

*DEVIL'S
DELIGHT*

A cluster of three vibrant yellow roses with green leaves, centered on the page. The roses are in various stages of bloom, with some showing the spiral pattern of the petals.

**To The Memory
Of My Mother
Maxie Rene Holmes
The Lady of the Yellow Rose
My Source of Inspiration**

**To The Memory of My Cousin,
Carol "Bunny" Holmes
For Your Shining Spirit
Thank You For Believing In Me**

THE BEGINNING

Mayor Alexander Covington was a man driven by ambition. He gathered a group of loyal campaign strategists who shared a single common purpose. Their combined goal was to get him elected as the next Senator to the State of Nevada. Alec brought with him the prestige of once being a senior partner in the law firm of Peterson, McKinley and Kahn. He started his political career as a City Councilman and worked hard to keep his name in print and featured in the news as he initiated and voted on well needed legislation that aided his district and the city.

He had been considering the idea of running for a higher office for a long time and the final decision had taken him nearly a year to complete. Since the announcement was made, his campaign manager, Gary Saunders had run a flawless movement. If the polls were any indication to the depth of Alec's popularity, he had a substantial lead over his opponents.

Tonight there would be another fundraiser that would be used as a chance to rub elbows with the elite members of the community. Each one was planned as part of the overall

campaign and they had been carefully orchestrated. Guests would be expected to produce huge checks that would help Alec move his agenda forward.

They were approaching the final months and every step was critical. All eyes had been turned to this race. His previous campaigns for City Council and Mayor had been based on district levels and bore no comparison to this one. This campaign was being waged throughout the state placing it on a much greater scale.

Alec's lips pressed into a hard, thin line as he thought of his most ardent rival, Mason Wilder. He was hosting his own fundraiser that night at a hotel across town. The fact that they had a completely different set of political and financial backers didn't matter. The Wilder name was widely known and respected. His entire family was entrenched in politics to a degree that was reminiscent of the Kennedy era.

Many were Congressmen, Senators, Councilmen or Lobbyists. Mason made no secret that his ultimate goal was set for the highest office in the land. He had been a Senator for three terms and this was going to be his last run for that office before formally announcing his bid as a Presidential candidate on the Republican ticket. To that end, he made sure to attend the noted charity functions and high profile gatherings that kept him in the press and allowed him to hobnob with wealthy peers who were funding his re-election campaign.

Mason was a master at political tricks as he put more time and money into smear tactics than declaring his own agenda. During his last term in office, he'd done little to make political or economic change. He didn't create new legislation or draft any new bills. Very often he wasn't in attendance to vote on the passage of key legislation.

Somehow the public image he portrayed was done so well that his constituency seemed to ignore these glaring facts. However, several key members of Alec's campaign did not

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and had to be reminded on more than one occasion that the type of campaign Mason ran was not in the same category that Alec would endorse.

Forcing those thoughts to the back of his mind, he stole a sideways glance in his wife's direction. The pale gray of her Vera Wang gown was in direct contrast to his sleek, black tuxedo. The jewelry she'd chosen for the occasion was diamonds and her hair was styled to show off her dark tresses and signature widow's peak.

Francis looked sensational and she was positive Alec approved. Politics was her husband's business and pleasing Alec was hers. Right now his mood was brooding, but she was sure he would pour on liquid charm the minute he stepped from the car. She knew that almost as well as she knew what was expected of her. Gary made sure of that.

He was sitting directly across from her and next to him was Eve Randall, Alec's top press agent. Together Eve, Gary and hundreds of people across Nevada shaped Alec's public image as the right man to help run the state.

"We're almost there," Gary announced. "You two can make an entrance down the red carpet. Eve and I will follow and meet you inside. All the major press corps should be here."

"The only one I'm worried about is that reporter from WKGF," Eve cut in. "Her name is Haley Adams and she's working hard to make a name for herself."

"Make sure she doesn't make it by raking Alec over the coals," Gary snapped.

"Haven't we been using the press for the last several years?" Alec's tone was dry as he reached for his wife's hand and threaded his fingers into hers. "My record speaks for itself."

Eve's eyes met his in the darkness. "This woman is working an angle," she warned. "Beside her own column,

she's been anchoring a political segment and there aren't many days that go by without your name on her lips." She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Don't give it a second thought. I can always run interference."

"Instead of doing that be sure she has an agenda and she's not just an ambitious reporter. There is a difference." Alec's fingers tightened around Francis' hand. "Otherwise, I don't need you to block anything since I have nothing to hide. If I do, I expect my campaign manager and one of my top aides to clue me in."

"That's not what she meant Alec and you know it," Gary interjected. "It's our job to protect your image. If this woman has a scheme up her sleeve, she's going to keep digging. Everyone has something to hide. Including you."

Alec's heated retort fell silent as the limousine pulled to a stop in front of the Genoa Lakes Resort that was located at the base of the Sierra just south of Carson City. The resort was rustic and elegant with mountain and valley views overlooking a massive golf course and putting greens. A red carpet was extended between velvet draped banisters to block people from crowding the front entrance.

The rear door was opened by a uniformed attendant and Alec and Francis exited the vehicle. They were a striking couple as they posed for the first set of pictures. Alec's hand circled Francis' waist when the sudden flash of camera bulbs temporarily blinded her.

The banquet hall they'd reserved for the evening was on the lower level where dozens of circular tables were draped with white linen cloths and centerpieces housing flowers in red, white and blue and small replicas of the Nevada state flag. At the front of the room, there was a long kidney shaped table that was set up for the candidate and special VIP guests.

"Mr. Senator." A man stepped forward through the crowd and shook Alec's hand.

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"That's a bit premature, Brian."

"I don't think so," he replied.

Brian Stevens had been a colleague. He and his wife, Loren were two of their closest friends. Brian had been the one who lead Alec to victory in his first bids as Councilman and Mayor. However, when he made the decision to put his hat in the ring as a Senatorial candidate, Alec called in his Yale Law School classmate instead.

"I believe in a few short months calling you Mr. Senator will be the way of it. I know how to read the signs."

"That's exactly what I've been telling him." Gary and Eve made their way down the red carpet. "It's always good to see you at these events, Brian. Having the support of Alec's former law firm always looks good. Anything that makes Alec look good, makes my job that much easier. I'm going to get this man elected if it's the last thing I do."

"I don't doubt that for a minute," Brian sniped. "Alec and Francis know they can always count on us." His voice carried a raw edge before he turned back to his friend. "I'll speak with you later. Good luck tonight."

"I don't like that guy," Gary muttered. "But he is a vote."

"Don't worry about him. I think the feeling is mutual," Eve countered. "There aren't many people who do like you. Why is that?"

"Because I don't mind telling them where to go," he smirked. "I don't have time to waste worrying about people's feelings."

Francis suppressed the urge to speak. There were too many cameras and she was well trained in playing the dutiful spouse. However, she never totally understood her husband's choice. Gary was good. There was no mistaking that, but she knew that Brian was just as good. She also knew that his friendship was unwavering and he would have walked through fire for Alec. Gary had his own motives as if in

securing Alec's election, he could live vicariously through him.

"We need to stay one step ahead of everything tonight," he ordered.

"My thoughts exactly. As always, play to the cameras," Eve confirmed, as she turned in line and stood next to Gary as a row of reporters circled in front of them.

Alec and Francis took their places at the head of a receiving line and stood patiently as numerous photographs were taken. Once that had run its course, Alec began to circle the room and Francis went to the VIP table to greet other guests.

Gary waited until they'd moved away from earshot before he turned towards Eve. "Of all the reporters, Haley Adams and her cameraman weren't getting a piece of the photo op. If you really think she's a problem, throw her a bone."

"What about Alec?"

"Let me worry about him. Since he thinks there shouldn't be a problem, let's test the water and see if we're dealing with a shark."

"And what if we are?"

"Take aim and shot. Haley won't be one of our problems. If she is an enemy, we need to be sure to keep her close."

"She's doing a series on the candidate's wives. We've had requests for Francis. She's good in front of the camera. We can use that."

"True enough. Dangle Francis in front of her and see what happens."

Eve couldn't recall a time she'd had a conversation with Francis that didn't involve the campaign. She had a hard fast rule to always keep her relationship with the candidate's spouse at arm's length. She was hired to fix problems and win elections. She wasn't there to make friends. Work was Eve's only companion and after a string of failed affairs, she

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wanted to keep it that way, preferring to work in the background of things in order to push the candidate forward.

No one was in that room tonight because Eve Randall was running for political office, but they were there because of her efforts. Her P.R. team was responsible for keeping ahead of the media. The press releases they'd created for this event had been good work and the associated journalists in the hall were proof positive of that effort.

The only exception was Haley Adams. She had the hungry gaze of a tigress. That look was underling the fact that she was looking extremely chic in a royal colored evening gown and had her hair perfectly styled. In other circumstances, Eve might have called her a friend. Haley was a determined, professional woman and more in line with Eve's type than Francis and her socialite friends.

Eve set her sights, jutted her chin forward and marched across the room until she was standing so close she could catch the scent of her expensive Chanel perfume. "Good evening."

"Ms. Randall." Haley nodded her head so slightly, it was almost undetectable. "To what do I owe this sudden distinction?"

"Meaning?"

"Don't be coy. I've been treated like a leper in the Covington camp. What happened that changed my status?"

"I don't know what you mean," Eve lied. "You've been invited to every fundraiser and event."

"Come now. We're both intelligent women. Are we really going to stand here and play cat and mouse with each other? I haven't gotten where I am by playing games or playing it safe. I've had to work twice as hard to be recognized half as much. Judging from what I've seen of Gary Saunders, I'm sure you had to do the same thing."

Haley was sharper than Eve originally thought and it threw her off guard. She recovered herself quickly enough, but refused to give her the satisfaction of confirming her suspicions. Instead, she replied. "I've seen the puff pieces you started on the candidate's wives and I wondered if they are only a prelude to a sharper series. What are you hoping to achieve?"

Eve knew she'd hit a nerve when she heard Haley's sharp intake of breath and she arched her back slightly at the insult.

"I don't write puff, Ms. Randall. A better question might be to ask what you are trying to hide."

"Nothing. He is what you see."

"No politician is that good." Haley held up one hand. "I'm not interested in having P.R. smoke blown up my skirt."

"What if I guarantee you an interview with Francis Covington? That will conclude your series, won't it?"

"Almost. I still need to consult with Natalie Porter," she confirmed. "I'd love the chance to sit down and speak with Mrs. Covington. I think she's an interesting woman. I know she has worked with her husband on a number of important concerns that are aimed at the heart of his platform. As the wife of the Mayor, I would have loved to interview her long ago, but I've always met a brick wall."

"We have her schedule for the week and I should be able to juggle a few things. Call headquarters on Monday morning and ask for Theodore Calvin."

"I look forward to it."

"I'm glad this is settled and I hope you enjoy the rest of the night."

Haley's lips curled into a sly smile and she turned to her cameraman. He'd been shamelessly watching the exchange silently hoping it would turn into a messy catfight that he could film and post on-line. "Let's start rolling tape, Lance," she ordered. "We've got a story to cover."

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The hall was crowded and at five thousand dollars a plate, this was going to be an extraordinary night. The VIP table was full. The group included key members of the City Council, as well as, the Mayor's office and some members of various Boards where Alec served or once had been in service. Most of them had been in attendance at every fundraiser and continued to be heavy supporters.

Other attendees included Brian's wife Loren, Jessica and Harrison Davis and Trent and Margaret Pierce. Loren was a good looking woman and after eleven years of marriage and three kids, she still had an hour glass figure that she kept styled with the latest and most expensive couture. The fact that she was married to a man who in the last three years had gone from a high powered attorney to an elected judge on the bench, didn't seem to alter her steps.

Jessica was Harrison Davis' second wife. He was sixteen years her senior and had remained unmarried for many years following the death of his first wife. Harrison was the owner of half a dozen casinos in Las Vegas and Reno and had recently opened one in Carson. Alec and Francis had attended the lavish Grand Opening and Jessica told her friends that Harrison spent over two million dollars on the festivities. They were millionaires several times over and made no apologies for it as they enjoyed the life of jetsetters and lived in one of the most palatial homes in the city.

The last members of the inner circle were Maggie and Trent Pierce. He had spent the last fifteen years as a stock broker on Wall Street before he was forced to change careers when he was struck down by a heart attack at the age of forty. With Maggie's prodding, they moved west and started a real estate agency using the bulk of the money Trent made during his Wall Street days.

Eve watched them as a small knot gathered in her stomach and she tried to convince herself it wasn't jealously

and reaffirmed her stand. She didn't want what they had. She enjoyed the freedom to travel to other states and work on different campaigns. These couples appeared happy and successful on the surface, but she knew from personal experience that looks were always very deceiving.

"I want the real story, Francis," Jessica insisted. "I haven't seen so many reporters since Harrison's Grand Opening. Where's all this going to end? The White House."

Francis grimaced. "You must have Alec confused with Mason Wilder."

"No one is going to confuse Mason with Alec. Trust me. They are polar opposites. One is a sleek panther; the other is a sneaky poll cat." She looked across the room. "Speaking of poll cats, I'm wondering why Eve Randall can't seem to take her eyes off us. There's something about that woman that I don't like, but I can't put my finger on it."

"She's a political powerhouse for one," Francis supplied. "Alec is lucky to have her in his court." She couldn't think of anything more that wouldn't sound negative so her voice fell silent as her eyes searched the room for her husband who was sandwiched between Gary and a rather eager looking constituent. Astute as always, Gary knew the right time to pull Alec from a crowd. He would handle every situation until the second Tuesday in November and this was only another stepping stone towards that day.

The fundraiser was going well as indicated by Gary's increasing smile. Dinner had been served and Francis was pleased since she'd been the one to oversee this portion of the evening and had consulted with several top catering services. Crystal goblets of strawberries and diced peaches were served with another round of champagne. As the last glasses were poured, Harrison approached the podium that was set in the center of the main table.

"Ladies and gentlemen. It is my honor and privilege to stand here tonight to introduce the man of the hour," he

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began. "I have known him to be a man of the people." He paused for the first round of applause. "He is a man of integrity and principal with a proven track record of dedication and service. The next voice you will hear will be that of the next Senator to the Great State of Nevada. He is our one and only, Alexander Covington."

There was a blast of applause that was so loud and explosive it lasted long after Alec shook Harrison's hand and walked towards the podium. He waited until the ovation slowed before he began speaking.

"I am the honored one because I'm looking out at a crowd of people who have as much love for this state as I do and I'm proud to be one of you."

The applause started again. When it lapsed a second time, Alec stared out over the tables and then he looked at his speech. His eyes gazed across the carefully typed lettering and well phrased words. When he turned the pages over, he glanced out the corner of his eye and saw Gary's face turn ashen.

"Carson is a proud city. It stands strong in the Great State of Nevada that comprises a small portion of that place we call the United States. In that small portion that we call ours, we have come a long way," he began. "We had problems that needed to be solved. There were rising crime rates that started to mirror larger cities like New York and Los Angeles. We had crippling unemployment rates. The city's resources that were earmarked for childcare and elderly care were being slashed. The roadways and city infrastructures were in great need of repair and renovation. As Mayor, I worked hard to bring about change." There was another round of applause and several people came to their feet.

"The time for lip service has long passed. We can speak about issues. We can write about the problems, but the time came to stop talking, put down our pens and roll back our

sleeves." Alec leaned toward the microphone and set out a point-by-point rendition of the programs and campaigns he'd waged in order to drive forth a plan for the city that had led to many economic and social improvements. "Be about change." The flashes from several cameras went off all at once and the light was almost blinding.

"This has been my mission in the goals I enacted for this city and that will be the strategy that I will carry to Washington. It will be my goal to be the mouthpiece of the people and to carry forth a collective vision for improvement that will benefit all the citizens of Nevada," he promised. "Make change happen!" The speech continued for another ten minutes and the applause that ended it lasted almost as long. Alec reached for his wife's hand and she stood and joined him at the podium.

Pencil thin brows drew together in a frown that marred the usual cool resolve of Marilyn North. As her eyes locked on Francis, she saw an easy grace that looked almost effortless emanating from a woman who seemed self assured and confident. She needed someone like her on some of her fund raising committees. Pity she was a Democrat, but for once Marilyn thought she might be tempted to overlook it even though she and her husband were hard core Republicans.

He wouldn't have been the least bit pleased to find his wife rubbing elbows with right wing conservatives during a Democratic political fundraiser. That thought alone, coupled with many others, left her wallet happily buried in the bottom of her purse. She hadn't planned to contribute to the candidate who was currently running for Senate in her own state.

He was a man with a platform that so clearly defiled her beliefs that no amount of persuasion from her husband or youngest son could make her change her mind. Across the row of VIP tables, she spotted the friends who invited her

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that evening. Maggie Pierce looked almost as pleased with herself as the group of people Marilyn was sure had to be the committee behind the candidate.

"I thought I'd have to give you oxygen," Eve told Gary. "I was sure you were about to have a stroke when Alec turned his speech over. I was torn between giving you mouth-to-mouth or rendering Last Rights."

"I wouldn't have wanted either one. You're no doctor and you sure aren't a priest," Gary quipped. "What's the point in having these over paid speech writers if he's going to go off script? I hope that's not going to become a habit."

"For once I might have to agree, but Alec is a man who knows how to shoot from the hip and it worked."

"We still have to be careful. We're in the final lap and anything can come back and bite us in the butt."

"There won't be a problem," Eve confirmed. "I told you I'm making sure my team stays one step ahead."

"Good," he nodded. "For once I admire your tenacity and I'm counting on you to deliver."

"I'll deal with my end of it anyway I have to. You deal with Alec. He's taking too many high roads."

"We all know the high road doesn't normally lead to a Senate seat. We're not going to play fair through the entire campaign," Gary promised. "Whoever said life was fair, wasn't a politician."

You've just finished reading the first chapter of Alyce Holmes' Devil's Delight. If you want to know more about Alec and Francis Covington, please purchase your choice of a Paperback or CD

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