

## Chapter One

Death, unexpected and tragic, threw open the door to opportunity. At the tender age of eighteen, Eliza Lane walked through the door, entering stage left. And brought down the house.

Tears for a lost friend, for a member of her theatrical family, she wrote in her memoir, had to wait. The show must, and did, go on, and she dedicated her opening night performance in *Upstage*, and all that followed, to Leah Rose.

Leah Rose, dead at the tender age of eighteen from a deadly combination of pills and vodka, hours before her opening on Broadway.

And so Eliza—Angie, swing, understudy to Ms. Rose—stepped into the spotlight as Marcie Bright in Cabot and Lowe’s *Upstage*, September 22, 2036. Curtain at eight.

She’d held that spotlight for twenty-five years, through talent, discipline, hard work, a dedication to her craft, and a keen instinct for the right part at the right time.

There had been downs as well as ups. A broken ankle during rehearsals that had cost her a plum role in a film musical—for which her replacement won a Golden Globe. A shattered love affair in her twenties and the snickering media that followed. The deaths of her parents in a fatal car crash. The divorce in her thirties that cost her dearly, emotionally and financially.

But Eliza believed in staring the downs in the face and working for the ups. Her pride in and her love of her art demanded she give no less than her best each time, every time she stepped onstage or in front of a camera.

The fact she demanded the same of anyone who worked with her gave her the reputation as a bitch in some circles. She accepted that, even prized it.

She had acquaintances by the score, but only a few she considered true friends. Her rivals were many, and she assumed a few of that number rose to the level of enemy.”

That was show business, after all.

And still, she’d never have believed anyone who knew her—or thought they did—wanted to kill her.

Twenty-five years after her star-making performance, she opened her grand and glorious New York home to the cast and crew, the friends and frenemies, to select media and critics. She and her husband of nine years threw the party in the window between the revival of *Upstage* coming out of workshop and going into rehearsals.

In the revival, she would play Lily Bright, the headliner, the mother—and relentless stage mother—of Marcie. Marcie might have given her career its solid roots, but Eliza saw the part of Lily as the big, gorgeous bloom of it.

She’d make them laugh as she chewed up the scenery, bring them to tears with her voice and its heartbreak in “Lily’s Lament.” She’d dance until her feet bled, work her ass off to inhabit Lily Bright as no one had before.

And by God, she’d bag her fifth Tony.

So tonight was for celebration, and she’d dressed for it in a bold red cocktail dress by Leonardo that showed off her dancer’s legs. It fit her slim, disciplined body to perfection,

following the curves like a lover before the skirt flared, highlighting strong shoulders and toned arms with slim straps.

With it she wore the ten-carat, square-cut Burmese sapphire on a chain that sparkled with diamonds. A fortieth birthday gift from her husband that had made the start of a new decade go down a little easier.

She'd had her hair, a deep, honeyed blond, styled in a severe blunt bob just to her jaw with a long, spiky fringe over her arctic blue eyes.

When her husband walked into their bedroom, he looked at her, shook his head.

"I think my heart just stopped. Eliza, how do you manage to get more beautiful every day?"

She turned to check her back and butt in the mirror, then sent him a flirtatious look over her shoulder. "I have to try to keep pace with you."

And he was gorgeous, she thought as he walked over to tip her chin up in that way he had and kiss her. A golden god of stage and screen, that was Brant Fitzhugh. And those sea-green eyes still made her heart sigh, even after a decade.

He was built like a god, too, to her mind, and so known for his physically demanding roles. The sword-wielding rebel who could ride a horse or a woman with equal skill, the bare-fisted brawler, ready to fight for a just cause. The man who climbed mountains, swam the seas, saved the world, and seduced the ladies with equal fervor.

"You're not dressed for the party."

"We've more than an hour yet, and it won't take me long." He gave her an absent kiss before he walked to, then into his closet. "And I know my girl. You're going down to make sure everything is perfect when it's already perfect because it wouldn't dare be otherwise. It's an Eliza Lane affair."

"A Lane/Fitzhugh affair." She walked over, hugged him from behind. "And it will be perfect. The caterer has two new people on the party, so—"

"Which they wouldn't if the new people couldn't handle it. They value you, Eliza."

"I know, I know. Still." She laughed, hugged him harder. "I can't help it."

"Don't I know it. And I know you get nervous before a party—never understood it, but know it. So I'll be down in time for us to have a good-luck-to-us toast before the first guest arrives."

"Which will be—"

"Marjorie and Pilar," they said together, and made her laugh again.

Now she pressed her face into his shoulder. "Oh, what am I going to do without you for six months!"

"It won't be six months. I'll fly back every few weeks."

"I know you'll try."

"I'll do more than try, and no matter what, I'll be there for opening night."

"You'd better."

“Wouldn’t, couldn’t miss it. It’s the part of a lifetime, Eliza. I knew as soon as I read the script.”

“It could’ve been written for you, but . . . Why the hell do you have to shoot on location on the other side of the world—and I know the answer.” She waved her hand in the air as she stepped back. “You need the landscape, the weather, the realism.”

“It’s as important as character, because it is another character.” He kissed her again. “I really see it as the first global blockbuster for the production company.”

She put a smile back on her face. “I just wish I could go with you. Such bad timing, that’s all. I have to be here, you have to be there—thousands of miles away. Why the hell are we in this business, Brant?”

“Because we’re wildly talented narcissists?”

She tilted her head, nodded. “That could be it. I love you anyway—you remember that when your leading lady puts the moves on you. I know she’s a good choice for the role, but—”

“Natalie’s a bright light, but she can’t hold a candle to my wife.”

“She’s ten years younger than your wife.” Eliza rolled her eyes. “Okay, fourteen. And I know why you pushed for her for the part. She’s damn good. And you’re right, I’m working myself up to nervous. I’m going down so I can drive everybody as crazy as I am, and have Dolby approve my ensemble.”

“Didn’t I do that already?”

“You did, but you’re biased. Come down soon, lover, and we’ll have that good-luck drink.”

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It was perfect, of course, the food, the drinks, the music, the flowers all carefully selected. She kept the terrace doors open so guests spilled in and out at will, and New York served as a glittering backdrop.

The living area with its white baby grand and candle-filled fireplace spread out, inviting conversational groups, sing-alongs, dancing. Servers in severe black passed food and drink to any who didn’t want to break away long enough to hit one of the bars or buffets.

Voices—song, laughter, gossip—lifted into the air, trailed through the rooms on the main floor and up the curve of the staircase.

“You’ve done it again.” Sylvie Bowen, a longtime and true friend, toasted Eliza. “You’ve got a certified bash on your hands.”

“It’s just what I wanted. Once rehearsals start, I won’t have the time or energy for a party. And I do love a good party. Plus, with Brant away . . .”

“I know you’ll miss him. But God knows you’ll both be busy. And when you need some companionship, you just call on your newly single pal.”

“You know I’m sorry about you and Mikhail.”

“You never liked him.”

“I never liked that he wasn’t good enough for you, which he proved.”

“Didn’t he just? Cheating Russian bastard. Now I’m a forty-seven-year-old single woman with three divorces under my belt. Two great kids, and that’s more than something. And Jesus, Eliza, I’m a grandmother. A freaking grandmother. And I adore that kid to pieces. But why the hell haven’t I ever found somebody like Brant?”

“Because I grabbed him first.” She looked at her statuesque friend with the fall of chestnut hair, the flashing green eyes. “You’re a beautiful single woman, a talented actor, and an exceptional mother—and friend. And if you’re looking for companionship, there are some very fine specimens of single men at this bash.”

Sylvie shook her head in a definite no. “Not going there for a while, if ever again. Besides, a lot of those single fine specimens are eyeing up the other fine specimens of single men. Or they’re too young.”

“No such thing as too young.” She smiled as Brant crossed over to them, carrying a flute of champagne. Maybe it did scrape a bit, from time to time, that he was four years younger, but she wouldn’t mention that to Sylvie.

“You’re empty-handed, my favorite lady.” He handed Eliza a flute. “Do you need a fresh glass, my second-favorite lady?”

“I’m good, thanks. Couldn’t the Icovs have cloned you?” Sylvie wondered.

“The mad scientists.” Eliza gestured with her glass. “I heard the follow-up’s in pre-production. I should’ve invited the writer—ah, Nadine Furst. And Roarke. We met him a few times, before he married the policewoman.”

“Now, there’s a fine specimen, but alas.” With a sigh, Sylvie drank champagne. “Already taken.”

“As you know, for a lot of people, the taken part doesn’t matter a damn.” She looked stricken as soon as she said it, turned to her friend to lean close, murmur in her ear. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine. I’m absolutely fine. I should mingle. And you should give us a song.”

“You’re right. Here, Brant, take this and mingle with Sylvie. I’ll grab my stage daughter and browbeat her into a duet. It’s just what the crowd needs—and the media will report on tomorrow.”

She handed him her glass, gave Sylvie’s hand a squeeze.

Brant mingled with Sylvie, though conversations died off once Eliza pulled the young Samantha Keene to the piano.

The girl’s cheeks flushed—nerves and pleasure—and it warmed his heart to see Eliza take her so kindly under her wing. At the opening bars, he lifted his glass in toast.

The voices merged, strong Broadway voices, and the confidence, the irony of the lyrics came through. As he drank, he thought Eliza would have a monster hit on her hands yet again. And the girl? Her life would never be quite the same after opening night.

He felt a quick clutch in his belly, his throat, and deemed it sentiment. But it turned to a kind of pain. He took a step back, then another.

With those merged voices soaring through the room, out into the air, up the curving stairs, the glass crashed to the floor.

And he followed.

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She'd had a nice evening going. A nice, quiet evening at home with no pressing work, no duties, and weather conducive to a lazy interlude sitting by the pond with her husband and a bottle of good wine after a steak dinner.

Now Eve Dallas stood in a luxurious Upper West Side penthouse looking down at a body. She judged the body, and the scene, both thoroughly compromised by guests in high-end cocktail wear, the medical techs, and the deceased's widow—apparently a famous actress who'd had to be physically dragged away from her dead husband and given a mild sedative before the first uniforms arrived on scene.

At the moment, the guests—those who hadn't managed to leave before the uniforms secured the scene—along with catering staff, domestic workers, and Christ knew, were settled in other areas of the expansive apartment.

As she opened her field kit to seal her hands, her boots, she turned to the uniform with her.

“Run it through, Officer Rickie.”

“Sir. The nine-one-one came through at twenty-two-forty-three. My partner and I responded and arrived on scene at twenty-two-fifty-one. The MTs, called prior, were on scene when we arrived. The victim, Brant Fitzhugh, of this address, was DOS. Before our arrival, a Dr. James Cyril, a guest, requested the MTs administer a sedative to the victim's spouse, Eliza Lane, and he and another guest, Ms. Sylvie Bowen, escorted Lane upstairs to her bedroom. My partner's on the door there, and considering the number of witnesses, we called in two more uniforms to secure the rest of the guests and staff.”

Rickie paused to clear her throat. “I'd estimate the head count at about two hundred, Lieutenant. Both the doctor on scene and the MTs suspect poisoning. I alerted Dispatch.” Eve nodded as she looked down at the body, the dilated pupils, the red patches on the face, the blue tint to the fingernails.

A classic, she thought, for a reason.

“Looks like a few little bits of glass on the floor.”

“Yes, sir. The victim had a glass of champagne, which broke when he collapsed. Ms. Lane's personal assistant, Dolby Kessler, stated he was afraid someone would cut themselves, so removed the broken glass. He further states, at that time, they assumed Fitzhugh had had a heart attack or seizure.”

“Jesus. We need the glass, Officer.”

“Yes, sir. When the other officers arrived, I retrieved it from the main kitchen recycler and bagged it. I also bagged the cloth he used to mop it up.”

“Good. Find a place where you can start getting names, contacts, and initial statements from guests. Separate the catering staff, the domestic staff, the assistants.”

“Lieutenant? Some of the guests are reporters.”

“Well, fuck me. Separate them, for all the good it’ll do now. My partner’s on the way, Rickie. Make sure she’s cleared through. I’ve got the body.”

Before turning to the body, she scanned the space around it. Streamlined furniture in bold blues and soft greens, glass tables, painted cabinets, a big white piano. Flowers everywhere, and a trio of diamond-bright chandeliers overhead.

A fireplace, white marble, held a couple dozen white candles, still burning. Over it stood a portrait of what she assumed was the widow, a slender blond in sinuous blue, arms lifted, face glowing.

A wall of glass, the doors centering it open to a terrace easily twice the size of her first apartment. More flowers, tables, chairs, a fancy portable bar, all with New York glittering behind it.

The living area opened to a dining area and a long table in that bold blue loaded with fancy food. A second bar, chairs, a small sofa.

She’d come in through a foyer—mirrored walls, potted palms, large closet, private elevator—blocked for the party.

The staircase to the second floor curved gracefully.

The body lay about six feet back from the piano, and wore a pale blue shirt, open at the collar, and a trim black suit. A high-end wrist unit, probably platinum, adorned his left wrist.

His hair—blond, a few shades lighter than his wife’s—had a casual, shaggy look. His face—seriously handsome—sporting some scruff.

She recognized him now, and flipping through her mental files, remembered at least one vid she’d seen with him in the lead. What Roarke called sword and sorcery. He’d been—ah . . . a displaced, sword-slashing, power-tossing wizard.

Damn good battle scenes, she recalled.

Now, with her field kit, she crouched, a tall, long-legged woman with short, choppy brown hair and golden brown cop’s eyes.

To make it official, she took out her Identi-pad, pressed the victim’s thumb.

“The victim is identified as Brant Robert Fitzhugh of this address. Other residences in Malibu, California; East Hampton; and Aruba. Age thirty-nine, Caucasian male. Married Carmandy Proust, 2048, no offspring. Divorced 2049. That was fast,” she muttered. “Married Eliza Lane 2052, no offspring.”

Though she’d dig into it later, she skipped over the rest of his personal data and took out her gauges. Time of death, twenty-two-forty. Gone before the MTs got to him, before the nine-one-one to the police.

“The victim’s fingernails show a blue tint. He exhibits red patches on the face. Pupils are dilated, and there is a distinct scent of almonds. All consistent with cyanide poisoning. ME to

confirm. No visible signs of violence. There's a contusion and laceration on the left temple and cheekbone, most likely a result of striking the floor when he collapsed. ME to confirm."

She sat back on her heels. "In the middle of a big, fancy party. Where'd you get the champagne, Brant? And who wanted you dead?"

She checked his pockets, drew out his pocket 'link. And heard Peabody's familiar clump. It didn't surprise her to hear McNab's—her partner's cohab, and e-man—prance along with it.

"Passcoded." Without looking, Eve held up the 'link. "Seal up, fix that."

"Will do," McNab said cheerfully.

"Shit, damn, *jeez!*" Peabody, her red-streaked black hair bouncing with curls, crouched beside Eve. "That's Brant Fitzhugh. McNab, it's Brant Fitzhugh."

"Yeah, it is. That's a major low."

"We love his vids. Man, he's really great-looking. Even dead. Shit, I can smell almonds. Cyanide. Who'd want to cyanide Brant Fitzhugh?"

"You know, I was just wondering the same thing. Strangely, it's our job to figure that out. Big party," Eve continued as she looked at her partner—and the flouncy, low-cut dress with the skinny shoulder straps. "Looks like you had a party."

"Date night, salsa dancing. We're getting less sucky at it."

"Standard five-digit passcode, Dallas." McNab, in shiny red skin pants, collarless polka-dot shirt, held out the 'link.

"Take a quick look, since you're here, then bag it. Big party," she repeated, "so we've got close to two hundred guests, add staff—catering and personal—tucked away. The new widow's upstairs in her bedroom with a friend and a doctor."

"The widow's Eliza Lane. You know, right? Eliza Lane," Peabody repeated. "She's like legendary."

"She sure as hell will be if she put the cyanide in her husband's champagne."

"Probably not. I know the spouse is first on the list," Peabody continued, "but their romance, marriage, all of it? Also legendary." Frowning, Peabody studied the body while Eve emptied the other pocket contents into an evidence bag. "No cheating on either side—and you know the gossip media's always sniffing for that. They're both loaded, so it wouldn't be money. He was about to start shooting a major vid—and he's one of the exec producers, too—in like, I think, New Zealand, and she's heading back to Broadway for a revival of *Upstage*. She played the daughter decades ago, and it made her a star. Now she's playing the mother, who's the actual star."

Eve simply stared. "How do you know all that?"

Peabody just lifted her shoulders. "I like that stuff."

"Okay." Eve stood up. "McNab, you start with the guests—uniforms on that, too. Have one of them sit on the body for now. Some of the guests are media types."

"Crap."

"Yeah. Peabody, bring in the sweepers, the morgue. Considering the dead guy and the spouse, this is going to be high-profile, so we definitely want Morris. Then take the caterers."

We'll hit the live-ins and assistants after, but we're going to need to let some of these people go. I'll take the spouse."

She started up the long curve of stairs. She heard voices behind a set of closed doors, thought witnesses, and kept going.

She opened other doors as she went. A slick, masculine home office with posters of the victim in leather, hair flying, sword in hand, on horseback with a flat-brimmed hat and gun belt, another of him holding a martini glass and dressed in a tux.

She'd make use of McNab with the data and communication center on the big black-and-silver desk.

She avoided another door where she heard numerous voices, found a guest room—more luxury—a powder room, another office. From the decor—feminine elegance, a wall of photos of the widow alone or with other luminaries, a lot of trophies—she assigned it to the widow.

She approached the double doors at the end of the hall, gave one brisk knock, and opened it.

A woman in a red dress lay on a bed with an arm tossed over her eyes. Beside her, a woman with a fall of reddish-brown hair held her free hand. A man, silver hair, dark suit, active physique, paced in front of the terrace doors.

"It's you!" The woman who sat turned red-rimmed green eyes to Eve. "Oh, thank God! You're Dallas."

"That's right."

"Eliza, sweetie, you're in good hands now. You and—and Brant are in good hands. We were just talking about her, remember? She's the best of the best. I think. I hope. Oh, Eliza."

"I can't, Sylvie. I can't. I can't. Brant. My Brant."

"Officer—"

"Lieutenant," Eve said, and turned to the man as he crossed to her.

"Of course, I'm sorry. Lieutenant, I'm James Cyril. Dr. Cyril. I asked the MTs to give Ms. Lane a sedative. Mild, hardly more than a soother."

"You're Ms. Lane's personal physician?"

"Oh, no, no. I came as Roland's plus-one. Roland Adderson. We've been friends for years, and he knew I was a particular admirer of Ms. Lane. He's the assistant director on her new production of *Upstage*, and—I suppose it doesn't matter."

"Let's step outside for a minute."

She went out into the hall. "This is the first time you've met Ms. Lane?"

"Yes, and Mr. Fitzhugh. It was such a lovely, exciting night until . . ."

"Walk me through what you saw, what you did."

"Of course." He looked to the closed doors. "She's just devastated. I was on the terrace. I was having the time of my life, meeting all these people in theater, in vids, and in such a setting. Then I heard Eliza—Ms. Lane—start to sing."

He pressed a hand to his heart. "The opening from 'Is It Your Life or Mine.' I came in, and I stood just feet away from her and the young actress who'll play her daughter. Beyond



thrilling. Then I heard glass break. I thought nothing of it at first, but someone shouted, someone screamed, and everyone crowded around. Ms. Lane rushed over, and I heard her scream her husband's name. That's when I went over, and saw him on the floor, gasping for air.

"I moved in to try to assist, shouted for someone to call for the medicals, ordered people to move back, give him air, room, but he started to convulse. Eliza was trying to cradle him in her arms, kept saying his name. I told her I was a doctor, and to let me try to help him."

He shook his head. "She wouldn't let him go, but begged me to help him. Unfortunately it was already too late. Even though the MTs came so quickly, there was nothing that could be done. I smelled almonds. I've told no one that, as Ms. Lane was already inconsolable, and I felt I should tell someone in charge. So I am. I believe Mr. Fitzhugh ingested cyanide."

"What happened next?"

"I asked them to give her something to calm her, mild, as I knew the police would come. The MTs would recognize the signs of poisoning as I did. Then Ms. Bowen and I helped Ms. Lane upstairs."

"You were on the terrace. Did you see where Mr. Fitzhugh got the champagne?"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't know it was champagne. There was broken glass, a spill." He glanced at the heel of his hand.

"Cut yourself?"

"Just a nick. I used the en suite to clean it after Ms. Lane came out. Just a scratch. I didn't see where he got the glass. And at the point when I came in, to be honest, I was so focused on Eliza I didn't see anyone else until it happened."

Could've been the point, Eve thought. Taking advantage of everyone looking one way, hand the victim the poisoned champagne.

"I appreciate your help and your cooperation, Dr. Cyril. I'll need your contact information in case we have any follow-up questions."

"Of course. Such a tragedy. A horrible thing. Someone they invited into their home did this horrible thing."

People did horrible things every day, she thought as she took his information. It was her job to see they didn't get away with it.

Once again she gave a brisk knock and opened the door.

She had her first good look at Eliza Lane, as the widow sat up in bed now, wrapped in the arms of her friend.

The eyes that had been bright and clear in the portrait were cloudy from the sedative, swollen from weeping. But they looked directly at Eve.

"I'm all right, Sylvie. I'll be all right." She eased back. "You're the policewoman from the Ilove vid."

"No, that was an actor. I'm Lieutenant Dallas, NYPSD."

"Lieutenant Dallas, NYPSD, you're going to find out who did this to my husband, to my partner, to the love of my goddamn life. And make them pay. It'll never be enough." She covered her mouth with both hands, stifled sobs while her eyes went fierce. "Never be enough."

“Eliza—”

“No, no, I won’t start up again. I won’t. Please, Sylvie, get some water, will you? The dressing room friggie. I shouldn’t have let them give me the damn sedative.” She pushed herself off the bed. “I’m muddled, and I don’t want to be muddled. I want to be clear.”

She moved to the terrace doors, struggled to push them open.

“I need some air.”

Eve moved over, opened them for her.

“I feel a little sick, but I’m not going to be sick. Some air, some water. A minute to get my head clear.”

“Ms. Lane, why do you believe someone caused your husband’s death?”

“Because I saw him, I saw my Brant. He was . . . he was dying in my arms, and his fingernails were going blue. I smelled the almonds. I know you did, too,” she said to Sylvie when her friend came out with glasses of water on a small tray.

“Oh, Eliza, yes. Oh God, I did. But—”

“Cyanide. Just like in *Body of the Crime*.”

“The body of what crime?”

“A vid,” Sylvie explained while fresh tears leaked. “Eliza and I met making that vid.”

“Sylvie and I played sisters, it must be fifteen years ago now. Sylvie’s character put cyanide in brandy, to kill a man pursuing me for my fortune. A man she loved, who betrayed her for money and planned to kill me.”

Eliza sat, took the water, sipped slowly.

“But none of that was real. Oh, Sylvie, how could this be real? What happens now? Will they take him away? Will they take Brant away? Why would anyone want to hurt him? He never hurt anyone. Why would someone do this?”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Ms. Lane. There are questions I need to ask.”

“Should I leave?”

“Oh, no, no.” Eliza reached for Sylvie’s hand. “Please, can she stay? Please.”

“All right. Why don’t you sit down, Ms. Bowen? We’ll make this as quick as possible.”