

Glamour, celebrities and secrets...



Hotel
Vendôme

Danielle
STEEL

About the Book

Swiss-born Hugues Martin has worked for the world's most prestigious hotels, so when he purchases a small, run-down place in New York, everyone thinks he must be crazy! He alone sees it for the rough diamond it is, transforming it into a beautiful boutique hotel of impeccable elegance, run with the precision and attention to detail he learnt through his hotelier training in Europe.

The Hotel Vendôme soon becomes renowned for its unparalleled service, and is the ideal New York refuge for the rich and famous, as well as a perfect home for Hugues' beautiful wife and their young daughter. But when his wife tires of his obsession for the hotel, she walks out on him for a notorious rock star, leaving Hugues a single parent to four-year-old Heloise.

And so the kind hotel staff quickly embrace the little girl, becoming Heloise's family, and she has a happy upbringing, adored by the fascinating milieu of high-profile guests. Hugues' commitment to his work has heavily influenced his daughter, so he is delighted when she decides she wants to follow in his footsteps – hotelier training in Switzerland.

But for a father and daughter who have always relied solely on each other, how is Hugues going to cope with his daughter so far away? Will Heloise ever be able to accept another woman in her father's life? And will Hugues have to choose between them?

As life marches quickly on, the close-knit unit at Hotel Vendôme are forced to form new bonds, face the often bittersweetness of life, and work out the true meaning of love and family against the backdrop of a glamorous hotel.

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About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

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DANIELLE
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HOTEL
VENDÔME

A Novel

To my adorable, wonderful children,
Beatie, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Sam,
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,
Joy of my life, music of my soul,
You are the delight in my days!
How incredibly lucky and blessed
I am to have you!

All my love,
Mommy/DS

Chapter 1

THE SCENE IN the lobby of the Hotel Vendôme on East 69th Street in New York was one of impeccable elegance and meticulous precision. The black-and-white-checked marble floors were immaculate, red runners were rolled out the instant there was a drop of rain outside, the moldings on the walls were exquisite, and the enormous crystal chandelier that hung in the lobby was reminiscent of the finest palaces in Europe. The hotel was much smaller than the one that had inspired its decor, but for practiced travelers, it was remarkably similar to the Ritz in Paris, where the Hotel Vendôme's owner had worked as an assistant manager for two years, during his training in the finest hotels in Europe.

Hugues Martin was forty years old, a graduate of the illustrious and respected École Hôtelière de Lausanne in Switzerland, and the hotel on Manhattan's Upper East Side was his dream. He still couldn't believe how lucky he had been, how perfectly it had all come together five years before. His Swiss banker father and equally conservative mother had been devastated when he announced that he wanted to go to hotel school. He came from a family of bankers, and they thought that running a hotel, or working in one, had a seamy quality to it, of which they strongly disapproved. They had done everything they could to talk

him out of it, to no avail. After four years at the school in Lausanne, he trained and eventually had respected positions at the Hotel du Cap in Cap d'Antibes, the Ritz in Paris, and Claridge's in London, and even did a brief stint at the famed Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong. He figured out during that time that if he ever had his own hotel, he wanted it to be somewhere in the States.

Hugues worked at the Plaza in New York before it closed for extensive renovations, and he assumed that he was still light-years away from his dream. Then it happened. The Hotel Mulberry was put up for sale, a small tired hotel that had been run-down for years and had never been considered chic, despite its perfect location. When he heard about it, Hugues put together every penny of his savings, took out every loan he could get in both New York and Switzerland, and used all of the modest inheritance his parents had left him, which he had carefully put aside and invested. And the combination made the purchase of the hotel possible. He just managed to do it, with a mortgage on the building. And suddenly Hugues was able to buy the Mulberry and do the necessary renovations, which took two years, and at the end of it the Hotel Vendôme was born, to the amazement of New Yorkers, most of whom said they had never even realized that there was a hotel in that location.

The building had been a small private hospital in the 1920s and was turned into a hotel in the 1940s, with abysmally bad decor. In contrast, in its transformed state, every inch of the Vendôme was magnificent, and the service was superb. Hugues had brought chefs from all over the world for their now extremely popular restaurant. His catering manager was one of the best in the business, and everyone agreed that even the food from room service was fantastic. In its first year it had become an overnight success and was booked months in advance now, with reservations made by visitors to the city from around the

world. The presidential suite was one of the finest in the city. The Hotel Vendôme was an absolute gem, with beautifully decorated suites, and rooms with fireplaces, moldings, and high ceilings. The hotel faced south, so most of the rooms were sunny, and Hugues had chosen the finest china, crystal, and linens, and as many antiques as he could afford, like the chandelier in the lobby, which he had bought in Geneva at a Christie's auction. It had come out of a French château near Bordeaux and was in perfect condition.

Hugues ran his 120-room hotel with Swiss precision, a warm smile, and an iron hand. His employees were discreet and experienced, had a remarkable memory for every guest, and kept detailed files on each important client's needs and requests while they were there. It had made the Vendôme the most popular small hotel in New York for the past three years. And the moment one entered the lobby, one knew it was a special place. A young bellboy stood at the revolving door, in a uniform inspired by those the *chasseurs* wore at the Ritz: navy pants, a short jacket, a small amount of gold braid on the collar, and a little round hat with a strap under the chin, tilted at an angle. To meet the clients' needs, there was a fleet of willing bellmen, a crew of brilliantly capable concierges. Everyone moved rapidly to serve the guests, and the entire staff was ready to service large requests and small ones. Hugues knew that impeccable service was essential.

The assistant managers wore black tailcoats and striped trousers, once again inspired by the Ritz. And Hugues himself was on hand night and day, in a dark blue suit, always with a white shirt and dark Hermès tie, and he had an extraordinary memory for everyone who had stayed with them and, whenever possible, greeted important guests himself. He was the consummate hotel owner, and no detail missed his practiced eye. And he expected his department

heads to meet the standards that he set. Guests of the hotel came as much for the service as the luxurious decor.

As an added touch, the hotel was always filled with spectacular flowers, and its spa was one of the best. There was almost no service the staff wouldn't provide, as long as it was legal and in relatively good taste. And despite the objections Hugues knew his parents had had, he couldn't help feeling that they would have been proud of him now. He had used their money well, and the hotel had been such a success in its first three years that he was almost out of debt. It wasn't surprising, since Hugues worked day and night himself to make it what it was. And personally, his victory had come at a high price. Owning the hotel had cost him his wife. It had been the subject of considerable gossip among staff and guests.

Nine years before, when Hugues had been working at Claridge's in London, he had met Miriam Vale, the internationally famous and spectacularly beautiful supermodel. And like everyone else who laid eyes on her, he had been dazzled by her the moment they met. He had been infinitely proper and professional, as he had always been with guests of the hotels he worked in, but she was a twenty-three-year-old girl, and she had made it clear that she wanted him, and he fell head over heels in love with her overnight. She was American, and eventually he had followed her back to New York. It had been an exciting time for him, and he took a lesser position at the Plaza to be in the same city with her and continue their romance. And much to his own amazement, she was just as much in love with him, and they were married within six months. He had never been happier in his life than in their early years together.

Eighteen months later their daughter Heloise was born, and Hugues was madly in love with his wife and child. He trembled when he said it, for fear of angering the gods, but he always said then that he had the perfect life. And he was

a dedicated man. Despite whatever temptations came his way in the hotel business, he was totally in love with and faithful to his wife. She continued her modeling career after Heloise was born, and everyone at the Plaza had fawned over his little girl and indulged her, and teased them about her name. Hugues assured them honestly that she had been named after his great-grandmother and he didn't expect to stay at the Plaza forever, so there was no reason not to use the name. Heloise was two years old when he bought the Mulberry and turned it into the Vendôme. He had everything he wanted then, a wife and child he loved, and his own hotel. Miriam had been far less enthused about the project and had complained bitterly that it would take too much of his time, but owning his own hotel, and one of the sort he was creating, had always been his dream.

His parents had been even less pleased about Miriam than they had been about his working in the hotel business. They had serious doubts that a spoiled, twenty-three-year-old, spectacularly beautiful, internationally known supermodel would make him a good wife. But Hugues loved her profoundly and had no doubts.

As Hugues had expected, it took two years to renovate the hotel. It came in only slightly over budget, and the end result was everything he had hoped.

He and Miriam had been married for six years, and Heloise was four, when the Hotel Vendôme opened, and Miriam had obligingly posed for some of their ads. It added a distinctive cachet that the owner was married to Miriam Vale, and male guests in particular always hoped they'd catch a glimpse of her in the lobby or at the bar. What they saw far more frequently than her mother was four-year-old Heloise following after her father, with one of the maids holding her hand, and she enchanted everyone she met. She had gone from being Heloise at the Plaza to being Heloise at the Vendôme, and became something of a

mascot for the hotel, and was clearly the pride and joy of her father's life.

Greg Bones, the famous and notoriously badly behaved rock star, was one of the first guests in one of the penthouse suites, and fell in love with the hotel. Hugues was uneasy about it, because Bones was well known for trashing hotel rooms and causing chaos wherever he stayed, but he behaved surprisingly well at the Vendôme, much to Hugues's relief. And they were fully prepared to meet celebrity needs and requests.

On Greg's second day there, he met Miriam Vale Martin at the bar, surrounded by assistants, magazine editors, stylists, and a famous photographer after a shoot. They had just finished a twelve-page spread for *Vogue* that afternoon, and as soon as they recognized Greg Bones, they invited him to join them. And what happened afterward hadn't taken long. Miriam spent most of the following night in Greg's suite with him, while Hugues thought she was out when he was working. The maids were all aware of where she was and what had happened—the room service waiters discovered it when Greg ordered champagne and caviar for them at midnight. And it rapidly became the backstairs talk of the hotel and spread like a forest fire. By the end of the week Hugues had heard about it too. He didn't know whether to confront her or to hope it would pass.

Hugues, Miriam, and Heloise had their own private apartment one floor below the two penthouse suites, and the hotel security were well aware that Miriam was constantly slipping up the back stairs to join Greg in his suite, whenever Hugues was in his office. It was an extremely awkward situation for Hugues, who didn't want to ask the famous rock star to leave the hotel. It would cause a public scandal. Instead he begged his wife to come to her senses and behave. He suggested she go away for a few days, to stop the madness of what she was doing. But when Bones checked out, she flew to Los Angeles with him

on his private plane. She left Heloise with Hugues and promised she'd be back in a few weeks, and said this was something she had to get out of her system, and begged him to understand. It was a heartbreak and humiliation for Hugues, but he didn't want to lose his wife. He hoped that if he let her do it, she'd get over her infatuation quickly. She was twenty-nine years old, and he thought she'd come to her senses. He loved her, and they had a child. But it was all over the tabloids by then, and on Page Six of the *New York Post*. It was a crushing humiliation for Hugues, in front of all of his employees and an entire city.

Hugues told Heloise that her mother had to go away to work, which was something that the little girl already understood at four. The story became harder to maintain when Miriam didn't come home. And three months later, back in London with Greg Bones, Miriam told him she was filing for divorce. It had been the most devastating moment of his life, and although his demeanor with the guests was unchanged, and he was ever smiling and attentive to them, in the three years since, those who knew him well were aware that he had never been the same again. He was far more aloof, serious, deeply hurt, and withdrawn in his private moments, although he put a good face on it for his staff and guests.

Hugues had been the soul of discretion since the divorce. His assistant and some of his department heads were aware of quiet affairs he had had, occasionally with hotel guests or with well-bred or accomplished women around the city. He was one of the most sought-after bachelors in New York, invited to everything, although he rarely accepted. He preferred to keep a low profile, and keep his personal life to himself. And most of the time he was working at the hotel. The hotel came before all else for him, except for his daughter, who came first. He hadn't had a serious relationship since Miriam left and didn't want one. He believed that to run a hotel properly, you had to

sacrifice your own life. He was always there, keeping an eye on everything, and working incredible hours, most of the time behind the scenes to ensure the smooth running of the hotel.

A month after her divorce from Hugues was final, Miriam married Greg Bones, and they had been married now for two years and had just had a baby girl six months before. Heloise had only seen her mother a few times since she left. Heloise was sad about it. And Hugues was angry at Miriam. She was too busy in her new life, too obsessed with Greg, and now their child, to tend to their daughter or even see her. Heloise and Hugues had become relics of her past. It left Hugues no other choice but to be both mother and father to their child. He never commented on it to Heloise, but he considered it a painful circumstance for them both.

At the hotel Heloise was constantly surrounded by doting surrogate mothers, at the concierge desk, in room service, the maids, the florist, the hairdresser, and the girls who worked in the spa. *Everyone* loved Heloise. They were no substitute for a real mother, but at least she had a happy life, adored her father, and at seven she was the princess of the Hotel Vendôme. Their regular guests knew her, and once in a while brought her little gifts, and thanks to her father's attention to her education and manners, she was both adorable and extremely polite. She wore pretty little smocked dresses, and the hairdresser did her long red hair in braids with ribbons every day before she went to school at the Lycée Français nearby. Her father walked her to school every morning before he started work. Her mother called her once every month or two, if she remembered.

Hugues was at the front desk in the evening, as he often was when he had time away from other tasks, surveying the scene in the lobby, and greeting guests discreetly. He always knew exactly who was staying at the hotel. He

checked the reservation ledgers daily, was aware of who was there, when they arrived, and when they'd be departing. And there was the familiar aura of calm in the lobby as guests were checking in. Mrs. Van Damme, a well-known aristocratic dowager, had just come in from her evening walk with her Pekingese, and Hugues walked her slowly to the elevator as he chatted with her. She had moved into one of the largest suites in the hotel the year before, and brought some of her own furniture with her, and some very important works of art. She had a son in Boston who seldom visited her, and she was extremely fond of Hugues, and Heloise had become the granddaughter she'd never had, having only grandsons, including one the same age as Heloise. She often spoke to Heloise in French, since Heloise went to the Lycée Français, and Heloise loved to join her on her walks with her dog. They would walk slowly, and Mrs. Van Damme would tell her stories of when she was a little girl. Heloise adored her.

"Where's Heloise?" Mrs. Van Damme asked with a warm smile, as the elevator man waited for them, and Hugues chatted with her for a few minutes. He always made time for the guests. No matter how busy he was, he never looked it.

"Doing her homework upstairs, I hope." And if not, they both knew she was probably roaming the hotel, visiting her friends. She loved pushing the maids' carts, and distributing the lotions and shampoos, and they always gave her spares.

"If you see her, tell her to come and have tea with me when she's finished," Mrs. Van Damme said with a smile. Heloise often did that, and they shared tea sandwiches of cucumber or egg salad, and éclairs from room service. They had a British chef, originally from Claridge's, who was in charge of only their high tea, which was the best in the city, even though their main chef was French, and had been personally recruited by Hugues too. He had his hand in

every aspect of the hotel, whether “front of the house” or back. It was all part of what made the Hotel Vendôme so special. The staff was trained to provide personalized attention, and it started with Hugues.

“Thank you very much, Madame Van Damme,” Hugues said politely, smiling at her, as the elevator door closed. After that he walked back through the lobby, thought of his daughter, and hoped she was doing her homework, as he had said. He had other things on his mind, although he looked so totally unruffled that no one would have suspected the chaos that was going on in the basement of the hotel at that moment. They had had several calls from guests, since they had had to shut off the water to most of the floors half an hour before. They explained that they were doing some minor repairs, and the hotel operators and desk clerks were assuring anyone who called that they expected to have the water back on within the hour. But the truth was that a pipe had burst in the basement, every engineer and plumber in the hotel was working on it, and minutes before, outside plumbers had been called.

Hugues looked calm as he reassured everyone with a smile. Seeing him, one could only assume that he had everything in control. He mentioned the water shutoff lightly to each guest who checked in. He told them that water service would be restored imminently, and asked if room service could send anything to their room. He didn’t say it, but there would be no charge for it, of course, to make up for the lack of water and the inconvenience. He had preferred to stay in the lobby himself so arriving guests had a sense that all was in order. All he could hope was that the burst pipe could be located and repaired quickly. They were hoping that room service wouldn’t be forced to close; the main kitchen was already swimming in six inches of water, and everyone they could spare had been sent to the basement to help. There was no sign of any of it in the lobby. He was planning to go downstairs himself in a few

minutes to check the situation again. And from what he was being told, the flood in the basement was getting worse. Despite all their renovations, it was after all an old hotel.

As Hugues greeted a Spanish aristocrat and his wife, just arriving from Europe, the scene in the basement was one of utter chaos. No one observing the calm appearance of elegance in the lobby could have suspected what a mess it was downstairs.

In the basement men were shouting, the water was rising, and a torrent of water burst from a wall, as engineers in brown uniforms waded through the flood, and were soaked from head to foot. Four plumbers were working on it, and all six of the hotel's engineers had been called back into work. Mike, the head engineer, was close to where the torrent was coming from, and working like a demon to try and locate the source. He had a belt around his waist with a series of wrenches hanging from it, and as he tried one after another, a small voice behind him told him to try the biggest one. He turned in surprise as he heard the familiar voice over the ruckus, and saw Heloise standing there, watching him with interest. She was up to her knees in water, wearing a red bikini and a yellow slicker, and she pointed to the biggest wrench on his belt.

"I think you have to use the big one, Mike," she said calmly, standing very close to him, with her big green eyes and bright red hair still in neat braids. He could see that her feet were bare beneath the water.

"Okay," he acknowledged, "but I want you to go stand over there. I don't want you to get hurt." She nodded very seriously and then smiled at him. She had freckles and was missing both her front teeth.

"It's okay, Mike, I can swim," she reassured him.

"I hope you won't have to," he said, grabbing the biggest wrench from his belt, which he had been about to use anyway. Whatever went on in the hotel, Heloise was always there to see it. And she particularly loved hanging out with

the engineers. He pointed to where she should stand, and she obediently went to higher ground and chatted with some of the kitchen staff who had come out to see what they could do to help. And with that the outside plumbers arrived and waded into the rising water to join the others. A number of the bellmen came down to carry bottles of expensive wine out of the wine cellars, and the kitchen staff joined them to help.

Half an hour later, after intense work by both the engineers and outside plumbers, the leak was located, the right valves were turned off, and the plumbers were working on the repair. Heloise waded back in to see Mike then, patted his shoulder, and told him he had done a really great job. He laughed as he looked down at her, picked her up, walked her back to the sous chefs in their tall white hats, white jackets, and checked pants standing just outside the kitchen, and set her down.

"If you get hurt, young lady, your father will kill me. I want you to stay here." He knew the directive was useless. Heloise never stayed in one place for long.

"There's nothing for me to do here," she complained. "Room service is too busy. I'm not supposed to disturb them." She knew not to get in their way during peak hours.

By then the desk was getting frantic calls. People who wanted to get dressed for the evening were discovering they had no water to bathe or shower with, and anyone calling room service was told that they were extremely busy, and all orders were delayed, but the hotel was offering free wine or drinks. Hugues knew that an event like this could seriously damage the reputation of a hotel, unless handled with grace and poise. He called all of their most important guests himself to apologize and asked the catering manager to send a complimentary bottle of Cristal to each of their rooms, and he was fully prepared to discount the rate for every room affected, for that night. He knew that it would cost him, but it would cost him far more

not to. Problems could occur in any hotel, but how they were handled made all the difference between a second-rate hotel and a first-class hotel like the Vendôme, which was what they called a “palace” in Europe. So far no one was truly furious at them, people were just annoyed, and happy with the free wine and champagne. How they ultimately felt about the inconvenience would depend on how fast it was going to take the plumbers and engineers to make the repairs. They had to do the best they could that night, and in the ensuing days they would have to make more extensive efforts to replace the broken pipe. Right now, all they needed was water for the hotel, to get service back to normal.

Forty-five minutes later Hugues was finally able to slip away from the front desk and went down to the basement to see what was happening there. Pumps had already been set up to bail the water, and a cheer went up just as he arrived. The plumbers had been able to do what was necessary to circumvent the pipe and turn the water back on. The room service staff were working frantically to deliver bottles of wine and champagne to the guests. Heloise was dancing around in the water in her slicker and bikini, grinning happily minus her front teeth, and clapping her hands. And the moment she saw him, she waded over to her father, who looked at her with a rueful expression. He wasn't happy to see her there, but he wasn't surprised, and the sous chefs she'd been talking to all laughed. Heloise was always where the action was, just like her father. She was as much a part of the hotel as he was.

“What are you doing down here?” her father asked her, trying to sound stern but without much success. She looked so cute that it was hard for him to be angry at her, and he very rarely was, even though he prided himself on being strict. But he could never quite pull it off. Just looking at her melted his heart, and her missing front teeth made her even more irresistible, and she made him want to laugh in

her red bathing suit and yellow slicker. She had dressed for the occasion. Since her mother had left, he helped her dress for school every morning.

"I came down to see what I could do to help," she said practically. "Mike did a wonderful job. There was nothing for me to do." She gave a little shrug of her shoulders as her father laughed. People always commented that she looked very European.

"I hope not," her father said, trying not to laugh. "If you're the chief engineer now, we're in big trouble." As he said it, he walked her back into the kitchen, and then went to congratulate his plumbers and engineers for their good work. He was always deft at handling his staff, and they liked working for him, although he could be tough at times. He expected a great deal of them and himself, and everyone agreed that he ran a tight ship. It was his training and what the hotel guests loved; they could rely on a high standard of excellence if they stayed at the Vendôme. Hugues ran it to perfection.

When he came back to the kitchen, Heloise was eating a cookie and chatting with the pastry chef in French. He always made her French *macarons*, and she took them to school for lunch. "What about your homework, young lady? What happened to that?" her father asked her seriously, and Heloise opened her eyes wide and shook her head.

"I don't have any, Papa."

"Why is it that I don't believe you?" He looked carefully into the big green eyes.

"I did it all before." She was lying to him, but he knew her well. She much preferred cruising around the hotel to sitting in the apartment alone doing her homework for the Lycée.

"I saw you in my office making paper clip necklaces when you got back from school. I think you'd better check again."

“Well, maybe I have just a little math to do,” she said sheepishly, as he took her hand in his own and led her to the back elevator. She had left a pair of red clogs there when she waded into the flood and retrieved them now for the ride upstairs.

As soon as they arrived in the apartment, Hugues changed his suit and shoes. The cuffs of his trousers, and his shoes, were soaked from his brief visit to the basement. He was a tall, thin man with dark hair and the same green eyes as Heloise’s. Her mother was an equally tall blonde with blue eyes. The great-grandmother that Heloise had been named after had had red hair like Heloise.

Hugues wrapped her in a towel and told her to change her clothes, and she reappeared a few minutes later in blue jeans and a pink sweater and pink ballet shoes. She took ballet class twice a week. Hugues wanted her to lead the life of a normal child, but he was well aware that she didn’t. Without a mother, her life was already unusual, and her entire world consisted of the hotel. She loved everything that happened there.

With a mournful look at her father, she sat down at the desk in the living room, once she was dressed, and took out her math book, and the notebook from school.

“Make sure you do all of it. And call me when you’re finished. I’ll come up and have dinner with you if I can. I have to make sure everything has calmed down first.”

“Yes, Papa,” she said quietly as he left the apartment to go back to the reception desk and check on things there.

Heloise sat looking dreamily at her math book for a few minutes, and then tiptoed to the door. She opened it a crack and looked out. The coast was clear. He was back in the lobby by then. And with an elfin toothless grin that made her look like a pixie with her freckles and red hair, Heloise let herself out of the apartment and slipped down the back stairs in her jeans and pink ballet shoes. She knew just where her favorite night maids would be. And five

minutes later she was helping them push the trolley with all the creams and shampoos and lotions on it, as they turned down the rooms for the guests. She loved turn-down time, when they delivered little boxes of chocolates to each guest, from La Maison du Chocolat. The chocolates were delicious, and as they always did, Ernesta and Maria handed one of the boxes to her, and after thanking them, she helped herself to the chocolates with a grin.

"We had a lot of work to do in the basement today," she informed them seriously in Spanish. They had been teaching her Spanish ever since she could talk. She had been fluent in both French and Spanish as well as English before she was five. It was important to Hugues that she speak several languages. And he spoke Italian and German too, since he was Swiss.

"So I hear," Ernesta, the motherly Puerto Rican woman, said to her and gave her a hug. Heloise loved being with her and held her hand. "You must have been very busy this afternoon," Ernesta said with a twinkle in her eye, as Maria, the pretty young second night maid, laughed. She had children of her own the same age as Heloise. And they never minded having her join them for their turn-down service to every room. She was always hungry for female companionship and got lonely alone in the apartment.

"The water was up to here," Heloise said, showing them a place just above her knees. "But it's all fixed now." Both women knew there would have to be more extensive repairs in the coming days. They had heard it from the engineers.

"What about your homework?" Ernesta asked her then, as Heloise avoided her gaze and played with the shampoos. They had recently changed brands to a more luxurious one, and Heloise loved the way it smelled. "Did you do it?"

"Yes, of course," Heloise said, grinning mischievously, as they pushed the cart to the next room, and Heloise handed her two more shampoos. She followed them on their rounds

until an internal alarm went off for her, and she knew it was time to go. She kissed them both good night then and scampered up the back stairs, just in time to get back to their apartment and sit at the desk again. She had just finished her last math problem, when her father walked in to have dinner with her. He had ordered it from room service, as he always did, although later than usual tonight. Her schedule had to be flexible to adjust to his, but having dinner together was a ritual that was important to them both.

"Sorry I'm late," he said as he walked in. "It's a little crazy downstairs tonight, but at least everyone has water again." He was just praying they didn't spring another leak, but things were holding for now, as long as they did the necessary repairs soon.

"What's for dinner?" Heloise asked as she closed her math book.

"Chicken, mashed potatoes, asparagus, and ice cream for dessert. Sound okay to you?" her father asked her with a loving look.

"Perfect," she smiled at him as she put her arms around his neck. She was the woman in his life, and had been the only important one for the past three years since her mother left. And as he hugged her, their dinner arrived. The chef had added escargots for Heloise, because he knew she loved them, and profiteroles for dessert. It was hardly an ordinary dinner for a child, but it was one of the perks of living in the hotel, for both of them. Hugues had built-in babysitters for her, and they both had all the services that the hotel provided, including gourmet food.

They sat down properly in the dining room of the apartment, and they talked about the hotel, as they always did. She asked him what important guests had checked in, and if any movie stars were coming soon, and he told her a simplified but accurate version of what he had done that day, as she looked at him adoringly. He liked teaching her

about the hotel. And with Heloise to love, and the hotel to keep him busy, Hugues needed nothing more in his life; nor did Heloise. They lived in a sheltered world that suited them both to perfection. She had lost a mother, and he a wife, but they had each other, and that seemed like more than enough for now. And in his fantasies about the future, Hugues liked to think that when she grew up, they would run the hotel together. Until then they lived in the hotel that had been his dream.

Chapter 2

HUGUES HAD STRUCTURED the hotel in the traditional way he had learned at the École Hôtelière and at all the important hotels where he had worked. And he made good use of his staff. He had a back office, which handled all the business aspects of running the hotel, reservations, sales, marketing, and accounting, all functions that were vital to the operation of the hotel. The human resources staff were part of the back office too, and they dealt not only with the employees but with the labor unions, which was crucial. A strike could cripple the hotel. Hugues had picked his staff with infinite care and knew full well how important they were. If reservations weren't diligently handled with minute precision, and carefully kept track of, or if accounting was inaccurate, it could put them out of business. And he kept a careful eye on all the administrative aspects of the hotel. He had a profound respect for how important the back office was, despite the fact that their guests never saw any of those people, but the smooth running of the hotel depended on the competence of the administrative staff, and he had chosen them well.

The front desk and concierges worked hand in hand and were key faces that the hotel guests saw on a constant basis. Without a smoothly run reception desk, and

supremely competent concierges, his guests would have swiftly shifted their allegiance to other better-run hotels. Among the many functions they performed, they had to meet the sometimes-exotic needs of their VIP and celebrity hotel guests. They were used to movie stars, who insisted on changing suites three and four times until they found the one that pleased them, had their assistants send long lists of special dietary needs in advance, and required everything from satin sheets to orthopedic mattresses, special items for their children, air filters, hypoallergenic pillows, and masseurs to be standing by day and night. The staff were used to unusual requests and took pride in adapting to their most demanding guests. They were also accustomed to some of the more unpleasant behaviors of their VIPs, who frequently accused the maids of stealing valuable items that they had misplaced or lost themselves. In the past three years, they had not had a single case of real theft by employees, had been able to calm hysterical guests who falsely accused staff, and had proved otherwise in each instance. The hotel staff had learned how to handle difficult guests and take accusations of that nature in stride. Hugues demanded criminal background checks and bonded all his employees to protect the hotel and the guests.

The housekeeping department was impeccably run by another graduate of the École Hôtelière, with a fleet of maids and valets, and a dry-cleaning operation and laundry in the basement. They were responsible for keeping the rooms and suites and hallways immaculate and their guests satisfied, again frequently with challenging demands. All of the personnel who had direct face-to-face contact with the guests had to be efficient and diplomatic, and the rooms had to pass housekeeping inspections that were conducted with military precision. Members of the housekeeping staff were let go if they did not meet the Vendôme's stringent standards.

The department that provided uniformed services was equally closely supervised and included bellmen, doormen, elevator men, valet parkers, and chauffeurs when they needed them, which they did frequently, from a limousine service that they used for many of their guests. They were responsible for getting people in and out of the hotel quickly and efficiently, with the right luggage, keeping track of arriving packages, and getting them to where they wanted to go around the city, to airports, or out of town.

Food, beverages, and catering was one of their largest departments and was responsible not only for room service, and their now-famous restaurant frequented by people from all over the city, but they dealt with all catered events that were held at the hotel: weddings, private dinners and lunches, conferences, and meetings. Food and beverage handled it all, and thus far, extremely well.

The security division was somewhat behind the scenes, but it was another vital service that Hugues relied on heavily to keep personnel in line and guests safe. Jewel robberies had become a common occurrence in many first-rate hotels, and Hugues was extremely pleased that the hotel had experienced none so far. Their staff was extremely vigilant on all aspects of security.

They had a business center, with secretaries and IT personnel available at all times. The spa and health center was one of the best in the city. Engineering and maintenance kept the hotel in working order, whether it was a crisis like the burst pipe in the basement, or something as simple as a blocked toilet or a television that wasn't working. All of it required the attention of engineers. And the other essential department was the staff that manned the telephones to keep communications in and out of and within the hotel working smoothly, taking messages properly, and handling all calls with speed, precision, and discretion.

In all, it was an enormous staff to make the hotel what it was, with Hugues overseeing everything himself. He was proud that he knew each of his employees by name, and his constant presence at the hotel kept everyone on their toes. Running the hotel was a tremendous job, and each piece of the machine, however seemingly unimportant, was actually a vital piece that allowed the hotel to function smoothly and well as a whole. And just as Hugues knew every one of his employees, so did Heloise as she roamed freely through the hotel.

The Hotel Vendôme was not only Hugues's dream but his passion, and other than his daughter, it was his love. There was so much to do there that it was hard for him to focus on much else. In the absence of Miriam, once she left him, the hotel became his wife. He often said he was married to the hotel. He ate, slept, breathed, and loved everything about it. He couldn't even imagine being married again now; he didn't have time. And any woman he got involved with realized very quickly that she was only secondary in his life, if that. He had too much else on his plate—all of which related to the smooth running of his hotel and averting crises before they happened, or solving them quickly when they did—to have time for anything other than breakfast and dinner with Heloise and a few quick hugs in between. The rest of what he did all day required his full concentration and most of his time. Heloise got what was left.

When he arrived at dinner parties, he inevitably arrived late. When he went to the theater, the opera, or the ballet, when taking out a woman, his phone vibrated on his belt all night, and too often he had to leave halfway through the performance to deal with a security issue surrounding a head of state or the Secret Service. They had to clear the floors above and below the floor occupied by a head of state. It was a hugely complicated undertaking, and he needed to make sure that the other guests were not unduly

inconvenienced while they were there. It left the passing women in Hugues's life frustrated and annoyed that they could never spend an evening with him without interruptions. It was rare that he could enjoy a quiet evening with a friend, and more often than not, he didn't even try. Women staying in the hotel frequently pursued him, once they realized that he was single and saw how handsome he was. But he was always candid with them right from the beginning that he was too busy at this point in his life to get seriously involved with anyone, and they were liable to be disappointed by the little time he had to share. It was also a clever way to mask how badly he had been hurt by the failure of his marriage, and by Miriam's betrayal when she left with Greg. He had no desire to go through that again, although he enjoyed female companionship once he healed from Miriam, and frequently he couldn't resist a pretty woman, but it never lasted long. There were too many other demands on his time, and Heloise fulfilled his emotional needs better than any romance. She wasn't going to cheat on him and leave him, and she filled his heart in all the ways that mattered most to him.

"I can't compete with your daughter and your hotel," a famous film actress had complained after dating him for a few months whenever she was in New York. She had been crazy about Hugues and sent him expensive gifts, which he quietly sent back to her. He couldn't be bought, and he knew that what he offered wasn't a fair exchange. All he wanted was an occasional lighthearted evening here and there, and on rare occasions he would slip away for a weekend, but only if Heloise was staying at a friend's. And he never involved her with the women he went out with. None of them was ever important enough for him to do so. And his affairs within the hotel had been discreet and rare. He had learned that lesson before his marriage, and he knew how disruptive it could be to get involved with