

Handfasting

August 1967

Theirs was the only room on the third floor of the small hotel, so no one noticed when they walked, hand in hand, down the short hallway. Katherine had never done anything quite like this before, and her hand shook as she took hold of the rail at the top of the stairs. She looked at Steven and smiled nervously as he squeezed her hand in reassurance.

Small lights gleamed on the landing below, but the stairs were dark, her steps unsteady, and she stumbled twice on the way down. Steven was holding her arm, though, and he caught her each time she tripped. They stopped as they reached the hotel's front door.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

"Fine. It's just dark." She hugged him. "Really."

"You have the key?"

She reached into a pocket and pulled out the ring that held both the key to their room and the one to the hotel's door. "Got it."

They opened the door and slipped out into the darkness. Even though it was summer, the night air was cold and Katherine pulled her sweater around her, tightly. Only in Scotland, she thought, would she need a sweater in August. It was just after midnight, and the small Scottish town was effectively closed for the night. Their hotel was dark, except for a light in one room on the second floor. The other hotel, directly across the street, was also dark.

They turned to the left and walked down High Street toward the central plaza. They passed two pubs, one on each side of the street, both closed. Farther down, a third one, the Golden Lion, appeared to be open—lights were visible through the window at least. Katherine thought it unlikely that many patrons were still inside. If so, they were surely sipping their last pints for the evening.

They reached the plaza, the one part of town that was brightly lit. It was surrounded by shops—a candy store, a shop that carried Scottish woolens, two cafés, and one filled with what Katherine called *tourist junk*—stuffed Nessies, t-shirts with cute slogans, tartan ties, plastic swords, anything that might induce a tourist to part with a few pounds or dollars.

The Mercat Cross, the ancient symbol of royal authority, stood in the center of the plaza. Some fifteen feet high, it had occupied the same spot in the center of town for over five hundred years, witnessing the town's gradual change from a place of pilgrimage, to a bustling market town, to the tourist attraction that it had become in recent years.

The tourists came to see the ruins of the great abbey, much as the pilgrims in centuries past had come to see it in its glory. Katherine and Steven were going to the abbey, tonight.

High Street ran through the plaza and they continued for two more blocks before turning left on the B road that ran toward the ruins. The buildings blocked the lights from the plaza and they had to watch their steps to stay on the sidewalk that ran beside the narrow road. Since it was late, there was no traffic—if a car should come speeding along, the driver would be as surprised to find them on foot, as they would be to see the car.

The walkway ended abruptly and they stepped off onto the grassy shoulder.

When Katherine looked up, she could see the stars. She had been in Scotland for almost six weeks and this was the first time she had seen them. Perhaps it was a good omen.

Ten minutes later, they reached the abbey. The floodlights that illumined the ruins had been turned off and a single streetlight in front of the visitor center provided the only illumination. A chain hung across the entrance to the abbey grounds. Few visitors would walk out from town, and

since there was no place to park, other than in the car park, the chain effectively closed the site to visitors.

Steven started across the road, but Katherine held back.

The abbey seemed ominous in the darkness, and Katherine could easily envision that the spirits of the monks who had once lived within its walls still hovered about.

Steven must have felt her hesitate because he squeezed her arm.

Katherine looked up into his eyes. Coming here had been her idea and she wondered if he still thought it was a good plan.

“You’re sure?” she whispered. “You want to do this?”

Steven nodded and hugged her. “Positive.”

They crossed the highway, stepped over the chain, and hurried across the brightly lit lawn, stopping when they reached the shadows of the abbey’s walls. They had to walk slowly because the ground was uneven and littered with stones, but they finally reached the side entrance to the abbey’s church.

The church had held up better than the rest of the abbey. When the abbey had been disbanded in the mid fifteen hundreds, the church had continued to be used as the parish church for another two centuries. The walls were mostly complete, and the stone floor was still in place. A roof and windows were all that would be needed to make the building serviceable again.

Katherine switched on a penlight when they entered the church, confident that it would not be seen by a passing motorist. Walking through the nave and the choir, they approached the high altar—the altar itself was gone, but the raised platform, on which it had stood, remained.

To one side, a yellow rosebush was in full bloom. The fact that it could survive in the abbey was amazing on its own, that it bloomed each year in August, even more so. It was said that a sixteenth-century abbot had removed stones from the floor in order to plant the bush and that it bloomed once each year, on the anniversary of the last mass said by the monks. Its water source was a mystery. The yellow rose had been adopted as the symbol of the abbey, and later as the symbol of the town itself.

Together, they knelt in front of the space where the high altar had stood. Katherine unfolded a sheet of paper, placing it on the ground. Steven held the light as they joined their right hands and Katherine wrapped a purple cord around them. She picked up the paper, and Steven began to read.

“I, Steven Andrew Richardson, take thee, Katherine Lee Jackson, to be my betrothed wife, as the law of the holy Kirk shows, and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

Katherine looked into his eyes. “I, Katherine Lee Jackson, take thee, Steven Andrew Richardson, to be my betrothed husband, as the law of the holy Kirk shows, and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

A smile spread across Katherine’s face. She wanted to jump and shout, but she remembered that they were not supposed to be in the abbey. She put her arms around Steven and squeezed as hard as she could.

He hugged and kissed her in return. “We are engaged now?” he whispered.

“According to Celtic custom we are. I am bound to you forever, unless you release me. You are bound to me.”

They knelt in silence and she whispered a prayer, asking that they would be able to carry out the plans they had made. When she had finished, she raised her head and looked at Steven. Her eyes followed his toward the rosebush. The moon had risen behind the abbey and its light

streamed through one of the small round windows on the side of the nave, falling on a single rose at the end of an especially long cane.

He reached out and pulled the rose toward them. The fragrance was sweet, reminding Katherine of a perfume that had once been her favorite.

“Whenever you see a yellow rose, Katie, think of me.” He said quietly. “Every time you see one, remember that I love you.”

Steven released the rose and took her hand in his. “Everything will work out. You’ll see.”

After another minute, he helped her to her feet and they retraced their steps to the entrance. A light raked across the door just before they reached it, and he peered around the wall.

Two police officers stood at the chain, shining lights around the ruins.

“They couldn’t have seen my light,” she whispered.

“Just a routine check. If they had seen the light, they would have come in.”

After several minutes, the officers drove away. Katherine and Steven hurried down the road and returned to town.

The police car was in the plaza as they turned onto High Street.

“Good evening, Officer,” Katherine said as they passed.

“Good evening, ma’am. It’s a bit late for a stroll.”

“We’re going in now, Officer. Good night.”

“Good night, ma’am.”

Reaching the hotel, Katherine looked back down the street. The officer was still watching them. She inserted the key, opened the door, and carefully, they climbed the stairs.

Reaching their room, they changed clothes and kissed good night. Then, as they had for the past two weeks, Katherine lay under the covers, Steven on top. He put his arm around her and they slept.

Birthday August 1977

The twang of the electric guitar and the whine of the singer's voice drowned out the conversations from the other tables, as Katherine sat with Becky and Sara in The Shining Stallion Restaurant, not far from Central Park.

Friends in college, the three of them now shared an apartment in a converted brownstone on the Upper West Side. While Sara and Becky had moved to New York several years earlier, after graduation from UVA, Katherine had completed med school and her internship. She had then taken a position in the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital, joining her friends in June.

"Ow!" Katherine's hand flew up as a couple of peanuts bounced off her forehead. Others hit the posters of Loretta Lynn and Kenny Rogers hanging on the wall behind her.

A young guy sitting at the table next to them laughed. "Sorry, lady."

Bowls of roasted peanuts sat on each table, and he and his friends were tossing them at each other, trying to catch them in their mouths. Katherine looked for the peanuts on her table, planning to throw them back at him, but they had fallen and were now lost on the sawdust-covered floor.

She appraised their waiter as he strode across the room. He stopped to deliver fresh drinks to a group of guys, then he approached their table. He looked good in his white Western shirt, red bandana, and cowboy boots. He touched the brim of his Stetson as he smiled, speaking loudly to be heard.

"Everyone all right? You ladies need more to drink?"

He reminded Katherine of the clichéd man in the white hat in her father's favorite Westerns—the hero who rode into town, cleaned it up, and then in the last reel, rode away with the girl.

She returned the waiter's smile. She supposed that almost any girl would be willing to ride off with this guy.

"Another for the birthday girl," Becky replied, pointing at Katherine.

"If I have much more, I'll be the birthday blimp." She patted her stomach, as the waiter went off to get their order. "This barbeque is good. Reminds me of what we eat in Hamilton."

Becky laughed. "That was the point, child. That was the point."

As the song ended, a line of waiters formed near the entrance and began to snake through the restaurant toward their table. Before Katherine could react, the waiters began to sing their own song. "Happy birthday! Happy birthday! Happy birthday to you!"

Katherine's eyes grew wide and her face felt warm. "You didn't!"

The waiters circled the table, still singing. On cue, they stopped. The crowd fell silent.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Katherine." The lead waiter pointed to her. "Katherine came in tonight to celebrate her twenty-eighth birthday."

"Woo-hee!" A voice rang out from the other side of the room.

"On the count of three, let's all give her a big, Shining Stallion birthday wish. One. Two. Three."

The crowd roared, "Happy Birthday."

Katherine covered her face with her hands as the waiter set a cowboy hat on her head, kissed her on the cheek, and placed a giant cupcake in front of her.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you both!"

Becky and Sara were doubled over, laughing.

“Death is certain!”

The waiters drifted away amid diminishing applause as the conversations around them resumed.

“Okay, old lady, what words of wisdom do you have for us?”

“Old lady? I won’t be old until—”

“I guess you’re right,” Becky cut in. “Twenty-eight isn’t thirty...but it’s getting awfully close.”

“Hey. You two are only a couple of months behind. Just wait until October.”

“Sweet twenty-eight and never been kissed,” Sara sang.

“Stop it. Someone might hear you. Besides, it’s not true. Of course I’ve been kissed.”

“Not true? Tell us. Who has been able to pry the book out of your hands to even get close enough to kiss you?”

“Stop!” Katherine laughed.

“Who? Was it Robert Carson, that guy who was sweet on you your senior year at UVA? Maybe what’s his name?” Sara snapped her fingers three times, as if recalling the name. “Yes, Bill Wilson, that attorney from Hamilton who calls sometimes?”

“Leave her alone, Sara, or she’s going to get upset.”

“She knows I’m teasing.”

“I know she’s teasing, but if she doesn’t stop, I’ll start asking her about Will.”

“You don’t want to go there.” Becky laughed. “You’ll hear a lot more than you bargained for.”

“Not true,” Sara replied. “I always behave myself.”

“Right.” Becky turned to Katherine. “Back before you moved in, they used to sit in the living room while I was trying to sleep. The things I heard!”

“You heard nothing.”

“Sara and Will sitting in a tree...”

Sara rolled her eyes and the others laughed.

“So, Katherine, what are you doing this weekend?” Becky asked. “Did you say that the aforementioned Bill Wilson is coming to town, going to take you to dinner for your birthday on Saturday?”

Katherine shrugged. “I had a letter saying he would be in town—that he wanted to take me to dinner. He was supposed to call or something, but he hasn’t, so I guess not.”

“That’s not nice.”

“He wasn’t coming just to see me, Sara. I would have told him not to do that. I’m not sure that he knew Saturday was my birthday.”

“He wasn’t your boyfriend?”

“In his mind, maybe. We dated a little in high school, but he wanted more than I did. He would show up at random times when I was in college and med school. Really weird. You know, I haven’t seen him in,” Katherine looked up, recalling, “oh, over a year, at least. He dropped in to see me in Atlanta last summer, at the hospital. We went to lunch. He got really upset about something. I never knew what.”

Sara pouted. “You’ll be all alone on your birthday.”

“That’s right. Sara is going to Boston to see Will.” Becky turned toward Katherine. “I’d like to be a fly on the wall at his apartment.”

“You’re terrible. I’m staying with his sister.”

Becky ignored her protest. “And I’m flying to Denver for that sales meeting.”

Katherine waved it off. "I'll be fine. It's just a birthday. Anyway, I volunteered to work a shift for one of the other doctors. I'll be in the ER until three or four o'clock."

The recorded music stopped and a live quartet began to play. A boy tapped Katherine on her shoulder.

"Uh...birthday girl, would...would you like to, uh, dance?"

Katherine looked at the guy standing beside the table. He might be twenty-one, she thought. Probably not, though. Must have a fake ID. His face was red and his eyes darted everywhere, except to hers. She glanced over her shoulder at the table where he had been sitting and saw five other guys, snickering.

"How much?"

"What do you mean, how much?"

"How much is the bet?" She smiled, trying to put him at ease.

He looked at his feet. "Uh, twenty bucks."

"To ask me or to dance with me?"

"I have to get you on the dance floor."

Becky started to laugh, and the boy turned a deeper shade of red.

"What's your name?"

"Chris."

"Well, Chris, I'm Katherine. I'd love to dance with you." She took his hand and they walked onto the floor as the musicians began to play.

Katherine glanced over Chris's shoulder and saw his friends staring, mouths open, eyes wide. She smiled and put her head on his shoulder. It had been years since she had been to a dance. He put his arms around her waist and she put hers around his neck. They began to sway in time to the music—the same song they'd heard earlier, a woman growing older without a man in sight. Katherine attempted to ignore the lyrics.

It was true, she was only twenty-eight. That wasn't old. Not for having finished med school and all. She thought about the boys she had dated in high school, in college. Almost all of them were married now. Most of them had children. Back then, there was so much time, so many guys, but now? She suddenly felt all alone, and a few tears slipped out.

The song ended. Katherine quickly wiped her tears and kissed Chris on the cheek.

"Thanks for asking me to dance. I enjoyed it." She smiled and Chris blushed.

"I...I did too."

"That was really nice," Sara said when Katherine reached the table.

Katherine looked back at Chris's table and saw the other guys reaching for their wallets. "I hate jerks like them."

"That's why you shouldn't encourage them," Becky replied. "But you were nice to Chris."

"Are you crying, Katherine?" Sara reached across the table and patted her hand. "What's wrong? You were really nice to him."

"It's nothing, really. Just that song, I guess. I feel so alone. No boyfriend. You know, I really would like a family someday."

"Well, you've been in school—"

"And almost everyone in my med school class was married by the time we finished. The young nurses at the hospitals look forward to the new interns because they know that those who are not married are looking for wives. And they find them."

"Prince Charming will come along. Any day now."

"Only in fairytales, Sara. Maybe I should chase Bill Wilson. He would marry me."

“But you don’t love him.”

“No, but sometimes there are other reasons for marriage.”

“Not good ones, Katherine. Not good ones.”

“I’m being silly. I’ll be all right.” Katherine wiped her eyes. “Ready to go?” She stood up. “Dinner was delicious. Thank you.”

Bill Wilson sat at the end of a long table at the Pub Beside the River, in the fishing village north of Charleston.

“To friends, fun, and fish!” His friend, Johnny Metzger, raised his mug high.

“Hear! Hear!”

“Fantastic trip, isn’t it, Bill.”

“In more ways than one, Johnny. In more ways than one.”

“We certainly reeled them in today.”

“Certainly did. Two more days like this and we’ll be able to feed the whole town of Hamilton for a month.” Bill smiled. “Great fishing.”

“You were supposed to be in New York this weekend.”

“Yeah, I was going to drop in on Katherine Jackson.”

“You still sweet on that woman? I thought you lost interest last summer.”

“Oh, I thought I’d give her another chance.” He sighed. “But she would have dragged me around town, poking in antique stores, going to museums. You know how Katherine is. She’ll be at home next weekend, anyway. I’ll see her on Saturday at the cookout.”

“Missed a weekend with your girlfriend? Wouldn’t the nights have made up for the museums?” His buddy, Eugene, snickered.

Johnny laughed too. “You’ve never met Katherine Jackson.”

“No action, huh?” Eugene shook his head.

“Not for lack of trying on Bill’s part.” Johnny motioned toward the group sitting around the table, all of whom had turned to listen. “Tell them Bill. Tell them what happens when a guy gets fresh with Katherine Jackson.”

Bill reflexively rubbed his left side. “You brought it up, Johnny, you tell them.”

“It was—what?—about ten years ago, just before graduation. Bill and Katherine had been to a movie over in Richmond. They stopped for a burger and then Bill drove her home. Now, you fellows have never met Katherine. The word *fox* doesn’t even come close to describing this girl—beautiful, smart, funny. Every guy wanted to date her, and a bunch of them tried.” Johnny took a swig of his drink.

“Well, they drove up to Katherine’s house. The lights were on, but Bill didn’t see any cars. They walked in—he didn’t hear anything. Dead silent. He checked his watch, saw that they made it home a lot earlier than they had planned, and he recalled that her parents were going to a dinner party a couple of blocks down the street.”

Johnny looked around the table. “You guys aren’t from Hamilton—in Hamilton, dinner parties are long-term affairs. You might start with drinks and appetizers at seven, move on to dinner at eight, and find yourself eating dessert on the deck around ten. People often don’t leave until after eleven o’clock. Her parents wouldn’t be home for at least an hour. Maybe longer.”

Johnny chuckled. He had told the story many times and it appeared to Bill that it never got old for Johnny.

“Well, Bill tells Katherine, ‘Your parents aren’t at home. I’d better make sure everything is safe.’”

“She asked me in!”

“That’s his story.” Johnny waved him off. “Katherine’s version says Bill had been drinking and he pushed his way in.”

Bill didn’t need to finish listening—he clearly recalled what happened next.

“No one’s here, Katherine.”

“I know. I’ll be fine. Mom and Dad are down the street. I’ll reset the alarm as you leave.”

Bill locked the door and stepped toward her. “That might not be for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

He ignored her question and pushed her down on the sofa in the living room.

“Bill! Stop!”

“There’s something I want to do before I leave.”

Katherine tried to push him away. “Bill, let me up!”

“When I’m finished.”

Holding one hand firmly on her chest, he began to unbuckle his belt and unbutton his pants.

“Let me go!” Katherine rolled from side to side, struggling to free herself.

Bill laughed.

She hit him, kicked him, scratched at his face. “You’re hurting me!”

“You’ve been asking for this and it’s past time I gave it to you.”

“Let me up! Get out!” Katherine was shouting. Her face was red. She hit at him, tried to push him away again.

She screamed.

He laughed.

“Scream away, Katherine. No one is home.”

She started to cry. “My father will use you as crab bait!”

Bill stared down at her in utter contempt. “Typical female,” he snorted. “You tease a guy all night long, but when the time comes to fill your part of the bargain you don’t do it. You cry, no, no, and turn on the tears.” He chuckled. “Well, darling, tonight I’m going to get what I deserve, and I don’t give a damn about your tears.”

He turned his head as he dropped his pants, and Katherine shifted her position, throwing him off balance. As he started to fall backwards, she sat up and pounded her fist into his side.

“Bitch,” Bill mumbled.

Johnny laughed. “Well, after she KO’d good old Bill here, Katherine called her dad. He found Bill on the floor, writhing in pain. Katherine had her dad’s pistol, pointing it at Bill’s head, daring him to get up.”

The entire group was laughing now.

“A real spitfire,” one guy said.

“The pistol was loaded and the safety was off.” Johnny cackled. “She was ready to blow him away.”

“I spent three days in the hospital. Two broken ribs.” Bill sighed. “If I hadn’t been buzzed—well, things would have ended really differently.”

“Yeah, Bill. We hear you.” Johnny laughed again. “Guys, you don’t mess with Katherine Jackson. Not without backup. Not if you want to live.”

“Birthday girl gets first shower,” Katherine called as they reached home. She slipped into her bathrobe and picked up a towel. As she tied the belt around her waist, she glanced at her desk, covered in medical books, papers, a couple of bills, and the novel she had been trying to read for over a month. There was a birthday card from Bill Wilson.

He was really a puzzle. He would tell anyone who would listen that he and Katherine would marry, but he visited her very occasionally, wrote seldom, almost never called. The birthday card wasn’t even really a birthday card. It was generic—a picture of a bowl of flowers on the front and *Have a Happy Day* printed inside. She wasn’t even sure that he had signed the card, and it had arrived a full week before her birthday.

She shrugged. It didn’t really matter. He could be fun on a date, if it was something he wanted to do and *if* he had not been drinking.

She recalled their last date. He *had* been drinking that night for sure, the night he’d tried to assault her. She supposed he had probably been outright drunk. That had been her mother’s explanation anyway. And afterwards, her mother had insisted that Katherine be nice to him, even if she refused to date him again. The Wilsons, after all, were friends of the family. Katherine wanted to please her mother, and she had been able to tolerate the occasional contact with Bill over the years.

As she started for the bathroom, she heard a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it.” Becky checked to see who was outside. “It’s Christa.” Christa and her husband lived across the hall. “She has a vase of flowers.”

“Hi, Christa, come in.”

“Hi. I can’t stay. I’m just playing delivery girl. The florist dropped these off right after the three of you left. They’re for,” she looked carefully at the card, “Katie Lee Jackson. Is that you, Katherine?”

That got Katherine’s attention. She paused to listen to Christa. No one called her Katie Lee—there was only one person. Her heart began to race. It was the summer before she went to college, ten years ago, that she’d last heard the name Katie Lee.

Steven.

Taking a deep breath to steady her hand, she reached out. “I’ll take them, Christa. Thanks so much for keeping them for me.” Katherine leaned in and inhaled their fragrance as she took the vase, holding it out to gaze at the blooms.

Whenever you see a yellow rose, think of me. His voice rang true in her mind. It was almost as if she heard the words spoken aloud.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” she asked.

“A dozen yellow roses in a crystal vase—what’s the occasion?”

“My birthday is Saturday, so I guess they’re a present.”

“Well, you be nice to whoever sent these. I would topple over if Ben brought me anything like this.”

“Ben is very nice to you.”

“He is. He is. But flowers? This vase?” She shook her head on her way out. “Well, have a nice birthday.”

Katherine turned to see Becky and Sara standing, hands on hips.

“After all of the things you’ve said about Bill Wilson,” Sara reprimanded her. “Those are so pretty. Why did he think of yellow roses, I wonder?”

Katherine’s hands shook as she placed the vase on the coffee table. She ran her fingers along the purple ribbon and fumbled with the card as she pulled it from the envelope. She had been looking for a sign for months, hoping for a call. The flowers—they couldn’t be, but surely they *must* be from Steven.

She stared at the card, her mouth open.

“What is it, Katherine? Who sent them?”

When she didn’t answer, Becky snatched the card and read it aloud. “Hi, Katie Lee. Can you believe it has been ten years? Remember, I promised to track you down. If you would like to talk, I have dinner reservations at Villa Antonia on Saturday at six. Saturday is your birthday, isn’t it? If you can’t make it, please let me know. I can’t wait to see you! Steven.”

Becky looked to Katherine, eyes full of questions. “Who is Steven?”

Katherine flopped onto the sofa, shock setting in.

“I said who is Steven?” Becky chided. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll call—there’s a phone number at the bottom you know.”

“Steven is...an old friend.” She pulled a single rose from the vase and held it out, studying the swirl of the petals. “Think of me,” he had said. “Remember I love you.” She looked up. “I...well, I had hoped to hear, but I never really expected to...I mean...Steven and I, we’re engaged to be married.”

