

*Fade into Gray*

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*Alyce Holmes'*

*"YELLOW ROSE NOVELS COLLECTION"*



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# ***Fade into Gray***

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Three yellow roses are arranged in a cluster, with one rose at the top and two below it. The roses are in full bloom, showing the characteristic spiral pattern of the petals. The background is a light, textured white.

**To The Memory**

**Of My Mother**

**Maxie Rene Holmes**

**The Lady of the Yellow Rose**

**Victory and Triumph**

## *Fade into Gray*

**T**hat night wasn't the first time Jared was virtually comatose with mind numbing boredom. The restaurant was trendy. The meal and service were superb. Those were the ear markings of an enjoyable evening. The only exception was the company.

He and Sabrina had been a couple for the last year. She was beautiful, sophisticated and everything any red-blooded man could possibly want. In the last few weeks, she'd made no secret she was prepared to soon wear his ring. He felt it with every comment and gesture and it started to make him feel suffocated.

They were spending that evening with a group of Sabrina's friends and she loved it as much as he came to hate it. During the last hour, one couple regaled them with tales of a recent trip abroad. Jared tried to hide his feelings as he smiled in all the right places and questioned all the right things.

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He reached for his glass and signaled the waiter at the same time. "I'll have the check."

Sabrina's slim hand wrapped around his forearm. "Do we have to leave?" she pouted. "It's so early."

Every muscle across Jared's chest tightened and a plastered smile froze on his lips as he glanced at his watch. "Maybe next time," he uttered. "I have meetings in the morning." He dropped a stack of bills inside the leather pouch the waiter discretely sat near his elbow.

Jared was a man who relied on his instincts since historically they'd served him well. Sabrina deserved something his heart wasn't able to give. With no definitive plan in mind for the right time, that night he reached a decision. When he told her there was no yelling, screaming or ceramic vases hurled across the room. No harsh, nasty words of profanity, anger or regret were uttered.

That was the scenario he expected and was surprised when the opposite was true. With every word, he saw a series of expressions flash across her face. Jared took no pleasure in hurting her as he saw the light in her eyes dim before defensive shields were lifted.

This wasn't the first time he'd broken things off with a woman and that's one of the reasons he expected the worse. Instead of slapping his face, she chose to be gracious. The parting kiss on her cheek was barely felt as she accepted it and Jared's final exit held no particular fanfare.

He stood outside the door for a fraction of time. His fist was ready to knock before his open palm pressed against the hard, wooden panel and he exhaled a breath and stepped back. Sitting behind the wheel of his car, he stared through the windshield before finally sliding his key into the ignition and turning on the stereo. Arriving home, Jared needed the drink he poured before stepping onto the balcony.

The view across the city with its silver lights was always breathtaking. The traffic below was dense and he heard a

distant car horn in the background. Jared leaned one elbow against the metal bannister and stared back into the living room.

He'd been living here a few months and Sabrina decorated the place with the help of a design firm. It was nice, but didn't have the masculine touch that fit him best. He would have preferred a black leather sofa, an overstuffed ottoman and fewer flowers and scented candles. At the time he hardly paid attention since he'd been too busy with the completion of a project to give it much thought. Sabrina had the freedom to do as she pleased. By the time the place was finished and he'd shelled out a ton of cash, it was too late.

Jared sighed as he finished his drink and walked back into the room. Sitting on the sofa he hated, he switched on the television and stared at the screen. He was restless and after several hours, he drove to his office. It was deathly quiet and his various thoughts rolled in too many directions for his mind to concentrate on a solitary task. Early morning loomed on the horizon as gold and orange hues peaked through the mass of skyscrapers that made up the view from his window. The bulk of the corporate staff wasn't due for another two hours.

*Broderick-Donaldson Construction* was a family owned operation founded by a set of brothers and one cousin. They began as a small outfit handling office renovations. Soon that branched into the housing market with single family dwellings, subdivisions and apartment complexes. Today the company had three divisions including industrial, commercial and residential.

Jared's father, Conrad was the eldest Broderick brother. He controlled the commercial side in the construction of corporate offices and shopping malls. The youngest brother was Harrison. His team specialized in luxury condominiums, private homes and community development. Jay Donaldson handled industrial and governmental contracts and worked closely with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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Thirty years since its inception, they'd grown into one of the most prominent and well-known minority construction outfits in the state of New York with a reputation for architectural design and the highest levels of quality. Now the second generation was also at the helm including Jared and his cousins Cole and Stephanie.

Turning from his computer monitor, he placed his elbows on the desk. He tried to convince himself he'd done the right thing; the honest thing by ending his relationship instead of letting Sabrina continue to believe they had a future with marriage, a house and children. Squaring his shoulders, Jared walked to the refrigerator hidden behind a cabinet and got a bottle of water. Two anti-acid tablets floated to the bottom of a glass as nitrogen enriched bubbles sprang to the surface. He sat the mixture in the middle of his desk and waited three full minutes before lifting it to his lips before his office door burst open, startled him and splashes of liquid spilled over his tie.

"Sorry about that." Cole stepped into the office and pointed at the glass. "If that's what I think it is, wouldn't the hair of the dog be a better idea?"

Jared reached for tissue to wipe moisture from his tie as profanity sprang to his lips and he shot an angry glare in his cousin's direction.

Cole ignored him and dropped into a chair. "From the looks of it, you didn't have a great night."

"It could have been better," Jared moaned. "How'd you know I was here?"

"I saw your car in the parking lot, genius," Cole smirked. "It wasn't exactly some fancy deductive reasoning on my part."

"I guess not," Jared snapped. "I know why I'm here at the butt-crack of dawn. What's your story?"

"I have a lot to handle this morning," Cole informed him. "A big chunk of it includes you so I need your undivided attention."



“This is bound to be good,” Jared returned, sarcastically. “State your case.”

“While you were busy doing whatever, I was on an overseas conference call from Tokyo with our fathers and neither one of them is happy with me. They’re concerned about the Highlander project.” When Jared started to speak, Cole cut him off. “Before you state the obvious and tell me I handle the residential side of things, bear something in mind. The recent problems at Highlander can affect the *Hanzatsu* deal. That means we’re all in this together.”

*Hanzatsu* was a multi-billion-dollar Japanese global conglomerate. They were expanding their current market with new business ventures that would bring them to the United States. There were several general construction companies vying for the contract to build the vast complex that would spread across several city miles and encompass eight-hundred thousand square feet of space. The largest portion of the building would be the technology center, laboratories and testing facilities.

That would be closely followed by the main headquarters made up of four floors of offices and conference rooms at a combined cost of three billion dollars. After almost four years, the design was complete and the next stage would be closed bids from construction agencies. In the running was *Frasier-Wilkins Construction*, *the Holston Agency*, *Broderick-Donaldson*, *Graham, Asher and Pitts*, *Blue Dot* and *Meyers Contracting*.

There were few days the news didn’t cover some aspect of the project including the political battle between the location of the complex and the possibility of bringing thousands of industrial and technical jobs to the chosen state. In the past few weeks, *B&D* was featured in the press and not because of their ties to the project. Instead, it was due to recent accidents at Highlander. The last one sent their site manager to the hospital with a broken leg and a concussion. It wasn’t long

before they were served a law suit that spelled a massive hit to a thirty-year history of work place safety.

“I’m swimming in crap up to my eye sockets. Jay is hot as hell and chewing nails. You know the Donaldson temper. Dad and Uncle Conrad are there to support him in putting our bid proposal together.” Cole stood up and started pacing through the office.

“I saw preliminary plans,” Jared told him. “It’s a monster.”

“Building a complex of this size and magnitude will catapult us through the roof,” Cole said. “We’ll have more business than we can handle across all divisions of the company.”

“Word of our issues in the states made it to Japan. How?”

“That’s anyone’s guess. All we know is it reached straight to the ears of some *Hanzatsu* representatives.” Cole stopped pacing long enough to grip the back of a chair. “You know Stephanie received paperwork from the Garvin family for medical expenses, lost wages, pain and suffering. I don’t want to think what would’ve happened if Craig Nelson died. We’ve been in meetings for days. Our cousin is a smart lady, but this is going to be an uphill battle.”

“It’s a battle that will get us nowhere,” Jared moaned. “I’m assuming making a few quick settlements out of court aren’t a good idea. That means we need other options.”

“True that. A settlement would look as if we’re accepting fault,” Cole muttered. “The *B&D* reputation could go right out the window along with *Hanzatsu*. These are not the type of people you can make explanations to for any type of business weakness. We have to present the best there is to offer. They won’t accept anything less and neither will OSHA.”

“We’ve never had a problem with the Occupational Safety and Health Association before. They know our track record,” Jared stated.

“Our past record won’t matter. It’s all about what we’ve done lately. We’re in uncharted water so I’ve been ordered

to come up with a plan.” Cole took a deep breath. “We’ve decided to put someone on the inside to find out what’s really going on.”

“I see,” Jared said, quietly. “Who did you have in mind?”

“You,” his cousin returned, easily.

“You just lost me.”

“We need you to go in undercover and not only take over where Craig left off, but to investigate these accidents.”

“We’re sure they are accidents?”

“Relatively sure.”

“This sounds like the sort of thing Trent would do in a heartbeat.”

Trent was Jared’s older brother. He should have been the one groomed to sit at their father’s right hand. Much to Conrad’s dismay, Trent never wanted to join the family business. Instead, he spent years as a police officer until the day his partner took a bullet meant for him and he switched gears and became a private investigator. Last year, he was hired to probe into misconduct at *Duvall Beverage and Distribution*. During the course of his investigation, he solved the case, brought several people to justice and found himself a wife.

“Trent’s name came up,” Cole admitted. “He’s a newlywed. Let’s give him space to maneuver that one. In all honesty, he doesn’t know the construction business like we do.” He leaned forward. “If you really want me to spell it out for you, I will. You’re more comfortable in a pair of old jeans than that business suit you’re wearing. You and Trent have that much in common.

“I have to agree,” Jared returned. “This serves me right for missing a conference call.”

Cole laughed. “Actually this was Stephanie’s idea.”

“Remind me to thank her later,” he grimaced. “Any particular reason she didn’t think of you?”

“I’ve been on site a few times. They know me.”

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“I don’t care that it’s seven in the morning,” Jared huffed, glaring at his glass of Alka Seltzer. “I need a real drink.”

“Just tell me whether or not you’re on board.”

“Yeah. I’m right there in the boat with you and Stephanie in the middle of this crap storm,” Jared agreed. “I’ll start with the Nelson incident. It might help take my mind off other things.”

“Like Sabrina?” Cole surmised.

“More deductive reasoning?”

“Again no. I recognize the signs. I’ve seen that particular brand of blood shot eyes before.”

“I ended things with her last night,” Jared said.

“Is that a fact? Why?”

“I wasn’t in love with her and I didn’t want to keep stringing her along.”

“She was in love with you. Anyone with one good eye could see it.”

“Sabrina loved something,” Jared said. “I’m not exactly sure it was me. This was for the best.”

“If you recall, Nancy and I broke up a few months before I finally came to realize there was no other woman out there for me.”

“You were lucky when you found her and I believe Trent scored well too. This wasn’t right for me.” Jared was adamant as he shook his head. “I need something more.”

“Beauty and brains doesn’t work for you?” Cole was being sarcastic and Jared knew it. “Tell you what. Help me get this project handled and I’ll help you start a Lonely Hearts Club and buy out an ABC store. Then you can get hammered ‘til your heart’s content. Hell, I’ll even join you,” Cole smirked. “In the meantime, I’m going to alert Dusty Monroe and Mitch Jacobs to expect you this morning. Get changed into something less flashy than pin stripe and head on over,” he pointed.

“Yeah,” Jared threw his hands up. “Go ahead. This will be interesting. I’ll study the plans and current schedule sometime today and see what you’ve gotten me into. If I’m going to do this, I want to go in fully loaded.”

As the early dawn arrived, all she could hear was silence. Sabrina pulled off her visors and rolled to her back. It took a minute for her eyes to focus and when they did, she spotted two wafting cobwebs in the crystal chandelier that hung over her bed. She watched them billow, softly floating between the clear, glass crystals. Under other circumstances, that would have angered her enough to fire her present housekeeper, but this morning she no longer cared.

The woman would probably quit the minute she saw the mess Sabrina made in the living room and the shards of glass that littered the floor. An ugly smile touched her lips before she turned and spotted the empty scotch glass sitting on the bedside table. She sat up and reached for it before she threw it at the wall to hear it shatter and spread more glass confetti. Sabrina groaned, coiled into a tight ball and rolled over against the mattress.

Breaking everything in sight should have happened last night in Jared’s apartment. Instead, she sat there and let him shatter her world. She noticed he was quiet that evening; lost in contemplated thought to such a degree that she read things into it that weren’t there. She saw him watching her so intently. When he said he wanted to talk, she thought he was going to propose.

She practiced her acceptance speech for weeks and knew exactly how she’d respond the moment he’d pull a velvet box from his pocket. Sabrina also believed that proposal would be followed by love making that would last until the early hours. He should be there now and a diamond should be on her finger.

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The worse part was everyone would know and she had to devise a way to save face. She had every intention of telling her friends the split was her idea since he was dragging his feet and it was time to cut bait. They'd believe her and trust her word in the matter. Chances were slim they'd have the opportunity to question Jared. If so, he was private enough to never be forthcoming.

Most women in this position would have called their mother and poured their hearts out. Sabrina couldn't do that because her mother wasn't the caring type. She wasn't cold or aloft either. Instead, she was emotionally and physically absent. It seemed the more Sabrina needed and craved her mother's love and affection, the more she pulled away.

As a result, she sought to console herself with the attention of various men. Jared was the last in a long string of them. Just like the others, he'd come to regret his decision. When he did, she vowed she wouldn't be waiting in the wings. As she sank deeper into the warmth of her expensive bedding, Sabrina knew that wasn't entirely true. He'd come back and she'd be there, but she didn't plan to make it easy for him.

Jared pulled through the back gate of the construction site. Passing the *Broderick-Donaldson* sign, he suppressed a smile as memories of going to sites with his father flashed through his mind. Back then, he and Trent didn't understand the significance to what their family was doing. It wasn't until their formative years when they moved from a nice house in the suburbs to the estate where their parents now resided that the enormity of their financial situation hit home.

Exiting the truck, Jared pulled a nap sack over his shoulder as he walked across the sandy gravel that peaked beneath a thin layer of frost. Winter did its worse for the season and with every passing day the snow was melting off and gray mist broke away to reveal portions of blue sky.

A triple wide trailer, that was stationed to the rear of the complex, was being used as the site office for the duration of the project. He climbed the four stairs and pushed the door open. There was office space taking up two entire sections with engineering tables in the center portion, restrooms and a break area along the rear.

He smelled coffee and walked in that direction. A stack of cups sat next to a silver vat. Jared ignored the tray of pastries and poured a cup of coffee before moving to the empty desk near the window and sat in a worn out chair that clearly saw better days.

Finishing his coffee, he looked through the window to see several crew members coming across the field. One lead the group and Jared could tell from the pace of his walk that he was angry. Pounding into the trailer, he threw down the load he was carrying as the others followed closely behind.

“Don’t be so sensitive, Mitch. We were only kidding around. You’re too touchy. That’s another reason I think you’d be happier at home taking care of a house, nursing some babies and cooking dinner for your man; if you’re not too much of a man yourself. I think maybe that’s it.”

“I don’t give a damn what you think, Tim,” Mitch shouted back. “Maybe you’d be better off in a cave and dragging your Neanderthal knuckles across the ground. If you ever disrespect me like that again, my knuckles will be aimed straight across your jaw. I’ll rip your head off first and finish with your naughty parts.”

The one they called Mitch snatched off a hard hat and a long ponytail dropped out. She turned on the heels of her boots and froze solid when she saw Jared. They were all so engrossed in the exchange no one seemed to notice him. The two men had the grace to look embarrassed, but the woman held her ground.

“Morning,” Jared said, quietly. “That was quite an entrance.”

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“Holy smoke,” she muttered, under her breath and threw the hard hat on the desk.

“Morning,” one of the men returned. “Are you a representative from one of our sub-contractors?”

“I’m Jared Spears. I’ve been assigned as the new project manager to replace Craig Nelson.”

Mitch pursed her lips. “We did get the word.”

“Did you now?” Jared asked, as he surveyed part of his new team. “Is this how things normally work around here?”

“No. It not usually like this,” she offered.

The men were practically standing at attention with two sets of weary eyes that began to look worried.

“I hardly think it matters if you knew who I was or not. Your behavior wasn’t what I’d call professional. Let’s have introductions.”

“Some people call me Mitch. It’s short for Michelle,” the woman responded and Jared turned to the others.

“Tim Peterson.”

“Randy Owens, sir.”

“Sir is more formal than I’d prefer. My name is Jared,” he instructed. “I’d like to have a word with the head team.”

“I’ll call Dusty for you,” Mitch offered, reaching for the radio that was fastened to her hip.

Jared was caught off guard. He didn’t expect to see some Nubian Queen with dark, angry eyes and a razor sharp tongue. He thought Mitch would be a balding, stocky man with a sun beaten face. Instead, his eyes traveled from the curve of her worn, steel toed boots to a pair of black jeans and a denim shirt. The top two buttons of a leather jacket were unfastened and faux fur surrounded the collar. Her skin was the color of honey and her eyes were dark brown.

In that moment, those eyes were watching him. What Michelle saw was a tall arrogant, black man. She normally liked chocolate skin and piercing eyes. Jared’s shoes were still new with very few scuff marks. His pants were creased a little



too sharply and anyone could see his shirt had been dry cleaned. She was immediately leery since she believed he might be another male chauvinist who hated the idea of having a woman on site. This man looked as if he didn't know the first thing about the industry. How could he be their new boss?

"Nice to meet you gentlemen. I don't want to keep you." Jared's tone was low, but it carried authority and both Tim and Randy reacted by grabbing hard hats and leaving the trailer. Jared was sure news of his arrival would spread across the site like a wildfire in summer.

"Dusty's tied up. He'll meet with us directly," she told him, as she refastened her radio.

"That's fine. Can you point me in the direction of my desk?" he asked. "I put my stuff on that one."

Michelle pulled her eyes off his face and pointed to a desk stationed near the back. "Craig used that one. He liked to be off to himself."

"Okay. Let me move my gear."

She watched long strides walk to the back as he dropped his bag on Craig's old desk.

"This should do nicely." He sat in the chair that cried just as badly as the first one.

"I know this wasn't the best welcome on the planet," Michelle said. "I'm sorry we didn't make a good first impression."

"I have to agree," he nodded. "Hopefully, there's room for improvement."

"I think so," she mumbled. "Let me know if there's anything you need me to do to...to help with the transition."

Michelle hated being lost for words and she was angry with herself for that and the fact that this man was knocking her off balance.

"There's a lot I'm going to need. I already know we're way behind schedule. I've seen the numbers."

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“Craig couldn’t seem to keep us on track. There have been issues,” Michelle admitted.

“Issues?” Jared’s brows creased.

Michelle felt heat rise in her chest again. She was one of the lead engineers on the project, Craig was the manager and as supervisor, Dusty lead the crew. This man made it sound as if it was their fault. She choked down a biting comment.

“I’d like to take a tour of the site and maybe we’ll run into Dusty along the way.”

“That can be arranged without any trouble.” She finally found her voice. “You inherited a good team for the most part. *B&D* hires the best in the business.”

“I’m aware. Headquarters gave me a run down on things.”

Her head cocked to one side. “Where were you before?”

Jared knew that question would come so he and Cole prepared a back story. “I’ve been with *B&D* a couple of years dealing mostly with the commercial side of the operation. Have you heard of the Benedict Project or the Gordon Building?”

“I’ve heard of both. They were big.”

“They each lasted well over two years,” he confirmed. “This one has about six to eight months left until completion?”

“Something like that,” she returned.

“Let’s get it back on track so on with that tour.”

“Do you have a hard hat? You can grab one of those.” She pointed to the rack of yellow hats lining the wall.

“I have my own,” Jared replied. “I’ll get it from my truck on the way out.”

Michelle caught the arrogance that flashed across his face. “No problem. Let’s go.”

She fastened her coat further to the neck and jammed her hands into the pockets before following him outside. She watched the easy way his body moved as he walked down the stairs and over to a black Ford pick-up. He unlocked the door

and reached into the rear seat. Jared was a tall man and the hat added a few more inches.

He was wearing a leather coat that was unfastened despite the weather. He'd pushed the sleeves as far as they could go and revealed muscled forearms. There was a watch on his left wrist and a gold ring sparkled on his small finger, but there was no wedding band. Michelle cleared her throat and shifted her eyes in another direction when he turned to face her.

"All set," Jared replied. "Show me what you've got."

The make-shift walkway from the office trailer to the main building was cleared of snow that was shoveled to both sides.

"We could get a lot more done if the weather cooperated a bit," she said.

They entered the building and Jared stared up at the metal structure where windows would eventually be installed. He saw the fittings for wall attachments and door openings for various rooms. This was the rear entrance and they walked around the large structure beyond areas that would become conference rooms and meeting locations and further towards the front lobby with its southern exposure.

"This is good work," Jared declared.

Michelle thought he sounded surprised and that made her angry all over again.

"Tell me more about the team I've just taken."

"You already know Dusty is your second. You met Tim and Randy."

"So, I did."

"They can be a handful, but don't let that fool you," she insisted.

His first introduction to those men was Michelle berating them. For the second time, she was singing their praises. Her behavior was hard to read.

"Hey there," someone shouted behind them. "Even if Mitch hadn't called me about you, the rumor mill would have

done it. Everyone is talking about the new boss. I'm Dusty Monroe."

Dusty was a large man with a sandy blond beard and long hair tied behind his back. Cole's physical description for him was dead on target. Jared shook a calloused hand that swallowed his completely and crushed the fingers.

"Pardon my hand." Dusty rubbed it down his pants leg. "It's Alaska cold today and I'm one of those guys who can't work in gloves."

"Not a problem," Jared returned, flexing his fingers. "I'm glad to meet you. Michelle was showing me around."

"Nothing wrong with that," Dusty nodded. "Makes sense. What's next on your agenda?"

"I'd like to have a sit down with the two of you."

"Okay," Dusty agreed. "Hopefully some place warm."

Michelle knew this team well. She saw the slight narrowing of Dusty's eyes when he first walked up and the stiffness he fought to keep out of his voice by sounding overly thrilled. He had to play nice with the new guy and pretend he wasn't slighted not to have been offered the lead position after Craig. It was hard to blame him. Dusty knew every square inch of this building.

Apparently, the *B&D* team had something different in mind. It was just as well she told herself. Dusty probably wasn't the right man to dig them out of this hole and she wasn't sure Jared was either. As they walked back to the site trailer, she glanced at him from the corner of her eye. He wanted to have a meeting with them and frankly she was anxious to hear what he had to say. What in the world was corporate thinking to send this superior man to them?

Michelle had a bad feeling things were about to go from bad to worse. The last thing she needed was her name associated with a failed project. Maybe it was time to pull out her resume and shake off the dust.

## Alyce Holmes

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*You've just finished reading the first chapter of Alyce Holmes' **Fade into Gray**. If you want to know more about Michelle Jacobs and Jared Broderick, please purchase your choice of a Paperback or CD on our website. Thank you for becoming an Alyce Holmes fan.*

