, and stopped.

'What is it?' Abbot said.

I wanted to turn back and go home. Was I ready for this? It struck me this was how I felt in life now, like someone stalled on a lawn outside of a giant house who looked into beautiful windows where people were living their lives, filling flower vases, brushing their hair while looking in the mirror, laughing in quick flutters that would rise up and disappear. And here was my own sister's life, brimming.

'Nothing,' I said to Abbot. I grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. He squeezed back and just like that he took a step ahead of me and pulled me toward the house – full of the living.

At that moment, the back door flung wide, and my mother emerged. Her hair was a honeyed confection swooped up in her signature chignon, and her face was glazed in a way that made her look 'dewy and young', which she attributed to a line of expensive lotions. My mother was aging beautifully. She had a long, elegant neck,

full lips, arched eyebrows. It's a strange thing to be raised by someone much more beautiful than you'll ever be. She had a regal beauty, but, set against this posture of royalty, her vulnerability seemed more pronounced – a certain weary softness in her expressions.

Her eyes fell on me and Abbot there on the lawn. 'I've just been sent out to find you!'

My sister sent my mother to find me? This was bad. Very bad.

'How late are we?' I asked.

'You mean, how angry is your sister?'

'Have I missed the mini toasts?' I asked, hoping I had.

My mother didn't answer. She bustled across the deck and down the small set of stairs. Her toffee-colored dress swished around her. It was a sleek design that showed off her collarbones. My mother is half French, and she believes in elegance.

'I needed to get out of that house!' she said. 'And you were my excuse. Direct orders to find you and get you moving.' She looked agitated, maybe even a little teary. Had she been crying? My mother is a woman of deep emotion, but not one to cry easily. She's the definition of the term *active senior* – she puts on a show of busyness meant to imply satisfaction but has always given me the impression of a woman about to burst. Once upon a time, she did burst and disappeared for the summer, but then she came back to us. Still, once a mother's taken off without you – even if she was right to do so – you spend the rest of your life wondering if she may do it again. She turned her attention to Abbot. 'Aren't you a beautiful boy?'

He blushed. My mother had this effect on everyone – the

mail carrier harried at the holidays, the pilot who steps out to say bye-bye at the end of a flight, even a snotty maître d'.

'And you?' she said, brushing my hair back over one shoulder. 'Where are the pearls?'

'I still need a few finishing touches,' I said. 'How is Elysius doing?'

'She'll forgive you,' my mother said softly. My mother knew that this might be hard for me – one daughter was gaining a husband, one had lost one – and so she was trying to tread carefully.

'I'm so sorry we're late,' I said guiltily. 'I lost track of time. Abbot and I were . . .'

'Busy writing the speech for Auntie Elysius,' Abbot said. 'I was helping!' He looked guilty, too – my co-conspirator.

My mother shook her head. Her eyes filled with tears. 'I'm such a mess!' she said, trying to smooth the ripples from her dress and then laughing strangely. 'I don't know why I'm responding like this!' She pinched her nose as if to stop herself from crying.

'Responding to what?' I asked, surprised by her sudden emotion. 'The wedding? Weddings are crazy. They bring up a lot of—'

'It's not the wedding,' my mother said. 'It's the house. *Our* house . . . in Provence – there's been a fire.'