

**THE
SEVEN
HUSBANDS
OF
EVELYN
HUGO**

ALSO BY TAYLOR JENKINS REID

Carrie Soto Is Back

Malibu Rising

Daisy Jones & The Six

One True Loves

Maybe in Another Life

After I Do

Forever, Interrupted

**THE
SEVEN
HUSBANDS
OF
EVELYN
HUGO**

A NOVEL

**TAYLOR
JENKINS REID**

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For Lilah
Smash the patriarchy, sweetheart

Evelyn Hugo to Auction Off Gowns

BY PRIYA AMRIT

MARCH 2, 2017

Film legend and '60s It Girl Evelyn Hugo has just announced that she will auction off 12 of her most memorable gowns through Christie's to raise money for breast cancer research.

At the age of 79, Hugo has long been an icon of glamour and elegance. She is known for a personal style both sensual and restrained, and many of Hugo's most famous looks are considered touchstones of the fashion and Hollywood archives.

Those looking to own a piece of Hugo history will be intrigued not only by the gowns themselves but also by the context in which they were worn. Included in the sale will be the emerald-green Miranda La Conda that Hugo wore to the 1959 Academy Awards, the violet soufflé and organdy scoop-neck she donned at the premiere of *Anna Karenina* in 1962, and the navy-blue silk Michael Maddax that she was wearing in 1982 when she won her Oscar for *All for Us*.

Hugo has weathered her share of Hollywood scandals, not the least of which being her seven marriages, including her decades-long relationship with film producer Harry Cameron. The two Hollywood insiders shared a daughter, Connor Cameron, who is no doubt the influence for the auction. Ms. Cameron passed away last year from breast cancer soon after turning 41.

Born Evelyn Elena Herrera in 1938, the daughter of

Cuban immigrants, Hugo grew up in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City. By 1955, she had made her way to Hollywood, gone blond, and been rechristened Evelyn Hugo. Almost overnight, Hugo became a member of the Hollywood elite. She remained in the spotlight for more than three decades before retiring in the late '80s and marrying financier Robert Jamison, older brother of three-time Oscar-winning actress Celia St. James. Now widowed from her seventh husband, Hugo resides in Manhattan.

Preternaturally beautiful and a paragon of glamour and daring sexuality, Hugo has long been a source of fascination for moviegoers the world over. This auction is expected to raise upward of \$2 million.

1

CAN YOU COME INTO MY office?”

I look around at the desks beside me and then back at Frankie, trying to confirm to whom, exactly, she’s talking. I point to myself. “Do you mean me?”

Frankie has very little patience. “Yes, Monique, you. That’s why I said, ‘Monique, can you come into my office?’”

“Sorry, I just heard the last part.”

Frankie turns. I grab my notepad and follow her.

There is something very striking about Frankie. I’m not sure that you’d say she was conventionally attractive—her features are severe, her eyes very wide apart—but she is nevertheless someone you can’t help but look at and admire. With her thin, six-foot-tall frame, her short-cropped Afro, and her affinity for bright colors and big jewelry, when Frankie walks into a room, everyone takes notice.

She was part of the reason I took this job. I have looked up to her since I was in journalism school, reading her pieces in the very pages of the magazine she now runs and I now work for. And if I’m being honest, there is something very inspiring about having a black woman running things. As a biracial woman myself—with a Black father and a white mother—Frankie makes me feel more sure that I can one day run things, too.

“Take a seat,” Frankie says as she sits down and gestures toward an orange chair on the opposite side of her Lucite desk.

I calmly sit and cross my legs. I let Frankie talk first.

“So, puzzling turn of events,” she says, looking at her computer. “Evelyn Hugo’s people are inquiring about a feature. An exclusive interview.”

My gut instinct is to say *Holy shit* but also *Why are you telling me this?* “About what in particular?” I ask.

“My guess is it’s related to the gown auction she’s doing,” Frankie says. “My understanding is that it’s very important to her to raise as much money for the American Breast Cancer Foundation as possible.”

“But they won’t confirm that?”

Frankie shakes her head. “All they will confirm is that Evelyn has something to say.”

Evelyn Hugo is one of the biggest movie stars of all time. She doesn’t even have to *have* something to say for people to listen.

“This could be a big cover for us, right? I mean, she’s a living legend. Wasn’t she married eight times or something?”

“Seven,” Frankie says. “And yes. This has huge potential. Which is why I hope you’ll bear with me through the next part of this.”

“What do you mean?”

Frankie takes a big breath and gets a look on her face that makes me think I’m about to get fired. But then she says, “Evelyn specifically requested you.”

“Me?” This is the second time in the span of five minutes that I have been shocked that someone was interested in speaking with me. I need to work on my confidence. Suffice it to say, it’s taken a beating recently. Although why pretend it was ever really soaring?

“To be honest, that was my reaction, too,” Frankie says.

Now *I’ll* be honest, I’m a little offended. Although, obviously, I can see where she’s coming from. I’ve been at *Vivant* for less than a year, mostly doing puff pieces. Before that, I was blogging for the *Discourse*, a current events and culture site that calls itself a newsmagazine but is, effectively, a blog with punchy headlines. I wrote mainly for the Modern Life section, covering trending topics and opinion pieces.

After years of freelancing, the *Discourse* gig was a lifesaver. But when

Vivant offered me a job, I couldn't help myself. I jumped at the chance to join an institution, to work among legends.

On my first day of work, I walked past walls decorated with iconic, culture-shifting covers—the one of women's activist Debbie Palmer, naked and carefully posed, standing on top of a skyscraper overlooking Manhattan in 1984; the one of artist Robert Turner in the act of painting a canvas while the text declared that he had AIDS, back in 1991. It felt surreal to be a part of the *Vivant* world. I have always wanted to see my name on its glossy pages.

But unfortunately, for the past twelve issues, I've done nothing but ask old-guard questions of people with old money, while my colleagues back at the *Discourse* are attempting to change the world while going viral. So, simply put, I'm not exactly impressed with myself.

"Look, it's not that we don't love you, we do," Frankie says. "We think you're destined for big things at *Vivant*, but I was hoping to put one of our more experienced, top hitters on this. And so I want to be up front with you when I say that we did not submit you as an idea to Evelyn's team. We sent five big names, and they came back with this."

Frankie turns her computer screen toward me and shows me an e-mail from someone named Thomas Welch, who I can only assume is Evelyn Hugo's publicist.

From: Thomas Welch
To: Troupe, Frankie
Cc: Stamey, Jason; Powers, Ryan

It's Monique Grant or Evelyn's out.

I look back up at Frankie, stunned. And to be honest, a little bit star-struck that Evelyn Hugo wants anything to do with me.

"Do you *know* Evelyn Hugo? Is that what's going on here?" Frankie asks me as she turns the computer back toward her side of the desk.

"No," I say, surprised even to be asked the question. "I've seen a few of her movies, but she's a little before my time."

“You have no personal connection to her?”

I shake my head. “Definitely not.”

“Aren’t you from Los Angeles?”

“Yeah, but the only way I’d have any connection to Evelyn Hugo, I suppose, is if my dad worked on one of her films back in the day. He was a still photographer for movie sets. I can ask my mom.”

“Great. Thank you.” Frankie looks at me expectantly.

“Did you want me to ask now?”

“Could you?”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and text my mother: *Did Dad ever work on any Evelyn Hugo movies?*

I see three dots start to appear, and I look up, only to find that Frankie is trying to get a glimpse of my phone. She seems to recognize the invasion and leans back.

My phone dings.

My mother texts: *Maybe? There were so many it’s hard to keep track. Why?*

Long story, I reply, but I’m trying to figure out if I have any connection to Evelyn Hugo. Think Dad would have known her?

Mom answers: *Ha! No. Your father never hung out with anybody famous on set. No matter how hard I tried to get him to make us some celebrity friends.*

I laugh. “It looks like no. No connection to Evelyn Hugo.”

Frankie nods. “OK, well, then, the other theory is that her people chose someone with less clout so that they could try to control you and, thus, the narrative.”

I feel my phone vibrate again. *That reminds me that I wanted to send you a box of your dad’s old work. Some gorgeous stuff. I love having it here, but I think you’d love it more. I’ll send it this week.*

“You think they’re preying on the weak,” I say to Frankie.

Frankie smiles softly. “Sort of.”

“So Evelyn’s people look up the masthead, find my name as a lower-level writer, and think they can bully me around. That’s the idea?”

“That’s what I fear.”

“And you’re telling me this because . . .”

Frankie considers her words. “Because I don’t think you can be bullied around. I think they are underestimating you. And I want this cover. I want it to make headlines.”

“What are you saying?” I ask, shifting slightly in my chair.

Frankie claps her hands in front of her and rests them on the desk, leaning toward me. “I’m asking you if you have the guts to go toe-to-toe with Evelyn Hugo.”

Of all the things I thought someone was going to ask me today, this would probably be somewhere around number nine million. Do I have the guts to go toe-to-toe with Evelyn Hugo? I have no idea.

“Yes,” I say finally.

“That’s all? Just yes?”

I want this opportunity. I want to write this story. I’m sick of being the lowest one on the totem pole. And I need a win, goddammit. “Fuck yes?”

Frankie nods, considering. “Better, but I’m still not convinced.”

I’m thirty-five years old. I’ve been a writer for more than a decade. I want a book deal one day. I want to pick my stories. I want to eventually be the name people scramble to get when someone like Evelyn Hugo calls. And I’m being underused here at *Vivant*. If I’m going to get where I want to go, something has to let up. Someone has to get out of my way. And it needs to happen quickly, because this goddamn career is all I have anymore. If I want things to change, I have to change how I do things. And probably drastically.

“Evelyn wants me,” I say. “You want Evelyn. It doesn’t sound like I need to convince you, Frankie. It sounds like you need to convince *me*.”

Frankie is dead quiet, staring right at me over her steepled fingers. I was aiming for formidable. I might have overshot.

I feel the same way I did when I tried weight training and started with the forty-pound weights. Too much too soon makes it obvious you don’t know what you’re doing.

It takes everything I have not to take it back, not to apologize profusely. My mother raised me to be polite, to be demure. I have long oper-

ated under the idea that civility is subservience. But it hasn't gotten me very far, that type of kindness. The world respects people who think they should be running it. I've never understood that, but I'm done fighting it. I'm here to be Frankie one day, maybe bigger than Frankie. To do big, important work that I am proud of. To leave a mark. And I'm nowhere near doing that yet.

The silence is so long that I think I might crack, the tension building with every second that goes by. But Frankie cracks first.

"OK," she says, and puts out her hand as she stands up.

Shock and searing pride run through me as I extend my own. I make sure my handshake is strong; Frankie's is a vise.

"Ace this, Monique. For us and for yourself, please."

"I will."

We break away from each other as I walk toward her door. "She might have read your physician-assisted suicide piece for the *Discourse*," Frankie says just before I leave the room.

"What?"

"It was stunning. Maybe that's why she wants you. It's how we found you. It's a great story. Not just because of the hits it got but because of you, because it's beautiful work."

It was one of the first truly meaningful stories I wrote of my own volition. I pitched it after I was assigned a piece on the rise in popularity of microgreens, especially on the Brooklyn restaurant scene. I had gone to the Park Slope market to interview a local farmer, but when I confessed that I didn't get the appeal of mustard greens, he told me that I sounded like his sister. She had been highly carnivorous until the past year, when she switched to a vegan, all-organic diet as she battled brain cancer.

As we spoke more, he told me about a physician-assisted suicide support group he and his sister had joined, for those at the end of their lives and their loved ones. So many in the group were fighting for the right to die with dignity. Healthy eating wasn't going to save his sister's life, and neither of them wanted her to suffer any longer than she had to.

I knew then that I wanted, very deeply, to give a voice to the people of that support group.

I went back to the *Discourse* office and pitched the story. I thought I'd be turned down, given my recent slate of articles about hipster trends and celebrity think pieces. But to my surprise, I was greeted with a green light.

I worked tirelessly on it, attending meetings in church basements, interviewing the members, writing and rewriting, until I felt confident that the piece represented the full complexity—both the mercy and the moral code—of helping to end the lives of suffering people.

It is the story I am proudest of. I have, more than once, gone home from a day's work here and read that piece again, reminding myself of what I'm capable of, reminding myself of the satisfaction I take in sharing the truth, no matter how difficult it may be to swallow.

"Thank you," I tell Frankie now.

"I'm just saying that you're talented. It might be that."

"It's probably not, though."

"No," she says. "It's probably not. But write this story well, whatever it is, and then next time it will be."

Evelyn Hugo's Coming Clean

BY JULIA SANTOS

MARCH 4, 2017

Word on the street is siren/LIVING LEGEND/world's most beautiful blonde Evelyn Hugo is auctioning off gowns *and* agreeing to an interview, which she has not done in multiple decades.

PLEASE tell me she is finally ready to talk about all those damn husbands. (I can understand four, maybe even five, six if you are really pushing it, but seven? Seven husbands? Not to mention the fact that we all know she was having an affair with Congressman Jack Easton in the early '80s. Girl. Got. A. Round.)

If she won't come clean about the husbands, let's pray she at least goes on the record about how she got those eyebrows. I mean, SHARE THE WEALTH, EVELYN.

When you see pictures of E back in the day with her brassy blond hair, those dark, straight-as-an-arrow eyebrows, that deep-tanned skin, and those golden-brown eyes, you have no choice but to stop what you are doing and stare right at her.

And don't even get me started on that body.

No ass, no hips—just huge boobs on a slim frame.

I have basically been working my entire adult life for a body like that. (Note: Am very far away. Might be the spaghetti bucatini I've been eating for lunch every day this week.)

Here is the only part that has me heated: Evelyn could

have chosen anyone for this. (Ahem, me?) But instead she chose some newbie at *Vivant*? She could have had anyone. (Ahem, me?) Why this Monique Grant chick (and not me)? Ugh, fine. I'm just bitter it's not me. I should really get a job at *Vivant*. They get all the good stuff.

COMMENTS:

Hihello565 says: Even people at *Vivant* don't want to work at *Vivant* anymore.

Corporate overlords producing censored advertiser courting bullshit.

Pppppppppps reply to Hihello565: Yeah, OK. Something tells me if the most well-respected, sophisticated magazine in the country offered you a job, you'd take it.

EChristine999 says: Didn't Evelyn's daughter die of cancer recently? I feel like I read something recently about that. So heartbreaking. BTW, that picture of Evelyn at Harry Cameron's grave? Basically ruined me for months. Beautiful family. So sad that she lost them.

MrsJeanineGrambs says: I do not care about Evelyn Hugo AT ALL. STOP WRITING ABOUT THESE PEOPLE. Her marriages, affairs, and most of her movies just go to prove one thing: Slut. *Three A.M.* was a disgrace to women. Focus your attention on people that deserve it.

SexyLexi89 says: Evelyn Hugo is maybe the most beautiful woman of all time. That shot in *Boute-en-Train* where she's coming out of the water naked and the camera cuts to black right before you see her nipples? So good.

PennyDriverKLM says: All hail Evelyn Hugo for making blond hair and dark eyebrows THE LOOK. Evelyn, I salute you.

YuppiePigs3 says: Too skinny! Not for me.

EvelynHugolsASaint says: This is a woman who has donated MILLIONS OF DOLLARS to charities for battered women's organizations and LGBTQ+ interests, and now she's auctioning off gowns for cancer research and all you can talk about is her eyebrow game? Seriously?

JuliaSantos@TheSpill reply to EvelynHugolsASaint: This is a fair point, I guess. SORRY. In my defense, she started making millions by being a badass business

bitch back in the '60s. And she would never have had the clout to do that without her talent and beauty, and she never would have been as beautiful without DEM BROWS. But OK, fair point.

EvelynHugolsASaint reply to JuliaSantos@TheSpill: Ugh. Sorry for being so bitchy. I skipped lunch. Mea culpa. For what it's worth, *Vivant* won't do half as well with this story as you would have. Evelyn should have chosen you.

JuliaSantos@TheSpill reply to EvelynHugolsASaint: Right????? Who is Monique Grant anyway? BORING. I'm coming for her . . .

2

I'VE SPENT THE PAST FEW days researching everything I can about Evelyn Hugo. I was never a big film buff, let alone interested in any old Hollywood stars. But Evelyn's life—at least the version on record as of now—is enough for ten soap operas.

There's the early marriage that ended in divorce when she was eighteen. Then the studio-setup courtship and tumultuous marriage to Hollywood royalty Don Adler. The rumors that she left him because he beat her. Her comeback in a French New Wave film. The quickie Vegas elopement with singer Mick Riva. Her glamorous marriage to the dapper Rex North, which ended in both of them having affairs. The beautiful love story of her life with Harry Cameron and the birth of their daughter, Connor. Their heartbreaking divorce and her very quick marriage to her old director Max Girard. Her supposed affair with the much younger Congressman Jack Easton, which ended her relationship with Girard. And finally, her marriage to financier Robert Jamison, rumored to have at least been inspired by Evelyn's desire to spite former costar—and Robert's sister—Celia St. James. All of her husbands have passed away, leaving Evelyn as the only one with insight into those relationships.

Suffice it to say, I have my work cut out for me if I want to get her to talk about any of it.

After staying late at the office this evening, I finally make my way home a little before nine. My apartment is small. I believe the most appropriate term is *teeny-tiny sardine box*. But it's amazing how vast a small place can feel when half of your things are gone.

David moved out five weeks ago, and I still haven't managed to replace the dishes he took with him or the coffee table his mother gave us last year as a wedding present. Jesus. We didn't even make it to our first anniversary.

As I walk in my front door and put my bag on the sofa, it strikes me again just how needlessly petty it was of him to take the coffee table. His new San Francisco studio came fully furnished courtesy of the generous relocation package offered with his promotion. I suspect he put the table in storage, along with the one nightstand he insisted was rightfully his and all of our cookbooks. I don't miss the cookbooks. I don't cook. But when things are inscribed to "Monique and David, for all your many years of happiness," you think of them as half yours.

I hang up my coat and wonder, not for the first time, which question gets closer to the truth: Did David take the new job and move to San Francisco *without me*? Or did I refuse to leave New York *for him*? As I take off my shoes, I resolve once again that the answer is somewhere in the middle. But then I come back to the same thought that always stings afresh: *He actually left*.

I order myself pad thai and then get in the shower. I turn the water to nearly scalding hot. I love water so hot it almost burns. I love the smell of shampoo. My happiest place might just be under a showerhead. It is here in the steam, covered in suds, that I do not feel like Monique Grant, woman left behind. Or even Monique Grant, stalled writer. I am just Monique Grant, owner of luxury bath products.

Well after I've pruned, I dry myself off, put on my sweatpants, and pull my hair away from my face, just in time for the deliveryman to make his way to my door.

I sit with the plastic container, trying to watch TV. I attempt to zone out. I want to make my brain do something, anything, other than think about work or David. But once my food is gone, I realize it's futile. I might as well work.

This is all very intimidating—the idea of interviewing Evelyn Hugo, the task of controlling her narrative, of trying to make sure she doesn't control mine. I'm often inclined to overprepare. But more to the point,

I've always been a bit like an ostrich, willing to bury my head in the sand to avoid what I don't want to face.

So, for the next three days, I do nothing but research Evelyn Hugo. I spend my days pulling up old articles about her marriages and her scandals. I spend my evenings watching her old movies.

I watch clips of her in *Carolina Sunset*, *Anna Karenina*, *Jade Diamond*, and *All for Us*. I watch the GIF of her coming out of the water in *Boute-en-Train* so many times that when I fall asleep, it plays over and over in my dreams.

And I start to fall in love with her, just the littlest bit, as I watch her films. Between the hours of eleven P.M. and two A.M., while the rest of the world is sleeping, my laptop flickers with the sight of her, and the sound of her voice fills my living room.

There is no denying that she is a stunningly beautiful woman. People often talk about her straight, thick eyebrows and her blond hair, but I can't take my eyes off her bone structure. Her jawline is strong, her cheekbones are high, and all of it comes to a point at her ever-so-swollen lips. Her eyes are huge but not so much round as an oversized almond shape. Her tanned skin next to her light hair looks beachy but also elegant. I know it's not natural—hair that blond with skin that bronze—and yet I can't shake the feeling that it *should* be, that humans should be born looking like this.

I have no doubt that's part of the reason film historian Charles Redding once said that Evelyn's face felt "inevitable. So exquisite, so nearly perfect, that when looking at her, you get the sense that her features, in that combination, in that ratio, were bound to happen sooner or later."

I pin images of Evelyn in the '50s wearing tight sweaters and bullet bras, press photos of her and Don Adler on the Sunset Studios lot shortly after they were married, shots of her from the early '60s with long, straight hair and soft, thick bangs and wearing short-shorts.

There is a photo of her in a white one-piece, sitting on the shoreline of a pristine beach, with a large, floppy black hat covering most of her face, her white-blond hair and the right side of her face illuminated by the sun.

One of my personal favorites is a black-and-white shot from the Golden Globes in 1967. She is seated on the aisle, her hair pulled into a loose updo. She is wearing a light-colored lace gown with a deep scoop neckline, her cleavage controlled but on full display and her right leg escaping through the high slit of the skirt.

There are two men seated next to her, names lost to history, who are staring at her as she looks ahead at the stage. The man next to her is staring at her chest. The one next to him is staring at her thigh. Both of them seem enraptured and hoping to see the tiniest bit farther.

Maybe I'm overthinking that photo, but I'm starting to notice a pattern: Evelyn always leaves you hoping you'll get just a little bit more. And she always denies you.

Even in her much-talked-about sex scene in *Three A.M.* from 1977, in which she writhes, reverse-cowboy style, on top of Don Adler, you see her full breasts for less than three seconds. It was rumored for years that the incredible box-office numbers for the film were because couples were going to see it multiple times.

How does she know just how much to give and just how much of herself to withhold?

And does that all change now that she's got something to say? Or is she going to play me the same way she played audiences for years?

Is Evelyn Hugo going to tell me just enough to keep me on the edge of my seat but never enough to truly reveal anything?

3

I WAKE UP A HALF hour before my alarm. I check my e-mails, including one from Frankie with the subject line “KEEP ME UPDATED,” yelling at me in all caps. I make myself a small breakfast.

I put on black slacks and a white T-shirt with my favorite herringbone blazer. I gather my long, tight curls into a bun at the top of my head. I forgo my contacts and choose my thickest black-framed glasses.

As I look in the mirror, I notice that I have lost weight in my face since David left. While I have always had a slim frame, my butt and face seem to be the first to pick up any extra weight. And being with David—during the two years we dated and the eleven months since we married—meant I put on a few. David likes to eat. And while he would get up in the early mornings to run it off, I slept in.

Looking at myself now, pulled together and slimmer, I feel a rush of confidence. I look good. I feel good.

Before I make my way out the door, I grab the camel cashmere scarf that my mother gave me for Christmas this past year. And then I put one foot in front of the other, down to the subway, into Manhattan, and uptown.

Evelyn’s place is just off Fifth Avenue overlooking Central Park. I’ve done enough Internet stalking to know she’s got this place and a beach-front villa just outside of Málaga, Spain. She’s had this apartment since the late ’60s, when she bought it with Harry Cameron. She inherited the villa when Robert Jamison died almost five years ago. In my next life, please remind me to come back as a movie star with points on the back end.

Evelyn's building, at least from the outside—limestone, prewar, beaux arts style—is extraordinary. I am greeted, before even walking in, by an older, handsome doorman with soft eyes and a kind smile.

"How may I help you?" he says.

I find myself embarrassed even to say it. "I'm here to see Evelyn Hugo. My name's Monique Grant."

He smiles and opens the door for me. It's clear he was expecting me. He walks me to the elevator and presses the button for the top floor.

"Have a nice day, Ms. Grant," he says, and then disappears as the elevators close.

I ring the doorbell of Evelyn's apartment at eleven A.M. on the dot. A woman in jeans and a navy blouse answers. She looks to be about fifty, maybe a few years older. She is Asian-American, with straight jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail. She's holding a stack of half-opened mail.

She smiles and extends her hand. "You must be Monique," she says as I hold out my own. She seems like the sort of person who genuinely delights in meeting other people, and I already like her, despite my strict promise to myself to remain neutral to everything I encounter today.

"I'm Grace."

"Hi, Grace," I say. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Come on in."

Grace steps out of the way and beckons to invite me in. I put my bag on the ground and take off my coat.

"You can put it right in here," she says, opening a closet just inside the foyer and handing me a wooden hanger.

This coat closet is the size of the one bathroom in my apartment. It's no secret that Evelyn has more money than God. But I need to work at not letting that intimidate me. She's beautiful, and she's rich, and she's powerful and sexual and charming. And I'm a normal human being. Somehow I have to convince myself that she and I are on equal footing, or this is never going to work.

"Great," I say, smiling. "Thank you." I put my coat on the hanger, slip it over the rod, and let Grace shut the closet door.

“Evelyn is upstairs getting ready. Can I get you anything? Water, coffee, tea?”

“Coffee would be great,” I say.

Grace brings me into a sitting room. It is bright and airy, with floor-to-ceiling white bookcases and two overstuffed cream-colored chairs.

“Have a seat,” she says. “How do you like it?”

“My coffee?” I ask, unsure of myself. “With cream? I mean, milk is fine, too. But cream is great. Or whatever you have.” I get hold of myself. “What I’m trying to say is that I’d like a splash of cream if you have it. Can you tell I’m nervous?”

Grace smiles. “A little. But you don’t have anything to worry about. Evelyn’s a very kind person. She’s particular and private, which can take some getting used to. But I’ve worked for a lot of people, and you can trust me when I say Evelyn’s better than the rest.”

“Did she pay you to say that?” I ask. I am trying to make a joke, but it sounds more pointed and accusatory than I intended.

Luckily, Grace laughs. “She did send my husband and me to London and Paris last year as my Christmas bonus. So in an indirect way, yeah, I suppose she did.”

Jesus. “Well, that settles it. When you quit, I want your job.”

Grace laughs. “It’s a deal. And you’ve got coffee with a splash of cream coming right up.”

I sit down and check my cell phone. I have a text from my mom wishing me luck. I tap to respond, and I am lost in my attempts to properly type the word *early* without auto-correct changing it to *earthquake* when I hear footsteps on the stairs. I turn around to see the seventy-nine-year-old Evelyn Hugo walking toward me.

She is as breathtaking as any of her pictures.

She has the posture of a ballerina. She’s wearing slim black stretch pants and a long gray-and-navy striped sweater. She’s just as thin as she ever was, and the only way I know she’s had work done on her face is because no one her age can look like that without a doctor.

Her skin is glowing and just the littlest bit red, as if it’s been rubbed clean. She’s wearing false eyelashes, or perhaps she gets eyelash exten-

sions. Where her cheeks were once angular, they are now a bit sunken. But they have just a tint of soft rosininess to them, and her lips are a dark nude.

Her hair is past her shoulders—a beautiful array of white, gray, and blond—with the lightest colors framing her face. I’m sure her hair is triple-processed, but the effect is that of a gracefully aging woman who sat out in the sun.

Her eyebrows, however—those dark, thick, straight lines that were her signature—have thinned over the years. And they are now the same color as her hair.

By the time she reaches me, I notice that she is not wearing any shoes but, instead, big, chunky knit socks.

“Monique, hello,” Evelyn says.

I am momentarily surprised at the casualness and confidence with which she says my name, as if she has known me for years. “Hello,” I say.

“I’m Evelyn.” She reaches out and takes my hand, shaking it. It strikes me as a unique form of power to say your own name when you know that everyone in the room, everyone in the world, already knows it.

Grace comes in with a white mug of coffee on a white saucer. “There you go. With just a bit of cream.”

“Thank you so much,” I say, taking it from her.

“That’s just the way I like it as well,” Evelyn says, and I’m embarrassed to admit it thrills me. I feel as if I’ve pleased her.

“Can I get either of you anything else?” Grace asks.

I shake my head, and Evelyn doesn’t answer. Grace leaves.

“Come,” Evelyn says. “Let’s go to the living room and get comfortable.”

As I grab my bag, Evelyn takes the coffee out of my hand, carrying it for me. I once read that charisma is “charm that inspires devotion.” And I can’t help but think of that now, when she’s holding my coffee for me. The combination of such a powerful woman and such a small and humble gesture is enchanting, to be sure.

We step into a large, bright room with floor-to-ceiling windows. There are oyster-gray chairs opposite a soft slate-blue sofa. The carpet under our feet is thick, bright ivory, and as my eyes follow its path, I am

struck by the black grand piano, open under the light of the windows. On the walls are two blown-up black-and-white images.

The one above the sofa is of Harry Cameron on the set of a movie.

The one above the fireplace is the poster for Evelyn's 1959 version of *Little Women*. Evelyn, Celia St. James, and two other actresses' faces make up the image. All four of these women may have been household names back in the '50s, but it is Evelyn and Celia who stood the test of time. Looking at it now, Evelyn and Celia seem to shine brighter than the others. But I'm pretty sure that's simply hindsight bias. I'm seeing what I want to see, based on how I know it all turns out.

Evelyn puts my cup and saucer down on the black-lacquer coffee table. "Sit," she says as she takes a seat herself in one of the plush chairs. She pulls her feet up underneath her. "Anywhere you want."

I nod and put my bag down. As I sit on the couch, I grab my notepad.

"So you're putting your gowns up for auction," I say as I settle myself. I click my pen, ready to listen.

Which is when Evelyn says, "Actually, I've called you here under false pretenses."

I look directly at her, sure I've misheard. "Excuse me?"

Evelyn rearranges herself in the chair and looks at me. "There's not much to tell about me handing a bunch of dresses over to Christie's."

"Well, then—"

"I called you here to discuss something else."

"What is that?"

"My life story."

"Your life story?" I say, stunned and trying hard to catch up to her.

"A tell-all."

An Evelyn Hugo tell-all would be . . . I don't know. Something close to the story of the year. "You want to do a tell-all with *Vivant*?"

"No," she says.

"You don't want to do a tell-all?"

"I don't want to do one with *Vivant*."

"Then why am I here?" I'm even more lost than I was just a moment ago.

"You're the one I'm giving the story to."

I look at her, trying to decipher what exactly she's saying.

"You're going to go on record about your life, and you're going to do it with me but not with *Vivant*?"

Evelyn nods. "Now you're getting it."

"What exactly are you proposing?" There is no way that I have just walked into a situation in which one of the most intriguing people alive is offering me the story of her life for *no reason*. I must be missing something.

"I will tell you my life story in a way that will be beneficial to both of us. Although, to be honest, mainly you."

"Just how in-depth are we talking about here?" Maybe she wants some airy retrospective? Some lightweight story published somewhere of her choosing?

"The whole nine yards. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Whatever cliché you want to use that means 'I'll tell you the truth about absolutely everything I've ever done.'"

Whoa.

I feel so silly for coming in here expecting her to answer questions about dresses. I put the notebook on the table in front of me and gently put the pen down on top of it. I want to handle this perfectly. It's as if a gorgeous, delicate bird has just flown to me and sat directly on my shoulder, and if I don't make the exact right move, it might fly away.

"OK, if I understand you correctly, what you're saying is that you'd like to confess your various sins—"

Evelyn's posture, which until this point has shown her to be very relaxed and fairly detached, changes. She is now leaning toward me. "I never said anything about confessing sins. I said nothing about sins at all."

I back away slightly. I've ruined it. "I apologize," I say. "That was a poor choice of words."

Evelyn doesn't say anything.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Hugo. This is all a bit surreal for me."

"You can call me Evelyn," she says.

“OK, Evelyn, what’s the next step here? What, precisely, are we going to do together?” I take the coffee cup and put it up to my lips, sipping just the littlest bit.

“We’re not doing a *Vivant* cover story,” she says.

“OK, that much I got,” I say, putting the cup down.

“We’re writing a book.”

“We are?”

Evelyn nods. “You and I,” she says. “I’ve read your work. I like the way you communicate clearly and succinctly. Your writing has a no-nonsense quality to it that I admire and that I think my book could use.”

“You’re asking me to ghostwrite your autobiography?” This is fantastic. This is absolutely, positively fantastic. *This* is a good reason to stay in New York. A great reason. Things like this don’t happen in San Francisco.

Evelyn shakes her head again. “I’m giving you my life story, Monique. I’m going to tell you the whole truth. And you are going to write a book about it.”

“And we’ll package it with your name on it and tell everyone you wrote it. That’s ghostwriting.” I pick up my cup again.

“My name won’t be on it. I’ll be dead.”

I choke on my coffee and in doing so stain the white carpet with flecks of umber.

“Oh, my God,” I say, perhaps a bit too loudly, as I put down the cup. “I spilled coffee on your carpet.”

Evelyn waves this off, but Grace knocks on the door and opens it just a crack, poking her head in.

“Everything OK?”

“I spilled, I’m afraid,” I say.

Grace opens the door fully and comes in, taking a look.

“I’m really sorry. I just got a bit shocked is all.”

I catch Evelyn’s eye, and I don’t know her very well, but what I do know is that she’s telling me to be quiet.

“It’s not a problem,” Grace says. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Are you hungry, Monique?” Evelyn says, standing up.

“I’m sorry?”

“I know a place just down the street that makes really great salads. My treat.”

It’s barely noon, and when I’m anxious, the first thing to go is my appetite, but I say yes anyway, because I get the distinct impression that it’s not really a question.

“Great,” Evelyn says. “Grace, will you call ahead to Trambino’s?”

Evelyn takes me by the shoulder, and less than ten minutes later, we’re walking down the manicured sidewalks of the Upper East Side.

The sharp chill in the air surprises me, and I notice Evelyn grab her coat tightly around her tiny waist.

In the sunlight, it’s easier to see the signs of aging. The whites of her eyes are cloudy, and the complexion of her hands is in the process of becoming translucent. The clear blue tint to her veins reminds me of my grandmother. I used to love the soft, papery tenderness of her skin, the way it didn’t bounce back but stayed in place.

“Evelyn, what do you mean you’ll be dead?”

Evelyn laughs. “I mean that I want you to publish the book as an authorized biography, with your name on it, when I’m dead.”

“OK,” I say, as if this is a perfectly normal thing to have someone say to you. And then I realize, no, that’s crazy. “Not to be indelicate, but are you telling me you’re dying?”

“Everyone’s dying, sweetheart. You’re dying, I’m dying, that guy is dying.”

She points to a middle-aged man walking a fluffy black dog. He hears her, sees her finger aimed at him, and realizes who it is that’s speaking. The effect on his face is something like a triple take.

We turn toward the restaurant, walking the two steps down to the door. Evelyn sits at a table in the back. No host guided her here. She just knows where to go and assumes everyone else will catch up. A server in black pants, a white shirt, and a black tie comes to our table and puts down two glasses of water. Evelyn’s has no ice.

“Thank you, Troy,” Evelyn says.

“Chopped salad?” he asks.

“Well, for me, of course, but I’m not sure about my friend,” Evelyn says.

I take the napkin off the table and put it in my lap. “A chopped salad sounds great, thank you.”

Troy smiles and leaves.

“You’ll like the chopped salad,” Evelyn says, as if we are friends having a normal conversation.

“OK,” I say, trying to redirect. “Tell me more about this book we’re writing.”

“I’ve told you all you need to know.”

“You’ve told me that I’m writing it and you’re dying.”

“You need to pay better attention to word choice.”

I may feel a little out of my league here—and I may not be exactly where I want to be in life right now—but I know a thing or two about word choice.

“I must have misunderstood you. I promise I’m very thoughtful with my words.”

Evelyn shrugs. This conversation is very low-stakes for her. “You’re young, and your entire generation is casual with words that bear great meaning.”

“I see.”

“And I didn’t say I was confessing any *sins*. To say that what I have to tell is a sin is misleading and hurtful. I don’t feel regret for the things I’ve done—at least, not the things you might expect—despite how hard they may have been or how repugnant they may seem in the cold light of day.”

“*Je ne regrette rien*,” I say, lifting my glass of water and sipping it.

“That’s the spirit,” Evelyn says. “Although that song is more about not regretting because you don’t live in the past. What I mean is that I’d still make a lot of the same decisions today. To be clear, there *are* things I regret. It’s just . . . it’s not really the sordid things. I don’t regret many of the lies I told or the people I hurt. I’m OK with the fact that sometimes doing the right thing gets ugly. And also, I have compassion for myself. I trust myself. Take, for instance, when I snapped at you earlier, back at the apartment, when you said what you did about my confessing sins. It wasn’t a nice thing to do, and I’m not sure you deserved it. But I don’t

regret it. Because I know I had my reasons, and I did the best I could with every thought and feeling that led up to it.”

“You take umbrage with the word *sin* because it implies that you feel sorry.”

Our salads appear, and Troy wordlessly grates pepper onto Evelyn’s until she puts her hand up and smiles. I decline.

“You can be sorry about something and not regret it,” Evelyn says.

“Absolutely,” I say. “I see that. I hope that you can give me the benefit of the doubt, going forward, that we’re on the same page. Even if there are multiple ways to interpret exactly what we’re talking about.”

Evelyn picks up her fork but doesn’t do anything with it. “I find it very important, with a journalist who will hold my legacy in her hands, to say exactly what I mean and to mean what I say,” Evelyn says. “If I’m going to tell you about my life, if I’m going to tell you what really happened, the truth behind all of my marriages, the movies I shot, the people I loved, who I slept with, who I hurt, how I compromised myself, and where it all landed me, then I need to know that you *understand* me. I need to know that you will listen to *exactly* what I’m trying to tell you and not place your own assumptions into my story.”

I was wrong. This is not low-stakes for Evelyn. Evelyn can speak casually about things of great importance. But right now, in this moment, when she is taking so much time to make such specific points, I’m realizing this is *real*. This is happening. She really intends to tell me her life story—a story that no doubt includes the gritty truths behind her career and her marriages and her image. That’s an incredibly vulnerable position she’s putting herself in. It’s a lot of power she’s giving me. I don’t know *why* she’s giving it to me. But that doesn’t negate the fact that she *is* giving it to me. And it’s my job, right now, to show her that I am worthy of it and that I will treat it as sacred.

I put my fork down. “That makes perfect sense, and I’m sorry if I was being glib.”

Evelyn waves this off. “The whole culture is glib now. That’s the new thing.”

“Do you mind if I ask a few more questions? Once I have the lay of

the land, I promise to focus solely on what you're saying and what you mean, so that you feel understood at such a level that you can think of no one better suited to the task of gatekeeping your secrets than me."

My sincerity disarms her ever so briefly. "You may begin," she says as she takes a bite of her salad.

"If I'm to publish this book after you have passed, what sort of financial gain do you envision?"

"For me or for you?"

"Let's start with you."

"None for me. Remember, I'll be dead."

"You've mentioned that."

"Next question."

I lean in conspiratorially. "I hate to pose something so vulgar, but what kind of timeline do you intend? Am I to hold on to this book for years until you . . ."

"Die?"

"Well . . . yes," I say.

"Next question."

"What?"

"Next question, please."

"You didn't answer that one."

Evelyn is silent.

"All right, then, what kind of financial gain is there for me?"

"A much more interesting question, and I have been wondering why it took you so long to ask."

"Well, I've asked it."

"You and I will meet over the next however many days it takes, and I will tell you absolutely everything. And then our relationship will be over, and you will be free—or perhaps I should say bound—to write it into a book and sell it to the highest bidder. And I do mean highest. I insist that you be ruthless in your negotiating, Monique. Make them pay you what they would pay a white man. And then, once you've done that, every penny from it will be yours."

"Mine?" I say, stunned.

“You should drink some water. You look ready to faint.”

“Evelyn, an authorized biography about your life, in which you talk about all seven of your marriages . . .”

“Yes?”

“A book like that stands to make millions of dollars, even if I didn’t negotiate.”

“But you will,” Evelyn says, taking a sip of her water and looking pleased.

The question has to be asked. We’ve been dancing around it for far too long. “Why on earth would you do that for me?”

Evelyn nods. She has been expecting this question. “For now, think of it as a gift.”

“But why?”

“Next question.”

“Seriously.”

“Seriously, Monique, next question.”

I accidentally drop my fork onto the ivory tablecloth. The oil from the dressing bleeds into the fabric, turning it darker and more translucent. The chopped salad is delicious but heavy on the onions, and I can feel the heat of my breath permeating the space around me. What the hell is going on?

“I’m not trying to be ungrateful, but I think I deserve to know why one of the most famous actresses of all time would pluck me out of obscurity to be her biographer and hand me the opportunity to make millions of dollars off her story.”

“The *Huffington Post* is reporting that I could sell my autobiography for as much as twelve million dollars.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Inquiring minds want to know, I guess.”

The way Evelyn is having so much fun with this, the way she seems to delight in shocking me, lets me know that this is, at least a little bit, a power play. She likes to be cavalier about things that would change other people’s lives. Isn’t that the very definition of power? Watching people kill themselves over something that means nothing to you?

“Twelve million is a lot, don’t get me wrong . . .” she says, and she

doesn't need to finish the sentence in order for it to be completed in my head. *But it's not very much to me.*

"But still, Evelyn, why? Why me?"

Evelyn looks up at me, her face stoic. "Next question."

"With all due respect, you're not being particularly fair."

"I'm offering you the chance to make a fortune and skyrocket to the top of your field. I don't have to be fair. Certainly not if that's how you're going to define it, anyway."

On the one hand, this feels like a no-brainer. But at the same time, Evelyn has given me absolutely nothing concrete. And I could lose my job by stealing a story like this for myself. That job is all I have right now. "Can I have some time to think about this?"

"Think about what?"

"About all of this."

Evelyn's eyes narrow ever so slightly. "What on earth is there to think about?"

"I'm sorry if it offends you," I say.

Evelyn cuts me off. "You haven't *offended* me." Just the very implication that I could get under her skin gets under her skin.

"There's a lot to consider," I say. I could get fired. She could back out. I could fail spectacularly at writing this book.

Evelyn leans forward, trying to hear me out. "For instance?"

"For instance, how am I supposed to handle this with *Vivant*? They think they have an exclusive with you. They're making calls to photographers this very moment."

"I told Thomas Welch not to promise a single thing. If they have gone out and made wild assumptions about some cover, that's on them."

"But it's on me, too. Because now I know you have no intention of moving forward with them."

"So?"

"So what do I do? Go back to my office and tell my boss that you're not talking to *Vivant*, that instead you and I are selling a book? It's going to look like I went behind their backs, on company time, mind you, and stole their story for myself."

"That's not really my problem," Evelyn says.

"But that's why I have to think about it. Because it's *my* problem."

Evelyn hears me. I can tell she's taking me seriously from the way she puts her water glass down and looks directly at me, leaning with her forearms on the table. "You have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here, Monique. You can see that, right?"

"Of course."

"So do yourself a favor and learn how to grab life by the balls, dear. Don't be so tied up trying to do the right thing when the smart thing is so painfully clear."

"You don't think that I should be forthright with my employers about this? They'll think I conspired to screw them over."

Evelyn shakes her head. "When my team specifically requested you, your company shot back with someone at a higher level. They only agreed to send you out once I made it clear that it was you or it was no one. Do you know why they did that?"

"Because they don't think I—"

"Because they run a business. And so do you. And right now, your business stands to go through the roof. You have a choice to make. Are we writing a book together or not? You should know, if you won't write it, I'm not going to give it to anyone else. It will die with me in that case."

"Why would you tell only *me* your life story? You don't even know me. That doesn't make sense."

"I'm under absolutely no obligation to make sense to you."

"What are you after, Evelyn?"

"You ask too many questions."

"I'm here to interview you."

"Still." She takes a sip of water, swallows, and then looks me right in the eye. "By the time we are through, you won't have any questions," she says. "All of these things you're so desperate to know, I promise I'll answer them before we're done. But I'm not going to answer them one minute before I want to. I call the shots. That's how this is going to go."

I listen to her and think about it, and I realize I would be an absolute moron to walk away from this, no matter what her terms are. I didn't

stay in New York and let David go to San Francisco because I like the Statue of Liberty. I did it because I want to climb the ladder as high as I possibly can. I did it because I want my name, the name my father gave me, in big, bold letters one day. This is my chance.

“OK,” I say.

“OK, then. Glad to hear it.” Evelyn’s shoulders relax, she picks up her water again, and she smiles. “Monique, I think I like you,” she says.

I breathe deeply, only now realizing how shallow my breathing has been. “Thank you, Evelyn. That means a lot.”

4

EVELYN AND I ARE BACK in her foyer. “I’ll meet you in my office in a half hour.”

“OK,” I say as Evelyn heads down the corridor and out of sight. I take off my coat and put it in the closet.

I should use this time to check in with Frankie. If I don’t reach out to update her soon, she’ll track me down.

I just have to decide how I’m going to handle it. How do I make sure she doesn’t try to wrestle this away from me?

I think my only option is to pretend everything is going according to plan. My only plan is to lie.

I breathe.

One of my earliest memories from when I was a child was of my parents bringing me to Zuma Beach in Malibu. It was still springtime, I think. The water hadn’t yet warmed enough for comfort.

My mom stayed on the sand, setting down our blanket and umbrella, while my dad scooped me up and ran with me down to the shoreline. I remember feeling weightless in his arms. And then he put my feet in the water, and I cried, telling him it was too cold.

He agreed with me. It *was* cold. But then he said, “Just breathe in and out five times. And when you’re done, I bet it won’t feel so cold.”

I watched as he put his feet in. I watched him breathe. And then I put my feet back in and breathed with him. He was right, of course. It wasn’t so cold.

After that, my dad would breathe with me anytime I was on the verge

of tears. When I skinned my elbow, when my cousin told me I wasn't Black, when my mom said we couldn't get a puppy, my father would sit and breathe with me. It still hurts, all these years later, to think about those moments.

But for now, I keep breathing, right there in Evelyn's foyer, centering myself as he taught me.

And then, when I feel calm, I pick up my phone and dial Frankie.

"Monique." She answers on the second ring. "Tell me. How's it going?"

"It's going well," I say. I'm surprised at how even and flat my voice is. "Evelyn is pretty much everything you'd expect from an icon. Still gorgeous. Charismatic as ever."

"And?"

"And . . . things are progressing."

"Is she committing to talk about any other topics than the gowns?"

What can I say now to start covering my own ass? "You know, she's pretty reticent about anything other than getting some press for the auction. I'm trying to play nice at the moment, get her to trust me a bit more before I start pushing."

"Will she sit for a cover?"

"It's too early to tell. Trust me, Frankie," I say, and I hate how sincere it sounds coming out of my mouth, "I know how important this is. But right now, the best thing for me to do is make sure Evelyn likes me so that I can try to garner some influence and advocate for what we want."

"OK," Frankie says. "Obviously, I want more than a few sound bites about dresses, but that's still more than any other magazine has gotten from her in decades, so . . ." Frankie keeps talking, but I've stopped listening. I'm far too focused on the fact that Frankie's not even going to get sound bites.

And I'm going to get far, far more.

"I should go," I say, excusing myself. "She and I are talking again in a few minutes."

I hang up the phone and breathe out. *I've got this shit.*

As I make my way through the apartment, I can hear Grace in the kitchen. I open the swinging door and spot her cutting flower stems.

“Sorry to bother you. Evelyn said to meet her in her office, but I’m not sure where that is.”

“Oh,” Grace says, putting down the scissors and wiping her hands on a towel. “I’ll show you.”

I follow her up a set of stairs and into Evelyn’s study area. The walls are a striking flat charcoal gray, the area rug a golden beige. The large windows are flanked by dark blue curtains, and on the opposite side of the room are built-in bookcases. A gray-blue couch sits facing an oversized glass desk.

Grace smiles and leaves me to wait for Evelyn. I drop my bag on the sofa and check my phone.

“You take the desk,” Evelyn says as she comes in. She hands me a glass of water. “I can only assume the way this works is that I talk and you write.”

“I suppose,” I say, sitting in the desk chair. “I’ve never attempted to write a biography before. After all, I’m not a biographer.”

Evelyn looks at me pointedly. She sits opposite me, on the sofa. “Let me explain something to you. When I was fourteen years old, my mother had already died, and I was living with my father. The older I got, the more I realized that it was only a matter of time until my father tried to marry me off to a friend of his or his boss, someone who could help his situation. And if I’m being honest, the more I developed, the less secure I was in the idea that my father might not try to take something of me for himself.

“We were so broke that we were stealing the electricity from the apartment above us. There was one outlet in our place that was on their circuit, so we plugged anything we needed to use into that one socket. If I needed to do homework after dark, I plugged in a lamp in that outlet and sat underneath it with my book.

“My mother was a saint. I really mean it. Stunningly beautiful, an incredible singer, with a heart of gold. For years before she died, she would always tell me that we were gonna get out of Hell’s Kitchen and go straight to Hollywood. She said she was going to be the most famous woman in the world and get us a mansion on the beach. I had this fan-