Author's Note

In 1902, Louis Comfort Tiffany began building Laurelton Hall on Long Island's Gold Coast, not far from where, years later, F. Scott Fitzgerald would place Gatsby's fictional mansion.

Housed on 580 acres in Laurel Hollow, the eighty-four-room estate would take three years to finish and would cost Tiffany $2 million—$54 million by today's standards. Laurelton Hall was Tiffany's personal effort to create a vision incorporating every aspect of his love of beauty, from the stained-glass windows and mosaics he designed himself, to the rooms of antique Japanese, Native American, and Indian objects he had collected during his lifetime, to the more than sixty acres of impeccably landscaped gardens complete with imported peacocks that roamed the grounds.

In 1918, Tiffany created the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation at Laurelton in order to aid artists, endowing it with his own funds as well as the estate and its contents.

Two years later, eight students attended the first summer session. They included two silversmiths, one sculptor, one designer, and four painters. During the remainder of Tiffany's life, until his death in 1933, artists lived at Laurelton and attended one of two eight-week summer sessions during which they were

afforded the time to imagine and create while surrounded and inspired by nature and the beauty that Tiffany had cultivated and brought into the world.

After Tiffany died, the Foundation struggled, and the mansion fell into disrepair. By 1949, parcels of the estate had been sold off, and the main house and a surrounding three acres were purchased by Thomas H. Hilton for what today would be $100,000. Over the next eight years, Hilton did nothing to restore the house, and it was virtually abandoned.

On March 6, 1957, at five p.m., a neighbor spotted flames coming from Laurelton Hall. The fire lasted until two a.m., with outbreaks continuing for days. The grand house, along with what was left of its gardens, was destroyed.

To this day, the cause of the fire has never been discovered

I have been fascinated with Louis Comfort Tiffany since childhood. My great-grandparents' house in Brooklyn contained a Tiffany window of lush red roses with a border of verdant green leaves. I loved to watch its colorful reflections move across the oak floors as the afternoon slipped into dusk.

My mother, who always encouraged and nurtured my interest in the arts, sought out other Tiffany windows in New York, and we visited them all.

In 1978, when the Metropolitan Museum installed the Laurelton Hall Loggia from pieces salvaged from the Long Island mansion, my mother and I were among its first visitors, and it was in the pages of the catalog

accompanying the exhibition that I first read about Tiffany's magnificent estate and its fate.

I don't think I've ever gone longer than a month without visiting the Metropolitan Museum, and I always stop in the American Wing to sit in front of the wisteria windows from Laurelton Hall and rest for a moment—surrounded by all that beauty.

It's easy to look at artifacts from the estate and wonder what it must have been like to study under Tiffany's tutelage. Who were the students? What did they go on to create? How did the setting and the master influence them?

But most of all, why did the estate burn down in the first place? In response, my creativity-prone brain began: *What if one summer there was a student who . . .*

I've written *Tiffany Blues* through the eyes of Jenny Bell, a young artist who, in the summer of 1924, studied at the renowned Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation.

While Jenny and her story are fictional, Mr. Tiffany, the history of his family and namesake store, his windows, his aesthetic and personality, the estate, and the Foundation are fact. If I've included a famous name, he or she was indeed involved in some way. For instance, Thomas Edison *was* a friend of Mr. Tiffany's and *was* working on a Spirit Phone. The amazing artist Paul Cadmus *was* a student at Laurelton in the summer of 1924. Stanley Lothrop *did*

manage the Foundation, Sarah Eileen Hanley *was* Mr. Tiffany's companion (in every sense of the word, many said). The Art Students League, the Institute of Psychic Research, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and her studio are all real.

As often as possible, Mr. Tiffany's dialogue about art, architecture, and his own philosophy and quest are, if not verbatim, then influenced by his actual words recorded in letters, books, or articles. The same is true for Mr. Edison's espousing on his ideology.

Other parts of the novel are a combination of fact and fiction. While Tiffany did have many grandchildren, Oliver Comfort Tiffany is my creation. The history of Ouija boards is as described, but the Garland family and the Reverend are my invention, as are Minx and her family, Edward Wren, and Ben Montgomery.

All cities and towns mentioned are real, but the Reverend's specific church, the Weber Falls Cemetery, and the Fond du Lac Mausoleum are fictional.

And so I present *Tiffany Blues* as my way—as a novelist fascinated with art and history and where they overlap—of imagining an answer to the lingering question of who set the Laurelton Hall fire in 1957 that destroyed so much beauty, and why. It is my hope that through my heroine, Jenny, readers may experience what guests and students at Laurelton were able to during its 1920s heyday, what Tiffany himself wanted them to experience, what he

wanted everything he created to express: beauty. And while this book is a tribute to that opulence and beauty that were Tiffany’s legacy, it is also a tribute to the power of art to overcome the worst of traumas.

Prologue

March 13, 1957

Laurelton Hall, Laurel Hollow

Oyster Bay, New York

I lost my heart long before this fire darkened its edges. I was twenty-four years old that once-upon-a-time summer when I fell in love. A love that opened a door into a new world. A profusion of greens, shades of purples, spectrums of yellows, oranges, reds, and blues—oh, so many variations of blues.

I never dreamed I'd come back to Laurelton Hall, but I always trusted it would be there if I ever could visit. Now that will be impossible. For all that is left of that arcadia is this smoldering, stinking mess.

Somewhere in this rubble of charred trees, smashed tiles, and broken glass is my bracelet with its heart-shaped diamond and benitoite charm. Did my heart burn along with the magical house, the primeval forest, the lush bushes, and the glorious flowers? I'm not sure. Platinum is a hard metal. Diamonds are harder still. Or did just the engraving melt? And what of the man whose hand had grabbed at the bracelet? His muscle and flesh would have rotted by now. But what of the bones? Do bones burn? Back when it all happened, no report about a missing artist was ever made.

I take a few tentative steps closer to the rubble of the house. Bits of glass glint in the sun. A shard of ruby flashes, another of deep amethyst. I bend and pick up a fragment the size of my hand and wipe the soot off its surface.

With a start, I recognize this pattern.

Patterns, Mr. Tiffany once said, be they found in events, in nature, even in the stars in the firmament, are proof of history repeating itself. If we see randomness, it is only because we don't yet recognize the pattern.

So it shouldn't surprise me that of all the possible patterns, this is the one I've found. This remnant of the stained-glass clematis windows from Oliver's room. I remember how the light filtered through those windows, radiating color like the gems Mr. Tiffany used in his jewelry. How we stood in that living light and kissed, and the world opened up for me like an oyster, offering one perfect, luminous pearl. How that kiss became one more, then a hundred more. How we discovered each other's tastes and scents. How we shared that alchemical reaction when our passions ignited, combusted, and exploded, changing both of us forever.

Clutching the precious memory, I continue walking through the hulking mass of wreckage, treading carefully on the broken treasures. I listen for the familiar sounds—birds chirping, water splashing in the many fountains, and the endless rushing of the man-made waterfall that I always went out of my way to avoid.

But everything here is silent. Not even the birds have returned yet.

. . .

I learned about the fire seven days ago. I was at home in Paris, having breakfast, eating a croissant, drinking a café crème, and reading the *International*
Herald Tribune. The headline popped out at me like the obituary of an old friend with whom I had long been out of touch.

Old Tiffany Mansion Burns

An eight-level structure with twenty-five baths, the house
was owned originally by the late Louis Comfort Tiffany
of the jewelry firm that bears his name. At one time the
estate covered 1,500 acres of woodland and waterfront.

I didn't realize my hand was shaking until I saw a splotch of coffee soak into my white tablecloth.

The structure later housed the Tiffany Art Foundation,

which operated a summer school for artists.

The reporter wrote that a neighbor out walking his dog noticed flames coming from the clock tower of Laurelton's main house. Within hours, the mansion was ablaze. Fire companies came from as far as Hicksville and Glen Cove. Firemen drained all the neighboring swimming pools using the water to try to contain the conflagration. They carried hoses a half mile down to the Long Island Sound to siphon off that water, too. At one point, 435 firemen worked on the blaze, but the fire raged on and on for five days, defeating them. Those who lived nearby said the skies blackened as metal and wood, foliage, ephemera, and fabric burned.

The sky here is no longer black. But the smell of the fire persists. And no wonder, considering it burned for so long.

Once the present turns to past, all we have left are memories. Yes, sometimes we can stand where we stood, see our ghost selves, and relive moments of our life. See the shadow of the man we loved. Of the friend we cherished. Of the mentor who made all the difference. Our memories turn specific. The terrier that played by the shoreline, joyously running in the sand. We can remember the smell of the roses. Look at the azure water and see the glimmer of the sun on the opposite shore and hear a fleeting few bars of jazz still lingering in the air.

If you were the only girl in the world . . . Staring into the remains of what is left, I see ghosts of the gardens and woods, the gazebo, terraces, rooms ablaze with stained glass—everywhere we walked and talked and kissed and cried. With my eyes closed, I see it all in my mind, but when I open them, all of it is gone, up in flames.

Mr. Tiffany once told me that there is beauty even in broken things. Looking back, there is no question I would not be the artist I am if not for that lesson. But would he be able to salvage any beauty out of this destruction?

No, I never dreamed I'd come back to Laurelton Hall. The Xanadu where I came of age as both a woman and a painter. Where I found my heart's desire and my palette's power. Where depravity bloomed alongside beds and fields of flowers, where creativity and evil flowed with the water in the many fountains. Where the sun shone on the tranquil sea and the pool's treacherous rock crystals reflected rainbows onto the stone patio. Where the glorious light streaming from Mr. Tiffany's majestic stained glass illuminated the very deep darkness that had permeated my soul and lifted me out of despair. And where I found the love that sustained me and remained in my heart even after Oliver and I parted.

Standing here, smelling the acrid stench, looking at the felled trees with their charcoal bark, the carbon-coated stones and bent metal frames that once held the master's windows, at the smoky, melting mess that was one of the greatest mansions on Long Island's Gold Coast, I know I never will see it again, not how it was that magical and awful summer of 1924.

The fire is still hot in spots, and a tree branch snaps. My reverie is broken. Leaves rustle. Rubble falls. Glass crushes. Twigs crack. Then comes a whisper.

Jenny.

But it can't be. The wind howling through a hollow tree trunk is playing a trick. Fooling me into thinking I am hearing his sapphire voice, its deep velvet tone.

As I listen to the repeated whisper—*Jenny*—I raise my hand to wipe at my tears and tell myself that it is the smoldering ash making my eyes water. The charms on my bracelet jingle as I lower my arm. And again the whisper . . . and again my name—*Jenny.*

1

March 20, 1924

New York, New York

I hadn't expected to find a waterfall in the middle of Central Park. Even there, so far away from home and the scene of the tragedy, the rushing water that pounded on the rocks made me shudder. The waterfalls in Ithaca and in Hamilton had been powerful, beautiful forces of nature, but I'd grown to hate them.

"Jenny, certainly this early-spring scenery is going to inspire you to use some color," Minx said, as we set up our easels.

A dozen of us from Professor Robert Pannell's class at the Art Students League of New York had scattered around the pond, preparing to spend the afternoon painting en plein air in the tradition of the impressionists. We'd walked from the school on West Fifty-seventh Street north into the park and then continued along manicured pathways into this untamed, romantic area.

"Your assignment is not to paint what you see but what you feel. Paint the atmosphere," Professor Pannell instructed. He always pushed us to go beyond convention.

After a half hour, I was still struggling to get something worthwhile down on my canvas. The ceaseless noise of the water falling distracted me and made me anxious.

"So you're not going to use even a little bit of color?" Minx coaxed me. Christened "Millicent," she'd come by her nickname honestly. She had been a hellion growing up—bold, flirtatious, and cunning, much to her parents' chagrin—but she was just beguiling enough to get away with it.

I forced a small smile but didn't proffer an actual answer. I didn't need to. She hadn't really been asking for one but was rather expressing her never-ending surprise at how uninspired I was by the things that moved her so much.

"I know you are fascinated by the shapes of the trees and the negative spaces and patterns they create, but there are colors out there, Jenny. Look at the colors. Winter evergreens and spring's very first buds."

Minx had been questioning my reluctance to use color for months and knew that nothing—not spring or fall or flowers or fabrics—would inspire me. Despite my unchanging black, white, and gray palette, she believed she could help and refused to give up trying. I loved her for that and for her generosity.

She was the daughter of the Deerings, a wealthy shipping scion and a socialite whose fabled family had helped found the Bank of New York. Her parents, Eli and Emily, had spoiled her, and in return, Minx spoiled her friends. All her life, she'd witnessed her father showing his love and his remorse with

gifts; for her, then, expressing love meant showering people with her largesse. And as her best friend and flatmate, I was often on the receiving end of her generosity.

Minx's family was wealthy and worldly. She'd grown up in a mansion on Sixty-second Street and Madison Avenue in New York City. The first time she took me home with her for dinner, I'd been awed. Yes, I'd seen opulence in museums, theaters, and government buildings but never in a home where people lived.

The Deerings were also serious art collectors with eclectic tastes. The walls of their mansion were crowded with Renoirs, Manets, Monets, Rembrandts, Titians, and Renaissance drawings. There was even a Leonardo da Vinci sketch done in sepia chalk. Marble stands showcased seventeenth- and eighteenth-century bronzes. Mantels were crowded with bejeweled bibelots from Fabergé, Cartier, and Tiffany. Plants were potted only in majolica. Sofas and chairs upholstered only in silk and damask. There was not a corner that didn't hold a treasure, not a wall that didn't showcase a masterpiece.

"Miss Deering, are you painting your canvas or Miss Bell's?" Professor Pannell called out.

Minx rolled her eyes at me, and as she returned to her own canvas, she picked a sprig of holly and tucked it behind her ear. In the sun, the leaves gleamed like jade.

Even there in the park in painting clothes, Minx was distracting. She never walked into a room without eyes turning. Everything about her gleamed, from her bobbed helmet of blond hair to her couture clothes in the palest shades of beige, pink, champagne, topaz, and citrine.

Like Minx, my hair was bobbed. But unlike hers, mine never agreed to lie flat and exploded in a profusion of curls that fell over my forehead. It made me look bohemian and mussed, whereas her smooth helmet of gold made her look chic and coiffed.

When Minx moved, the silks and satins glowed like liquid candlelight. Her deep brown-red lipstick blazed. Even her perfume shimmered: Ombre Rose from the House of L'Etoile in France. It contained minuscule flecks of gold, and sometimes you'd catch a glimmer where she'd applied the spicy, rich scent.

Despite all her dressing up and embellishments, I always saw the frantic light behind Minx's electric green eyes, her longing for something she couldn't name and didn't know how to satisfy. Gifted as both painter and sculptor, she was trying to find that something in art. And when she wasn't in the studio, she was trying to find it in too many glasses of champagne or in bed with men she never knew well enough. Like so many of our generation, even if we hadn't been at the front, we were shell-shocked in the aftermath of the war, and someone like Minx tried to chase away the sadness and loss with whatever it

took—drink, drugs, frivolous theater, literature, music, forced gaiety, or a lot of sex.

After another half hour, I glanced over at Minx's canvas. She'd captured the charm and romance of the glen perfectly. We were in a section of the park called the Rambles, a particularly lush area that Fredrick Law Olmsted had created to resemble natural woods. After the waterfall rushed over the rocks, it spilled into a pond surrounded by bushes and trees in configurations that didn't look man-made but indeed were.

During the three-hour period we were in the park, Professor Pannell strolled among us, examining our work, critiquing in his notoriously staccato sentences, and gesturing ferociously with his arms. He always carried his own paintbrush, which he often dipped into our palettes—without apology—to correct mistakes on our canvases.

He approached Minx and studied her work in progress.

"Lazy, lazy. You can do better. You are better. But this—" He broke off and threw up his arms.

He was tougher on her than the rest of us because—as he often repeated—she had more promise than most. And he made sure he said it loudly so we could all hear him. He believed in playing us against one another, a habit that didn't endear him to many students. Yet he was one of the most popular

teachers at the League, because once you got over the shock of his methods, you could learn so much from the brushstrokes he applied to your canvas.

“More depth, Miss Deering,” he said, as he dabbed his brush into the white oil paint and, with just two or three strokes, created the illusion of deeper space on the two-dimensional surface of her painting.

Leaving Minx, he stopped beside Edward Wren. Though not tall, Edward vibrated with energy. He had chestnut hair, a high forehead, and hooded hazel eyes. He had been at the League longer than Minx or I had. And while he’d taken several classes with Minx before, this was the first time the three of us were in a class together. As of late, I’d noticed Edward and Minx exchanging glances, and at home she mentioned him often. This surprised me. With his working-class aspect, Edward had neither the grace of the high-society gentlemen Minx had grown up with nor the aesthetic of the bohemian artists we spent time with. Yes, many were rebels devoted to their art, but few had scars on their cheeks or knuckles. Yet Edward did. At thirty-one, he was older and gruffer and not as polite as the other men in our set. At times, he could seem aloof or distant, as if something were preying on his mind. I knew virtually nothing about him except what I saw in his paintings—a powerful and raw talent often ruined by his impatience to invest the necessary time in finishing them. Even so, his canvases always exuded an exciting crudeness that made everyone take notice. Perhaps that rawness was why he reminded me of

boys I had grown up with in Hamilton, Ontario. The sons of steel-factory workers and railroad men. The boys my mother had taught, hoping she might discover a budding artist in their midst.

Having finished critiquing Edward, Professor Pannell came to stand behind me. He hadn't yet been satisfied with anything I'd done in his class, and judging from his groan as he examined my interpretation of the pond, nothing had changed.

"Miss Bell, is that how you feel looking at the scenery?"

"It is."

"Then, Miss Bell, look harder. Examine Miss Deering's work. Note the colors she's used. Even with the lack of dimension in her rocks, pay attention to the feelings she's expressed. Don't you realize that your determination to stick to your colorless palette restricts you? Why are you handicapping your efforts?"

I looked from my best friend's canvas back to my own. We'd both painted the same scene, but where she saw spring greening the copse to life, I saw a forest out of a Grimms' fairy tale. Woods no little girl would want to enter willingly, a foreboding waterfall from which to flee.

"Miss Bell," Professor Pannell instructed, "look at this scene, this day, this sunshine and spring. Paint how this makes you feel." He then proceeded to inspect the next student's work.

I glanced from my painting to the waterfall, pond, trees, and grass. Back to the painting. Back to the rushing water. Back to the painting. Back to the rushing water. Of course, I could see the colors, but they weren't my focus. They were a distraction from my subject. I used a monochromatic palette because I wanted to capture light, to show how it illuminated the water and shadowed the trees. I wanted to master chiaroscuro. DaVinci, Rembrandt, and Caravaggio all knew that what we see is a result of light falling against it. It's the light that matters. Without it, there would be no subject. But light was so elusive. If I could just capture that simple bit of—

Suddenly, I saw a flash of blue tumbling over the edge of the waterfall. It was clothing. Child-size.

Then a woman's high-pitched voice called out: "Jeffrey!"

"It's a child in the falls!" I cried, as I dropped my brush and my palette and ran. The water was so powerful. A child who fell in would be caught in the current of the rushing cascade. His little body would be thrown against the rocks. Unless someone reached him quickly, he might drown.

I reached the edge of the pond. I didn't know how deep the water was, but that didn't matter. If a child was in danger, if there was a life to save, I had to attempt it.

"Jeffrey, you bad boy. Look at that, your jacket is all wet!"

The voice expressed exasperation, but no panic.

A jacket?

I circled around to see a woman tugging a well-groomed Maltese on a light green leather leash. She approached the edge of the pond and looked down at the errant piece of clothing.

“Jeffrey!” she called. “Come out here and see what you did!”

With that, a little boy, about seven or eight, emerged from the woods. He stood beside her, scuffing his shoe in the dirt and looking sheepishly from the floating jacket to his mother. And then he leaned over and started to reach toward the jacket.

“No, Jeffrey! Don’t. You could fall, and then you’d be all wet, too. Let’s find a stick and drag it in.” Before she moved away, she looked at me. “Thank you,” she said.

I nodded at her and took a deep breath. Although the boy was clearly fine, my heart continued racing as I returned to my easel. I’d seen the jacket and jumped to the conclusion that a child was drowning. My vision was warped, you see. Damaged by what I had endured as a girl. By now, at age twenty-four, I had long viewed the world through one particular lens, taking in what was there and pulling out the color so I could focus on the light and how it fell and created highlights. How shadows created depth. And in the process, I never failed to notice the potential for catastrophe and heartache. I couldn’t

help it any more than Minx, who looked at the world through her own starry eyes—and saw only beauty.

2

Though filled with its own combination of colors and light and a variety of textures, my childhood was modest. It began in Upstate New York. Both of my parents were students. My mother, Faith Garland, studied painting at Ithaca College, and my father, Robert Fairburn, studied architecture at Cornell. To pay for tuition, both worked at night in the same coffee shop, Westoff 's on State Street, which was where they met. They married less than four months later, and she became pregnant within weeks of the ceremony—or had it been a few weeks before?

Tragically, my father never finished school. He was killed in a bicycle accident on a snowy night a month before I was born, when he skidded on a patch of ice and broke his neck in the spill. Mother, nineteen years old, widowed, and pregnant, moved in with her sister, my aunt Grace, who at age twenty-five was an unmarried suffragette and spiritualist.

A few years before, Aunt Grace had taken over her father's job with the Kennard Novelty Company, selling Ouija boards. It was almost unheard of for a woman to be a salesperson, but my aunt was nothing if not a firebrand about women's opportunities. And then, once we moved in, Aunt Grace had the idea to have my mother paint customized boards, which made them even more desirable, and to have her sell them at a premium.

My family's history with the boards went back to my grandfather, Harold Garland, who'd worked in Kennard's factory from 1891 until he passed away. He revered the Ouija boards but not for their rumored psychic powers. It was simply the livelihood they afforded by giving us a healthy business.

Grace and Faith grew up with several incarnations of the "talking boards" and relished tales of others communicating with the dead. They both told me stories of trying to get their boards to work. My mother never succeeded. But eventually, Aunt Grace did, after being schooled by Helen Peters, a women's rights activist and supposed "medium," whose brother-in-law, a patent lawyer, helped bring the boards to the marketplace. Some people thought *Ouija* meant "good luck," but the mysterious word was nothing but a name engraved on a gold locket that Helen had found in an antiques store and thought sounded curious.

As the boards grew in popularity, so did the public's reactions to them. Many spiritualists believed in them and were against their commercialization. They insisted they needed to be used in the right way, or else they could harm the user. Some devout Christians viewed them as tools of the devil, while scientists considered them baseless pseudoscience that shouldn't be taken seriously by anyone.

Aunt Grace wasn't deterred by anyone's opinion. She liked working with the boards. Drawn to helping friends who were in mourning connect to their loved ones, she selectively did readings.

And every bit of extra money came in handy, since, in addition to taking care of me, my mother was trying to finish her art studies at Ithaca College so she could get a teaching job. But when she did, it was at a high school in Hamilton, Ontario.

My aunt didn't want us to leave. And I didn't want to go, either. We were a decidedly eccentric trio, and I had a happy childhood in the Queen Anne house on Eddy Street, with its towers and turret and warren of rooms filled with eclectic furniture and antiques.

The house was right on the electric trolley line that came up State Street before continuing on to the Cornell campus. In the winter, when Beebe Lake was sufficiently frozen, we'd grab our skates and join the crowds. There was sledding, too, and both my mother and my aunt would join in.

I can remember my mother's hair escaping from under her hat as her sled flew down the hill. Like my mother, I had auburn curls and artistic ability. She'd begun teaching me how to paint as soon as I could hold a brush, and she praised every splash and squiggle and promised I had talent whenever my desire outpaced my ability and I grew frustrated.

Also like my mother, I was shy, yet I had romantic ideals and could be stubborn. Like Aunt Grace, I had strange purple-blue, peacock-colored eyes, long limbs, and a love of music and theater.

Like both women, I had a strong work ethic from the start and a willingness to make my own way in the world. I only wish my mother had been

just a bit less anxious to strike out on her own and live away from her older sister.

However, despite protestations from both me and Aunt Grace, Mother felt that she and I needed to find our own way in the world, at least for a while. She would still paint the Ouija boards, and she and Grace could write letters and visit anytime. And after all, it was just half a day's journey.

Oh, the power of that single decision. Had my mother and I not made that journey north and west across the border past raging Niagara Falls, our lives would have been very different.

. . .

I wasn't the only one to experience trouble and trauma while growing up. Minx had upheavals in her life, too. But hers were the result of parents who believed indulgence could make up for lack of attention while they traveled and partied and doubled the wealth they'd inherited. The apartment I shared with her on West Ninth Street in Greenwich Village was just one example of their bounty.

I had arrived in Manhattan a year before, directly from Ithaca, where I had returned to live with Aunt Grace when I was eighteen and, like my mother, study art at Ithaca College. Five years later, when Grace passed away from pneumonia, I discovered she'd borrowed against the house for both her suffragette causes and my education, leaving me with only a small inheritance—

just enough to get me to New York City, rent a room, and pay for three months of classes at the League. Just enough to get me started on a new life with a new name: Jenny Bell, in memory of the nickname my mother had given me because of the bells she heard ringing the Sunday morning I was born.

I attended the Art Students League five mornings a week and worked the rest of the day, and often evenings, at Mrs. Bullard's Tea Shop in Greenwich Village. I'd found a boardinghouse in Hell's Kitchen. The room was drafty and smelled of grease, and the cracked windows leaked cold air. Damp spots stained the ceiling. Most challenging of all, I shared a bathroom in the hallway with six other girls. But none of that really mattered; I was finally in New York City, studying at one of the most prestigious art schools in the country.

I met Minx in a figure-drawing class when we found ourselves sitting next to each other and realized we were the only two women in the class not nervously twittering about drawing a nude male. He wasn't even totally nude, with a cloth covering his privates. Minx drew him so easily that I found myself staring. I was so caught up in her swift strokes and assuredness.

"That's beautiful," I whispered, nodding at her work.

"Thanks," she said, as if she was used to compliments, and leaned over to inspect my sketch.

"And your *idea* is perfect," she whispered back.

"My idea?"

"To leave him unfinished. So clever of you. It's quite a statement when everyone else is trying to cram in every single aspect of him. You've made him into a bit of a hero the way you've done it."

I looked at the drawing I had abandoned, searching for the meaning that Minx saw, but it eluded me.

After class that day, as we were packing up, she invited me for a drink at a speakeasy not far from the League.

"Their sidecars are to die for. And despite the swanky uptown address, they won't give our costumes a second glance." She gestured to our trousers. Working women had started wearing pants during the war, but once that ended and the men came home to reclaim their jobs, many women had gone back to dresses. But pants remained an option, and almost all the female art students wore them.

"And if they do have a problem with Coco Chanel's pants outfits, they can stuff it," Minx said, pointing to her outfit and then batting the air dismissively.

I knew who the French designer was, of course. You couldn't read a fashion magazine without seeing a sketch of something new she'd created or scan the society columns in the newspapers without reading about this socialite or that one wearing one of Chanel's creations. Until that moment, I'd guessed Minx was well-off from the way she spoke, the cut and fabric of her jackets, because her shoes were never worn out. But if she was wearing an actual Chanel outfit, she was more upper-crust than I'd guessed.

We walked north a block and then went east. Dusk in New York can be either romantic or disturbing depending on how you filter the world. I, for one, always peered into the shadows. We passed a row of walk-ups on Fifty-eighth Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. At that time of day, you couldn't clearly see the recesses under the stoops of the massive brownstones that rose up around us. But the man who leaped out from one of them had no trouble seeing us.

Caught by surprise, Minx wasn't ready for him, but I, always on guard, sensed him and saw him pounce. Just as he reached out to grab Minx's purse, I jerked her back and away from him. Before he could try again, I kicked his shin hard. He tripped on the curb and fell to his knees.

"Thief!" I yelled. "Police—thief!"

The scoundrel rose.

"Thief!" I yelled even louder.

From the opposite direction, a voice called out, "You in trouble?"

The crook decided Minx's purse wasn't worth getting caught and took off, running west, his footsteps a fast staccato on the pavement.

We both watched as his retreating form disappeared into the twilight, just as the gentleman who'd called out reached us from the opposite direction.

"Are you two all right?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"We are. Thank you for coming to our rescue," I said.

"You're not hurt? Neither of you?"

Minx rubbed her arm, looked at me, and smiled. “Just a little where my friend here pulled me away.”

“I’d be happy to escort you both to the police station or the hospital,” he offered.

Minx told him he didn’t have to do that, that nothing had been taken and we really were fine, but he insisted on at least walking us to our destination.

Two blocks south, he waited with us at the door of the speakeasy until the proprietor let us in.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” I asked Minx.

“I’m fine,” she said, but I could tell she was shaken.

Inside, we ordered sidecars and took a long sip when they arrived.

The incident had a different impact on each of us. I was angry, while Minx was scared. But I’d been attacked before. Circumstances had forced me to learn how to protect myself.

“Better?” I asked.

“Right as rain, thanks to you. It’s my favorite purse, too. I owe you one.” She pulled the pocketbook into her lap and petted it like a dog.

“As long as he didn’t hurt you,” I said.

“No, he never touched me. I’m still rattled—but nothing this drink isn’t fixing. What about you?”

“He was all muscle. My foot feels like it hit a brick wall.”

Minx looked down under the table at my right foot.

“You did kick him hard, didn’t you? I couldn’t believe you had the nerve.” She leaned back and gave me a long once-over. “You’re just a little thing, too, but you took him on. How’d you get to be such a brave bunny?”

There was so much about us that was different. I was suspicious of everyone from the start. People usually needed to work to earn my trust. But for all her worldliness, Minx was endearingly innocent. She believed her money and her privilege would keep her from harm. Someone had always come to her rescue. No one, not even my father’s ghost, had ever come to mine.

. . .

Following the “purse incident,” as Minx forever after called it, we sat next to each other in class and spent a lot of our free time together. We went to museums or out for meals, and sometimes, if I wasn’t too tired from Mrs. Bullard’s Tea Shop, I went with Minx to a club or revue or speakeasy.

Sometimes when we stayed out late, I slept over at her apartment in Greenwich Village. The location was perfect for Minx. In addition to studying painting and drawing at the League, she also apprenticed with the renowned sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in her Eighth Street studio. Mrs. Whitney was certainly high society—the highest in New York—but to those of us who worked and lived in the Village, we knew her as an artist first, a benefactress second, and a social scion last.

I waited tables in the tea shop every afternoon and took on second shifts to make enough for my art supplies, while Minx went out on the town to parties, jazz clubs, and Broadway musicals.

I harbored no resentment. Minx and I came from separate circles. That our lives had even overlapped in the first place proved that I had some luck after all.

We'd been friends for about six weeks when Minx finally saw where I lived. A few days later, we were sitting in her Greenwich Village living room, drinking her favorite cocktail: champagne poured over one sugar cube. I'd never even tasted champagne before I met her.

"This place is too big for me alone," she said, gesturing to the divans, sleek tables, and fireplace. Everything in copper hues that set off her coloring. Even the walls and ceiling glinted with metal filaments mixed in with the paint. Elaborate rust-colored silk curtains draped the west-facing windows and pooled on the carpeted floor.

Mrs. Deering's designer had furnished number 5B without skimping on any inch of the decor. The bathroom overflowed with piles of fluffy towels and trays of fancy soaps, lotions, and perfumes. The finest-quality pots and pans hung from hooks over the stove in the diminutive kitchen, which was more than adequate for Minx, who never cooked and kept the refrigerator filled with more champagne than food. In the foyer, a lacquered table and chairs for four

accommodated meals. There was even a small guest room with an elaborate window treatment to distract from the air shaft it faced.

"You should move in with me. We would have such fun. And my parents not only approve, they insist you aren't to pay any rent. They hate that I'm living alone so much that they'd probably pay you to move in."

"I can't let them pay my rent, Minx."

"Yes, you can. They have more money than Croesus. And your job is arduous. Just think, you could leave Mrs. Bullard's."

"But my job isn't that bad. Mrs. Bullard loves her artists, whether they frequent the shop or work there. When there aren't any customers, she is happy to have me sit in the corner and draw. And the people who come in make it almost an adventure. Edna St. Vincent Millay was there just last week."

"Your hours are too long. If you didn't have to work as much, you could come out with us at night. You're missing so much fun, Jenny. So many jazz clubs. Have you been in a single speakeasy raid?" Her vibrant laughter sounded like the coppery glitter of her dwelling.

When I was a little girl, my mother and I played a game in which we would assign colors to sounds. A neighbor's voice, a robin's chirp, a duck's quack, a dog's bark, the sound of rain, thunder, chimes, a child's cry, wood being chopped, glass breaking—each one was a color. By rote, I still designated colors to sounds that I found interesting or appealing, curious or disturbing. Sometimes

it brought back memories of my mother. Good memories of the times before the trouble started.

Minx continued to tempt me. “And if you came out with me to more parties and plays, who knows who you might meet? Not just starving artists who can’t even afford to buy you a drink. But men who have well-paying jobs and can buy you bracelets and hats and bring you orchids and take you to Broadway plays in chauffeured cars.”

“You do all that *except* give me orchids and bracelets,” I said. “And I can live without those.”

“I’m talking about romance, Jenny. Meeting men who will seduce you.” I shook my head while running my fingers up and down the rust-colored velvet arm of the chaise, feeling the soft nap against my skin.

“I can’t accept charity,” I said.

“It’s not charity. You’d be keeping me company. My parents would be so thankful someone is watching out for me. They’d have my old nanny move in if I’d let them.”

But to me it *was* charity. And I didn’t want to be in that position again. When my mother was married to the Reverend, we partially lived off the largesse of his congregation. I saw what it did to her pride and honor. I saw how people—even when they willingly gave—came to resent you and how in the end it made it even easier for them to turn on you.

“You are too stubborn, Jenny,” Minx went on, having become quite expert at reading my silences. “How about this? The second bedroom is the size of a postage stamp. You can pay a postage-stamp fraction of the rent. The same amount you are paying for the room in the boardinghouse.”

And so I moved in. But I continued working at Mrs. Bullard’s, and in the next eight months, Minx became even more of an expert at reading my expressions and moods.

. . .

That spring afternoon, as I made my way back to my easel at the edge of the pond in Central Park, Minx ran up beside me and watched as the little boy’s mother retrieved his jacket and wrung it out.

“Jenny, what’s wrong?” Minx’s forehead furrowed, worry clouding her green eyes.

“I’m fine,” I said.

She put her arm around my shoulders. “No, you aren’t. You are as white as a sheet. Maybe you should sit down.”

“No, I’m all right. I just thought . . .” I started to explain.

“I know, you blurted it out. You thought a child was drowning. And you were going to jump into the pond and save him, weren’t you?”

“Well, someone had to do something.”

"You really are something else, aren't you?"

I was, but not the way she meant it. I shrugged and was about to answer when Edward Wren came over.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"Of course," I lied.

"The way you ran out there, it looked like you believed someone was drowning." He frowned, clearly worried.

I shivered again. "Well, for a second, I did."

"Drowning." He shook his head. "That must be a terrible way to die. Your lungs filling with water . . . not being able to breathe . . ."

"Edward, don't be so morbid! Jenny's just had a scare. Don't make it worse."

"Of course. I'm sorry," he said to me. His voice wasn't a deep rich color but a watered-down ash, and something about its tenor gave me pause. He was about to say something else when Professor Pannell came over and told us to return to our paintings.

Edward walked back to his easel, and Minx and I headed to ours.

"One day," Minx said, "you're going to tell me what happened in your past that caused you to be so nervous all the time."

"I'm not nervous, Minx."

"You are not seeing yourself accurately. I am. What just happened spooked you."

I tried to make my voice light. My mother once told me I had a silver voice that tarnished when I wasn't giving her the whole truth.

"I grew up near waterfalls. I know how dangerous they can be." But despite my efforts to sound nonchalant, Minx's face told me that I had inadvertently responded more mysteriously than I had intended.

New York was alive, each new day bringing with it a colorful explosion of buds bursting on the trees and tulips blooming in the tiny sidewalk gardens I passed on my way to the League. Minx considered two miles too far to walk in the morning when there were trains and plentiful taxis, but I liked to watch as New York woke itself up.

A few days after our Central Park excursion, I was reaching Fifty-seventh Street and Fifth Avenue when the wind picked up and blew through the canyon created by the buildings around me. Always sensitive to the cold, I shivered as I crossed the street and hurried on. As I approached 40 West Fifty-seventh Street, I noticed that a commotion was occurring in front of it. I passed that building at least five times a week on my way to the League and knew that the Institute for Psychic Research was housed there.

Minx's mother donated to the institute, and often, when I dined with the Deerings, she talked about its newest findings. Once she even insisted that Minx and I accompany her to be tested. A scholar at the institute believed there was a connection between artistic talent and one's connections to other psychic planes. Little did Mrs. Deering know that I didn't need a test to tell me I had a link to the spiritual realm. Or at least a doorway to it through my Aunt Grace.

Outside the institute was a man dressed all in brown who stood talking to a group of reporters, each of them scribbling down every word he said. I managed

to maneuver myself to the edge of the crowd to get a better look. It wasn't often I stumbled onto news in the making.

"I was able to read the note that Marjorie had written," the speaker declared with a thick accent. German, I thought, though I wasn't a very good judge. He was thin and balding, with a mustache.

I pulled out a sketch pad and pencil from my satchel and quickly—so as not to lose his precise expression—committed my impression of him to paper.

"Yes, the police have given me permission to tell you my findings. I believe that the person who signed the note, Marjorie, was not, in fact, a woman at all but a man."

A gasp came from someone behind me.

"How do you know it was a man?" a reporter shouted.

Cameras clicked, flashbulbs exploded. Meanwhile, I kept sketching. The drawings weren't bad, but I didn't feel I was truly capturing what I wanted on the page.

"Yes, Marjorie was certainly a man masquerading as a woman—and an inebriated man, at that. Of this I am sure." The man said this with a theatrical manner that I tried to catch in my sketch.

"May I see?" A man's voice came from behind me. In its timbre, I saw a flash of forest green. The color of holly in the summer when its leaves are at their glossy best.

He looked to be about my age, not striking except for the excitement in his warm brown eyes as he glanced from me back to my drawing.

And then he tipped my pad toward himself.

“Hey,” I said, pulling the pad back.

“No, no, don’t. Let me look. These are so good. You’ve captured so much more of him in one drawing than I can with this,” the man said, pointing to the camera slung around his neck.

Before I could stop him again, he took the sketch pad from my hand and was riffling through my series of drawings.

“You have absolutely no right—” I tried to grab the sketch pad back, but he held tight.

“Please say you’ll come to the office with me. I want to show these to my boss. I’m sure he’d want to buy at least one from you.”

“The office? Your boss?”

“I work at the *New York Herald Tribune*.”

My heartbeat quickened. “No, no,” I said. “I have to go. I have class. And you are being amazingly rude!” I held out my hand for the sketch pad. He returned it with a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry,” he said.

I slipped the pad into my satchel and prepared to go.

“But I’m certain the paper would—”

I shook my head. “I’m really late and not at all interested.” I walked away, not waiting to hear the rest of what he had to say.

My last run-in with newspapers and reporters had been almost nine years earlier. Enough time to give me perspective but not enough to take away the sting or to erase the memories. No matter how kind this man's eyes looked, he was obviously a reporter, and I knew from experience that reporters could not be trusted. The press was out for one thing only: the story that would give them a headline to sell copies.

I hurried westward, half walking, half running, crossing Sixth and then Seventh Avenue, and finally coming to a stop at number 215 West Fifty-seventh Street. I took the steps two at a time, pulled open the door, and took a deep breath.

I was safe in the hallowed halls of the art school that had been training men and women for the last fifty years. The combined scent of oil paints, turpentine, primer, clay, wood chips, marble dust, and cigarettes was an aroma like no other. It could not be reproduced in even the finest perfumery. I walked up two flights to the classroom, laid out my supplies, and banished all thoughts of the scene on the street and the rude reporter. Instead, I threw myself into trying to capture the pose of the current female model on the dais.

. . .

Minx and I took different classes on Wednesdays, and then I worked a shift at Mrs. Bullard's, so I didn't see her until I got back to our apartment at

seven thirty that evening.

As I twisted the key in the door, I heard voices, which wasn't at all unusual. Minx often had friends over. It amazed me she could be so industrious when it came to her work and still have such a busy social life. If it weren't for her, I'd have spent every one of my nights off at home with the radio and a book and never met anyone. But she loved having people around. She even preferred painting and sculpting in studios with other artists around. She said she wilted if she was alone too much.

I put my satchel and keys on the table in the foyer and walked inside.

"Well, hullo, I didn't think you were ever going to come home," Minx called out as I stepped into the living room.

She stood at the far end, by the windows, in the area we'd made our workspaces. Hers was to the left, where she painted and sculpted small pieces—she did her larger work at Mrs. Whitney's—and mine was to the right, where I drew and painted. The two spaces were a study in contrasts. Hers was cluttered and bright, with her brazenly colored paintings and dozens of clay figures all reaching, stretching, dancing, jumping—none of them in repose. Mine, meanwhile, was a bunch of monochromatic blacks, whites, and grays. My somber pencil studies of empty tree branches, rocks, leaves, and acorns, along with my partial figure studies focusing on one hand, one foot, or half a face, were all careful examinations of how light revealed its various dimensions.

There were paintings, too, all of them depicting the white marble crypt that I discovered in Hamilton's Weber Falls Cemetery when I was a girl. I continued to paint it over and over again, trying so hard to capture the elusive light filtering in through the stained glass, falling on the stone bench and on the floor. Holy light falling on my hands. In my mind, the light was cobalt and ruby and amethyst, but my canvas was still monochromatic. I hadn't tried to paint the window and its extravagance of color since I was sixteen. I wasn't ready to do so. Not yet.

"I'm just showing Ben our studio," Minx said, as she gestured to a man who was mostly hidden behind her easel.

"Ben Montgomery," he said, extending his hand as he stepped forward and I saw his face.

It was the rude reporter from in front of the Institute for Psychic Research. "How did you find me?" I asked, as I reluctantly took his hand. "Well, I did a little sleuthing. I saw your name on the sketch pad, so I did some research in the morgue—"

I blanched at the word. He saw it, hesitated, and then proceeded, clarifying what he meant.

"In the morgue at the newspaper, I mean, and I found your name mentioned in a group show at Mrs. Whitney's gallery. Minx and I are old friends, and I know she works with Mrs. Whitney, so I gave her a ring and asked about

you. I never dreamed you two would be sharing a flat. That was just damn good luck, don't you think?"

"N-no," I stammered. Not good luck. Not for me.

"Well, I think it was. I couldn't stop thinking how much life your drawings would bring to my story. I really do want to show them to my editor. I'm certain he'd buy them." Ben smiled encouragingly, and the skin around his eyes crinkled.

"Isn't it exciting, Jenny?" Minx asked, without letting me get a word in edgewise as she took up the narration. "When Ben told me about your sketches, I insisted he come down and meet you properly and talk to you. Jenny, if the *Herald Tribune* wants to buy your drawings, you have to sell them. The money is amazing—five dollars per—that's more than you make in a week waiting tables at Mrs. Bullard's. You could save enough for Paris in just a couple of months."

Minx wasn't wrong, I had to admit. Studying at the League had been my dream since I was thirteen years old and my mother told me about it. And I'd achieved it. Now I was working toward my next goal: studying in Paris with the masters. Once Minx had discovered we shared the same dream, she'd started planning our year abroad. She wanted to leave sooner rather than later and had offered to pay my way. But just like the rent, I wouldn't accept charity. I was putting something away every week, but my savings were growing slowly. Living in the city was expensive; I didn't make a lot at Mrs. Bullard's, and art supplies cost a fortune.

Minx stopped to pour me a glass of the ever-present champagne. I sank into a chair and took a long sip of the delicate liquid, trying to concentrate on the bubbles bursting on my tongue instead of my sudden attack of nerves.

There is no reason to be nervous, I told myself, as I took a second sip and tried to control my breathing, the way Aunt Grace had taught me when I felt panicky. *Calm, breathe in, calm, breathe out, calm, breathe in.*

As Minx carried on with her chatter, I took another sip of champagne. But I *was* nervous. I didn't want Ben or anyone searching for information about me. And despite my every effort, I recalled the third major event of my childhood, the one that would change my life most profoundly—the first being my father's death, the second our move away from Aunt Grace and Ithaca, and the third my mother's remarriage.

. . .

Just before I turned fourteen, in what must have been my mother's weakest moment, she married the Reverend William Haddon, who was associated with St. Theresa's, the school where she taught.

At first, it was easy to see how he seduced her. He was a well-educated man of forty-four, tall and broad-shouldered, with wavy light brown hair and intense brown-black eyes. His scarlet voice could cajole and calm when he sat and talked about a spiritual crisis, or it could rouse you and make you rejoice when he

was at his pulpit. Mother was still so young then, only thirty-two, and she'd been on her own for twelve years. I could see how flattered she was to receive attention from such a highly esteemed man and how much she enjoyed being courted.

He made both of us feel special and wanted, not just bringing my mother flowers or candy when he came to take her out but always having a nosegay or a book for me as well. Mother marveled at how well loved he was by his flock of congregants. They called him the "paragon of soulfulness."

But once we moved out of our sweet cottage and into the damp, ancient parsonage, things began to change. With her salary, the Reverend's stipend, and the free housing, Mother assumed there would be more money, not less. That life would become easier. But it didn't. I didn't discover it for years, but the Reverend had been embezzling church funds to buy rare books for a collection he kept locked in the library and expensive wines and brandies that he enjoyed far too much.

Mother and I had never had a man in our lives, nor had we lived with one, and it was quite a change. The Reverend was a stickler for orderliness and punctuality. He wanted food at the same time every morning and evening. My mother and I, however, had never adhered to schedules. Not when we lived with Aunt Grace or when we lived on our own. Mother and Aunt Grace were too creative. Didn't a bunch of flowers look better if a few petals fell on the table? A book left open was more inviting than one with closed covers. And we all loved to

talk and play piano and chatter away. But the Reverend needed long hours of quiet to work on his sermons in the evenings, which meant Mother and I often had to tiptoe around.

Every day, the free and colorful life that Mother and I had experienced together before grew more distant. Mother seemed a bit in shock in those early days. And then the shock grew to horror as the Reverend fell back into his old ways. Mother had told me he believed she'd be the reason he would stop drinking to excess. He'd put his faith in her. But my mother wasn't a magician. She didn't know how to quiet his demons and stop him from whatever drove him to the bottle night after night. He blamed her for his debauchery and made her suffer for her failure. And I, who had always done everything with my mother, also suffered.

. . .

In the Ninth Street apartment, the past was far away. I knew that. I'd put years and miles and a new name between me and that other Jenny. Ben Montgomery had no idea I was anyone other than just another artist trying to make it. I needn't give him any reason to wonder about me. I needed to play this game and act like anyone else would when offered five whole dollars for a mediocre sketch done in as many minutes.

I forced a smile to my own lips and swallowed my trepidation along with the pale golden bubbles. "You caught me by surprise on the street. I'm not used to strangers grabbing my sketchbook."

"I'm sorry about that. Truly I am. But I was so excited to see the life in your drawings. Please say yes."

I shook my head. "I need some time to think about it."

Minx and Ben both looked surprised.

"Not too much time, please. I want one of the drawings to run with my story."

"What story are you talking about? Who was that man?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"The man you were sketching is Rafael Scherman, a Polish psychic and handwriting expert. His claim—that a man masqueraded as a woman—is a brand-new clue in the stalled Ewell case. If Scherman is right, this could very well be the clue needed to solve a murder mystery that has eluded detectives for four years. That's my beat. Murder, high crimes, and serious misdemeanors."

And with that, I looked down into my glass, studied the long strings of bubbles in it, and took another very deep sip.