HAPPY DAYS
Taylor with Zahedi in 1964. "Vivacious, funny, generous, down-to-earth friend," Zahedi writes of Taylor, who "loved life and lived it to the fullest."
screen life, to benefit the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation (ETAForg) that was her final passion. The book, which contains many never-before-published photos, opens a window onto the woman behind the movie marquees, husbands, glamour and jewels. “She didn’t give a damn about looking camera-ready,” says Zahedi, 66. “She was very low-key, very hippy, very sweet. And maternal too—like your fantasy mother, the one who lets you do fun things.”

Although Taylor’s four children grew up wary of press intrusions—“She taught us early on not to pay any attention to [tabloids],” her son Christopher Wilding, now 61, told People in 2013—her family, including her granddaughter Laela Wilding, welcomes Zahedi’s book of memories that are so like their own. “With Grandma, our favorite thing to do was to stay in bed together, just snuggling and chatting and eating lunch and watching movies,” Laela, 44, one of the star’s 10 grandchildren, tells People in a rare interview. She and Taylor would talk about boys, play dress-up and browse “Grandma’s” jewelry closet, home of the legendary 33-carat Knupp diamond from fifth husband Richard Burton whom she married twice. “I knew she was famous, but when I was with her, she was larger than life in the most wonderful way—fun and funny and very accepting,” says Laela. She and several of Taylor’s other grandchildren carry on her work with ETAF.

THE REAL DEAL
1. On their 1976 tour of Iran, Taylor was “mesmerized” by the Persian fabric, says Zahedi, and accessorized them with a pendant from Richard Burton.
2. In 1992, at age 60, Zahedi, “the happiest when her children came to visit,” writes Zahedi of Taylor (at husband John Warner’s farm with her daughter Lisa in the late ‘70s).
3. Taylor’s hairdresser and personal assistant Arthur Brockett (in Perspex) tagged along on the ’76 tour of Iran.
4. Plot at Warner’s Montecito, N.Y., home (in 1976) didn’t expect Taylor to join their softball game, Zahedi recalled. She proved them wrong by picking up a bat, which was near her own height, whacking the ball really hard and racing to first base with a triumphant smile.

“She had her own style of dressing and getting made up, and whether people found it stylish or not she didn’t give a damn”
—AROZZ ZAHEDI

ICON-ACTIVIST FRIEND
1. Taylor always sent handwritten thank-you notes and birthday greetings. Zahedi recalls, “As the greenwine towards the end, the notes were typed for her, but they never stopped coming.”
2. Taylor (in 1999 with her three Academy Awards) would be very silly and “laugh her head off,” says Zahedi. Once she took up the cause of AIDS patients, “she lost interest in wanting to win another Oscar.”
(and will travel to Washington, D.C., to attend AIDSWatch on Feb. 29, which became Taylor's true calling when the AIDS epidemic first hit in the 1980s. "She wanted to take care of others, and that motherly energy infused all of her relationships," says Laela. "She really wanted to break down the stigma of AIDS."

Several years earlier, in 1976, Taylor, then 44, and Zahedi, a former ambassador's assistant, took her junior, met and soon became a playful, platonic twosome who traveled together through his native Iran, her Hollywood home turf, Washington, D.C., and more. Taylor encouraged Zahedi to buck his family's traditional expectations and make a career of photography, starting as her personal photographer on the set of A Little Night Music. "She basically saved my life," he says. She was casual, easygoing and quick to laugh—even at aging. "It wasn't her looks that she worried about, it was her health," he adds.

The pair's colorful story might have included romance if only Zahedi hadn't so fiercely denied rumors in 2006 that he was to be husband No. 9. "That upset her because I said older women shouldn't marry young men," says Zahedi now. "There is always this ridicule about older actresses... and I didn't want her to be ridiculed again." The last time he spoke to Taylor before her death in March 2011, they were mulling a Christmas Eve outing. Zahedi joked about running off to a Vegas wedding chapel. "And she gave me one of those cackling laughs of hers and said, 'No way, Rustie.' Like, you had your chance—and you blew it.'"

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