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MARISKA HARGITAY

"LIFE AFTER
40—IT'S
BEAUTIFUL,
PEOPLE!"

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MARISKA HARGITAY IS REHEARSING A SCENE IN WHICH HER DETECTIVE CHARACTER ON *LAW & ORDER: SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT* SAVES THE LIFE OF AN UNCONSCIOUS GIRL WHO HAS

attempted suicide. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation will be involved, says director Peter Leto. "My first make-out scene on *SVU*!" Hargitay cracks; then, in an effort to put the young actress at ease before they lock lips, Hargitay tells her, "Honey, you're hot, but this is not that kind of show." A crew member on the New Jersey soundstage yells, "Not this week!" Hargitay crouches on the ground to perform CPR and realizes that her cleavage is busting out of her low-cut shirt. "I need a new bra," she calls out, "or America will be very happy." Leto, who has worked with Hargitay since just after the show debuted in 1999, teases her about her weak and strong points, saying, "I'd rather shoot down your shirt than up your neck." Hargitay roars with laughter and replies, "Life after 40—it's beautiful, people!"

Law & Order: SVU, for which Hargitay has won both an Emmy and a Golden Globe award playing the brooding sex crimes investigator Olivia Benson, is a dark show, and the psyche of the heroine, who was herself born of a rape, is even darker. So Hargitay's nonstop wisecracks are startling at first, but they're clearly a necessary mood-lightener. "She can fit very well into an eighth-grade-boys' locker room mentality," quips Hargitay's *SVU* costar Christopher Meloni. "We bust each other's chops."

The past year, however, has brought frustrations that have tested even Hargitay's ebullient personality. NBC's decision to program *The Jay Leno Show* at 10 PM weeknights meant moving scripted dramas like *SVU* to nine PM, and that led at first to an exodus of

viewers. "It's tough; I don't know that it's a show you want to put your kids to bed to," says Neal Baer, an *SVU* executive producer.

Kicking back in her office during a break, Hargitay agrees. "It ruined our numbers," she says. "The first four episodes, we were considerably down because nobody knew when the show was on. Finally, we're starting to find our audience again." Given Leno's disappointing ratings, she wishes the network brass would reconsider. "I hope we go back to where we belong," she says. "It was doing so well. Why mess with it?"

After a protracted renegotiation last year, Hargitay signed a contract that takes her through the 2010 to 2011 season, but she's already thinking beyond that. "I constantly worry about money," she says, a surprising comment given that *Forbes* recently estimated her annual earnings at \$8.5 million. "I make a lot now," she explains, "but I don't feel that way, because I was poor and had no money for a lot longer than I've had it. As an actor, if this show ends next year, then what? As an aging woman, then what? I'm saving money to live on, for the future. There are not that many roles for women, and I've been blessed with one of the great ones."

Her financial anxiety may also be the lingering aftereffect of a serious accident she had on the set. The necklace she's wearing—a regular accessory for Detective Benson—reads

► NORMAN AMBROSE
hand-beaded paillettes on silk chiffon dress
with crystal de chaine lining; price on
request; normanambrose.com for stores
► ROBERTO CAVALLI
leather shoes, \$1,045; endless.com



FEARLESS, but that word has now taken on an ironic note. While performing a stunt in October 2008, Hargitay landed awkwardly and didn't realize until months later that she had suffered a collapsed lung. "I thought it was a pulled rib. I'm pretty tough," she says. "When I couldn't breathe anymore, I got an X-ray, and they couldn't believe I was walking." The result: three surgeries and a long recovery. An athlete since childhood (cheered on by her late father, Hungarian-born bodybuilder Mickey Hargitay, who won fame as Mr. Universe), she has long reveled in her physical prowess, but now she must take it easy. Learning to hold back has been a major adjustment.

"I was doing stunts when I was pregnant," she says. (She and her husband, actor Peter Hermann, have a son, August, now three.) "I'd fall, jump on guys. Now there are scenes when I have to run, and I'll only take a few steps. Everyone is super-careful of me."

In fact, Hargitay could teach a grad-level psych course on resilience. There is a steely core of self-confidence beneath her madcap manner. "Mariska doesn't bury things. She owns her sadness, but she tries to turn it into something positive and move on," says Ashley McDermott, a friend since their sand-box days. Says Hargitay, "There's so much that you can get mad about. Out of self-preservation, I focus on being grateful."

EVERY DAY when Hargitay looks in the mirror, she sees a tangible reminder of the tragedies that can occur in life. As we talk, a makeup artist dabs concealer on a small red scar on the right side of her forehead, close to her hairline—the legacy of a car accident that occurred in June 1967, when she was only three years old.

Her mother, Jayne Mansfield, the bombshell star of films such as *Too Hot to Handle* and *The Girl Can't Help It*, was killed; Mariska and her two older brothers, riding in the backseat, escaped without serious injury. The children were raised by their father, who was divorced from Mansfield, and his second wife, Ellen, a former flight attendant, to whom Hargitay grew close.

The mother she scarcely knew—but who is featured in photos and movie posters prominently displayed in Hargitay's New York apartment and *SVU* dressing room—looms large for her. "She's definitely always with me," Hargitay says, acknowledging that she's spent endless amounts of time wondering "why, why, why?" and talking through the loss in therapy. But now, she adds, she can take pleasure in hearing stories about Mansfield. "I love it when people say, 'She had such a great laugh, and so do you.' When I find similarities, it gives me so much peace."

Julianne Margulies, who worked with Hargitay on *ER*, recalls that Hargitay hid her scar behind bangs for many years before letting it be visible. "It's a fantastic reminder of love, in a weird way," Margulies says. "Even though it came from a trauma, it reminds her of her mom. Mariska's gone through the wringer and back again. She wants to mother people the way she wasn't mothered."

Those who know Hargitay well say that she's the first to call when anything goes wrong. Hillary Swank, a close pal, recalls that when her marriage to Chad Lowe broke up, "Our friendship became deeper. I leaned on her and she took my weight—and I am very grateful." Hargitay has been known to pay her friends' medical bills and underwrite educational costs for their children. "She is generous