

***Forbidden
Fruit***

Alyce Holmes

Alyce Holmes'

"YELLOW ROSE NOVELS COLLECTION"



Forbidden Fruit

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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. The text is overlaid on the roses.

**To The Memory
Of My Mother
Maxie Rene Holmes
The Lady of the Yellow Rose
The Hand That
Gently Guides Me**

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Shots fired.

Aimed straight and targeted directly over the bow of *Kingdom Records*, they were a clear declaration of war. Since James Vaughn functioned well in threatening situations, he was prepared to wage battle. It didn't matter whether he was the aggressor or the recipient since the end result would be the same.

He built this record label and as a result, he was an enormously wealthy man. *Kingdom* had artists in every genre including R&B, Hip-hop, Rap and Pop. Beau Harper was one of their latest discoveries. His fresh style would have brought a new edge to their Hip-hop division. The label had long-range plans and by this time next year, he would have been a rising star on their roster.

The top officers of the *Kingdom* Board of Directors were seated around the conference table. The collective team viewed the tape from the Harper audition and once the screen faded to black, several sets of angry eyes shifted in James'

direction including Clancy Walton. He was Board Chair and made an unholy habit of letting James know he disagreed with him on a multitude of business decisions.

“We called this special session to discuss whether you're going to remain the Chief Executive Officer. This Harper incident is all over the media and we need to know what you plan to do about it.”

“I have to agree,” replied another member. “We can't sit back and continue to lose artists to the *Cassidy* label. It will have a huge effect on profit shares and our bottom line.”

At the censure James heard in their tones, the thought crossed his mind that he should never have taken the label public. He longed for the days he was in total control of the company he founded and every rule that was made or broken came from his hand. He knew the best way to handle this situation and the members sitting around that table didn't have the guts required.

“This isn't the first time in the last fifteen years an artist was dropped by us or walked away in the middle of negotiations.”

“Maybe so,” Clancy returned. “It's never been so publicly communicated before.”

“I don't have control over the press or social media. I do govern what happens under my roof and within these four walls. Do you honestly believe I'm standing idly by and allowing this to happen?”

“That's just it. We don't know what you're doing,” Nora added. “No one has said anything.” Nora Woods was a short woman; no more than five foot nothing, fifty years old, still single and could easily top the scale at two hundred.

The only person in that room James had any trust in was Kenny Abbott. He was his associate, friend and longtime confidant. Kenny's manner and style was very different from James'. Where he was sharp around the edges, Kenny was calm and more cautious. His composed demeanor necessitated

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him functioning as mediator on many occasions and today would be no different.

“Getting this sorted out will take time,” James returned.

“I don’t think we have the luxury of time,” Clancy insisted and several other members shook their heads in agreement. “This is the third artists in as many months that we’ve lost and because of that we’re losing confidence in the management of this label. None of us came to this decision with pleasure.”

“I don’t take kindly to you or Nora coming here to threaten me. I built this company from the ground up. I’m the one who crawled and scratched in the early days to make it what it is now.”

Kenny had been quiet until that point. He stole a glance in his boss' direction. He could feel the electrical charge of James' anger. This meeting ambushed both of them. The Board was making him sound like a liability. Kenny wouldn't be good at his job if he didn't operate one step ahead.

“There's a plan under consideration. I've been in contact with a crisis management team. I placed a call to the head man earlier this week.”

“If they can help us enact a business strategy against this, it would make a difference,” Clancy confirmed.

“You think these people can make the difference I can't?” James hissed. “Just who the he...?”

“Come off it,” Clancy shouted over him. “It's a good move. We're only asking you to consider it. Meet with the man and hear what he has to say.”

Nora put the cover on her pen and sat it beside her folder. “We'll give you time to put this in place. After that, we will convene a formal session. If we determine structural changes are needed, we'll be prepared to carry them out. Next time, we won't be side tracked.”

A sharp pain hit James' chest as he heard the underlining threat and the veins at his temples throbbed.

“When this team rolls out their plan, we’ll get in touch,” Kenny offered.

He knew James was fuming and nothing else was shared as that handful of Board members started to file out of the conference room and he followed James to his office. He sat at the piano and slammed the lid opened.

“You want a drink?” Kenny calmly asked.

“I need a clear head,” James returned, as his fingers snapped over the keys to hammer out a song he’d written years ago and never recorded.

“You know I can make this go away. Just say the word.”

James started playing another song that had an even harsher melody. “Cassidy has declared war on me and so has my Board. These people must be out of their minds. Did they just sit in my conference room and issue a threat? They’re going to force me out of my company? I intend to clap back just as hard.”

He squared his shoulders in anger that was barely contained. At six foot two, he was an imposing man with honey colored skin and a clean-shaven head. James wore a moustache and beard that were immaculately groomed and his body was muscled.

“Logan Cassidy is poaching my artists and boasting about it on social media.”

“We should have closed the Harper deal faster.”

“This wasn’t on us,” James returned, as he snapped the piano lid shut and pushed the bench back. “If Beau wanted to sign with *Kingdom*, nobody could have pulled him away. I didn’t like his manager. I’ve seen slick-gut shysters like him before. I used to be one. Game recognizes game. Back in the day, we would have seen this coming a mile away.”

Kenny waited until the thundercloud of James’ mind numbing profanities fell silent.

“This cost us millions.” He accepted the drink he’d refused earlier. “I’m more concerned with the cost to *Kingdom*’s

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reputation. It makes us look weak.” He took a deep swallow from his glass. “When were you going to tell me you called a crisis management group?”

“Just as soon as I actually do,” Kenny smiled, slyly. “I had to think of something before that group of vultures made a move neither of us would have liked.”

“Son-of-a-gun,” James uttered and finished his drink. “I’m glad you’re on my side. No one understands the cut-throat nature of this business like we do. There’s an unwritten code and Logan has no class, no refinement. He lacks finesse. If you look hard enough you can find grace in the movement of a snake and he hasn’t even mastered that.”

“I agree,” Kenny said. “This isn’t the first time you’ve had to cut the head off a snake. You must have a plan in mind. Is it something I can know or is it better if I maintain plausible deniability?”

James hunched heavy shoulders beneath his suit jacket. “I planned to let Logan know who he’s dealing with, but it has to be subtle. I need a heavy hit with a soft fist. Now that you’ve told the Board this cock-and-bull story, we have to make good on it.”

“I didn’t lie outright. There is a company that was in the paper this week. It’s called *Daniels and Associates*. The head man is Hunter Daniels.”

“Forget it. That’s absolutely out of the question. I know the guy and I’m not doing business with him.”

“You never mentioned that before,” Kenny frowned.

“It’s not as if you know every brother I do. There’s nothing Hunter can fix for me.”

“Just hear me out. What if we bring Daniels in and let his team nose around? He might be able to give us insight into Logan and clues to his end game. That will satisfy the Board and give us time to figure this out. If it gets Logan off our backs, it’s a win-win.”

“You think Hunter is up to that?”

“If he's not, we'll get rid of him and use it to regain your leverage.”

James sputtered. “The worst that can happen is Clancy and Nora will be gutted like fish.”

“Make sure they don't hear you say that,” Kenny cautioned.

“I don't care about them. I've always respected your ability to have my back. This is something I have to think about. I'm not a fan of Hunter and I can assure you the feeling is mutual. Getting him to help me might be an uphill battle.”

“I'll work it out.”

“Let's discuss my other problem,” James said. “Rachel is working in the studio this morning. I'm going to stop by and see how it's going. She's not concentrating on this album. *Knock on my Heart* was stellar. *Pathway* needs to be just as good, if not better.”

“I know. *Knock* was at the top of the R&B chart fifteen straight weeks.”

“My wife never ceases to amaze me. She's beautiful, talented and became an overnight sensation just like we knew she would. We need to maintain that status and in order to do that she has to remain focused.”

Rachel Corday-Vaughn's first album went gold and all indications were her second would go platinum. There had been television and radio interviews that were followed by an American tour that lasted almost a year.

“I'll be in session with her the rest of the morning.” James adjusted his suit jacket. “Tell you what. Go ahead and get in touch with Hunter. It might be interesting to hear what he has to say. Once you talk to him, join me in the studio.”

Rachel was working in Studio-A that was situated in the west corner of the building. James opened the door and saw two of his best engineers at the control board.

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“Sorry Mitch.” Headphones in place, Rachel was standing behind the glass enclosed soundproof booth. “Can we start again? Take it back to the bridge.”

“Sure,” Mitch confirmed. He turned to the man sitting at his left before he caught sight of James out the corner of his eye. “Morning.”

“Mitch. Randy. How’s she doing?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Fine,” James repeated. “It looks a little rocky to me.” He reached for the microphone on the console. “Rachel. Baby. You got this,” he encouraged. “Let me hear it.”

James nodded in Mitch’s direction and the music began. When Rachel started to sing every nerve in James’ body was stimulated. Her success didn’t take long and sometimes a knot welled in his gut when he thought how easily she could have slipped through his fingers.

It was one of his Artists and Repertoire talent scouts, Ernie Graham, who first brought Rachel to his attention after hearing her sing in a Manhattan nightclub. He approached her and was surprised when she didn’t jump at the chance. He learned later that she’d been working toward that goal over a decade and suffered one disappointment after the next.

Several weeks went by before Ernie received a call from a woman named Marty Gibson who claimed to be Rachel’s agent. Apparently, she’d done her homework and discovered Ernie actually was a member of the *Kingdom* staff.

When Rachel walked into the studio, James could tell she was in a frightened daze of disbelief. He’d seen that look before so he took time to make her feel at ease. As soon as she began to sing, nothing else mattered. It was magic and he was mesmerized. Within months, contracts were negotiated and she became one of his artists. Before that year was over, she also became his wife.

Rachel ended the song on a high note that slowly softened as she met her husband’s eyes through the glass.

“That was fantastic,” he smiled. “That song will radiate with your fan base. It’s your next single, baby.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“When have you known me to do that?”

“Never,” Rachel laughed.

“Exactly. Let me hear it again,” he requested. “Once more from the top.”

Hunter sat in his Manhattan office reading several versions of the Vaughn article. He frowned as he reduced the last one and pulled up his business file on the *Bennington Group*. They were his latest client and the company had been in deplorable condition. In its heyday, *Bennington* was a solid firm.

It was only in the death of their President and CEO that things began to unravel and they found themselves perfectly positioned for a hostile takeover. The group was throwing themselves on a sword to willingly surrender as a point of record. That was before Hunter's staff took control, restructured the firm and helped leverage remaining assets.

Hunter and his key man, Ron Gilles, would meet with the newly appointed CEO within the coming weeks for a follow up on the new programs they put in place. *D&A* had a full schedule for the next few months and had no plans for taking on new clients. The telephone call from Kenny Abbott came as a complete surprise.

“I have the Vaughn proposal.” Ron took one of the chairs opposite Hunter's desk.

“Are you planning to keep it a secret?”

“I’m savoring the moment,” Ron replied, before leaning forward and placing the single sheet in front of him.

Hunter's eyes swept to the bottom of the page. “You've got to be kidding me.”

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“I don't think so. That, my friend, is a long number with a lot of commas in all the right places. We can't turn this down, Hunt. How would we make the argument?”

Hunter didn't want this case. He snatched the page from his desk and started to ball the sheet into a knot. “You're right, we can't.”

“If money talks, these boys are screaming at us,” Ron confirmed. “We've been invited to dinner at the Vaughn mansion.”

Hunter leaned his head back against the chair and stared at the acoustical ceiling tiles above him. “Why not meet at his studio or here for that matter?”

“I have a pretty good idea,” Ron answered. “What better turf when it comes to seduction than the client's own home?”

“You think this is a seduction? Strange choice of words.”

“There's another option,” Ron offered. “He wants to pull us in and doesn't want his entire team to know about it. Either way, we stand to make a fortune.”

Hunter built his company with a targeted niche. *Daniels and Associates'* overall business portfolio had several renowned business leaders and captains of many diverse industries across the northeastern region. Hunter heard the buzz in his office from several staffers who were following James' current situation and thought parlaying into the entertainment world would be an exceptional move.

He was hesitant since he had a reputation to uphold and in his estimation, this *Kingdom-Cassidy* competition had all the ear markings of an east coast-west coast rivalry and he didn't want his firm associated with that. Ron was right. There was no valid way to justify turning the proposal down and Friday evening as they drove to the Vaughn estate; Hunter continued to have that thought in mind.

He hadn't openly followed James' career, but it was impossible not to know his record label and the heights of fame he'd achieved. The two men might have spent their

formative years together, but they were never close since there were too many marked differences in their personalities. He remembered how controlling James had been and could hazard a guess nothing changed. He was raised as the entitled son of a wealthy man.

Raymond Vaughn was an investment banker who earned his first million before he was twenty-seven. As an Afro-American, that in itself was a tremendous achievement. With an I.Q. that bordered near the genius level, no one was surprised when he earned his next million before he turned thirty and made an impassioned commitment to hit the billion-dollar mark before the age of forty.

His goal was accomplished. Unfortunately, by that time he was living a life of excess as a heavy smoker and drinker. It wasn't hard on his wallet, but it was extremely hard on his body. His liver was shot, his lungs were fried and he had an enlarged heart. In the middle of a business meeting, Raymond died of a massive coronary long before the paramedics could reach him. After his passing, James and Hunter parted ways.

They drove beyond the lake that circled one side of the property, pulled through the gates and traveled down the pathway. Two slender columns stood on both sides of a massive set of doors that were opened by a uniformed woman who showed them inside. The exterior might be the same, but many interior things were different. If Hunter remembered correctly, there were no less than thirty rooms including a theatre and indoor pool.

He had to brace himself as he walked further into that house as memories poured across his mind. He turned to Ron and saw the awe that gripped him. They were led into the living room with its high ceilings and hand crafted crown molding. The décor was changed from beige and brown shades of yesterday to crisp grays, black and silver. It was years since he last stood in that room. He accepted the drink he was offered and needed to take a minute.

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A blue velvet box was sitting on the bed. Beside it was a single, red rose. Rachel stared at it for a long time seeing the contrast between its deep burgundy richness and the stark whiteness of the spread before her eyes swept over the jewelry box again.

She knew what was inside. This wasn't the first time she'd received an unexpected gift from her husband and it erased her joy because it was an indication of a guilty conscious. She lifted the container and opened the lid. Nestled within satin folds was a ruby necklace and matching earrings.

James came up behind her. "That's for the fantastic job you did in the studio this week."

"Is that why you bought this?" she asked, woodenly.

"Of course. Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful."

He pulled the set from the box and fastened the necklace around her throat.

Feeling choked, she moved to the vanity table and clipped the earrings into place. "Who are these special dinner guests you've invited tonight?"

"The main one is Hunter Daniels. By the end of the evening, I'm going to convince him to work for me."

"I don't understand. Since when do you campaign to win anyone over?"

James pulled a necktie from the rack. "My Board of Directors and Kenny think he's the second coming. Logan Cassidy is after us hard and we have to stop him. If I have to kiss the devil to get the job done, I will."

"Have you ever stopped to think why you have so many enemies?" Rachel asked. "Do you know how bad this Cassidy fight looks?"

"I don't care how it looks and it's not my job to understand this man. Maybe his business strategy is to steal my artists instead of discovering his own. Maybe he had a hard time

growing up or he misses his mommy and needs a hug,” James bawled. “Pick a lane. We have to work as a team. I need loyalty.”

“When haven't I given you my loyalty? How can you say that?”

He put his hands on her shoulders and met her eyes. “No matter what, you're my wife and we're in this together.”

“Are you telling me something real for once?”

“Of course, I am. We've both been busy lately. I had a lot of fires to put out and you've been on tour.”

“That might be true. We haven't had a minute to just take a beat.”

“After the label is in the clear and your album is finished, we'll both be able to do that. Until then, I need you to have my back.” He shrugged into his jacket. “Our guests should be here by now. I'll meet you downstairs. A grand entrance isn't required for this, baby. Be down in five. This is all about the business.”

James stopped in the living room entrance and surveyed the room. If he had his way, and he usually did, these three men were about to become a huge part of his inner circle.

“Hunter. My brother. It's good to see you.” He stepped forward as a pained smile stuck to his lips. “Same old Hunt. I bet you haven't changed one bit.”

“I wouldn't say that.”

James took Hunter's hand. “We all have additional mileage on us. It's been a while, but the years have been kind.”

“Definitely,” Hunter returned, before he introduced Ron.

“I see you've met my head man,” James said. “Kenny Abbott.”

“We've spoken.”

“Good. Good. Let's freshen those drinks.”

“Gin and tonic,” Ron supplied.

“Scotch rocks,” Hunter told him.

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“I’ll have the same. Scotch always works for me,” James agreed, walking to his bar. “I’ve done my homework. You boys have been busting heads and taking names all over the country.”

Hunter cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t have phrased it that way, but okay.”

“I’m not a man who mixes words so I won’t start now. My record label is being attacked and because of that, I’ve decided to make moves to protect it. I need patriots like yourselves to help fight this battle with me.”

“You need to clue me in on the details before I’ll step on board and shout a battle war cry with you. I read the articles. That seldom tells the whole story. If I didn’t know better, I’d say this war was more personal than business.”

“It could be, but I don’t have proof of that. I just know he’s coming after us and we need to stop him. In the process, if we do a little damage to his firm that’s icing on the cake.”

“The first part is something I can help you handle. Not so much the second.”

“Aren’t you the guys who take over companies and sell them for spare parts? What’s the difference?”

“The difference is I’m not in the market of destroying someone’s life work. *D&A* is geared toward crisis management.”

Ron didn’t speak because he knew it was best not to. He spent that time sizing up Kenny instead. Doing the same for James didn’t take long.

“Like I said, same old Hunter. You always stood on the moral high road.”

“Not a bad place to stand from what I’ve heard,” Rachel replied. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

James sat his glass on the mantel. “I’d like you to meet my wife. Rachel, this is Ron Gilles and Hunter Daniels.”

When Hunter's hand touched Rachel's, they received an electric shock. She responded by jerking hers back and it left the warmth of his.

Rachel was a stunningly beautiful woman. She was taller than he'd imagined; her body was slender and her skin was the color of chestnuts. It was more than her physical appeal. There was something about her that he couldn't readily put into words. This was James' wife and for the first time in years, he might actually envy the man.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Hunter replied, finding his voice. "I'm a fan."

"Same here," Ron added. "My daughter loves *Knock on my Heart*."

"I'll make sure you don't leave tonight without an autographed copy for her," Rachel offered.

"Thank you very much."

When she looked at Hunter she caught his eyes and in their depth she saw a manner that was guarded as a protective veil dropped into place. He was a handsome black man, tall and lean. His hair was cut very short and his eyes were deep brown.

"I believe dinner is served," Rachel smiled, as she took her husband's hand and the couple led their guests into the dining room.

There was no immediate talk of business at the Vaughn dinner table. Instead, the conversation turned to current news events and politics. Once the table was cleared and coffee had been served, James lit the tip of an imported cigar.

"Let's get to business," he stated with eyes that were fixed on Ron and Hunter. "You've seen the proposal. You know the politics of business and that's what I need." He inhaled on his cigar and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "My Board is mandating this alliance between our two firms. That means they're giving it full backing." His eyes moved to his second. "Kenny."

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“Since we first contacted you, there's been a development. We learned *Cassidy Records* is planning a concert tour for one of their artists. It's a group called *Deep Six*. The dates coincide with our *Encounter* tour.”

“That's very serious. That means you could have a leak in your organization,” Ron offered.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Kenny returned. “Our tour is widely publicized. We think Logan is setting up his dates to spite us.”

James sat his cigar in a tray. “I'll double that figure I gave you earlier.”

Hunter felt his steadfast resolve slide. “Tell us more,” he coached.

As James and Kenny relayed all the information they knew to that point, Hunter started reading other signals. “I think I've got the gist of it,” he said. “What kind of time table is involved? If we accept, I don't think I'd go after a hard, quick fix. You need something slower and far reaching.”

“You're damn right we do,” James screamed. When that happened, Rachel left the table.

She wished she gone sooner since James already dismissed her participation. It wasn't the first time he let it be known who handled the business on the other side of the microphones. Rachel opened the balcony doors and walked outside.

“Nice night.”

She jumped from the railing at the sound of Hunter's voice.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.”

“I thought you were still at the dinner table talking to my husband.”

“I told him I needed a minute to consider his proposition. I thought I'd think better out here.” He looked across the grounds. “The dinner was excellent. My compliments to the chef.”

“I’d love to take credit, but I haven’t prepared a meal in three years.”

“You sound as if you miss it.”

“I love to cook. Not as much as I love to sing. It runs a close second.”

There was something different about this man that she didn’t see in James or Kenny. She knew he was successful. That could be easily seen in his clothing and a suit that was tailored to his body. This man was sexually attractive and he oozed self-assurance.

Rachel licked her tongue across her bottom lip and forced her thoughts to return to her husband and his needs as she absently tugged at the necklace around her throat. She let the dense fog that was starting to invade her thoughts drift away and remembered she promised her loyalty.

“Logan Cassidy is trying to destroy my husband’s company and reputation. James doesn’t deserve this. He has worked very hard to build the label and no one has the right to destroy it.”

Her words struck a chord in the strings of Hunter’s mind. He found her passion refreshing.

“It’s nice to know my wife is on my side.” James came onto the balcony and wrapped one arm around her waist. His fingers played against the fabric of her dress. “I’ve put all my cards on the table. What’s your decision?”

“I’ve had time to mull it over,” Hunter said. The fact that James quoted a fee so high it could easily finance a third world country, didn’t matter. He wouldn’t have hesitated if the offer came from anyone else. Rachel’s plea tipped the scale. “I’m inclined to say yes.”

“Good. Very good,” James nodded. “I want to set up a meeting as soon as possible. Let’s get a strategy in place.” He put his hand out and Hunter took it. James smiled. “Welcome to the team. The devil is out to play.

Lock and load.”

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*You've just finished reading the first chapter of Alyce Holmes' **Forbidden Fruit**. If you want to know more about Rachel Vaughn and Hunter Daniels, please purchase your choice of a Paperback or CD on our website. Thank you for becoming an Alyce Holmes fan.*

