

PROLOGUE

An Affair with Beauty

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I F I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, it was Sigmund Freud, the great German psychoanalyst, who once said that all artists want in life are three things: fame, money, and beautiful lovers.

It was during the autumn of 1923 that I first heard this aphorism.

As the sun slowly descended behind the city's jagged skyline of concrete and stone, I found myself milling about a crowded art gallery in midtown Manhattan. The main exhibition space swarmed with pearl necklaces and gold pocket-watch chains. For the exhibiting artist, this was absolute splendor; the throng of prospective wealthy patrons meant success—a newfound clientele, new acquaintances, and, of course, old friends. For me, the whole affair became a fantasy of elegance spun of shimmering silk, painted chiffon, and violet georgette.

As I left the main gallery, my attention was drawn to the exotic headdresses adorning two young women. Sheathed in crimson red and rust, they desperately wanted to appear like modern-day Egyptian princesses, perhaps distant cousins from the same royal bloodline as Tutankhamun, the young pharaoh whose tomb was discovered the previous year. But somehow, with their fair complexions, they looked more like showgirls from Grauman's Egyptian Theater in Hollywood. Close by, two tall enchantresses in flowing gowns of iridescent blue and royal purple hastily retreated from the crowd, only to fall victim to

the idle plans of a pair of even taller gentlemen. Arms linked, they were off.

In the distance, beyond the din of the celebration, a white ostrich fan darted in and out of the room's darker recesses. Carried by unseen hands, it oscillated to and fro, here and there, from one corner of the room to the next, reminding me of gossamer floating over a sunny meadow I once knew.

Willowy gowns, some lavishly dripping with beads or metallic threads, swirled about that evening. The varied styles, patterns, and hem lengths all seemed lost in an ever-shifting sea of black dinner jackets. Dominating the scene then were high wing collars with a glistening gold button in front and a simple, narrow bow of black satin below. White piqué shirts—as stiff as sign board—and tight black waistcoats transformed even the most modest gentleman into a debonair man of mystery like that of a movie star.

As the people passed, I kept thinking, *There goes Rudolph Valentino! Or, Here comes Douglas Fairbanks!*

Wait! Is that Mary Pickford?

Who is that? Harry Houdini? Oh, he knows Howard and me.

They all knew us . . . in fact, they were our close friends.

It was all so difficult to avoid illusion then, when the entire room and its occupants glittered. Beauty reigned everywhere. Or so it seemed. This was the sublime sophistication of American prosperity during the early days of the Coolidge administration. Everything was magical then. The music seemed louder, the buildings seemed taller, and the cars seemed faster than I had ever known. The men and women seemed more daring. After what they had been through, no burden seemed too great. Invincibility filled the air. Diamond dust fell at their feet.

And that is how it was on that October night when I met Emil Fuchs.

Mr. Fuchs was an astute Austrian painter whom Queen Victoria and King Edward VII commissioned to paint the English royal family years earlier. Lean and somewhat gaunt, he had a distinctive, aristocratic accent and a well-trimmed white beard. Knowing

who I was and to whom I was married, he edged up beside me in his white tie and tails and furtively uttered those insightful words of Dr. Freud: *"Fame, money, and beautiful lover-r-rs; that is all ar-r-rtists want in life."*

My sudden unrestrained giggling could have stopped all conversation midafternoon in any tearoom in this metropolis but not there, not in that gallery.

Yes, it is true. I have encountered scores of artists. The vast majority certainly fell into this category of unbridled cravings. But I wonder now. If anyone overheard Mr. Fuchs or my reaction, perhaps they thought ill of us. Then again, perhaps they didn't suspect anything at all.

In those days, the profession of an artist was considered a distinguished line of work. And for an artist, the ingredients of fame, money, and beautiful lovers are a certain recipe for tragedy. The exception to this rule of thumb was a painter who possessed an extraordinary gift. With his brush, he could seize beauty and immortalize youth. His observations went well beyond the physical being; the inner beauty he would see. Some say he could capture a person's soul.

This painter was my husband, Howard Chandler Christy.

In Howard's life, he accomplished those three objectives and much more, but along the way, he paid a significant price. Was it all worth it? I will leave that for you to answer.

For me, that is a particularly difficult question, now that over seventeen years have passed since the day he departed this life. What I do know as a certainty is this: Howard turned out far better than anyone could have envisioned. More important, he unearthed something more precious than those ideals. His discovery transformed his life forever. To him, it was all worth it. And for good reason.

Something was uniquely different about Howard. As he became older, he didn't seem to feel the ill effects that old age generally casts upon most. For some unexplained reason, he remained strong to the end.

His memory never faltered.

His eyes never failed.

He still worked constantly, possessing a vitality equal to that of his youth.

Everyone was in awe of him, especially those forever-youthful models of his, the ones with perfect skin and lithe, ivory bodies. They simply adored him.

All of them.



MY JOURNEY WITH HOWARD began many years before that lavish art exhibition.

Now that I am in the winter of my own life, I, on occasion, reflect upon those early days with a bit of nostalgia. It was precisely that way when, on this late September afternoon, I decided to stroll through Central Park, a world-famous pastoral oasis just across the street from where I live. To me, it was a foreign land, but I longed to experience what he had seen those many years earlier.

From the park's dimly lit, tree-framed corridors, I see young couples emerge. Refreshed yet weary, they forge home hand in hand, amid the alluring glow of headlights streaming up and down the busy avenue. I press ahead and see the panorama that I had once envisioned but never took the time to discover.

Oh, yes! It's everything that he said it was.

It's so beautiful.

The sun tumbles through the distant trees. Its last rays guide my path.

The birds that once filled the park's bright pathways prepare to take flight for an evening's slumber.

Within this rare hour of the day, when the soft hues of deep violet, indigo, and amber intersect the sky, I explore the woods and begin to contemplate my life, much like Howard did those many years earlier when he walked the same tree-lined meadows.

Striding the pavement at a rhythmic pace, as he once did, I take notice again of those fleeting years and the rapidity with which they deserted me. When I do, I feel more than a touch of old age and fading beauty. Perhaps that is because when I view my own life, I look not at myself but at the many exceptional individuals, now gone, who have enriched it, who have taught me and comforted me. In doing so, I know that no one impressed me more than he did. And so, when I think of Howard now, my heart returns to his last few hours on this earth. And those melancholy emotions return to haunt me again. With them, a tinge of regret unavoidably follows.