

Chapter 42

Adah smoothed the folds of the aprons and laid it in the tattered duffle bag. It only took her a few minutes to pack her things. She hadn't accumulated much in the few months she'd been in Branson. She regretted not being able to return her work apron to the coffee shop before she left. The experience with the Dillon sisters, those revealing moments on the sidewalk, told her she couldn't wait. She and Jackson hadn't attempted to speak on the trip back to the house. He hadn't even turned on the radio. The silence had vibrated with words already spoken, feelings bared, emotions poured out. Everything had been said. More than said.

She had to go home. Today. Now. Staying here would only be a constant reminder to Jackson that she wasn't the girl he wanted her to be. Adah smoothed the silky material of the pink western shirt with its white piping around the pockets and the sparkling pink and white rhinestones and shiny snaps. Maybe Jackson could return it to the store and get his money back. She fingered the denim jeans with the rhinestone designs on the pockets. She'd never even tried them on. Sighing, she laid them aside and zipped up the half-empty bag.

Captain, who hadn't left her side since she hopped from the truck and ran into the house earlier in the day, lifted his head and whined, his expression troubled.

"You should be with Jackson." She patted his head and scratched behind his ears, eliciting another soft whine in the back of the dog's throat. He sounded like she felt. "He needs you more than I do. Come on."

He got to his feet and hobbled to the door, then stopped and looked back, his ears lifted, nose up. She hoisted her bag to her shoulder. "I'm coming."

She took one last look around. RaeAnne wouldn't be able to tell anyone had used her room. Everything remained exactly as Adah had found it. The posters of horses, the Nancy Drew

mysteries on the bookshelves, the checkered bed spread on the four-post canopy bed. The only changes were to herself. She'd learned that she couldn't make it in this world. As much as she loved music, loved hearing it and making it, she didn't have what it took to live in this world. She was a disappointment to Jackson. She couldn't be what he wanted her to be.

Her family would accept her for who she was. They would take her back. Mudder and Daed would forgive her. That's what Plain families did. They would want her back for her sake, no matter how much pain she'd caused them. They would want her to be baptized and a full fledged member of the district.

Matthew, on the other hand, would forgive her, but whether he would take her back, that remained to be seen. It would take time—for both of them—to heal and to forget.

She drew a deep breath and exhaled. Time to go. She shut the door and marched down the stairs, aware of the thud of her sneakers against the carpet and her damp hand as it slid down the smooth, varnished banister. Captain led the way, occasionally looking back as if to say *come on, get it over with*.

Time to go.

Time to face the consequences.

Time to say goodbye to Jackson.

The pain of that thought made her want to run back up the stairs. Saying goodbye would cause him pain and she never wanted to do that. The pain that radiated from her chest wasn't only for him. She would miss him. His smile, his dark blue eyes, his collections of silver buckles and guitars, his tall tales and endless optimism. But most of all, she'd miss his voice. That melodic, country boy voice. How she loved that voice.

Best to do it quick. A clean break.

The living room was empty, the only sign of Jackson's recent occupation a full ashtray and sheaf of paper covered with notes and scribbled lyrics lying on the coffee table next to an empty tea glass. Adah inhaled the scent of tobacco and Jackson's aftershave still lingering on the fall breeze that rustled curtains in the open windows across the front of the room. She could feel his presence as palpable as the air she breathed.

"Where is he, Cap?" She lugged her bag through the kitchen door. Cap followed, a whine soft in the back of his throat. "I know you know where he is, boy, go get him."

She opened the screen door. Cap shot through it, hurled himself down the back porch steps, and loped across the expanse of high grass toward the lake. Jackson's favorite Gibson guitar—the one he'd tried to give to her so long ago at the pond on his father's farm—lay on the pillow of the rattan chair nestled next to the porch swing. A knot in her throat so big she couldn't breathe, Adah picked it up and smoothed her fingers over the high sheen of the varnished wood. She dropped her bag on the porch and sank into the chair.

Of their own volition, her fingers plucked a cord, then another, and another. *Gott, I will miss this. How could this be wrong?* She would miss it like she imagined a mother must miss a child who leaves and never returns. The way her mother must miss her. *Gott, what do I do? I don't belong in either place.*

She had one foot in this world and one foot in the world to which she was born. She was a failure in both. Words whirled and danced in her heads. The words of Jackson's song that he wrote for her. "Stop it, stop it!"

The words refused to leave. She did the only thing she could. She opened her mouth and sang.

*You say our worlds don't touch, they can't meet.
They're like hot and cold, black and white, bitter and sweet.*

We're walking on opposite sides of a raging river, no bridge between us.

I say our roads met the first time I saw you.

I want you and you want me.

That's the plain truth

Lord, it's the plain truth

Coming down on you and me.

The sound of a car engine cut the air, forcing her to raise her head. She didn't stop singing. She didn't stop playing. She couldn't. A rusted station wagon approached, its tires spitting gravel, dust following in a billowing cloud as it wound its way up the dirt road and hit the paved driveway.

Still, she played and sang.

The station wagon stopped.

Matthew shoved open a door and got out.

Still, she played. For those last few minutes, last few seconds, she wanted to sing. When she stopped everything would be different. This time in this place would be over. Her time with Jackson would be over.

Matthew strode across the grass. She could read everything in his face. So intent. So solemn. So sure he was doing the right thing. Doing his righteous duty. He stopped at the porch steps, a silhouette in the setting sun. For a few seconds, he paused, his head cocked as if listening.

Adah's voice faltered. She let the song die away in a few last breathless notes and waited.

"That's a nice song."

"A friend wrote it."

“I figured as much.” He slid his hat back on his head and wrapped his fingers around his suspenders. Only the white of his knuckles spoke of the tension under which he labored. “We’ve come to take you home.”

No *I missed you*. No declaration of love or even caring. She knew he cared for her. But he cared more for her eternal salvation. He was here to bring her back to the fold. She looked beyond him. Daniel slid from the backseat of the car, then Molly. Her brother and her friend. RaeAnne slammed the door on the driver’s side and leaned against the front bumper, her arms crossed over her chest. She would be thrilled to see Adah leave. As well she should be. Adah didn’t belong in her brother’s world.

Adah stood and laid the guitar in the chair with infinite care. The tears, she stuffed back in a box filled with dreams laid to rest. She picked up her bag. Matthew’s gaze went to it. “You knew we were coming?”

“Nee.” Her voice sounded foreign and strange, like it belonged to someone else. “I was leaving for the bus station after I . . . in a few minutes.”

“You’re ready to come home then?” Emotion seeped into Matthew’s voice with an ever so slight tremble. “You made your choice?”

“I—”

“Adah, Adah, wait!”

Jackson’s voice, hoarse and urgent, the voice that would visit her dreams for the rest of her life, called to her. She dragged her gaze from Michael toward the lake. Cap at his side, Jackson strode toward them, his tan chest bare, jean shorts riding down on his narrow hips. He flung aside a fishing pole and let a string of catfish fall to the ground. “Don’t go! Wait.”

She stood, unable to move, barely breathing, as he picked up speed, his long legs pumping, his bare feet slapping against the packed dirt of the narrow trail they'd worn through the grass over the long summer of trips to the lake to sing and laugh and write songs.

"Jackson." RaeAnne straightened and snatched at his arm as he roared past her. "You look like a mountain man. Dani Jo says hey."

He shrugged off his sister's hand and plowed ahead.

"Come on, get in the car. We'll get you home where you belong." Matthew's quiet assurance cracked around the edges. He put a hand on the porch railing, but his gaze remained on Jackson who approached the same way he did everyday—headlong, no holds barred. "Your mudder and daed are waiting for you. They miss you."

"I know, I just—"

"I need to talk to you for one second." Jackson halted a few feet from the first porch step, his broad chest heaving. The sound of Cap's panting mixed with Jackson's labored breathing. The dog plopped down next to Jackson, a growl humming in his throat. Jackson hushed him. "Please, give me one second of your time. You owe me that."

"She doesn't owe you anything." Matthew edged toward a spot on the sidewalk between Jackson and the steps. "It's time she came home, where she belongs."

"That's for her to decide."

Both men looked up at her. Adah breathed.

Gott, what now. Tell me, what now?

Thy will be done. What was Gott's will for her life?

"I have to go home. It's not working here. I don't fit in."

Jackson dodged Matthew and pounded up the steps. He came to a dead stop in her path. He stood between her and the road home, between her and Matthew, between her and her future.

“I have to go home.”

“Just hear me out.” He ducked his head and swiped at his face with the back of one sweaty hand, his gaze on a crumpled piece of paper gripped in his huge hand. “I want to give you something.”

She knew without looking what it was. A song. He’d written her another song.

“I can’t—”

He grabbed her hand and stuffed the paper in her palm and wrapped her fingers around it. “Please don’t go.” His head came up and his gaze met hers. “Stay here with me.”

“I can’t. I’m not cut out for this.” To her chagrin, her voice trembled. She swallowed and breathed. No breaking down now. “I’ll only disappoint you.”

“Is that what this is all about?” He glanced at Matthew, who hadn’t moved, as if his boots were stuck to the cement. “You worried about disappointing people? I don’t care if you never sing another note. I don’t care if you never play another note. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life being your best friend, being your . . . everything.”

His voice broke on the last word. He took a long, shuddering breath and dropped to one knee, his gaze locked on hers. “Stay with me. Marry me.”

The edges of her vision went fuzzy. She couldn’t see anything beyond the face looking up at her, with those blue eyes that had mesmerized from the first time she encountered them in the corral on his parents’ farm. “What?”

“I’m asking you to marry me. Will you marry me?”

The puzzle that was Adah's future rearranged itself, pieces moving, images disappearing and new ones appearing. "We can't get through one day without arguing. You drink and you cuss and you never wipe your boots on the rug. You track mud all over the floor and leave cigarette ashes on the coffee table. You think I should wear . . . bling."

"I don't care what you wear. I know I'm not perfect. Not even close. But I love you more than I have ever loved in anyone or anything in my life." His hand gripped hers so hard she feared her fingers would be crushed. "I have some growing up to do, but I promise I'll never disrespect you again. I'll never do anything to hurt you. I'll never ask you to do anything you don't want to do."

"Jackson—"

"Let me finish. I know that loving me and staying with me will come at a terrible price for you. I won't ever forget that. You have my word I will do everything in my power to make you happy and to be . . . worth it."

Adah stared at a face she knew better than her own. The blue eyes she could drown in with waves crashing all around her. She could submerge herself and never come up for air. She tore her gaze from his to the man standing at the foot of the steps. Waiting for her. Waiting to take her back to the place where everyone else she knew and loved thought she belonged.

Matthew stared up at her. Resignation etched itself across his face. He smiled. No bitterness reflected there, only sadness for something lost. For something he knew and she knew neither of them had never really had. She and Jackson would fight, yes, but the feelings she'd thought to have for Matthew couldn't hold a candle to the torrent of emotion Jackson caused her. And Matthew knew it. She could see it in his face. He touched two fingers to the brim of his hat and nodded. "Just remember you can always come home. Always. The second you walk through

the door, you'll be forgiven. Never forget that." He nodded and turned away. "Get in the car, Molly. We're going home."

Daniel stormed across the grass. "Nee—"

"Get in the car. She's made up her mind."

"I'm her bruder." Daniel tried to dodge past Matthew, but his friend ducked into his path. "I told Mudder I'd bring her home."

"Your mudder won't want her to come under these circumstances." Matthew's inflection had gone flat, neutral. "She has to want to come and she doesn't."

"Tell Mudder this is where I belong. Tell her I love God and I love Jesus and that will never change." The words tumbled out, thoughts barely formed before spoken and swiftly a certainty once said. "Tell Mudder and Daed Gott gave me a talent and I'm certain his plan is for me to use it. Tell them I'm sorry and I love them and I miss them."

Daniel backed away, the pain on his face etching itself on Adah's heart in wide, arching swathes. "I'm sorry, bruder. I had to make a choice. Gott still loves me. His love never changes." She looked down at Jackson, still on bended knees. "And neither will Jackson's. I'm as sure of that as I am you'll never stop loving Rachel."

Daniel whirled and followed Matthew to the car. RaeAnne slid in the driver's seat and slammed her door. More doors slammed, but Adah had ceased to watch. Her gaze was on Jackson. She tugged at his hand. "Please get up."

His hand tightened on hers. "You still haven't answered my question."

She swallowed, unable to look away even as the car's engine rumbled, gravel crackled and pinged under tires, and brakes squealed. "The answer is yes. It's yes."

A grin spreading across his face, Jackson shot to his feet. His hands grasped her waist.

“So now do I have permission?”

Adah stared up at that impetuous face, so full of love and happiness and hope, so full of everything she'd ever wanted. “Yes.”

He picked her up and whirled her around, her body crushed against the hard cords of his chest muscles. His scent of sweat and sun and lake wafted around her. He made her wait until he settled on to the porch swing and tugged her onto his lap. His lips covered hers and she forgot about the car driving away and the music and the people who wouldn't understand. She forgot to be afraid of singing in front of strangers. She forgot to be afraid of anything. She forgot to breathe.

The kiss told her everything she needed to know. She was home. Jackson was her home.

He eased away, but his hands remained cupped around her face. The certainty faded, leaving behind a look of entreaty, as if he expected her to change her mind. “It won't be easy.”

Those weren't the first words she expected him to say after a kiss so full of promise. “I know.”

“We'll fight.”

“I know.”

“You'll miss your family.”

“I know.”

“But I meant what I said. I will always love you.” His thumbs brushed against her cheeks.

“You still haven't said it.”

She touched her fingers to her lips and then his. “I love you.”

His grin returned, the grin of a big, overgrown kid getting exactly what he wanted for Christmas. “We’re gonna make great music together.”

She leaned into him, seeking another kiss. “We already do.”

Epilogue

Inhaling the sweet fragrance of baby, Adah swaddled Loretta's warm body and tucked her in the pine crib. The baby sighed and smacked her lips as if still nursing. Loretta Lynn Hart's rosebud lips and round cheeks belonged to Adah, but her blue eyes, the shape of her face, the thick, black hair around it, and even her nose were Jackson's. Adah picked up the guitar that leaned against the changing table and settled into the rocking chair, its squeak making her wince. Loretta tended to fight sleep—something else she had in common with her daddy. One last lullaby—Jackson's optimism had rubbed off on Adah in the two years they'd been married—and this little pumpkin would be asleep. Finally.

“Adah, Adah where are you?”

“Shush!” Jackson was back from the recording studio early, as promised. The man did not know how to make a quiet entry. She popped from the chair and started for the door. “I'm trying to get the baby down.”

Jackson barreled in before she reached it. “Did you hear it? Did you hear it?”

“Hush, I'm trying to get Loretta to sleep.”

“No, no, I want Retta to hear it too.” He scooped up the baby and rushed toward the door. “It's on the radio. They're playing our song on the radio.”

“Are you serious?”

They'd known it was coming, of course, but the reality of it was almost too much to contemplate. Adah hurtled after him and raced down the hallway. Sure enough. Jackson had the stereo blasting in their tiny Nashville bungalow's living room crowded with a second-hand sofa, loveseat, half a dozen guitars, and the used upright piano Jackson had insisted on buying her for her birthday the week after they'd moved to Nashville. The room that served as a mini studio,

practice session room, and the place where Adah labored over her songs everyday while Loretta took her naps was the center of the life they'd made together despite the objections of both their families.

Her husband's voice, deep and sure, floated around her on a wave of steel guitars, drums, and fiddles played by the band Mac had put together for him. Jackson called it their song, but he'd written it one afternoon on the banks of the lake in Branson. When he thought he'd lost it all.

*The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.
I was too busy writing a song
You couldn't hear,
Making up lyrics as I went along,
Thinking you'd be singing the same song*

*The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.
It was lost in the sound of the slamming door
And the riot of two hearts that don't beat together anymore.*

*I had this dream of two pairs of shoes
Lined up beside a bed covered
With a lilac and blue quilt.
The blue was the same color as your eyes
And the Missouri sky.
The shoes were black sneakers and cowboy boots.
Yours looking small next to mine.*

*I thought later maybe there'd be more,
Smaller sneakers and little pink cowboy boots with fringe
That shakes when she takes her first steps.*

*The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.*

*You told me you couldn't stay.
You told me you're going away.
Back to the place where things are easier,
Back to the place where no one
Looks at you strange.*

*Where you make bread and sew your dresses
On that treadle machine,
Your black sneakers
Pumping in time to the song in your head.*

*The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.*

*I was too busy writing a song you couldn't hear
Making up lyrics as I went along,
Thinking you'd be singing the same song.*

*The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.
It was lost in the sound of the slamming door.
And a heart not beating anymore.*

*The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.
I was too busy writing a song
You couldn't hear*

*Making up lyrics as I went along
Thinking you'd be singing the same song
The other shoe dropped tonight
And I didn't even hear it hit the floor.
It was lost in the sound of the slamming door.
And a heart not beating any more.*

Adah took two seconds to thank God the song was only that . . . a song about what could've been if she'd taken the easy way out and returned to her family instead of reaching for her dream.

As the notes died away, Jackson wrapped his long arm around her waist and hugged her against his body in an embrace that included the two people she loved most in this life. "I can't believe they're playing our song on the radio." He planted a big kiss on the top of her head and then another on Loretta's sleepy face. The baby's lower lip curled down in the sure sign she was about to cry. "I have to call Mac. See if he heard."

“Didn’t you just leave him at the studio?”

“Yeah, yeah, but I’m just so psyched.”

“You’ll see him tomorrow when the tour bus takes off.” One of the few things Adah didn’t like about her life. The touring. It was too hard on a baby as small as Loretta. They’d agreed to wait until she was older to take her along, which meant Adah would be seeing a lot less of Jackson in the coming months. “It’s getting late and I want to spend this last night with you.”

He squeezed her hand and let go. “You got it, babe. I’ll get Retta down.” He headed back toward the nursery. “You got a letter. I left it on the table.”

Something in his voice warned her. She watched him disappear down the hallway and then forced herself to walk into the kitchen, not scurry like a child sent to bed for getting in trouble at school. The white envelope lay on top of the Burpee seed catalogue she’d ordered online. She wanted to plant some vegetables in their tiny backyard while Jackson was gone. It would be good to get her hands in the dirt, smell the earth, and with any luck, it would ease the ach in her heart caused by his absence. She smoothed the edges of the envelope, studying Molly’s careful block print.

It had to be Molly. The only two letters Adah had received in the last two years had been from her friend. The first brought the good news that Molly and Richard had married. Molly had thanked her for helping bring them together, even though they both knew it had been entirely God’s doing. Molly wouldn’t get in trouble for writing these letters. Adah hadn’t been baptized in her district church. She wasn’t shunned. She could go home anytime, but chose not to out of respect for the pain it would cause her family. The others could write, but chose not to do so for their own reasons. Adah respected that too. She suspected Molly still harbored hopes that Adah would end this forever rumspringa and return to her church family. Adah didn’t have the heart to

tell her she'd been baptized along with Loretta in the little church she and Jackson attended every Sunday when they weren't on the road.

She ripped open the envelope. The letter was short and sweet. Matthew and Elizabeth would marry in two weeks' time. Adah glanced at the postmark on the envelope. Now only a few days away. Inhaling the mingled aromas of the chicken pot pie and brownies she'd made and kept warm for Jackson's late supper, she sank into the pine chair at the small two-seater table with its place mats of green apple prints and rooster salt and pepper shakers. Her mind sorted through memories and she was back to that evening so long ago when she'd driven to Matthew's house and saw him sitting on the porch, eating pie and ice cream, with Elizabeth. *Thank you, Gott.* Relief made her muscles weak. Not that she believed that Matthew would pine for her forever. But everyday she regretted the pain she'd caused a good man who'd done nothing more than offer her his heart and a lifetime of love.

"Retta's down. The little bugger made me sing *Amazing Grace* twice, all the verses." Jackson stood in the kitchen doorway, hands stuffed into the pockets of his faded blue jeans adorned by his favorite silver and gold rodeo buckle, his Johnny Cash T-shirt stretched tight across his broad chest. He leaned against the frame and pulled his hand from one pocket to scratch at his dark five o'clock shadow. "The news from home . . . everything okay?"

Even after all this time, he still wondered. She saw it his face when he leaned in to kiss her at the beginning of everyday and when he wrapped her in a hug every night. Adah folded the single sheet of paper and slid it back into its envelope. "Everything is wonderful." She stood and went to him. He met her halfway. "Everyday with you is wonderful."

Jackson grabbed her waist and whirled her around the way he had on the day he proposed. He kissed her long and hard, leaving her dizzy and breathless, the way his presence

always did. “Good, because we just got started making music, girlie girl. We’re just getting started, you and me.”

To Adah, the words, warm with love and acceptance and her husband’s particular brand of eternal optimism, sounded like the perfect love song, the one they would write together everyday for the rest of their lives.