

Elizabeth Taylor: The Grit and Glamour of an Icon
Kate Andersen Brower
9780063067653

PROLOGUE

*There are no coincidences and nothing happens
without a reason—I will find it.*

—Letter from Elizabeth Taylor to Richard Burton

Rome
1987

The most photographed movie star in the world stood alone on the terrace of the Villa Papa, a ten-thousand-square-foot Roman mansion at 448 Via Appia Pignatelli. The early afternoon light lit up her raven hair, and those legendary blue eyes—that some swore were actually an otherworldly shade of violet—peered out onto the villa’s eight acres, with its lush gardens, crystal clear pool, and tennis court. Elizabeth knew the house’s current occupant, the celebrated director Franco Zeffirelli, very well. This was the home where she had lived during the filming of the 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, where she began her passionate, all-consuming romance with her costar Richard Burton. At that moment, as she leaned over the balcony railing, she wished she could be standing anywhere else in the world. But something kept her there.

Her friend Aprile Millo, an opera singer who was in Rome with Elizabeth helping her prepare for her role in Zeffirelli’s latest film, assumed that Elizabeth was reveling in technicolor memories of Richard Burton, the man she had married twice. Richard had died three years earlier, and even though they had divorced long before his death, the two talked almost every day on the phone.

Elizabeth walked through the primary suite and out onto the terrace. She turned back toward Millo and asked, “Can you give me a second, please?” After a few minutes, she walked back inside and seemed lost in her thoughts. Millo did not realize that this was also the home Elizabeth had shared with the singer Eddie Fisher, who she was married to before Richard, and the place where she and Richard had been hounded by the press at a time when much of the world viewed her as a homewrecker. The house represented a time in her life before the darkness gave way to the light.

In the 1960s, Elizabeth and Richard had practically invented the paparazzi, the term for the aggressive Roman freelance photographers who became famous in Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*. Everyone knew the story: Elizabeth stole Eddie Fisher away from his wife, the actress Debbie Reynolds, and then she set her sights on Richard, whom she stole from *his* wife, Sybil Burton. Of course, it was not quite as simple as that.

Images flashed through Elizabeth’s mind of being trapped inside the villa and hearing the photographer’s ladders hitting its outside walls as they tried to get a photo of her through a window. She thought of the day when a photographer knocked on the front door pretending to be a priest, or another time when a photographer posed as a plumber. There were death threats against her children. One paparazzo punched her in the stomach to try to get a reaction and a

higher price for the photograph. Nothing, it seemed, was sacred. One of their dogs was even stolen—and later returned.

Eventually, plainclothes officers guarded the villa whenever she was there and uniformed police officers walked the grounds as though she were living in a fortress. And no one, it seemed, was deserving of trust without proving themselves first. A publicist on *Cleopatra* used to wear her hair in an elaborate updo until it was discovered that she was hiding a small camera in her chignon when she visited the set. Before the police got involved, one of Elizabeth's assistants opened the front door and slammed it shut as soon as they saw a camera lens trained on them. Determined, the photographer on the other side tried to break the door down, and several people inside the house had to throw their backs against it to keep it shut. Memories of her children using rakes and water hoses to chase the paparazzi out of their garden came rushing back as she stood inside the house for the first time in two decades. Back then, she and Richard had tried to turn it into a fun game of cops and robbers so they could mask the reality that they were actually being hunted. In the years that followed, Elizabeth had tried not to dwell on the damage done to her family—and to herself.

In an envelope marked "ET PERSONAL—DO NOT OPEN" there is a private letter. It is from Elizabeth's archives, part of a meticulously catalogued collection of 7,358 letters, diary entries, articles, and personal notes, and 10,271 photographs. The letter tells the story of that day in 1987 when she went to visit Villa Papa. It is addressed to Richard Burton, who died in 1984, when he was fifty-eight years old. By that point in her life, she had married five other men and would marry once more.

"Richard, my always, forever love, this is really just for me, maybe you can hear and feel my soul," she writes, "I think you probably always can, I think you are aware of everything that goes on in this odd brain of mine. It's always filled with you, but, of course, sometimes more than others. Right now, I am brimming with you, you so pervade my thoughts and my very inner mood that it's like you are in me. I have you, but holy God I don't! I'm not really bitching because I am one of the most fortunate women in the world—to love you and have you love me in return. But God, I miss your arms, your eyes that told me so many things, your voice that taught me to understand and appreciate so many fantastic and yes unknown things to me. I want your body next to mine tonight. I need you to hold me fast and hard and tender."

It is so much more than a love letter. It is a rare and deep plunge inward for a woman who did not believe in doing much soul-searching during her seventy-nine years of rapid-fire love and loss. One marriage ended because of physical abuse, another because of a plane crash, and yet another fell victim to alcoholism. Her two marriages to Richard would haunt her forever.

"Oh God. Richard, I loved you so and I will love you for the rest of my life, just let me say it to you and please hear my heart—I love you, I love you, I love you and I thank God for you. Please God, let him know. And please God. . . . allow me to forgive myself for some of the cruelties I was responsible for (and had so neatly tucked away) and let me make my amends to those I have caused such pain to."

But she would not have taken back those mistakes. “Without a sense of guilt and shame,” she said, “I don’t think one would be nearly as compassionate or understanding.” And compassion is what would later come to define her life.

Elizabeth had weathered so many storms, and standing in that villa in Rome brought some of the worst of them back. There was nothing but devastation in the wake of the sudden death of her magnetic superproducer husband Mike Todd, who was killed in a plane crash in 1958. Feeling half dead, she fell into the arms of Eddie Fisher, who happened to be Mike Todd’s best friend. Fisher was married to the actress Debbie Reynolds at the time, and he was one half of America’s storybook couple. The scandal was the top story in *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* in their September 22, 1958, issues. The *Life* headline read: “TALE OF DEBBIE, EDDIE AND THE WIDOW TODD.”

Then came *Cleopatra*, and she and Fisher, who were newly married, moved with her children to Rome. It was there, on January 22, 1962, on the set of the most expensive movie ever made at the time (it cost \$44 million in 1963, the equivalent of \$415 million today, and it remained the most expensive film for the next thirty years), that she started shooting scenes with the rakishly handsome Welsh actor Richard Burton, who was thirty-six years old. He had piercing blue-green eyes and pockmarks from bouts of childhood acne growing up in a Welsh coal-mining town. He was also married and well known for his habit of seducing his leading ladies. Elizabeth was on the cusp of thirty and at the height of her raw, smoldering sensuality.

Richard had cheated before, but he always went back to his wife. This time, with Elizabeth, it would be different.

In 1987, when she pulled up to Zeffirelli’s opulent villa, Elizabeth, now fifty-five years old, knew that something was wrong. She thought she was going to a different house, the one she had shared with Richard when they were married and filming 1967’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. She called that house “The Happy House.” Instead, she found herself standing in “The House of Pain.” The rooms had an “awful, heavy, humid, before-the-storm atmosphere,” she wrote. The Villa Papa was along the Appian Way, a road constructed in 312 BC to transport military supplies and Roman troops to southeast Italy. Still visible along the Via Appia Antica are indentations from chariots and parts of the same roads that St. Peter and Julius Caesar walked along. Before she set foot inside, Elizabeth turned to Millo and said, “I know this house very well.”

Elizabeth wrote that seven-page handwritten letter to Richard in scrawling cursive on yellow legal paper. It looks like someone was emptying their emotions out in a hurry. Her brain, she wrote, “started flashing and sounds started popping in my head . . . letting in too much light, then too much dark, and I could make out in all this a fight that had taken place some twenty-five years before, with blood, bodyguards, gardeners, and waiters wielding rakes, planks of wood, pots and pans, hoses against the P [paparazzi], armed with anything they could get their hands on and those god damn cameras—trespassing, breaking and entering right in the front door and those awful sounds screaming down 25 years of a fun house slide with the echo of my babies fear still shrieking and

howling behind that same door—closed now, and safe, just as they are and just as I will be when my beloved Franco opens the doors of 1987.”

Being there, in the house, was a gut-wrenching shock, “like some awful mixed-up macabre joke,” she wrote. “I thought I was going to the house we rented during *The Taming of the Shrew*, the house Franco had spent so much time in, and that we had been so happy in. When I heard Franco had bought our old house, I naturally thought it was that one—and I was not at all apprehensive about seeing it. God, it held so many wonderful memories. Liza [Elizabeth’s daughter with Mike Todd] riding on Pipo the donkey, the time the cat climbed too far up the tree, peed all over you, and as you finally grabbed him and threw him down, both the butler and I who had been holding the ladder let go to chase after the cat and leave you to fall out of the tree, and like an arrow finding its mark the end of the ladder with unerring accuracy found my running head and knocked me out. Your sprained ankle, scratched hands, my numbed skull and . . . [the] cat licking his mitts and straightening out his ruffled dignity—Oh God we laughed! . . . I started to think about the other house, and I can’t write anymore tonight—I had no idea there is still so much pain in me. . . . I didn’t realize how much I have buried, and now I have to let it out so that I can try and learn from it all.”

She lived in the Villa Papa during the end of her marriage to Eddie Fisher, which she described as a “slow suicide.” In an unpublished interview, Elizabeth talked about the trauma of their years together. Toward the end, Fisher was using shocking means to try to control and manipulate her, and there were times when he would sit up all night with a gun by his side. “I’d take a sleeping pill to try and just fall off and forget it and go to sleep and he wouldn’t let me. Every time I’d start to close my eyes and nod off, he’d stroke my arm and say, ‘I’m not going to kill you. I wouldn’t shoot you. You’re much too pretty.’ All night long. And then I’d stagger off and go to work. And come home to it. And he’d be unshaven and in his pajamas. And I’d go through the whole thing again at night time. And I ended up like a screaming lunatic . . . he used to tell me that I was his mother and that I couldn’t leave him.”

Elizabeth was one of the most famous celebrities in the world, but alone with her memories she was like anyone else, trying to figure out why fate had brought her there. She was writing for herself, for her children, and for Richard. It was Richard and Mike Todd, who was her third husband and her other great love, who had abandoned her with no warning. “You and Mike made me go on living without you . . . you bastard you married Sally when I had pneumonia and couldn’t go on stage that night and half the audience left and rather than play to a half-empty theater you got drunk, flew to Vegas and got married. You son of a bitch, you know we should and would have married three times. But that was near the end—Via Pignatelli [Villa Papa] was near the beginning, the real beginning.”

Decades after that visit in 1987, propped up in bed by plush pillows in her master suite on the second floor of her Bel Air home, Elizabeth still could not escape Richard’s memory. She wanted it that way. She made sure that night-blooming jasmine was planted near her terrace, so that she could open her bedroom window and bring back memories of Richard and their escapes to their home in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

“I smelled Richard,” she said in a quiet voice. “It was like he was there.”

Her garden provided a peaceful sanctuary, but there were many days when Elizabeth did not leave her bedroom suite. “I decided that if I’m going to be sick, then I’m going to have a gorgeous bedroom,” she said in 1997. It was her favorite room in the house, and it was decorated in shades of blue and white. She had a canopy bed with Pratesi and D. Porthault sheets. When she went to the hospital—which was quite often—she took her pillows, and sometimes those expensive sheets, along with her.

Her visit to Zeffirelli’s house took her by surprise because, unlike the wafts of jasmine that made their way up to her bedroom suite, the bad times came creeping in. Maybe fate brought her there to help her say good-bye to Richard one last time.

Later that night in her hotel room in Rome in 1987, she wrote the letter to Richard and drank a Brandy Alexander, even though she was on the wagon. Then, she did what she always did: She got on with it.