

*Halfway
To
Heaven*

Alyce Holmes

Three yellow roses are arranged in a triangular pattern, with one rose at the top and two below it. The roses are vibrant yellow with some green leaves visible at the base. They are set against a light, circular, textured background that resembles a lace or fabric pattern.

**To The Memory
Of My Mother
Maxie Rene Holmes
The Lady of the Yellow Rose
Ten Years Gone
Forever Missed**

Some of this was her story.....

Halfway To Heaven

"**W**hat floor?"

A thin, young man was leaning against the paneled interior wall with one long finger hovering near the keypad. He waited for his answer as a wave of absolute boredom crossed his face. He adjusted the package under his arm and slid others closer to his feet in order to make more space on the floor.

A woman stepped onto the elevator with her briefcase clutched in one hand, her purse slung over a shoulder and a stack of manila folders tucked into the crook of her arm. The other hand was busy balancing a Styrofoam tray with two cups of Starbucks Cappuccinos and a couple of cinnamon buns. "Fourteen please."

She watched the light bar across the top of the door slowly slide closer to her floor as she felt the added strain of the load she was carrying while trying to balance herself as the car rose. She stepped out of the way as people disembarked on their floors and took up a new position closer to the rear as others boarded.

The young man near the keypad got off on twelve and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief when the doors finally opened on fourteen. She shouldered her way off and started walking through the main lobby of *Legacy Magazine*. The wide, carpeted corridors and glass wall offices were the classy setting for one of the foremost, premiere fashion magazines in the city.

"Thank goodness you're here." A young lady rushed forward, took the folders from Elizabeth's arm and reached for the Styrofoam tray. "As soon as you get a minute, Greta needs ten," she supplied. "After that, the senior staff is due in the conference room at eight thirty."

They walked further along the corridor that displayed an array of magazine covers from the last ten years. Noted fashion models, Hollywood actresses and other elite personalities had all adorned the cover at one time or another and there was a long list of those who still coveted that prize.

They came to a set of double doors. Etched into the thick glass was the name, 'Elizabeth A. Harris, Executive Fashion Editor.' She'd been working at *Legacy* for six years and within that time she'd risen to the top faster than many of her colleagues and the editors of other major departments.

Elizabeth placed her briefcase on the side of the desk, reached for one of the Cappuccinos and pulled a bun from the paper bag. "There wasn't a meeting scheduled this morning," she frowned. "Any idea what this is about?"

"Haven't a clue. You know Greta plays everything close to the vest." Tracy tore off a corner of her bun and popped it into her mouth.

It was a typical Monday and the morning schedule was already so crowded Elizabeth wondered how she'd get through it. She took one last sip of her coffee and frowned. It would probably be ice cold by the time she left Greta's office and tackled an unscheduled staff meeting.

Halfway to Heaven

"I don't need heartburn this early," she said, as she wiped her hands on a napkin. "I was supposed to meet with Dion this morning. Give him a call and set it back. I might have to reschedule the Draper Cosmetics meeting and the session with Johnson-Hart Shoes. It took three weeks to set that up."

"I'll take care of it," Tracy assured her. "It's after eight. You'd better not keep her waiting."

Elizabeth followed Tracy out and walked through the maze of hallways that lead to Greta's office which was situated near the back of the general suites.

Greta Benton was the Editor-in-Chief. Her name was synonymous with *Legacy Magazine*. She was the original founder, one of the first writers, editors and graphic designers. She started the magazine over twenty years ago and since then it had become a well respected part of the New York landscape in fashion, design, art and entertainment.

Greta saw Elizabeth and motioned her inside. Her office was very classy. This was the place she spent nearly fourteen hours a day. Hard work and long hours were the things that helped her build all she had and she was well known for doing it in grand style.

Leaning forward in her chair, the jacket of her business suit fell open, revealing an emerald green blouse beneath. The expensive perfume she wore was clinging in the air as she signaled Elizabeth towards one of the chairs across from her desk. She eased into it and looked beyond Greta to a gorgeous view of the New York City skyline.

"Listen to me. I have this covered and I can't tell you how exciting it is. My entire staff will be thrilled. You don't need to worry. If *Legacy* handles it, it will be a fantastic affair," she promised. "This is going to be a great year for the magazine. I'll make the announcement this morning and let you know how everything goes." Greta pulled the Bluetooth from her ear as she looked across her office towards her Fashion Editor.

She'd been watching Elizabeth for some time, studying her under her own microscopic perusal. Greta liked to believe she knew her personnel extremely well. She took pride in the knowledge that the upper levels of her staff had all been hand selected by her and that she'd chosen well.

She admired Elizabeth's style that seemed to be one of graceful elegance. She was a beautiful woman and once Greta thought of featuring her in some of their fashion ads. Her skin was rich chestnut. Hazel eyes were wide set and expressive. Deep brown hair curled slightly on the ends as it reached her shoulders.

Her outward beauty shrouded a woman who was determined, strong and accomplished and that's what Greta liked most. Elizabeth was in charge of an important part of the magazine and had a staff of both males and females who answered to her. She ruled her division well and didn't bend one iota to the will of the men who'd mistakenly thought she was someone they could easily ignore or maneuver.

With a tinge of regret, Greta wished she had those same feelings of admiration and respect for her own daughter. They had been estranged for several years and at this stage, the rift between them was far too wide to possibly mend.

"I wanted to speak with you before we head in to talk to the rest of the staff," she began. "Doing things this way might be unorthodox and against normal protocol. This is my magazine and fortunately for me, I tend to make my own rules. For the last few months, I've been considering a very aggressive expansion project. It includes the opening of *Legacy Magazine* divisions in the European market. One division will be in Paris, the other in Rome."

Greta waited until that piece of news sank in before continuing. "Additionally, I have been negotiating for the purchase of a television station right here in New York," she told her. "Elizabeth, your work is excellent, phenomenal in fact

Halfway to Heaven

and because of that I'd like you to consider making the transition to head one of the European divisions."

Pure shock caused Elizabeth to straighten in her chair. "I'm very flattered. I don't know what to say."

"Flattery has absolutely nothing to do with it. I didn't come to this decision based on anything more than pure business strategy and that's what I presented to the Board. I certainly didn't get where I am today by relying on sentiment," she acknowledged. "I have selected other likely candidates that I would like to transfer over as well. You are one of the first people I've spoken to and I intend to talk to the others very soon."

"I'll make a formal announcement on the expansion at the end of the month once our latest edition hits the stands," she continued. "However, there is one very important caveat. All this information must be kept strictly confidential. That includes confirming any knowledge of the expansion or my job offer. If word gets out, I'll have a stampede on my office." Greta leaned forward and looked into Elizabeth's eyes. "Can I count on your discretion?"

"Absolutely," Elizabeth promised. "Our conversation won't go outside this room."

"I don't expect your answer today. I assume you need time to think everything over. I know it's a big decision. I need your answer before I go public with the news." Greta checked her watch. "It's almost eight-thirty. I scheduled a meeting in the conference room. Did Tracy tell you?"

"She did." Elizabeth came to her feet and adjusted the buckle on her belt.

"I have one more announcement to make and this one is just as exciting," Greta promised.

They went to the conference room together. Gathered there were all the various department heads. Greta took her place at the large, walnut table.

"Good morning, everyone," she began. "I'll keep this as brief as possible. We have to put our latest edition to bed so I know we are all extremely busy. However, this news simply couldn't wait." She put both palms flat against the table and leaned forward in her chair. "It has been brought to my attention that we have been chosen to host Jacques Toussaint's premiere debut of his new couture line in a Fashion Gala weekend. I just got off the telephone with one of my contacts that *Legacy* made the short list last week and the final decision was made just this morning.

By this time tomorrow, the news will hit all the major media outlets," she told them. "I want everyone in this room to be in attendance each and every night. Mark your calendars now. I don't want to hear any excuses about this later. Alert your wives, husbands, partners and significant others. I want a huge group. Advertising, Marketing and Creative. We are going to represent ourselves in all our glory. Agreed?"

They all nodded their agreement. "This is certainly big news," Don Grisham replied. Don was the head of the Creative Department.

"There's more," Greta broke in. "I don't want this to interfere with the general running of the magazine so I'm going to hire a top ranking service to help with the preparations and all the major details."

"Congratulations, Greta," Elizabeth said.

"Congratulations are in order for all of us. This will mean *Legacy* has just gained the exclusive advertising rights to the Toussaint line. That ladies and gentlemen can translate to millions in advertising."

These events were normally held within weeks of the formal announcement. The Fashion Gala was always a lavish, black tie affair that lasted three consecutive nights. Elizabeth attended last year's event with her former boyfriend, James.

James Bernard was great on the eyes. He was clean shaven, had rippling muscles, a firm six pack and smoldering eyes.

Halfway to Heaven

Their sex life had been incredible, as well as, insatiable. There was one glaring problem. James was as dull as he was beautiful. At first, Elizabeth hardly noticed how socially inept he was. Later, she spent half her time fearing what ridiculous things he might say and hoping she would have some well chosen words to counteract them.

The last night of the event, James put his foot in his mouth on more than one occasion and Elizabeth had been mortified in front of her colleagues. Great sex was no longer sufficient reason to keep him around. She wanted and deserved better and less than a week later, James had been sent packing.

"As you all know, Fashion Week is normally held in February. However, Toussaint's team requested a break in tradition. His event will be held the first weekend in March. I intend to contact as many *Legacy* supporters and sponsors as possible to give them personal invitations," Greta pledged. "The last two years, *Quasar Look* sponsored the affair and Dominic Phillips hasn't let me hear the end of it since. Not this year. We're going to make our event bigger, better and bolder."

Elizabeth pulled the lid off her coffee and peered inside. It was no longer appealing and she dropped the entire contents into the waste basket and checked the timer on her computer. Almost half the morning was over and she'd accomplished very little. She didn't want to pull another all-nighter. There had been two last week and she still wasn't caught up on all the sleep she needed, but Greta's announcements and her job offer were mind blowing news. She had to take a few deep breaths and steady herself. She was just offered the job of a lifetime. All her hard work at *Legacy* and the two magazines she'd previously worked for were finally paying off.

Reviewing a string of over one hundred emails, she spotted one from her sister, Clarissa. She opened the attachment which was a short video of her standing in front of a real estate sign posted on the front lawn of a large house with a circular

driveway. She was placing a 'Sold' banner across the sign and shaking the buyer's hand. According to the message, she'd closed the deal on the home and was about to receive a huge commission.

Elizabeth had her own business success to share, but she'd given Greta her word. She knew if she confided in just one of her sisters, she would start a rippling effect that would end in a tidal wave.

The announcement box blinked on the right hand corner of her screen and she opened the email. Greta made the formal announcement about the Fashion Gala and the Toussaint line.

"That's what all the fuss was about." Tracy stuck her head around Elizabeth's door.

"That's it and Greta wants all hands on deck."

"I'll bet she does. What else did she want to see you about?"

"It was just a heads up on items she wants checked for the edition," she lied.

Tracy waved away the answer. "All right." She opened a file on her note pad. "You pushed Dion back this morning. He didn't take it well. He wants you to be in on a photo shoot."

"Not a problem."

"You've got a full day." Tracy went through a rendition of the appointments and top items. "Where do you want to start?"

Elizabeth spent the remainder of the morning in a fashion shoot with several of their top models. They were doing a swim suit spread, followed by one on a new line of lipstick and nail polish. She also wanted to make some suggestions to the Art Department on the fashion spread for a natural hair wig collection that would be marketed to the Asian community. After that, she met with the Marketing Group of Draper Cosmetics.

It was early afternoon before she had a moment to take a break. They ordered a late lunch and she and Tracy reviewed photos from an earlier session.

"Who are you taking to the gala?" Tracy asked.

Halfway to Heaven

"I'll probably go stag."

"Stag! Are you for real? You haven't dated anyone seriously since you and James broke up. I never totally understood that. He was one great looking man."

"He was a great looking idiot," she confirmed. "There's nothing wrong with going out alone."

"I know someone who'd be perfect for you. He's one of Bruce's friends. I didn't want to say anything before. Why don't I give him a call?"

Elizabeth put her fork down. "A blind date. No, thank you. I think I can find my own man."

It was after eight o'clock before Elizabeth pulled her car into the parking lot and made her way to her apartment. She dropped her briefcase on the floor, kicked off her shoes and padded into the kitchen. She removed a bottle of chilled wine from the refrigerator and found a glass.

She'd managed to complete almost everything on the work schedule with the exception of Johnson-Hart Shoes. She'd met with the Art Department. She'd met with Creative and she dealt with the always dramatic Dion.

Picking up her glass, Elizabeth sat on the couch, tucked her feet under and checked her cell phone. There had been several text messages from her sisters and one call from her mother. It was late so she vowed to call them all later. Elizabeth hadn't been home in months and she had no pangs of regret or plans to rectify it. Even though the sisters made weekly conference calls, that's as far as it went. Sometimes her family was her greatest source of frustration and the short distance between Manhattan and Long Island was something she valued.

Her oldest sister, Andrea, had been formed from iron. That tended to cause trouble when she was so steadfast in her opinions and beliefs that nothing and no one could shake her personal resolve. The man she'd chosen to spend her life with

was a kind man and a good provider. To his credit, Kevin's kindness should never be confused with a streak of weakness.

Everything changed a year ago when their four year old son died of pneumonia. Andrea and Kevin needed all their strength to get them through the horror of their lost and it made the already harsh lines of Andrea's personality more inflexible. They'd all shown their support in the beginning. As time wore on, she started to push them away and erected a block wall that still hadn't been torn down.

The second sister was Benita. She and Andrea couldn't be more different. Benita attended college. Andrea didn't. Andrea had a nice home, but it was plain and comfortable while Benita had a large four bedroom house and a weekly cleaning service to help maintain it.

Most important of all, they'd chosen two very different types of men. They were hugely surprised when Benita came home and introduced her new husband to the family. They were already married and the glaring diamond on her hand made that wholly obvious even more so than the tall, blond, green eyed man who stood at her side.

That had been six years ago and from their union came a son. Taylor looked very much like his father with green eyes and pale skin. He had a thick mop of light brown hair that couldn't be tamed by a comb or a brush.

Clarissa was the sister beyond all understanding. She was as smart and sassy as she was witty and beautiful with a carefree, fun-loving spirit. Unfortunately, she was as free with her spirit as she was with her body. She had a string of boyfriends and none of them had been taken seriously even though one or two would have made her a decent match.

Sometimes Elizabeth wondered if she was feeling the effects of being the middle child. She questioned whether her sister had low self-esteem in which she craved the unyielding attention of various men as a means to keep her ego stroked.

Halfway to Heaven

Clarissa was the first one of them to go to an out of state university. During her first year, she dropped out and to everyone's surprise she returned home and finished school with a degree in Business Management. She worked hard, had a flashy apartment, a new sports car and since starting her own real estate agency, she was never short on cash.

Denise was eighteen months older than Elizabeth. She worked for an agency called Green Fields which fought against the destruction of wildlife preserves and endangered natural resources. She'd once chained herself to a redwood tree in order to save it and had been arrested for the trouble. Denise was also a huge animal rights advocate and the only Harris daughter who still lived at home.

Frank was the youngest and the only son. He had no ambition, didn't plan for his future and seemed to care less about his past. Elizabeth hadn't laid eyes on Frank or spoken to him since the day of their father's funeral.

She put her glass on the table before reaching for the remote control. Frank wasn't worth thinking about. He'd made his choice. He'd broken their parent's hearts and that alone was unforgivable.

The next few weeks swept by like a thunderstorm. The event planning team Greta hired was assisted by all available *Legacy* staff. Greta, herself broke away from regular duties to oversee some of the preparations.

By undertaking this role, many of the main essentials of getting that month's issue completed were left in the hands of the various department heads and Elizabeth worked hours that were longer than usual. She arrived home late in the evenings with only enough energy to drop into bed. When *Legacy* finally hit the newsstands, she was so exhausted the idea of the gala was almost too much to bear.

Greta vowed to pull out all the stops and had offered limousine service to her top aides. She was adamant that the

Legacy event would go far beyond any other group ever selected to perform the task.

The first days were absolutely seamless. The decorations were spectacular. There were three different runways branching out like tentacles through the audience. Mass seating was arranged in the Grand Ballroom. News stations throughout New York State were in attendance and Elizabeth spied a few out of state television reporters as well.

Saturday evening marked the grand finale that would culminate the event. On that last night, Elizabeth chose a breathtaking gown and looked phenomenal in it. She'd purchased three new dresses and this one was a satin creation in deep bronze that made her brown skin glow.

She met the rest of the *Legacy* team and they made their way down the red carpet of The Pierre Taj Hotel, one of New York's top venues of distinction. Politicians, actors and business icons, from various industries, had once graced its doors. Like the previous nights, this one would also be a star studded array of 'Who's Who' in the fashion industry.

They were using the silver and gold Grand Ballroom and adjacent to it was the Garden Foyer banquet area where hand painted murals from Versailles adorned the walls. No less than one hundred tables had been arranged for the dinner that would take place at the conclusion of the show.

As required, *Legacy's* top staff was in attendance with their families and Greta had an entire area roped off for them. There was a proud look in her eyes as she watched her VIP section fill to capacity.

"I wanted this, Greta. I don't know what kind of strings you pulled. I'm going to make sure it won't happen again next year."

She turned to find Dominic Phillips standing close behind her. Dominic was medium build, with wide shoulders, light gray eyes and a salty, white beard. He was born in London,

Halfway to Heaven

moved to the United States when he was a boy and spoke with a classic British accent.

"I never liked the smell of envy on you, Dominic," Greta sneered. "It blares over your cologne and it's not nearly as attractive."

"Neither was the last edition of that rag you produce. I certainly hope the garbage you published this month will smell better."

"Like the finest perfume," she promised. "What I create is for a mature audience. Not at all like your date for the evening." Greta looked through the crowded hall towards a young blond. "Really, darling. Shouldn't that child be at home working on her history paper? I assume this one can read."

The corner of Dominic's mouth arched as he turned his body at an angle and blocked her view of the girl. "Rethink your tactics, love," he warned. "Don't throw down the gauntlet for a challenge we both know you can't win."

Greta leaned in so closely, she could see the specs in his eyes. "I've got the balls for the job. Do you?" She reached down and cupped the front of his pants, giving it a tight squeeze before she brushed by his shoulder and left him with an astonished and angry scowl.

"I need a drink," Sharon moaned. "Where's a waiter when you need one?"

"I need to know where Greta has disappeared to," Elizabeth said. "She has to make the evening's opening statement."

"I saw her talking to Dominic Phillips a little while ago," Tracy offered. "It was a bit of a surprise since I thought they hated each other."

"They do," Elizabeth confirmed.

A waiter walked by and Sharon stopped him. "I need this," she said, lifting one of the glasses from the tray. Tracy and Elizabeth did the same.

"This place is full of very attractive men. I think I've died and gone to heaven," Tracy gushed.

"You're a married woman," Sharon warned.

"I'm married, not dead. Besides that, I'm quite sure Bruce is somewhere hoping to catch a glimpse of Heidi Klum."

"There's Greta," Elizabeth announced. She shouldered her way through the crowded ballroom. When someone brushed into her arm, the contents of her glass splashed and the champagne splattered over the back of a man's tuxedo jacket.

Elizabeth's hand flew to her open mouth as the man froze. He slowly turned around and angry eyes momentarily blazed. In that moment, she felt the overwhelming urge to hide the empty glass behind her back. "I'm so sorry. It was an accident. Someone brushed into me."

"May I?" He reached for the offending glass. The touch of his warm fingers grazed against the fine bones of her wrist and made her skin tingle.

He was at least six foot, two with brown skin, a moustache and dark goatee. Elizabeth was a tall woman, but she noticed that the top of her head was just above his shoulder. He put the glass on a nearby table and reached for a handful of napkins.

"I've ruined your suit. I'm not usually so clumsy. I'm very sorry." She went into her evening bag. "I'm more than willing to pay the cleaning bill. Here's my business card. Please give me a call." A pair of hazel colored eyes held all the embarrassment she was feeling.

He reached for the card she offered and read the name. "That won't be necessary, Ms. Harris."

"Your suit?" She knew it was expensive from the way it fit so well to every contour of his body. If she had to make a guess, it was an Armani. "You have to let me do something."

"I'm quite sure I can think of an appropriate punishment before the evening is over," he confirmed.

"I might be difficult to find," she said, indicating the crowd. "I'm going to be very busy."

Halfway to Heaven

"I don't think I'll have any problem finding you." He stepped aside and watched Elizabeth walk away. She looked good from the front and from behind as the bronze satin of her evening gown hugged her body.

"Where have you been?" Tim scolded. "You know Greta is going to begin by announcing the head team. If you hadn't made it in time, she would have hit the roof."

"I was looking for her and I got held up. Is she ready?"

"Look over there," he nodded. "She's boiling mad about something. She's doing a great job hiding it."

Elizabeth glanced at her boss. "It might have something to do with that run-in with Dominic Phillips."

"They hate each other."

"I know."

"They were also rivals for hosting this event."

Elizabeth nodded. "So were a dozen other magazines. What makes him so different?"

"Don't know," Tim returned. "I never did, but I'd like to be a fly on the wall if it ever hits the pan."

Brad checked his suit in the men's wash room. On closer inspection of the jacket, you could see a stain forming in the dampness and the wrinkles in the fabric where it was starting to dry. It had been an Armani and it costs him a small fortune. He mopped the remaining moisture from the garment and shrugged back into it before heading back out to find his seat and join his friends.

There was a woman standing center stage and Brad reached for his program to find that her name was Greta Benton and she was the owner and publisher of the magazine hosting this gala. She started to introduce her staff. One of the names mentioned was Elizabeth Harris. She was tall and shapely and he noticed what a rich voice she had even as she'd made her hasty apologies to him.

He pulled her business card from his pocket. She was a Fashion Editor and one of the key people at *Legacy Magazine*. At first glance he'd mistaken her for a model, but she was a business professional. That showed too. She said a few words and handed the microphone to a balding man to her left. He and two others said a brief word before Ms. Benton concluded and the fashion show began.

Throughout the evening, Brad made a point of searching the crowd in order to find her. In fact, he couldn't keep his eyes away. She had a smooth and graceful way about her, moving with such self confidence. It was no wonder she'd been so mortified when she'd drenched his jacket.

The three runway fashion show was very formal, very snobbish and lasted well over two hours. At the conclusion, all the models took to the stage and the applause became deafening when Jacques Toussaint himself followed behind them with great flourish. He bowed to the crowd in every direction, kissed the palms of his hands and threw kisses to the crowd.

When the last model left the runway, people began to filter into the Pierre Garden Foyer where dinner was served by uniformed waiters in short, red coats. The music changed tempo and people began to move onto the dance floor.

That's when he saw her again. She was standing with a group of her colleagues and several photographers were taking pictures. Before he knew what he was doing, Brad walked across the floor and found himself standing in front of her.

There had been moments throughout the evening that Elizabeth thought she was being watched. It caused the fine hairs on her arms to stand on end. At first, she thought she was imagining things. Now he was facing her and his dark eyes held hers. He lifted his hand and she took it, making no comment when he led her to the dance floor and one of his arms circled her waist.

This was crazy, she told herself. She didn't even know this man's name. This beautiful, sexy, gorgeous man. She felt her

Halfway to Heaven

own body respond to his movements. He was a good dancer, she thought as her steps easily matched his. He smelled wonderful too.

Elizabeth tried to remain focused, but her head started to swim. Against her will, it eased down onto his shoulder. This was insane, she thought again as her eyes lifted to his and she saw her own thoughts reflected there.

Brad just met this woman and he was physically drawn to her. He liked the way she fit in his arms and the way her body felt against his. He could feel her slight resistance and he understood it. They were strangers, but it didn't seem that way. They'd met in a crowded room two hours ago and yet it felt as if it had been much longer.

Her head against his shoulder was perfectly right. The crowd started to fade away, leaving only the two of them. He inhaled the heady fragrance of her hair that felt so soft against his cheek. Her lips looked soft too and he wanted to lower his head and prove himself right. When the music slowed, she lifted her head from his shoulder again.

His finger under her chin tilted her face at just the right angle. The tip of her pink tongue darted across her lower lip and he couldn't resist. When he inched closer to her, she didn't back away and the light brushing of his lips against hers was just as sweet as he thought it might be.

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

