



THE LIGHTNING BOTTLES

MARISSA STAPLEY

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For Courtney Love, Deborah Anne Dyer AKA Skin,

Dolores O’Riordan, Donita Sparks,

Fiona Apple, Juliana Hatfield, Kat Bjelland,

Kim Deal, Kim Gordon, Liz Phair,

PJ Harvey, Shirley Manson, Sinéad O’Connor,

Tori Amos, and my teenage self

One day you will ask me which is more important?
My life or yours? I will say mine and you will walk away
not knowing that you are my life.

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

PROLOGUE

“Where were you when you found out rock legend Elijah Hart had disappeared? That the talented yet troubled musician had taken a rowboat into the stormy waters off Iceland’s south coast and never returned?”

The radio DJ’s voice rumbles through the air in seventeen-year-old Hen Vögel’s bedroom. “I was right here,” she says to her walls.

“Maybe you were returning home from work when you learned the front man of the multiplatinum-selling husband-and-wife duo the Lightning Bottles had been declared dead,” the DJ continues. “Maybe you were on a first date. Or a last date. Or driving in your car with the radio on.” Hen shakes her head; she has never done any of those things.

“How did you feel when you realized his miraculous voice had been silenced forever?”

DJ Grüber does this every year. In case the emotions are fading, he tries to stir them up. But Hen doesn’t need stirring. The difference between thirteen years old and seventeen is supposed to be a caterpillar versus a butterfly. But Hen has remained stuck in her cocoon, trying to rewrite the story of her hero’s demise, since the day Elijah Hart disappeared five years earlier.

She stares up into his eyes gazing out from a poster tacked to the wall above her bed. There’s a permanent sunbeam stained across his T-shirt now. He’s tall and lean, his hair unkempt like he just woke up. One of his front incisors overlaps the other—Hen knows the details of Elijah Hart’s

face the way she knows the curves of the letters in her own name—and his left canine points out a little, so when he smiles he looks a bit like a vampire, but not in a dangerous way. It's just that you find yourself wishing he were immortal. His eyes are ocean green, but with a ring of yellow around the iris that makes them look blue at the right angle.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I'm DJ Jon Grüber. But you probably already knew that, didn't you?" Hen turns her attention back to the radio show and sighs. Why do adults always try to act so cool? DJ Grüber isn't cool, he's fifty. He plays a clip of himself announcing the news about Elijah's disappearance, his voice in December of 1994 not quite as cigarette-smoke raspy as it is five years later. *Icelandic authorities are reporting . . . the boat has turned up empty . . . no sign of the body . . . vigils being held around the world . . . I hate to be the one to have to tell you this . . . little hope for survival at this point . . .*

Hen flops backward on her bed and wraps her arms around herself in a lonely sort of hug. She remembers the days that followed this terrible news. The television images of Icelandic search and rescue boats. Helicopters, divers, a splintered rowboat on a black sand beach, a shoe and a waterlogged leather jacket washing ashore. There was the revelation that Elijah Hart had made one phone call in the hours before his disappearance—to his estranged best friend and former bandmate, Kim Beard. Exactly what was said during that call had never been confirmed; Kim Beard wasn't what anyone would call a reliable witness. Elijah's body never turned up, but as the days passed, his death became a given. No one could have survived for long in such cold and tumultuous water. Except—

Hen sits up and meets Elijah's two-dimensional, ocean-eyed gaze again. "How am I supposed to solve the mystery of you when I have no one to talk to?"

A scratch at her bedroom window is all that answers. A soft *meow*. The stray calico she feeds is on the sill, and when Hen lets him inside, he winds himself around her ankles like a friendly, furry serpent. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a treat. He takes it from her hand,

then licks her palm once with his pink sandpaper tongue before trotting off to the corner where she has set up a bed for him with old army blankets she found in the attic. She leaves the window open, lets the cold air flow into the room. Maybe it will finally jolt her into action.

"We lost a rock god in 1994, five years ago today," DJ Grüber growls from the radio. Hen winces. Elijah wouldn't want to be called a god. He was mostly affable in interviews—but say the wrong thing and a shadow would pass over his splendid face. "If you're not a hero, or an icon, or a god," Barbara Walters had once asked him, "who are you, then, Elijah Hart?"

"I'm really just a session musician," he'd replied, gifting her one of his seductive grins as Barbara visibly melted. Elijah had turned to Jane Pyre then, looking at his wife the way he always did, as if he saw a pyramid full of hidden wonders, not an angry-looking woman in a plaid mini-skirt and 20-hole Doc Marten boots. "It's Jane I'm more interested in."

Barbara had looked at Jane too, tilted her head, and asked, "Okay, how would you define your husband, Jane?"

"I wouldn't," she had replied. Hen remembered liking that answer. It's what Hen would have said too, had she been lucky enough to be sitting there in Jane's place. But it had only cemented Jane Pyre as unknowable, obtuse. Not especially likeable. How had someone like Elijah Hart ended up with someone like her? It was yet another mystery about him.

Now, DJ Grüber's voice edges its way back into Hen's consciousness. "To mark the fifth anniversary of the loss of Elijah Hart from this world, here's what we're going to do . . ." Hen leans forward, holds her breath, hopes he might say, *We're going to tell you incredible news: our hero has been found!*

"We're going to listen to some tunes, relive some hard moments, share some memories," DJ Grüber says instead. Same old same. Hen stands. She crosses the room to her desk, where she reaches down and touches the closed drawer, the place where she keeps a secret that could change everything, if only she had the courage to let it out.

"Friends, I hope to hear from some of you today. Call in. The lines

are open. Let's remember what we loved about the Lightning Bottles. Let's dive deeper into the brilliant musical legacy of Elijah Hart and remind ourselves he's never really gone. But first—"

The DJ plays a recording of Jane Pyre's voice giving the single statement she made after her husband disappeared. "He's gone," Jane said. It was the day after the search for Elijah had been called off, the sea too wild for rescuers to traverse any longer. The rock star's wife—now his widow, really—had stared into the cameras and microphones with eyes like storm clouds. Icelandic police had just released her, having questioned her extensively and determined she held no culpability in her husband's misadventure—even if the court of public opinion gave a different verdict. "I loved him." Her brittle voice broke in two, then turned defiant. "And he was mine. *My* husband. The love of *my* life. So give him back to me. Let me grieve in peace."

It had been all wrong, of course. The fans wanted comfort, for their grief to be validated. They didn't want to be told Elijah Hart had never belonged to them. Not when every word he sang felt like he was shining a searchlight into the loneliest parts of their souls and saying, *I'm here, I found you, you're going to be okay now.*

Jane Pyre didn't speak to the media again after that. And she guarded his legacy like a warden. There were rumored to be unfinished Lightning Bottles songs in a vault somewhere, and because of her, the world would never get to hear them. She released an album of remixes that was nothing but a slap in the face to fans. And she never wrote another song—even though Elijah had insisted they were collaborators and had even gone so far as to hint that *she* wrote the majority of their music and lyrics, not him. No one had believed this while he was alive, and they certainly didn't after he was dead. Jane Pyre was a succubus, nothing more. A talentless fake.

Hen had always had a hard time believing Elijah could be so wrong about someone, though. Had he really handed his heart over to a fraud? There had to be something about Jane that had caused him to fall so irrevocably in love, right? Hen tumbled this question around in her mind

constantly but never landed on anything tangible. If Jane Pyre wasn't who the world said she was, she had never offered an alternative, even when given chance after chance. She was as elusive and mysterious as a creature who lived at the bottom of the ocean—and only Elijah, perhaps, had ever truly known her.

Hen opens the desk drawer. Inside is a small wooden box. Her late opa whittled it for her out of wood from a fallen ash tree when she was little. *You can keep your special things in here*, he'd said. At the time, it had never occurred to Hen that her life would shrink as she got older. She filled the box with pebbles and feathers, then forgot all about it—until she finally came to possess something she needed to keep safe.

She opens the box and there it is. Her treasure doesn't look like much. Just a crumpled piece of lined paper she handles like it's the Hope Diamond. She runs her index finger along the creases, carefully coaxes the paper to bloom. What is revealed? Pencil drawings depicting a man and a woman, a story told in a comic-style grid. "The Secret Adventures of Adam and the Rib" is drawn across the top of the page in letters that mimic the shape of spray-painted graffiti. A hand-drawn character matches each name: Adam has hair to his collar and slightly hunched shoulders; he is lean-limbed and handsome, even in pencil. Rib has thick-lashed eyes and a familiar frown. She is wearing a short plaid skirt and lace-up boots.

To Hen, there are only two people these characters could be: Elijah Hart and Jane Pyre. Adam and his Rib, which is exactly how the world saw them.

Hen runs her finger along the pencil grooves. The first square in the grid shows Rib sitting in front of a computer, typing out a list. The names of alternative rock bands flow onto the screen:

1. The Disintegration
2. L7
3. Concrete Blonde
4. The Smiths
5. The Vaselines

6. Pixies
7. Jane's Addiction
8. Sonic Youth
9. R.E.M.
10. Babes in Toyland

In the next square, Adam sits at a desk in front of his own computer, and Rib's face smiles out at him from the screen. "Weirdo," says her speech bubble—but there are hearts in her eyes. Next, the two characters are surrounded by musical notes, letters tucked into envelopes, mix-tapes, song lyrics, everything flying through space.

Then a phone booth, with Rib inside, Adam drawn in a thought bubble above her head. Rib in a car, driving across a map of North America to Seattle, where she stands alone outside a bungalow surrounded by firs, pines, cedars. There is a racehorse inside her chest instead of a heart. You can feel how nervous she is. How expectant.

Finally, she ends up in Adam's arms—and Hen can almost feel it, what it must have been like to be held by him.

But, one last square. A sad ending. Adam is alone, words about love and loss creating an ocean in the space separating him from the cartoon woman. Rib tries to reach out across the chasm but almost falls in.

Poor Elijah. It's all Hen can think each time she unfurls this page. And she feels sorry for Jane Pyre, too—and wonders if she's the only person in the world who ever has.

DJ Grüber has put on a song, and it drags Hen away from the drawing and back to reality. The Lightning Bottles' first-ever and still most popular hit, "My Life or Yours," never gets old. "The bass and drum intro grabs you by the throat, doesn't it?" Grüber says, as Hen nods her head over a musical intro that builds from mellifluous to incandescent. "A full and unprecedented thirty-eight-second opening, very radio unfriendly, and yet that didn't stop it from becoming the most requested radio song of the decade." Grüber chuckles while Hen wishes he would just stop talking and let the song play. Instead, he keeps up his chatter, weaves it through the lyrics and melody. *You asked if I'd die for you / I didn't know*

what you meant / but the words were all there for me / from a prophet, heaven sent.

“He was singing about his mother, of course,” Gruber says, his tone somber. “We all know that now, because of the Kim Beard lawsuits. His mother, and some lines she used to read to him when he was a child from the well-known mystic poetry book *The Prophet*.”

Still gently clasping the piece of paper, Hen sinks back down to her mattress and listens with her eyes closed. Some great songs make it feel like a spell is being cast, and this is one of them. It never fails to enchant Hen, to lift her up. She’s soaring now, and nothing can touch her. “And here it is,” the DJ says. “One of the most famous choruses in all the world. Sing it with me, folks . . .” Hen can’t help it, she does. *Baby, don’t cry / ’cause we’re all gonna die / might as well just get high . . .*

“A call to inaction for the MTV generation,” Grüber says. “Sung by one of the most transporting voices in the music world.”

Once the song is over, he takes a call. A man shares his feelings about Elijah’s voice, describing it as “a roman candle that flares up in the distance when maybe you thought you were the only person left on the planet.”

A cold breeze from her open bedroom window ruffles Hen’s hair and she sits up, reaches for the telephone that sits on her bedside table. She can do this. She will. Today is the day. She dials before she can overthink it, and as the phone rings, tries to plan out what she’ll say. *I want to share a memory—but it’s more than that. I was one of the winners of your call-in contest, back in 1994, when the Lightning Bottles were in Berlin for what no one knew was going to be their last public performance.* And Hen would feel proud, nostalgic as she remembered the way the radio station had created a temporary concert hall out of an old, underground water-pumping station in Berlin for the occasion. For one night only, it was a hidden lair for the truest of Lightning Bottles’ fans, the ones who had dedicated themselves day and night to waiting by the radio, phones tucked into laps, handsets cradled in tensed hands, poised to call in at the right moment. Reportedly, fans had flown to Berlin from around the world only to sit

crouched in hotel rooms, radios on, waiting, intent on possessing one of the golden Lightning Bottles tickets.

“Hello? Can I get your name, please?”

“Henri—Henrietta Vögel,” she stammers to the receptionist. “I go by Hen.”

“I’m placing you in a queue, Hen,” the voice says. “You’ll be live, on-air to share your memory of Elijah Hart in about forty-five seconds.”

Hen’s palms are slick. She distracts herself by continuing to imagine what she’ll say. *I had to lie to my mother about where I was going; she would never have let me go to Berlin. By the time I got to the city I was late for the show and led to the only seat left—at the very front, but off to the side of the stage with a poor view. Elijah and Jane were standing at the top of a staircase, waiting to go on. I could see them. They were arguing. Elijah kept trying to hand Jane a piece of paper, and she kept shaking her head. I thought maybe they were arguing about the set list, but then she pushed him away and started to cry and it seemed more serious than that. Finally, she did take the piece of paper, but she crumpled it up. She threw it into a trash bin at the bottom of the steps. As the two of them went onstage, I darted over and grabbed that piece of paper from the trash. I put it in my pocket—and I’ve had it ever since.*

Grüber’s voice is loud and sudden in Hen’s ear. “Who do we have on the line, and what do you want to share with us on the anniversary of the loss of Elijah Hart?”

She can’t speak.

“Hello? Do we still have you on the line?”

“Um. Hi. Well. So. It’s just that—um. I think he might not be . . .” *I believe Elijah Hart is still alive, and that he’s using street art to send out messages.* She slams down the receiver. She can’t do it. Her story would sound like the lie of an obsessed fan. And besides, this isn’t just her secret. It’s Elijah’s—and Hen knows in her heart there’s only one person in the world he would want to share it with. And that person is Jane Pyre.

DJ Grüber has put on a song—“Watching Us”—to cover up the abrupt silence on-air. Unlike “My Life or Yours,” this one gets right to it, a quick guitar riff and then Elijah’s voice, singing, *I give you all my sweetness*

but my love comes out a scream . . . Take my flesh, my bones, my body, as he's watching through the screen . . .

"Hen?"

Startled, Hen hides her secret drawing in her fist, crumpling it the way Jane Pyre once did. Her mother is standing in the doorway.

"Are you alright? I heard a bang."

"I'm fine, Mama. I just dropped something."

Anja is wrapped in the blue bathrobe she always wears, but her hair is wet and brushed back. She's showered, a good sign. This has been happening more often lately, but the steps Hen's mother takes into the world are so small that Hen, at the precipice of adulthood and longing to fly away, can no longer find hope in them.

"Will we maybe walk out to the edge of the driveway today?" Anja asks, and Hen tries not to grimace. The edge of the driveway—at this rate, her mother will make it into town by the time she's ninety.

"I'm listening to something on the radio right now." Hen hears the dismissiveness in her tone, sees the ripple of hurt in her mother's eyes, feels sorry, but not enough to say so. "Maybe later, okay?"

"Of course. And maybe you could also go to the market and get me some noodles and cheese. I'll make käsespätzle. Would you like that? It's Saturday. We should do something fun."

Noodles and cheese. A fun Saturday night. Despite the open window, the air in the room feels suddenly oppressive. In the past, when Anja would send her on errands, Hen would rush to the market as fast as she could, afraid that by the time she got home her mother would have retreated back into the place inside her head that made her ask things like, "Did the cashier touch her earlobe, did she scratch her nose? Did you see any men on the streets, tying their shoes?" Hen has had to remind her mother hundreds of times that the Berlin Wall fell years ago now. *The Stasi are gone, the neighbors are not spies, Mama.* Sometimes her mother will say, *No, that can't be true.* Other times, she will tell Hen that she knows the Wall is gone—and that's even more reason to be cautious. *There is nothing to protect us now, vögelchen.* Little bird. Hen's mother was fed propaganda

like porridge, along with everyone else in East Germany. But not everyone took it as literally as she did. There is no help for people like her, the ones who don't know how to move on. No one even wants to believe that people like her mother exist.

"Yes, Mama. I'll go later, okay?"

Once her mother is gone, Hen crosses her room to the wall that faces the window. Here, she has set up a milking stool she took from the abandoned barn on the property next to hers, and a bunch of old buckets. It's the closest she has ever been able to get to a drum kit. She sits on the stool and picks up her drumsticks. The music from the radio is still filling her room, and Hen begins to play along, pumping her foot up and down on an imaginary bass pedal and hitting one of the buckets so hard it almost falls over. She can't believe she actually called into that radio show. Had she really been about to tell her story live, on-air?

As the music keeps playing, she can see herself at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Concocting more lies to tell her mother so she could return to Berlin, always with the drawing tucked into her pocket. Elijah Hart did the art for the Lightning Bottles' second album, and it was as if the cover and liner notes had been decorated in graffiti. In a few interviews, he expressed his interest in street art. And so, during her visits to Berlin, Hen sought to understand what Elijah loved so much about this form of expression. Why had he made the title, *The Secret Adventures of Adam & the Rib*, look like graffiti spray-painted on a building wall? Had he ever done this in real life? She wanted to know him, to understand him, to connect the piece of art she had of his to something real in the world.

Until finally, she made a connection beyond her wildest dreams.

Grffiti allowed a person to be somewhat famous, but in secret. You could plaster your work across apartment buildings, emblazon it on subway cars—and if you were careful enough, no one would know it was you.

But Hen had known.

She taps at her drum-buckets, loses herself a bit more in the music, closes her eyes—and she can see it in her mind's eye, among the ubiquitous layers of graffiti and art coating Haus Schwarzenberg alley in Berlin:

those soft but certain pencil-like strokes, done in paint. The brightness of the title, emblazoned across the top of the poster. It looked like the cover of a comic book—one called *The Secret Adventures of Adam & the Rib*.

Shock had frozen Hen in place. She had looked up and down the alleyway, wondering if anyone else saw what she saw. But of course no one did. She was the one who had the piece of paper in her pocket. The only one who knew what this meant—what this could be. What it *was*.

The poster had been decoupaged to the brick wall with thick swathes of glue. It was not enough to say the style of art on the poster was similar to the drawing Hen had in her possession. Not enough to claim some of the details as the same. The character on the poster was a replica of Adam, there was no question. Never had Hen felt so elated—and then, all at once, never so alone. She didn't want to be the weird girl with the shut-in mother anymore. Having a secret this huge made her long for a friend more than she ever had before.

I believe Elijah Hart is still alive, and that he's using street art to send out messages.

And I wish, more than anything, that I had someone to tell.

Hen keeps playing her fake bucket drums, can at this point almost believe they're not made of plastic. She feels a sudden sense of power; the music does that for her. If she can conjure a drumbeat from thin air, what else can she conjure? It's such a great feeling, the moment of being swept away by a song. The way music can make it feel like anything is possible.

The song ends, and in the beat of silence that follows before the DJ speaks again, Hen hears a car's engine outside. Startled, she drops her drumsticks and rushes to the window. No one ever comes out here. She hears the solid *clunk* of a car door slamming, the creak of an opening trunk, leans out the window to see what's going on next door.

A small field separates the two properties, and in the distance, a woman wearing large, dark sunglasses, her hair tucked up under a black flat cap, walks back and forth between the car and the house, carrying luggage. The month before, there had been a flurry of renovations done

next door. Hen's mother had watched out the downstairs window, her face creased with worry as a delivery of sleek, simple furniture arrived. But then nothing happened. The house sat, dressed up for a party no one seemed to be coming to. "They're probably going to sell it," Hen said to her mother. "We might get neighbors—it will be fine. Nothing to be afraid of."

The woman carries a suitcase, then a duffel bag, then what looks like a small safe. She comes back outside empty-handed and looks around. Is she from town? Likely not. Even from a distance, Hen can see she's dressed in shredded jeans, combat boots, a leather jacket. No one from town dresses cool like that. A gust of wind blows the cap from her head, revealing mahogany hair in a Cleopatra-style bob—and Hen is struck by powerful *déjà vu*. She leans farther out the window, watching as the woman bends to retrieve her hat. Her sunglasses slip from her face, then fall to the frost-crunchy grass. The woman retrieves them and walks—no, *stalks*—back toward the house, barefaced, bareheaded. Hen leans so far out she has to clutch the window frame so she won't fall.

Could it be?

Those maroon-painted lips. That scowl, as if even the wind is trying to get her. But now she's out of sight and Hen can't be sure.

Of course it wasn't Jane Pyre, she tells herself. But she flings open her bedroom door and runs down the stairs two at a time, desperate to be certain. She's got her shoes on, is almost out the front door, when her mother comes out of the living room to ask where she's going.

"To the market, of course, like you asked me to," Hen lies. "And . . . I might go bird-watching," she adds, pulling binoculars from their peg beside the front door. What a stupid lie. She's seventeen, not seventy-five. But her mother believes her.

"Be careful!" Anja calls out, following her daughter. But she stops at the threshold, as if halted by an invisible barrier. She waves goodbye to her daughter and closes the door.

Hen runs. Soon she's hidden in the group of trees outside the window of the renovated house next door. She lifts the binoculars to her

eyes, brings them into focus. Black countertops, stainless steel appliances, wide-planked wood floors, stark white walls. And then—there she is, the woman Hen saw from her bedroom window, like a mythical sea creature caught in focus in the middle of an expanse of ocean that is really just a kitchen. Hen zooms in on eyes that are like gray flint, then lips so matte her lipstick looks tattooed on. Dark hair hanging in thick curtains beside sharp cheekbones.

It's really her. It's Jane Pyre.

As if sensing the presence of a spy at the window, she turns. Hen drops the binoculars and squeezes her eyes shut, clinging to a childish belief that if you can't see a person, they can't see you either. She watches vapor trails and shadows dance across the backs of her eyelids. They become threads on a spool, a story, a spell. *Something is finally happening*, Hen thinks. *I am finally getting unstuck*. But when she gathers the courage to open her eyes, the kitchen is empty. Jane Pyre is gone.

PART ONE

BERLIN, GERMANY

DECEMBER 18, 1999

Jane Pyre understands only basic German, but anyone would have known that the young man wearing the Marvel Boys shirt, standing behind her in the car rental agency line at Berlin Tegel Airport, has recognized her—despite her cap and sunglasses—and called her a piece of shit. She resists the urge to give him the finger in case someone takes a photo and she ends up in a tabloid. No more of that.

“Fräulein?”

Jane steps up to the counter and hands her ID and credit card over to the clerk, who calls up the booking file for Janet Ribeiro without a flicker of recognition. Soon, she’s walking away from the desk with the keys to her rental car.

The German farmhouse she purchased has a name: *Asche-Aussicht*. The real estate agent told her it meant “Ash Lookout.” Jane likes that. *I’m not a phoenix from the ash, I’m a ghost, I’m a gash, and soon I’ll be—* The lyrics to a potential new song stream into her mind, unbidden; she presses her hand to her forehead as if trying to stanch blood flow. The last melody she ever wrote is a constant earworm. It would have been a good song, she knows. But there had been no words back then to add to it, just the haunting, nameless tune. *I’ll be the stardust on your pillow / the sand that burns your eyes / When the hit of morning comes / waking lonely your surprise . . .* Jane shakes her head and the words disperse.

She dumps her luggage into the trunk of a dark-blue BMW 3 Series,

gets in, turns on the ignition, and is immediately assailed by the sound of a gravel-voiced DJ saying her dead husband's name. Jane hears German words like *legendäre musiker* and frowns. She hates it when people talk about him. Which, she supposes, is like saying she hates the wind. There's nothing she can do about the fact that, even five years after he disappeared (*died*, Jane reminds herself; *he is dead, not just missing*), Elijah Hart is still a worldwide obsession.

The DJ is talking to a caller now, and Jane feels a stab of jealousy at the easy tone of their voices as they discuss her husband. Everyone seems to think they know the details, the truth of their love story, their rise to dizzying fame, their equally spectacular crash. But only Jane knows what really happened, and all her secrets have crystallized inside her like mosquitos in amber. What would it be like, she wonders, to call into a radio station and just start talking?

But Jane would never.

A song begins. It's "My Life or Yours," their most popular song. His voice rises, reverberates, touches her core the way it always did—but with this song, she can hardly bear it. She struggles to focus on the road. Jane has grown used to meandering California highways and the traffic that comes alongside the spectacular views. But here, cars shoot past at top speed and she feels vulnerable. Then the song ends and the voice of a caller unsettles her even more. A young woman, her tone uncertain, halting, says a few words before slamming down her receiver so hard Jane winces. She takes one hand off the wheel and spins the dial away from the station.

Elijah always said finding the right music was the key to solving anything, and although she knows this isn't actually true, she still channel surfs hopefully. Eventually she lands on heavy metal. It's not her favorite genre, but she's suddenly certain Elijah would say it was the perfect type of music for driving into unfamiliar territory. It almost makes her happy to feel so sure of this—as if he's there in the passenger seat, playing with the tuning dial himself.

She misses him so much. It never goes away.

The roundabouts are confusing, the German signs unfamiliar, but

the chaos of the music does indeed help. Soon, the frenzy of the highway is behind her and Jane is winding her way past farms and fallow fields. Here is her exit: an unpaved road, black mountains in the distance, a glimpse of a lake with flat waters mirroring the sky that, for just a moment, flashes her brain back to images of black sand, divers and helicopters, a much stormier body of water.

Focus. The road.

Tall, slender trees wave from the gravel shoulder. The song on the metal station switches, and she recognizes the band: it's La Dure, the French punk-metal band the Lightning Bottles opened for the first time they were in Europe. Right here, in Germany. It takes her breath away a little, to hear the lead singer's voice—Maxime. So different from Elijah's, not even close to as good, but it's also joyous, full of mischief and adventure. Jane always liked it.

At the crest of a hill, she stops thinking about Maxime's voice, because she has spotted the farmhouse she's only previously seen in photos. But something is wrong. There's another roof—a neighbor. Jane frowns. A *close* neighbor. Hadn't she carefully explained to the estate agent that she wanted to live somewhere very remote, that the possibility of not seeing another person for weeks on end was perfectly fine with her?

The gravel under her tires pops like broken glass as she pulls up in front of her new house. The faded concrete exterior is covered in creeping vines that have browned and crisped in the December air. A wooden terrace on the second story is constructed of wood aged to a pleasant patina. Ash trees are everywhere, as expected. There is the decrepit barn, and beyond that, a field laid out like a threadbare green carpet. Then everything disappears into fog.

Jane turns off the engine, opens the car door—and thinks she hears the drum solo from the Lightning Bottles' song "Watching Us" somewhere in the distance. She can't be sure it's real; her music follows her everywhere. After such a long car ride, her knee aches. It's the scar from an old injury that plagues her every day, still burns incessantly—much like her grief. She wishes she could say she's gotten used to either.

She unloads her luggage from the car into the front vestibule of the farmhouse, then comes back outside to look around. In the distant valley, past the field, lies a village that must be Woolf. A gray concrete observation tower seems to stare at her from the field with curious, broken-window eyes. And then—the back of Jane’s neck prickles. It feels like a warning. *Someone is watching you.* She looks toward the neighboring house but doesn’t see anyone there. Maybe it’s abandoned. She can hope. It looks neglected, though not entirely so. No one is watching, she tells herself. This feeling of being observed is simply one she carries, always, the way, on holidays, survivors of war hear missiles and gunfire instead of fireworks.

A gust of wind blows her hat from her head, her sunglasses fall off, and Jane swears under her breath, then gathers up her things and heads for the house, fast. *You’re stomping,* the ghost of Elijah whispers in her ear. She suddenly imagines herself gray-haired and time-faded, wearing a gabardine raincoat and hiking boots, tramping through the somber landscape. She could get a walking stick. Wear strange hats. Scare any children who might happen by. *Jane,* Elijah whispers again. *That’s not you. You’ll never disappear the way I did.* She tries to ignore the voice. The ghost of Elijah is not always a welcome thing. He never seems to want the same things she does.

Inside the farmhouse, Jane looks around and decides she likes it. Especially the kitchen. The walls are painted white with the barest hint of pewter. Black countertops are set off by stainless steel appliances. Everything is new and fresh and reminds her of nothing, nowhere. Jane and Elijah’s homes in LA were beachy and bohemian. Candles dripping down wine bottles, instruments everywhere. His family’s home in Seattle had oak cabinets, homey clutter, vinyl albums spilled across the living room floor. A happy place, but only if you squinted, covered one eye, didn’t look too closely. This place is a blank canvas, and that’s good.

Her telephone rings; it’s black plastic with a rotary dial, mounted to a wall near a window. *Ring. Ring. Ring.* And then the person hangs up and calls again. This means it’s Petra, her manager, using the code they agreed upon so Jane will pick up.

“Hey.”

"All settled in? You doing okay?"

Jane can't help but smile. "I've been here about five minutes. I'm fine, so far."

"Remind me again why you're doing this?"

"Because I'm finished," Jane says. "I'm exhausted."

"You're twenty-seven years old—"

"I'm a widow and a has-been with a trick knee."

"Oh, stop." But Petra's tone is as gentle as ever. "You think the world is going to forget about you, but it won't, no matter how much you want it to." She pauses, perhaps waiting for Jane to agree. "Anyway," Petra continues when Jane stays silent. "I'm calling with a little good news, actually. It's about Kim Beard's latest attempt at an appeal." Kim Beard is Elijah's former best friend, his ex-bandmate. A lot of people hate Jane, but Kim probably hates her most. For the better part of a decade, he has claimed the Lightning Bottles stole some of the lyrics for "My Life or Yours" from him. He has sued, lost, appealed, lost again.

"Frivolous and vexatious, given the history," Petra says. "It won't go ahead. And if he tries to sue you again, it will be considered harassment. It's over."

"I'm sure he'll find a way," Jane says, unable to garner any joy from this news. She knows this particular feud will never end.

"The last Marvel Boys album was a flop. Maybe he's running out of money for lawyers."

"Okay, great," Jane says, trying to inject some happiness into her voice for Petra's sake. "Thanks for letting me know."

"Just keep answering the phone when I call, okay? Otherwise, I'm showing up at your door. It's Christmastime. You shouldn't be alone."

"I'm *fine*. And I'm sure Ramona will have something to say about you coming to Europe, considering you have a newborn at home. How is he?" Jane welcomes the topic switch, anticipates the way Petra's voice will change when she talks about her son.

"He's perfect. Overwhelming. He doesn't seem to require sleep. I could use a few nights incognito at a rural farmhouse, frankly."

"You can come visit in the new year," Jane allows. "As long as you don't try to convince me to come back."

"No promises."

Jane wonders, not for the first time, what she did to deserve Petra, not just as a manager but also as a friend. In her worst moments, when she's certain she deserves all the vitriol sent her way, she reminds herself that Petra, a genuinely good person, cares about her. "Listen, I already miss you too," she says. "But I was running out of ideas for disguises when we met for lunch. Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, drew the wrong sort of attention."

As Petra laughs, Jane feels the back of her neck prickle again, the way it did outside, earlier. She turns toward the kitchen window—and fights back a gasp when she sees someone really is out there: a teenage girl, half-hidden in the trees, spying on Jane through a pair of binoculars. "What the hell," she mutters.

"Everything alright, Jane?"

The girl has dropped the binoculars and squeezed her eyes shut. Jane steps closer to the window to peer out at her. Her hair is pale and fluffy, soft-looking, like dandelion seed or the inside of a milkweed pod. She is so close, Jane can see a light purple dusting of acne scars marring her chin. She has a strange sort of half smile on her face.

"Hello? You okay?"

Jane backs away from the window. She can't tell Petra about this—she'll be on the next plane to Berlin. And the girl looks as harmless as it's possible for anyone hiding outside a window with binoculars to look. Jane just needs to get rid of her—then deal with her dismay. This farmhouse isn't isolated at all. Jane will need to find somewhere else.

"I have a lot of unpacking to do, that's all. I should go. We'll talk another time." Jane hangs up and returns to the window, presses her face to the glass. The girl is gone—but are those shoes peeking out from under a cedar bush, just a few feet away from the window?

Jane pulls her combat boots on and goes outside, moving along the edges of ash trees and unruly cedars until she sees her, barely concealed, trembling.

“Just come out,” Jane says. “Come on. I know you’re there.”

The girl steps forward, brushing twigs from her pale hair. Her curious, attentive eyes are the purple-blue of a forget-me-not. She’s not wearing a coat; the skin on her arms is mottled with cold, furred with gooseflesh.

“Is it really you?” She speaks in English, but with a German accent. There’s something familiar about the girl’s voice.

“No,” Jane says unconvincingly.

“It is you.” The girl’s eyes grow wide with excitement. “You’re Jane Pyre. I can’t believe it! In my town, of all places. *Why?*”

“None of your business.”

Now the girl rolls her eyes—and Jane hears her mother’s voice. *If the wind changes and you’re making that face, Janet, your beautiful features will be stuck that way forever. Do you want to lose your looks?*

“You always say that to people: ‘None of your business.’”

“Please, just get off my property or I’ll call the police.”

“Oh, come on.”

Jane turns and starts to walk away.

“Wait! I need to talk to you!”

Jane doesn’t stop.

“Really?” the girl shouts. Jane speeds up. “You’re not going to bother to listen to what I have to say to you?”

“Nope!” Jane calls over her shoulder.

“You’re as bad as everyone says you are!” the girl shouts—and it’s as if she actually expected something different from Jane. “You never deserved him! It’s your fault he’s gone! You didn’t take care of him! You were the only one who could, and you didn’t!”

This hurts, actually. Jane wasn’t prepared for this, not today. She speeds up again, making mental calculations as she does. She can drive back to Berlin, get a hotel room, call the estate agent. Scratch that, she’ll find a new one, someone who can procure her the sort of property she wanted in the first place. An actual hideaway. A little privacy, for fuck’s sake.

“Why won’t you listen to me; what’s *wrong* with you? Why are you like this?”

Jane is almost at her front door now.

“If he had never met you, things would be different! The world would be a better place! He would still be here! You should have just left him alone! *You* should be gone, not him! You’re a horrible person!”

Jane opens the door, closes it, locks the dead bolt, lets her body slide to the floor, presses her back against the door and her hands against her ears. But it doesn’t matter, she can still hear the words. *You should have left him alone!* Jane closes her eyes and tries to imagine choosing a different path. *If he had never met you, things would be different!*

It’s no use. She can’t. There was no other way. In Jane Pyre’s world, all roads led to Elijah Hart.

STOUFFVILLE, ONTARIO

1989

Janet Ribeiro was the most talented musician in her church. She could master any instrument. Drums. Piano. Guitar. Violin. Her voice wasn't bad, either—she had played the starring role in several church musicals. “The Lord has given our Janet a gift,” Pastor Morris always said. This made Janet's mother, Raquel, glow with maternal pride. It also made her even more horrified when she caught her daughter violating the electric guitar the church had loaned her to practice for an upcoming “Rock 'n' Roll Hymn Sing” with an unfamiliar and evil-sounding song.

“What is that music?” Janet's mother had shouted. “Those are certainly not the songs you learned at church!”

“It's Romeo Void,” Janet said. “New Wave. It's for *fun*. I can't always play hymns if I want to be a musician.”

“You're not going to be a musician. You're going to Bible college to become a youth minister. This is how you'll use your gift. Campfire sing-alongs!”

Raquel said this as if it weren't ridiculous, as if they had agreed to it. Janet thought about shouting back that she would rather die than be a youth minister or ever participate in another campfire sing-along—but she had decided long ago that “turn the other cheek” was the only useful takeaway from her many school-enforced read-throughs of the Bible.

“Right. Sorry. Of course I'm not going to be a musician,” she offered, hoping for peace. But Raquel would not be placated. Hearing Janet sing

music about liking someone better if you slept together instead of glorifying God was the last straw for her—the second-to-last straw having been used up during the Hudson’s Bay catalog incident.

At first, Raquel had approved of Janet’s modeling for the department store. Physical beauty was another one of her daughter’s God-given gifts—and besides, they needed the money. But then Janet forged a parental release form so she could pose in a Wonderbra shoot that paid double what the rest of them did.

“Do you know what people think of us now?” Raquel had cried when one of the church elders’ wives discovered the catalog under her son’s mattress, the pages of the bra ad suspiciously sticky. “It’s bad enough I’m a single mother!”

“How is it *bad*? It’s not your fault Dad left, it’s mine!”

Her mother had pressed her hands to her ears at this. Raquel told people Janet’s father, Alphonse, had moved away and died. She told Janet that although the Bible said all lies were sins, some falsehoods were necessary. Really, Alphonse had just been a nobody—at least that was what Janet always told herself to take away the sting of his prolonged absence. He’d lost his job as a welder because he was sloppy, always late. He pushed Raquel around, called Janet names, seemed to blame them both for the failures of his life until finally, one day, an eight-year-old Janet packed him a bag.

“Get out!” she’d said, channeling the mature, self-righteous anger she had seen on the afternoon soap operas her mother watched. “We don’t want you here! All you do is embarrass us! And you’re *mean*! Get out, and don’t come back!”

Janet was a little surprised when her father actually did what he was told, slamming the door of his rusty old truck and peeling out of the driveway with more vigor than she had ever seen in him. She felt triumphant about the power she wielded, but only until they had to sell the house because the little he brought in when he actually worked was what paid the mortgage. Still, even in a smaller rental house, things were better without her father around.

Until Raquel took up with God. There was soon no limit to the things

they could be ashamed of. Single motherhood, department store catalogs, the wrong kind of music.

Now, Raquel strode across the room and wrestled the vacuum cleaner out of the closet so she could begin vacuuming the already pristine beige carpet. Watching her mother frantically vacuum made Janet wonder, not for the first time, if she had been switched at birth. When Raquel was finished, the living room would look like it had crop rows running across it.

"Pastor Morris is coming here," her mother said over the din. "It's not just that evil song you were singing in your room. Some of the kids at school have been saying things. About you."

"All they do is say things about me, Mom."

"And whose fault is that?" Raquel shouted as the vacuum roared. "Who posed in her underwear? Who listens to the devil's music and draws strange pictures of women with their hair on fire in her notebooks?"

Janet swallowed a retort and went to sit on the couch. Raquel's fury would pass. She just had to wait it out. No, actually, it wasn't her fault she needed to get a job modeling so she could help her mother, who barely earned enough as a receptionist at a local veterinarian's office to make ends meet. Not her fault that she loved music—all kinds of it—and that ever since she had started listening to her little clock radio alone in her room at night, she had hungered for music with loud guitars and pounding bass the way she imagined other teenage girls yearned for boys or pop stars—or, in the case of the kids at the tiny, church-affiliated school she attended, Jesus Christ. Not her fault that after the Hudson's Bay catalog had been discovered by that creep John Mahew's mother, the girls at school who had once been her friends then started whispering behind her back that she was a slut, even though none of them had any clue what that word meant, except maybe in the context of Mary Magdalene. Not her fault that Ruthie, her best friend since kindergarten, didn't talk to her anymore, had broken off their friendship with a note shoved in Janet's backpack saying she wasn't so sure about her old friend's "scruples" anymore. Most of the time, Janet told herself she didn't need a

friend who used words like *scruples*—but she missed Ruthie, and that was the truth. Janet had imagined they would be friends forever, the kind of friends who were different but shared a past, a bond akin to sisterhood.

It hurt to think about. Janet shook her head to try to loosen the sad thoughts, cast them away, but the sharp back-and-forth movement made Raquel even angrier.

“You look possessed when you do that! Stop that right now!”

So, Janet folded her hands in her lap and thought about Elijah Hart instead. A smile played across her lips as she imagined the boy she had met online when she set up the BBS chat room using the old Commodore 64 and modem the vet had passed on to Raquel—to give to “that smart daughter of yours”—when the clinic had upgraded computers a few months before.

“Better, Janet. That’s so much better. The pastor will be here any minute.” Raquel wrestled the vacuum cleaner back into its closet home as Janet drifted off into a world that was half-fantasy, half-real, all hers. Raquel didn’t know what a modem did, so she had no way of knowing that the innocuous machine in the corner of their living room was Janet’s portal to the fledgling internet—and a whole hidden life full of possibility.

BBS CHAT ROOM “STILL LIFE IN STOUFFVILLE”

Welcome, BBSers. System Operator (SysOP) requires a bit of information about you before she’ll allow you in her chat room or game zone. Yes, I’m a girl, and I don’t take any sexist shit. No I will not tell you my measurements. Thank you in advance. This is mostly a place to chat about music. Be nice. I get to decide if I feel like banning you.

INTAKE

What is your

Full name: Elijah Hart

Birthday: March 19, 1970

Please choose a user name

... — — ...

User name chosen: Eli72

05/12/89

03:11 am

Eli72: Hello? Anyone there?

SysOP: Hi.

Eli72: Hi. I didn't expect anyone to be awake.

SysOP: Insomnia.

Eli72: Me too.

SysOP: What kind of music do you like?

Eli72: Whoa, that was fast.

SysOP: It's a music chat room.

Eli72: Maybe we should get more acquainted first. I'm Elijah.

SysOP: I go by Jane. Nice to meet you. What kind of music do you like, Elijah?

Eli72: I like all kinds of music.

SysOP: Glam rock? Metal?

Eli72: I mean, metal is not my first choice, but I can find something to like about any kind of music.

SysOP: Hmm. Even New Kids On The Block?

Eli72: NKOTB take their cues from the Beatles. What's not to . . . if not like, at least admire?

SysOP: Ok. Top ten favorite bands, then?

Eli72: That's a big question.

SysOP: This is not a test.

Eli72: But I get the sense if you don't like the bands I choose you'll kick me out of here. Admit that if I say my favorite band is Warrant, I'm out of here. It's totally a test.

SysOP: :)

Eli72: Can we start with you? Favorite bands?

SysOP: Sure. In no particular order . . .

1. The Disintegration
2. L7
3. Concrete Blonde
4. The Smiths
5. The Vaselines
6. Pixies
7. Jane's Addiction
8. Sonic Youth
9. R.E.M.
10. Babes in Toyland

Eli72: You had that ready to go.

SysOP: Of course I did. I've been getting into some New Wave lately, but that sort of feels like a separate list.

Eli72: It's a great list. Most people I know are a lot less original.

SysOP: What music do most people you know like?

Eli72: The Melvins, Mother Love Bone, more Melvins.

SysOP: Do you by any chance live in Seattle?

Eli72: Correct.

SysOP: But you don't like those bands?

Eli72: I guess. They're fun. But I like what you like better. Music that sounds . . . like the person who wrote it HAD to. Does that make sense?

SysOP: Completely. As if the song was a compulsion, an urge. Ok, so, your list, then?

Eli72: Still not ready. :) Let's talk more about you. Do you play any instruments?

SysOP: I can play drums, guitar, piano, violin. I would love to learn bass. You?

Eli72: Drums, piano, guitar, bass, pretty much anything. Are you in a band?

SysOP: Yes.

Eli72: Cool! Tell me more!

Eli72: Are you still there?

SysOP: I was trying to find a way to make myself sound cooler than I am. But it's no use. I'm in a church ensemble. Christian rock, to be exact.

Eli72: I'm sure there are cool things about Christian rock.

SysOP: I'm sure there are not. And my mom is super strict. I'm running out of places to hide the albums I actually like listening to. Last month she found Jane's Addiction's *Nothing's Shocking* under my mattress and had a meltdown.

Eli72: Ah, bummer—but yeah, I can see how a strict mom might not love that album cover. To be honest, I'm over the whole naked-or-half-dressed-woman-on-album-covers thing. Sexism is getting really old. But "Jane Says" is SUCH a great song, right? Plus, that's your name. Which is cool. Negates the uncoolness of the Christian rock ensemble. ;)

SysOP: Thank you. :) And yes, it's one of the best songs ever. The alternative "Stairway to Heaven," dare I say?

Eli72: Hmm. Interesting. You're right, it's got classic written all over it. I wonder what an alternative classic will look like in twenty years though. The point is sort of for it not to become classic, right? It's not that accessible.

SysOP: What's the point of music if it doesn't live on, though?

Eli72: I don't have a huge problem with the concept of music for music's sake—but maybe that's shortsighted, I don't know. So, does your Christian rock ensemble have a name?

SysOP: Oh god.

Eli72: The band's name is "Oh God"?

SysOP: Ha! No. It's just so embarrassing.

Eli72: I'm the drummer in a band called the Marvel Boys, if it makes you feel any better.

SysOP: Why are you called the Marvel Boys?

Eli72: Not really sure. Something to do with comic books. We've all been friends since we were toddlers. Our lead singer, Kim, he thought of the name. Probably while drunk or stoned.

SysOP: Try being in a band called . . . Samson's Mullet.

SysOP: Hello?

Eli72: I'm sorry.

SysOP: You were laughing.

Eli72: So hard I spit water all over my desk and had to go get a paper towel.

SysOP: Can we talk more about *your* band instead? Please? What's the genre, the style?

Eli72: I'd say we're post-punk metal funk. Maybe. But I like it when things are hard to define.

SysOP: Me, too. Like the Pixies. Rock-alternative-metal-punk? And the Cocteau Twins! Dream-garage-soul? I love it when a band has a sound I haven't heard before.

Eli72: Yeah. Our band is loud. Maybe that's how to define us. We used to play house parties every weekend and people slam danced so hard the floors caved in.

SysOP: Come on. Really??

Eli72: OK, that happened once and it was a pretty crappy house. But still.

SysOP: Caving in a floor is pretty rad.

Eli72: I actually find it kind of weird when everyone is partying and no one is really listening to us. Wow, I sound about 80 years old, don't I? I swear, I'm a 19-year-old guy.

SysOP: If it makes you feel any better, I took the bus to Toronto and went to a Pixies concert last spring—and shushed the people standing next to me. At a club show.

Eli72: I like you, Jane.

SysOP: I WANT to say I like you, but you haven't given me your list of favorite bands yet so the jury is out. :)

Eli72: This is stressful! You have exquisite taste in music and I feel pressured to live up to it.

SysOP: Exquisite. Whoa. Relax. It's just music. No pressure.

Eli72: Music is everything. I thought we'd sort of established that.

SysOP: You're pretty intense, Elijah.

SysOP: Hello? Don't be mad. Intense is not a bad thing.

Eli72: I wasn't mad. I was thinking. And I've determined I need a day to come up with my list for you. Meet me on here tomorrow at the same time. OK?

SysOP: Ok . . . weirdo. :)

Eli72: Till tomorrow at . . . what time zone are you in?

SysOP: Eastern.

Eli72: I'm Pacific. OK, 9 pm my time, midnight yours?

SysOP: See you.

(X) to Exit to Main Menu, (?) for Help

Your selection is?

05/13/89

01:59 am

Eli72: Hi.

Eli72: Hello? Jane?

Eli72: You there?

(X) to Exit to Main Menu, (?) for Help

Your selection is?

09:06 am

SysOP: Hi.

SysOP: Elijah?

(X) to Exit to Main Menu, (?) for Help

Your selection is?

09:16 am

SysOp: Hello? Is there anyone named Elijah in here?

Malkie47: Nope, it's just me.

AlaskaGold1: And me.

Malkie47: Chattin about G N' R, because they fuckin rule. I'll fight anyone who says *Lies* is not the best album ever made, and "Used to Love Her" isn—

SysOP: She's great. Plus, she's Canadian and so am I. :)

Eli72: No one knows I listen to her except my mom.

SysOP: Your biggest secret is that you like Helen Sear?

Eli72: I wish.

SysOP: Well anyway, it's official. I like your taste.

Eli72: I like yours too. Obviously. We have some crossover.

SysOP: You can stay. :)

Eli72: I'm glad. Except I'm kind of exhausted. I had band practice for like six hours tonight because we have a club show on the weekend. Kim is convinced we're not tight enough. I can't feel my arms.

SysOP: A Seattle club show. Exciting!

Eli72: I guess. Not as exciting as chatting with you, but I'm wiped and I'm afraid I might type something stupid. Same time tomorrow?

SysOP: Of course.

(X) to Exit to Main Menu, (?) for Help

Your selection is?

05/15/89

01:32 am

SysOP: Hello?

Eli72: Hi. Are you hot? Can you describe yourself? What are your measurements?

SysOP: Elijah? What. The. Hell. **[logged out] [X]**

01:59 am

Eli72: Jane?

Eli72: Hello?

Eli72: That was my idiot friend Kim, NOT ME. He stayed at my place after band practice and started looking through my shit without my permission when I fell asleep. I would never ever say anything like that to you. I'm so sorry.

(X) to Exit to Main Menu, (?) for Help

Your selection is?

ELECTRONIC MESSAGE TO SYSOP

From: Eli72

Jane, this is Elijah. That was my friend, not me. He's an asshole. Please, chat with me again. I miss you.

—Elijah

ELECTRONIC MESSAGE TO ELI72

From: SysOP

I know it wasn't you. But I don't like the idea of other people being able to read what we write to each other. It freaks me out.

ELECTRONIC MESSAGE TO SYSOP

From: Eli72

Why don't we start writing letters, then?

May 17, 1989

Dear Jane,

I've never written letters to anyone before. I hope they're not boring. I don't have much to say about myself—I'm just so curious about you. How did you get into music? And I don't mean church music. :) What was the first album you ever bought? You said you wanted to learn to play bass guitar; are there any other instruments you wish you could learn? Do you write songs? I admire people who can write great songs. I've already told you how much I love Helen Sear, and it's her voice, for sure—but also her songwriting. All her songs are like stories, in the best way. The emotional payoff is always so great.

I like R.E.M.'s lyrics, too. More obscure, but just as good. I always find myself writing down my favorite lyrics of theirs, and thinking I might try to write my own. But I never do. I prefer to just admire good lyrics.

Anyway, tell me more, Jane. About you. Write back soon and tell me anything, everything.

*Yours truly,
Elijah*

A full week passed before she received his first letter. She checked the mailbox every day, intent on getting to it before her mother did. When it finally arrived, she raced up to her room, breathless, clutching it to her heart. *Dear Jane . . .* She read it over and over and felt like a new person. No more Janet, a name she had always hated. It was amazing to her the difference dropping just one letter made—almost like writing a song and finding that a single note could make the melody come together. He had drawn little pictures across the bottom of the page, pencil-sketched images of a teenage boy she assumed was a composite of him: shaggy-haired, wearing a Disintegration concert tee, playing a guitar in one image, behind a drum set in another. He also drew a record player, with albums by his favorite artists stacked up beside it. She noticed a few of her favorites, too. She cut out that drawing and stuck it in the corner of her mirror. Since she covered the pages of almost all her notebooks with drawings and doodles, her mother assumed she had drawn it herself.

May 24, 1989

Dear Elijah,

R.E.M. is so good. Not just the lyrics, which are great, but Michael Stipe's voice. It's so unique, it should be its own emotion. Like, you should be able to say, "I'm feeling a little stiped today" and everyone would know what you mean.

The Smiths' The Queen Is Dead is how I got into music. Morrissey's voice! So gloomy it's almost . . . joyous. Does that even make sense? I think this is why I'm an insomniac now. I'm used to staying up late because I

would wait for my mom to go to bed and then listen to the radio at night. I never wanted to miss what the DJ might play next. Depeche Mode, Cocteau Twins, Pixies, Billy Bragg, Jane's Addiction.

What got me into playing music was the Pixies' *Surfer Rosa*—that album is EVERYTHING. I HAD to learn those songs so I wouldn't have to wait to hear them on the radio anymore. I taught them to myself and now I feel like I can play almost anything. Even though it turns out Frank Black is a jerk—did you hear he threw a CHAIR at Kim Deal during a concert? Why doesn't she quit already and start her own band?! But I'll always be grateful to the Pixies.

Bass guitar is really the only instrument I can't play that I'm interested in right now. I guess I also wish I could sing better, but that's not really an instrument I can learn. My voice is my voice, and it's just okay. Do you ever sing?

I do write songs, but no one has ever heard them except me, so I'm not sure if they're any good. Remember when we chatted online, and you said something about songs that felt like an urge? I've thought about that a lot. I get a sort of agitated feeling when a song wants to come out. Writing songs can be a little painful sometimes, to be honest. Then again, I'm not sure I'd trade the feeling of finishing one for anything.

How did you get into music? Exactly how long have you been in the Marvel Boys? How did the club show you were telling me about go?

Write back soon.

Jane

PS: You're a good artist. I like your drawings. Is that supposed to be you?

June 5, 1989

Dear Jane,

I'd love to hear you play, hear your songs. I'm sure they're really good. I bet you have a great voice. And I agree with everything you wrote, every single thing. Let's start using "stiped" as an emotional descriptor.

You make me feel stiped, by the way.

To answer your other questions: my mom got me into music. She's a folkie, and that's where the love of Helen Sear came from. We used to listen to a lot of Harry Chapin (speaking of storytelling in songs!), Melanie, Joan Baez. I would sing along to her records, which is embarrassing to think about now because I have a super weird singing voice, which I suppose sounds great when you're singing along to Melanie or Joan Baez, but not awesome when you're singing along to rock or punk. My mom taught me to play piano to go with my singing. I never really stopped with music after that.

I can't imagine singing something I wrote. How do singer-songwriters do that? Don't they feel totally exposed?

The Marvel Boys have been together for four years now. The club show was okay. Kim was a bit fucked-up and fell off the stage. Someone started a food fight with the cold cuts from the greenroom. I think the Seattle scene could best be described as an endless sleepover jam session with Ritalin party favors.

What's it like in your town? What are your friends like, what do you do for fun?

Also . . . I could teach you to play bass.

Except after I wrote that down I looked it up in an atlas, and Stouffville, Ontario, is about 2,400 miles away from the Seattle 'burbs where I live. Kind of far to go for guitar lessons. Sadly.

Have to go. Band practice.

Yours,
Elijah

PS: Yes, the character in the drawings is supposed to be me. I'm glad you like them. I'll send you more.

Jane and Elijah wrote each other multiple letters per week. Jane always managed to get to them before her mom did; she couldn't risk her mother finding Elijah's letters; they were too important to her. She was on her best behavior, worked extra hard at school, never missed a church band practice, pretended to throw away all her contraband CDs—which she really just hid in an old packing box in the basement, removing them only when her mother wasn't home.

Dear Elijah,

Stouffville is so boring. And my mom is so strict that I'm stuck at home a lot. Or at church. I think Seattle sounds awesome.

I'm counting the days until I turn eighteen (just under a year) because I'm planning to get out of here. I have no idea where I'll go—somewhere, anywhere, would be better than this town—but I've always dreamed of moving to Europe. Somewhere cool, like Amsterdam or Paris. Maybe somewhere in Germany. Where would you go, if you could go anywhere? What would you do, who would you be? I want to be a musician, if that's not obvious. I'd love to be in a band that's not just a church ensemble, get paid to travel the world and do what I love. I think being famous would be amazing. Everyone would want to know you, but you'd only have to spend time with people you wanted to be around and do things you wanted to do. Everyone would love you, because they loved your music.

Wow, I've never told anyone that before. I don't know what it is about you that makes me want to answer all your questions, and more. I'm usually pretty quiet around people.

Why do you think you have a weird singing voice? Aren't the best singing voices a little unusual? I bet your singing voice is stiped. :) And I'd love to hear you sing someday so I can decide for myself.

I have to go to now, Samson's Mullet calls! But more soon, as always.

Jane

The spring of 1989 turned to summer, then fall. Jane and Elijah kept writing letters. It was hard to define what Elijah Hart was to her. A friend? A pen pal? More? But whatever he was, Jane knew it was important.

Dear Jane,

Months ago, when we first started writing, you mentioned you'd dreamed of moving to Europe. To be honest, I'd never really thought much about Europe in general—no one I know even has a passport, let alone me—but because of you, I took an interest. You're right, it would be so cool to live somewhere over there. A place with history, personality. And now that the Berlin Wall has fallen, I'll admit I'm getting a little obsessed with Germany. It actually makes the evening news my dad always falls asleep in front of at night interesting. The wall was dismantled by accident, did you know that? Some government official messed up what he was supposed to say in a speech, and the next thing everyone knew, people were rushing through the gates. All those years of control, and then no one could stop freedom from happening when it did. COOL.

Do you think the world is pure chaos or that things happen for a reason? Do you believe in fate? Do you believe in anything?

*Yours,
Elijah*

PS: Here's a photo of me instead of a drawing. It was taken at a Marvel Boys concert a few weeks ago. Maybe you could send a photo too. I would love to be able to picture you. Then maybe I could draw you too. :)

Elijah,

I never believed in fate until I met you in my chat room. I hope that doesn't sound too weird. Other than that, I don't know what I believe in. Maybe

that seems odd given that I go to a religious school and I'm in a church band—but I have a hard time swallowing Bible stories because I always find myself wondering why the women are all either mothers or . . . whores. There's no in-between, and I know that's not real. Which means the rest of it can't be real either.

I do believe in music, though. That it holds some kind of power. I remember reading something once about a rumor that Led Zeppelin sold their souls to the devil for one great song—and half believing that could be true. What do you think?? Is "Stairway to Heaven" sell-your-soul-to-the-devil good? Can songs be magic spells, or curses, or both? If I've ever felt rapture in my life, or like a miracle could be possible, it didn't happen in church, it happened in my room, when I was hiding under my duvet, listening to a new song on my Walkman or the radio.

Now, about Berlin. I wrote a song yesterday because I can't stop thinking about it either. The lyrics (enclosed) were inspired by the minister at my church giving a sermon on the "miracle" that apparently happened in Leipzig, not too far from Berlin. He said the reason the Wall fell is because thousands of people in that city prayed for it. I went to the library and read some newspaper articles about it, and he was so wrong. It wasn't prayer, it was protest! The activists just happened to use a church as their starting point, their shelter. Maybe some of them prayed, who knows. But that's not why they were there.

The song I wrote is about the difference between miracles and force of will. It's called "Miracle Monday." There's music, too. I recorded myself playing it on my guitar, and that's enclosed on a tape. And finally, I'm sending a school photo of me. Try to ignore the stupid uniform. Yellow is not my color.

x, Jane

Dear Jane,

I'm nervous, but here goes. I loved your song so much I wrote a bassline for it. I played your guitar track on my boom box while recording myself

playing the bassline with a tape recorder. But . . . something happened. I started to sing. And as I think I've told you, I never really sing anymore. The quality is terrible, but I think it's okay otherwise. And that you should hear it. I hope you like how I arranged it and that I didn't take too many liberties.

Sending this before I lose my nerve.

*Yours,
Elijah*

PS: I hope it's okay to say this, but you're really beautiful. I drew you. As you can see, we're together in the picture at the bottom of this page. I'm teaching you how to play bass. I hope that really happens one day, Jane.

Dear Elijah,

Forget about my song, your voice is incredible!!! It's like if Robert Plant and Leonard Cohen had a baby with Joni Mitchell and Helen Sear. Which, I know, is not even possible. But how in the world could you think you're a bad singer? Who told you that??

I wrote another song, it's on the enclosed tape. I feel like I have a secret superpower now, which will make every song I write better—because from now on, no matter what, every song I'll ever write is going to be for you to sing.

x, Jane

PS: I liked the drawing of you teaching me to play bass. I hope that really happens, too.

• • •

A sharp rap at the front door of her house brought Jane back to the present moment, in her living room with her angry mother. Raquel ushered Pastor Morris in; his feet left yeti-like prints on the recently vacuumed carpet. He had left his shoes on, and Janet marveled at the way her mother managed not to react to this. He sat down and said *no, thank you* to coffee, even declined her mother's famous lemon-lavender bars. This was serious.

He got right to it. "Janet, the children at school have become concerned about some letters they found in your backpack." Jane's mouth went dry. She glanced at her mother, but Raquel had her arms wrapped tightly around herself and was focused on the minister.

"What was anyone doing looking in my backpack? That's my private stuff—"

"It is the job of the entire community to care for the herd. When sheep go astray—"

"We are people, not sheep," Jane interrupted, but he spoke over her.

"*When sheep go astray*, they must be led back to the correct path. Now, Janet, I'm going to play something for you." He had brought a small tape recorder with him, pressed play. "Perhaps you'll listen to a true authority on the matter of the music you can't seem to quit."

The voice of a concerned-sounding man began to explain that heavy metal music was satanic, that some bands embedded evil messages into their songs. "The devil's evil intent gets into the teenager's brain by osmosis," the man on the tape explained. "Especially when the music is played backward." He proceeded to play a Black Sabbath song in reverse, and it sounded like gibberish. Janet couldn't help it: she laughed.

"Janet!" her mother exclaimed. "Stop laughing right now!" She turned to the pastor. "That boy," she began, and Jane's heart sank. "The one she's been writing to. He's a *very* bad influence."

"I think it's time to pray for her soul," Pastor Morris said to Raquel.

• • •

December 1, 1989

Elijah,

My mom found out about our letters. She's never going to let the mail come to this house now before going through it first.

Can we start talking on the phone instead? If you call me at the number below any Wednesday between 7–9, my mom will be at choir practice. I'm so sorry. I know it's long distance. But I really want to stay in touch.

Jane

Elijah called Jane that Wednesday night, and every Wednesday after. Then Raquel figured out that the boy from the letters was calling, and she started unplugging the house phone and taking it with her when she went out—no matter that Jane pointed out she had no way to call 911 if there was ever an emergency. “Go to the neighbor’s, then,” Raquel said. “Go outside on the front lawn and scream.”

Jane took handfuls of change to the pay phone in town instead.

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Jane.”

His voice was her favorite thing: soft but confident, his words punctuated by thoughtful pauses, easy laughter. They talked about the songs Jane was writing, what Elijah was playing with his band, what they were both listening to, music scenes in the Pacific Northwest, which centered around a sound called “grunge” and a musical movement called riot grrrl.

If Elijah’s mother, Alice, answered the phone instead of him, she would say, “Hi, Jane” so warmly, Jane felt like they had met. Sometimes his dad would answer, too. His name was Moses and his voice was somber, so unlike Elijah’s and Alice’s that Jane asked Elijah about him. “What’s your relationship like with your dad?”

“Oh.” The question caught Elijah off guard, she could tell. “He’s quiet. He’s a dad. You know.”

"I don't, really. Mine left when I was eight. He was pretty much the worst."

Elijah cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Jane sighed. "I wish I had your life, though."

"It's not perfect."

"Why not?"

It was as if he hadn't heard her. "Hey, I miss your songs, you know?"

"I miss your singing voice," she agreed. "And I have an idea. I'm going to rent a PO Box, so we can keep sending our songs back and forth, keep working on our music. What do you think?"

"I'd love that," he said. "I really would."

Our music. She'd said it, and now it existed. Their music was something special, and Jane knew it.

Late in the winter of 1990, Elijah told Jane the Marvel Boys were going on a small tour of Washington State and Oregon, and that it might be hard for them to talk on the phone regularly for the next month. "I'll call when I can," he said, sounding regretful, a little worried. "And I'll miss you a lot."

The idea of a month without their weekly phone calls and exchanged tapes filled her with something like panic. A month felt like a lifetime. She was only seventeen. A month was a huge chunk of her life. But all she said was, "That's so exciting! I can't wait to hear all about your tour when you get back."

Jane began x-ing off the days until he came back in her school agenda, but this felt too pathetic, so she stopped. Still, she kept track of the days in her mind as she moved through a life that felt gray without Elijah. She tried to work on her songs, but nothing came together without Elijah to sing them back to her. She tried to read, but nothing held her interest. Late one night, she dug out the old modem from the closet and set up her BBS chat room again—feeling disloyal as she did so, but also determined. Elijah already had a band, and she needed to find one too. But no one interesting showed up, just the same guys who wanted to talk about G N' R.

It had been thirteen days since he'd been away when the telephone rang on a Wednesday night; Jane's mother was at choir practice and had stopped taking the phone with her because lately, her daughter had shown few signs of rebellion—and had been strategically leaving Christian rock tapes lying around the house. As soon as Jane picked up the receiver and heard the music and loud voices in the background, she knew.

"Jane. I'm so glad you answered. I know we didn't arrange anything, but I had to hear your voice." He sounded different—tired, his voice a little hoarse.

"Hey," she said. "I'm glad you called. How are you doing?"

A long silence. "Better now. I really miss you, Jane." She twisted the phone cord around her fingers, gazed at her smiling reflection in the kitchen window.

"I really miss you too," she said.

"How is it possible for two weeks to feel like forever?"

She laughed, agreed. "So, where are you calling from?"

"A pay phone at a bar in Spokane. We're here for sound check."

"And the tour is going well?"

"It's going" was all he offered. "How are things with you? What have you been up to?"

She thought about lying about parties and friends; she had done it before. But this time she couldn't. "Elijah, the truth is, my social life . . . isn't exactly great." She explained what she hadn't before, revealed the parts of her life she'd left out in their letters and calls. "I wanted you to think I was someone more interesting than I am. But I'm not. You're a big part of my life. The biggest part, probably. It's kind of embarrassing, but I feel like you need to know the truth. Two weeks without you has been really hard because . . . you mean a lot to me. You might even be the best part of my life." Her heart was racing. What if she scared him away?

"Wait," he said. "You think you're not interesting because you don't have a lot of friends in that town you're from, the one you're planning to leave the first second you can? Jane, I think you're the most interesting person in the world."

“Even though you’re . . . kind of my only friend?”

“Friend?” he repeated.

“Friend,” she said firmly, not exactly meaning it. “We haven’t even met yet, Elijah.”

“Not yet,” he replied.

Then someone called his name in the background and he said he had to go, but that he would call her the following Wednesday if he could. And if he didn’t, he promised he’d be thinking about her.

When Elijah got back home after the tour, he mailed her a tape right away. It read “A Song for Jane” in black block letters. After she picked it up from the PO Box on her way to school, she carried the tape around with her all day, waiting for the moment she could pull her blush-pink duvet over her head, press her headphones against her ears, and listen.

“Hi, Jane.” He had never spoken on any of the tapes, just sang. She sat straight up, surprised, the duvet falling away from her body. “This is cheesy, but I think we should tell each other everything, just like you did on the phone when I was in Spokane, so . . . here it is. While we were apart, I had this song in my head the whole time. I can’t write the way you do, I’m definitely no poet, but . . .” He trailed off. “I can sing for you. And I know you’ll like it.”

It was “Unchained Melody” by the Righteous Brothers—frankly, the last song she would have expected him to choose to sing. A recent romantic blockbuster movie starring Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore had made it popular—and the point of liking alternative music was that you didn’t listen to anything considered mainstream. Yet Elijah’s voice turned it into something else entirely. She felt like he was speaking directly to her, about her, even. She wondered as she listened if there was anything his voice couldn’t do. It was alchemical, spellbinding—and it was for *her*.

She listened to the song over and over and came to a realization. She was in love with him.

But when she called him the next day from the pay phone booth in her town, she felt shy. “I loved the song” was all she could manage.

"I loved singing for you," he said. "And . . . Jane? I know those weren't my words, but I meant every one. I've never felt this way about anyone."

Jane felt like she was experiencing a miracle—but still, she tried to be reasonable. "We haven't even met yet," she said.

"Imagine if we did," he said.

"I do, all the time."

She waited, thinking he might finally ask her to come visit.

Instead, he said her name again. "Jane?"

"Yes?"

"I just told you I loved you . . ."

"You did? I didn't realize."

"Well, I mean, I told you I meant every word of a song I sang to you about a guy who is basically like, *you are my everything*, and I guess I'm kind of wondering how you feel about that . . . ?"

"I feel the same," she said quickly, then started to laugh. "Of *course* I do. I was dying without you."

They were going to figure it out; she knew it. For now, this was enough. They'd meet someday, and it would be perfect. The start of the dazzling, music-filled life she had always dreamed of. Elijah was the one.