

Spellbound

SPELLBOUND

Alyce Holmes

A cluster of three yellow roses is centered on the page. The roses are in various stages of bloom, with some showing more defined petals than others. The background behind the roses is a light, textured white.

**To the Memory
Of My Mother
Maxie Rene Holmes
The Lady of the Yellow Rose
The Wind Beneath
My Wings**

PROLOGUE

Another bolt of thunder shook the windows of an abandon warehouse that was partly shrouded by lumbering trees. Forceful winds wailed through the blackened sky where angry daggers erupted in explosions that shot hard rain drops of beaded pellets against mud splattered windows. The shattering glass from one panel drove forth blades of jagged projectiles targeted for anything in their path.

The only source of illumination came from the lightning that streaked the darkness with patterned regularity. An abandoned warehouse stored several large crates on metal shelves around walls that were covered with intricately formed spider webs and discarded garbage billowed across the dusty, cement floor. In one corner, a huge section of the ceiling drooped down allowing rain water to pour in unhindered to form meandering puddles across the floor. An open door, hanging by a single rusty hinge, banged soundly against its metal frame.

A steady hand gripped the business end of a forty-five. Drawn brows were beaded with a mixture of rain water and sweat. The man's shoulders hunched several times in an effort to release the strain that was slowly building as wintry eyes stayed focused and ears were alert for any sounds of movement. It was only a matter of time until he found her.

Alexia sat huddled between two wooden packing crates. Cold rain soaked the clothing that clung to her slim body. Dark curls that framed her face only minutes ago had now been reduced to a matted, brown cap and ringlets of water were trickling down the nap of her neck. In this confined space a mirage of thoughts began to pass her mind. During the last few months every encounter had been a crisis. Several people had lost their lives and the person who had lured her here was the reason. This was the person who made those calls and sent her the domino chip.

"I want you, Alexia." A high-pitched voice crackled in the darkness. "Come out." A single warning shot was fired and Alexia sank deeper behind her only shield trying in vain to peer into the darkness. The harsh realization of what she'd done thawed the edges of her bravado. She clenched her fingers around the base of the gun Jason had insisted she keep and use for her own protection. He'd taught her how to fire the weapon. Even now it still felt heavy and awkward in her hand. She shouldn't be here. She should have waited for the police.

She tried to gather enough courage to shout back. Instead she uttered a piercing scream as she felt the claws of a rat chase across the back of her hand. She held trembling fingers to her lips, trying to fight down the rising knot of nausea that pressed at the back of her throat. At that moment there was another crackling sound of banishing gun fire. With simple

Spellbound

reflex action, she fired back shooting in the direction of the opposite blasts.

Suddenly it was as if a thunder bolt struck her and a muffled scream escaped Alexia's lips when a single bullet found its target and forced her to the bare, cement floor. She lay on her back for several dazed seconds and raised a hand to her head feeling its sticky moisture. Somewhere in the foggy haze that followed several names and faces danced before her. All of them had played a role. So much had changed in just a few short months.

She felt rather than saw someone leaning over her. *Three months earlier.* The gunman moved forward. *Three months earlier.* Alexia's body went limp. The fight left her. He'd won.

With a final lingering sigh, she welcomed the darkness.

SPELLBOUND

Three Months Earlier

Blind Justice!

Peter's hands were clenched so tightly the knuckles had turned white. A muscle at his throat jumped as his hard gaze shifted to Michael Williams and his team of lawyers. Michael was a man standing accused of murder and the jury should return a guilty verdict. Their views shouldn't be clouded because of this man's place in society as a financial wizard of Wall Street and Entrepreneur of the Year.

During the length of the trial, he didn't show his guilt by the mere flicker of an eye. He seemed to ignore the fact that this incident touching his life would damage his reputation at all. Peter hated the sanctimonious look of Williams' lead counsel. This woman made his blood boil even as his mind grudgingly admitted she was a beauty.

Alexia Blakeley was a woman of the millennium with the perfect mixture of poise and sophistication. Brains, beauty

Spellbound

and raw talent were combined into one rare combination making her stand out in the crowd, but it had been her full grasp of the legal system that held the jury's attention. She was first chair. The rest of the legal team consisted of Warren Hendricks and Benjamin Cox with the assistance of Larry Mitchell, Alexia's private investigator.

Warren's eagle eyes were capped by thick brows that were permanently drawn together from years of frowning over legal briefs. Behind his grim face and a mouth that never smiled, lurked a perceptive legal mind and a razor sharp tongue. Benjamin Cox was a younger man with debonair style. He knew the camera crews would be out in full force and he didn't mind posing before their lenses. He was a handsome man and he knew it. He was also a Yale alumnus and a very clever litigator.

Alexia knew the system only too well. To date, she had an unbeatable track record as a criminal attorney when she had been chosen by her firm to take Michael's case. The newspapers and television media had turned everything into a circus long before the trial began. The murders had hit the front page of papers all over the state. A case was being built and every available law officer in the city had been searching for the person the media dubbed the Domino Killer. Their client had been convicted by the press and in the eyes of the public. That public had been hungry for blood and enjoyed seeing a jetsetter fall from grace.

Peter Larson was the prosecuting attorney. He and Alexia had bumped heads before in several criminal cases. They battled on the field, but had become friends outside the courtroom, drawn by a mutual respect for the judicial talents of the other. This case had severed that relationship due to a violent clash of wills that had taken place in the courtroom.

"All rise."

The Honorable Marshall Howard sat on the bench. He was a large, imposing man. Above his head was the Great Seal. The Balancing Scales of Justice. "Madame Foreman, has the jury reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor."

A single slip of folded paper was passed to the judge. "Will the defendant please rise?" Michael stood surrounded by his attorneys. "Read the verdict."

"In the case of the State of New York versus Michael Stewart Williams, we the jury in the above pending action find the defendant-not guilty."

Peter slammed his balled fists into the table with such force it juttet forward. Judge Howard thanked the jury and turned to the defense counsel table. "Mr. Williams, you have been found not guilty by a jury of your peers. You are free to go." His gavel cracked down. "Case dismissed."

Michael didn't move for a minute. He sat and stared at the judge's empty bench before he stood and accepted the hug from his wife, Claire who had been sitting on the bench behind the low, dividing wall. Claire and their children, Madeline and Troy had supported Michael with their unwavering attendance in the courtroom.

The volume started to rise as rowdy crowds of reporters fought their way through the corridor. Camera bulbs went off with bright flashes of light when the doors opened and word of the verdict spread. A sea of microphones pushed through as reporters and paparazzi clamored to make their evening deadlines.

Alexia hated the press, but she needed it. Her picture had appeared in the media over this case more than any other trial she had and some of them had been headline makers too.

Spellbound

Her eyes searched the hordes of people pushing their way through the courtroom doors and fastened on the back of a man edging through the crowd. There was something familiar about the way he moved as the throng of people seemed to separate for him. He was a tall man with straight, dark hair. Alexia didn't see his face before he exited the double doors and people closed in around him. She shook off a strange feeling and turned to retrieve her briefcase.

"Let's take everyone through the front," she instructed. "Play to the cameras. Michael has been acquitted and New York needs to hear about it." They began to push their way through the corridors towards the front exit leading to the courthouse steps where a group of reporters were already gathered.

"Mr. Williams. What are you going to do now?"

"Ms. Blakeley. Did you ever think you would lose?" Alexia and Larry stood on one side of Michael. Ben and Warren flanked the other.

"We didn't have a moment's doubt that Michael would be cleared of all charges," Alexia declared. Ben took over with the camera and Larry eased away to get their cars into position.

Peter stood at the base of the long stretch of courthouse steps, squinting up at them in the afternoon sun. "That man should be on the receiving end of a lethal injection," he sputtered, as he reached the sidewalk.

Tony McKinsey gripped the handle on his briefcase and kept pace with Peter's long strides. "There's nothing we can do about it now." Tony had been Peter's second chair. "They had a few more maneuvers up their sleeves than we did."

"It's not over," Peter insisted.

"It's about as over as it can get." Tony nodded in Michael's direction. "You have heard of a little something called double jeopardy?"

Peter shook his head. "I don't care if a hundred juries find that man innocent. We haven't seen the end of this. I have a bad feeling in my gut that we'll see Michael Williams again and I intend to be around when we do."

Alexia stepped off the elevator at the law offices of Knots, Dexter, Charles and Klein to a round of applause. "The lady of the hour," Roger Klein replied. Roger was one of the senior partners and the man responsible for recruiting her into the firm. "Congratulations. Great job. I've already talked to Ben and Warren. Now I need a word with you."

"Your office or mine? Do I have time to grab a cup of coffee first?"

"Barbara will get it," Roger offered, as they passed her desk. "Two cups. I take mine black." Alexia followed him to her office. After Barbara deposited two cups of coffee on Alexia's desk, Roger closed the door behind her.

"I've just had a meeting with the senior partners about you," he began. "We were discussing how well you handled the Williams case. As a matter of fact, we've gone over your complete record. It's been very impressive. No loses to date. That's how you made partner years ago. Now we're considering making you a name partner at the beginning of next year."

Alexia didn't realize she was holding her breath and exhaled slowly. "Name partner."

Roger smiled. "Don't tell me you didn't expect it to happen sooner or later. This was one hell of a case. Williams' defense team had you at the helm. That's certainly worthy of increased status."

Spellbound

"You don't have to sell me on the idea," she replied. "Any lawyer worth their eye teeth wants this to happen. I'm just surprised. I wasn't expecting it."

"So I see," he confirmed. "I didn't have to sell the rest of the team on the idea. It's going to be a stellar year for you." He finished his coffee and tossed his empty cup into the waste basket. "This is something we can discuss in full detail in a few days. We may announce it at the next staff meeting," he told her "What's next on your agenda? Is another high profile client about to join the ranks?"

"I have a growing clients list, but I need to pull back the reins for a minute. This one took a lot out of me."

"Then you should be able to unwind at the party this weekend. You did plan on attending?"

At the halfway point of each year, James Dexter threw a lavish gathering. She knew her presence was required, just as every other associate and partner in the firm. Dexter also extended invitations to other legal colleagues in the field and various clients of the agency. It was all high profile, very elaborate and done in the hopes of adding clients and increasing the billable hours.

She hadn't missed a gathering in years and even though it was the kind of party she hated, she was obligated to attend. They would be spending the evening rubbing elbows with some of the elite members of the legal profession and it would bore her to tears.

She worked through that afternoon and spent her first quiet night at home in ages. She wished there had been a legitimate way of bowing out of the party and her mind raced with a multitude of excuses. She dismissed them all knowing she wouldn't be able to muster the courage to use them. In the end, she dressed for the occasion in a deep blue sensation

that might turn a few heads although that wasn't her actual intent and drove the distance to Dexter's home.

Alexia stood near a large ficus tree sipping champagne from a fluted glass. The bubbling liquid had been flowing in fluid arches from the fountain in the center of the banquet table. There were several trays of food and hors d'oeuvres that had been artfully arranged to be pleasing to the eye long before the palate.

From this vantage point, dark brown eyes swept the room. These were people who had money and lavished it on themselves with great abandon. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly midnight and there was no sign this party would be ending soon. She had been there long enough to make the rounds and make it look good. It was this house. It brought back too many memories. Alexia grew up in a house very much like this one.

Her family had everything money and influence allowed. Through sixteen sprawling rooms were antique furnishings, hand crafted, designer drapes and expensive artwork. It was the stage and her family had been the cast. Her parents held society parties that welcomed the posh world of business and industry. Her father had been the attorney to many of the men he'd invited there and most of them were not of the highest caliber, but Alexia was suppose to be too young to understand that.

She remembered being ushered into many of those gatherings to be put on display as Samuel Blakeley's little girl. She recalled the look she'd once received from one of her father's associates as he bent on one knee and asked for a hug. Samuel obligingly nudged her into the man's embrace as his hands rubbed slowly down her back.

He treated his son no better. David would hang back into one corner of the room as if he was trying to disappear into

Spellbound

the wallpaper and sometimes it would have been better if he had. David was no athlete. He wasn't smart and out-going and often an ugly smirk would appear on Samuel's face when he looked at the boy.

As he grew older, things didn't improve. He became tall and lanky with a face that held no particular character. All Samuel's dreams of his son following in his footsteps had been dashed in the early years. The boy seemed to have no backbone or guts. They were so different in fact that he sometimes doubted whether he'd sprung from his own seed.

His joy, if he allowed himself any at all, did rest with Alexia. She had grown tall too, but she was proud. Her shoulders were held back and straight and she looked you in the eye when she spoke. Her grades had always been above average and in many cases, she had topped the class. Barring all this, her father had a future in mind for her that did not include a professional career; even though she'd voiced those aspirations many times.

Samuel was unyielding. He had been a hard man whose children needed to escape his dominion in order to live some semblance of their own lives. She had to be strong to stand up to him and that strength helped make her the demanding attorney she had become.

The legal community knew she was Samuel Blakeley's daughter. For better or worse, his reputation preceded him outside the state of Massachusetts as the founding member of one of the most prestigious law firms in that state. What they didn't know was how much she wanted to stand outside her father's domineering shadow.

"Alexia." James Dexter waved a glass of golden liquid at the crowd of people. "Enjoying the party, I hope. You'll do well to rub elbows with this crowd. We have quite a few

influential people here tonight. It's never too early to consider next year's potential revenues."

Of all the partners, Dex was the one she learned early on to watch. There always seemed to be something left hanging in the air when she talked to him.

"The new D.A. is here. Have you met him? You'll probably be going up against him sooner or later."

Alexia put her empty glass on a passing tray. "Do I look worried?" she asked.

Dex hunched his shoulders. "I know you enjoy beating Peter Larson. I think this guy is a different breed. They've pulled some hot shot from out west."

After the sudden death of the current District Attorney, Donald Manning, the Mayor appointed an interim prosecutor to fill the post until it was time for the next election. Alexia had heard the rumors, but she'd been too busy with the Williams trial to be more than vaguely interested.

"What's this hot shot's name?"

"He's right over there." Dex waved his hand toward a man standing with a group across the room. Alexia's eyes narrowed. She'd seen him before. His profile looked oddly familiar. It was the man from the courtroom. He turned and a bolt of thunder shook her to the core.

The man excused himself and walked across the floor, stopping in front of them. "Good evening," he replied. His voice was a deeper timbre than she remembered.

"Good evening again," Dexter replied. "Jason Steele. This is Alexia Blakeley. She's a rising star in our firm. I'm sure you must have followed the Williams trial."

"Ms. Blakeley." He extended his hand. She hesitated before she took it and the touch of his fingers started a shock wave. "I've definitely followed it. Your closing statement shook the rafters."

Spellbound

"So you were there."

"For one of the most sensational trials of the year, I certainly was."

"I just spotted someone I need to talk to," Dex interrupted. "I've been trying to catch up with him all evening. Will you excuse me?"

Alexia's eyes followed Dex across the room; then she turned to the man standing at her side. "What are you really doing here?" she demanded. "You've been in my courtroom all this time? You knew I'd be here tonight, didn't you?" A photographer came by and took several pictures.

Jason waited until the man finished before he answered. "As a matter of fact, I did. I wasn't planning to turn down an invitation to meet and greet my new colleagues whether I thought you'd be here or not."

He had changed a lot in ten years. His hair had always been thick and dark. Jet black eyes that were once warm now seemed cold. The outline of his face had hardened to angular lines and a mouth that smiled often was more inflexible. The younger Jason had been tall and thin. This man was broader across the shoulders and chest and he had self assurance that had come with age.

"If I had known about you, I would have stayed as far away as possible."

"Stop acting like a child," he ordered. "It's interesting to see nothing has changed."

"You always were a condescending bastard. Interesting to see that hasn't changed either."

"It's a good thing we're standing in the middle of this party surrounded by a crowd of so many cultured people. Am I safe in assuming you won't hurl a vase at my head?"

"Don't count on it. The night's not over. This isn't happening. The last thing I intend to do is stand here and hold a conversation with you. Good night."

Misty rain was falling as Alexia stepped through the front entrance and asked a waiting valet to bring her car. She wrapped her cape around her shoulders and stayed under the protective canopy until her vehicle arrived. She eased behind the wheel and leaned forward against it. Her hands were shaking and she had to take a minute to get steady. It was as if the years rolled back to the last day she saw him. A decade later they could still throw hurtful words that hit their targets.

Jason had been her great love. Their last days together had been so different from the way they began. The first time they'd met had been a rainy day too. She was in her second year of undergraduate studies and had moved off campus and found a small apartment that she shared with a classmate.

She'd been studying in the library when she first noticed the jagged lightning bolts. Quickly stacking her books, she stepped outside just before the sky opened and poured out a blanket of water so thick she could hardly see through it. She began to run back into the building to escape the downpour when she collided into a dark shadow behind her and her books dropped to the sidewalk. By the time they scooped them up and ran back inside, her woolen sweater was stretched from her shoulders and her hair was glued to the top of her head. She pushed tangles out of her face and looked at her companion for the first time.

The young man was handsome. He had dark eyes that seemed to see straight to her soul. He'd been quietly staring at her. His leather jacket was streaked with rainwater and a canvas bag was slung over his shoulder. For the next two years, they were inseparable, in love and near the end of senior year planning to marry.

Spellbound

Then everything fell apart. They fought and the last thing she remembered doing was hurling a glass vase at the door that shook in the frame when he slammed it closed. Looking back she didn't know how she managed. She finished the remainder of that year and received her degree. After that she spent the summer with her mother until she started law school. Three years later, she was recruited into her position with Knots and Dexter. She wiped tears from her face. Ten years was a long time to still cry for him.

Alexia jumped when she heard tapping on the passenger window. She turned on the ignition and slid the glass halfway down.

"Let me in," Jason requested.

"What do you want?" The rain had become much heavier and thick droplets sprayed under the canopy arch.

"I'm trying not to drown for one thing," he replied.

She frowned; then unlocked the lever and Jason slipped into the passenger seat. "I don't want to talk to you."

"I think we should." He turned the knobs on the heating system. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee," he offered. "There must be a Starbucks open somewhere."

"I'm going home," she said, quietly.

"We're not going to be able to ignore each other forever."

"I thought we'd give it a try. It's not as if you're the only prosecutor in the city," she confirmed.

"One hour to clear the air is all I'll need."

She said nothing as she watched the rain pour from the sky. "If I give you an hour, will you leave me alone?"

"I might be obliged to if we can come to an understanding."

She sighed. "We can't clear up several years in a few minutes."

"We aren't going to try. I want to discuss what we can do now. The past is best forgotten."

Those words should have angered her, but they didn't. Jason was right. The fact that they were in love a long time ago was all in the past.

"All right. One cup of coffee." She shifted into drive. "What about your car?"

"I drove in with a new colleague. I told him I'd catch another ride home."

She shot him a harsh look. "You were that sure of yourself?"

"I always am," he returned, mildly. "That much hasn't changed either."

The coffee shop wasn't crowded at one o'clock in the morning. They choose a table and placed their order.

"It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has."

"How's your family? Your mother and brother are still doing well?"

She nodded. He didn't ask her about Samuel. Her father had always been a bone of contention between them. "They're both fine. Mother still lives in Manhattan."

"I always regretted the fact that she and I never met. Maybe it was just as well."

"Probably so," she confirmed. "Why were you in court during the closing session?" She stirred her coffee and clicked the spoon on the side of the cup. She was positive he was the man she saw leaving the courtroom.

"I suppose I was curious. It was a sensational case and you were very visible even though you put that camera hungry colleague out front. Seeing you in action was interesting." He leaned back in the booth. "It was a strong

Spellbound

closing. I was a bit surprised when you allowed Warren Hendricks to make the opening statement."

She shrugged. "Warren is certainly no slouch. He's been practicing longer than I have."

"Then why wasn't he chosen as first chair?"

Her brow arched. "My track record is zero loses in criminal cases."

"Including murder trials?"

"I've had other victories too," she admitted. "They were all good enough to help me make name partner."

He smiled. "That's wonderful for you. I always knew you were going to go far," Jason put his cup down and gestured for a waitress. He stared across the table at her for a long time before he spoke again. "Let's get one thing straight. I didn't come to New York looking for you. This was a shock for me too. Neither one of us will be able to run and hide like we did before. We're adults now, not kids in college."

"I'm fully aware of what I am. Thank you for stating the obvious."

"We have history. There will be times we'll run into each other and there will probably be occasions when we will find ourselves on opposite sides of the counsel table. We'll have to learn to deal with it."

"You'd be surprised just how much I can deal with these days." She pushed her cup away.

"Then we shouldn't have a problem," he returned. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. "It's late. I'll call a taxi."

A bolt of thunder shook the windows. "That's not necessary," she offered. "Where are you staying?"

"I have a suite at the Hilton until I find an apartment. I heard finding somewhere in the city is next to impossible."

"You heard right." Alexia reached for her cape and Jason helped her wrap it around her shoulders. The light brushing of his fingers against the back of her neck made her shiver.

It was still raining heavily as they made their way to her car. Alexia's foot slipped from under her and she would have fallen if his arm hadn't blocked that fall and pulled her hard against his chest. The eyes that met hers were the eyes of a stranger. He was no longer the young man she once knew. The lips that suddenly pressed against hers were not soft or tender. Instead they were hard and demanding. Of their own accord, her hands threaded themselves through wet strands of thick hair.

He heard her moan softly. "Jason," she whispered, finally pulling away. "What are we doing?"

"Something we shouldn't," he whispered back.

"I don't want to be involved with you," Alexia insisted. "My feelings are the same now as they were ten years ago. Make no mistake about it. I still hate your guts."

You've just finished reading the first chapter of Alyce Holmes' Spellbound. If you want to know more about Jason and Alexia, please purchase your choice of a Paperback or CD on our website. Thanks for becoming an Alyce Holmes fan.

