

A
Plain
Love
Song

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To Tim, Erin, and Nicholas
Love always

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music
make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the king.
Let the sea resound and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

PSALM 98:4-9

The Original New Hope Families

Luke & Leah <i>Shirack</i> William Joseph Esther & Martha (twins) Jebediah Hazel	Thomas & Emma <i>Brenneman</i> Eli Rebecca Caleb Lilah Mary & Lillie Shirack (Emma's sisters)	Benjamin & Irene <i>Knepp</i> Hiram Daniel Adah Melinda Abram Joanna Jonathan
Elijah & Bethel <i>Christner</i> John	Tobias & Edna <i>Daugherty</i> Jacob Michael Ephraim Nathaniel Margaret Isabel	Peter & Cynthia <i>Daugherty</i> Rufus Enos Deborah Rachel John Mark Phillip Ruth Naomi
Silas & Katie <i>Christner</i> Jesse Simon Martin Phoebe Elam Hannah Lydia Sarah Ida Weaver (Katie's sister)	Aaron & Mary <i>Troyer</i> Matthew Molly Reuben Abraham & Alexander (twins) Ella Laura	

Chapter 1

Not having a pencil and paper handy made writing a song a challenge for Adah Knepp.

But then she liked a challenge.

Adah belted out the lyrics, the *bob-bob* of the horse's head along with the *clip-clop* of his hooves keeping time on the highway. The squeaking of the buggy wheels joined in. Her voice carried on the warm June wind across the wheat fields of Missouri. Sparrows preening on the power lines that ran along the road served as her only audience. They probably thought she'd gone crazy, talking to herself.

She closed her eyes for a second, listening to her own words. They weren't quite right. They didn't sound like the songs she heard on the radio while she cleaned the Harts' house. Not like Carrie Underwood or Taylor Swift with their sweet voices. She sounded flat. Of course, she didn't have the benefit of steel guitars, fiddles, keyboards, and drums. She stomped one black sneaker and then the other against the floorboard, picking up the beat. "Love like sun-kissed apples..." She shook her head. *Nee, nee*. "Love like a baby's sweet kisses..."

No, that wasn't it either. Still mulling over the words, she turned into the open gate adorned with a huge wrought iron *H* and onto the sunflower-lined dirt road that led to the Hart farm. She would clean the house lickety-split and use the rest of the afternoon to work on her song before she went home. That way she wouldn't be late and *Mudder*

wouldn't have cause to complain. *Stop mooning around, Adah, and get to work. Those dishes won't wash themselves.*

Which, of course, they wouldn't. Having six brothers and sisters, Adah surely wished they would. How about that for a fanciful notion?

She could write her song, cook, clean, and still be ready to take a ride after dark if Matthew Troyer should happen to shine his flashlight in her window. *Gott* was good.

A horse whinnied, an uncertain, unhappy sound that carried on a breeze that kept the day from being stifling hot. A man answered in a soft, coaxing singsong. The voice reminded Adah of the announcer on the radio the Harts kept tuned to a country music station. It was husky like sandpaper, yet smooth and warm like *kaffi* made with an extra dollop of milk and three pinches of sugar.

"Come on, steady, come on, you're okay, I promise. It's fine, it's okay, it's fine," the voice sang in a steady patter of sweet nothings.

Drawn by the velvety words, Adah hopped from the buggy and approached the fence. The voice belonged to a tall, lean man with a shock of black hair, ruffled and sweat-soaked under the rim of a dirty straw cowboy hat. He held a blanket in one hand while he used his other hand to hold the lead rope attached to a tawny Palomino with a long dark mane and tail. The man wore a T-shirt and tattered jeans faded to a blue-white. The sun glinted on the huge silver buckle on a belt that hugged his narrow hips.

"Come on, come on, girl," he crooned as he crept closer to the horse. "It won't hurt you, I promise. Remember this blanket? We played with it yesterday. You remember."

At that moment he looked across the corral and their gazes met. "Hey there, Amish girl."

He said *Amish girl* as if it were her full name. As if he'd been waiting for her. As if he were glad to see her. It made her smile. "I'm Adah."

Letting the lead rope out, he sidled away from the horse without turning his back on it. The horse pranced and arched her long neck as if she knew she no longer had the man's complete attention. "I know. Adah the Amish girl. The house cleaner."

Mrs. Hart called her the maid, a word that didn't bother Adah in

the least. She did honest work and what she earned helped her family pay for the things they needed, things they couldn't grow or make.

"That's me."

For some reason she couldn't string words together in a simple sentence. She edged toward the buggy. She shouldn't have stopped. She should've gone right up to the house. *Mind yourself with these Englishers. Mudder's voice echoed in her ears. You clean their houses. That's all.*

"I'm Jackson Hart."

Adah figured as much. He was the spitting image of his father. She'd started working at the Harts' after Jackson left for the spring semester of college so she hadn't met him, but she recognized him from the dozens of photos that lined the walls of the Hart living room and the room they referred to as the study. The study where she lingered over her dusting so she could run her fingers over the ivory keys of a grand piano. On the wall were photos of family members posing with horses and steers and trophies and ribbons.

Jackson glanced at the horse and then back at Adah. "You ever seen someone break a horse to a saddle?"

"My *daed*—my father—does it."

"Maybe he should come do this one. This filly's a stinker."

"She's willful." That's what her daed said about Adah. He said she was worse than a wild horse when it came to being stubborn. Her mudder said she inherited that from Daed. Either way, she'd made more than her share of trips to the woodshed as a little girl. "She doesn't want to give up her wild ways."

Like Adah had been doing since starting her *rumspringa*. She'd been avoiding baptism for two years now.

"My brother says he can't be ridden. The family we bought her from waited too long to break her, but I think she can be taught to be a lady. Today is her day to learn who's boss." Jackson grinned, his teeth white against the dark stubble on his chin. The bottom teeth were a little crooked, but they took nothing away from the blinding effect. "That would be me. I'm gonna turn her into a rodeo horse."

Adah had seen the rodeo when her family went to the county fair to visit the exhibits. They didn't have money to buy tickets, but she'd

peeked into the arena. Riding a bucking horse or bull or lassoing a bawling calf for sport didn't make much sense to her.

"I'd better get in the house." The words came out in a stutter. Why, she had no idea. She heaved a breath and tried again. "There are floors to be mopped."

"Mom went to the grocery store. Then she's stopping by the house in town." Somehow he made this information sound like an invitation to stay. "You've got all the time in the world."

"This house is big. Takes me all day."

"Yeah, but it's not like we're pigs or anything—well, except Rae-Anne, but she's at the house in town most of the time. I'm pretty good at picking up after myself and so is Jeff."

RaeAnne stayed at the farm sometimes and it always meant more work for Adah. Jeff, the other brother, kept his room neat and tidy, but she still had to vacuum, dust, take out the trash, and generally straighten up after him. She didn't mind. That was what they paid her to do. "You're never here, so I don't know."

"I'm here now."

No doubt about that. Adah couldn't take her gaze from him, as much as she didn't know why. She should get in the buggy. She didn't move.

Still grinning as if he liked having an audience, Jackson edged toward the horse, who snorted and tossed her head.

"Come on, girl. It's time. You know me. I'd never steer you wrong. You can trust me. It's just a blanket. You've seen this blanket before, remember?" He held it up. "It's nice. Soft. Warm. It's light. You won't even feel it on your back. I promise."

A chill ran up Adah's arms despite the June heat. Jackson spoke to the horse, not her. Still, she took a step back.

With a gentle flick of his wrist, he settled the blanket on the Palomino's back. The animal responded with a high, angry whinny. She side-stepped, snorted, and shook her head.

A second later, she reared and bucked, hooves flailing.

Still hanging on to the lead rope, Jackson stumbled back. "It's okay. It's okay, sweetheart, we're doing fine."

The words seemed overly optimistic. The Palomino came down and then reared again, bucking and shrieking.

Jackson moved, but not fast enough. The horse's front hooves connected with his chest.

Jackson crumpled to the ground.

Chapter 2

Adah raced to the corral gate and fought with the latch. Her shaking fingers wouldn't make it work. She fumbled with it, her gaze on Jackson. He sprawled on the ground. Not moving. She had to help him. Heart clanging against her ribs, she tugged on the gate.

Come on. Come on.

The Palomino snorted, reared, and bucked. Her front hooves came down on Jackson's leg. He rolled, came up on his hands and knees, and tried to crawl forward.

Her panting loud in her ears, Adah forced her fingers to navigate the latch. The gate swung open. She squeezed through and pushed it shut behind her.

Not taking her gaze from the horse with its frothing mouth and wild eyes, she scurried across the expanse to the man on the ground. "Can you get up?"

"Get out of here. Get out!" Jackson tried to lift himself up on his knees and then sank back, his face contorted in pain. "Get out."

And let him get trampled again? "Let me help you up."

The horse stampeded in a circle along the fence, its mane flying. She whinnied, tossed her head, and stormed toward Adah.

Adah froze for a split second. *Think. Think. Think.*

The Palomino was a gorgeous creature. God's creature. But God had put humans in charge—at least that's what her daed always said about

their livestock. She grabbed her apron and flapped it hard. “Haw, haw, get, yahaw, get!” She stomped her feet. “Go on, get along, Get along.”

The horse veered left and raced away. She began to circle the fence as if seeking a way to escape. Adah darted toward Jackson and knelt next to him. Blood soaked one shoulder of his torn T-shirt. A gash ran along his collarbone. It was already beginning to darken in a long, deep, purple bruise. He clutched at his pant leg just above the boot, his breathing harsh. “Well, that was just stupid.”

“You’ve not seen a horse react that way before?” She had, but Daed had never been hurt breaking a horse. He said it was his voice. Horses trusted him. “She doesn’t know you. You just got here.”

“I spent two days getting her used to the blanket. She walked all over it yesterday.” Jackson gasped, a vein pulsing in his temple. “Do we really have to argue about this now? Help me up.”

He held out his hand. She hesitated for a tiny second. His dark blue eyes sparkled and widened. “I don’t have cooties. I promise.”

“I know. I know.” She took his hand. His fingers were long, his skin hard and callused. She’d never touched a man other than her family and Matthew. “I just... You need to go to the hospital.”

“Nope. Help me up.”

He weighed a good thirty pounds more than she did, but Adah let him lean into her as he struggled to his feet. His left leg buckled. He gasped as they nearly went down together. Inhaling his scent of sweat, cigarette smoke, and aftershave that reminded her of the woods, she braced her legs and stiffened her back. His arm went around her neck. His warm, ragged breath touched her cheek as he fought to stand up right. Together, they shambled toward the gate.

Adah glanced back. The horse pranced and snorted, its hooves digging the now torn blanket into the ground. “Come on, hurry.” She tightened her grip around Jackson’s waist and urged him toward the gate. “We’re almost there.”

A groan escaped his gritted teeth.

“Is it your shoulder or your leg?”

“Both.”

She shoved the gate open just enough to let them squeeze through. Once on the other side, Jackson slid to the ground while she fastened the latch, turned, and sagged against it.

“Haw, get, yahaw?” Jackson chuckled and then coughed. “An angry filly is throwing a fit and you come storming in and flap your apron at her?”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re crazy, girl. I would’ve gotten myself out of there.”

“On your hands and knees?” Adah should’ve left him on his own. “And then that horse would’ve kicked you two or three more times in the backside for good measure.”

Jackson leaned over and spat blood on the ground.

“Maybe you’re right.” His face turned white under the beginnings of a summer tan. Teeth gritted, he inhaled and then exhaled. His dirty, blood-spattered hand went to his head. “Lost my hat. I don’t suppose you want to go back in there and get it for me.”

Adah tossed a quick glance at the corral. The hat was as flat as her chicken fried steak. No loss. It appeared old and dirty and sweaty. Besides, Jackson looked better without it. His thick black curls were damp with sweat and dust, but he had a nice head of hair. She gave herself a mental shake. No thinking about a strange man’s hair. What had gotten into her? No wonder the *Ordnung* called for hats for all men and prayer *kapps* for women. “Forget it. It’s a goner.”

“It’s not like I don’t have half a dozen more in the house.” Jackson shifted and stuck a hand on the fence as if to pull himself up. He didn’t make much progress. “Help me get up. I need to get into the house.”

“You need to go to the hospital. You’re coughing up blood.”

“Ain’t the first time I’ve been kicked by a horse and won’t be the last, I reckon.” He coughed and spat more blood. “I bit my tongue, that’s all. A cold soda pop, a cigarette, and a couple of aspirin and I’m good.”

He had a strange way of doctoring himself. “Cigarettes will kill you if the horse doesn’t. Is your father here?”

“He’s out baling hay. I left my cell phone on the porch with my coffee cup. I need it and a cigarette bad.”

“Stay. I’ll get the phone for you.” The cigarettes he could get under his own steam.

“Stay? What do I look like, a dog?”

Jackson Hart looked like he’d been beaten to a pulp by a guy twice his size and he was still full of vinegar, as Daed would say. “Just hush. I’ll be back.” Marveling at how quickly she’d learned to talk back to this Englisch man with his silver buckle and torn blue jeans, she turned and ran.

Better to put some distance between her and that silver buckle.